

HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

OLD BEWICK

NORTHUMBERLAND

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

JANUARY 2018



South view

PETER F RYDER
B.A., M.Phil, F.S.A
HISTORIC BUILDINGS CONSULTANT

**1 Ford Terrace
Broomhaugh
RIDING MILL
Northumberland
NE44 6EJ**

**Tel (01434) 682644
E mail: PFRyder@broomlee.org**



HOLY TRINITY, OLD BEWICK

Old Bewick church, formerly a parochial chapel. lies 5 km north-west of the parish church of Eglingham in Northumberland and c 14 km north-west of Alnwick, in Northumberland. The church (NGR NJ 0679 2215) stands alone on the south bank of the Kirk Burn, a tributary of the Till, on rising ground below sandstone moorland and around 500 m north of the hamlet of Old Bewick



Location Map from Ordnance Survey 1:25000
Explorer sheet 332. OS map licence 100045703

Description

The church consists of an aisleless nave with a south porch and a pent-roofed vestry on the north, a short chancel and a sanctuary that curiously is apsidal at ground level (and internally) but square-ended in its upper part. The church is built of coursed roughly-squared masonry that verges on the megalithic, with some blocks in the nave in excess of 1 m long; a number have oblong slots that may well be Lewis holes, suggesting re-use from some Roman structure. The chancel and apse are of similar but perhaps slightly smaller stone; the roof is of graduated blue (Lakeland?) slates.

The masonry of the west end is particularly impressive, and has its lower course set forwards as a rough plinth, which slightly varies in height; c 2 m above ground level and close to the south-west corner (which is of slightly smaller and more regular blocks, and seems to course in with the south rather than west wall) is a block with an obvious lewis hole. The upper part of the gable is a Victorian rebuild, and has a pair of tall round-arched windows with chamfered surrounds, with roughly-faced orange sandstone dressings, and a large cinquefoil light in the gable, which has moulded kneelers and a projecting coping chamfered on its underside, and a ring-cross finial.



The south-west corner of the nave; contrast better-squared fabric of south wall (right) with less regular megalithic masonry of west end (left)

The south wall has broadly similar fabric, up to around two-thirds height, above which is rather better-squared 19th-century stone; the plinth has a neat 45° chamfer (typical of 12th-century work) which rounds the south-west corner and then becomes a rough offset. The porch is set towards the west end of the wall, and just west of it and c 2.5 m above the ground is a block, with a lewis hole; there is another midway along the wall east of the porch, immediately above the plinth. Towards the east end of the wall are a pair of quite broad round-arched lights with chamfered surrounds, all in 19th-century orange stone. At eaves level is an oversailing chamfered course (continued all round the church) in 19th-century orange sandstone ashlar.

The east gable of the nave has moulded kneelers and a coping chamfered on its lower angle, except where it is returned horizontally at the base of the 19th-century bellcote that caps the gable, which has twin round-arched openings, with between them an attached shaft with a foliate capital and moulded base, and a circular piercing in the spandrel above; the gablet above has similar details to the main gable, and a finial with a cross with a central disc and splayed arms.

The north wall of the nave is of similar fabric to the south, although here there is the odd course of smaller stones. There is only one window, about a third of the way from the east end, which is an old single-light with its semicircular head cut in a single large block. The

plan in the Northumberland County History¹ (hereafter 'NCH') shows a broad blocked opening immediately west of this window and a ragged doorway-like opening in this position is shown on Richardson's c1840 sketch (see Structural Analysis, p.11) but this is no longer clear – there is an irregular straight joint c 0.5 m west of the window at mid-height in the wall. At the same level as the window head and further west, 1.5 m before the vestry, is an infilled vertical slot or loop, and this is also visible internally. Close to the west end in the course above the plinth (which is buried over most of the north side of the church) is a large block with a lewis hole. Only the uppermost two or three courses of the wall look like Victorian restoration. Towards the west end of the wall is the pent-roofed 19th-century vestry, built of close-jointed rough-faced orange sandstone, which has a chamfered round-headed window in each end.

The **Chancel** is built of coursed squared stone, which on the south is slightly smaller than that of the adjacent nave wall; the wall has a chamfered plinth at the same level as that of the nave, and close to its west end an absolutely plain square-headed priests door (with the chamfered plinth forming its sill), and to the east of it a single-light window, in old masonry, with a segmental rather than round arch. The upper two or three courses are old stone, but probably re-used in the 19th century. The north wall is featureless; a blocked window is mentioned by the NCH, and whilst there is a vague area of disturbance more or less central to the external face, there is no sign of any opening on the interior. The uppermost three courses are clearly later, but look like re-used old stone; close to the west end of the lowest course is the head of a medieval cross slab.



The church from the north-east

The original 12th-century **Sanctuary** is apsidal, but at some later medieval period (in the 14th or perhaps 15th century) the upper parts of its external walls have been remodelled with a

¹ Vol. XIV (1938) 376-381; plan and also presumably the written account by H LHoneyman.

square end, its angles carried on two diagonal buttresses; at the base of the upper walling is a string course, chamfered on its upper angle, c 2 m above the ground; below this, in the angles between the curving apse wall and the added buttresses, are two levels of squinch-like blocks or corbels, and there is a chamfered off-set on the buttresses at the level of the string course. The buttresses continue above the string to end in 19th-century gabled tops with a trefoiled cresting. The east wall above the string, and the upper three or four courses of the side walls, are 19th-century close-jointed stone. The south wall of the sanctuary has a later medieval square-headed window of two trefoil-headed lights with very tight cusping, and shallow sunk panels in the spandrels, only its mullion being restoration. The east end has a small round-headed light with a rebated surround which, externally, seems all restoration, as does a similar window on the north.



The Nave from the north

The **South Porch** is of 19th-century date, and is largely built of orange rough-faced stone; it has a round-headed outer doorway of one square order, with impost and hoodmould both of grooved-and-chamfered section, and a gable with moulded kneelers, a square-edged coping and a ring-cross finial.

The church is surrounded by a gutter formed of stone slabs with a channel cut into them; on the west of the south porch this is actually raised some distance above ground level; on the south end of it sits a block, heavily lichened, with sundial faces on west and south, said

to be dated '1742', and in the angle between the gutter alongside the porch and that extending west along the nave is a mossed-over medieval cross slab.



Interior looking east

The Interior

Inside the **South Porch** the internal walls are of pink smooth ashlar, with square-edged stone benches and a collared rafter roof with ashlaring. A series of early carved stones, mostly cross slabs, are displayed – on the west a complete slab at each end of the wall and a row of five pieces directly above the bench, with at the south end of the bench what looks has been interpreted both as a section of Pre-Conquest cross shaft with moulded angles, or a stoup. It has a large socket in the top, with sloping rather than vertical sides, which looks more like a stoup bowl than a mortice for a cross head. There is another cross slab, a coped one with a cross on each face, set in the east wall at its north end, and two more badly worn pieces of cross slabs in the floor, at its northern angles².

The inner doorway, the old south door of the church, is ancient in part. It has a plain square-headed inner opening, of which only the lower jambs are old, and a semicircular arched outer order on jamb shafts. The much-eroded bases and simple cushion capitals are old, but everything above – the imposts with saltire crosses and the arch with its hollow chamfer and roll (both details taken from the chancel arch) are all in pink 19th-century ashlar, as is the plain tympanum. The threshold has remnants of a 19th-century inscription, mostly erased by passing feet:

KEEP THY (FOOT WHEN) THOU GOEST TO

(THE HOUSE OF) GOD +

This is a text from Ecclesiastes 5.1 (King James' Version)

Inside the church the walls are all bare of plaster, and show impressive roughly-coursed masonry of the same character as the external faces. It is evident that the south-west angle of the nave has been rebuilt, with slightly smaller and better-squared masonry like that of the adjacent south wall. Inside the **Nave** only the lower jambs of the south door are ancient; the semicircular rear arch is of 19th-century pink sandstone ashlar; opposite, the doorway into the vestry has a similar 19th-century arch as well, and only the lower blocks of its east jamb look pre-Victorian. The internal surrounds of the various windows in the west wall and the pair at the east end of the south wall are all 19th-century work as well, but the single window on the north is more interesting. Its plain round rear arch seems old, although disturbance around it makes the window look as if it might be an insertion; below its east jamb, c 1.2 m above the floor, is what looks like a vertical slot or socket infilled by

² The Old Bewick cross slabs are all described and illustrated by Ryder, P.F. (2003). *Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers in Northumberland*, 3: North Northumberland. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th serXXXII 107-8, 134

pieces of brown stone, and about 2 m west of its head is the infilled vertical loop or slot visible externally.

The nave roof is of five bays with arched-braced collar-beam trusses (including ones set against the end walls) which have ashlaring, one level of purlins and a ridge board. There is a moulded wall plate, with below it, on the lines of the trusses, simple quadrant-shaped ashlar corbels. The floor is of 19th-century stone slabs'

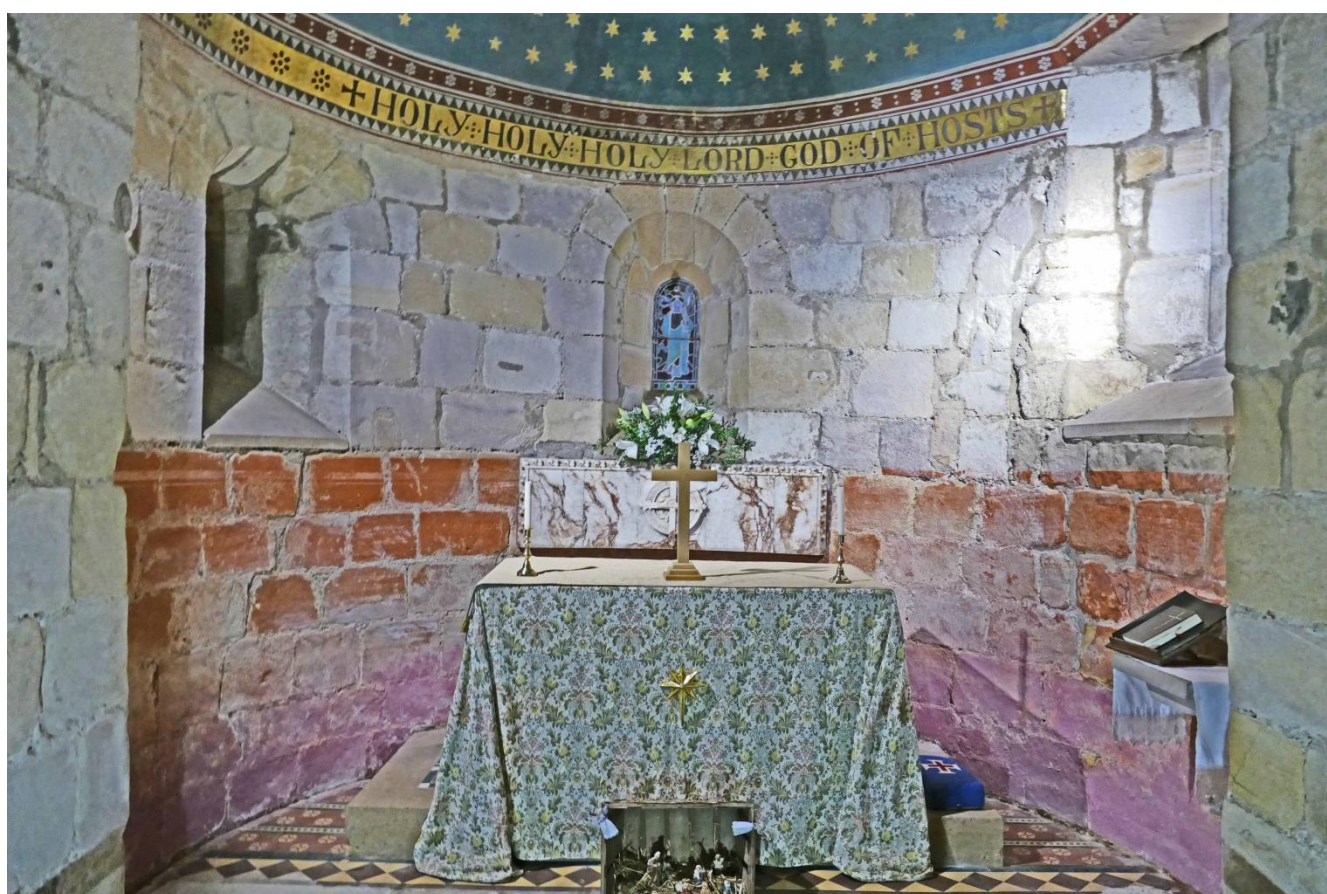
At the east end of the nave the arch into the **Chancel** is semicircular (although now somewhat distorted) and of two orders, the inner with a big soffit roll flanked by hollows, the outer square, with a hood (on the west face of the wall only) with its chamfers, above and below, studded by billet. The jambs have a big semicircular half shaft for the inner order that has a cable moulded neck and carved capitals, carrying an impost band, chamfered below, with relief saltire crosses within sunk panels, returned for the full width of the wall on each face. The half-shafts have moulded bases, of an early convex section, and a chamfered course below; the half-shafts have two levels of sockets, c 1.2m and c 2m above the floor, presumably for a screen. The southern capital is a simple scalloped one, the northern has a stylised carving of a tree between two grotesque heads that have either horns or pointed ears.

A step up leads into the chancel, which, together with the Sanctuary, has a 19th-century floor of Minton tiled floor. The two openings on the south, the priest's door and window, both have plain semicircular rear arches; it is clear from within that the external opening of the window has been widened; the rear arch looks of conventional 12th-century character. The trussed rafter roof has ashlaring and a moulded wall, and scissor-braced rafter pairs.

A second step up leads into the apsidal **Sanctuary** and this is set beneath a second semicircular arch, this time of one plain square order (with several through stones); the imposts and billet-ornamented hood are identical to those of the chancel arch. The NCH describes an ogee-headed recess of 14th century date in the north jamb, but there is no sign of this ever having existed. On the south jamb is an incised cross, within a circle; it is not clear whether this is a consecration cross, or a re-used sepulchral monument.

Within the sanctuary there are square-headed recesses each side wall, that on the south 0.45 m from the west end of the wall and that on the north only 0.28 m; the former appears to have been a piscina with its bowl broken away (there are traces of a central drain) and the latter an aumbry; both are set so low that it appears the floor level has been raised by at least 0.30m.

The apsidal wall of the east end of the Sanctuary has been painted orange up to the level of the window sills. The two-light window on the south clearly replaces an earlier 12th-century light of which the l. jamb and curve of the arch survive. The eastern light has old jambs and one voussoir of its head (the rest being restoration) and the northern light old jambs; its arch is somewhat distorted, which would suggest that it is old, although its stonework might be secondary. All three windows have 19th-century sloping internal sills of ashlar; the two-light window on the south has a tapering slab as its internal lintel, perhaps a medieval grave slab, although no design on it is apparent. One block of the south jamb of the east window has a lewis hole, as has a block in wall above to the north of it. There is an infilled socket just to the r of the east jamb of the north window, and two sockets cut into the east jamb of the southern window. At the top of the wall is a band painted gold with the words 'HOLY HOLY HOLY LORD GOD OF HOSTS'; above that the half-dome of the ceiling is painted blue, with a regular pattern of golden stars.



The apse

The Vestry

Inside the vestry the square-headed north door, which clearly pre-dates it, can be inspected. It has a narrow chamfer to its jambs, most of which are of 19th-century stone but

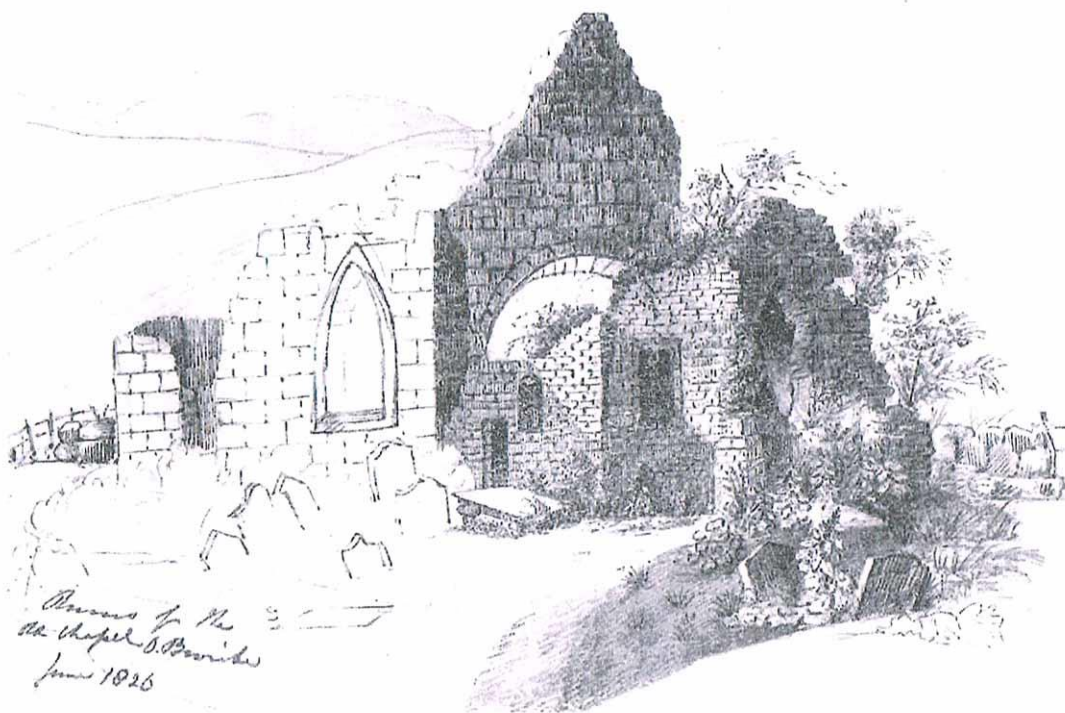
with a few old blocks either surviving or re-used. The square-edged lintel³ bears the incised inscription:

This Chapell Repared at the
Charg oF Ralph Willanison
Esq Anno do 1695

The sill of the east window bears the incised inscription:

‘TWO BELLS FOUND
IN EXCAVATING THE
APSE OF THIS CHAPEL
1850’

and chained to it are two small bronze hand-bells thought to be of late medieval date.



BEWICK CHURCH FROM THE SOUTH-EAST IN 1826.

1826 drawing from Northumberland County History)

³ Clearly placed here in 1867; was it originally over the south doorway, which is shown without a lintel in the 1826 sketch (above).

Structural Analysis

Anciently the church was one of a number of chapels within the parish of Eglington. It has very little recorded history. In 1105 Queen Maud of Scotland gave or confirmed the manor of Bewick to Tynemouth Priory, and from this, and from the quoted similarity between the north capital of the chancel arch and one of the capitals in the late-11th century Norman chapel of Durham Castle which are seen as 'obviously by the same hands' the NCH assumes a late 11th or early 12th century date for the majority of the building, although it leaves open the possibility that the west end is part of a 'still older church'. In fact the capital is only broadly similar to the Durham ones⁴ and might well be a little later.



North Capital of Chancel Arch

The church has no structural features which are stylistically of Anglo-Saxon date⁵; the possible stoup in the south porch is identified by the NCH as 'part of the shaft of an uncarved Anglian cross with triple beads on the angles' but its detailing is not sufficiently distinctive to confirm such an early dating. Having said this, there does seem a sufficient contrast between the heavy well-squared masonry of the south nave wall and the more

⁴ Pers.comm Gemma Lewis, Curator (Durham castle and Museum of Archaeology)

⁵ With the possible exception of the plain square-section plinth/offset at the west end.

massive less regular fabric of the west and perhaps north walls to postulate a change in build. It is worth noting that there is rather similar massive fabric of archaic appearance, with large elongate blocks, nearby at Chillingham, where again the earliest architectural features are Norman rather than Pre-Conquest.

The NCH interprets the slabs with slots cut into them as evidence that 'one of the features of the pre-romanesque church has been a balustrade or parapet resting on a massive stone kerb provided with slots or mortices at intervals'. It seems more likely that these slots are Lewis holes (a means of preparing a block for lifting using a crane and wedges) which are generally held to be characteristic of Roman masonry, and thus imply the re-use of stone from a Roman building.

So, leaving the question open as to whether parts of a pre-c1100 building remain in situ, Old Bewick certainly classes as a little-altered early Norman building, perhaps built or rebuilt under the patronage of Tynemouth Priory in the first quarter of the 12th century; its three-cell plan occurs several times in Northumberland (Bolam, Heddon on the Wall, Seaton Delaval, Thockrington) but is nowhere as well preserved; Old Bewick is the only Northumberland church to preserve an albeit-modified apse; Rock has an apsidal chancel but here the apse seems to be all Victorian rebuild.

A curious remodelling of the apse took place in the later medieval period, with the upper walls being refaced so as to make a square (or more accurately trapezoidal) east end externally, although the apse remained unaltered at ground level except for having two big diagonal buttresses added to support the new superstructure. The south window presumably goes with this modification, and is broadly of 14th or 15th century character, although quite vernacular in form.

Like most Northumberland churches Old Bewick has suffered numerous vicissitudes, although earlier medieval ones relating to the Anglo-Scottish wars have left no direct evidence – unless the 14th/15th century reconstruction of the apse followed such damage. The NCH quotes an 'unauthenticated tradition' that the church was damaged by General Leslie's troop during the Civil War, in 1640 or 1644 and the inscription over the north door (now within the vestry) records a restoration in 1695 by Ralph Williamson, then lord of the manor. A storm is said to have removed the roof not long after, and by the early 19th century the building was a total ruin; an 1826 sketch (NCH 376) shows that the west gable and the upper part of the western section of the south wall of the nave had gone (p.9). There is also a pencil-and-wash sketch of c 1840 in the T.B.Richardson sketch book⁶ which shows the interior looking east. Both these illustrations show a large window in the eastern

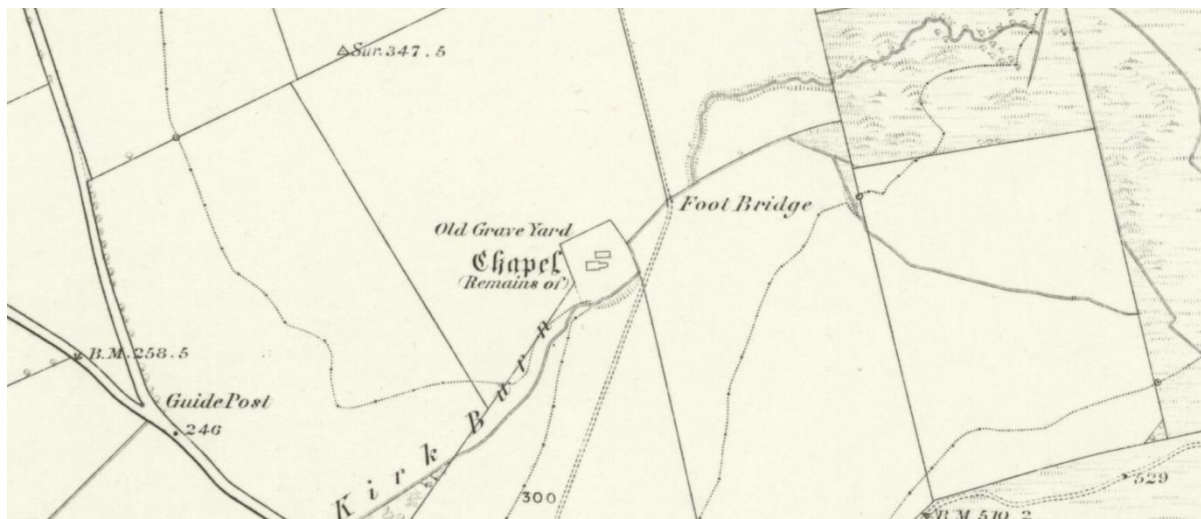
⁶ Northumberland County Archive (Woodhorn) ref ZAN M13/F13 p.,53

section of the south wall, under a pointed arch (by now lacking any of the tracery one might expect from its size and shape) which apparently with a sunk sill internally, and probably also a window with a pointed arch (a heightening of the now-restored 12th-century light) in the east end of the apse; both of these might have been of 14th/15th century date. The 1840 sketch also shows a ragged opening in the north wall which seems too far east to be the present doorway that opens into the vestry, where Honeyman shows a blocked opening in his NCH plan, but of which there is now little sign.

Moves to restore the church began in the mid-19th century. The prime mover was a Mr John Charles Langlands, who in 1850 asked the architect Philip Hardwick to comment on the feasibility of such a task. The NCH quotes a lengthy excerpt from Hardwick's assessment, which is worth reproducing:

'It fortunately happens in this case that so far from the destruction of any one portion of the church, a skilful restorer and one who took a real interest in the work would be able to replace every stone that has fallen and is still left on the ground and in point of fact very little new material besides common walling stones would be required to complete the work. The quality of the stone is excellent and unless too long postponed the progress of decay may be stayed and the church preserved both as an interesting monument and as an useful building for many centuries. The walls and arches that are still standing are in perfectly secure position and the only part that need to be positively taken down is the north-west angle of the nave, a piece of masonry, by the by, I think of a later date than the other part of the nave; very probably it would be found necessary to remove the vault over the Apse, and the Arch that separates it from the chancel but the stones could all be replaced and nothing ought to be done without first placing proper centerings under each. The Edward II. window in the Apse so completely spoils the arrangement of the windows and is of so little interest in itself that it would be better removed and the original window restored⁷ but it would be as well to leave the buttresses, as I mentioned before, they are so curiously constructed and now assist to strengthen the apse'.

⁷ This is typical of the thinking of the period on restorations; thankfully the window was retained.,



The outline of the ruined chapel before restoration is shown on the c 1860 Ordnance Survey 6":1 mile map (above) which also depicts, apparently unmentioned in other sources, the outline of a rectangular building set parallel to and a little north-east of the church.

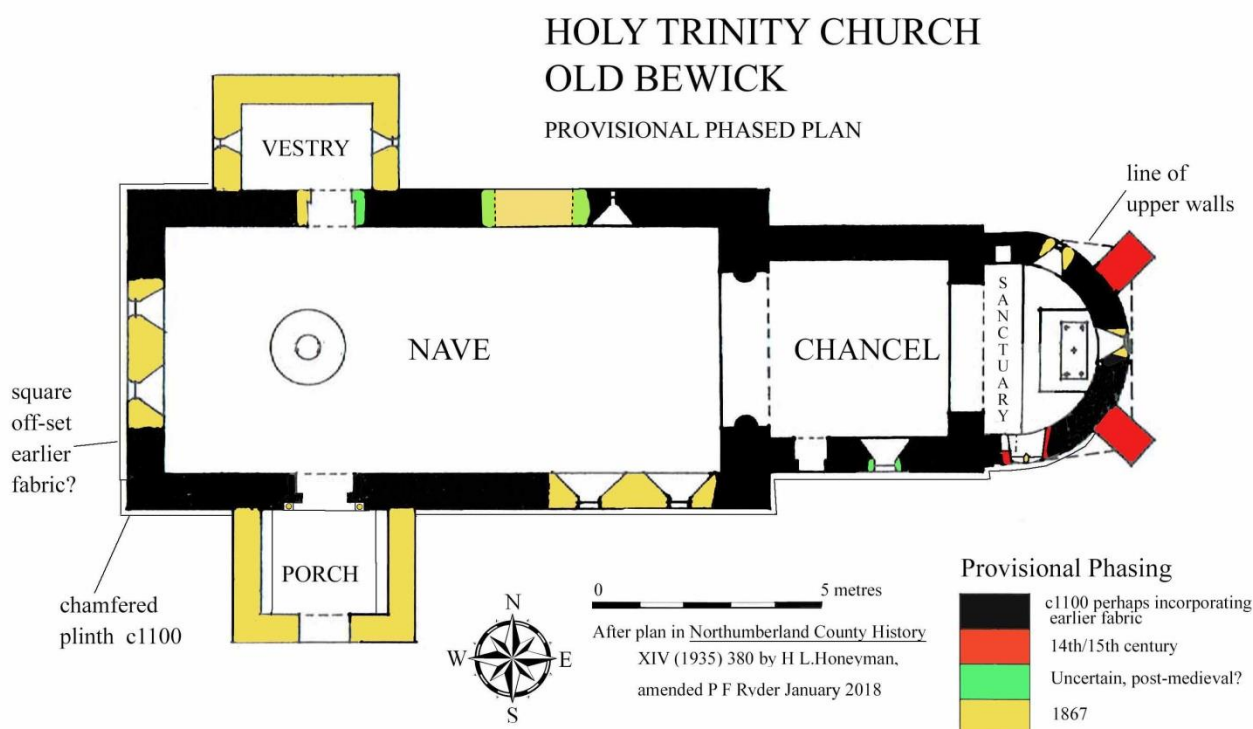
The restoration was carried out in 1866-7, R. Williams being the architect, and the chapel was re-opened on 5th September 1867 and has not been subject to any significant alterations since.

Archaeological Assessment

The above-ground fabric of the church is more or less fully exposed, inside and out so, unless there are major alterations and disturbance of the walling, there is little in the way of concealed archaeology – it might however be noted that with a building as important as this, the creation of stone-for-stone drawings, preferably by photogrammetry, which might be then tentatively marked up showing the extent of the 1867 restoration, would be a useful resource and perhaps enable the building to be better understood.

Inside the church the floors are all Victorian, but the earlier sub-floor deposits probably survive beneath with relatively little disturbance; there is no evidence of there ever having been an underfloor heating system. The level of the putative piscina and ambry in the sanctuary suggests that the medieval floor level was at least 30 cm below the present one, which again bodes well for archaeological survival. Any works that entail disturbance of the floor will then require careful archaeological monitoring, as will any groundworks in the churchyard, in particular on the north side of the building where the c1860 OS map shows a mysterious second structure.

Peter F Ryder January 2018



Appendix 1. Cross Slab Grave Covers (see p.6 footnote 1)

1 is in the nave, on the floor near the vestry door, 2-7 set in the internal west wall of the porch, 8 in the east wall, 9 lying loose in the chancel, 10 (which may actually be a consecration cross) set in the south respond of the sanctuary arch, 11 and 12 in the porch floor, 13 in the external face of the north wall of the chancel and 14 lying west of the south porch.

Old Bewick (Holy Trinity)

