

Yorkshire, West Riding County Preface

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Landscape, Geology and Building Materials

The West Riding lies on the east flank of the Pennines, and its rivers drain east and north-east into the Vale of York. The highest and least populated part of the Riding is the Craven district which lies north of Settle and the Aire gap; this area is underlain by the hard blue-grey Carboniferous limestone. The stone is used for walling locally and it was used, just as rough, for the remote church at Hubberholme at the top of Wharfedale, but was not exported for buildings in medieval times. A variety of useful Carboniferous sandstones outcrop over a much larger area of moorland to the south of the Aire gap: around Pateley Bridge, Ilkley, Barnoldswick, Hebden Bridge and on south-eastwards to the outskirts of Sheffield. South and east of the Pennine uplands, from Bradford and Leeds south to Rotherham and the county boundary, are coal-bearing strata interleaved with stone suitable for building. These warm-toned sandstones and gritstones are of very variable quality and depth due to the fluctuating conditions under which they were laid down. Some sandstones are evenly graded and massive, and are still used as building stone; some so thinly bedded they provided ideal flagstones or roofing slates. Herringbone walling, as seen at Kippax for example, used regular brick-like slabs untrimmed. The Romans and the Victorians used the sandstones found in this, but their use remained local in medieval times. The most attractive stone for the medieval sculptor was the Permian or Magnesian limestone, which outcrops in a belt never more than eight miles wide running from north to south and lying just west of Ripon, Tadcaster, Doncaster and Worksop. This was a fertile, well-drained zone with productive soils. The combination of suitable stone and productive land to fund the works made this area the richest in medieval buildings. The rivers crossing the outcrop assisted the transport of the creamy limestone from Tadcaster and Conisbrough to nearby towns and villages such as York, Selby and Hatfield. To the east of the Magnesian limestone outcrop, in the Vale of York, there is no bedded stone. Glacial and alluvial deposits mask the solid geology. Locally the vari-coloured rounded cobbles cleared from the fields on the boulder clay were used in building churches, for example at Askham Richard and Long Marston near York. Around the Humber, where all the rivers gather, a large area of permanent fen extended along the lower courses of the rivers. Settlements now far inland, in earlier times were the normal landing places for sea-going vessels (Selby, Fishlake). Drainage in the seventeenth century altered this landscape almost as much as the development of the coalfield in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries changed the character of the south of the Riding.

History

The open limestone pastures of the Craven district were watched by Palaeolithic cave-dwellers from the shelters of such as Victoria Cave, near Settle, and the sandstone moors have revealed tools of early hunting-and-gathering cultures. By the time the Romans set up a fortress on the north bank of the Ouse in AD 71, a Bronze Age people they called Briganti occupied much of the central and northern Pennines. Both cultures built fortified enclosures with earth banks, but the Romans stayed to build in cut stone, and Eburacum (York) came into existence. Massive evenly graded Carboniferous sandstones were found and used by the Romans. Their large squared blocks and turned column sections, occasionally with lifting slots, are conspicuous in a medieval building, where they contrast with the small blocks of limestone used in the twelfth century, and they are often bigger than Gothic stones too. Roman material is found not only in their former towns of Ilkley and York, but was removed to other places, such as South Stainley and Little Ouseburn, by tracks or river. Between the departure of the Romans in the early fifth century and the establishment of Roman Christianity in the seventh it is probably safe to say there was little building in cut stone. There are traces of the seventh-century church associated with Wilfrid at Ripon, but generally pre-Conquest Christian remains are incoherent by comparison with the Romanesque. Architectural fabric survives in situ at Bardsey, Kirk Hammerton, Ledsham, Laughton-en-le-Morthen and Monk Fryston, for example. Sculpture of that period was first catalogued and illustrated by W. G. Collingwood in four articles for the Yorkshire Archaeological Journal (vols. 19, 20, 21 and 23). The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture's volume on the West Riding is being finalised by Dr Elizabeth Coatsworth for publication in 2005 or 2006. Promising English contacts with Europe in the late eighth and early ninth centuries were disarranged by the Viking invasions of the late ninth century, and to some extent again aborted by the enforcement of Norman rule. The West Riding suffered under the Conqueror in the winter of 1078-79, and intermittently from Scots invasions well into the Middle Ages (Marton-cum-Grafton). Early Romanesque work in the West Riding consequently looks a poor affair, entirely depending on the abilities of a local mason, but there is some purposeful content even so: tympana at Austerfield and Braithwell show an informed mind directing the work. The modest remains of early tympana should not be overlooked; these all bear witness to an important, and lengthy, phase in the Romanesque (Austerfield, Braithwell, Emley, Marton, Thorp Arch, Wales, Woolley). The 'Yorkshire School' typically comprises rich figurative sculpture of the mid-twelfth century, and much of its work is in the West Riding, due no doubt to the

presence of the fine-grained Magnesian limestone. Selby Abbey was the likely immediate source for the workmen responsible for the elaborate carving at Brayton and Birkin, with dates perhaps as early as the 1130s. Further sophisticated forms and influences from the south and west of France arrived through the priory of Holy Trinity, York, which was an alien priory of Marmoutier, just outside Tours. The date formerly suggested for the arrival for workmen from that region is soon after 1137, when a great fire in York is said to have damaged the priory, but because this 'fire' seems to have crossed the river, has produced no archaeological evidence, and could be only an error in copying, that date must be ignored. Nevertheless, influence from that area of France does seem to be discernible in sculpture at Adel and Healaugh, which belonged to Holy Trinity priory, and (in the North Riding) at Barton-le-Street. Another powerful influence came in the mid 1150s when there was much building and rebuilding at the lost Cluniac Pontefract Priory (some remains in Pontefract Museum and store). Cluniac work survives at Fishlake and Conisbrough: the domestic quarters in the nearby magnificent donjon are somewhat later. It is overambitious to expect to trace 'influences' and 'workshops' very far beyond this. Yorkshire in the mid twelfth century is far more complex than Herefordshire, or the Welsh Marches, a decade or two before. There was so much interchange and movement, and so much has been lost — notably most of the sculpture in York, at the heart of the three Ridings — that such endeavours inevitably deteriorate into subjective speculation. It is more fruitful to consider the sculpture at each building as worthy of attention in its entirety. Many of the Riding's parish churches retained their individual Romanesque doorways through the later middle ages — a period when it was more usual for each succeeding generation to pull down and build 'better'. By the time Transitional or Cistercian forms became fashionable in the 1170s, most parish churches would seem to have been already completed in stone, though a few acquired new doorways with waterleaf capitals in this period. The Archbishop of York, Roger of Pont l'Éveque, probably sealed the fate of the 'Yorkshire School' with his work at Ripon.

Major Buildings

The earliest of the monastic churches and the 'foremost Norman monument in the West Riding', according to Nikolaus Pevsner, is Selby Abbey, started c.1100. Only Selby Abbey has both size and what would normally be thought of as sculpture. The abbey, now a parish church as large as some cathedrals, has an instructive range of sculpture of the highest quality, with the early presence of masons of the Durham/Normandy schools evident at the east end of the nave and building activity continuing into the Transitional period at the west end and in the north porch. Ripon cathedral (then a collegiate church) is precociously Gothic but the crossing arches that survive are round-headed and have chevrons. Other surviving major buildings are all Cistercian. Fountains Abbey was founded in 1135, Kirkstall followed (at the present site) in 1152, and Roche Abbey was founded in 1147 — Roche is less famous than the others, but equally interesting and beautiful. Like Ripon, it combines round and pointed arches without difficulty. The Cistercian aesthetic comes over strongly in the Tang reticence of the subtly carved leaf capitals at Fountains: its light, white plaster and silence might have pacified even St Bernard.

Lesser Buildings

Despite having the National Trust's most visited outdoor property in the Yorkshire Corpus (Fountains Abbey), it is the lesser churches, as discussed in the section on History, which are the major sculptural monuments in Yorkshire: Adel, Askham Bryan, Austerfield, Bardsey, Birkin, Brayton, Campsall, Edlington, Farnham, Fishlake, Healaugh, Kippax, Kirkby Malzeard, Sherburn-in-Elmet, Stainburn, Thorpe Salvin, Wighill. It is regrettable that they are not better known locally and nationally. The West Riding cannot be left without mentioning the 'beakheads', a malevolent crowd of not-quite-real birds of prey that wait in a mob at the doors of at least fourteen of the lesser churches. For the enthusiast there are fragmentary indications of much early work in what had been the chief area for Anglo-Saxon remains, in the west of the Riding: a few chevron voussoirs at Beeston, Leeds, a carved pillar at Rothwell, for instance, indicate buildings with something above the minimum provision, and a strange collection of figurative fragments at Boroughbridge might imply the presence of a workshop. In South Yorkshire, there are numerous remains in situ, both of the earlier period and of the mid-century Yorkshire School. With much evidently lost and few firm dates, we are really in the dark about the overall development of sculpture in the period: suffice it to say that the West Riding of Yorkshire was no provincial backwater but shook off early poverty to become rich enough to attract the best craftsmen and designers.

Rita Wood, September 2005.

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