



## St Helen's, Skeffling

'I never thought about Hull until I was here. Having got here, it suits me in many ways. It is a little on the edge of things, I think even its natives would say that. I rather like being on the edge of things. One doesn't really go anywhere by design, you know...'

That's the poet, Philip Larkin talking about his adopted home of Hull. Larkin, one of the most celebrated English poets of the 20th century, moved here in 1955, aged 33, to take up the position of librarian at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull. He lived here, and held this job, for thirty years, until his death in 1985.

In 2012, The Larkin Trail was devised. It picks up a trail of twenty-five places that the poet visited and wrote about. One of them is Skeffling – where you'll also find the latest church we saved, St Helen's. Set out on Spurn Point, about five miles outside Patrington and its church, the Queen of Holderness, you'll find the noble church of St Helen.

In Larkin's own words, out here 'leaves unnoticed thicken, hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken'. Holderness was washed into existence by the North Sea. ... And soon could be washed out of existence, as this strip of land suffers the highest rate of coastal erosion in the whole of Europe – losing on average 1.5m of coastline each year. It's easy to feel on the edge out here.

The reason for the erosion is in the bedrock: clay covered in boulder clay. St Helen's church is a product of this landscape, its walls built with glacial clutter in the 1460s. Externally, the church exists almost entirely in its original medieval form. Rounded cobbles set in rough and random courses with limestone ashlar edges form the nave, chancel, aisles, and tower.

There was an alien monastic cell nearby at Birstall with a chapel dedicated to St Helen, and it's thought that some of the cobblestones used in the church were recycled from here. Birstall Priory was built c.1219 on the riverbank between Skeffling and Weeton. It was ruinous by 1720, and disappeared following floods in the early 20th century.

The church is entered via the red brick porch with pantile roof. This was tacked on to the south aisle in the 19th century.

Inside, the brick pavement floor ripples, reminiscent of the area's landscape of mounds, ridges, and kettle holes. The nave is supported by an arcade of octagonal piers, with finely carved angels carrying shields and lions on the responds. Look closely at the piers, and you will find a range of mason's marks. A simple, almost secret, enduring reminder of the people that built this church.

In the chancel, is a plain triple sedilia with chamfered ogee arches, but really this space is dominated by the monuments to the Holme family. The Holmes owned the manor house to the north of church from the 17th century. There are floor slabs and wall monuments – most are monochrome marble obelisks with urns and palms, and all are the work of Rushworth of Beverley.



In the name is a monument to another important family – this time the Bees, who settled in Skeffling in the early-18th century. Edward Bee Esq. rebuilt Skeffling Hall in 1717. Apparently, these Bees are descendant of the ancient Bee family of St Bees, Cumbria.

There are so many interesting things to admire in St Helen's. The font is 15th-century and octagonal – matching the arcade columns. Its faces are scratched with graffiti. Lots of initials and dates, but also at least three ships are etched into the sides of the bowl.

At the west end is a pair of 18th-century fielded-panel box-pews – possibly churching pews. Beyond these pews, in the base of the tower is a row of lead panels taken from the church roof, and all soldered with the names and dates of churchwardens throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

St Helen's was re-ordered by the Victorians, and all of the benches in the nave date to this scheme. As do the complete collection of brass and glass oil lamps. The church was re-roofed in 1901 – as the churchwarden's inscription attests. The beams are moulded and punctuated with carved bosses at the knuckles of each joint. Two of the bosses from the medieval roof – a carved head and foliate roundel – hang from the chancel arch. It's a thrill to see them up so close.

St Helen's fortunes started to church in 2011 when the lead was stolen from its aisles. A grant was eventually secured, and the aisles, chancel and porch were re-covered in terne-coated steel, and new rainwater goods and a new surface water drainage system were installed.

For reasons that aren't entirely clear just yet, the church is suffering from severe structural movement across the west end. The land out here, a landscape of mudflats and saltmarshes, isn't naturally the most stable, but this movement appears to be relatively recent. Floor to wall-plate cracks have opened up in the west elevations of both north and south aisles, stones on westernmost column on the north aisle has split open in two places, the eaves have spread, voussoirs in the doorway are working loose and dropping out of their arch, and most worryingly, the tower buttresses are suffering. On the northwest corner, the buttress masonry is in tension and being pulled apart, while on the southwest corner its under crippling compression – splitting open the stone blocks. A simplistic analysis would be the church is sinking to the south – increasing the loading on the structure on that side, and lifting apart on the other side.

In the 1990s, the north elevation was underpinned. Perhaps the unpinned 'free' south elevation is now beginning to flex. Whatever is happening it's happening fast, with new cracks appearing in six months. Our structural engineer is investigating, and we are in discussion with Historic England about the best approach. Together, we will design a scheme to rebalance the stresses.

We will keep you updated and will let you know when this gorgeous church will be open for visitors. ☹️

