

ST GILES CHURCH, BIRTLEY

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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The church from the north-west

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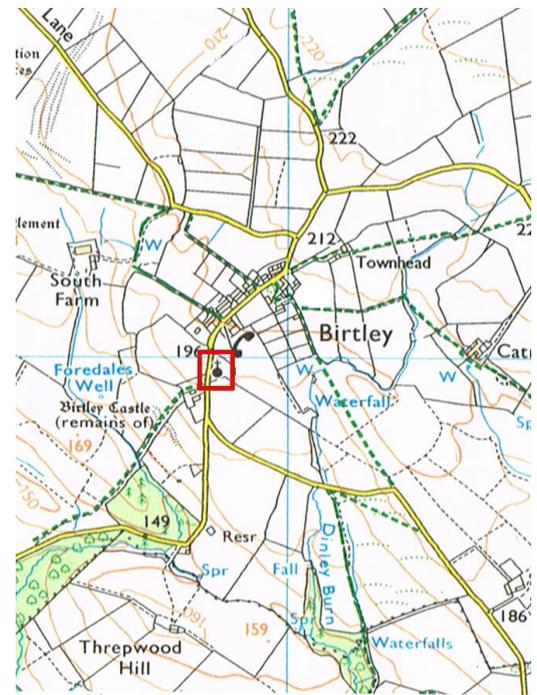


St Giles Church, Birtley

Introduction

Birtley parish church (NGR NY 8780 7796) stands a little to the south of the present village of Birtley, on the east side of the minor road running down to cross the Tyne at Wark; on the west side of the road a little to the south in the garden of the former vicarage are the fragmentary remains of Birtley Hall or Castle.

The church, formerly one of six chapels dependent on Chollerton, consists of a nave and chancel, with a western porch and a small tower and spire on its south side; this is basically a two-cell church of 12th century date although most of its features, and its porch and tower, date to an 1883-4 restoration carried out by the Newcastle architect Arthur B. Plummer, under the Rev. G. Rome Hall.



Location Map

From Ordnance Survey 1:25000 sheet OL 43
OS map licence 100045703

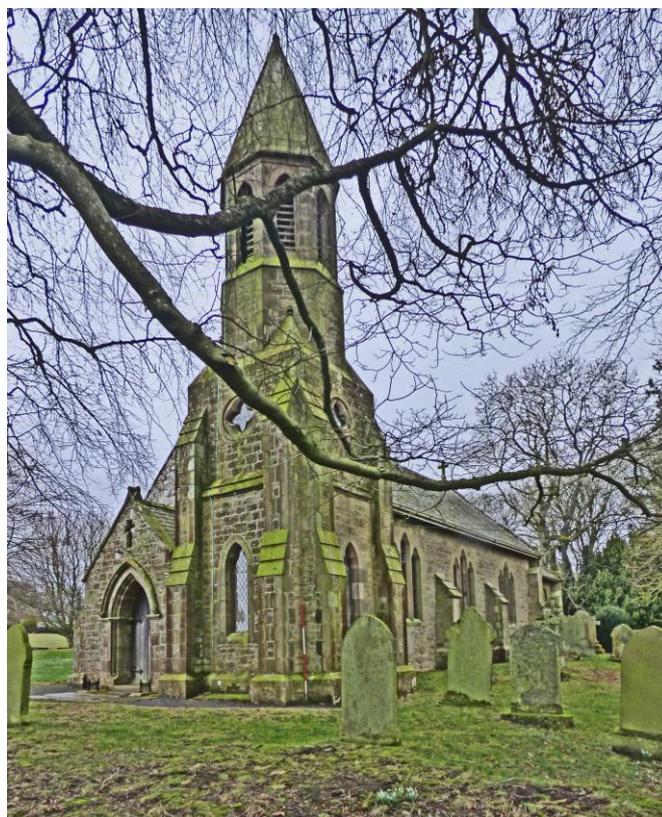
Description

The walls of nave and chancel are of roughly-coursed quite large stones, which vary considerably in shape and size. The 19th century parts are of squared pecked stone with dressings of lightly-tooled ashlar, and the steeply-pitched roofs are of Welsh slate; the gable ends have ashlar copings, with triangular gables enclosing cusped panels on their footstones.. There are a number of attractive downpipes, apparently contemporary with the restoration, with square hoppers and foliate brackets.

The **Porch** has a pair of double doors under a two-centred arch with a moulding of two hollow chamfer, interrupted by moulded imposts which carry a moulded hood with carved stops. Above is a chamfered cruciform loop, under a gable that has a square-edged coping and a cruciform-plan roll moulded finial. At the west end of the north wall is a low buttress, which has a chamfered plinth. The north wall may have some older stonework, perhaps re-used, in its lower courses, although most of it is of Victorian pecked stone. Outside the north wall is a flight of stone steps down to a boiler room beneath the porch, which has a segmental brick

vault set north-south, and an opening on the east into the heating duct under the nave.

The **Tower** (right; south-west view) rises in three stages; it has a chamfered plinth, and paired stepped buttresses at the corners. Its west wall is flush with that of the adjacent porch, but its south wall projects a little beyond the south wall of the nave. The lower stage has trefoiled lancets on the south and west; a deeply-moulded string marks the base of the second stage, which has a round window with quatrefoil cusping in each face. The transition to the octagonal third stage is achieved by broaches at each corner; the octagonal belfry has a single lancet in each face, and is topped by a steep slated spire carrying a weathervane.



A number of early architectural fragments have been re-set in the eastern of the pair of buttresses at the south-east corner of the tower. Immediately below the first set-back are what look to be three moulded voussoirs, with another adjacent, set in the angle between the nave and tower walls; a little lower down the buttress are a stone with a possible piscina bowl, and a moulding at one end, and another with worn dog-tooth ornament. In the tower wall immediately north of the buttress is a small tapered slab with chamfered edges, almost certainly a medieval grave slab although any design has gone, and below it a stone with an Ordnance Survey benchmark.

The west end of the **Nave** has old masonry surviving to almost full height, but its features are all from the Victorian restoration. Above the porch there is a circular window with septfoil cusping; the gable above has a ring-cross finial.

The side walls of the nave are each divided into three bays by 19th-century buttresses, the two intermediate ones only rising to two-thirds the height of the wall and, on the south, the taller one at the east end (and also the corresponding buttress in the chancel) has a lateral step-back to a narrower upper section which carries the end of the coping of the gable. The eaves of the nave and chancel south walls overhang considerably, carried by sprocketing; the north wall is more simply treated; here the taller end buttresses have caps below the wall-head, and the eaves do not overhang.

The south wall of the nave has three large 19th-century windows of three stepped trefoiled lancets, with a patch of contemporary pecked-stone walling above each. Below the windows are remains of two pre-19th century doorways. That in the western bay, a little west of the centre of the window, is little more than an vague patch of infill. Set centrally beneath the central window the lower part of a doorway now forms a recess c 5 cm deep; its jambs are of plain square section, and it appears to have a sill c 0.30 m above the present external ground level.



South nave wall: the two blocked doorways are labelled A and B

The north wall of the nave is windowless; in the western bay is the blocked north doorway, a plain square-headed opening with a chamfered surround and some large and irregular squared blocks in its jambs; its blocking is recessed behind the rebate of its jambs. To the east of the doorway is a ragged vertical joint also seen internally; the fabric to the west of this seems of rather larger blocks than to the east. To either side of the top of the buttress between the first and second bays are two stones (that to the west at a rather lower level) with a peculiar pattern (tooling?) of incised lines. In the central bay at mid-height are two courses of upright-section blocks, and low down in the eastern bay what looks like an irregular blocked opening about a metre high and wide.



The north wall of the nave

The south wall of the **Chancel** has an old priest's door near its west end, square-headed and with a chamfered surround; it is very like the north door of the nave. Its blocking is set well back, exposing its rebated jambs, and contains two very worn medieval grave slabs, with in front of them a decaying wooden cross commemorating the death of a First World War soldier, his name almost illegible, who was killed in action 7th December 1914. Several accounts refer to stones from the head of the original 12th-century east window being re-set in the wall above the priest's door, but there seems no sign of them. To the east of the door is a Victorian window of three stepped lancets, under a stepped moulded hood.

The east wall of the chancel is recorded as being taken down and rebuilt in 1883-4, although the two quite broad and low buttresses that support it are older, and could well be medieval. The main wall has a chamfered plinth, and a string course about a metre above it, below a well-spaced triplet of stepped lancet windows, with a common moulded hood; above is a chamfered cruciform loop (like that in the west porch gable) and the gable has a square-edged coping, topped by a foliate-cross finial.

The north wall of the chancel has no openings; its only feature of interest is a line of ten large upright blocks around 1 m below the eaves, where there is a 19th century oversailing course with a hollow chamfer.



The north (above) and south (below) walls of the chancel



The Interior



Medieval cross slabs in the side walls of the Porch

– left south side, right north side

The **West Porch** acts as a repository for a number of historic stones; two medieval cross slabs are built into the south wall, and four into the north, and addition several smaller pieces including a headstone cross and several 12th century architectural fragments are stored in the ashlar eaves. At the west end of the south wall is a rough segmental-pointed doorway into the base of the tower, cut through a metre-thick wall¹. On the north a stone bench, with moulded edges, is set against the eastern part of the wall and might have served as a coffin rest. The west doorway of the church is plainly Victorian- it has a two-centred arch with a broad chamfer, and, both internally and externally, alternating long and short voussoirs. Its taller segmental-pointed rear arch has a roll moulding to its head, and the jambs a chamfer with elaborate stops with a bar and trefoiled arch c 0.40 m below the top of each jamb, and the septfoil wheel window in the gable has an ashlar surround.

¹ The plan in the [Northumberland County History](#) implies that this thickness results from the tower wall being built alongside an earlier porch wall.

The base of the **Tower** of 1884 is formed by the vestry, which has plastered walls. The windows on the west and south are set under shallower recesses with pointed arches, and one the east is a similar recess containing a cupboard; on the north, alongside the door is a smaller arched recess containing what appears to be a contemporary safe. A ceiling hatch leads into the upper parts of the tower, where there is a ladder to the belfry (not examined)

The internal walls of the church are now bare of plaster; the nave has a boarded dado on the north, but that on the south has been removed. The north wall of the **Nave** is quite complex; about a metre to the east of the blocked north door is a ragged vertical break (also seen outside) and further east there is a course of upright blocks at around two-third height, then beyond that another rather lower down. The north doorway now forms a recess, with massive blocks in its jambs but a clearly Victorian steep two-centred rear arch that has alternating ashlar blocks like those of the west door. The possible blocked opening near the east end of the wall visible externally is not apparent internally, although two early-20th century monuments do obscure part of the wall here. About 0.5 m short of the east end of the wall and 3.5 m above the floor is a rough socket, possible for the rood beam, although there is no sign of a corresponding one on the south.

On the south of the nave the three large Victorian windows have segmental-pointed rear arches of tooled sandstone ashlar; the jambs of the blocked door under the central one are very obvious but that under the western is less distinct.

The chancel arch is the best early feature of the church, set in a wall of roughly coursed stone 0.92 m in thickness. Towards the nave the arch has a slightly damaged semicircular head of a single order of square-edged voussoirs, of diagonally-tooled ashlar; the east face (where the semicircular form is better preserved) is similar, with rubble wall core in between the cut voussoirs. The imposts, grooved and with a chamfer on their lower angle, only project on the internal face of the arch; there is no sign of them, having been continued along the western face of the wall, as often happens, nor is there any sign of a hoodmould. The jambs are made up of very large squared blocks – the fifth up from the floor of the seven blocks that make up the west face of the north jamb has the deeply-incised letters ‘HR’; their character suggests a 17th or early 18th century date.



The Chancel Arch

At the west end of the south wall of the **Chancel** the priest's door forms a recess, with a semicircular head formed by diagonally-tooled voussoirs of 12th-century character. Within the recess the Victorian restorer re-set several worked stone including the chamfered monolithic head of a lancet window, a cruciform stone, a cresset (lamp) stone with drilled indents, and what may be the end of a hoodmould. The Victorian south-east window has widely splayed internal jambs of fawn ashlar; below it is a round-arched piscine; the square-edged arch and projecting moulded sill look Victorian, but the quite large circular bowl, set well back, appears older.

The only feature in the north wall of the chancel, opposite the piscina, is a square-headed aumbry with a grooved-and-chamfered ashlar block as its sill; it appears totally medieval. Just east of the aumbry is a ragged vertical break in the wall fabric, the wall to the east being a Victorian rebuild; on the south the rebuilt masonry continues from the east jamb of the three-light window. The east end of the chancel has a panelled reredos below a boldly-projecting moulded string, which forms the sills of the lancet triplet, which have jambs shafts with moulded bases, shaft-rings and capitals, and deeply-moulded rear arches under a hoodmould.



The recess of the blocked priest's door, with various architectural fragments re-set in 1884

The nave has a wagon roof, of five bays with an additional half bay at the east end; only the tie-beams of the trusses are visible, and these have stopped chamfers. The panels have boarding set alternately diagonally and straight, whilst at the eaves is an upright board with trefoiled piercings. The chancel roof is of the same type, but of one broad bay with a half-bay at each end.

Discussion

Birtley church is very much a building of two periods; the majority of the fabric belongs to the first, which is the 12th century; most of the features (including the tower and spire) are of the seconds, the 1884 restoration by the architect Plummer of Newcastle which left the church with a rather spurious Gothic character which it had never possessed, although it would appear that all the features of genuine antiquity which the building had were retained, and all relics found carefully preserved.

Before discussing the 12th century building, it must be noted that there is one piece of evidence that suggests that it had a far earlier predecessor – the small cross slab preserved in the chancel, which has been variously dated to c700 and the 8th century (right). This appears to be a type of headstone or grave marker that is usually associated with early monastic sites. Three other stones from the church are included in the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture* but two of these have been identified as of 11th century date, and the third could not be closely dated.

The 12th century building consisted of a nave and chancel, and its best surviving feature is the chancel arch, a good but plain piece of early Norman work, similar to those at Corsenside and Thockrington. The rear arch of the priest's door also looks convincingly Norman with its diagonally-tooled voussoirs; the outer opening, like that of the north door of the nave, is a plain square-headed opening with a narrow chamfer that really could be of any medieval date. *The Buildings of England*² sees the latter door as of the 16th century but it really is very similar to the priest's door; possibly both may have had their original arched heads replaced by straight lintels in the course of some



² Northumberland (1992), 2nd ed. Grundy et al (Penguin) 188)

medieval or early post-medieval repair, or possibly the plain square heads may be simple Norman work. The rear arch of the nave doorway is clearly of 1884.

Several accounts³ refer to the head of a Norman window in the east end being found when that wall was rebuilt in 1884, and its stones re-set over the priest's door, although there seem no sign of them there today – are they the moulded stones built into the south-east buttress of the tower?.

Other 12th century fragments are ex-situ; they include a substantial capital of a jamb shaft, now in the eaves of the porch, that would seem to have come from a sizeable doorway – the only real candidate is the south door of the nave of which only vestiges survive, opposite the north door and underneath the western of the three of the nave's 1884 windows. Perhaps the moulded voussoirs in the tower buttress came from this as well; they certainly come from a feature of considerably more architectural elaboration than the surviving chancel arch; was the doorway a little later in date? One ex-situ feature, the window head re-set in the recess formed by the rear arch of the priest's doorway, looks of 13th century date.

There seems to be no surviving evidence of the later medieval history of the church; it would seem highly likely that it suffered during the long wars with Scotland, and it might well have been left a ruin at times, before patching up for further use. Documentary sources certainly indicate that it was a sorry state in the post-medieval period; in 1610 it was 'ruynouse and lying down' and in 1723 'coarsely rebuilt'. The central position of the more obvious of the blocked doorways on the south of the nave would be unusual in a medieval church, and might imply some degree of post-medieval reconstruction. It is possible that quite an amount of the standing fabric may have been rebuilt; there certainly seems to be evidence of several phases of work in the fabric of the north nave wall.

By the later 19th century the church was a building of plain domestic character, with square-headed sash windows⁴. The west porch is of uncertain date; although its walls and features today look to go with the restoration, Plummer clearly differentiates them on his plan as being earlier than his works, and the block plan of the church on the c1860 Ordnance Survey 6":1 mile map seems to show some sort of structure here. The restoration which gave the building its present character came in 1883-4, under the instigation of the Rev.G.Rome Hall, a vicar of antiquarian tendencies.

³ For example a guide to the church written in 1956 (Northumberland County |Archive, Woodhorn, ref EP87/82) which stated that the stones from the window were built in over the priest's door 'replacing a stone coping then removed'

⁴ A photograph of c1880 (see p.12, copy in village, original said to be in Northumberland County Council Archives at Woodhorn) shows the building from the south, with large square-headed sash windows, a simple arched bellcote at the west end and a chimney-like feature on the east gable.

Archaeological Assessment

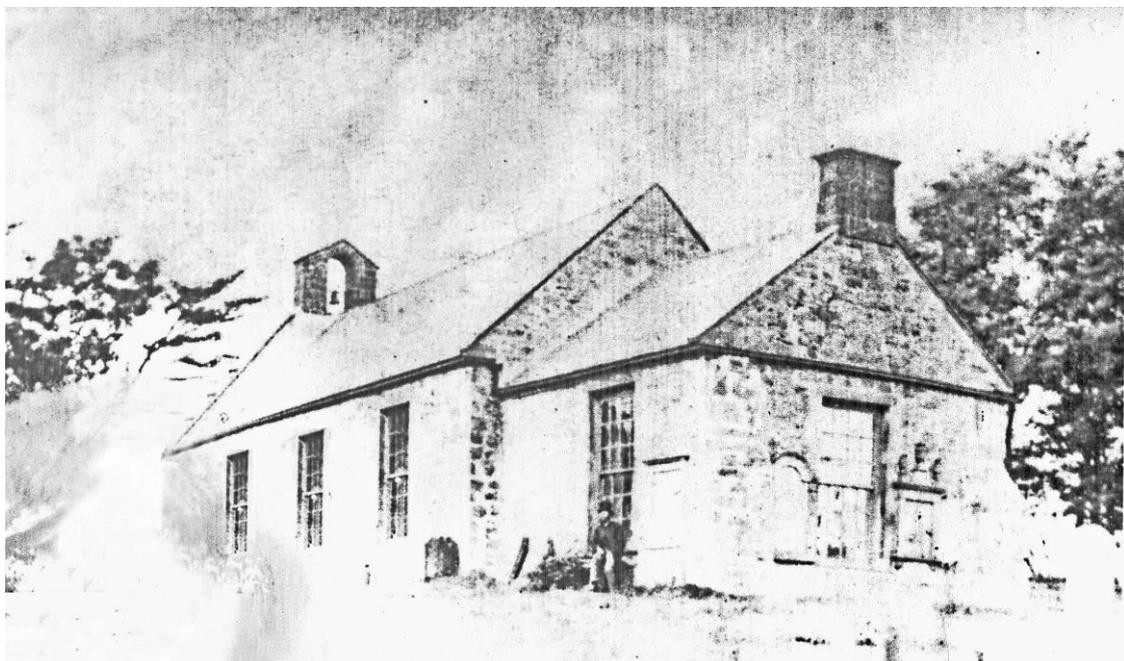
The church floor is now entirely covered by fitted carpets (except for the Minton tiles of the sanctuary), and whatever lies beneath cannot be assessed. The boiler room beneath the porch indicates that there was an underfloor heating system, which in terms of archaeology will have disturbed the sub-floor stratigraphy somewhat. Nevertheless, any works that entail disturbance of underfloor deposits will require at the least archaeological monitoring, as the 8th century grave marker indicates this is a site of great antiquity. This also goes for works in the churchyard, and in particular adjacent to the building. Adjacent to the church ground levels were probably reduced in 1883-4, to counter damp problems, which will probably result in burials lying very close to the surface.

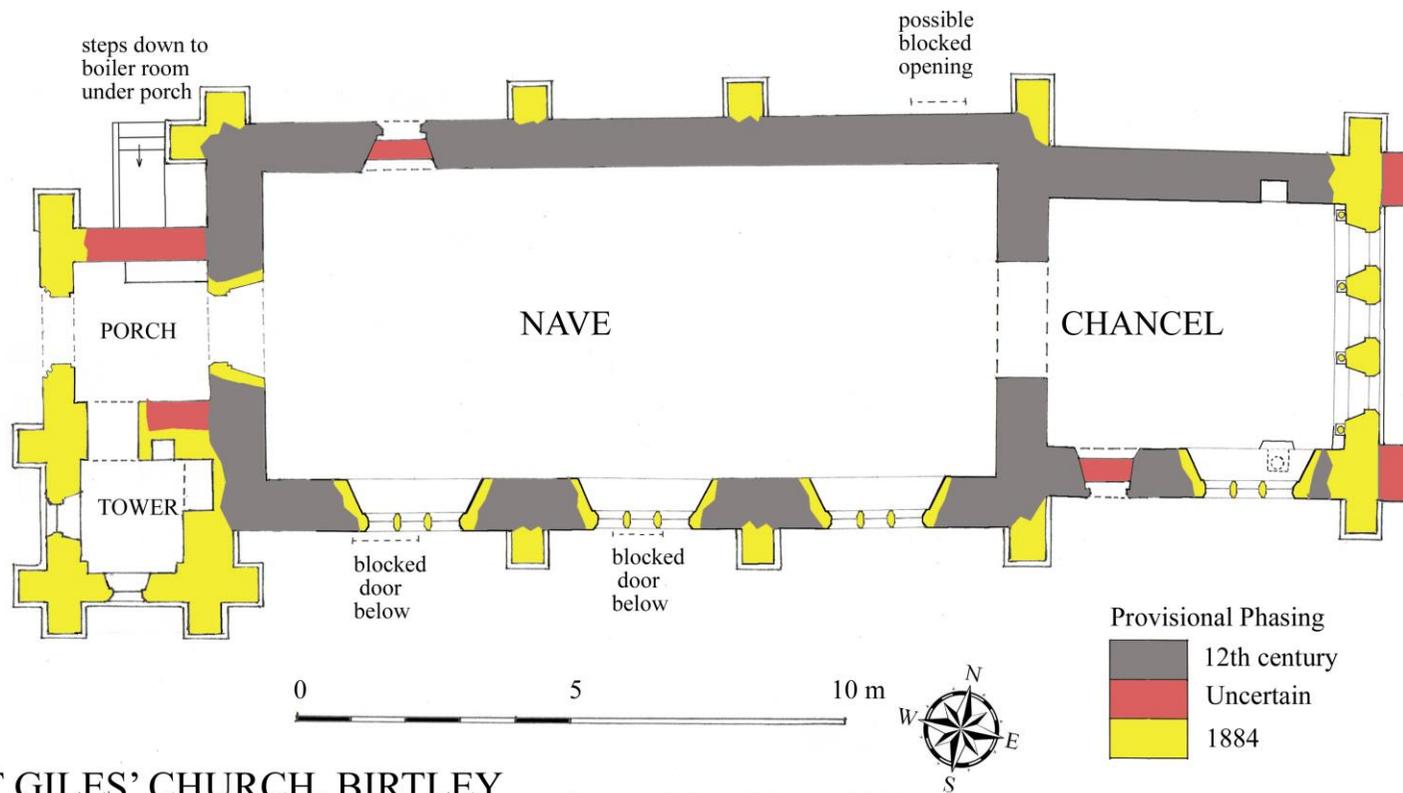
The churchyard is itself interesting from an archaeological point of view as there is a very pronounced bank surrounding the building and only c 10 m from it; it is especially prominent on the west, but seems to have been lost over the western part of the south side. This could be no more than an early churchyard boundary, but may have some other significance, and would require investigating in detail for instance if cut by a service trench.

The walls of the church are clear of plaster. Those of the nave and chancel (except its east end) are largely of 12th century date, but their fabric is of some complexity. A further step in their understanding might be the creation of stone-for-stone drawings (or rectified photographs).

Peter F Ryder February 2019

c1880 photograph, south-east view

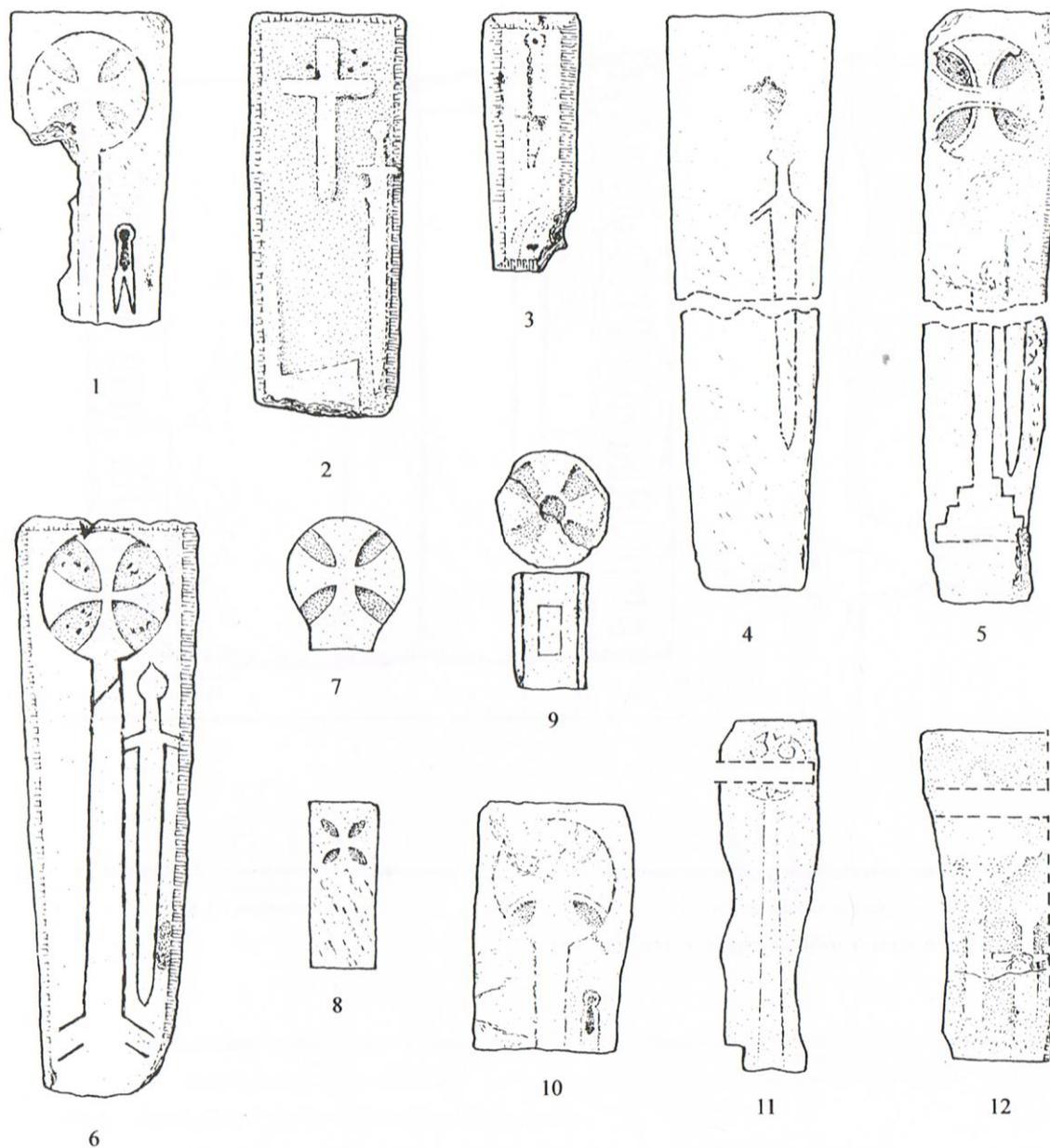




ST GILES' CHURCH, BIRTLEY

Survey P F Ryer February 2019

Appendix 1. The Cross Slab Grave Covers



0 1 2
Metres
Scale at 1:20

St Giles, Birtley

Despite having been ‘coarsely rebuilt for present use’ in 1723, and thoroughly Victorianised in 1883-4, Birtley Church retains a considerable amount of 12th-century fabric, including its chancel arch. Most of the collection of medieval cross slabs and worked stones seems to have come to light in 1883-4, when the east end was rebuilt from ground level. Most of the slabs are considerably worn, as if they had lain outside for many years before being re-used (in 1723?)

In addition to the grave covers listed below, there are a number of architectural fragments, mostly of 12th-century character in the eaves on the south side of the porch, built into the internal face of the blocking of the priest’s door on the south of the chancel (these include a cruciform stone with chamfered edges which might be a fragment of a headstone of the same type as Bellingham 4), and re-set in the south-east buttress of the little Victorian tower at the south-west corner of the nave. On the east side of the tower is a slab with chamfered edges that may be another grave slab but now seems to retain no trace of any design.

Slabs 1-2 are set in the internal face of the south wall of the west porch.

- (1) Upper part of slab of pinkish sandstone, with its design incised except for sunk panels in the cross head. Cross paté with a pair of shears on the r. of the shaft. Probably 12th century.
- (2) Rectangular slab of a more coarse-grained fawn sandstone with relief design; simple straight-armed cross only half the length of the stone, with sword on r. and an inverted axe beneath. This slab is illustrated in the Hodges notebook ; the sketch, dated Dec 5th 1883, is accompanied by the note ‘another small one decayed beyond recognition and fragments built into S buttress east end of church’. No dateable features, but perhaps 12th century..

Slabs 3-6 are set in the internal face of the north wall of the porch.

- (3) Small tapered slab of coarse fawn sandstone; there are remnants of an incised design, but one difficult to make sense of. Possibly a pair of shears, perhaps with a sword below.
- (4) Large tapered slab of coarse sawn sandstone, in two pieces. The only motif is an incised sword, set r. of centre, with a lozenge-shaped pommel and down-turned quillons. Not dateable.
- (5) Large slab of coarse brown sandstone, in two pieces. Cross paté, rather more elaborate than most, with sunk segments between the arms. Incised cross shaft rising from stepped base, with sword on r. 12th century.
- (6) Large tapered slab of yellow/orange sandstone. Cross paté (with sunk segments between arms) with broad tapering shaft rising from triangular mount, and sword on r. 12th century.

Stones 7 and 8 currently lie in the north eaves of the porch

- (7) Discoidal sandstone headstone with cross paté of usual type, with sunk panels between the arms. The reverse feels similar, but, perched as it is in the eaves, it is difficult to inspect the stone without braining oneself with it. Cramp (1984, I, 237, II, pls. 232-4) sees this as a ‘round-headed grave marker’ of the second half of the 11th century.
- (8) A rectangular block, possibly either a headstone or a small conventional slab, very worn, but showing the sunk lenticular panels of the usual cross paté. 12th century?

- (9) Set in the internal recess of the blocked north door of the nave, a discoidal headstone, probably of limestone, with a splay-armed cross, with sunk panels between the arms, and a circular one at the head centre. Mounted below it is a piece of a Pre-Conquest cross shaft with roll-moulded angles and an incised rectangular panel. Cramp (ibid) sees this as a 'circular grave marker or dedication cross' and ascribes it to the second half of the 11th century.

Slabs 10-12 are set in the external recess formed by the blocked priest's door on the south of the chancel, and partly concealed by a wooden memorial cross of 1914, to a Captain B. Allgood, which is itself now a sepulchral monument of some interest.

- (10) Upper part of a slab of coarse yellowish sandstone., Cross paté, very worn, with shears on r. of shaft. 12th century.
- (11) Narrow slab of orange ferruginous sandstone. Incised bracelet cross within a circle, on tapering shaft. Late 12th or 13th century.
- (12) Part of a slab of light fawn sandstone, very worn. Relief design; the cross appears to have had fleur-de-lys terminals, with a sword on its r., with a discoidal pommel and square-set quillons. Date uncertain.

From Ryder, P.F. (2000) Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers in Northumberland, 1: South West Northumberland Archaeologia Aeliana 5th ser. XXVIII, 51-110