

The Church of St Wilfrid Kirkharle

An Archaeological Assessment
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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



St Wilfred, Kirkharle

The parish church of St Wilfred (NZ 012827) now lacks any village other than a scatter of farms; it stands in rolling countryside, in a landscape that still bears some sign of the 18th century works carried out by Capability Brown on behalf of the Loraine family. Kirkharle lies c 2.5 km south-east of Kirkwhelpington and 200 m south of the A696 a little over 30 km north-west of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Historical Notes

The dedication of the church has given rise to the tradition of an early ecclesiastical site, but there is at present no confirmatory evidence, either historical or archaeological, of this, although there was a church here by the 12th century; in 1165 Walter de Bolbec appointed part of the church of Herla to the newly-founded Blanchland Abbey.

A chantry was founded here by Sir William de Herle in 1336, and the church is said to have fallen into decay and to have been repaired during the reign of Henry IV (1399-1413) by the three co-heiresses of William Strother. Various post-medieval alterations by the Loraine family have been recorded; Thomas ‘timbered the chancel with Irish oak and roofed it with lead’ whilst his son Sir William (d 1743) flagged the earthen floor of the chancel, whilst the parishioners did the same with the nave; Sir William also rebuilt the west gable and porch. During the incumbency of Mr Clarkson (1786-8) the lead roof was replaced by blue slate and the bell turret and porch rebuilt again¹.

Description

The church consists of a broad nave of only two bays, with a western porch (and vestry) and a lower chancel.



The west end of the **Nave** (left) is of good-quality coursed well-squared fawn sandstone, with some breaks in coursing where the re-used medieval fabric of the main wall abuts against the in-situ masonry of the buttresses at either end. The broad shallow-pitched gable has moulded kneelers and a square-section coping, and is capped by a Classical-styled bellcote that has a moulded round arch under an archivolt carried on raised pilasters.

The south wall of the nave is of very similar fabric, although the top three courses and the hollow-chamfered oversailing course at eaves level look like a 19th-century addition. On the south there is a broad chamfered plinth; the adjacent drainage trench also exposes a projecting square footing 0.3 m wide. At the west end of the wall a large stepped buttress with chamfered offsets continues the line of the west end, whilst the south-east angle has a pair of similar

¹The majority of this information is from Hodgson (1827), 235.

buttresses. The wall has two windows, one close to each end. The western is of two lights and the eastern of three; both have trefoil-headed lights and cusped tracery in an early 14th-century style, within a double-chamfered frame and under a moulded hood with carved stops. In each case the tracery is all of relatively recent (late 19th century?) date but the outer frame and hoodmould look like medieval work.

The north side of the nave is again of good squared stone, but here there is a distinctive ‘thin’ course c 1.5 m above the plinth, continued along the north side of the vestry, showing that this utilises a remnant of the north wall of the western part of the nave demolished in the 18th century. On this side the nave has a two-stepped chamfered plinth, with a projecting footing of large cut blocks, which forms a more extensive platform beneath the north-eastern angle buttresses. There are large stepped buttresses in line with the west end, in between the two bays, and paired at the north-east angle. The western buttress looks, above plinth level, like a 19th-century reconstruction. The two windows, of two lights in the western bay and three in the eastern, are similar to those in the south wall but in this case seem entirely late-19th century work, with alternating block jambs of tooled-and-margined ashlar; there are no indications of any earlier openings.

The **Chancel** is of similar fabric to the nave; just below the eaves are two courses of 19th-century ashlar. The plinth however is broader than that of the nave; the manner in which it abuts rather awkwardly on the nave plinth suggests the two may be of different dates. The side walls are of two bays, with large stepped buttresses between them and set diagonally at the eastern angles. At the west end of the south wall (right) is a low-side window with trefoiled ogee head, sunk spandrels and old iron bars. Just beyond is a priest’s door with a pointed arch of two continuous orders, the outer with a hollow chamfer, the inner a straight one, under a simple moulded hood with carved stops. Each bay has a window of three ogee-headed cusped lights with reticulated tracery that seems all restoration, within an old chamfered frame and moulded hood with carved stops; the sill of the western is set higher, to clear the priest’s door below.



The north wall of the chancel has a low-side window at its west end, this time with a two-centred rather than an ogee arch; there is some indication that it may be an insertion. There are also two three-light windows with reticulated tracery, but in this case only the mullions seem to have been restored. The plinth is set on a projecting footing at around ground level.,

The east end of the chancel has a big five-light window with reticulated tracery like those in the side walls, but all its stonework seems 19th century, except perhaps for parts of the outer jambs. The gable above has a square edged coping on simple chamfered kneelers, and a bracelet cross finial.

The West Porch is of tooled-and-margined ashlar, with a thin squared plinth. On the south is a very plain square-headed door and the west a central round-arched window holding a sash, under a pedimented gable with a chimney stack at the apex. On the north is the pent-roofed **Vestry**, its fabric a good match to that of the older porch, with the same style of plinth and moulded coping, and in its west end a square-headed window holding a 12-pane sash in a neat double chamfered surround. A flight of external stone steps descends from the west to a segmental-headed chamfered doorway into the boiler room below, with at the foot of the stair a doorway on the north into a chamber which actually lies beneath the field to the north of the churchyard. The north wall of the vestry, as already mentioned, incorporates a section of the north wall of the demolished western part of the nave, thinned back on its internal face.

The Interior

In the **Porch** one steps down onto a simple flag floor; the walls are of bare stone, and the south door has a timber internal lintel. On the east is the doorway into the nave, a two-centred arch with a double-chamfered surround; most of its dressings are of 19th-century ashlar, but parts of the jambs of the outer order look older. There is a good coffered ceiling of the late 19th century. On the north is a square-headed chamfered doorway into the **Vestry**, which has walls of neatly-tooled ashlar; a diagonal section of wall at the south-west corner clearly contained a fireplace at one time; the ceiling is underdrawn.



Four further steps drop down into the **Nave**, which has a flagstone floor, with boarded areas beneath the pews. The walls of the whole body of the church are of exposed good-quality squared stone, showing a wide selection of medieval mason's marks.. The west door has a segmental-pointed rear arch with a chamfer to the head only, as do all the windows; its jambs, set square to the wall, include some older stonework. There is a 19th-century moulded string at the level of the window sills, which

are all horizontal; although the internal surrounds of the northern windows are both largely of 19th-century character, their jambs show different types of tooling, and their heads could be older.

At the east end of the south wall is a good piscina with a moulded sharply two-centred arch with trefoil cusping, and an octofoil bowl with a stop-chamfered front. To the west is a square aumbry rebated for a recent wooden frame; the present woodwork is recent. There is a similar aumbry under the north jamb of the eastern of the two windows on the north, and in the east wall to the north of the chancel arch a second smaller piscina with a two-centred arch and a damaged octofoil bowl..

The **Chancel** is entered under a two-centred arch of two continuous chamfered orders, the outer with the narrower chamfer; there is no hoodmould. Some irregularities in the coursing around

the arch suggest that it might be an insertion. As in the nave there is an internal string course that looks entirely of 19th-century date; it forms the level sills of the windows, and the internal lintel of the priest's door. The windows in the side walls have segmental-pointed rear arches but without chamfers; the internal east jamb of the eastern of the two on the north is clearly restoration. On the south the low-side window has a slightly asymmetric internal splay, and the internal jambs of the adjacent priest's door are set almost square to the wall. Further east are the triple sedilia (below) with four-centred and trefoiled arches that have sunk quarter-round mouldings, under a moulded hood with carved stops. The sill projects and is chamfered on its



lower edge. East again is a contemporary piscina with a trefoiled arch and a fluted bowl, its projecting front edge somewhat damaged. The internal string steps down beneath the east window, which internally is all 19th-century restoration. It has a moulded rear arch of segmental-pointed form, under a moulded label with turned-back ends.

Both nave and chancel have good quality hammer-beam roofs of 1884²; that of the nave is of four full bays with a half-bay at each end, and has brattished tie beams, lateral arch braces linking the hammer posts, and arch braces below with shields on the ends of the hammer beams, ashlaring and a big brattished plate. The wall-posts rise from ashlar corbels. The chancel roof is similar, and of four bays with a half-bay at the east end.

Structural Development.

Kirkharle is an unusual church for Northumberland in being virtually entirely a building of the first half of the 14th century; the only physical evidence of any preceding structure is a pair of late 12th century cross slabs now standing against the internal face of the north wall of the sanctuary (Ryder 2002, 81 & 110). All the surviving medieval architectural features are of the earlier 14th century, although the discontinuities between the plinths of nave and chancel, and the apparent disturbed masonry around the chancel arch, suggest that there may have possibly been two phases of work.

Hodgson saw the present church as being the result of the recorded repairs c1400, but more recent workers put the reticulated tracery of the surviving chancel windows at around half a century earlier, and link the building instead with the 1336 foundation of a chantry.

It is clear that the 14th-century nave has been shortened; this probably took place during Sir William Loraine's alterations in the first half of the 18th century; at least a bay of the nave, and perhaps also a west tower and south porch, have been lost.

²An architect's drawing of one of the roof trusses, dated 1884, is currently displayed in the porch. The original drawings are in Northumberland County Record Office, but not accessible at the time of the preparation of this report.

Hodgson gives a print showing the church as it appeared in the early 19th century, with sash windows and wooden tracery in the windows on the south of nave and chancel. These windows were all restored in stone in stone during Victorian restoration work, perhaps in 1884; the roofs of that date, and the other late -19th century work, are of high quality. The vestry is probably an addition of this period, and painstakingly matched to the Georgian west porch.

The Churchyard

The present churchyard is trapezoidal in plan, with the church set roughly centrally on the longest boundary, to the north (although the orientation of church and churchyard is really nearer north-east to south-west). The site is on the northern slope of a hill, with the entrance to



the churchyard, at the south-west corner, at the highest point. It is possible that the present plan of the churchyard is the result of 18th-century landscaping; more conventionally one would expect a medieval church to stand towards the centre of a churchyard³. The present west wall and western part of the south wall look to be of 18th century date, as are the gate piers

with their low pyramidal caps and the adjacent mounting block (left). The north wall is more in the nature of a retaining wall, 0.6 m high on the uphill (churchyard) side and c 2 m on the downhill side. Towards the north-west angle, beyond the boiler room stair, there is a raised mound running along its inner face, of uncertain origin; could this be debris from the demolished parts of the medieval church?.

There are a scatter of headstones, mostly of 19th and 20th century date, many in poor condition; there are also two earlier slabs, a recumbent slab carved with a row of three raised bosses a few metres south of the nave, and one with a simple cross further south against the boundary wall (Ryder 2002, 81 and 110) (right) East of the chancel is a large 19th/early 20th century tomb to the Anderson family of Little Harle Tower, in a railed enclosure which is now in poor condition.



³The way in which the footings are exposed along the north wall seems rather odd, as if the natural ground level may have been lowered here (but why?)

Archaeological Assessment.

The present stone flagged floors of the church look of no great age; that in the chancel, with a number of re-set ledger stones, seems relatively recent. Whilst there is an underground boiler beneath the vestry (now disused), the present pipes in the nave are above floor level, although in the chancel there are heating grates alongside the side walls in the western section. It is likely that, as often, central heating systems will have disturbed sub-floor archaeology, which as in most old churches will obviously include many burials.

However, as with any medieval church, any disturbance of floor levels will need to be accompanied by archaeological monitoring. Externally; the 'sensitive area' extends not only to the external perimeter of the building (although the drain around the south side and east end of the building will have destroyed deposits adjacent to the wall faces) but the churchyard to the west as well, as the medieval church extended beyond the present building. The construction of the vestry and boiler room beneath (in 1884?), and the external stair descending to the boiler room, will have destroyed archaeological deposits over part of this area⁴.

Peter F Ryder May 2006

Sources

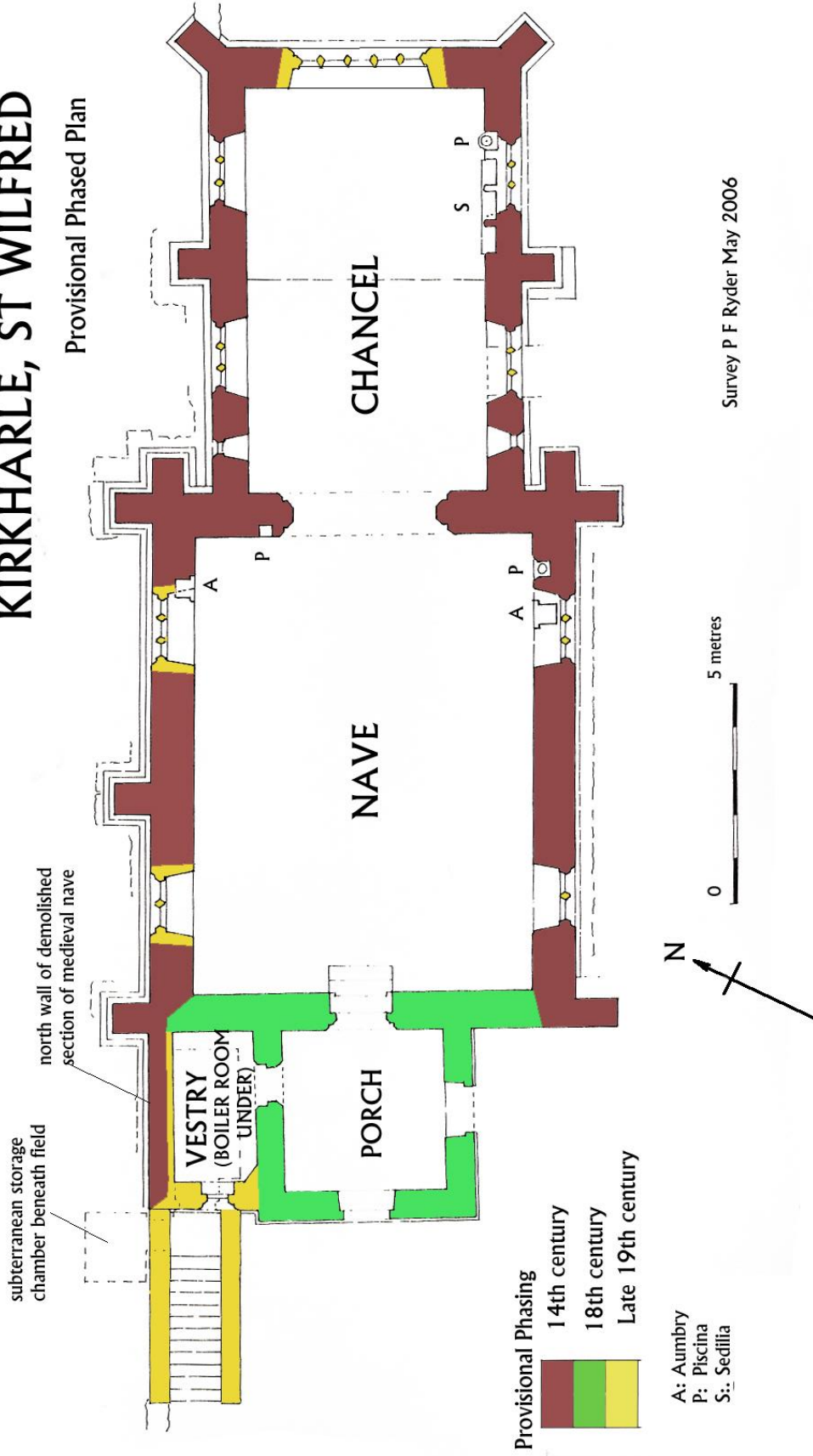
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⁴Documentary research might reveal records of feature seen/destroyed at this time.

KIRKHARLE, ST WILFRED

Provisional Phased Plan



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