

## ***OXNAM KIRK***

There has been a Kirk in Oxnam for well over 800 years. The first mention is in a charter of 1153 when the Percy family (not yet princes of Northumberland) gave the Kirk and adjacent lands to the new Abbey of Jedburgh, which appropriated its revenues and supplied a salaried vicar-pensioner to be responsible for the cure of souls. Almost nothing is known about this medieval building.

The present Kirk was built in 1738 on the site of its predecessor. Originally it was even simpler than it is today, a plain rectangular building of six bays with south-facing windows in three of the middle four and a door under the one carrying the date stone. (The doorstep can still be seen below the present window). It had, as now, walls of rubble masonry, harled, and possibly a thatched roof. The bell cote is original, though the bell was renewed in 1809. By 1816 there was a west gallery, perhaps with an external access on the north side, and the vestry (or Session House) was added to the east end in 1830. The major enlargement, consisting of the north aisle, the west porch and the boiler house, was carried out between 1874 and 1879, and the west gallery was also removed at this time. Today's interior is severely plain, with no decoration at all apart from the three memorial tablets. Until 1960, the walls were washed green with a gilt dado band, and the pine pulpit and seating of 1879 were brown-varnished as the Victorians left them. Then, by the inspiration of Mr. Thompson, the then Minister, the woodwork was stripped and bleached and the walls restored to white, back to the fashion of the eighteenth century. The oak communion table and Elder's chairs given as memorials in the 1920's, and the organ case, were treated similarly. Only the lectern, a memorial of 1997, is of plain oak.

The Kirk yard has some fine gravestones, carved with memento mori symbols, tools of trade, the Green Man and other traditional motifs. Several pre-date the present Kirk, the earliest being 1681, and by the vestry door is a medieval grave slab, probably rescued from the original building.

The Watch House in the southeast corner dates from the earliest nineteenth century when Edinburgh medical schools made body snatching a profitable local enterprise. Graves were watched for seven nights after burial; the house is provided with a fireplace, more than some cottages were at that time.

Attached to the south wall of the Kirk are the jugs, in which offenders were secured for the edification of their fellow parishioners. Public admonishment of immorality was a major part of the Kirk Session's duties in previous centuries, a pre-occupation which had the incidental secular advantage of helping to establish the paternity of bastard children, who might otherwise have become a charge on the parish.

Outside the kirk yard is the louping-on stane, or rather steps, put there for the benefit of less agile riders among the congregation.

The Kirk as it stands today, is entirely typical of many small Border kirks built in the eighteenth century, but within this similarity it has its own character which distinguishes it as Oxnam Kirk and no other. Bare almost to starkness to anyone used to medieval churches, it feels neither cold nor unfriendly. Two and a half centuries of worship are giving it a patina. Though set high without screening trees, it does not dominate the countryside it serves; Oxnam Kirk is too modest a structure, and the landscape too wide and beautiful for that; but it can be seen, small and white from great distances, and always to good effect. The kirk is part of the surrounding farmlands, and from inside, seen through its clear glass windows, the land is part of the Kirk.

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