

ST JOSEPH'S (BIRTLEY)

Taking Stock is an architectural and historical review of Catholic churches and chapels in England and Wales. The project is a partnership between the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, individual dioceses and Historic England

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Birtley is one of the oldest Catholic missions in County Durham, dating from the late seventeenth century. From its origins until 1977 it was served by the Benedictines.

In 1696 William Tempest, agent to Lord Lumley of nearby Lumley Castle, gave £300 to the English Benedictines for the provision of a priest to serve the needs of the small number of Catholics in the area. Originally based at Chester-le-Street, the mission was moved to Birtley in 1746 possibly to maintain a low profile in the aftermath of the Jacobite rising of 1745.

The Birtley mission was supported by the Brandling and Humble families, who had coal mining interests in Leeds and Felling. The mission grew in the late eighteenth century and by 1780 there were 180 Catholics in the Anglican parish of Chester-le-Street, which included Birtley. Soon after this, in 1783, the Benedictines placed Fr Bernard Slater in charge of the mission, and it is likely that it was in his time that the first church was built (public Catholic chapels having been legalised under the Catholic Relief Act of 1791).

The present church replaced a building of around 1791 and is a stone-built Early English Gothic design by John Dobson of Newcastle and opened on 18th August 1843. The building was seamlessly extended in 1862 and 1910 and although the church was built in three phases, the consistent use of the same building stone and lancet Gothic style gives the whole a seamless quality.

In 1910 the North Aisle and the Lady Chapel were added. The North Aisle has buttresses marking the bay divisions, and a range of window types - all Early English in character: a single lancet, paired lancets within plate tracery and stepped triple lancets.

In 1915 a new baptistery was created at the western end of the new north aisle, with a fine font which was later moved to its present location in the north chapel near the sanctuary in the 1970s. The font is beautifully carved in fine limestone, with low relief panels of sacred emblems on each of the eight sides. The style is in the manner of Eric Gill, but the piece is presumably a product of the Bromsgrove Guild. In addition, there is a stained-glass window of the Baptism of Our Lord, by Archibald John Davies (1877-1953) of the Bromsgrove Guild, in memory of two members of the Blythe family.

Finally, in 1917, a fine carved wooden statue of Our Lady, again by the Bromsgrove Guild, was installed at the eastern end of the north aisle, in memory of Fr Edward Morrall.