

# TAKING STOCK

CATHOLIC CHURCHES OF ENGLAND & WALES

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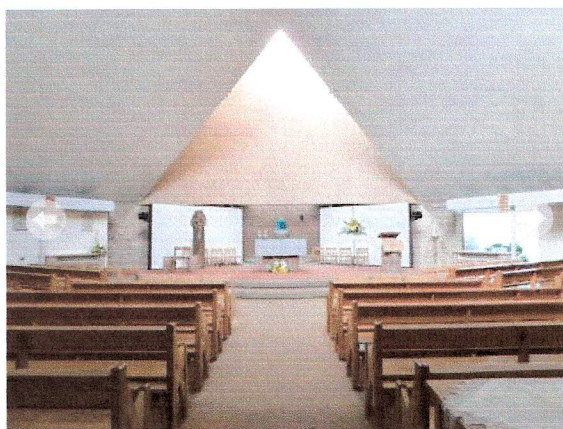
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## BEDLINGTON - ST BEDE

Catholic Row, Bedlington, Northumberland NE22



*A notable church design of the 1990s, with an impressive interior with some dramatic lighting focussing on key fittings that are works of art. Despite its scale, the church is somewhat hidden and plays little part in the urban landscape, but is just within the Bedlington conservation area.*

A mission appears to have begun in the 1860s and a school, also used for Sunday Mass, was built by 1865. It was adapted as a church running parallel to Catholic Row and a presbytery added to the site around 1876. Both had slate roofs replaced with concrete tiles c.1970 which caused structural difficulties to such an extent that it was decided to rebuild the church. In fact, the 1876 sanctuary survives as the presbytery garage with a meeting room above, the original coffered roof running parallel to Catholic Row and the former 'north' sanctuary two-light window surviving at first floor level. The rendered gable may contain the chancel arch.

Vincente Stienlet is a third generation architect in the family practice founded by Pascal J. Stienlet in North Shields. St Bede's broadly follows the form of his two earlier churches at Wetherby (St Joseph, 1984-6) and Sheffield (St Francis of Assisi, Crosspool 1990) and was built to seat 250 in 1991-92 for £589,000. Bishop Griffiths

opened and consecrated the church on 23 October 1992. It won the RIBA's Hadrian Award for Architecture in 1995.

The sanctuary of this modern church is at the southwest corner of this roughly square site, with the entrance to the north east on Catholic Row that runs east-west on the north side of the site. Geographic points are used in this description.

St Bede's church was built to the designs of Vincente Stienlet in 1991-92. Low buff brick walls with wood framed windows, two large curved roofs covered with leather coloured plain tiles and lead dressings. The nave roof opens to the northeast in a large eight-sided window crowned with a tall cross. The steeper conical roof above the sanctuary has a glazed area to the east ridge to light the tabernacle inside and another glazed area at wall plate level behind to light the small areas for private prayer behind the sanctuary. The interior has partly plastered low walls over a continuous soldier course plinth but it is dominated by the wide sweep of the plaster ceilings. The large northeast and southwest walls are faced with panels of pale plywood; the latter has been worked to reveal darker coloured 'flames' rising above the altar.

The worship space is fan-shaped, the sanctuary located at the hub and the entrance doors from the large narthex on Catholic Row is directly opposite. A big hall that can be opened into the church is to the east and the 1870s presbytery (which also contains a parish office and a first floor meeting room accessed by a circular staircase tower) is to the northwest along Catholic Row. The northwest wall is interrupted by the baptistery with its three sided apse formed of glass bricks (like the six sided font) and the deep narrow Lady Chapel, lit only by top lighting in the Fletton brick apse. The confessionals and sacristy are to the north corner, which also gives access to the circular staircase to the upper small meeting room formed in the former sanctuary.

The sanctuary platform is a symmetrical 'cloud' shape, with little extensions for the ambo in front of the altar on the north and a large wooden Celtic cross standing behind the altar on the south. The angled white walls behind the altar hide spaces for private prayer that can focus on the top lit tabernacle set on its own platform at the apex of the fan. There are four small coloured glass crosses (by Ralph Pattison) set into the adjacent walls (invisible from the church) as further foci for prayer.

There is a 'service platform' on steel columns at wall plate level containing lighting and the sound system, but there are extra banks of spotlights in the roof. Wall heaters are encased in low free-standing Fletton brick walls (like the ambo and president's chair). The large east ('west') window over the narthex has eight sides of two different lengths and is glazed with pale glass around a central cross on St Bede's prayer 'Christ the Morning Star'. By Fenwick Lawson, it is spoilt by the grid of the external glazing. Lawson was also the artist for the standing cross, statue of Our Lady and the flamed plywood wall over the altar. Fred Watson made the altar from a piece

of granite salvaged from the Newcastle quayside and the tabernacle. Tim Kendall made the timber ambo with its ingenious rising lectern mechanism. Pews and chairs are to the architect's design and the understated Stations are of white glazed ceramic.

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