

The Church of St Cuthbert,
Elsdon,
Northumbeland

An Archaeological Assessment
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The church from the south

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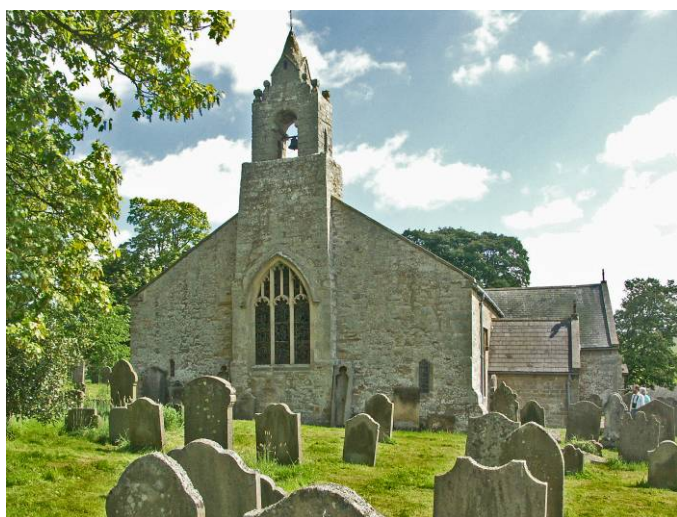


The Parish Church of St Cuthbert, Elsdon

Elsdon is a classic Northumberland upland village, its houses bordering a broad green, with on the north Elsdon Tower (at one time the vicarage), one of the best-known of the county's so-called pele towers, and beyond the houses to the north-east the massive earthworks of the early Norman castle. The church stands in an almost square churchyard on an island site towards the north end of the green, and consists of a broad nave with a western bellcote and a roof of shallow pitch extending unbroken over the aisles, a south porch, transepts, and a chancel with a vestry on the north.

Exterior

The west end of the **Nave** is built of coursed roughly squared stone, now very heavily mortared. The bellcote is carried by a broad but shallow projection, containing the west window of three cinquefoil-headed lights with panel tracery over under a two-centred arch; all its stonework is of later 19th-century date, and above its head is the four-centred arch of a previous window, although possibly no older than the early 19th century. The bellcote is one of a distinctive Northumberland group, probably of 17th century date; it has a round-headed arch with square imposts and a keystone, with finials on either side and a cross-gabled spirlet above, carrying a wrought-iron finial cross. On either side of the bellcote projection are short lengths of a big triple-stepped sloping plinth; beyond these, in the west walls of the aisles, are narrow windows that have had round heads, now somewhat mutilated; the larger one, on the south, has upright blocks as its jambs. The east face of the lower section of the bellcote shows the remains of the roof tabling of a taller and more-steeply-pitched nave roof, difficult to relate to the present tall aisles; this



The church from the west

presumably indicates that this part pre-dates the rebuilding of the aisles, and is thus probably of medieval date. The gable itself has a raised slab coping, with short horizontal returns at its feet, in a common late 18th or early 19th century manner. The east gable of the nave has a similar coping, and is topped by the base of a lost finial. The south wall of the nave - only a short length of which is exposed above the eastern slope of the transept roof - has a square oversailing course, of 19th-century character, to the eaves.

The south wall of the **South Aisle** is again of coursed roughly-squared stone; at its west end is a low stepped buttress. On either side of the porch are square-headed windows, Each of three trefoiled ogee lights, under moulded hoods with crowned heads as stops; both are entirely of 19th-century date. Above the porch is a slab with the inscription 'REPAIRED MDCCCXXXVII' (1837). The south doorway, inside the porch, is of tooled-and-margined 19th-century ashlar, and has a two-centred arch with a continuous chamfer, set in a wall of the same nature as the side walls of the porch, and clearly of 19th-century date. The outer arch of the **South Porch** is of two-centred form, with a slightly-dropped keystone, its continuous chamfer being studded with square four-petalled, with a mitred head at the apex; the gable above has a raised coping and a cross crosslet finial. The side walls of the porch are of coursed square stone, with 19th-century tooled-and-margined quoins; a re-used stone in the west wall is inscribed 'W T 1715'. The fact that the

top three or four courses of each side wall are of rather better-quality stone suggests that two phases of masonry are present, but if so it is all of 19th century date as Davison's 1813 print show only a shallow gabled panel of masonry rather than a porch.

The north wall of the **North Aisle** is of very roughly coursed rubble, except for its upper 2 m or so which is of slightly better quality stone, with more recent fabric still just below the eaves; there are no openings at all, the absence of a north door being very unusual in any medieval church. There is a rough projecting footing, extending 2.66 m from the north transept to a gap 1.3 m wide¹, followed by a stretch of slighter footings for a further 2.0 m (including one block which looks of 19th century date, and which corresponds to a small patch of lighter masonry in the wall directly above; to the west of this the heavy irregular footings resume and continue to the west end of the wall.

The **South Transept** is of coursed roughly-squared stone; it is clear that its western aisle is an addition. There have been quite slender pairs of stepped buttresses at the angles of the original transept, with a chamfered plinth and two levels of moulded string courses, the upper of which has continued across the wall between them. Above the head of the surviving southern member of the western pair, a kneeler and then the footstone of the original pre-aisle gable can be seen in outline. The eastern pair of buttresses are peculiar in that the re-entrant angle between them cuts into the corner of the transept, ie the outer faces of each are longer than the inner (c 0.67 m as against c 0.47 m); the result is that above them the upper corner of the wall appears to be clumsily corbelled out, perhaps indicating a later heightening. The present south window of the transept is a big four-light one, with tracery, moulded hood and head stops, all of 19th-century date; about 0.30 m outside its west jamb is the west jamb of an earlier window. The window also cuts down through the earlier moulded string course which only survives to the east of it. Between the window and the south-west buttress what looks like a blocked doorway is in fact a big 18th-century monument with Doric columns carrying a pediment enclosing a coat of arms. Both the east and west walls of the transept are quite featureless.

The **North Transept** is similar to the south in having very similar paired buttresses at its angles (although the intact eastern pair are laid out rather more conventionally), and a string-course on its end wall broken by the present window, as well as an added west aisle; in this case the western buttress of the north-western pair is incorporated in the north end of the added aisle; the aisle has a low and shallow buttress at the north end of its west wall. As on the south the gable end of the transept again has a large 19th-century traceried window, of four lights, with a chamfered surround, casement-moulded hood and head stops; the gable coping is again of 19th-century date, as is the ring-cross finial. On the east of the transept, and only visible above the vestry roof, is a large blocked square-headed window with a narrow chamfer to its lintel. The west wall of the transept aisle is quite featureless.

The **Chancel** is of similar fabric to the rest of the church, although less heavily mortared. Its south wall has been relatively untouched by the Victorian restorer, and is of large roughly-coursed rubble. At its west end is a square-headed three-light window of three trefoiled ogee-headed lights with cusped mouchettes above, under a moulded hood with worn heads stops. Its sill is set a little lower than those of the other windows in the wall, so that in effect it is a 'low side' window, the function of which used to exercise Victorian antiquarian minds. Then comes a priest's door with an irregular four-centred head and a continuous chamfer, with a hoodmould chamfered above and below, and beyond that a 14th-century single light window with a mutilated

¹ Does the gap, and/or section of lighter footings, correspond to the area in which a mass grave was recorded in 1877 (church guide p.11) over which 'the foundations of the north wall were found to be not so deeply laid as in other parts of the Church, the builders evidently wanting to avoid disturbing the half-decomposed bodies'

trefoiled head and two sunk mouchettes above. East of this is a vertical crack, probably a simple structural failure rather than a discontinuity in the fabric, and finally an arched window of three trefoiled ogee-headed lights with simple reticulated tracery above, under a chamfered hood with large but badly worn head stops. At eaves level is an old oversailing course with several broken off drainage spouts, similar to those found on the parapets of several local castles and towers. Coupled with the internal thickening of the upper section of the wall (which on the external face looks to be all of a single build). This seems strong evidence that there was originally a parapet with a wall-walk behind it, clear evidence of defensive intent.



The chancel, seen from the south; note old stone spouts to eaves

The eastern angles of the chancel each have a pair of stepped buttresses rising to about two-thirds of the height of the wall. These are rather more substantial than those of the transepts, and appear medieval although the quoins above them are of 19th-century character. Only the lower part of the east wall appears old; the big five-light east window with intersecting tracery and a hood with crowned heads as stops is all of 19th-century date, as is the gable with its coping returned at the foot, and the finial in the form of St Cuthbert's pectoral cross.

The short length of the north wall of the chancel exposed to the east of the vestry is of heavy roughly-coursed large rubble except for its top four courses of squared stone, which must represent 19th-century reconstruction. There is an oversailing chamfered course to the eaves, but without the spouts of its southern counterpart; despite its degree of weathering, on this side this is probably a post-medieval feature. Only an indistinct patch of rubble indicates the position of the blocked window more clearly visible internally. To the west of the ridge of the vestry roof the wall seems of a single phase, with an old oversailing course that has the remains of spouts, as on the south.

The 19th-century **Vestry**, gabled north-south, is built of coursed and roughly-tooled stone, and has a chimney stack on its north gable; on the east is a Yorkshire sash window with simple Gothic glazing bars, under ashlar lintel. A second parallel block to the west projects a little further to the

north, and has in its north end a boarded door in a stop-chamfered frame and two small sash windows, sharing a common timber lintel that probably served an earlier wide opening.

Interior

The internal walls of the church are now bare of plaster; they are largely of rubble, with little attempt at any coursing.

The 19th-century window in the west wall of the **Nave** has a wide internal splay, and is set inside a large pointed arch of a single square order and without any impost; it has large roughly alternating blocks in its jambs and what looks like a clumsy and heavy hoodmould, of square section, springing from very simple triangular-section corbels. The suggestion is that this is a 12th-century arch, originally semicircular, reconstructed in its present quite steeply pointed form; the outer order has been re-set a little proud of the wall face, hence its hoodmould-like appearance. Above the arch are two shallow vertical grooves in the wall, just beneath the apex of the roof, that must relate to the bell ropes and bell cote.



The interior looking east

The nave has five bay arcades, each made up of four narrow arches on octagonal piers, then a fifth rather wider arch to the transepts (of the same height but less steeply pitched), with larger square piers between the two sections. The four-bay sections of the arcades have arches of quite steep two-centred form, of two orders with rather narrow chamfers, and no hoodmoulds; the octagonal piers have moulded capitals; that of the third pier from the west of the north arcade is of quite different section to the others. The piers have chamfered bases, set on either square or octagonal plinths (some of which have clearly been altered), and the heavier eastern piers have chamfered angles. The capital of the second pier on the south has high-relief foliage carved on the four principals faces of its; the southern of the larger square eastern piers has small caryatid-type

figures as stops to the top of its chamfered angles, whilst the northern, and the eastern responds of both arcades, have small trefoiled arches in the same position. All this looks of 14th-century date, except for the western responds which are of 12th-century character, semicircular in plan with a beaded moulding to their bases (that on the north the better preserved) and simple capitals – that on the south square, that on the north octagonal at the abacus. The walls above the arcades are of coursed roughly-squared small stone, with larger blocks in the top four or five courses.

The seven-bay nave roof is of 19th-century date and of hammer-beam form, the braces and beams springing from two levels of shaped and moulded ashlar corbels; the lower are clearly of 19th century date, but the upper may be older. The three-bay transept roofs are similar. The aisles of both nave and transepts have remarkable quadrant-section vaults of coursed and squared stone (or markedly better quality than the rubble walls below); in the nave aisle there are a series of corbels above the arcades, just beneath the vaults, which must relate to an earlier phase of aisle roofing.

In the **South Aisle**, the west window has an internal lintel formed by a medieval cross slab set on edge; it is very obvious that the aisle has been narrowed, as the present south aisle overlaps the splay of the south jamb of the window. Both of the 19th-century windows in the south wall have jambs crudely hacked through the rubble of the 1.2 m wall, and lintels formed by large slabs, some of which seem to have been medieval cross slabs, their designs erased by re-tooling, except for that of one over the eastern window, which retains remains of its incised design. The eastern internal jamb of the western window seems to show two phases, an earlier one set square to the wall covered by a later splay. The south door is set in a section of wall that is thickened externally, to 1.7 m; its internal opening is ancient, and has its lintels additionally supported by chamfered corbelling on the splays. The innermost lintel is 19th century restoration the other two are formed by cross slabs, one exceptionally well preserved. The small west window of the North Aisle has a crude shouldered rear arch; the north wall of the aisle is completely featureless, except for a line of projecting footings at its base.

The **Transepts** each have western arcades of three narrow bays, with architectural detail broadly similar to the nave arcades; the outermost arches spring from the end walls, without any corbel or respond. In the South Transept (formerly 'Hedley's Porch' (Hodgson 1837, 93) the boarded floor is set a step below that of the nave; the arcade has four-centred arches, with their moulded bases partly submerged in the present floor, suggesting that the floor has been raised, although a piscina set towards the south end of the east wall is now 1.5 m above the floor, which might imply the floor has been lowered! It has shallow ogee-arched recess, but has lost its bowl (the drain survives) having a modern stone bracket set beneath it now; about 1 m to the south of it, close to the end of the wall, is what looks like the drain of another piscine, this time set only c 0.80 m above the floor.

Remains of the predecessor of the large window in the south wall are more clearly visible internally; this was considerably wider than the present window, and set a little further to the west; both jambs and much of the arched head are visible, The internal west jamb is set 0.90 m beyond that of the present 19th century window; midway between them is another jamb, as if the earliest window was narrower internally at some time; this inserted jamb is of rather peculiar construction, with alternating long and narrow blocks. To the west again is another straight joint, roughly on the line of the east face of the arcade.

In the North Transept ('Anderson's Porch'. *ibid* 94), which has a concrete floor at the same level as that of the nave, the arcade has rather taller arches, this time sharply two-centred; the capitals are of quite different section to those in the south transept; the southern pier has an octagonal base and the northern an octagonal base on a big square plinth.

The west wall of the aisle has projecting footings, a continuation of those of the north aisle wall. The north end of the transept again shows clear evidence of an earlier window, although here little wider than its Victorian successor. A little to the west of it and c 3 m above the floor is an odd infilled vertical slot. On the east of the transept, four steps lead up to a 19th-century door into the Organ Chamber; this has a two-centred arch, with a chamfer only to its head, in diagonally-tooled ashlar. Above it is the outline of a large blocked window, with a shouldered rear arch.

The **Chancel** is entered by a single step under quite a large arch of segmental-pointed form, of two chamfered orders; the inner dies into the jambs whilst the chamfer of the outer is stopped against square jambs, which have stopped chamfers to their lower portions, and a variety of cuts and sockets for earlier screens etc.

On the south side of the chancel the westernmost window has a shouldered rear arch and a level sill (a re-used medieval grave slab carved with a pair of shears). Re-used above the plain internal lintel of the priest's door is a long slab with a moulded upper edge, which is probably another grave cover; it seems to have formed the sill of an opening, which seems to have had a low arched head². The single-light window has a chamfered internal lintel, and then comes a set of three sedilia with simple chamfered two-centred arches, and a projecting sill with a chamfer on its lower angle. The easternmost window has a broad segmental-pointed rear arch with a chamfer to its head only; there are signs of disturbance below the window, possibly indicating the position of a former piscina. The upper section of the wall, from the single-light window eastwards, is thickened in an odd manner, at the level of the lower of the two levels of corbels which carry the roof timbers; its inner face steps out c 0.10 – 0.15 m. As already discussed, this seems to relate to a former defensive wall-walk and parapet arrangement.

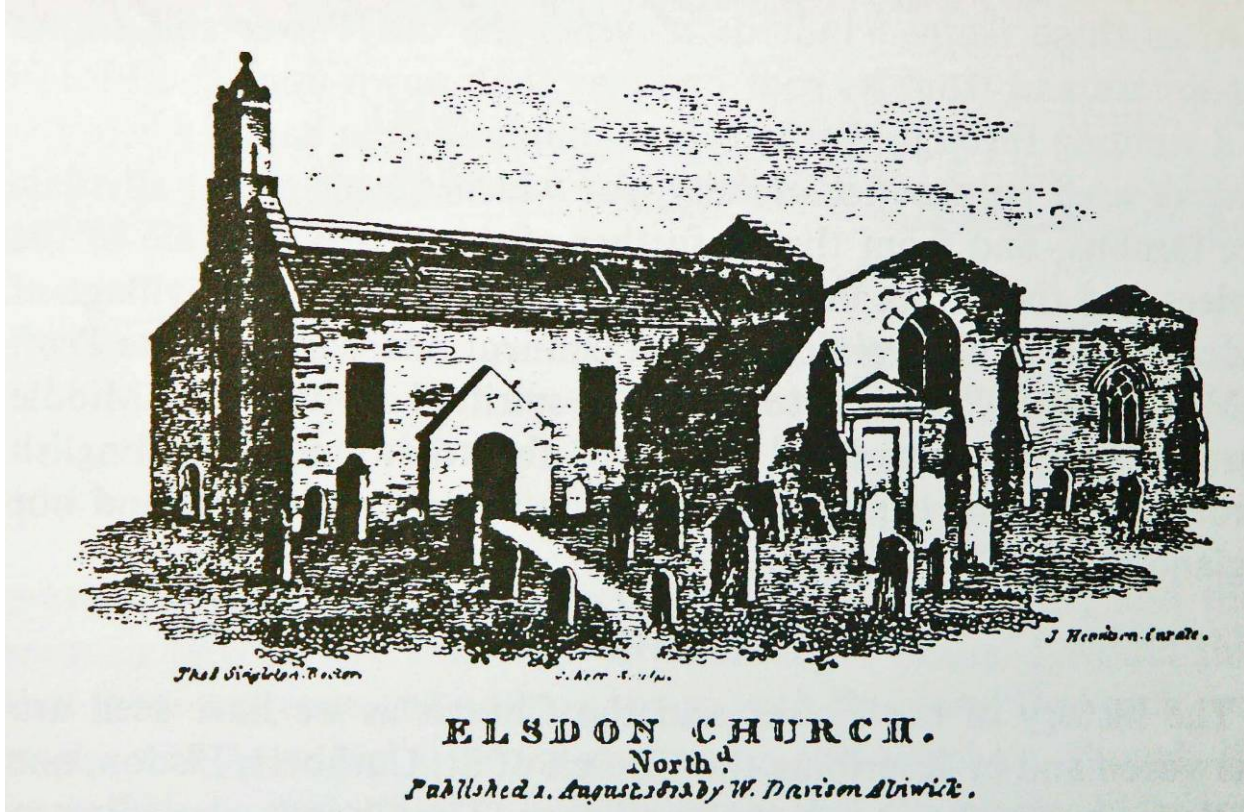
At the west end of the north wall of the chancel is a 19th century arch to the organ chamber, of segmental-pointed form with a chamfer only to its head. Above its apex is a vertical break in the fabric, with the short section of wall to the west set back c 0.10 m. To the east is a wall monument to Charles Howard (d 1726) with disturbed masonry above it; then comes the door to the vestry, which is a 19th-century opening with a chamfered shouldered arch; reused in the wall face above it is a roll-moulded block, and around 1 m from the east end of the wall is what appears to be the east jamb of a blocked window. Its west jamb is no longer apparent, suggesting that there has been a considerable amount of rebuilding in this area. There is still some thickening of the wall-top, although not as pronounced as on the south, and this ties up with the external evidence of the upper four courses (at least of the external face) being a post-medieval rebuild.

The east wall of the chancel has a rough set back c 1.2 m above the floor, above which the wall seems to have been largely rebuilt in the 19th century; all the rear arch of the large east window looks of 19th century date.

The five-bay roof of the chancel is of 19th century date, its trusses springing from ashlar corbels like those in the nave, although behind and above them are earlier corbels, probably medieval; four of the six on the south two-stepped.

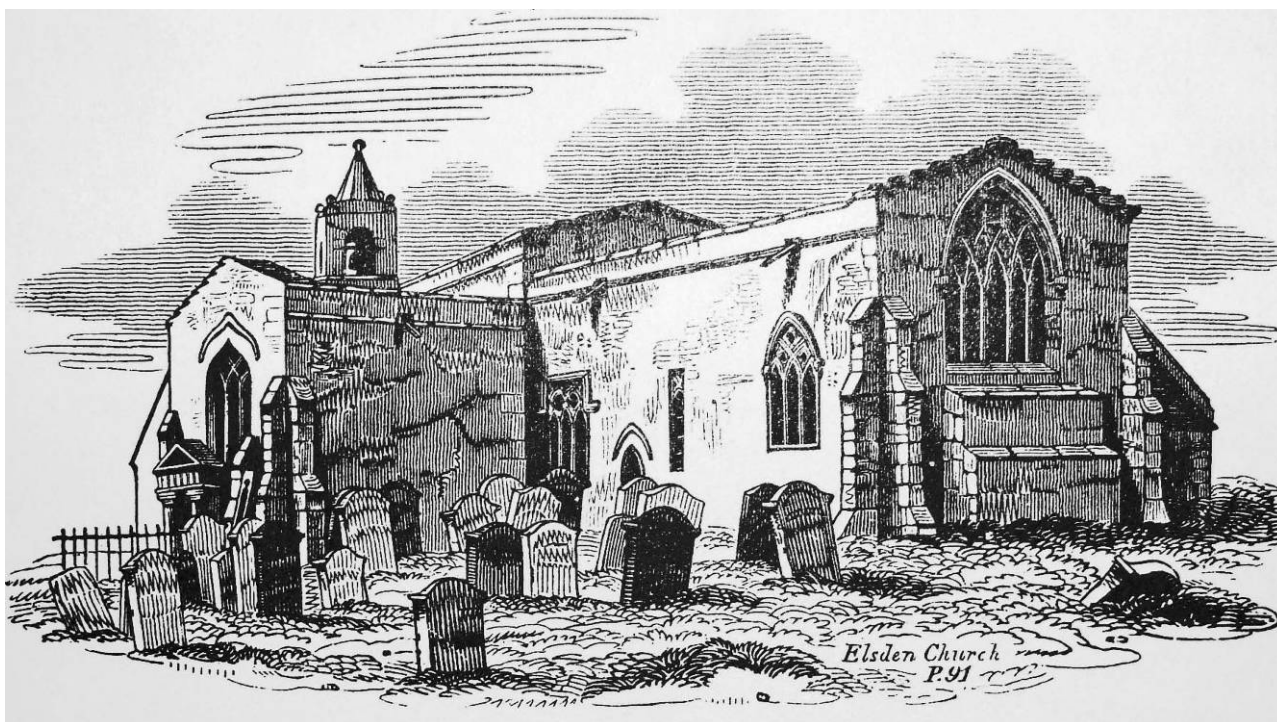
There are two **Vestries**, the inner behind the Organ Chamber, now boarded round internally. On the south wall, around the slot through which the organ was pumped, are pencil graffiti dating from around World War II. The outer (eastern) vestry has bare stone walls, and a plain 19th-century fireplace on the north, with a chamfered surround.

² This is rather puzzling; there seems no sign of it externally. Was it an access point to the wall-walk?



1813 print (Davison) of the church seen from the south-west

Print from Hodgson's history (1837) showing south-east view



Structural History

There is a tradition of the body of St Cuthbert having lain here in the 8th century, but no tangible proof of pre-Norman structures or monuments. There does not appear to be any recent account or analysis of the church available, as Elsdon was not covered by any of the later volumes of the Northumberland County History. An outline of the structural development is given by Pevsner et al (1992, 267): this theorises that there was a 12th-century (Norman) church with an aisled nave and a western tower, of which the (altered) tower arch and western responds of the arcades survive. In the 14th century the building was remodelled, first the transepts being added and then the nave and transept aisles, the chancel being rebuilt at the same time. In the 16th or early 17th century the aisles were rebuilt, narrower than previously, with their quadrant vaults and barely any windows. The bellcote is known to date from 1720. Restoration works in 1837 including the construction of the present south porch, and there was a further restoration in 1877, F.R. Wilson of Alnwick being the architect.

Recent geophysics³ have suggested that a large building, looking very much like a church with a north aisle to the nave and some structure on the north of the chancel as well, lies under the Green immediately to the north of the present churchyard; it is aligned fairly precisely with the present church, the axis of which is orientated some distance north of east. This suggests that the church may have been moved and rebuilt, possibly as the result of some unrecorded destruction during the Border Wars. Whilst the present building does retain some undoubted 12th century features, in its west end, it is quite possible that all these are *ex situ*; the western responds of the aisle are quite different in detail, and the tower arch certainly looks re-set. A key piece of evidence here is the steep plinth visible externally. This looks of 13th rather than 12th century date, and clearly relates to the west end of the aisleless nave; it would also seem to preclude the existence of a tower broad enough to have been served by the blocked 'tower arch'. The most reasonable scenario would seem to be that the church is of 13th century construction, importing an earlier arch – perhaps the chancel arch of a Norman building – which was simply set into the wall to serve as a structural support for the bellcote. That the bellcote in part predates the quoted 1720 date is plain from the old roof tabling visible on its east side, which clearly relates to a period before the 16th century (?) rebuilding of the aisles. The dowsed plan of the church (Bailey, Cambridge & Briggs 1988, 142) shows a western tower, but archaeological recording when a trench was cut alongside it in November 1984 failed to reveal any sign of it (*ibid*, 82-3)

There is clear evidence that the transepts pre-date their western aisles; their angle buttresses look more of 13th than 14th century character. The nave and transept arcades fit so well together – despite considerable differences in style between the north and south transept arcades – that they must really be part of the same campaign of building, which would also seem to include the chancel.

Whatever the crisis that preceded its construction, the 14th century church would appear to have met with further vicissitudes, as the outer walls of both nave and transept aisles were rebuilt, probably entirely without windows, and with quadrant vaults. This must have produced a building that was more fortress than church. It would appear that the chancel was altered at the same time, the walls being heightened, the thicker upper section clearly being intended to carry a wall-walk and parapet, the drainage spouts for which remain.

None of this work has any easily datable architectural features, but viewing it in the context of the other defensible building in the village – Elsdon Tower – an early 16th century date seems likely. This is because the tower, which is recorded in the 1415 list of defensible buildings, does not figure in its 1541 successor. Recent examination of the Tower suggests that in its present form it

³ Archaeology in Northumberland 16 (1996)

is a structure of the later 16th century, incorporating some sections of an older building; it is surmised that its absence from the 1541 survey is due to its having lain in ruins at this time. This would mean that the only defensible retreat available to the village was the church. Brooke (2000, 124) suggests that the reconstruction of the aisles took place after the disastrous years of 1583 and 1584 when the village was first attacked by the Scots and then burned by the Elliots and Armstrongs. On the grounds of Philip Dixon's sage dictum 'every castle is built too late for the last war' it seems likely that the Tower too was reconstructed in the aftermath of these calamities.

A few old prints show the church as it stood before the 19th century restorations. The chancel retained its 14th century windows – which, one might surmise, must have been walled up when the building was in its fortress phase. The large windows in the gables of the west end and transepts must have also been blocked and re-opened, but had these had lost their tracery and been converted into sashes; Hodgson (1827, 95) refers to their mullions being removed 'in Mr Duten's time'⁴. The two large square windows in the south aisle had simply been punched through the thick rubble walling, at a time the need for at least some lighting could be balanced against the need for defensibility. Hodgson also refers to the foundations of the earlier and wider aisles still being visible, which is not now the case.

In 1837 the south porch was built, and large traceried windows reinstated in the western and transept gables. It is not clear when the east window was renewed; unfortunately its tracery does not properly copy that of its 14th-century predecessor; the old tracery is now built into a wall at Elsdon Tower. Further restoration work was carried out in 1877, when during repair works to the bellcote the three horses' skulls (now preserved in a cabinet at the west end of the nave) were found. At this date the vestries on the north side of the chancel, which were probably of 18th or early 19th century date, were rebuilt; the present roofs also appear to date from this time.

Archaeological Assessment

The present floor of the church is entirely of concrete except for the square of boarding in the centre of the south transept and the sandstone flags in the sanctuary which are said to have been put down in the 1930s. The floor in the south transept is one step below the level of the rest of the building and the chancel one step higher. As already mentioned, there is evidence that the south transept floor has been at an even lower level at some time.

There has been an underfloor heating system; a heating grate in the chancel covers a pit containing two cast iron radiators and there were similar ones throughout the building but these and the related pipework were removed about 25 - 30 years ago when the pipes burst during a particularly bad winter. The church now uses gas heaters which are thought of as unsightly and produce much moisture.

It is certain that the area beneath the floors will have been disturbed by many generations of burial (as in any old church), and in addition it is known that there is a major burial pit, assumed to be of victims of the Battle of Otterburn (1388) beneath the north aisle wall.

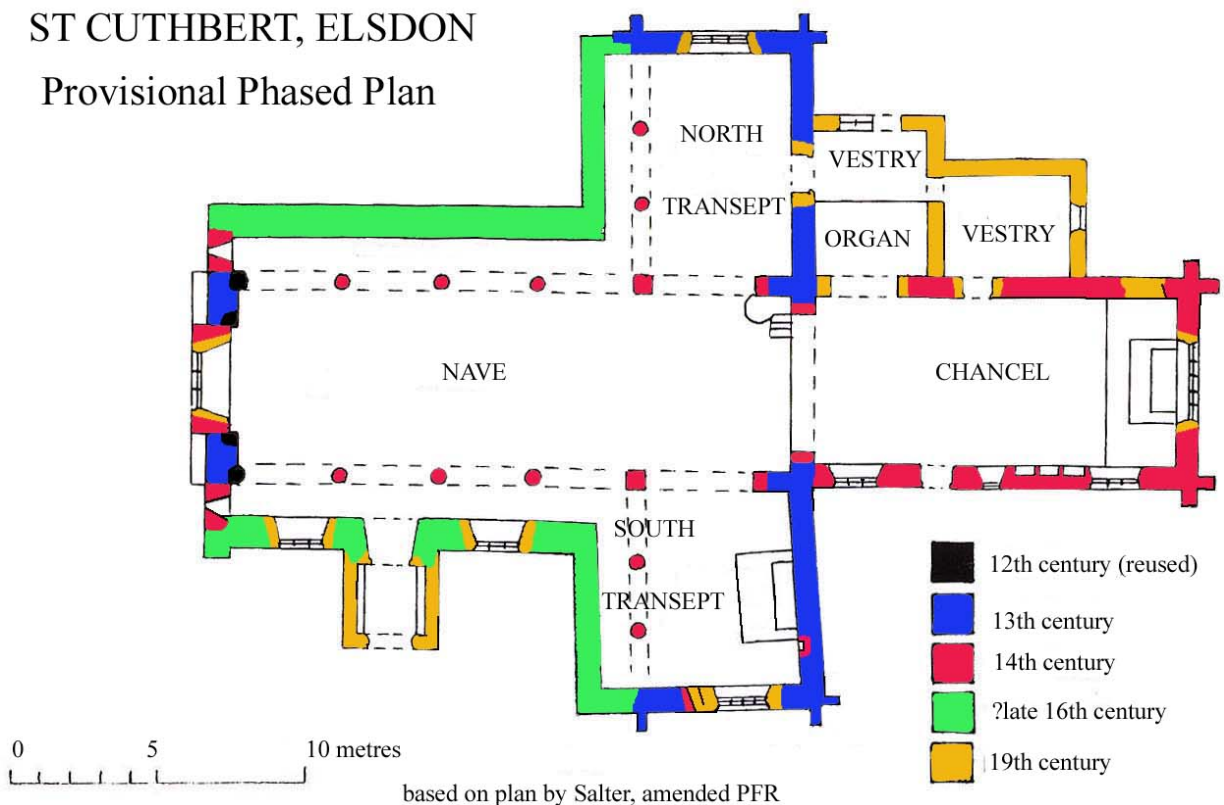
Any works that entail disturbance of underfloor deposits will require at the least archaeological monitoring; this also goes for works in the churchyard, and in particular adjacent to the nave aisles which it is known have once been wider. It should be borne in mind that in the immediate vicinity of the church accumulated ground levels have clearly been lowered reduced (to counter damp problems) which will probably result in burials lying very close to the surface.

⁴ Louis Dutens, the famous French writer, was rector 1865-1812; Hodgson also records that he refused his archdeacon's instructions to remove the tracery from the chancel windows.

The churchyard has a considerable number of interesting monuments, including some fine 18th century headstones carved with skulls, crossed bones and various mortality emblems. Two well-preserved medieval coffins are currently stood upright against the external face of the west end of the church.

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A Note on the Plan It does not appear that there is any proper modern plan of the building available; that above is taken from Salter's The Old Parish Churches of Northumberland (Folly Publications 2002) which at least shows the south transept skewed. The layout of the building in fact seems to be rather more irregular; an accurate modern survey might help shed further light on the development of the building.