

The Parish Church of St Aidan, Bamburgh

Analysis of the Fabric and Archaeological Assessment

Bamburgh parish church consists of a five-bay aisled nave with a western tower, transepts, and an aisleless chancel with a crypt beneath its east end.

The **West Tower** is built of squared and coursed stone, mostly pinkish in colour except for the top stage (above its two lowest courses) which is in white sandstone. Virtually all this stonework is 19th-century re-facing, whilst the top stage is a mid-19th century addition. The tower has a chamfered plinth, and rises in four stages of varying height, divided by chamfered set backs. The first and tallest stage rises above the aisles, which engage the side walls of the tower. On the west of it are a pair of stepped buttresses, and between them, set to the south of centre to clear the stair, the west window has Y-tracery with trefoiled cusping beneath a two-centred arch, and a moulded hood with turned-back ends; all its dressings are of parallel-tooled ashlar, and of 19th century date, except for the sill, which seems to survive from an older window c. 0.20 m wider. To the north is a vertical series of three small chamfered square-headed windows lighting the stair; in the second stage is a smaller rectangular opening without any chamfer, which is probably a secondary insertion. This stage has a chamfered square-headed window on the south, looking out above the south aisle roof, and a similar opening above the low-pitched nave roof on the east. On each face of the third stage of the tower, which is in fact the belfry, there is an almost door-like segmental-pointed opening, with a chamfered surround. The added top stage has narrow trefoil-cusped lancets in broad chamfered surrounds. The parapet, set forward on a series of plain block corbels, has a crenellated parapet with moulded copings only to the merlons.



The only sections of the **Nave** walls exposed externally are above the aisle roofs, and the eastern gable; all these are clearly 19th-century fabric, of elongate blocks of grey stone, and are capped by moulded copings, with a finial cross on the gable.

The broad **South Aisle** has a flat roof. Its west wall of neatly coursed and squared pinkish stone has a chamfered plinth continuous with that of the tower, and a moulded coping. It has a two-light window of the

same type as that in the tower (again with pre-19th century stonework surviving only in its sill), and a stepped buttress at its south end; the wall has a moulded coping.

The south wall of the aisle displays a variety of fabric types. Towards its west end, and set between two small stepped buttresses, is a small two-centred doorway with a chamfered surround and a moulded hood with turned-back ends; parts of the jambs of the doorway look old but its upper part and the buttresses seem all restoration. Above the doorway is a sundial

dated '1828' with a Latin motto. Beyond the second buttress is a two-light window of the usual type; above its head is a break in the fabric, which extends up through the parapet, which on this wall has a chamfered oversailing course below it. Everything to the west is grey stone (perhaps 19th-century re-facing) except for some older work in the lower courses. To the east is creamier stone with the odd pink block; this section contains the main entrance to the church, a big two-centred arch with four continuous hollow chamfers and a moulded hood, holding boarded double doors with good decorative ironwork; all its stonework is restoration. To the east of the door are two three-light windows with cusped reticulated tracery, in double-chamfered surrounds and under moulded hoods with turned-back ends; once again all their external stonework is restoration, but between them is an interesting old stepped buttress, its upper part having chamfered angles with carved stops above and below. The NCH sees this as a 13th-century feature re-set when the aisle was widened in the 14th century.

In contrast to the aisle, the **South Transept** is of coursed and squared pinkish stone, with a lot of quite elongate blocks. There seems to be a remnant of a chamfered plinth at the south end of the short west wall, with possible traces of a cut-back continuation crossing the south end. The parapet is set on an oversailing chamfered course at a slightly-higher level than that on the adjacent aisle; this course runs horizontally across the south end wall, the shallow gable above having a 19th-century coping on hollow-chamfered kneelers. Below is another three-light window with reticulated tracery like those in the aisle, except that here parts of the jambs may be old.

The east wall of the transept has a rough plinth running its full length, c 0.50 m high but stepping up at its north end; the wall above is of coursed squared stone, with extensive re-facing in the centre between two more three-light windows; these differ from those so far described in having slightly-raised surrounds to their jambs and sills above; their dressings are all in parallel-tooled fawn ashlar, except for parts of the tracery which are more recent renewals. At the far north end of the wall is an old buttress, although its sloped top is set against the transept, its plinth shows that it is structurally part of the chancel.



The **Chancel** is constructed of yellowish coursed squared stone; there has been extensive restoration and re-facing. It is five bays long, and has a large plinth with a bold roll at the top and two chamfered steps below. The second bay from the west was remodelled in the early 19th century, and has a priest's door set in a shallow gabled projection, of grey

diagonally-tooled ashlar. The studded door is set in a square-headed opening flanked by pilasters, with a moulded cornice broken forward round the pilasters; the gable above has a ogee-cusped octofoil panel. The other bays each have a pair of lancet windows with linked hoodmoulds, and there are gable-topped buttresses between the third, fourth and fifth, their

tops linked by a string to the lancet hoodmoulds. At the head of the wall is a projecting parapet on corbels, which seem all restoration; on both north and south walls are a series of rainwater heads dated '1830' with bishop's mitres. At the first buttress the plinth drops to a much lower level, in the sunk walkway that surrounds the crypt beneath the two eastern bays of the chancel. The crypt doorway in the fourth bay has a square head and a chamfered surround; its lower jambs look ancient but the upper jambs and lintel (with its incised 'CRYPT') are more recent; the fifth bay has a small lancet with a monolithic head, lighting the crypt.

There are paired buttresses of the same gable-topped type at the eastern angles of the chancel¹, and also set between the three eastern windows, which are again lancets, of equal height with individual hoodmoulds; above their heads the gable is of greyer stone and there is another change in stone type c 1 m below their sills, the lower section of the wall being of pinker sandstone. At crypt level are three small lancets; all have monolithic heads but those of the northern two are formed by peculiar blocks of inverted-T form (rather like parts of cross heads)

The north side of the chancel is again of five bays, articulated by similar buttresses, rather less restored than on the south; here the fabric is largely coursed pinkish sandstone. As on the south the plinth steps down to crypt level for the two eastern bays, but only the first and fourth bays have pairs of lancets. Beneath that in the first bay, at the west end of the wall, is a low-side window with a cinquefoiled head in a square frame. The eastern bay has an old projecting spout c 2 m above the external ground level .

The **North Transept** is built of coursed squared stone of varying colours, but mostly white/grey; the steep flagstone roof is of 19th-century date. The transept has a broad two-stepped plinth, now very worn, and a chamfered string-course/set-back on its side walls, c 2.5 m below the parapet. There are clearly two separate builds in the east wall, with a ragged straight joint between them and a scatter of L-shaped blocks that are difficult to explain. At the extreme south end of the wall, in the re-entrant angle with the chancel, are two odd projecting blocks, possibly angle quoins of the north-east corner of the original aisleless nave. In the earlier southern part of the wall is a simple lancet window with a chamfered surround² ; in the northern part is a two-light window of the usual Bamburgh type, but in this case apparently unrestored medieval work (except for its mullion); its hoodmould, chamfered above and below, has carved stops.

The north wall of the transept has a stepped projecting buttress at each end. It has a three-light window with cusped intersecting tracery, but only its outer frame is old, and the hoodmould with worn carved stops. The chamfered string on the side walls of the transept returns for a short distance at each end of the wall; about 1.5 m above this is a masonry change to the pinkish 19th-century fabric of the gable, which has an ashlar coping with a cross fleury finial.

On the west side of the transept the plinth is largely buried. There is another two-light window like that on the east, again largely ancient; its hoodmould stops have been destroyed by erosion.

The north wall of the **North Aisle** has a big chamfered plinth, quite worn, set at a slightly

¹In the east face of the northern of the pair of buttresses at the north-east angle of the chancel, c 3 m above ground level, is a stone with what may be the eroded remains of sculpture, possible Anglo-Saxon.

²Its round-headed rear arch suggests that this is a 12th-century opening, so the external head may have been re-cut from a semicircular to its present two-centred arched form.

higher level than that on the adjacent transept; a short section beneath the westernmost of the windows in the north wall has clearly been renewed. The wall above is of very large squared blocks, varying in colour from pink to white and grey. Attached to the western part of the wall is a pent-roofed boiler house built of grey squared roughly tooled stone, with a pent roof of Welsh slates, with ashlar copings to its end walls. On the north it has three small shoulder-arched windows, and there is a shouldered doorway in the east wall..

The north wall of the aisle has four two-light windows of the usual type. The western three all show areas of disturbance around their heads, and the second occupies a former door position; the east jamb of the doorway is in line with that of the window, but the western c 0.50 m further west. The fourth window, near the east end, seems to be set in a re-faced area of wall; all four windows seem to have had all their external dressings renewed in the 19th century, but the jambs of the easternmost are in smaller blocks, and probably of a different date to the others. To the west of the four windows is the boiler room; inside it the aisle wall is devoid of any openings, except for one small and roughly cut one, once again blocked up. In the short length of wall to the west of the boiler room is an irregular straight joint between the large squared masonry and the smaller squared stone of the west end; the plinth in this final section is much shallower, and has perhaps been cut back.

The west wall of the aisle has a stepped buttress at its north end; wall and buttress have a simple chamfered plinth, continuous with that of the tower. The wall is of pinkish squared stone, with an oversailing coping that at least seems pre-19th century; it has a window with a segmental-pointed head, oddly cut into walling stones, and a chamfered surround; rather than tracery it holds an old 8-pane sash window with simple Gothick glazing in the head.

The Interior

The internal walls of the main body of the church are all now bare of plaster.

The **Tower** opens to the nave by a two-centred arch of three chamfered orders, with a chamfered hood; the jambs are of the same section, and the impost moulding is returned along the west wall of the nave; the chamfers run straight down to the floor without any bases. There are similar arches to the aisles (except without hoodmoulds), that on the north being partly blocked by later structures. Built into the north-western angle of the tower is a square stair turret, with a big chamfered plinth and a square-headed chamfered doorway on the east; immediately north of the door is an internal buttress-like feature (actually containing a chimney flue) in relatively recent tooled ashlar, of the same fabric as the adjacent wall that half-closes the arch between the tower and north aisle. The internal face of the west wall is of more regularly squared masonry than the others, and seems to have either been rebuilt or refaced, probably in the earlier 19th century. The west window has a broad internal splay and a strange rear arch, roughly semicircular in form and set on corbels at the heads of each jamb; its internal recess is continued down to floor level, but its sides are concealed by panelling. The lower stage of the tower is covered by a beamed ceiling that includes some old timbers that includes one heavy member, running north-south on the line of the east face of the stair projection, which forks at its south end before entering the wall.

The tower stair is of a highly unusual, and possibly unique, square winder type, with square landings at each corner of a rectangular central pier. The lower doorway is rebated (with a recess for the door to open into) but shows no evidence of drawbars or any similar defensive arrangement. The underside of the treads all have neatly chamfered angles. As one ascends one

passes two heavy horizontal beams incorporated in the north wall, before reaching the door (on the east) into the ringing chamber; this is cut at an awkward angle through the wall, and may have been widened; the north jamb seems in recent stone.

The walls of the ringing chamber are whitewashed; the window on the east, now looking over the flat nave roof, has old re-used timbers forming its internal lintel. The ceiling beams are of some age, and are carried on curving braces (some also re-using older timbers with peg-holes etc) springing from simple block corbels.

Continuing up the stair, a recess on the south (now with a small window) appears to be the original access to the belfry; the present belfry door (on the east) is at a higher level and seems recent, opening onto a wooden gallery about 2 m above the belfry floor. Here the old belfry windows are covered by sliding wooden shutters internally; two old beams survive of the original tower roof, below the 19th-century top stage. The top of the stair has been altered; clearly it continued further than at present, to give access to the original roof; there is another window opening into the belfry, and then a sloping internal slabbed roof. Access to the present roof is by means of a metal ladder. The openings to the top stage have rather strange swept rear arches, reminiscent of those of the west windows of south aisle and tower.

The eight bells are all of early 20th century date (1907-1912) and the bell frames are probably contemporary; they have bolted long-headed wooden trusses of Pickford type 6A and plan 8.3. Some empty sockets in the walls at around the same level as the heads of the present frames probably relate to their predecessors.

The internal walls of the **Nave** contain many features of interest, including some of the most problematic when it comes to attempting to unravel the structural history of the church. Basically, each wall contains an arch to the transept (here termed, together with the chancel arch, the 'crossing arches'), and then, further west, a four-bay arcade; all the arches are of two-centred pointed form, and of two orders, and the arcades have circular piers with moulded bases and capitals. After this there are some very significant differences.

The south arcade consists of four regular bays, with to the east of it the south crossing arch which is set in a thicker section of wall on a markedly different alignment; the internal face of the wall steps c 0.30 m to the north, the face of the eastern section more or less aligning with the southern respond of the tower arch. The arcade has responds of semicircular form; working from west to east, the western respond has a re-cut capital, the base mouldings of the second pier are damaged and of the third cut away, and the eastern respond has a damaged base, and is partly overbuilt by the adjacent northern respond of the arch between south transept and aisle; the arches of the arcade are each of two chamfered orders, without any hoodmould. Above is a clerestory of six narrow single-light windows, widely splayed internally. These are spaced irregularly, getting closer together towards the east, and their tops are at the level of the present aisle roof, although some of their internal lintels look old, suggesting that their present square heads are the original form.. The external face of the wall shows a clear break in masonry between the tower and nave wall, with what may be the scar of the west wall of an earlier aisle that stopped short of the tower. Above the arcades there are infilled sockets over the piers with patches of re-faced walling above, which presumably relate to an earlier aisle roof, probably of 19th-century date. Some long slabs beneath the third and fourth clerestory windows could be a remnant of a cut-back string course.

Then comes the thicker section of wall on the south of the crossing; on the north the step between the two parts has largely been re-faced in the 19th-century, and on the south the join is covered by the west wall of the transept. The arch has narrow chamfers to its two orders towards the crossing, but they are left square on the transept side; there are remains of a hoodmould on both faces of the wall. The jambs are of the same section, and the simple impost band is chamfered on its lower angle.



On the south face of the wall (left) there is a vertical column of rough rubble immediately to the west of the arch, generally interpreted as the cut-away west wall of a narrower transept; to the east of it the walling is of large blocks, some more upright than square, of 'early' character. The line of the western slope of an earlier and lower transept roof cuts across both the squared masonry and the rubble column. The relationship between the rubble column and the crossing arch is not quite clear; the western jamb of the arch and the west end of its hoodmould impinge on the boundary, but not to a sufficient degree for one to insist that the arch must be later than the removal of the old west wall, although the sag of the courses above it seems to point in the direction of the arch being an insertion. Below the rubble column, the section of wall adjacent to the western respond of the arch has been re-faced

(on both sides) in the 19th century, and contains a strange lancet window, equally splayed from each face of the wall. The north face of the wall shows a less clear and more irregular vertical break between the heavy squared fabric and walling with more elongate blocks, c 1.5 m from its west end, which might tally with the western wall of a former crossing being cut away at this point.

From the nave it appears that the north arcade and north crossing arch are all in a single length of wall without any obvious discontinuity; however, the wall is a heavily pointed, and the lining visible does not necessarily relate to the coursing and jointing beneath. The four-bay arcade is in a wall c 0.70 m thick, and the crossing arch in one of 0.90 m; on this side it is the outer (northern) face that steps out rather than the inner. An examination of the fabric of the upper section of the aisle face of the wall shows a real complexity; above the two western arches are coursed elongate blocks, above the next rubble and in the final section of wall almost square blocks of Romanesque character; there is an old string course a metre or so below the roof. The arcade has arches of two chamfered orders, and towards the nave a hood chamfered on its lower angle; it consists of three 'full size' arches and a much narrower and lower one at the east end. The western respond is a large moulded corbel; the second and third piers have their bases partly cut away, and the third pier is distinguished by having a capital carved with fine stiff-leaf foliage of early-13th century character. The upper part of the eastern respond is of semicircular plan like the western, but it is then carried on a moulded corbel. The crossing arch is of similar

form to that on the south, but is considerably wider and set in a longer thick section of wall. The fabric of this seems of quite different character to that of the south wall of the crossing, with more elongate blocks laid in quite regular courses..

The nave has a ten-bay roof of 19th-century date, with low-pitched trusses that have, big moulded pendants below their king posts; there are six longitudinal members/ purlins on each side of the ridge, all carrying boarding.

In the **South Aisle** the west wall is of regularly-coursed and squared stone to full height, like the west wall of the tower, and may also be a 19th-century refacing; the west window has a strange shouldered semicircular rear arch just like that of the west window of the tower, with a recess (now a cupboard) below it; its sides are rough and irregular, suggest that it has been hacked into an older wall (perhaps one re-faced both inside and out). A series of infilled sockets indicate that there was an upper floor or gallery here at some stage.

The south wall of the aisle has been heightened by around seven courses of horizontally-tooled 19th-century stone; the older masonry below is still heavily rendered. There is an internal moulded string running from the west end above the first small door (which has a segmental rear arch with a chamfer to its head only) then stepped up to form an internal hoodmould over the two-light window, before being stepped down to form a similar hood above the main south door; this also has a segmental-pointed rear arch with a chamfered head, which in contrast to the remainder of the opening seems to be undisturbed medieval masonry. The string seems to step down again adjacent to the first of the pair of three-light windows, but has then been cut away; these windows have rather crudely cut two-centred rear arches of uncertain date. At the head of the older walling are a series of infilled sockets, each with a large sandstone block on either side, for the tie-beams, of a previous roof, although 'ghosts' above them show that this roof post-dated the heightening. There are corresponding sockets (with patches of re-facing above them) in the wall above the arcade.

At the east end of the aisle a broad four-centred arch, of two chamfered orders with a chamfered hood, opens into the south transept. On the north it springs from a semi-octagonal shaft with a moulded capital, and on the south from a quite elaborate corbel with foliage carving, which the NCH account sees as transferred from the earlier narrower aisle. On the west face of the wall most of the walling above the arch is of 19th-century horizontally-tooled stone foliage carving; on the east face there is rather more old rubbly masonry, with evidence of some sort of feature (either a socket for a roof truss or possibly a blocked opening of some sort) towards the north end..

The aisle has a modern boarded roof of six bays, with horizontal tie-beams.

In the **South Transept** the two windows in the east wall have crudely-cut two-centred rear arches; the rear arch of the window in the south wall looks more like a genuine medieval feature, Beneath this window is a low but wide aumbry, its lintel renewed but with old jambs and sill that have a square rebate; to the east of it is a piscina with a roughly semicircular arch of two chamfered orders and a damaged bowl. The roof of the transept is of modern boarding with no beams visible.

At the west end of the **North Aisle** is a plastered partition wall, closing off the western bay alongside the tower which is now used as a vestry. In the north wall the westernmost window has an old segmental-pointed rear arch with a chamfer to its head; the second is plainly inserted

in an older doorway opening, the west jamb of which remains intact; the two windows in the eastern part of the wall also seem to have old rear arches of the usual type. At the head of the wall, and above the capitals of the arcade piers are plain quadrant corbels of 19th-century character, carrying the roof trusses. At the east end of the aisle is a two-centred arch opening into to the north transept; the narrow chamfers of its two orders and chamfered imposts all resemble those of the crossing arches. The face of the wall above the arch is set back c 0.1 m behind its dressings. The roof of the aisle is all of 19th-century date, and has cranked tie-beams to its half trusses and two levels of purlins

In the east wall of the **North Transept** the change in fabric type apparent externally is again obvious. The southern part of the wall has squarish blocks with a neat diagonal tooling, characteristic of 12th-century work, and the window in it has a semicircular rear arch that would correlate with this date as well. The window in the later northern section of the wall has a two-centred rear arch with a chamfer to its head, only its sill being restoration. The similar rear arch of the three-light window on the north again seems old, and at the east end of the wall is quite a large square-headed recess, probably an aumbry, with a chamfer to its head and east jamb but a square rebate to west jamb and sill. The two-light window in the west wall seems relatively unrestored internally; to the south of it is a patch of coursed rubble with 19th-century refacing below it; this patch seems to be in the form of an arch with a four-centred head³

The roof of the transept is of three bays, with king-post trusses with arched braces from tie to principal and then from principals to the tops of the kingposts, carried on large quadrant shaped corbels; all this is clearly of 19th-century date.

The **Chancel** is entered from the nave by a two-centred arch of the same character as those to the transepts; its impost band has been cut into above each jamb, perhaps to take a rood beam. It is displaced slightly to the north of the centre of the east end of the nave, with to the south a sizeable square-headed opening with cusped tracery of 14th-century character, which is generally seen as a squint to allow a view of the altar. The east wall of the nave is of coursed roughly-squared stone; up to around the head of the arch the blocks are of square or upright form, and similar to those of the south side of the crossing, but above this are more elongate blocks, and finally four courses of clearly 19th-century masonry⁴. Close to the northern respond of the arch is what looks like the remains of a straight joint low in the wall, perhaps a remnant of some form of niche or recess. The opposite face of the wall, the west wall of the chancel, shows an interesting break in coursing between the blocks of the north jamb of the arch, and the adjacent masonry, suggesting that when the arch was constructed it opened into an earlier and narrower chancel. Further evidence for this may be the manner in which the impost moulding, returned across the full length of the west face of the wall, is stopped close to the arch on this side. The corresponding area top the south has been obliterated by the insertion of the big 14th-century traceried squint, whilst the upper sections of the wall have been re-faced, perhaps when the present chancel was built. At the level of the eaves of the side walls is a change to rougher masonry (with the line of a former low-pitched roof), with above that again obvious 19th-century fabric.

³There is no sign of any opening externally; might it have been a recess for a former wall monument?

⁴A late 19th-century photograph in the Gibson collection (Northumberland County Record Office ref 1876/J34 shows an interior view looking east, with high above the chancel arch a spheric-triangle window set in a pointed arch, a short-lived Victorian feature (it is not shown on a mid-19th century painting). Its position can barely be distinguished today.

The internal walls of the chancel are of coursed and squared stone; there is a moulded string at the level of the sills of the windows, all renewed except for the section that steps up to form a hoodmould over the priest's door on the south. The paired lancet windows, which have shouldered two-centred rear arches, are set in an arcade of moulded arches, with a steeper blind arch between each pair; the pattern of two broader arches and one narrow continues on the bays of the north wall that do not have any windows. All the arches spring from moulded corbels; above is a moulded oversailing course at eaves level, that may be old.

At the west end of the south wall, under the westernmost pair of windows, is a square-headed splayed recess that presumably indicates the position of a southern low-side window, although re-facing has destroyed all external sign of it. Like its counterpart opposite, the internal west jamb of the recess returns square before splaying, whilst the eastern jamb is all splayed; immediately to the east of it is a small rebated aumbry. Then comes the priest's door which retains its medieval segmental-pointed rear arch, and a good tomb recess with a steep segmental-pointed arch with a moulded head on square-section jambs, and a hoodmould. Beneath the windows in the fourth bay are three sedilia with trefoiled and chamfered arches, the sill of the eastern being set higher than the other two; the sedilia and a piscina to the east, set under a similar but narrower arch, share a common moulded hood. The piscina bowl is partly broken away but its drain survives; further east is a second piscina with a tiny and worn recess, its drain now visible in section.

At the west end of the north wall of the chancel is a low-side window, well-preserved except for a renewed lintel; as on the south there is an accompanying rebated aumbry immediately to the east, although in this case the aumbry is taller and narrower. The sill of the window is level, and in front is a stone bench (said to mark the place in which St Aidan died) that seems relatively modern. Beneath the windows in the fourth bay is a large aumbry with a trefoiled arch and evidence of two shelves; its sill is restoration. At the east end of the wall is a large recess with a two-centred arch carrying what is either a stepped moulding or perhaps a rebate for a door; it contains a large fluted bowl with a central drain⁵; it is said to be a lavatory, for the washing of vessels after Mass.

The east wall is largely concealed by an ornate reredos of 1895; the eastern lancets have elaborate mouldings to their rear arches, and between them are big moulded corbels, now carrying statues. An old painting (mid-19th century) now hanging at the west end of the nave shows a line of two-centred arcading beneath the eastern lancets; it is not clear whether this is an original feature, or perhaps a Gothic revival piece of the late 18th or early 19th century; it is now concealed by the reredos.

The chancel has a five-bay roof of c1895; the trusses have collars set high with by short braces between ties and principals and solid ones between principals and collar together producing an arched form, with above the collar upper king-posts with arched braces to the ridge; there are also arched windbraces to the two levels of purlins on either side, and a big moulded wall plate. The tie-beams are set on short projecting moulded brackets, and secured to them by means of metal straps.

The **Crypt** beneath the two eastern bays of the chancel can now only be reached by the external door on the south side; the sunk walkway which surrounds it has an external retaining wall of

⁵This is the feature associated with the external drain spout.

19th-century date, with a steep little stair at the south-east angle. The crypt itself consists of two parallel chambers, one under the southern two-thirds of the eastern two bays, and a narrower passage-like compartment to the north.



Five steps lead down from the south door to the slabbed floor of the main crypt chamber, which has a groined vault in two bays; the NCH (107) describes it as being ‘a peculiar combination of the quadripartite and sexpartite forms, the outer halves of each bay being of the latter, which the inner, where they conjoin, is of the former construction. The transverse rib is semi-circular’. The vault ribs are all chamfered on their lower angles. Three lancets that light the crypt -

two on the east and one on the south - have triple-stepped internal sills, and the two eastern ones have a peculiar form of shouldered rear arch. Beneath the lancet on the south is a piscina with a trefoiled arch and a projecting bowl, now broken away. In the east wall are two small sockets, perhaps for brackets to support an altar, whilst on the north are a range of three rough sockets, c 1.5 m above the floor, which may relate to post-medieval use as a burial vault. Towards the west end of the north wall is a low square-headed opening into the northern chamber; it seems to have had chamfered jambs and head, but these have been hacked back to allow slightly easier access. The chamber beyond has walls of neatly-tooled ashlar, and its sides a string, chamfered on its lower angle, below the rubble barrel vault. The small lancet on the east has a triple-stepped sill. At the west end a crude staircase descends from the chancel above (now covered over by slabs) to break through the end wall of the chamber 1.5 m above the floor; it is clearly a secondary insertion, and must have been continued by a wooden section within the chamber. The floor of the chamber is of earth, and on it lie the dismembered remains of a 14th-century three-light window; perhaps this is the old stonework from the north window of the north transept, the restoration of which was regretted by the NCH account (106, footnote 1).

The Structural History of the Church

I The Saxon Building

Despite the historical importance of the site, there is no clear indication of Pre-Conquest work either in the fabric, or in the various lapidary material (carved and worked stones) in and around the building. The associations of Saint Aidan with the forked beam in the tower ceiling⁶, and with the present little shrine created in the internal opening of the northern low-side window in the chancel, are both tenuous.

The popular notion that there was little Christian presence in this area between the Viking raids of the late 8th century and the Norman Conquest has now been dispelled; for instance the parish church on Holy Island is now recognised as a later Saxon building. It is possible that the earliest portions of the fabric of Bamburgh Church are of Pre-Conquest date; this brings us to the sections of wall on the south and probably also east of the crossing. The nave walls of the church are so complex that at this time it is impossible to construct a coherent structural story from the visible evidence; however, the heavy squared fabric of the south crossing wall looks unlikely to be much later than c1100⁷, and it bears the scar of the west wall of an earlier south transept or porticus that would appear to pre-date the present crossing arch of c1180. The cross walls are thicker (0.90m) than usual for Saxon work, but this would be explicable if they carried a tower. It is tempting to reconstruct a substantial church of just before or after the Norman Conquest, probably an aisleless structure with a crossing tower (like Norton in County Durham, now thought to be of late 11th century date).

II A Major Remodelling c1180-1210

Towards the end of the 12th century the church seems to have been completely remodelled, possibly after the collapse of the older tower. The three crossing arches may be of c1270-1280; the southern was probably narrower because it was opening into an older south transept or porticus which was retained at this stage, whilst any corresponding northern one was rebuilt, so a much wider arch was possible here. The western wall of the old crossing was removed; then followed the addition of first a north and then a south aisle to the nave, and then the present western tower, the aisles being extended to embrace it.

This three-stage reconstruction is the simple picture presented by most antiquarians and architectural historians over the last century or so; it remains tentative, and does not accommodate some features. For instance, the evidence of the north face of the north arcade wall seems to suggest that the arcade was pierced through a pre-existing wall, which possibly contained several phases of masonry, which was not however parallel to that on the south side of the older crossing. The more ornate capital of the eastern pier of the north arcade, and the lower and narrower eastern bay, have long puzzled antiquarian opinion.

⁶The tradition that this is the beam which carried the awning under which Aidan died in 651, and which was recorded by Bede as surviving two later fires, seems unlikely to have any foundation.

⁷The NCH account sees this wall, together with the east wall of the north transept, as Norman; their masonry is however very different in character, that of the crossing all being much more massive.

III The New Chancel, c1230

Northumberland is a county with a number of fine Early English chancels, typically elongate like this one, and Bamburgh is one of the best, remaining virtually unaltered, but for Victorian scraping and renewal of stonework. Its construction seems to have followed on a little later than the remodelling of the western parts of the church, and can be comfortably linked to documentary evidence of the church being confirmed as a possession of the Augustinian canons of Nostell Priory in 1228.

Bamburgh is sometimes considered as a monastic church, but there is nothing in its structure to validate this. It has been suggested that the parish used the south aisle, whilst the canons entered via the smaller western door in the aisle, to use the main body of the building. Apart from this unusual doubling-up of doorways, there are none of the features (primarily, evidence of a cloister) that one would normally associate with a monastic church.

The crypt under the eastern bays of the chancel is highly unusual. Its larger southern portion seems to have been used as a chapel; the corridor-like northern part may have been a bone store, or possibly housed relics of St Aidan. Contrary to most published accounts, its original access was only by way of the rather restricted opening from the larger southern chamber; the crudely inserted staircase from the chancel above may be related to post-medieval use as a Forster family vault.

The bases of further buttresses set in the angles between the chancel and transepts are an unusual feature, usually read as an indication that it was intended to continue the c1230 rebuilding westwards, but this was never carried out.

IV Later Medieval Changes

Further alterations seem to have come after the building is thought to have been burned out, between 1300-1304, as a consequence of the enthusiastic attentions of Scots visitors. The 'Three Hundred Years War', commencing at the end of the 13th century, virtually brought a close to church-building throughout Northumberland, but Bamburgh (like Alnwick) would have been afforded some measure of protection by the proximity of its Castle.

It is recorded that chantries were founded by William Galoun in 1316 and Thomas de Bamburgh 1333; these have been linked to the extension of the north transept and the reconstruction of the southern one. The tomb recess in the chancel is generally dated to c1320.

The reconstruction - and widening - of the south aisle is usually dated to the later 14th century, whilst the north aisle was either rebuilt (on its old foundations) or re-faced in the 15th or even early 16th century, to judge from the character of its fabric; the late 12th century arch at its east end shows that it was not widened.

The square stair built into the tower is an oddity; it has been tentatively dated to the later 15th or 16th century and is seen by Brooke (2000,78) as perhaps indicating that the tower was being utilised as a refuge at this time; however, the degree of alteration to which this part of the church has been subject may have removed further evidence

V The Post-Medieval Period.

As often, in the centuries following the Reformation churches suffered little major structural change, but there was often decay and dilapidation. Wilson (1870,61-2) records that a 1617 reference states that ‘their steeple is one-half covered in lead, and the other half utterly decayed and open; their church is thatched and indecently kept, and deformed with doves... At some time, possibly as late as the beginning of the 19th century south porches were built onto both the main door of the south aisle, and the priest’s door in the chancel. There may have been major structural problems at the west end; an 1836 drawing (Northumberland County Record Office ref SANT/BEQ/18/2/1) shows rather larger buttresses on the west side of the tower than exist today.

V! The 19th Century: A Century of Restorations

Bamburgh church, like many others, was subject to a series of campaigns of restoration in the 19th century, and, again as frequently occurs, some are better documented than others.

Major works appear to have been carried out quite early on. Rainwater heads on the chancel are dated 1830, probably dating a substantial programme of repairs and refacing⁸, when the priest’s door lost its porch and was reconstructed externally in a decidedly non-ecclesiological style. At around the same time the whole west end of the church was re-faced inside and out (accounting for the considerable thickness of the west wall) and a new top stage added to the tower; this probably took place between 1836 (the date of the drawing) and 1846, when Sir Stephen Glynne visited the church and described the upper part of the tower as ‘modern’ (Proc Soc Ants Newcastle 3rd series III, 262-3). His notes (although somewhat garbled) shed some valuable light on the state of the church at the time; the ceiling of nave and aisles were ‘of a bad modern Gothic pattern’ and the aisle windows ‘bad modern ones’, embellishments ‘not according to true ecclesiastical taste’ carried out by the Lord Crewe Trustees; however their more recent restoration of the chancel was ‘excellent’ and of ‘ecclesiastical propriety’.. He mentions a ‘lofty small pointed recess’ over the squint on the south of the chancel arch, and two square aumbries in the arcade, now concealed, behind the altar. There was a low loft carrying the organ at the west end of the south aisle. Further works were carried out in 1857 when the nave was re-roofed and re-leaded (church guidebook). Wilson’s 1870 plan shows that the west end of the north aisle had been walled off to form a vestry, as at present, but that the external boiler room had not yet been built. The Ordnance Survey 1st edition 6":1 mile map of c 1860 shows that main south porch shown in the 1836 drawing had been removed by then.

The crypt beneath the chancel is generally referred to as having been rediscovered in 1837 (although Wilson gives ‘1847’); it had been used as a burial place for the Forster family; their coffins were re-interred beneath the floor of the main chamber. Glynne states ‘the descent to the crypt is from the chancel’ so perhaps the restoration of the external doorway came later. Gables were raised on the east ends of nave and chancel before 1870 (see Wilson’s drawing); the NCH account refers to them as ‘useless’ but they gained practicality when the chancel roof was raised in the 1895 restoration by W.S.Hicks, which also saw the installation of the present elaborate reredos.

Most of the windows in the aisles and south transept were renewed in the 19th century; it is not clear whether all follow their original form. The boiler room on the north side of the north aisle

⁸Re-facing which obliterated the southern low-side window; later in the century increasing antiquarian considerations would surely have seen this restored.

is a post-1870 addition.

Archaeological Assessment

With its associations with Saint Aidan and early Northumbrian history, this is clearly a church of national significance, and has the potential to preserve archaeological material and information of great consequence, both in the below-floor deposits and the standing structure. As outlined above, the building is unusually complex, and its fabric retains a considerably number of unresolved problems, in particular relating to the earliest phases of the building and the question as to whether standing Pre-Conquest fabric may survive. All wall surfaces are bare of plaster, although in places their fabric is partly obscured by poor modern pointing (eg the north wall of the nave); it is desirable that a full archaeological record of these walls should be made at some time, preferably in the form of stone-by-stone drawings based on photogrammetry or rectified photography, but this is clearly a long-term project.

Beneath the floor, as usual it is almost impossible to assess the extent of the survival of archaeological material; inevitably there will have been disturbance by generations of burials (and vaults) and 19th-century and later heating systems. The floor of the nave is of slabs, with a central heating grille, and boarded areas under pews; the broad south aisle has paving of two dates (19th and later 20th century), again with boarded areas under the pews. The south transept has some old slabs, with rings and brass plates, that relate to burials (probably in vaults) of the Grey family. The north aisle is partly slabbed and partly boarded, and the north transept has a largely-20th century paving incorporating a few old ledger stones. The chancel has a floor of diagonally-set stone slabs, of later 19th or early-20th century character, with heating grates alongside the side walls.

In a church of this importance, any works entailing disturbance of floor level will need to be accompanied by at the least an archaeological watching brief. In the event of any large scale works a preliminary archaeological assessment and investigation may well be necessary.

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