

The Church of St Cuthbert

Corsenside

An Archaeological Assessment

January 2012

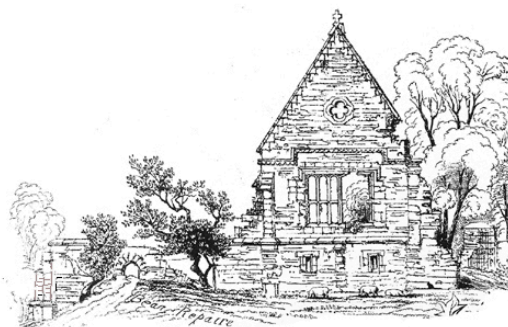


The church seen from the north-west

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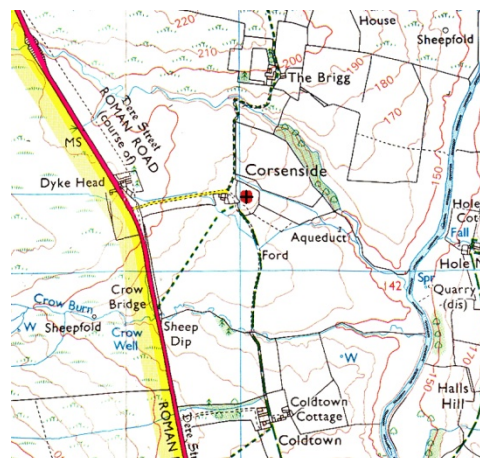
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The Church of St Cuthbert, Corsenside

The parish church of St Cuthbert, Corsenside (NGR NY 890289813) lies c 400m east of the Roman Dere Street (now the A68) c 2.5 m north of West Woodburn; the parish is very much one of dispersed settlements, and only one farm lies close to the church, on the west, otherwise the church stands solitary, high on the west side of the valley of the River Rede.

The dedication – traditionally referring to this being one of the resting places of the body of St Cuthbert in the late 9th century - and the place name, which may indicate an early cross (or alternatively the personal name ‘Crossa’) – both may indicate an early date. There are firmer historical references to a church here in 1120, and in 1311 when the Bishop of Durham granted it to the nuns of Holystone.



Location Map from OS 1:25000 Explorer sheet OL42 OS map licence 100045703

Description

The building is a simple one of nave and chancel, with a south-west porch and a small pent outbuilding on the north of the nave; its proportions are long and low, with the ground falling gently towards the east

The nave measures c13.4 by 5.2 m internally, with side walls c 1.1 m thick; the chancel, 7.1 by 4.6 m, has walls c 0.75 m thick. The walls are largely of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone, and are much obscured externally by heavy pointing; the external face of the north wall is best seen inside the pent outbuilding, where its lower part is of large roughly-shaped blocks and its upper of well-coursed quite elongate thin stones. The roofs of the nave and south porch are of graduated grey Lakeland slates, that of the chancel of artificial slates, and that of the outbuilding Welsh slate.

The Exterior

The west end of the **Nave** has substantial well-squared alternating quoins. The west window has a simple Gothic arch with a narrow chamfer framing margined fixed glazing of late 19th-century character. The gable above has a square-edged coping, and a stepped bellcote that looks of 18th century date, which has a keyed semicircular arch and a shallow-pitched gable that has moulded eaves and a ball finial; on the east face there is a vertical groove below the opening, to accommodate the bell rope.

The porch is set at the west end of the south wall of the nave, and is built of coursed pecked stone with ashlar dressings; its outer opening has a two-centred arch with a continuous hollow chamfer, and a hollow-chamfered hood with turned-back ends. East of the porch are four identical square-headed windows (below), similar to the west window in having very



narrow chamfers to their surrounds, and margined glazing. A number of monuments have been set on or against the wall; between the easternmost two windows is a large tablet to a Matthew Reed, d.1755, flanked by fluted pilasters carrying a dentil

cornice. The east end of the wall is peculiar; 0.70 m short of the actual south-east corner of the nave the wall face steps in 0.30 m; the quoining to this step (which seems to indicate an external thickening, see 'structural history' section) and that at the actual angle of the nave are very similar, of roughly-shaped alternating blocks. A modern drainage trench has been formed along the whole length of the south side of the church, which exposes a block of projecting footings beneath the step rather than the actual corner of the nave, and another beneath the Reed monument. The actual corner has a narrow chamfered plinth, continuous with that beneath the chancel wall; to the west this disappears behind the added thickening.

The north wall of the nave is absolutely plain, without any external indication of blocked openings; the attached outbuilding is set west-of-centre, and is featureless other than having a plain door at the south end of its east wall. At the east end of the wall is a stepped buttress of 19th-century ashlar. The east gable of the nave has a plain square-edged coping.

The chancel is of coursed stone, less heavily pointed than elsewhere, with quite square blocks of broadly 12th century character; its eastern quoins are no larger than walling stones. Near the west end of the south wall is a priest's door that has a shallow triangular head within a chamfered square frame, perhaps of c1700, and further east is a square-headed window, a shortened sash (8 panes above, 4 below) with jambs that have a small external rebate, and a parallel-tooled lintel that looks relatively recent. The jambs of both the priest's door and the window both course in quite well with the adjacent walling. At the foot of the wall, only partly exposed above the slab base of the modern perimeter drain, is a small chamfered plinth, which at the east end continues a short distance beyond the line of

the external face of the present east wall, and then returns north (right) At each end of the east wall there is a projecting footing at the present ground level, which is c 0.50 m above the top of the plinth exposed in the drainage trench¹. In the centre of the east wall is



a three-light window with simple intersecting tracery in tooled ashlar that is clearly of the later 19th century. The gable above has a raised coping of triangular blocks, of a form familiar in 17th/18th century vernacular buildings in the area. The north wall, like that of the nave, is devoid of any architectural features

The Interior

There is a step down into the south porch, and then two more from the porch into the nave; the floor of the church, which is level between the west end and the sanctuary, is thus towards 0.60 m below the external ground level. The porch has a roof of collared rafter pairs with ashlaring, and encloses the south door, which has quite a tall elliptical arch with a narrow chamfer and a stepped keystone bearing the incised date '1735'. Internally the doorway has a segmental rear arch; there is a clear vertical break between the coursing of the internal splay of the west jamb of the door and that of the west end of the nave.

The internal walls of the church are all now bare of plaster; the fabric is much more clearly visible inside than out. The north wall of the nave is of especial interest; there are courses of large roughly-squared blocks to a height of c 2 m, than above that thinner and better-coursed stone. Looking at the wall face in profile, there is a slight inward curve just below the junction between the two fabric types, above which the wall face is vertical. Turning to the west gable end (where the west window has a segmental rear arch, and an internal recess carried down to floor level) this break in fabric type corresponds to the point at which what at first sight appears to be an early gable line meets the side walls. This line, formed by a clear break in coursing) is in fact slightly curved. Has this in fact been a gable-line, one would have expected it to be visible in the external face of the wall (despite the heavy

¹ The implication seems clearly that the plinth survives in situ from the 12th century chancel, as may one course above, but the walling above that has been rebuilt, doubtless re-using old stone, when the ground level was at least 0.50 m higher – see 'Structural Development' section. A fragment of older walling – fabric that stands out a few cm from the present wall face – seems to survive in situ at the extreme west ends of both side walls.

pointing) but it is not. The implication, confirmed by the break-in-profile of the internal face of the north wall, is that we are looking at the line of a removed tunnel-vault (below) . Corresponding evidence may exist on the east wall of the nave (and be hidden by the two large Commandments tablets) although it may well be that this wall pre-dates the vault, which might simply have butted up against it.

In the western bay of the nave the side walls rise to an underdrawn ceiling at a height of 4.5 m; over the remainder there is a lower ceiling carried by the tie-beams of the roof, at 3.4 m. Within the loft/roof space the tops of the side walls are in fact at tie-beam level, around a metre below that of the ceiling in the western bay.



The tie beams are in fact at the external eaves level (the north end of the westernmost is exposed externally), so that the inner wall face of the western bay is around a metre above the outer. The stonework of this topmost section of the internal walls is quite distinctive, being of well-squared blocks of brownish/greenish sandstone. On the north there are clear indications of a blocked opening in the north wall at this level, just below the eaves ; the west jamb, in large squared blocks, is very clear, whilst the east jamb is in much smaller stone; this is all of course above the level of the external eaves.

The south side of the nave is of broadly similar fabric, although now largely occupied by the four square-headed windows, which have timber lintels; the internal jambs of the easternmost appear to continue some distance below the present sill. The internal splays of all four windows all show the same irregularity, suggesting that rather narrower openings have been widened to their present form.

The east wall of the nave² contains the earliest feature in the building, the 12th-century chancel arch. This is a plain arch, semicircular but now a little distorted, of one square order, springing from an impost band, square above and chamfered below. The band is returned on the east face of the wall; any evidence of its return on the west face is now concealed by the Commandments tablets, but on this side there do seem to be fragments of a cut-back hoodmould. The wall on either side of the arch is of large quite square blocks, quite distinct from any other fabric in the church, and clearly of one build with the arch itself. Each of the

² Which tellingly is a little thinner (0.96m) than the other walls – bolstering the theory that these have been thickened (see ‘structural history’ section).

responds has a vertical pair of small square sockets, set centrally, one c 1.5 m above the floor and the other immediately above the impost. Above the ceiling the west face of the wall (only observed from a distance) is plastered, although there are possible traces of a central opening.

The chancel arch from the west; note traces of cut-back hoodmould



The nave roof is of six bays, with collared trusses, apparently of sawn softwood, carrying two levels of purlins and a diagonally-set ridge carried between the overlapping ends of the principals; it all appears relatively recent

Inside the chancel, the priest's door has some very large blocks in its jambs, and a 19th-century internal lintel; there are possible traces of an infilled drawbar tunnel in its jambs. The window further east has quite a broad internal splay and a slightly lowered internal sill. There are no signs of any medieval ritual arrangements (eg piscina or sedilia) in the south wall, but opposite in the otherwise-featureless north wall is a square aumbry with a simple external rebate all round. There are two steps up to the sanctuary; the east window has a simple pointed rear arch.

The chancel has a three-bay roof, with slightly cambered tie-beams (possibly of 17th or 18th century date); its upper parts are concealed by an underdrawn plaster ceiling about a metre above the ties, perhaps carried by collars.

Structural History

Corsenside Church has attracted little attention from architectural historians, usually being dismissed as having been rebuilt apart from its chancel arch. It is in fact a building of very considerable interest, with a complex medieval and post-medieval building history that takes some untangling.

The chancel arch is clearly Norman, and of a very simple form; it has been ascribed a date as early as the late 11th century, but is probably more safely put into the 12th. How much else of the Norman church survives? The wall in which it is set seems contemporary with the

arch, at least in its lower sections, and the south-east angle of the nave has a chamfered plinth of typical 12th century form. On the east face of the wall the return of the impost band indicates that the 12th century chancel was as wide as the present one, and the continuation of the chamfered plinth visible (just) in the perimeter drain on the south of the chancel confirms this. It looks as if the wall above this (except perhaps for the first course) has been rebuilt, probably re-using older squared stones (although ones considerably smaller than those in the chancel arch wall). The rebuilt wall is probably rather thinner than the original, as the return of the plinth at the south-east corner is c 0.15 m outside the present external face of the east wall.

The masonry of the nave seems quite different, and represents at least two (and probably more) different structural phases. Its lower walls contain some larger and elongate roughly-shaped blocks quite different to those in the chancel, difficult to date precisely; they might be roughly paralleled both by pre-Conquest and late medieval (16th/17th century) work, but presence of fabric of this type in what is clearly a thickening of the 12th century south wall of the nave indicates the latter.

One of the most interesting features of the nave is that there is clear evidence for its being vaulted, which rather surprisingly does not seem to have been noted previously³. This is almost a defensible, or at last a fire-proofing move, related to the troubled later medieval and early post-medieval period. Quite a number of Northumberland churches have defensible features, and two in parishes adjacent to Corsenside, Bellingham and Elsdon, have vaults – at Bellingham, over the nave and south transept, and at Elsdon over the aisles; further north Kirknewton has vaults over chancel and south transept. The vaults at Elsdon may be part of a late 16th century reconstruction, and at Bellingham of early 17th century date. At Corsenside the double-stepped south-east angle of the nave seems likely to indicate an external thickening of the wall, presumably made to take the weight of an inserted vault. Was the north wall of the nave similarly thickened? The discontinuity between the 12th-century fabric of the east wall and the quite different wall fabric of the north suggests a rebuilding rather than a simple thickening on this side. On the internal face the more thinly-coursed upper masonry clearly post-dates the vault, but there seems a similar change in fabric externally, suggesting that the upper part of the wall may have been completely rebuilt rather than just refaced on the inside. The blocked opening visible internally near the west end of the wall is a real puzzle. The only interpretation would seem to be that the wall has been considerably reduced in height; so does this high-level opening relate to an early nave prior to the insertion of the vault, or, more intriguingly, to a high-level chamber set above the vault? This would suggest that the nave was converted into a

³ Except for the Pastoral Measure Report prepared by Joseph Elders, Archaeology Officer for the Council for the Care of Churches (2002, copy in church). He sees the vault as Norman, and saw possible traces of one in the chancel as well.

structure analogous to the local bastle houses that have living accommodation set above a vaulted basement⁴.

Thus the earlier nave of Corsenside was converted into a thick-walled defensible retreat, possibly around c1600, probably intended to be used as a communal refuge at a time when raiding and reiving were frequent. What form the chancel took at this stage is uncertain; the present relatively thin-walled version would seem inappropriate; it would seem quite likely that it was demolished, and the chancel arch walled up.

The vault at Corsenside only seems to have existed for a century or so; perhaps its weight caused structural problems. The present south door is dated 1735; from its height it would seem to have been inserted when or after the vault was removed. The bellcote could well be of the same date. It is possible that there was a complete reconstruction of the church at this stage, including the rebuilding of the chancel⁵, and the insertion of the present nave windows, although the four on the south do seem to have been widened somewhat, possibly in the earlier 19th century. Hodgson's 1827 account (*History of Northumberland* Vo.2, 170) 'the windows are at present all square-headed, and had stone mullions, and glass in lead, till about 17 years since, when they were sashed' may well date the alterations to the windows to c1810.

Further works took place in the later 19th century; the south porch, the present nave roof and the east window of the chancel may all be of this period.

Archaeological Assessment

As in many old churches, there remain two areas of uncertain archaeological potential - the sub-floor deposits (which here will never have been disturbed by the creation of an underfloor heating system) and the above-ground fabric. Any disturbance of sub-floor deposits, which will clearly necessitate an archaeological watching brief. The internal wall faces are largely bare of plaster, except for the east wall of the nave above the under-drawn ceiling; if this is ever stripped, then some recording will be essential as this wall face may hold clues to the insertion and removal of the nave vault.

This disturbance of ground levels outside the building may also require monitoring, although a drainage trench alongside the south wall is already present. It seems unlikely that there are remains of further sections of the church beyond its present perimeter, although it should be borne in mind that many Northumberland churches lost aisles, transepts and porches during the troubled later medieval period (eg Kirkwhelpington), and we know little about the 12th century church here other than the positions of the east end of its nave and its chancel.

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⁴ Bastles are relatively small vernacular buildings, and only a minority are vaulted. Perhaps a better parallel would be the 'strong houses' that have basement vaults, like Akeld and Pressen in northern Northumberland.

⁵ The priest's door looks earlier in style than the distinctly Georgian '1735' south door, but this might only reflect a slightly less prestigious function – or it could have been re-used from some slightly earlier building.

Provisional Phasing

- 12th century
- Uncertain/late medieval 1735?
- 19th century

ST CUTHBERT, CORSENSIDE

Provisional Phased Ground Plan

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