

St Michael and All Angels, Alwinton

Northumberland



The church from the north-west

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Alwinton is remotely sited in the Coquet valley on the edge of the Cheviot Hills, c 14 km north-west of Rothbury. The parish church of St Michael and All Angels (NGR NT 92400578) is situated c 500 m south of the village, close to the river but on a hillside rising quite steeply to the east. The church stands out quite dramatically in the landscape, with its steep gabled roof and bellcote; its external appearance is in an Early English Gothic style but is largely Victorian, although quite an amount of older fabric survives. The church was the subject of a detailed study in 1940 by H.L.Honeyman¹, to which reference will periodically be made.



Location Map

From Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer sheet OL16
O S map licence 100045703

Description

The church consists of a three-bay aisled nave with the transept –like Biddlestone Porch to the south-east, and an aisleless chancel with a north vestry. It is largely built of coursed roughly-squared stone, although there are a number of changes in the character of the fabric; almost all the dressings are of tooled 19th century ashlar and the steeply-pitched roofs are of Welsh slate.

Although one's first impression is that the western parts of the church are all a product of Pickering's 1851 restoration, closer inspection shows that much earlier fabric survives. The lower courses of the north wall of the north aisle (except for the western third) are of large roughly-shaped stones and would seem to be medieval, although there is no sign of any north door, normally present in a medieval building but possibly omitted here as a security measure (might this wall be part of a late medieval defensive reconstruction, as at Elsdon and Corsenside, which also lack north doors?). The three windows higher in the wall are all of 1851 – two lancets with a double one further east – but near the east end of the wall the tooled ashlar blocks of the east jamb of a

¹ Northumberland County History XV, 413-416

square-headed 18th century window are visible, which according to pre-restoration drawings (now hanging in the Biddlestone Porch) was once the only opening in the wall. The east end of the aisle is 13th century masonry, with an undisturbed lancet window; to the south of it are the north-east quoins of the original nave, large roughly-squared blocks surviving up to a little below the level of the chancel eaves. Adjacent to the quoins is a column of renewed stone, patching for the flue of a heating chamber, removed in the later 20th century.

Honeyman refers to a 13th-century grave slab in the base of the north wall, which is no longer apparent – might this be an error for a fragment of a cross slab in the south aisle wall; immediately to the west of the sill of the lancet nearest the doorway, which he does not mention.



The Church from the South

The west wall has remains of a shallow square-topped plinth of 18th century character, and the jambs of another window, presumably of this date, are visible beneath the two tall lancets in the west wall of the nave, and the sills of others beneath the lancet in the end walls of the aisles. The buttresses are

clearly 1851 additions, and the bellcote and clerestorey are also obviously of this date. The south door has a plain chamfered arch; the old drawings show a similar doorway here, but the present one seems to go with the other architectural features of the wall, two 1851 lancets.

The Biddlestone Porch has two more lancets in its west wall and three in the south gable, with buttresses between. It is difficult to tell how much pre-1851 fabric survives; the lower quoins at the south end certainly look old. Re-set in the steep gable is an ornate cross dated 1672, which came from the lower gable of the old porch; on its upper arm is carved S (for Selby) above T and A (Thomas and Anne) above a shield with the arms of Thomas Selby and his wife Anne Lumsden, a baluster-shaped bend sinister in relief (Lumsden) impaling six bars, three sunk and three in relief (Selby).



The south wall of the Chancel

The chancel is low compared to the lofty nave, and almost seems to burrow into the rising hillside; the upper parts of its walls and its steep roof are all of 1851, but lower down is much medieval fabric. Some quite small squared stones in the west part of the south wall are of 12th century character, as is a small round-headed window midway along the wall; to the east of this there appear to be two large quoins low down, suggesting that the eastern bay beyond them is an extension. In this section is a two-light window, most of its stonework 19th century but with a genuine 14th-century head, of two trefoiled

lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel. Below the window a long roughly tapering block is re-used in the wall, which Honeyman though may have been a cross shaft or tomb slab, but it bears no sign of any carving. At the west end of each side wall of the chancel is a low-side window, a short lancet, with its jambs splayed symmetrically from the centre of the wall. Honeyman sees these as 13th century in origin, but with their outer openings widened in the 17th century. The southern has been given an 1851 hoodmould.



The north wall of the chancel with its low-side window, and east end of the north aisle with a genuine 13th century lancet

The east end wall seems to have been rebuilt above its lower courses (probably at some post-medieval date), and its three-light window is all of 1851, as if the vestry on the north. Below the northern low-side window, to the west of the vestry, the head of a brick arch is visible at the foot of the wall.

This formerly opened into the now-removed boiler house; Honeyman saw it as an entry to the crypt, but it seems more likely to be connected with the heating system.

The Interior



Looking east

The interior of the church is dominated by the fact that the floor of the chancel is raised ten steps above the nave, and there are three further steps up to the sanctuary. All walls are plastered and there is little immediate evidence of antiquity. The near-matching three bay arcades have pointed double-chamfered arches, octagonal piers and semi-octagonal responds, which have moulded capitals and bases. According to Honeyman all this, bar the eastern responds of the arcades, is of 1851, but a closer inspection shows that this is not the case. All the south arcade is Victorian (bar its eastern respond which has a renewed capital but an old chamfered base) but the north arcade is old; its stonework is of quite different character, and its outer order much narrower, and plastered over. The piers have at least been re-tooled, and their moulded capitals and bases are Victorian, as are those of both responds. The

eastern respond has an infilled slot, probably for a screen, and, tucked into the angle between it and the east wall of the north aisle is a tiny round-arched piscina, recessed into the lower section of the aisle east wall, which has a marked batter. The east window of the aisle has an old shouldered rear arch, behind plaster. The chancel arch is all of 1851; its predecessor (shown in an 1825 sketch by John Hodgson, seen by Honeyman²) was a very narrow arch with a heavy chamfered impost returned across the west face of the wall as a string course.

The impressive flight of steps up to the chancel is probably all of 1851; it conceals the entrance to the crypt or burial vault under the chancel; this was last used for burial in 1868 (Honeyman 415). The ninth step has sloping wedge-shaped joints so that its central section can be lifted out, which would allow the removal of the steps beneath to give access to the crypt.

In the chancel, the two low-side windows each have trefoiled rear arches, and the Norman window in the south wall a plain semicircular one, behind plaster. The internal sill of the window on the south of the sanctuary is lowered to form a sedile, although its stonework (except perhaps for part of the seat) is all Victorian, but immediately to the east of it is a genuine piscina with a pointed chamfered arch and a shallow circular bowl, with a central drain. Its top is roughly domed, and seems to have a clogged central shaft, perhaps a flue³



Nearby in the east wall is a square-headed aumbry, externally rebated for a door, but its dressings all look of 1851.

The south-east corner of the chancel, with the medieval ritual arrangement of sedile, piscina and aumbry (with door)

² A search of the Northumberland County Archives failed to locate it.

³ In the sacristy at Hulne Friary is a recess with a bowl, shelf and flue, thought to have been used in the preparation of wafers for Mass.



*The chancel
piscina
(left) and its
possible blocked
flue (right); was
this once an
oven used in
preparing
wafers for Mass?*



Discussion

The oldest fabric in the church, the east end of the nave, was thought to be Honeyman to be of the late 11th or early 12th century, on the strength of the character of the lost chancel arch; he saw the western part of the chancel as a later 12th century rebuilding (it is not quite clear why). It is probably safer to see both the end wall of the nave and the western part of the chancel as 12th century. In the 13th century aisles were added to the nave, and the chancel extended – if one relies on the simple pointed arch of the piscinas dating evidence, otherwise the extension may have been made in the mid-14th century, the date of the head of the south-east window.

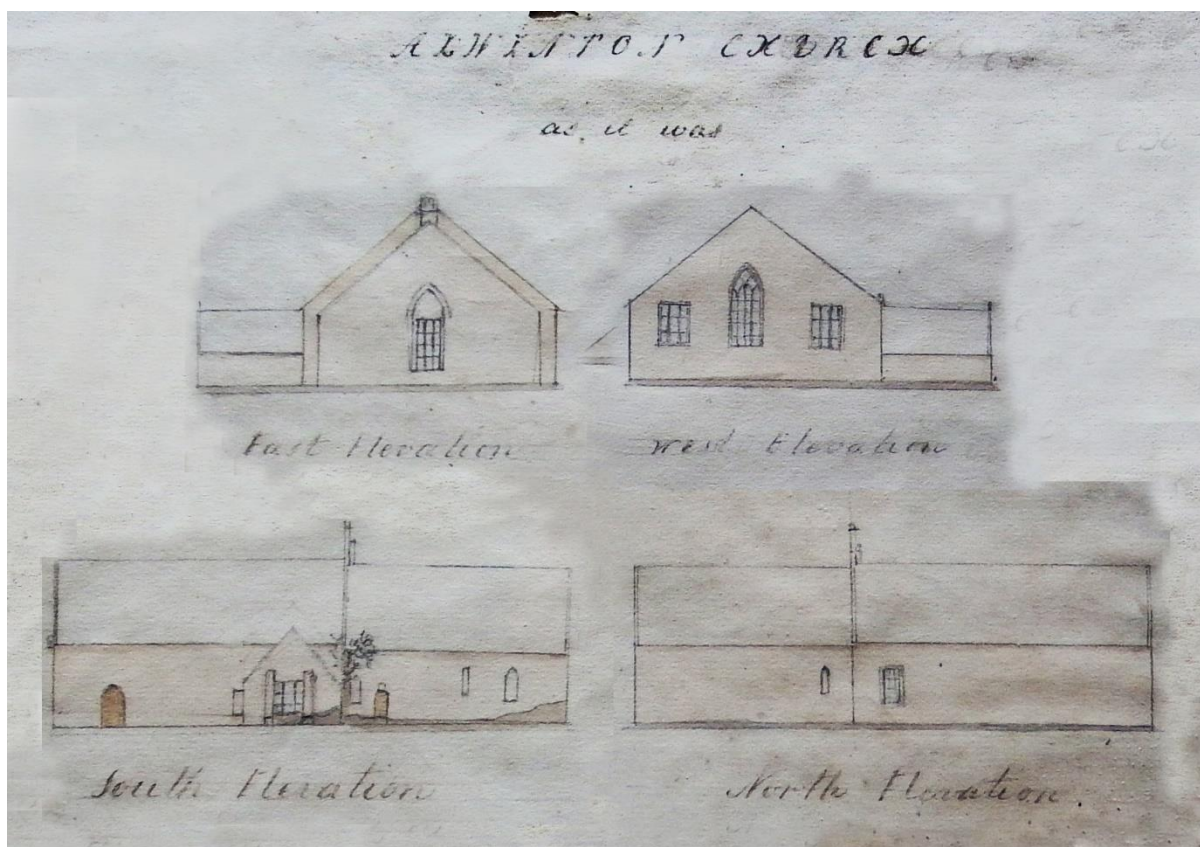
That accounts for the medieval features of the building. Honeyman summarises the historical evidence for post-medieval changes:

1672 One of the Selby family rebuilt the Biddlestone Aisle (the date on the re-set gable cross)

C1720 major repairs were carried out; in 1724 the roof was re-covered with stone slates.

1851 The Rev Aislabie Procter who had long planned major works on the church, was able to 'turn loose' (Honeyman's phrase) George Pickering, a Durham architect, on the church. Pickering had already been responsible for the virtual rebuilding of Holystone, and, more disastrously, Rothbury churches.

It is with these post-medieval changes that Honeyman's interpretation becomes problematic, as he sees virtually all the post-medieval work as Pickering, whereas there is good evidence that much of the aisle walls are of 18th century date. Honeyman also seems to have been unaware of the drawings of the pre-restoration church that now hang in the vestry.



The drawings (above) show the nave and aisles as much lower than at present, and covered by a single gabled roof of fairly low pitch; the chancel had a roof of the same pitch, and was only marginally lower. The bellcote was unusually placed on the east gable of the nave. The west end had a Gothick-style window to the nave (holding a sash window with intersecting glazing bars) flanked by square-headed sashes to the aisles. The side walls of the aisles were almost bare of openings; the south aisle had an arched doorway and a possible small window hard up against the Biddlestone Aisle, and the north aisle had one square-headed window (remains of which survive) near its east end. The Biddlestone Aisle had a very low eaves line, and one square headed window set between a pair of buttresses in its south end wall.

The drawings give some clue to the earlier history of the building. Whilst there is now no direct evidence of defensible measures in the building, it seems highly likely, given the situation of the church and the troubled history of the area, that they existed. Although the nave and aisle walls were probably rebuilt c1720, their dearth of windows may perpetuate what was there before; there may have been a late medieval/early post-medieval reconstruction such as took place at Bellingham and Elsdon. The low eaves of the Biddlestone Aisle, and the fact that Honeyman records that it had thicker walls before the 1851 may imply that it was once vaulted even if, as the re-used cross suggests, it was rebuilt in 1672.

The 1851 restoration clearly caused controversy. F.R.Wilson, writing in 1870, was complementary 'the edifice is now in beautiful order'; Honeyman, 90 years later, instead saw it as a 'catastrophe'. Wilson (1870, 97) reproduces an account of the church in its pre-restoration state, admittedly by the vicar, the Rev Aislabie Procter, under whose auspices the works took place.

'The earth was lying against the walls of the chancel to a depth of several feet/ In wet weather a stream of water penetrated the east wall and trickled down the floor. An ash-tree grew in the walls of the south transept and chancel, and by its roots remaining inside these walls, they were thrown very much out of the perpendicular, and were in such a dilapidated state that they had to be rebuilt. The south arcade also had to be taken down and re-built, as one of the arches had fallen and was replaced by a solid wall with a small low opening in it to allow one to pass from the south aisle to the middle aisle. The pillars were very much out of the perpendicular and the remaining arches in a very dangerous state. In the chancel the form of the windows in the wall was still in existence, but the east window was reduced in size by walling and the pointed top built up and a square wooden sash inserted. In the south two-light window the mullion was knocked out, and the tracery filled in with small stones and lime, and a wooden sash inserted. Every window was a common cottage sash; and one low-pitched roof covered by nave and aisles'.

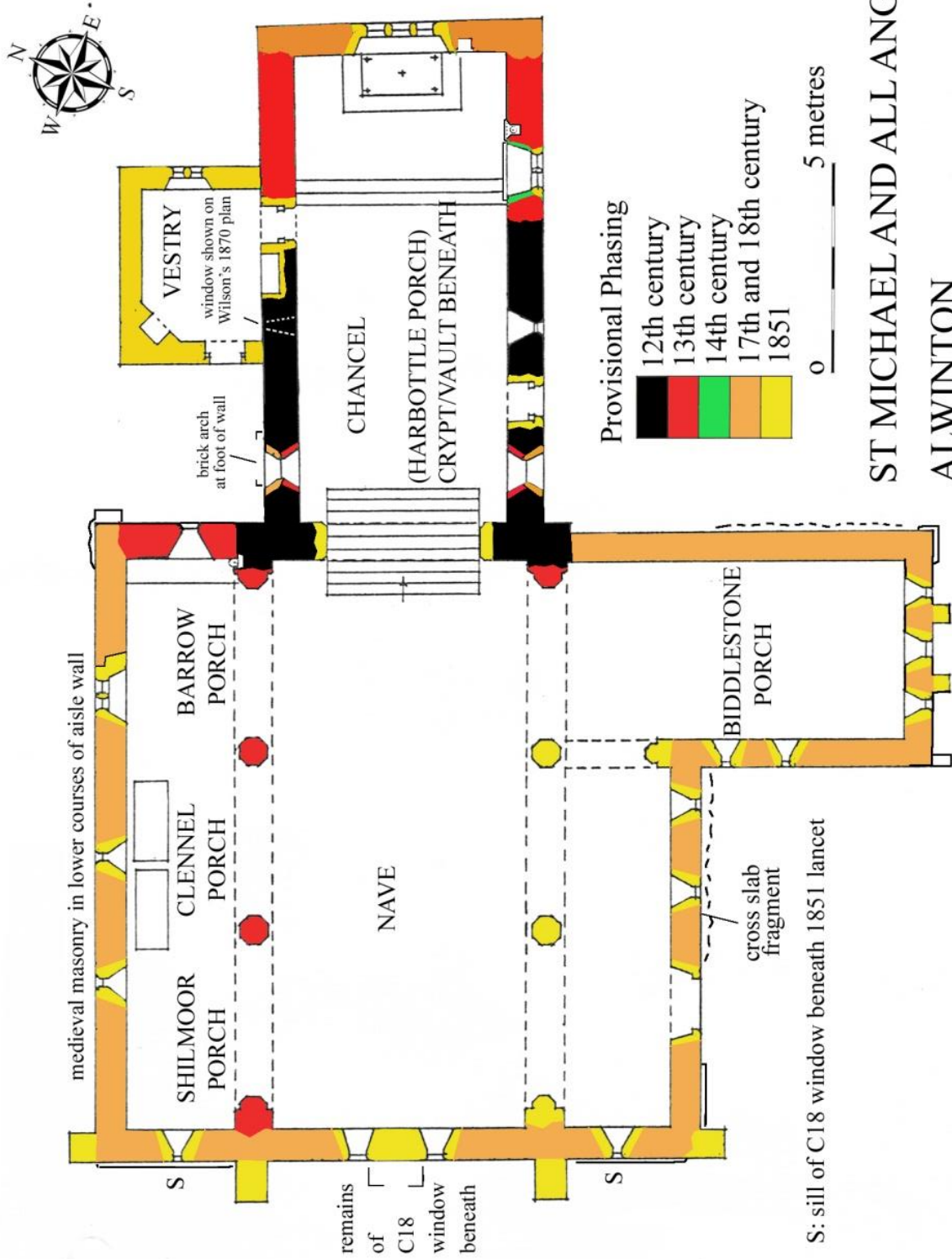
The end result of Pickering's restoration is the church we see today, now virtually devoid of any of its former vernacular character. A contemporary

newspaper account of its 1852 reopening⁴ states that ‘the sanctus belfry, and all the ancient features of the building, have been retained’ which makes one wonder whether there was more than one phase of work; Wilson writing in 1870 seems to imply that the Norman chancel arch still survived then (‘this was originally a Norman edifice. The chancel arch, the western portion of the masonry on both sides of the chancel, and one small window in it, bear testimony to this fact’), although his plan shows the church as at present..... The same newspaper account records that ‘after divine service the incumbent entertained a large party at a substantial and handsome luncheon..... nor were the workmen forgotten, as they were also entertained with good Old English Cheer’.

The 1672 gable cross, with the Selby arms, and, unusually for this period, the Sacred Monogram.



⁴ Northumberland County Archives, ref (A) ZAN Bell 59/16



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Outline plan 1936/7 H L Honeyman, amended PFR 2020