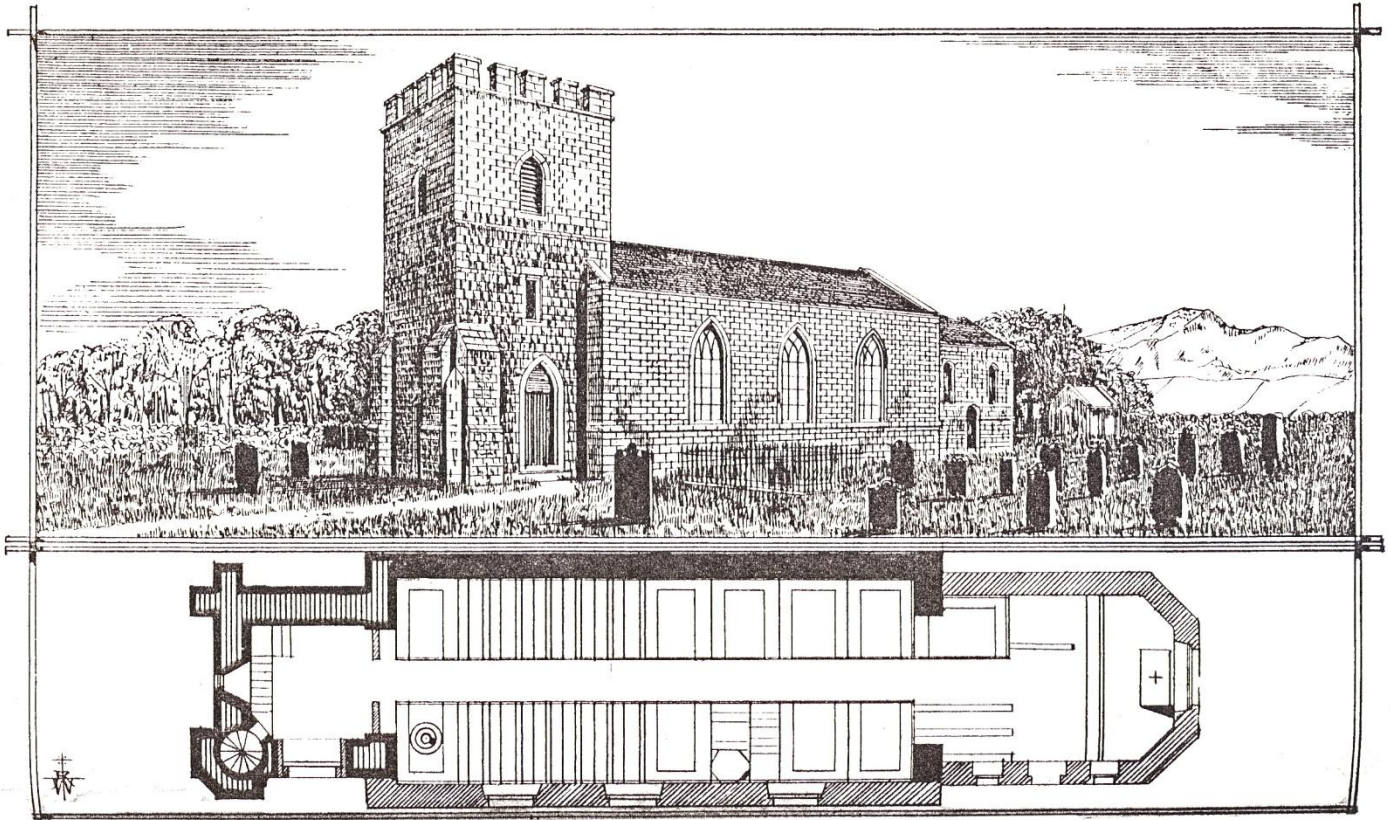


St Michael and All Angels, Ilderton

Archaeological Assessment

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South-west view and plan, after F.R. Wilson 1870

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St Michael and All Angels, Ilderton

Ilderton Parish Church stands roughly at the centre of a sizeable sub-rectangular churchyard, on land that overall slopes away gently to the south, but appears to be ramped up to the north and west walls of the building, which consists of an aisleless nave with a narrower west tower, a chancel with a polygonal eastern apse, and a north-eastern vestry. The most detailed published description of the building is by H.L.Honeyman, in the *Northumberland County History XIV* (1935) 259-262 (hereafter NCH).



The church from the south-east

Description

The Exterior

The tower is almost square in plan and is built of squared pink sandstone; there is no visible plinth but it appears likely that the present ground level is considerably higher than the original. The tower rises in three stages, the second marked by a chamfered set-back on north and south walls. At the western angles of the lower stage are substantial paired and stepped buttresses; those at the south-western angle are broader, and have a canted projection between their outer faces, to accommodate the internal newel stair. The present entrance to the church is in the south wall of the tower, and has boarded double doors under a tall two-centred arch, in a simple square-edged raised surround of similar character to the nave windows, and sheltered by a pendant timber porch of later 19th century character supported by shaped ashlar brackets set in the south-west tower buttress and south-west angle of the nave, and having arch braces, moulded pendants and a slated roof. The west window is an old trefoil-headed lancet with a chamfered surround, its sill only c 0.50 m above the present ground level. The second stage of the tower has what looks to be an original square-headed window, chamfered round, on the south, and an almost square opening with a narrow chamfer on the west that looks of 18th or early 19th century date.

The third (belfry) stage of the tower has clearly been rebuilt in rather better-squared stone, from two courses above the chamfered set-back; it has a plain square-edged Gothic-arched opening in each face, and is topped by a thin string course and simple battlements, with an arched coping.

The nave is built of squared stone (again pink sandstone) the courses varying somewhat in height and having a roughly pecked finish. There is a shallow square-edged plinth, and, on the south, a band at the level of the sills of the three windows which have tall openings with two-centred openings, within raised surrounds that have simple square impost; they now hold simple wooden tracery of later 19th century date, and leaded glazing. The NCH description mentions a 'step' at the foot of the wall 'about 26 feet from the west end' (shown on their plan as beneath the central window) which is interpreted as the sill of a door or window surviving in in-situ medieval walling. This is no longer visible; there is a rough projecting footing below the 18th-century plinth, but it is now virtually submerged by the gravel of the adjacent path.

The north wall, by contrast, has only a plinth, and is of unbroken masonry; the courses are similar in height to those of the south wall, and the tooling similar, but the blocks are more square and almost certainly re-used medieval ones. The gables have a coping, chamfered on the underside, carried on simple shaped kneelers of 18th century character.

The rather narrower chancel with its polygonal eastern apse is of broadly similar fabric to the nave, and replicates the plinth and sill band, but closer inspection shows that the blocks have a slightly-different finish. The two-centred priest's door on the south and the sharply-pointed lancet windows to each side of it have narrow chamfers to their surrounds; the dressings of their arches have a neat parallel tooling, closer than that of the surrounds of the nave windows. The east window is clearly secondary; it has dressings of yellow sandstone ashlar, and is in the Geometrical style with three trefoiled lights and a big six-foiled circle in the head, under a moulded hood with foliate terminals. On the north of the chancel the pent-roofed vestry is again of tooled-and-margined stone, but looks later again; it has a simple plinth. In the east wall is a two-centred doorway with a short lancet window to the north, and there are two more similar windows on the north, all with narrow chamfered surrounds that have a similar parallel tooling to the openings on the south of the chancel..

The Interior.

The doorway opens, through a small lobby contrived within the considerable thickness of the wall,. Into the base of the tower where the walls are of exposed coursed stone, although heavily pointed; in the north wall there is a single course of much thinner blocks at approximately the same level as the impost of the tower arch; the walling above is of well-squared blocks, probably a later re-facing of the ragged core left when an original vault was removed. It is immediately obvious, from the levels of the sill of the west window and the truncated shape of the tower arch, that the present stone slab floor is considerably higher than the medieval one; there is a sunken area against the west wall with stone steps dropping c 1.5 m down to an underfloor heating chamber which is at around the original floor level, just below the sill of the square-headed doorway into the tower newel stair, set diagonally at the south-west corner. The west window has a shouldered segmental-pointed rear arch; the tower arch is of two-centred form, with a simple narrow chamfer, springing from projecting impost only c 0.5 m above the present floor; they are much mutilated, but have had a hollow chamfer with a roll moulding above.

The stone slab floor under the tower is relatively recent, but includes a re-used 14th-century cross slab grave cover, lacking its head¹

The doorway to the tower stair, its lintel somewhat mutilated, opens into a small lobby; a slab above has a chamfered edge and may have been a grave cover, but no design remains; the first slab roofing the stair proper (now broken) is also a probable grave cover, set face upwards, but with its roll-moulded edge visible. The steep and narrow stair twists up to a short straight length opening under another simple square-headed doorway into the upper section of the tower, which is now open up to the roof which has a north-south valley. There is a substantial set-back at the base of the rebuilt upper stage, but no floor; a simple 19th or early 20th century frame carries a single bell. The southern window of the second stage has a mixture of stone and old timber lintels; the square opening in the west wall and another at the same level in the east wall, without cut dressings, both have had some modern concrete lintels inserted. The four belfry openings all have jambs set square to the wall and roughly arched internal heads.

The internal walls of the nave are plastered, above a boarded dado; the plain plaster ceiling is underdrawn. The three windows on the south all have two-centred rear arches, plastered over. The nave roof structure, only accessible from the opening in the east wall of the second stage of the tower, is of eight bays, with shallow-pitched trusses that have collars, two levels of purlins, and a lozenge-section ridge carried between the overlapped ends of the principals.

The chancel arch is semicircular, and springs from imposts with narrow chamfers above and below; below these the jambs are boarded over. The arch, of parallel-tooled ashlar, has a narrow chamfer with broach stops above the imposts and on either side of a square keystone with a sunk faceted panel; east and west faces are identical.

The chancel walls are again plastered; the priest's door on the south has a shallow triangular rear arch and the windows plastered rear arches which follow their external form; on the north is a two-centred doorway to the vestry. The chancel has an exposed roof structure; there are two collar-beam trusses, with wall posts and arch braces rising from on moulded ashlar corbels, with pendants where the braces join the collar, and king-struts and arched struts above; there is a ridge, two levels of purlins and a moulded wall plate. Over the apse are four principals carried on smaller ashlar corbels.

The vestry is plastered internally, with an underdrawn ceiling; the two doorways, into the chancel and in the east wall, have segmental-pointed rear arches. To the west of the doorway into the chancel is a plain square-headed opening, concealed by the organ on the opposite face of the wall.

¹ Another medieval slab, currently turned face down, lies outside the west wall of the tower, along with the head of a medieval lancet window.



Interior looking west

Historical Notes²

The church may well be of Pre-Conquest origin; if the present nave stands on the foundations of its predecessor then its proportions might imply an early date. The dedication to St Michael and All Angels is also sometimes indicative of an early origin, and possibly of a site that had pre-Christian religious significance.

1121 The church of 'Hildretune' is given by Walter Espec to the Augustinian canons of Kirkham Priory.

1312 It is recorded that the church had recently been burned by the Scots (perhaps in 1296)

1578 Thomas of Ilderton left money for the repair of the church including 'my owne porche'.

1663 The church is recorded as 'ruinous'

1715 John Warburton reported that the only part of the church used was 'the middle aisle' and this was roofed in turf.

1723 Archdeacon Thomas Sharpe ordered the construction of 'an entire new roof of flags laid on the old stone arch'.

1769 A series of letters by J.Sharp (Northumberland County Archive ref EP 39/15) relate to the proposed rebuilding of the church. The chancel had lain in ruins 'time out of mind' but its foundations were

² Taken from NCH, unless otherwise stated.

‘sufficiently open’ to discern its original dimensions of 37ft by 16 ft. There was some debate as to whether it should be rebuilt to its full length – or whether it should even be rebuilt at all.

1779 Further letters in the same collection show the problem had not been resolved, and the chancel had not yet been rebuilt: ‘the workmen (when building the church) waited for some time before they closed in the east end but were obliged to finish at last; however to the best of my remembrance, there is an arch left in the east wall, and filled, which will soon be opened out, whenever a chancel is added’.

1870 The church is described and illustrated (a plan and a south-west view) by the Alnwick Architect F.R.Wilson³.

1878 The church is restored; the faculty papers are in the Northumberland County Archive, but do not preserve the architect’s name.

Structural History

It seems reasonable to assume that the present nave stands on the foundations of its predecessor. The NCH identifies the footings of the south wall as in situ medieval fabric, and the 18th century correspondence relating to the rebuilding of the chancel implies that its east wall is in the old position. The long and narrow proportions of the nave may well imply a Pre-Conquest origin, but there is no firm evidence of this.

If the original church at Ilderton was indeed Pre-Conquest, it is likely that it was remodelled and extended in the 12th and 13th century. Thanks to the 18th century letters we know the dimensions of the medieval chancel – 37 by 16 ft – which would tally well with a 13th century construction. Northumberland has a number of lengthy 13th century chancels, the product of both liturgical developments and a period of relative peace and prosperity prior the ‘Three Hundred Years War’ with Scotland that wrought such devastation in the area.

The NCH account interprets the west wall of the nave as of late 12th or early 13th century date, and the tower as a later 13th century addition. This argument is made on the basis of the corbels of the shouldered rear arch of the west window being seen as having been re-used from an earlier and narrower window, from which the lancet head which now lies in the churchyard outside the wall derives – rather tenuous evidence. An early 14th century date for the tower, after the recorded destruction by the Scots (1296?) seems more likely.

Wilson’s earlier description sees nave and chancel as ‘of Georgian architecture’ , but with stones ‘of Norman fashioning’ being re-used in their north walls; however, his plan shows the north and east walls of the nave in solid black, implying in-situ survival of early work. The NCH comments on this, and states that the date of the chancel arch could not be determined as it was concealed by plaster; it is now clear, and very obviously an 18th century piece.

Returning to the west tower, there seems to be some evidence that a vault has been removed from its lower stage; the course of thin blocks in the north wall could well relate to its springing, and the congruity of the tower arch and the rear arch of the west window might be another indicant.

For any further information on the medieval church we must turn to the rather enigmatic references quoted in the NCH. The 1723 new roof of stone flags laid on ‘the old stone arch’ is interesting; although the NCH opines that ‘the nave is not likely to have been vaulted’ there are several examples of vaults in the county, eg Bellingham, Elsdon and Kirk Newton, and formerly at Corsenside. Most of these seems to be of late medieval date (15th or 16th century), and clearly relate to the need for a fire-proof (and perhaps defensible)

³ An Architectural Survey of the Churches in the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne, 80-81

construction a time when raiding was frequent. A stone vault would seem the most likely construction to have supported the turf roof recorded in 1715, when the term ‘middle aisle’ must refer to the nave; the 1769 letters make it clear that the chancel had long been in ruins, probably since the medieval period.

The Ilderton ‘porch’ mentioned in 1578 sounds like a chantry chapel, which could have been on the north or south of either nave or chancel; despite its 16th century repair it was clearly either demolished or a roofless ruin by the early 18th century.

Despite periodic repair and re-roofing the much-patched old church was clearly in poor condition again by the later 18th century and it was decided to rebuild, retaining only the lower parts of the old tower. The nave and upper part of the tower were rebuilt around 1770; the surviving correspondence shows that rebuilding had been planned in 1769, and that by 1779 the writer used to phrase ‘to the best of my remembrance’ implying that works had taken place some time before. However, in 1779 the problem of who would finance a rebuilding of the chancel had still not been solved. It is not clear when it was finally constructed; when it was built its opening did not follow the simple Gothic form of those in the nave, but had four-centred arches. It might even be as late as the beginning of the 19th century.

One of the most intriguing features of the rebuilding is the raising of the floor level, as dramatically demonstrated by the flight of steps descending to the small area of original floor remaining under the tower. The reason for the change may result from two factors, the natural elevation of the ground within the churchyard, and the need to dispose of excess stonework from the old building (further indirect evidence for a vaulted nave). The ground to the south of the church is now more or less level with the floor within (is there a spread of demolition material from the old church on this side?) but on the west and north it rather looks as if earth has been heaped up against the building.

Wilson provides a good record of the church as it stood in 1870. The nave windows were small-paned sashes with intersecting glazing bars, whilst the east window had ‘thirty six small panes of glass in it, besides those in the low four-centred arched heading’. He describes the doorway and windows on the south of the chancel as having ‘the same character of configuration’, and this is also apparent from his illustration. His plan also shows the configuration of the stalls and pews within the building, which he stated included ‘both square pews and rows of sittings. The pulpit, which is composed of two stages and a sounding-board above, with a place for the clerk below, is in the centre of the south side of the nave’.

The 1878 restoration brought the church into very much the state we see it today. The vestry was added, the chancel openings all reworked in a more suitable Gothic style – although the new east window with its yellow ashlar and Geometrical tracery is quite out of character with the rest of the church, and the open porch/canopy over the south door was added. Internally the fittings and furnishings were virtually entirely renewed, only the font of 1727 surviving the reordering.

Archaeological Assessment.

With any ancient church there is always a strong probability that structural remains and deposits of archaeological significance will survive below the present floor, and will need to be carefully monitored in the event of any works entailing their disturbance. In many ancient buildings, successive alterations and improvements tended to see floor levels raised, until the 19th century when restorations often saw them returned to more or less their original level. At earlier dates there was more of a tendency to simply rebuild on top of what had gone before, and this is certainly what happened c1770 at Ilderton, where it appears that the lower walls of the medieval nave were retained, but the floor level raised c 1.2 m and external ground level raised so that all earlier fabric was concealed.

It thus seems likely that the sub-surface remains of what was clearly an extremely interesting medieval church are potentially very well preserved indeed, which makes archaeological vigilance essential. This also goes for any works adjacent to the external periphery of the church, which might well expose early plinths, bases of buttresses etc, the footings of the lost Ilderton Porch, or of the eastern part of the medieval chancel.

The internal walls of the 18th century parts of the church are all covered by plaster; any renewal of this should be monitored, as it could well conceal wall decoration or painted texts of late 18th or 19th century date, or re-used lapidary material in the underlying stonework. The internal walls of the lower part of the tower are of interest, but heavily pointed; any re-pointing here again should be monitored, as it may allow a detailed recording of the fabric that might reveal significant historic features.

The medieval grave slab and the head of the lancet window which are currently lying outside the west wall of the tower are of considerable interest, and merit being taken inside for their preservation, although not stood near pipes or a source of heat which could possibly cause damage.

