

ST JOHN'S CHURCH

One of the original four parish churches of the medieval town, St John's dates from the 12th century, standing at what is now the end of Grainger Street where it meets Westgate Road. As interesting as any church of its age, St John's has the air of a small country church transplanted to the city, and deserves its own chapter in this book because of four features of interest.

Inside the church in the north window of the chancel is the earliest known representation of the town's armorial shield. It is portrayed in a rich deep red glass of striated texture and shows the three castles or turrets in white. This late 14th century version differs from later and the present armorial bearings in that each of the three castles has only a single turret, whereas since the 17th century the castles have been triple-turreted – evidence, perhaps of increasing pride in the town's standing on the part of the corporation over the passage of the centuries. There is more detail on the city's heraldic device and blazon in the 'Civic Regalia' chapter of this book.

Over on the east side of the south transept is another stained glass window of particular local interest. The figures in the window's three lights represent faith, hope, and charity, and at the foot of the window is the inscription:

"In memory of John Cunningham, the pastoral poet, a native of Dublin who died in Newcastle, September 18th 1773 aged 44 years and was interred in the adjoining burial ground. A frequent contributor to the Newcastle Chronicle in which most of his poems first appeared, its grateful founder Thomas Slack

placed a memorial stone over his grave, and this memorial is erected by the present proprietor of the Chronicle, Joseph Cowen the Younger of Blaydon on Tyne."

The inscription – not totally legible today – is self explanatory but perhaps Cunningham himself deserves a further mention. Dubbed 'Newcastle's Poet Laureate', Cunningham made the town his home for the last ten years of his life. During his time here his poetry in the *Newcastle Chronicle* often sang the praises of our local culture. This verse

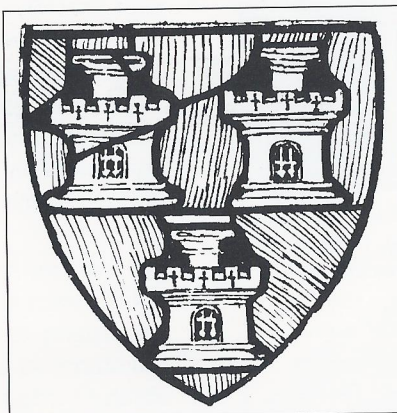
from his poem *Newcastle Beer* is typical, and suggests that some aspects of northern life and tastes have changed little in 200 years:

"Ye youngsters so diffident, languid, and pale
Whom love, like the colic, so rudely infests,
Take a cordial of this, 'twill probatum prevail
And drive the cur Cupid away from your
breasts.

Dull whining despise,
Grow rosy and wise,
Nor longer the jest of good fellows appear,
Bid adieu to your folly
Get drunk and be jolly
And smoke o'er a tankard of Newcastle Beer."

Cunningham is buried outside in the churchyard in the south-east corner. The flat horizontal stone over his grave – restored in the 19th century – bears an inscription stating

that: "his works will remain a monument for ages after this temporary tribute of esteem is in dust forgotten." Rather ironic words when read today, since Cunningham's monument has long outlived his parochial fame.

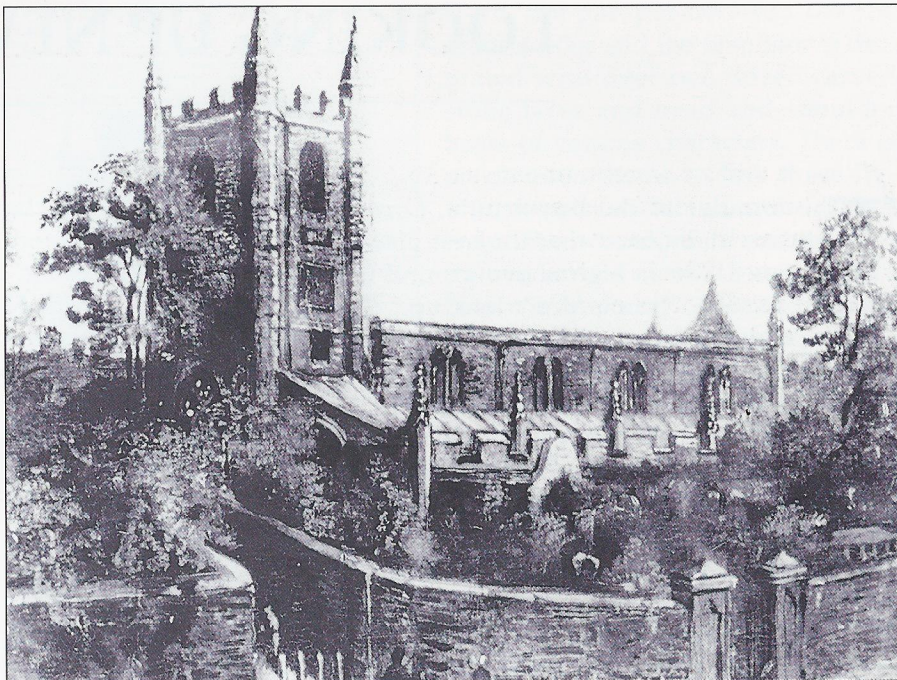


This 1922 drawing from the chancel, by R. Bertram, shows the earliest representation of the town's armorial shield.

Over in the north-east corner of the churchyard is the grave of another local man of letters. Solomon Hodgson was editor of the *Newcastle Chronicle* when he died aged 39 in 1800. The long inscription on his stone bears testament to the standards upheld by the press of his day, stating that as an "honest and independent" editor of the *Chronicle*;

"... he would not stoop to court the smile of any man so neither did he fear any man's frown, but through the medium of an uncorrupted press delighted in disseminating the principles of rational liberty and eternal truth."

Sentiments which, I am sure, are held just as dearly today among the staff of *Newcastle Chronicle & Journal Ltd*, whose offices at the rear of Thomson House in Pudding Chare overlook Hodgson's obituary.



This reproduction of an oil painting which belonged to a Mr M. Young of Gateshead is of unknown date, but the view probably dates from about 1800. It shows the old brick wall around the churchyard and the narrow lane between it and the old vicarage, in the days before Grainger Street was built. This lane was known as St John's Lane, or Copper Alley.

