

BIDDLESTONE VILLAGE  
NEAR NETHERTON  
NORTHUMBERLAND  
NE65 7DT



**TRADITION: ROMAN CATHOLIC**

**BUILT: C.1860**

**CONGREGATION ACTIVE  
UNTIL: 1992**

**LISTING: GRADE II\***

**OS GRID REFERENCE:  
NT955084**

**CATHOLIC CHAPEL OF A  
DEMOLISHED MANSION HIGH  
IN THE CHEVIOT FOOTHILLS**

# BIDDLESTONE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHAPEL



## TRANSPORT

The chapel stands in a clearing in woodland near Biddlestone Village. There is a sign for the chapel on the main road by the village and outside the chapel. Alnmouth station is 20 miles away; there is no bus service nearby.

The Northumberland National Park public footpath 139/006 passes beside the chapel.

## VISIT US

Contact our volunteer keyholders:  
01665 574420; 01669 620230 or  
01669 630270 for access.

No toilet facilities on site.

## HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Biddlestone Chapel in its current form was built around 1820 by an old Northumberland Roman Catholic family, the Selbys. They built the chapel on an existing 14th century pele (or 'peel') tower. It is this that gives the chapel its unusually tall proportions. The Selby family were landowners in the area from the 13th century onwards, and acquired Biddlestone Hall in 1311, when Walter Selby of Seghill married Katherine Delaval of Biddlestone. The Hall, later rebuilt, formed the basis of the depiction of Walter Scott's Osbaldistone Hall, an old Catholic manor, in Rob Roy.

Several Selbys were important nationally - Ralph Selby, the second son of James Selby, was a monk at Westminster Abbey, and rose to become an important official, being a Baron of the Exchequer and member of the Privy Council under Kings Henry IV and Henry V. He died in 1420, and is buried in the abbey. More unusually Charles Selby, the brother of Thomas Selby (1753-1816), was Chamberlain to King Frederick VI of Denmark, and was made a Danish Baron.

Along with a number of other Northumberland gentry families the Selbys kept the Catholic faith following the Reformation, refusing to adopt the Established church. Unable to worship in the local parish church, they maintained a private chapel in their house throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for themselves, their Catholic tenants, servants and the local community. For much of this period worship in the family chapel was secret, because it was illegal. The Catholic Relief Act 1778 permitted the building of 'undemonstrative' chapels, paving the way for country house chapels like HCT's Petre Chapel in Essex. The earliest reference to the Selbys' Catholicism is from 1632, when a clandestine marriage was arranged between Sir William Selby and Hellena Haggerston. The first recorded Catholic chaplain at Biddlestone whose name is recorded was Thomas Durham, who was buried in 1725. Records state that a chapel on Selby land served the local Catholic community throughout the eighteenth century, and it is likely that this was on the same site as the chapel now - evidence in the stonework shows that there were Georgian sash windows in the walls before the present gothic windows were inserted. The present chapel dates from around 1820, when the Selbys repaired the remains of the tower and reconstructed the chapel over the undercroft, while the interior is the result of further renovations made by Walter Selby in 1862. Following the sale of the Selby estates in 1914, the chapel became the responsibility of the Catholic diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, until it was given up in 1992 as a result of its remoteness and small congregation.



*A picnic at Biddlestone Chapel.*

## ENQUIRE & HIRE

THE CHAPEL IS AVAILABLE FOR A NUMBER OF USES, INCLUDING CONCERTS, MEETINGS AND PROJECTS.

WEDDINGS, MEMORIAL SERVICES AND BLESSINGS CAN ALSO BE CONDUCTED THERE.

To find out more visit [www.hct.org.uk](http://www.hct.org.uk) or contact [chapels@hct.org.uk](mailto:chapels@hct.org.uk)

THE HISTORIC CHAPELS TRUST | ST. GEORGE'S GERMAN LUTHERAN CHURCH,  
55 ALIE STREET, ALDGATE, LONDON E1 8EB, UK | REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 1017321



A concert in Biddlestone Chapel

## THE EXTERIOR

With the exception of the medieval north wall, only the ground floor remains from the pele tower – the upper part of the building was rebuilt. A reference from 1715 suggests that it used to be crenellated (that is, had battlements). The gothic style windows date from the 1862 remodelling, when Walter Selby sought to make the building look more religious in purpose, and to this end a stone foliate cross can be seen on the east gable. The west wall is the most visibly altered area of the exterior, and was the wall by which the chapel was attached to the Hall before the connecting wing was demolished.



Stained glass showing the Selby coat of arms.

## THE INTERIOR

Access to the chapel is by the external staircase for estate workers. What used to be the main doorway can be seen as a blocked opening high up on the external west wall. The arched inner doorway to the basement dates from the fourteenth century, while the rest was remodelled in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, when it was in use as a wine and beer cellar. The eastern section contains a corrugated-iron air raid shelter fitted during the Second World War. It is not a regulation model, but likely an ad hoc arrangement created to fit the existing space. It likely dates from 1940, when a seaborne invasion was considered the greatest threat following France's defeat, and may have been considered an outer defence for Otterburn Training Camp to the west.

Upstairs in the chapel, the interior appears entirely Victorian, with plastered walls, a high-pitched timber roof and gothic revival fittings. The walls were originally covered with stencilled decoration, a design that was simplified in the twentieth century. The walls were further redecorated in 1999 though for reasons of cost the stencilling was mostly not replaced. The heraldic shields on the walls are those of the Selbys impaled with those of their wives (i.e. split down the middle to depict both shields on one).

The Selby crest is a saracen's head, with the motto *semper sapit suprema* (He is always wise about the highest matters). The earliest member of the family to be commemorated is Alexander Selby, d.1631. Around the sanctuary at the east end are inscriptions from the Psalms. All of the fittings are of pitch pine, and in a gothic revival style, as is the altar. The altar also bears six brass candlesticks and an ivory crucifix. Statues of Mary and St Joseph flank the altar. At the west end is a small reed organ, made in America in 1840. The Stations of the Cross are present in the form of photographs of continental carvings, while the prayer cards at the back of the chapel record dead members of the congregation from 1900 onwards. The stained glass in the east window, attributed to Wailes of Newcastle, depicts Calvary, showing Jesus on the cross, Mary and St John. It is dedicated to the memory of Walter Selby's parents. He himself is remembered in the west window, along with his wife Laura Anne.

## SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

Biddlestone chapel was transferred to the care of the Historic Chapels Trust in 1996 in order to secure its future, and in 2008 a repair and upgrading programme was completed to provide public access to the gallery and improvements to the stairway, chapel entrance and undercroft.