

THE CHURCH OF ST MARY
LESBURY
NORTHUMBERLAND
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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The church from the south-east

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

The Vicarage
Otterburn
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE19 1NP
01830 520590
E mail: PFRyder@broomlee.org



St Mary, Lesbury

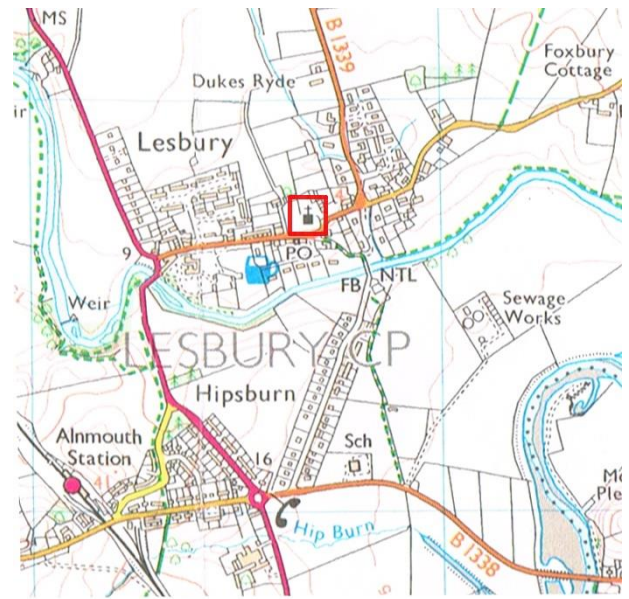
Lesbury lies on the north bank of the River Aln c 5 km east-south-east of Alnwick. The parish church of St Mary c(NGR NU 2367 1170) lies on the north side of the village street in the centre of the village.

Description

Lesbury church consists of a nave with a south porch, west tower and a two-bay north aisle, and a chancel with a two-bay north aisle and north-east vestry. The church is built of coursed and square stone, of a variety of types, and the roofs are of Lakeland slate to the nave and aisles, and Welsh slate to the remainder

The **West Tower** has a very complex fabric, with evidence of much patching, repair and partial rebuilding. The south-west angle in particular looks to have been rebuilt to its full height, in greyer more close-jointed stone; it has a clasping buttress of irregular form, rising higher on the west than on the south, although its multi-stepped base projects further on that side. The angle quoins at the other corners have all been renewed in the 19th century. Beginning with the west elevation, there is a shallow square-edge plinth of footing at the base of the wall, and a central lancet with a narrow chamfered surround, its dressings all in 19th century ashlar; there is some evidence that it replaces an earlier wider opening. The lower part of the wall is of well squared locks, and may have been re-faced in the 19th century, but at around two-thirds height is a course with some very elongate blocks (up to c 2 m long) and above that older fabric; the belfry opening, set well north of centre, has a worn segmental-pointed arch cut into a single slab. The top of the tower has a projecting ashlar course carried on block corbels, and a low pyramidal slater spire. The south elevation has an old quite broad chamfered plinth, over-built by the south-west buttress, and at just above mid-height a bold string/set-back, which ends short of the rebuilt south-west corner; the belfry opening, set centrally, is like that on the west.

The north side of the tower has an area of rebuilt fabric towards the north-west corner; the old chamfered plinth reappears c 2m from the corner, and is continuous with the plinth of the west end of the north aisle. In the centre of the wall 3.6 m above the ground is what looks to



Location Map

From Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer sheet 332
OS map licence 100045703

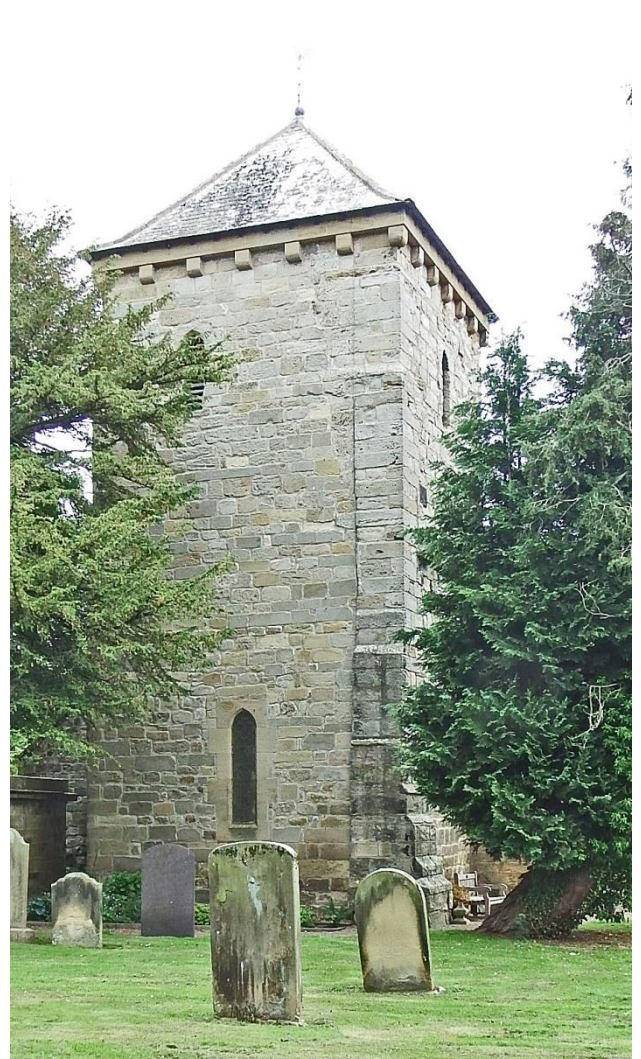
be a carved stone, possibly the head of a figure in a dished recess, but it is very worn. Further up there is a chamfered set-back at around the same level as the string/off-set on the south. The only sign of a belfry opening is what may be the west jamb of a small opening.

The east face of the tower, above the nave roof, looks to be entirely 19th-century refacing; the belfry opening, set well north of centre so as to clear the ridge of the nave roof, is a copy of the older ones but entirely in 19th century ashlar.

The south side of the **Nave** (together with the porch and south side of the chancel) is in close-jointed hammer-dressed stone, with lightly-tooled ashlar dressings, and is all of 1846. It has a heavy buttress at the west end, continued above the nave eaves to support the tower. There are four lancet windows, with narrow chamfered surrounds and their heads each cut into a single block, three to the east of the porch and one in the narrow gap between the porch and south-west buttress.

The end walls of the nave have a cut coping, carried on shaped kneelers; the western abuts on the side walls of the tower but the eastern rises to a gable with a cross fleury finial.

The tower from the south (left) and south-west (right)



The **South Porch** has a segmental-pointed outer arch with a continuous double chamfer, under a weathered sundial, and a gable with a cut coping chamfered on its underside.

The west end of the **North Aisle** has an old chamfered plinth continuous with that of the tower, ending 1.5 m short of the end of the north-west corner buttress. The lower four or five courses of the wall appear ancient; the lancet window and upper walling appear 19th century, as is the coping. The north wall of the aisle is in two bays, with stepped buttresses between and at each end. In the first (western) bay are the lower jambs of a blocked doorway; above them is a blocked window, which has had an arched head of some sort later cut square, then, to the east, a 19th century lancet. In the second bay are remains of a second similar blocked window, again with a 19th century window beyond, and near the east end of the wall, c 1.5 m up, there is an odd projecting block.

The south elevation of the **Chancel** is in three bays, articulated by two shallow pilaster buttresses, and a larger clasping buttress at the south-east corner. There is quite a tall chamfered plinth; each bay has a lancet window, like those in the nave, and the west bay has in addition a priest's door with a segmental-pointed arch, with a continuous chamfer. To the west of the priest's door a length of an earlier plinth is exposed at the foot of the wall, with a narrow chamfer, set c 150mm in front of the present plinth and at a slightly skew angle to it, widening eastwards; this may survive from an earlier (12th century?) chancel. During a watching brief in 1998 sections of another probably 13th century plinth were seen further east, just below the present ground level (right). The basal course of the present plinth, of roughly-tooled stone (not designed to be seen) sits directly on, and slightly overhangs, the clearly earlier fabric beneath. This earlier plinth goes round both pilaster buttresses.



The large clasping buttress at the south-east corner of the chancel is of 1849 but otherwise all of the east end, except for the upper part of its gable, is medieval. There is a stepped buttress at the north end and a lower central one beneath the east window; a broad chamfered plinth runs the length of the wall (as far as the south-east buttress) and a worn string course c 1.8 m above the ground rounds the northern buttress, but is cut through by the sill of the window, which is of three steeply-pointed cinquefoiled lights under a segmental-pointed arch, with a moulded hood

that has worn head stops. It is clear that the gable has been low-pitched; the present upper section is 19th century work and has a trefoil loop, and a coped gable with a cross finial.

The **Chancel Aisle** is taller than that of the nave, and has a low-pitched roof; its parapet has a flat sloped coping, and to have been heightened by c 1.2m. It is built of roughly-squared stone, the courses varying in height. Its east bay has a window of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights, which looks probably of 19th century date, with close to it to the west a slightly narrower blocked window which seems to have once had a head of similar form, but the heads of its lights have been cut away except for the very tips of their ogee arches. West again is a big buttress, medieval work but now carrying an ashlar 19th-century chimney stack with an octagonal shaft and a moulded cap; a sunken boiler room adjoins the external face of the wall here. The western bay of the wall has a window of three stepped trefoil-headed lights under a flattened triangular arch, which again is perhaps of 19th century date.



The east end of the chancel aisle from the north; note blocked window (behind drainpipe) which is cut across internally by the wall that divides the former vestry from the remainder of the aisle

The east end of the aisle has a square-headed doorway of Georgian character at its south end, with large upright blocks in the jambs, and a very narrow chamfer; directly above is a very similar rather narrower opening, now blocked, with in the course above its lintel a central wedge-shaped block. To the north of the lower doorway is a possible small square window, blocked, c 1.5 m above the ground. The stonework of this wall is reddened in parts, as if by fire.

The Interior



The nave looking north-west

The **South Porch** has a very simple roof with rafters and a ridge. The inner doorway has a semicircular arch, and an inner order with a big roll between two hollows, carried on jamb shafts, the western octagonal and the eastern circular, with shafts that mix scalloping and waterleaf motifs. The outer order, with a simpler roll, is continued down the jambs. The stonework all looks Victorian (with the possible exception of the moulded bases of one or both jamb shafts) but may replicate a previous feature.

The interior of the church is largely plastered, except for exposed dressings, and the internal walls of the north nave aisle, and the tower up to a height of 2 m. The lofty **Tower** arch is of segmental-pointed form and of two chamfered orders, the outer being continued down the

jamb and the inner carried on semicircular responds with moulded bases and capitals. Its dressings (except perhaps for the bases) look to have been re-tooled, but may be of 13th century date. Inside the tower ragged straight joints are visible in both south and west walls, c 1 m from the south-west corner, which ties in with the external evidence of this angle of the tower having been rebuilt at some stage. The west lancet has a plain square lintel; the ceiling of the upper floor is set high (a long ladder would be needed for access – the interior of the upper part of the tower was not seen) and carried on sawn east-west joists of upright section, which look 19th century.

In the **Nave** the south door has a semicircular rear arch, and the lancet windows trefoiled rear arches, arches and splays being in exposed 19th century ashlar; the western lancet has an awkward asymmetric splay necessitated by its cramped position between the doorway and the end of the nave. The north arcade is of two broad bays, with segmental-pointed arches of two chamfered orders (the outer chamfer being much narrower than the inner), springing from plain square responds, plastered over except for the boldly-projecting imposts (which are carried back as a band on each face of the wall) which have a broad chamfer beneath a small square step. The chamfer looks re-tooled, but the vertical face above is older and more weathered. The central pier is circular, and has a ring at the base of its square abacus, and another ring above its square base.

The nave roof is of four full bays with a quarter-bay at each end, and has collar-beam trusses with upper king posts, with braces from the principals to the collar, carrying one level of purlins and a ridge, the principals being supported by wall posts rising from block corbels chamfered on their lower angles; all this looks of mid-19th century date.

In the **North Aisle** the exposed stonework of the outer wall shows clear evidence of having been heightened by four or five courses, the upper section slightly overhanging the lower towards the west end. The 19th century lancet in the west wall has a trefoiled rear arch; beneath it some large and irregular blocks are exposed, and to the north of it a narrow column of relatively recent brickwork¹. In the north wall the two 19th century lancets have segmental rear arches; the lower jambs of the former north door are visible, and a long block higher up which is probably its internal lintel. There is rather less evidence of the two small earlier windows on the internal wall face than the external. The roof of the aisle is of the 19th century.

The **Chancel** arch resembles the arcade in that it has plain square jambs, behind plaster, and an impost band, continued along both faces of the wall. The band, with some sections renewed but with others retaining old plaster, is of similar section to that from which the arcade springs, but set around 1 m higher. The chancel arch itself is narrower and of quite sharp two-centred form, of two orders, both with quite narrow chamfers. On the east face of

¹ Probably relating to a 19th-century flue; during the 1998 watching brief a slabber-over channel in the floor running into this corner was seen, and thought to be part of an early underfloor heating system.

the wall, directly above the impost band are diagonally-set blocks, chamfered on their lower angles, which the NCH account sees as having carried the rood beam.



Interior looking east

Inside the chancel the three lancets on the south and priest's door have plain rear arches behind plaster². The arcade on the north is similar to that of the nave, except that its imposts are not carried back as a band, and that its plain square western respond has exposed stonework. The central pier has a square base with bevelled angles. In the sanctuary there is a piscina on the south with a trefoiled round arch, beneath the easternmost lancet, all in Victorian ashlar, and an aumbry concealed by Victorian woodwork on the north. The east window has a segmental-pointed rear arch behind plaster.

The chancel roof is an interesting late medieval one, of five bays, with cambered ties carrying one level of purlins, and, raised on a small block, a central ridge. There is also a straining beam, a central longitudinal upright-section timber cutting through the soffits of the ties, a feature again seen at Alnwick. The tie-beams have stopped hollow-chamfers, with raised motifs in bold relief, including foliate bosses, animals, a scallop shell and various Percy family emblems.

² Wilson's 1870 plan shows this wall as having been refaced rather than rebuilt, and the NCH account states that the internal jambs rear arches of the chancel lancets are original. The contrast between them and the nave lancets with their trefoil cusping and exposed ashlar suggests that this is correct, and that the south chancel wall was simply re-faced whereas that of the nave may have been completely rebuilt.



The late medieval chancel roof looking north-east

The interior of the **Chancel Aisle** has been extensively modernised, and is divided off by a modern screen wall set just outside the line of the arcade. It is now divided into two vestries. The eastern (choir vestry) has a diagonal projection at its north-east corner that probably represents an earlier fireplace; east again, beyond a stone cross wall, is the original vestry, which has a projection at its south-east corner (probably part of the north-east buttress of the chancel) and the blocked opening above its door forming an internal recess.

Structural Development.

It is reported that a dowser's survey detected 'an Anglo-Saxon church beneath the present building'³, but this does not appear to have been published. The earliest record of a church here is in 1147 when Eustace Fitz John de Vesci gave the church of Lesbury, together with its chapels of Alnwick, Longhoughton and Alnmouth, to the Premonstratensian Abbey of Alnwick. Prior to the 14th century Lesbury was regarded as the principal township in the district.

There does not seem to be a good modern account of the structural development of the church, the Northumberland County History⁴ being about the best there is. It sees the original building as being of early 12th century date, and describes a contemporary string course as surviving on the inner faces of the north and east walls of the nave - a puzzling reference, as there is now no sign of any such feature, and it is difficult to see how it can have been removed. An archaeological watching brief (carried out by the writer) in 1998⁵ recorded large block revealed internally (and now concealed again) at the south-east corner of the nave may have been the basal quoin of an Anglo-Saxon nave, whilst on the exterior of the south wall of the chancel a length of plinth outside the line of the present wall (still visible) may relate to a short 12th century chancel; the present chancel wall was shown to retain what was thought to be a 13th-century plinth course just below the modern ground level.

The south walls of nave and chancel, the former rebuilt and the latter probably refaced by Salvin in 1846/7, appears to have been of 13th century date although the south doorway, if a correct reproduction, seems a little earlier.

Otherwise the earliest fabric to survive above ground seems to be the east end of the chancel, side walls of the tower and west end of the north aisle, all of which have a broad chamfered plinth perhaps of c1300. The east window, which looks to be an insertion, seems early 14th century work and cuts down into an earlier string course, which is probably contemporary with the plinth)⁶.

Much of the apparently medieval work in the church – the arcades, chancel arch, and the majority of the walling of the north aisles of nave and chancel – is difficult to date. The chancel arch and nave arcade spring from impost bands with a small square step and a broad chamfer beneath, and the chancel arcade has simpler imposts without the step. What is the date of these? Three options seem open. Impost bands with a step/groove and chamfer on the lower angle are usually of 12th century date, but here the arches above look later medieval.

³ <http://www.alnandcoastland.org/lesbury.php>

⁴ Bateson (1895) County History of Northumberland 2, 445-448

⁵ Ryder, P.F. in Archaeology and Northumberland 1998-9, Northumberland County Council, 31 and also in Church Archaeology 3 (1999), 54-55

⁶ Although the print in Wilson (1870) Churches of the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne, f.po.124 shows the string intact, and running beneath the window.

So the lower walls could survive from a relatively early medieval church, but the arches all have been reconstructed, a somewhat unlikely scenario. It should be noted however that the imposts are of bolder projection, and the chamfers of shallower angle than the usual 45° of 12th century work. A second option is that all the arches represent an early post-medieval rebuilding, when the established language of medieval gothic architecture had been left behind. There is something like this at Ingram, where conventional medieval responds have been overbuilt by much simpler structures with simple heavy imposts. The church might have been wrecked in some Scots raid, maybe of the later 16th century, and then reconstructed⁷. A third option is that genuine medieval features have been re-cut at some later date, perhaps in the early 19th century, but close examination shows that it is possible to differentiate between re-cut sections and those which look quite unrestored.

A more complicated possibility, but still credible, is that the nave arcade and chancel arches both have 12th century jambs, but that their arches were reconstructed later (the sharply-pointed chancel arch in the 13th century, and the arcades possibly at some early post-medieval date. To further complicated things – as if they needed it! – there is a reference in the NCH to an 1853 faculty for the eastern arch of the chancel arcade being reduced in width. It is very difficult to see how this can have taken place, as the present eastern respond is close to the line of the cross-wall dividing the original vestry from the chancel aisle, and the present two arches are identical in span and form.



A VIEW OF LESBURY (Beilby, 1773). From a portfolio in the possession of the duke of Northumberland.

1773 print (from Northumberland County History)

⁷ Against this hypothesis can be set that fact that the chancel roof is of late medieval date

The north aisle is not simple either. A broad medieval plinth continuous with that of the tower survives at its west end, with a few courses of contemporary masonry above. The north wall has no such plinth, and so may be a later rebuild; it does have remains of a north door, which was later replaced by a small window (which seems to have had an arched head (later cut square) and so was thus probably of medieval date) before the wall was heightened and the present lancet windows inserted in the 19th century. The wall of the chancel aisle is a little thinner than the nave aisle, and probably of a different build; it has the remains of a window that, from the tips of its ogee lights surviving a later cutting-square- seems to have been of 14th century date. The cross-wall which now divides the aisle from the original eastern vestry seems to cut across this window, suggesting that the wall is a post-medieval insertion, and may go with the obvious 18th-century features in the east wall.

The tower is another part of the building that does not readily provide a coherent story. In 1604 it was reported ‘the steeple is like to fall’, and the whole south-west corner, with its irregular clasping buttress, may be a rebuild of around this date, whilst the lower part of the west wall has been refaced much more recently (some strengthening was undertaken in 1847 by Salvin, who may also be responsible for the east wall above the nave roof). Bielby’s 1773 print reproduced in the County History shows some significant differences here, for instance an eastern belfry opening set centrally rather than north-of-centre as the present (renewed) one is placed. He also shows the top of the tower as apparently slightly arched – was there a top vault?⁸. Thirdly- but this is perhaps most likely a draughtsman’s error – he shows the tower as considerably longer east-west than north-south, whereas now it is almost square.

The church in its present condition is largely the result of a major restoration carried out over the years 1846-1849 by the well-known church architect Anthony Salvin, at the expense of the Duke of Northumberland and Earl Grey. The whole south elevation of nave and chancel was renewed, making the church, as viewed from the village street, look almost entirely Victorian. Whilst there seems to have been little regard for the retention of ancient fabric, he does seem to have had a concern to replicate its architectural features.

Subsequent changes have not affected the basic structure of the church to any degree. During the 1999 works the pulpit was dismantled, and chalked upon its interior was the message ‘James Dixon, Lesbury, joiner, July 15th 1904. Pulpit taken out and new floor put down. Wet day. Friday’. Would it that all archaeological records were so lucid...

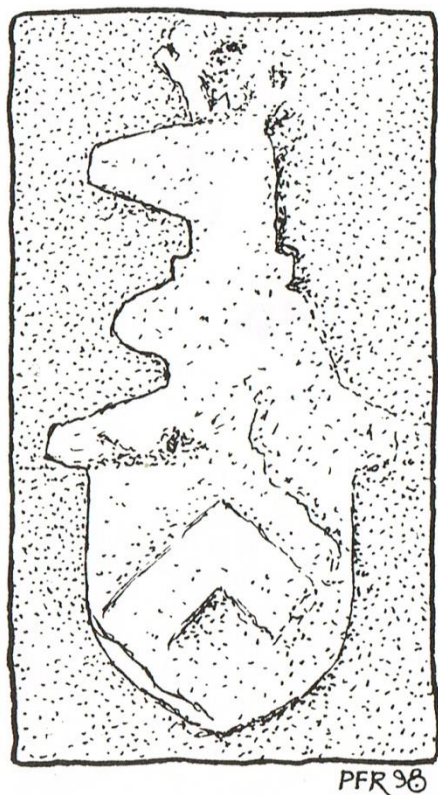
⁸ Brooke, C.J. (2000) *Safe Sanctuaries. Security and Defence in Anglo-Scottish Border Churches 1290-1690*. John Donald, 86-876

Archaeological Assessment

This is an important church that potentially stands upon a very early site, and its surviving fabric, albeit much-altered, retains evidence of a complex medieval and post-medieval history. Further evidence must survive beneath its floors (which have been mostly relaid relatively recently) , although structural remains will no doubt have been impacted both by generations of burial and the 19th-century creation of an underfloor heating system (a system of underfloor ducts seems to underlie the whole church).

Any proposed works which entail disturbance of floors will require archaeological monitoring, as will any that entail removal of wall plaster, both to record earlier plasters and possible remains of mural decoration, or to make a proper record of the structural features; it should then be possible to ascertain the extent to which Salvin totally rebuilt, or simply refaced, older walling. If a convenient access to the upper part of the tower is provided, the internal faces of its wall will merit photography and an examination of any medieval features.

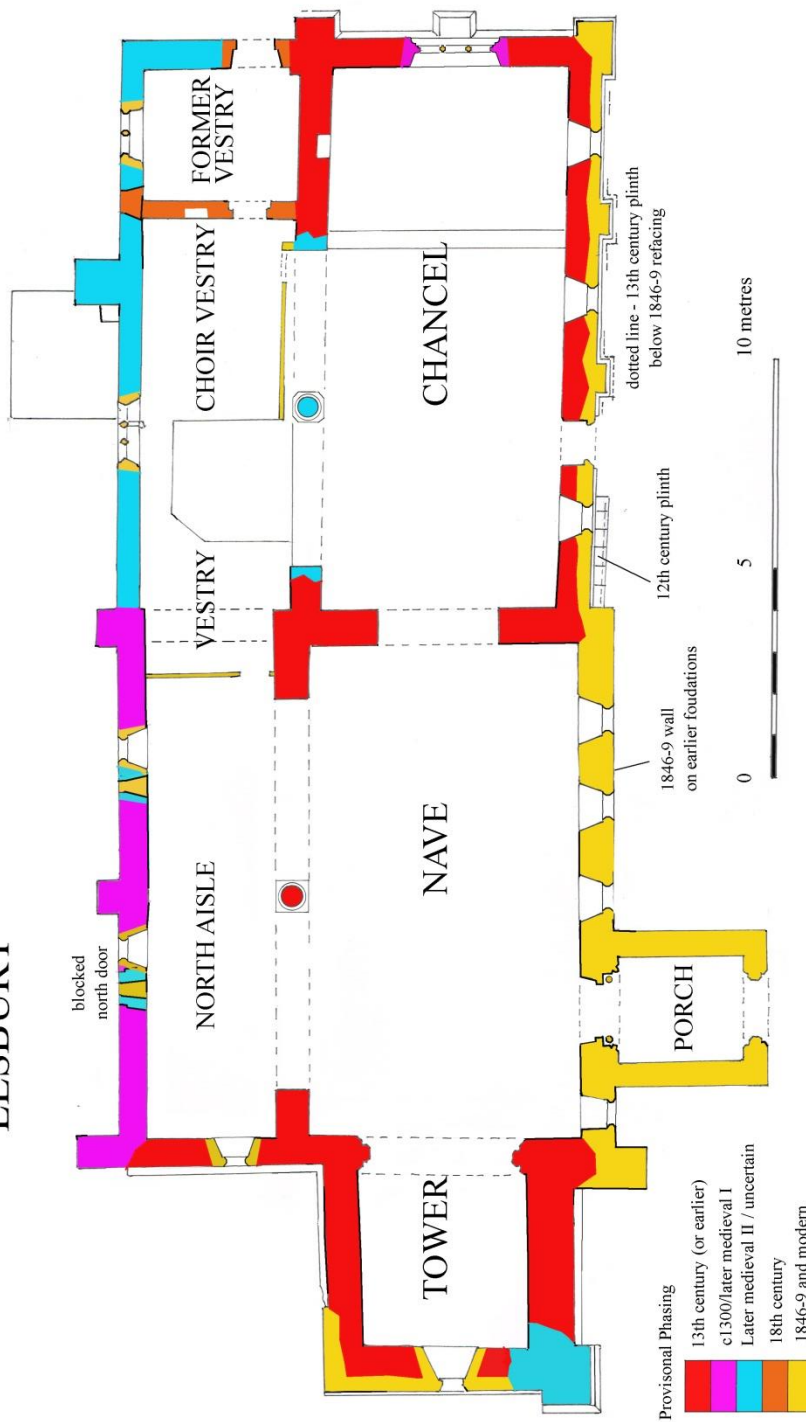
The carved stone in the north wall of the tower remains enigmatic; it merits a proper photographic record, made with lighting from a variety of angles, which may enable a proper identification and dating.



During the 1998 watching brief two carved stones were recoded, which had been found a few months previously under the floor slabs at the south-west corner of the chancel. Near identical, each is a rectangular panel, probably from a later medieval tomb, bearing a stag's head above a shield charged with a single bend. They are currently lying outside the church, and should really be brought inside and ideally mounted, with some explanatory material.

Peter F Ryder June 2020

ST MARY'S CHURCH LESBURY



Survey 18/19 6 2020 P F Ryder