

St Mary the Virgin  
**Longframlington**  
Northumberland



*The church from the north-east*

An Archaeological Assessment

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## Longframlington, St Mary the Virgin

### Introduction & Historic Notes

Longframlington parish church has a simple two-cell plan of nave and chancel, although both are quite spacious (nave 13.4 by 6.3 m internally, chancel 7 by 5.3 m), with a south porch (again quite large) to the nave and a 19<sup>th</sup>-century north vestry/organ chamber to the chancel.

The church was formerly the Chapel of Framlington within the parish of Felton, in 1891 becoming the Church of the Parish of Longframlington and Brinkburn. The earliest reference to the existence of a chapel (then dedicated to the Blessed Mary and St John the Baptist) is in an undated charter of William de Framlington, who died c1196 (NCH 7, 448). In 1663 the chapel was described as ‘totally ruined and destitute’ and in 1826 Archdeacon Singleton’s minute book paints a depressing picture – the building was ‘in a very ruinous and disgraceful condition, the pews ruinous within and the walls ruinous and unseemly with filth and abomination without’ (op.cit). The building was restored in 1882 (chancel) and 1896 (nave).



*The church from the south*

### Description

#### The Exterior

The **Nave** is largely constructed of quite large squared blocks of stone (often quite eroded) but there are some interesting variations within the fabric. There is a chamfered plinth to the side walls and a much broader two-step plinth to the west end; the gables have a 19<sup>th</sup>-century roll-moulded coping on raised footstones rather than kneelers, and the roof is of graduated Lakeland slates. The west gable is topped by a bell-cote, and the east by a cross fleury finial.

The west end is built of blocks of brownish stone (quite badly worn) although a harder-edged bluish stone is used for the south-west quoin, parts of which may have been renewed. The wall has a broad central buttress-like feature; immediately above the plinth this has a projecting band chamfered above and below, and three courses above the plinth is a block with the incised date '1740'. Although the plinth of wall and projection seem contemporary, on the north the stonework of the wall seems to curve in as if the projection blocks an older doorway, although this may well be illusory. The projection rises to a sloping top a little below the level of the eaves of the side walls; it may have originally extended higher, as its cap and the walling above look of more recent stone, and may have been rebuilt. On either side of the projection, quite high up, is a round-headed window with a chamfered surround, and a grooved-and-chamfered hoodmould, all in late-19<sup>th</sup> century ashlar. The gable is topped by a bellcote of 18<sup>th</sup> century character<sup>1</sup> (1740?) which has a square-section band at its base, a pair of plain lancet openings, a moulded top cornice above which rise squat corner pinnacles and a square cross-gabled central block which has with a small lancet in each face and rises a pyramidal cap topped by a weathercock and cast-iron cross finial.

On the south side of the nave the small chamfered plinth stops a few cm short of the larger plinth of the west end, which is returned for c 0.60 m round the base of the south-western quoin. The wall above is of coursed squared stone; for 3.5 m from the east end the lower part of the wall is of large well-squared blocks of bluish stone (the course immediately above the plinth is 0.40 m high); then comes a ragged break with much browner stone. Above the bluish fabric the upper half of the south-eastern quoin has the look of having been rebuilt. There are two windows east of the porch, set high in the wall, each a round-headed light with a narrow chamfered surround; the head and sill of each are clearly late-19<sup>th</sup> century ashlar, but the jambs re-use older stone. Ragged breaks on either side of the eastern window, and on the west of the western probably roughly indicate the positions of the jambs of the preceding sash windows. To the west of the western window, above the east wall of the porch, is a short but very clear straight joint, with above and to the east of it two large well-squared bluish stone; at the same level further east, between the heads of the two windows, there are four more big bluish blocks.

On the north of the nave there is again a short break between the big plinth of the west end, returning 1 m round the north-western quoin, and the smaller one of the rest of the wall, which then, together with one course of squared blocks above it, continues unbroken to the base of the north-eastern quoin which is masked by the added 19<sup>th</sup>-century vestry. However above the course of squared blocks the western third of the wall has a very distinct patch of very different fabric, roughly-coursed more elongate blocks of bluish stone, up to a height of c 1.5 m. The remainder of the wall is of well-coursed blocks of brown sandstone, apparently undisturbed to the east of the 'patch' but a little less regular immediately above it. The fact that the plinth and lowest course are continuous beneath the 'patch' suggest that it is just that – an area of repair – yet the manner in which the lower courses of squared masonry to the east neatly abut it, whilst those above seem to ride up over it, makes it look as if it a survival of earlier fabric. Unfortunately the internal wall face is hidden by the panelled dado.

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<sup>1</sup> One of a distinctive group of Post-Reformation bellcotes eg Felton, Ford, Holy Island etc)

At the west end of the wall there is a ragged break, with a vertical line of 19<sup>th</sup>-century patching, c 0.50 m short of the angle quoin, perhaps indicating that the north-west quoin has been rebuilt. There are two square-headed windows in the north wall, each of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights with pierced but uncusped spandrels; all their dressings are of late-19<sup>th</sup> century diagonally-tooled ashlar. At around 0.75 m from the east end of the wall (ie the west wall of the vestry) there is an irregular vertical joint in the lower courses, again hard to interpret. The lower part of the north-eastern quoin is concealed by the vestry, whilst above the angle of the nave is topped by an ashlar chimney stack which looks, in its present form, relatively recent.



*The nave from the north-west*

The **South Porch** is built of coursed squared stone, and has a chamfered plinth (set a little below the level of that of the nave); it is quite sizeable, and its steep roof, of graduated Lakeland slates, rises well above the eaves of the aisle. The outer arch is also unusually large, and of two-centred form; it is of two chamfered orders externally, although internally the inner order is square, and springs from rather mutilated jambs with fragmentary remains of capitals. The block in the external wall face below the western capital has the incised date '1740', and '174...' also occurs on the inner face of the eastern jamb; both jambs have a cut-out for the frame of a gate, now removed. The voussoirs of the outer order stand proud of the wall face above; has the arch been re-set?

On the west side of the porch there is an odd ragged break between the main wall and the south-west angle, where there seem to be eroded remains of a shallow pilaster (although the plinth shows no sign of this); there is a similar break in the east wall, but no sign of any pilaster.

Most of the south wall, and all of the east end of the **Chancel** were rebuilt in 1882 in coursed roughly-tooled stone, with tooled ashlar dressings; the roof is of Welsh slate. Old

masonry survives at the west end of the south wall, where there is a window, which can probably be classed as a 'low side'<sup>2</sup>; this has a semicircular head, and a continuous narrow chamfer. Its dressings (except for the sill) look old, but the three that make up the head have curves of rather too small a radius, and must be re-used. The plain square-headed priest's door to the east, at the head of three steps, has old masonry only in its lower west jamb; one block is worn, as if by knife sharpening. Towards the east end of the wall is a second window, very similar in form to the first, but entirely in 19<sup>th</sup>-century stone. The chamfered plinth seems old; close to its east end an 0.92 m length has been cut back, which must relate to the position of the buttress shown on pre-restoration drawings. There is a chamfered oversailing course to the eaves.

The east end is all of 19<sup>th</sup>-century fabric, except for the chamfered plinth which looks old. There are three round-arched windows, with chamfered surrounds, all the same height but the central one considerably wider than the others. The gable coping is carried on moulded kneelers, and rises to a square pedestal carrying a ring cross finial.

Only the eastern third of the north wall of the chancel is exposed externally, and is of old squared stone, without any features; the chamfered plinth is partly buried.

The **Vestry** of 1896 is built of coursed squared stone with ashlar dressings, and has a roof of graduated Lakeland slates. There is a broad chamfered plinth c 1 m above the ground; below this on the west steps drop northwards to a square-headed door into the boiler room, also served by a square-headed hatch on the north. In the north end is a ex-situ 14<sup>th</sup>-century window, which before 1882 was at the east end of the south wall of the chancel; it has a monolithic head of two trefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a simple moulded hood with turned-back ends. Parts of the jambs are old, but they also include 19<sup>th</sup>-century blocks. The gable above has a square-edged coping with a roll moulding at its apex. At the north end of the east wall three steps rise to a two-centred doorway with a moulded surround that reduces in width towards the foot of each jamb and is then finished with broach stops.

## The Interior

Inside the **South Porch** there are stone benches against each side wall; their square-edged top slabs are of brown sandstone, and seem to be purpose-cut, rather than (as often) older slabs re-used; the walls above include a number of blocks with scratched grooves and old initials, and are topped by a richly-carved late-19<sup>th</sup> century wall-plate; the roof, of the same date, has scissor-braced rafters and ashlaring. Above the outer arch can be seen the line of an earlier roof at a slightly lower level, and a carved stone head with oval eyes that may be post-medieval.

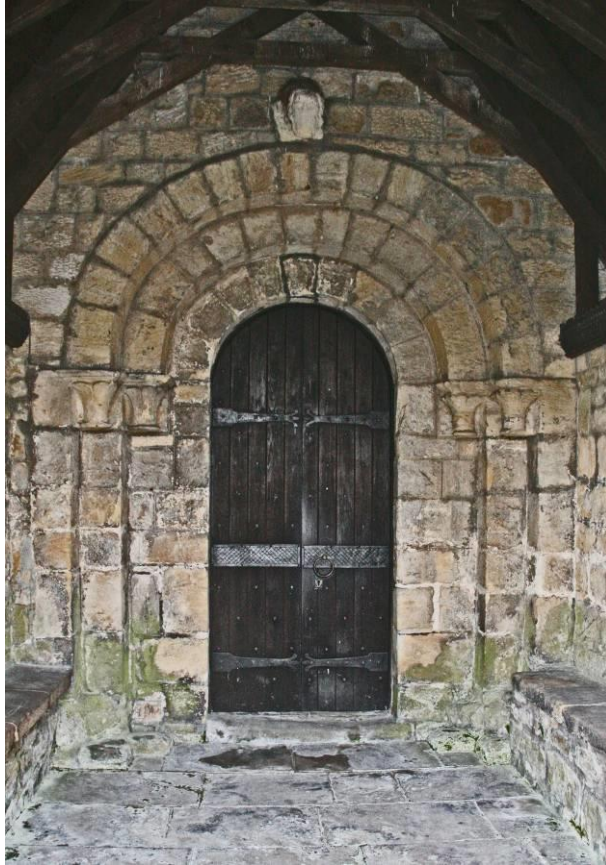
The inner doorway is a fine piece of late 12<sup>th</sup>-century work, a semicircular arch of three square orders; although not ornate, this is quite an ambitious portal for a church of this side<sup>3</sup>. The inner orders is continued down to the ground, whilst the outer two have been carried on jamb shafts; these have gone, together with their bases, but their waterleaf capitals remain. A straight joint immediately outwith the west jamb shows that the doorway was set in a shallow gabled projection, rising higher than the aisle wall (cf, on a grander

<sup>2</sup> It is set much lower than any of the other windows in the church, although the eastern window in the same wall, a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century insertion, is now at the same level.

<sup>3</sup> The arch is 2.82 m high from threshold to the soffit of the inner order.

scale, the north door at Brinkburn Priory); the walling above the arch appears to have been renewed. Above the outer order of the arch is a carving of a bearded human head (probably a representation of Christ) in whitish sandstone, now rather worn.

The internal walls of the **Nave** are clear of plaster, although their lower parts are concealed



*The South Doorway*

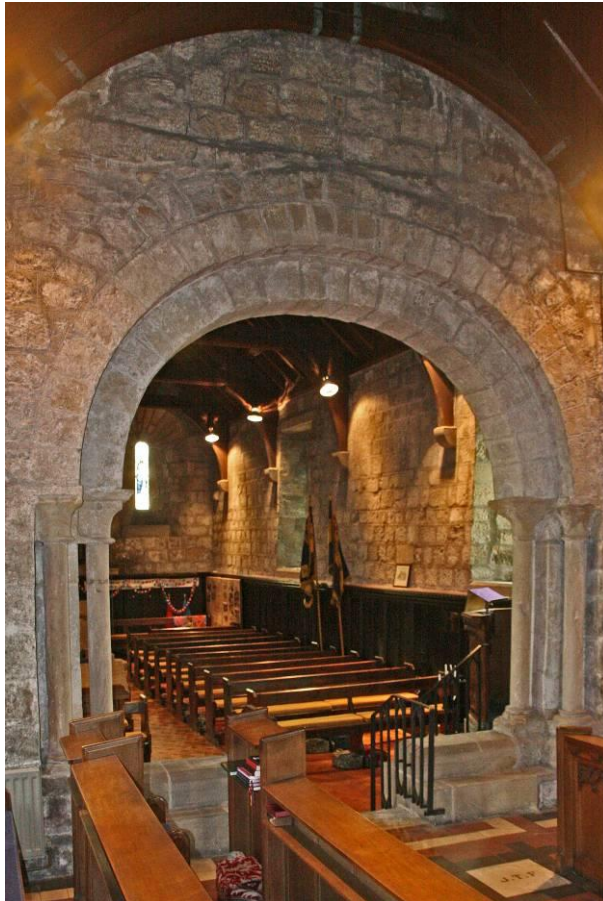
by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century panelled dado rising to c 1.8 m. The two windows in the west end have old stonework in their inner splays, but their semicircular rear arches with voussoirs standing proud of the wall face all look restoration, as are their stepped sills; the walling above and between them is quite heavily mortared.

On the south, the south door has a semicircular rear arch that has been restored in part, and quite broadly splayed jambs; the two windows to the east have semicircular rear arches that are each in part old and seem genuine late-12<sup>th</sup> century work. The internal splays of the western are partly old, but those of the eastern mostly restored; both windows have odd cavities in the jambs just inside the glass-line, perhaps the consequence of old jamb stones from elsewhere being re-used in the 1896 restoration. Both have stepped internal sills.

The western section of the north wall looks undisturbed, except perhaps for its upper metre or so; c 3.5 m above the floor there are remains of three cut-back corbels, the first only 0.20 m or so from the west wall, the second c 2m beyond and the third just short of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century corbel carrying the second roof truss; there does not seem to be any sign of corresponding corbels on the south wall. The two square-headed windows both retain some old work in their inner splays, although their lintels and sills are 19<sup>th</sup>-century ashlar. Built into the eastern splay of the western window is the upper part of a 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century cross slab grave cover.

The nave roof is of four full bays, with a very short additional bay at the west end; the roof structure is all of late 19<sup>th</sup> century date, consisting of arch-braced collar-beam trusses with king struts above the collars, from which curved struts rise to the principals, carrying two levels of hollow-chamfered purlins and a square-set ridge, supported by wall posts set on stone corbels of quadrant section. The eastern truss is oddly embedded in the east wall of the nave.

The arch into the Chancel is arguably the most important architectural feature of the building; it is roughly semicircular (there has been a little movement) and of two square orders, set on detached shafts – which really do stand well clear of the jambs - with good waterleaf capitals and hold-water bases, now rather damaged; the impostes are hollow chamfered on the lower angle. The bases are set c 1m above the level of the nave floor, and between them is a low ashlar screen wall, with a central opening, all of late 19<sup>th</sup> century date. nave floor two steps up, also low screen wall chamfered on upper margins all C19. In



*The Chancel Arch from the south-east*

wall above arch there is an outer series of roughly-shaped voussoirs, commencing c 1.2 m above the impostes; such outer orders are often a Victorian feature but this may not be the case here. The eastern face of the arch is similar.

Inside the chancel, the internal surround of the probable low-side window at the west end of the south wall looks largely original, except for some patching of the eastern splay; the priest's door alongside (now reduced to a cupboard) is partly concealed by a wooden frame, but its stonework, and that of the wall beyond, looks all 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is of precisely-coursed roughly-tooled stone. The eastern window seems a copy of the low-side except that its head is formed from three big arcuate blocks<sup>4</sup>. Both windows have level sills. Directly beneath the eastern a medieval piscine bowl, of rough conical form with simple mouldings at top and bottom, pierced for a drain, has been re-set in the rebuilt wall

At the west end of the north wall is a large arch of 1896 to the organ chamber/vestry; it is of segmental-pointed form and of two chamfered orders, the outer continued down to the floor and the inner dying into the jambs.

The triplet of pseudo-Romanesque windows in the east wall have plain semicircular square-edged rear arches carried on detached shafts with scalloped capitals; everything here is of 1882.

The chancel roof is four fairly short bays with simple arch-braced trusses (including one set against each end wall) that together with the common rafter pairs all have collars, those of the trusses carrying king-struts. The trusses are carried on scalloped corbels, on the south set c 1 m below the wall head, on the north at different levels so as to clear the Organ Chamber arch.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps in imitation of Saxon windows as at Monkwearmouth; narrower voussoirs are more typical of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The square-headed vestry door is set at the west end of a thin screen wall that frames the organ; inside the vestry the walls are of exposed squared stone, with a pecked finish. The doorway in the east wall and the re-set medieval window on the north both have segmental rear arches with chamfers to their heads only, all in 19<sup>th</sup>-century stone.

### **Structural History**

The church is usually dated to c1190 (NCH 7, 451), and is claimed to have been built by Osbert Colutarius, master mason employed at Brinkburn Priory c 2.5 km to the south west. Its earliest features – the south doorway and chancel arch – would tally well with this date. Although a simple two-cell building, its size and in particular the proportions of its south door mark it out as being in a class above many humble village chapels of the period.

Whilst it seems most likely that the church is of one period, there are one or two hints that this might not be the case. Although one may treat the dowsed plan (Bailey, Briggs and Cambridge 1988) that shows an narrower apsidal sanctuary pre-dating the present chancel; with some scepticism, it is true that the chancel arch is set off-centre as regards the present chancel. Another problem is raised by the peculiar ‘patch’ of roughly-coursed stonework in the north wall of the nave. If this is earlier than the adjacent walling – which is all of typical late-12<sup>th</sup> century character – then it may be a relic of an older, perhaps Pre-Conquest building. Whilst it would seem very odd to retain one fragment of walling in an otherwise totally rebuilt building, a precedent is seen at Kilpeck (Herefordshire) where one corner of an Anglo-Saxon church was deliberately retained in a high-status Norman rebuild.

However, another line of argument could point to the ‘patch’ simply being a repair. It is that Longframlington church now has no sign of any north door; the majority of earlier medieval churches possessed an opposed pair of doorways in the nave, the north or ‘devil’s’ door being that which tradition claims the evil spirit expelled from a baby at baptism left the building. Many north doors were blocked up after the Reformation. The absence of a north door here would be explained if the roughly-coursed masonry (and courses above it) are seen as a patch or repair. The situation might be clarified if the Victorian panelled dado were removed from the internal face of the wall.

There does seem a possibility that the projection in the centre of the west wall blocks an opening, or, perhaps more likely, contains the remains of a narrow newel stair as at Felton; again the removal of the Victorian dado might provide evidence.

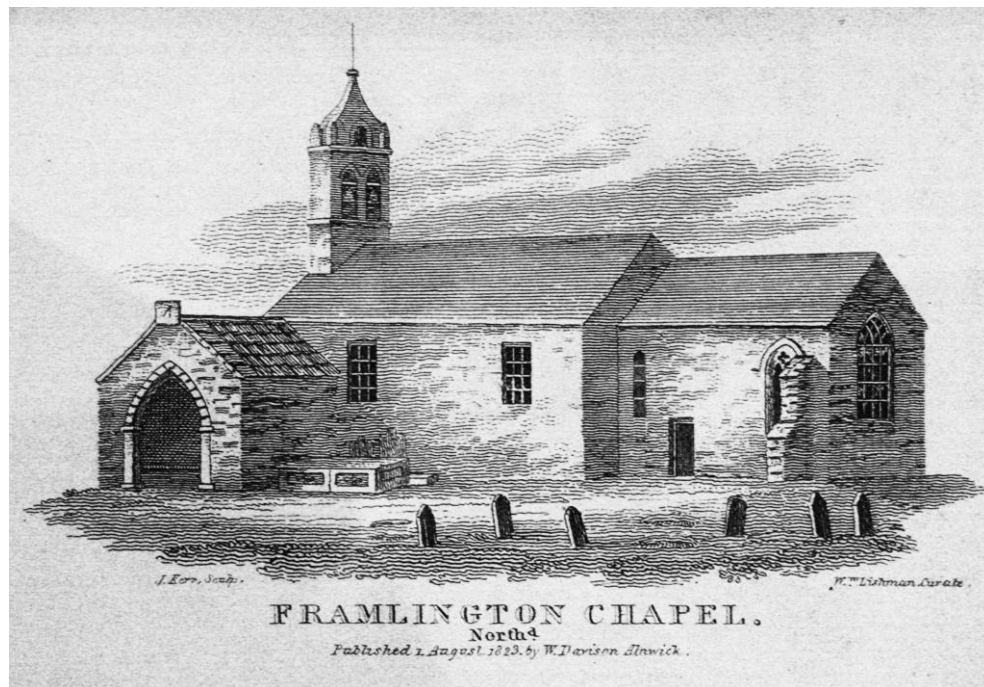
As often, Victorian restoration has left very little evidence of the later medieval and post-medieval history of the building. The west end with its broad plinth and central buttress-like projection seems like a later rebuild; although its two small windows (which, like most in the church had their outer openings widened but retain parts of their inner splays) have been restored in a pseudo-Romanesque style, this may not be their original form. A dowsed plan (Bailey, Briggs & Cambridge) shows a narrower rectangular structure projecting beyond the west end; might there have been a western tower, destroyed in the vicissitudes that plagued the area in the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century?

The date of the west wall is uncertain; the plinth could be medieval, but has nothing particularly diagnostic about it; the ‘1740’ date scratched on the central projection, (which also occurs on the south porch) seems more likely to refer to the bellcote; does this replace a small late medieval tower or belfry (cf Felton) coeval with the rebuilding of the west end?



The south porch is also something of a mystery; its outer arch looks of 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century date, but might perhaps have been re-used – although it seems unlikely to have come from elsewhere in this church.

One window, formerly at the east end of the south wall of the chancel but now in the north end of the vestry, is evidence of alterations to the church in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, and has a monolithic head in the Northumberland tradition, best exemplified by the spectacular head of the east window of the south aisle at Felton.



Davison's print of 1823 (a copy is hung in the church) (above) and Wilson's 1870 drawing and plan provide a useful record of the church before its late Victorian restoration. Many of the windows had been enlarged into plain square-headed sashes; there was a big stepped buttress at the east end of the chancel south wall (presumably countering some structural problem) and a plain Gothic-arched window in the east end, holding a sash with intersecting glazing bars in its head.

Restoration, funded by the Cadogan family of Brinkburn, came in two phases. In 1882 John Wardle of Newcastle largely rebuilt the chancel, which was probably in poor condition structurally, then in 1896 the nave was restored and previous small vestry rebuilt by Hicks & Charlewood, who clearly took pains to restore the historic fabric to what they thought was its original appearance. In style their work is more scholarly than Wardle's rather unhappy eastern triplet<sup>5</sup>, but their re-use of old material makes the history of the fabric a little harder to read.

### Archaeological Assessment

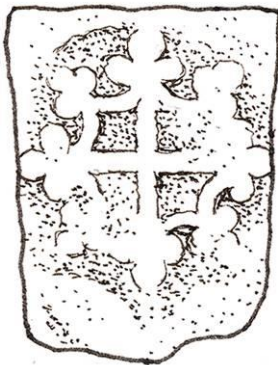
As with any medieval church, it is likely that structural remains and stratified deposits of archaeological significance survive beneath the floors, although this will almost invariably

<sup>5</sup> The NCH account (1904, 451) refers to the 1882 work as a 'so-called' restoration.

have been disturbed by burial and the construction of underfloor heating systems. It is difficult to assess at Longframlington exactly how much disturbance there has been, as the present floors – wooden blocks in the nave, tiling in the chancel – do not have heating grates; nevertheless, there is an underground boiler room beneath the vestry, and it seems likely that some form of underfloor system has existed.

The majority of the fabric of the church is exposed, so the question of the survival of plaster and historic wall finishes does not arise. However, the lower parts of the internal faces of the nave walls are covered by the 19<sup>th</sup> century dado, which may well conceal structural features and fabric changes of historic significance.

Cross Slab Grave Cover  
St Mary the Virgin, Longframlington



built into eastern internal splay of  
the western of the two windows on  
the north side of the nave



drawn Mar 2009 PFR

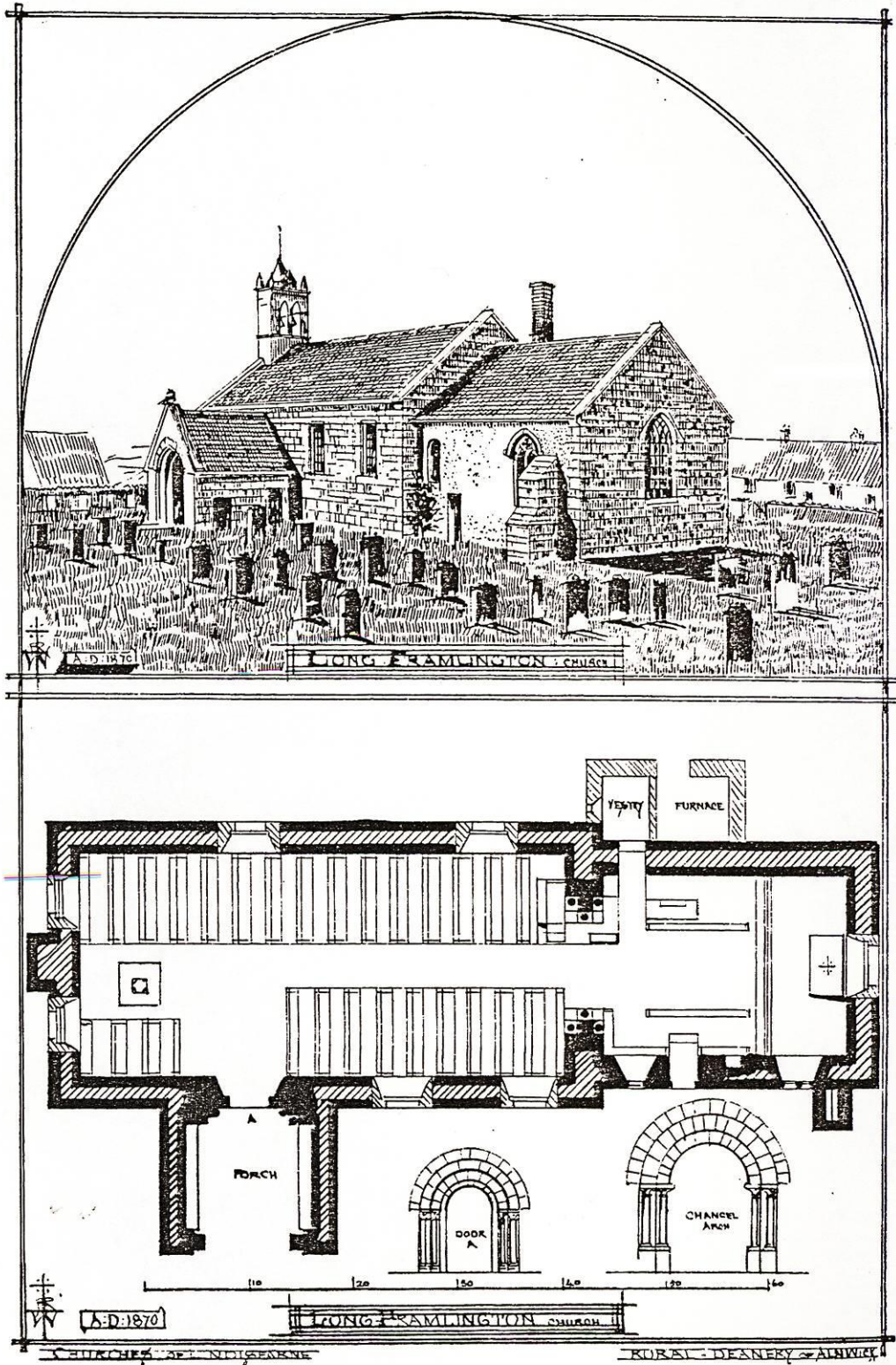
It is understood that an extension on the north side of the nave is currently in the planning stage; this will necessitate the creation of a new opening in the north wall of the nave, a part of the building which, as it is explained in the text above, is not yet fully understood. Some further investigation of this area, by means of the removal of the dado, and perhaps the preparation of stone-by-stone drawings of internal and external wall faces, may be thought desirable; an archaeological presence will obviously be required whilst any intrusive works are in progress.

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## Sources

NCH (1904) Northumberland County History Vol 7 (ed. J.C.Hodgson)

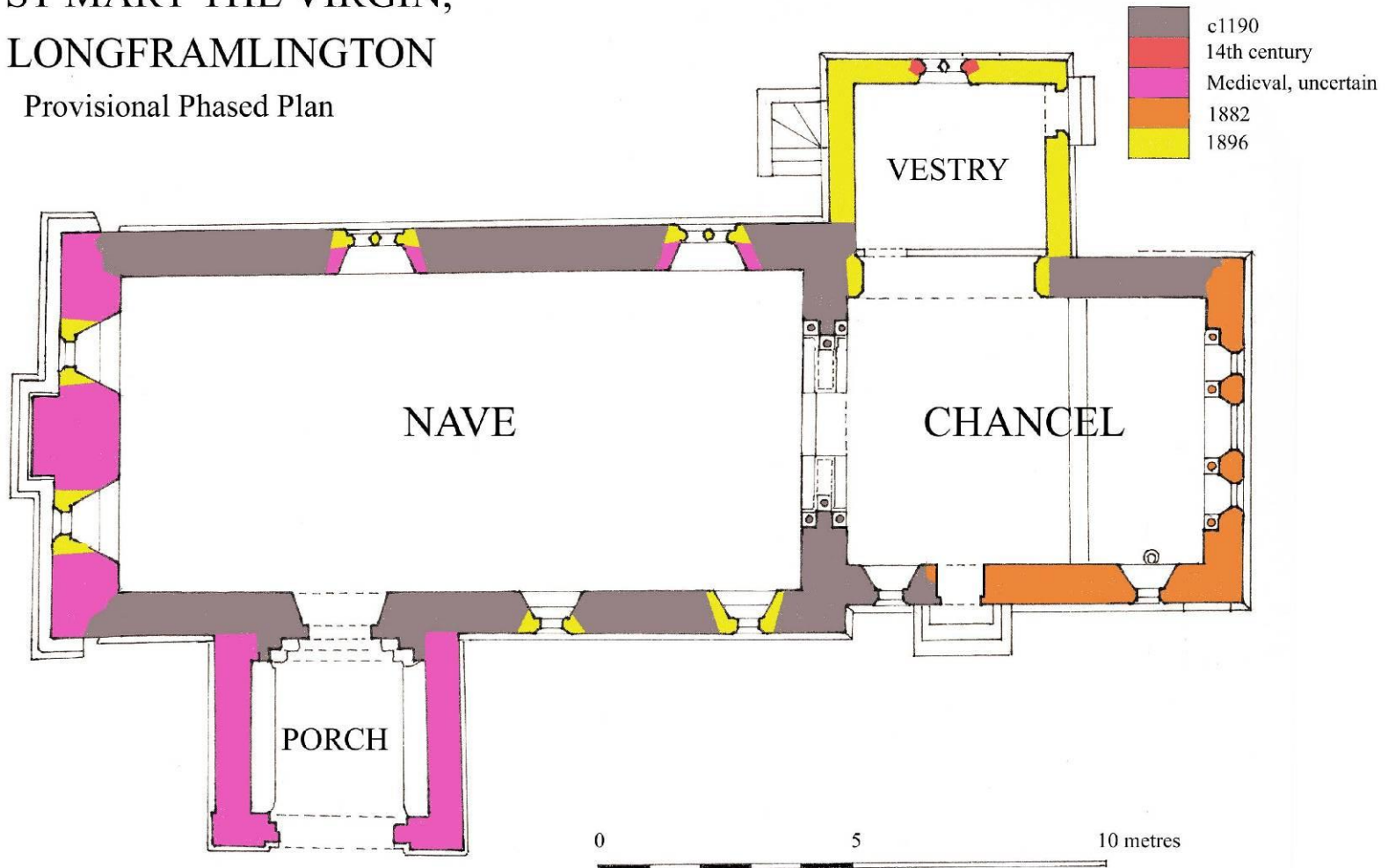
Bailey.R.N., Cambridge,E & Briggs H.D (1988) Dowsing and Church Archaeology



Wilson's drawings of 1870

# ST MARY THE VIRGIN, LONGFRAMLINGTON

Provisional Phased Plan



Survey P F Ryder March 2009