

# St Aidan, Thorneyburn

## An Archaeological Assessment

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*The Church from the South West*

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## Aidan, Thorneyburn

St Aidan's Church (NGR NY 7862087688), built by the Commissioners for Greenwich Hospital in 1818 to serve one of the most remote and thinly-populated rural parishes in England, stands on the west side of the Valley of the Tasset Burn, 7 km north-west of Bellingham. Thorneyburn is very much a dispersed settlement; the church stands on a minor road and is accompanied only by the former rectory, built at the same time, and, a little to the south, a later-19<sup>th</sup> century school, now Thorneyburn Lodge. It is now a Grade II listed building, as are the Old Rectory and the nearby coach house/stable block.



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

The church is a relatively simple but surprisingly high-quality building in a restrained Georgian Gothic style; it is constructed of sandstone ashlar, with smooth quoins and dressings of yellow/buff stone and a tall vertically-tooled chamfered plinth; the roof is of graduated grey (Lakeland?) slates. It consists of a single rectangular body of three bays with a narrower west tower, and a central transept-like vestry on the north side.

## Description

### The Exterior

The **West Tower** (right) rises in three unbroken stages, with paired stepped buttress at the western angles which have chamfered set-backs, moulded on their lower edges, and rise to the base of the belfry. On the west a contemporary stone stair, set at right angles to the wall, descends between walls with old railings to a chamfered square-headed doorway into the boiler room in the tower basement. The west window is of two lights, with simple Y-tracery under a chamfered round arch. On the south three steps rise to a pair of panelled double doors, under a panelled wooden tympanum, in a round arch with a continuous chamfer. The second stage of the tower has small round-arched windows to south, west and north, in surrounds of two chamfered orders, the inner being deeply recessed. The belfry openings are each of two lights, with





simple Y-tracery within a chamfered round arch, and the tower is topped by a bold moulded cornice and simple embattled parapet.

The **Main Body of the Church** is a simple unbuttressed rectangle, with neat alternating flush quoins; the windows – three on the south and one either side of the vestry on the north – are all of the same Y-tracery type as the west window; the ‘keystones’ of the central and western on the south have dropped slightly. The east window is of the same general type but of three lights, with simple intersecting tracery, and a big circular oculus above. The walls are topped by a bold moulded cornice, which at each end is continued up on the slope of the gable, but here with a blocking course, topped by a chamfered coping, above. At the east end there is a raised block, a bit like a bell-cote, with a blind semicircular chamfered arch, that has its own cornice and blocking course.



*North-East View*

On the north of the church the projecting **Vestry** has its ridge at the level of the eaves of the main body. There is a chamfered square-headed doorway at the south end of the east wall, with three steps up to it; the north end has a two-light window of the usual type and a gable topped by a smaller-scale version of the chancel finial, except that here there is no recessed arch.

### **The Interior**

The interior of the church is plastered except for the exposed ashlar surrounds of the openings, which all have broad chamfered splays, set slightly proud of the wall; there is also a shallow chamfered internal plinth two courses high.

Inside the **Tower** the floor is of stone flags; the doorway into the main body of the church has a chamfered round arch, and holds a pair of panelled double doors with a panelled wooden tympanum above. There is a rectangular flue in the south-east corner (rising the full height of the tower), and a steep wooden ladder-cum-stair, with a simple square newel and a moulded handrail, rising eastward against the north wall to a trapdoor into the chamber where the trapdoor has a balustrade around it, which has a square pyramid-topped newel, and stick balusters. The floor is of north-south boards and the three windows have broad splayed

surrounds; on the east, raised c 1.5 m above the floor, is a round-headed arch, with four steps within the wall thickness, opening into the church roof void, dimly lit by the oculus in the east gable. A raised platform at the north-west corner has taken a second ladder (now removed) rising through another trapdoor, set (like that below) alongside the north wall, into the belfry.

The belfry floor, carried by big shaped corbels in the corners and two, quadrant-shaped, on each side wall, has heavy horizontal section beams set against the walls and east-west joists, carrying renewed floorboards. The single bell is carried in a box-like free-standing timber frame, of bolted construction in tern E W joists, broad trapdoor for ladder on N side; the tower roof is carried on north-south joists.



*Looking East*

Within the **Main Body of the Church** the east face of the doorway from the tower has a much broader surround than the west, making it, on this side of the wall, look more like a tower arch than a simple doorway; on this side it has two orders, a very broad inner that has a cross incised into the shallow chamfer at the apex (and now the names of the World War I and II dead of the parish on the south and north sides respectively), and a more conventional chamfer to the outer. In the centre of the north wall the doorway to the vestry has a simple square-headed chamfered opening. There is a moulded plaster cornice to the side walls, and an underdrawn plaster ceiling with inset 20<sup>th</sup> century lights. The floors of the tower and the main body are of stone slabs, except for board areas beneath the benches and organ, and the sanctuary, which is raised by two steps, and has an altar rail on spiral-twist uprights with foliate brackets, and Minton tiles.

Inside the **Vestry** a wooden screen cuts off a triangular lobby at the south-east corner, allowing separate access between the external door and the church. The vestry itself has a panelled dado and a simple stone fireplace set diagonally at the north-west corner. The

fireplace itself is probably original, although the decorative cast-iron inner and tiles looks of late 19<sup>th</sup> century character. The under-drawn plaster ceiling has a moulded cornice and a central square panel outlined by mouldings.

Inside the church a tablet on the west wall, south of the tower arch, commemorates an 1885 restoration, mentioning George Ross Lewin, rector, and James Scott and James Mole, churchwardens

The main body of the church has a roof of five full bays, with an additional half-bay at each end. Each truss is of strapped construction, and has pairs of queen posts, jowelled at top and bottom, with a horizontal straining beam set between them. Principal rafters/blades rise only to the posts, which directly support the upper of two through purlins; there are also raking struts from the bases of the posts to the principal/blade. The rafters continue to the apex, where there is a thin ridge board.

**The Tower Basement** has some very interesting feature, and has a shallow segmental east-west vault of ashlar. The brick furnace and flue set diagonally at the south-east corner appears secondary and, now in turn replaced by a free-standing modern boiler, would appear to have supplanted an earlier heating system contemporary with the church, and of some archaeological interest. In the east wall (below) is an opening with a segmental-arched head, infilled with brick, set within a larger frame of neat ashlar blocks in the form of an inverted round arch, as if demonstrating the section of a heating duct beyond. Puzzlingly there is a second inverted arch, this time infilled with coursed stonework, in the south wall, although the north of simply of coursed ashlar.



## Discussion/Archaeological Potential

Although of no great age, in comparison with most of the country's parish churches, Thorneyburn is a building both of historical and architectural interest. Historically, it is witness to a major event in South-Western Northumberland, the forfeit of the Earl of Derwentwater's estates following his part in the 1715 Rebellion and their subsequent grant by the Crown to the Commissioners of Greenwich Hospital, who in 1818 employed the architect H.H.Seward to design them churches for four remote parishes producing what has been described as 'a curiously urbane group in the midst of these wild moors'<sup>1</sup>. This was an era of considerable church building, partly an Anglican response to the rising tide of Nonconformity (in particular the various strands of Methodism) but the Commissioners – forever keen on 'improvement' both in terms of agriculture and, here, evidently, in spiritual matters, served their far-flung tenants well – this would have been an elegant and handsome church even in a prosperous London suburb. Thankfully no later Victorian saw the need to interfere in a more 'correct' Gothic style, partly perhaps because the quality of the original build was outstanding. The church also seems to have had a state-of-the-art underfloor heating system, perhaps a source of local wonder, utilising ducts carrying hot air from a furnace in the tower basement, which instead of the usual brick-walled and slab-roofed form seem to have been of ashlar with a semicircular invert. If the floor is ever opened up, or the brickwork removed from the opening in the east wall of the tower basement, then the opportunity should be taken for proper recording of this piece of sophisticated Georgian technology.

Otherwise the church will obviously not have the many centuries of concealed archaeological information that others do; however, it is two centuries old, and the plastered walls may however conceal evidence of interesting earlier decorations, so any works involving these should be monitored.

The immediate surroundings of the church are themselves of interest, this little enclave of a civilised landscape amongst bleak moorland also includes Seward's contemporary Rectory and a slightly-later schoolhouse. The churchyard walls, and its eastern entrance with quirky lozenge-plan piers, also appear to be Seward's. Thorneyburn and its story deserve to be better known.

**Peter F Ryder March 2014**

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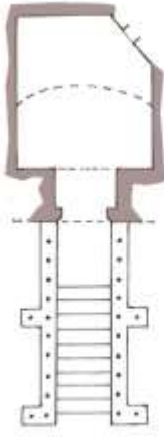
<sup>1</sup> Pevsner et al, *Northumberland* (Buildings of England series, Penguin) 1992, 84



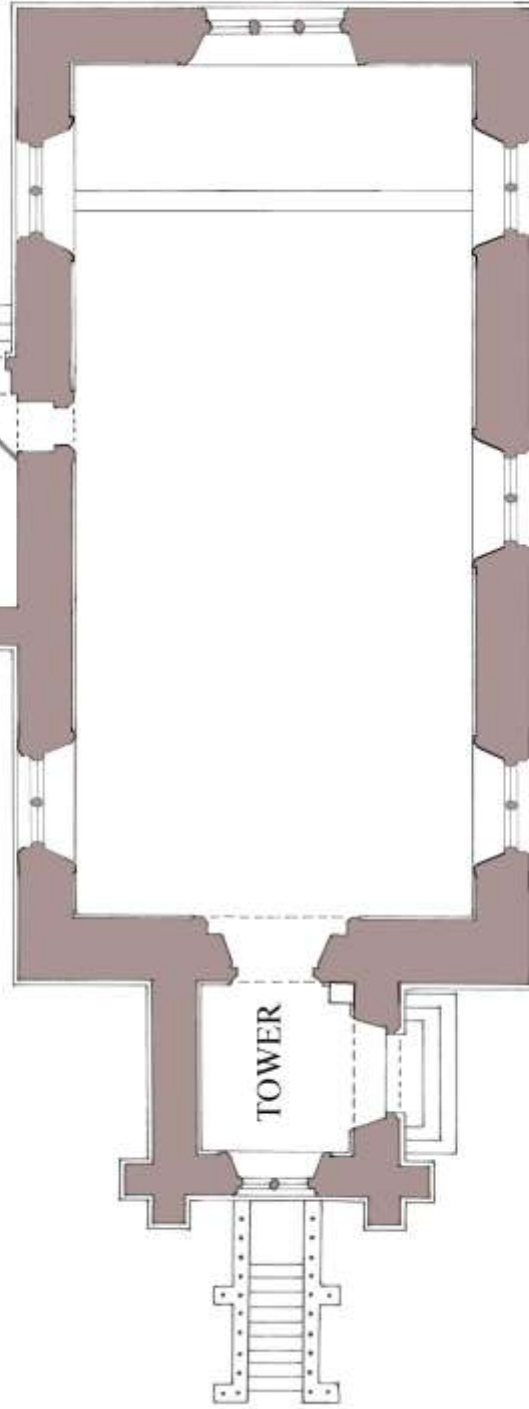
ST AIDAN'S CHURCH  
THORNEYBURN

Survey P F Ryder November 2013

HEATING CHAMBER IN TOWER BASEMENT



VESTRY



TOWER

