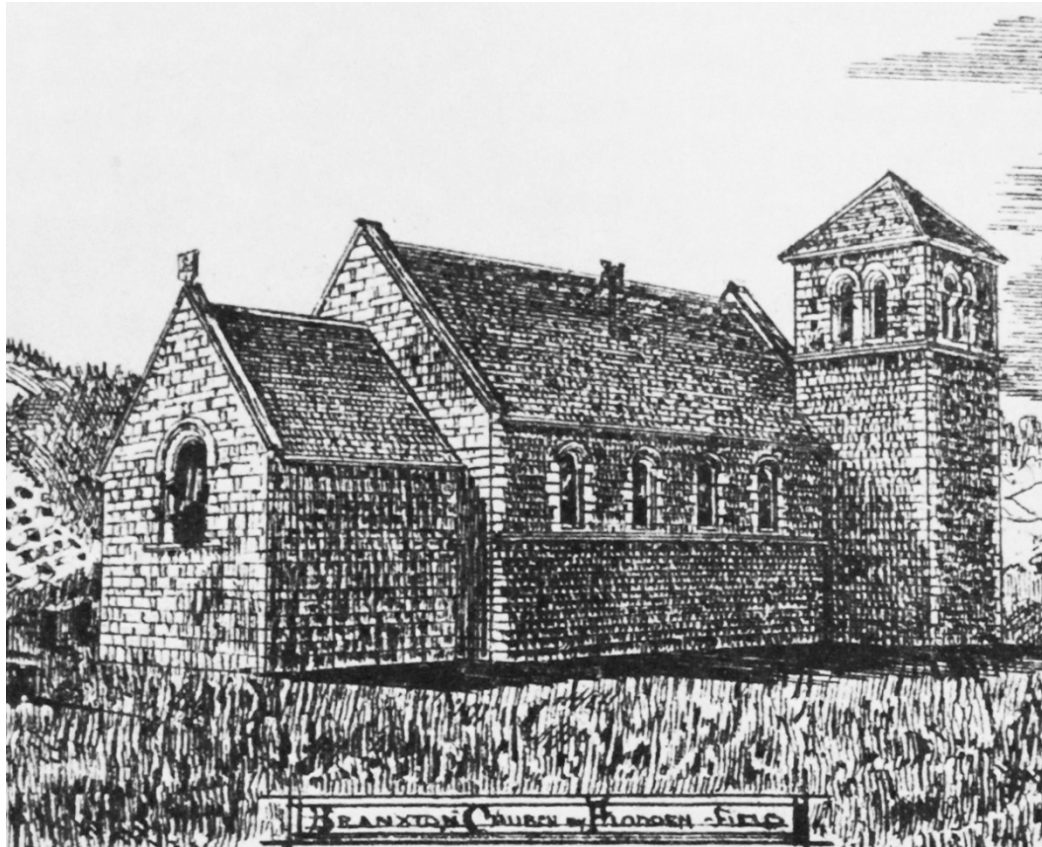


ST PAUL'S CHURCH, BRANXTON  
NORTHUMBERLAND  
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT  
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### St Paul's Church, Branxton

St Paul's Church is a simple structure consisting of a nave, with a projecting tower at the north-west corner and a porch at the west end of the south wall, and a small chancel. The nave, tower and porch are constructed of roughly-coursed dark igneous rubble, with small packing pieces (or galleting) in the interstices between the larger blocks, and sandstone ashlar dressings. The side walls of the chancel are of older roughly-coursed rubble, but the east wall is of roughly-tooled coursed sandstone. The roofs are of Welsh slate.



*The church from the south, November 2012*

#### Description

The **Nave** has alternating sandstone quoins that are slightly irregular and roughly tooled; they look as if they might be older stone re-used in 1849. The lower part of the south-east quoin is of two very large blocks, with beneath them a plinth-like block projecting c 10 cm to the east. There is a string-course, chamfered above and below, at the level of the sills of the four windows in the side walls; these are simple square-edged round-arched lights with alternating jambs and hoodmoulds chamfered on the underside. The westernmost window on the south side – and the section of string directly beneath – are in a distinctive pink stone; this is of 1935. The west end has a low pilaster buttress set centrally, and above that a pair of quite large round-arched windows, similar in detail to those in the side walls but in this case with their hoodmoulds linked. The gable ends an ashlar slab coping, chamfered on its underside, set on moulded quadrant-section kneelers.

With the fall in the ground the north wall is rather taller than the south, and there are some large sandstone blocks in the lower courses, where there are three underfloor vents. The lowest quoin at the north-east corner has a ragged projection on the east.

The 1935 **South Porch** follows the nave in its fabric and gable coping; it has a round-arched Romanesque doorway with two orders of chevron (an 1849 feature re-set from the south wall of the

nave, and said to be a copy of a 12<sup>th</sup>-century original), the inner with sunk-star ornament on its soffit, and a billet hoodmould, carried on pairs of attached shafts with scalloped caps and moulded bases, and imposts lined and hollow-chamfered beneath.

The lower stage of the **Tower** has quoins like those of the nave, and rises unbroken to a stringcourse, again chamfered above and below, at the base of the belfry; the quoins of the belfry are of smooth ashlar. The lower stage has a small round-arched window on the west, and the belfry openings are paired round-arched lights having a mid-shaft with a simple cushion capital, chamfered imposts and linked hoodmoulds. The steeply pyramidal roof has overhanging eaves and is of stone.



*The south wall of the chancel; note apparent remains of west jamb of opening (near centre) and re-used (?) angle quoins at south-east corner of nave*

The **Chancel** appears to retain medieval masonry in its side walls, which are today devoid of any openings. On the south the western section of the wall is of roughly-coursed large rubble (some igneous stone, some sandstone) as far as a ragged vertical joint which includes two upright chamfered blocks that looks as if they may be part of the west jamb of an early opening. The eastern part of the wall is of smaller rubble, and there is no clear indication of any east side to the putative opening. At the east end is a pilaster buttress of pink sandstone ashlar. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century east wall has quite a large round-headed window with an arch of two orders, the inner of square section and the outer with a roll moulding, carried on jamb shafts with cushion capitals, and imposts chamfered on their lower angles; there is a hoodmould, with turned-back ends, chamfered on its underside. The north wall has some large blocks in its base, but roughly-coursed rubble above; as on the south there is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century pilaster buttress at the east end. The only possible feature is close to the west end where three blocks look as if they could represent the east jamb and head of a small opening, perhaps a low-side window.

## The Interior

The internal walls of nave, tower and porch are plastered; those of the chancel are left bare. The inner doorway of the porch is a plain round-arched opening, plastered over. The nave has a boarded dado, stepped down beneath the windows in the side walls, and taller on the east wall; the windows all have plain semicircular rear arches, plastered over. At the west end of the north wall is a narrow shoulder-arched doorway into the tower<sup>1</sup>

The one ancient feature of the interior is the chancel arch (right), which is somewhat unusual, and poses several problems. The arch itself is of two-centred form, and of two chamfered orders, with broach stops to chamfer of the inner order; towards the chancel the outer order looks of more recent stone, and may be 19<sup>th</sup> century. The arch looks broadly of 13<sup>th</sup> century type, but the jambs on which it rests are clearly older; each consists of a broad semicircular respond flanked by smaller attached shafts, all with scalloped capitals. All have moulded bases, those of the central respond having very battered projecting leaves. The capital of the outer shaft on the south, towards the nave, has a relief-carved pattern of a grid or perhaps interlace on its west face. The impost is heavy, and grooved and chamfered on their lower angles. The west face of the wall is plastered but the east face bare, showing that the big blocks that form the jambs of the arch are irregular, and do not bond deeply into the wall – have they been re-set?



It is difficult to match the fragmentary features seen in the external faces of the side walls of the chancel with those seen inside. Near the west end of the south wall is what looks like the internal west jamb of an opening; the chamfered blocks seen outside would seem to belong to a separate

<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that this is a genuine 14<sup>th</sup>-century feature – Architecturally it is at odds with the Romanesque style of the 1869 nave - but the fresh and sharp-edged appearance of its dressings seems to imply it is of no great age.

opening in the eastern part of the wall, difficult to trace internally. On the north there seems no sign of the possible 'low-side' at the west end of the wall, but further east, on the north of the altar, are traces of a possible aumbry.

The east window has an internal surround of roughly-tooled splayed voussoirs.

The nave has a roof of five bays, with trusses that spring from quadrant-shaped stone corbels set c1m above the boarded dado. The trusses have wall-posts carrying collar-beam trusses, with long arch braces springing from the posts to the centre of the collar; there is also a chamfered wall plate. There is a diagonally-set ridge and two levels of purlins. The chancel roof is of two bays, but all that is exposed of it is the collar of the centrally-set truss dado, all other timbers being concealed by plaster

### **The Churchyard**

A number of medieval churches in Northumberland show evidence of having been intended as defensible structures, eg Kirknewton, Elsdon and Bellingham with their stone vaults, and the tower at Ancroft. Not enough survives at Branxton to show if that was ever the case here, but the churchyard itself has some indications of being a defensible enclosure. It is roughly rectangular in plan (with the church set a little north and west of centre), with a rounded corner to the north-west, and set on the west end of the low ridge that carries the village. The west side of the yard looks to follow an artificially-steepened scarp, its boundary being more or less a retaining wall up to c 2 m in height, and the north side is also a steep slope dropping to the road. The east and uphill side of the churchyard has a distinct raised bank which must be an artificial feature, the boundary wall forming a revetment to its external face. Only on the south is there no sign of any bank or scarp.

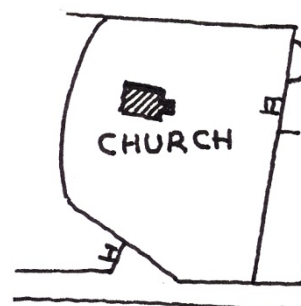
### **Structural Development**

This is a small and humble church, but clearly one of quite early origins. There is a local tradition that the dedication should be to St Paulinus rather than St Paul (Bede records that Paulinus baptised 3000 local people in Glendale, near Kirk Newton, in 627 AD) and also one that the local Pallinsburn takes its name from the saint. However, the earliest tangible evidence, the jambs of the chancel arch, are a good five centuries later than this. Documentary references come a little later still; Vickers (1922, 46) records that towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Ralph, son of Gilbert of Branxton, gave the church to the monks of Durham, a grant confirmed by the king in 1195 but then unsuccessfully challenged by the canons of Kirkham Priory (Yorkshire) who argued that it pertained to Kirknewton church, which was appropriated to them.

The church, like many in Northumberland, doubtless suffered in the long wars with Scotland; the rather puzzling chancel arch may point to destruction and rebuilding; the arch clearly post-dates the jambs, which have the look of being re-set, and have the look of being made for a rather larger arch (which would have almost certainly been of semicircular form). Was a larger Romanesque church destroyed in some 13<sup>th</sup> century incursion, and a smaller building then erected re-using some materials from its predecessor?.

We know almost nothing of the church between the 13<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, other than that it was probably a small and ill-maintained building. In 1369 a visitation records that the roofs of both nave and chancel were in decay. In 1513 came the one event that put Branxton on the national map, the

Battle of Flodden, which was fought around the village, and after which the church is reputed to have served as a mortuary for the Scots king James IV and many of his nobility. In 1725 the vicar of Norham wrote 'the church is in a sad condition, very unbecoming the service of Almighty God. Not only the Decencies but the very Necessities are wanting in it.' At the time there were only 36 parishioners, and all were Presbyterians. In 1758 it was recorded that 'the Holy Sacrament has never been administered here since I knew it, because there is not a congregation'. An 1823 plan of Branxton<sup>2</sup> (right) shows an outline of a church with what looks to be a rather broader nave than at present. Might the nave have been a post-medieval rebuild? One possible piece of evidence for this is in the present nave and tower angle quoins, which look of 18<sup>th</sup>-century character.



Sketch from 1823 map  
by Thomas Bell, surveyor

The church, bar the arch and side walls of the chancel, was rebuilt in 1849. F.R. Wilson (1870, 50) states that the Rev Robert Jones, vicar at the time, told him that the south doorway was 'as near as maybe a reproduction of the ancient one'; Wilson gives a north-east view (see front cover) and a plan of the church, showing that the doorway was set a little east of the present porch, and that there were only three windows in the south wall, the fourth (with the pinker stone dressings) being added after the present porch was built, re-using the 1849 copy of the ancient doorway. This took place in 1935; G. Patterson and Sons of Branxton were the builders (having tendered £104.) and C Franklin Murphy of Morpeth the architect<sup>3</sup>.

### Archaeological Assessment

It is clear that there has been a church at Branxton since at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and possibly much earlier, but tantalisingly little of its history has been recorded. Archaeological evidence may well survive that could add materially to our knowledge of the building; there is also the matter of the calamitous events of 1513 which took place here, which may be assumed to have left buried material evidence, although very little of this has as yet been discovered<sup>4</sup>, so the place has very considerable potential. However, looking at the church building itself, there is little to cause immediate concern. The building is carpeted throughout, and it is clear from the small vents set low in the side walls that there is an underfloor void beneath the 19<sup>th</sup> century nave. As with any medieval church, or church on a medieval site, any groundworks within the building (which disturb pre-19<sup>th</sup> century levels) or around it will require archaeological monitoring, and in this case such vigilance should probably be extended to the whole churchyard given both the possibility of its having been a defensible enclosure, and its moment in history at Flodden.

**Peter F Ryder November 2012**

Vickers, Kenneth H. (1922) History of Northumberland XI

Wilson, F.R. (1870) The Churches of the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne.

<sup>2</sup> Northumberland County Record Office ref ZHE 31

<sup>3</sup> Northumberland County Record Office faculty ref DN/8/2/2/1290.

<sup>4</sup> It is likely that 'finds' have been made but not publicised

ST PAUL'S CHURCH  
BRANXTON  
Provisonal Phased Plan

