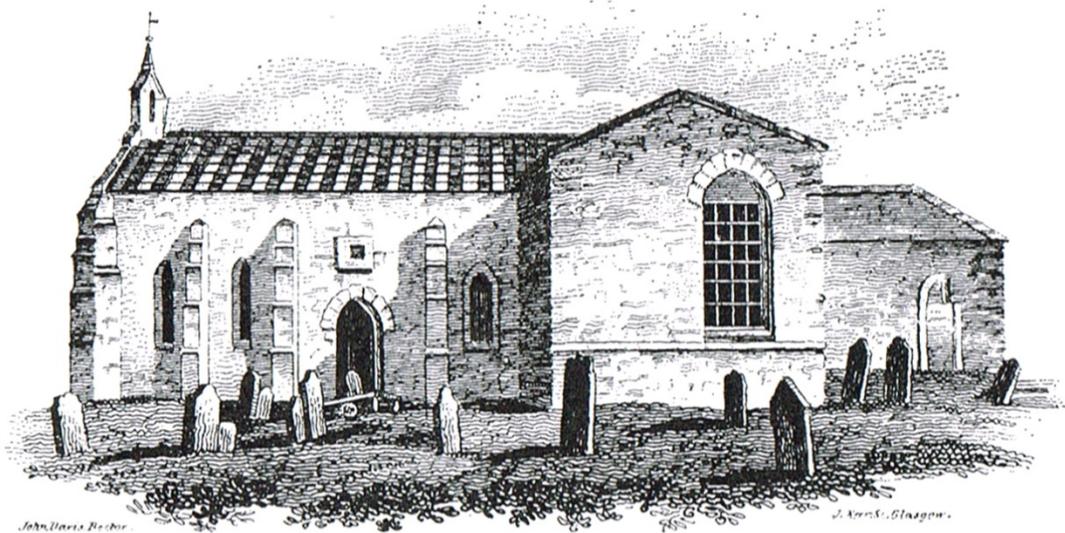


St Cuthbert's Church

Bellingham

Northumberland



BELLINGHAM CHURCH.

North^d.

Published 1. Nov. 1823. by W. Davison Alnwick.

An Archaeological Assessment

October 2014

PETER F RYDER

B.A., M.Phil., F.S.A

HISTORIC BUILDINGS CONSULTANT

1 Ford Terrace
Broomhaugh
RIDING MILL
Northumberland
NE44 6EJ

Tel (01434) 682644
E mail: PFRyder@broomlee.org



St Cuthbert, Bellingham

Bellingham parish church at the south end of the village, on the spur of land at the junction of Hareshaw Burn and the North Tyne; the building consists of an aisleless nave with a south transept, and an aisleless nave with a small outbuilding on the north of its western part.

Description

The Exterior

The **Nave** is built of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared sandstone stone, mostly fawn and yellow, but with a scatter of red and pink blocks which have probably been burned. The walls are heavily pointed, with remains of a former coat of render. The north elevation, towards the road, is articulated into six bays by multi-stepped buttresses; those at the ends rise to the full height of the wall, but the intermediate ones have low pyramidal caps c 0.50 m below the eaves. The doorway is in the third bay (numbering from the west) and has a near-triangular head, cut into two inclined blocks, with a moulding of two narrow chamfers separated by a square rebate, stopped c 0.5m above the ground. There seems to be some indication of disturbance, including a short straight joint, in the masonry above, perhaps indicating that there was once a recess or opening here as there is on the south. In the first, second, fourth and sixth bays (numbering from the west) are lancet windows of fairly broad proportions, with simple chamfered surrounds, and heads, like that of the doorway, cut into pairs of inclined blocks. The dressings of the lancet in the fourth bay shows evidence for a glass groove and bar sockets in its jambs¹; the lower part of its sill has been roughly cut away, as if there has been an opening beneath it at some stage, although there is no other sign of this.² In the fifth bay is a broader window with a shallow segmental arch and a raised stone surround above a projecting moulded sill, of 18th century character. The buttresses have projecting square footings, and chamfered off-sets, the off-sets projecting slightly above a square return to the wall face below. The buttress at the east end is very substantial, and returns or some distance as a shallow projection along the east wall; it has a chamfered plinth on its east side, suggesting that it is in fact part of the east wall of the original north aisle, retained and remodelled as a buttress.



The north side of the nave

¹ The only one to do so, although the jambs of some others are obscured by mortar.

² Alternatively the sill may be a re-used piece.

The west end of the nave has a central pair of tall stepped buttresses, with the west window in the narrow gap between. The greater part of the wall is of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone, with some quite elongate blocks; there are ragged breaks at either end, showing that the end buttresses of the side walls are secondary. The central buttresses, which rise to the base of the bellcote, have chamfered plinths and steeply-sloped offsets, and typically mid-late 19th-century dressings of tooled-and-margined ashlar, as has the window between them, a tall lancet with a chamfered surround. Above it is what appears to be the head of an earlier window, cut into two inclined blocks, both of which appear to have been roughly tooled back (right). Its original form (a segmental arch?) is not quite clear, as it has been cut both on the intrados and extrados by later sockets. The bell-cote is constructed of parallel-tooled 19th-century ashlar and has a simple round-arched opening, chamfered off-sets to its sides, and a gabled top with an oversailing chamfered coping that has a roll mould at the apex.



The south wall of the nave has very similar features to the north, and is articulated by similar stepped buttresses, except that there are only four bays, the eastern third of the wall being covered by the South Transept. The doorway in the third bay is now blocked; it is virtually identical to that on the north except that the mouldings are stopped only 0.20 m above the ground, and above is a recess c 0.50 m high and 0.40 m wide with a surround, cut into four stones, that has a bold projecting moulding with a small square rebate. In front of the second bay a stair descends to a subterranean boiler room, the chimney of which – the lower part in blackened stone and the upper a more recent rebuild in white ashlar – rises alongside the west face of the buttress between the third and fourth bays. The first and second bays have lancets, and the fourth a segmental-arched 18th century window, all identical to those on the north.

The roof of the nave is of considerable interest; of relatively shallow pitch, it is made up of squared stone flags in alternating raised and sunk vertical strips³. The gable ends have copings, chamfered on the underside; at the east end a slightly shallower roof line is visible just below the 18th century (?) coping, whereas at the west the coping and (rebuilt?) upper walling seem contemporaneous and are both probably of 19th century date.

The walls of the **South Transept** are of roughly-coursed and shaped stone – little better than rubble in parts of the east wall – with a scatter of reddened blocks, notably towards the north end of the west wall. On this section of wall there is a resemblance – no more – of a sloping roof line, as if for an aisle to the west. Near the centre of the wall is a square-headed window with quite a broad chamfered surround and old worn dressings, perhaps of 17th century date. The south wall has a chamfered off-set just over 1m above the ground; above that, set a little east-of-centre, is a three-light window of three lancet lights under a broader arch, with pierced spandrels. The jambs have old worn alternating blocks, but the sills, mullions and

³ A very similar roof to the early 16th century Ladykirk on the north side of the Tweed.

head are all of 19th-century tooled ashlar⁴. The quoins at the southern angles differ slightly in character, those at the south-east being rather more substantial, which would tally with the internal evidence of the west wall of the transept having been rebuilt inside its original line. The gable has a coping, chamfered on its underside, that looks to be of 19th century date.

The east wall of the transept is of considerable interest; its northern part incorporates the east end of an earlier aisle, the angle quoins of which remain up to c 1.5 m above ground level. The earlier walling includes some quite elongate blocks; there is no clear indication of any window in it. Further south is a lancet window of the same type as those in the nave, except that its head is cut into a single stone rather than a pair of inclined blocks.

The roof of the transept is of the same type as the nave; it does not join the nave roof, but has its own north gable, the valley between this and the nave roof being drained by a gutter discharging from an old stone spout on the east.

The **Chancel** is built of roughly-coursed stone of a variety of types, with much fire-reddened material, especially on the north. The ground drops away to the east, and a plinth only appears around the eastern third. On the north and east this is of conventional chamfered form, but on the south it projects further from the wall (and has been partly recut with a square step), the most likely interpretation of this being that the wall above has been rebuilt with its external face c 10 cm within the original line⁵. Both side walls have a 19th-century oversailing ashlar course to the eaves, with a narrow chamfer on its lower angle. The south wall shows some discrepancies in fabric type, with larger stones towards the east end; the only window is a lancet, of the same type as in the nave, set a little west of centre. Clamped



upright against the west end of the wall is an interesting early post-medieval grave slab to 'Charlton of Readsmouth' of 1628, with raised lettering and a small sword⁶.

The east end (left) has rather more regular alternating quoins on the north, another indicant that the south wall may have been rebuilt. It has a triplet of narrow lancet windows, with monolithic heads, of quite different character to those elsewhere in the church. and presumably of 13th century date. The central is only slightly taller than the northern, with the southern a little shorter. The upper part of the gable looks as if it may have been rebuilt⁷; the coping, chamfered on its underside and carrying a cross fleury finial, is certainly 19th century.

⁴ An 1823 engraving (see report cover) by Davison shows a tall small-paned sash or casement window here, under a round-arched head; this is reproduced in Graham, F (1978) *Tynedale, fom Blanchland to Carter Bar*, 29

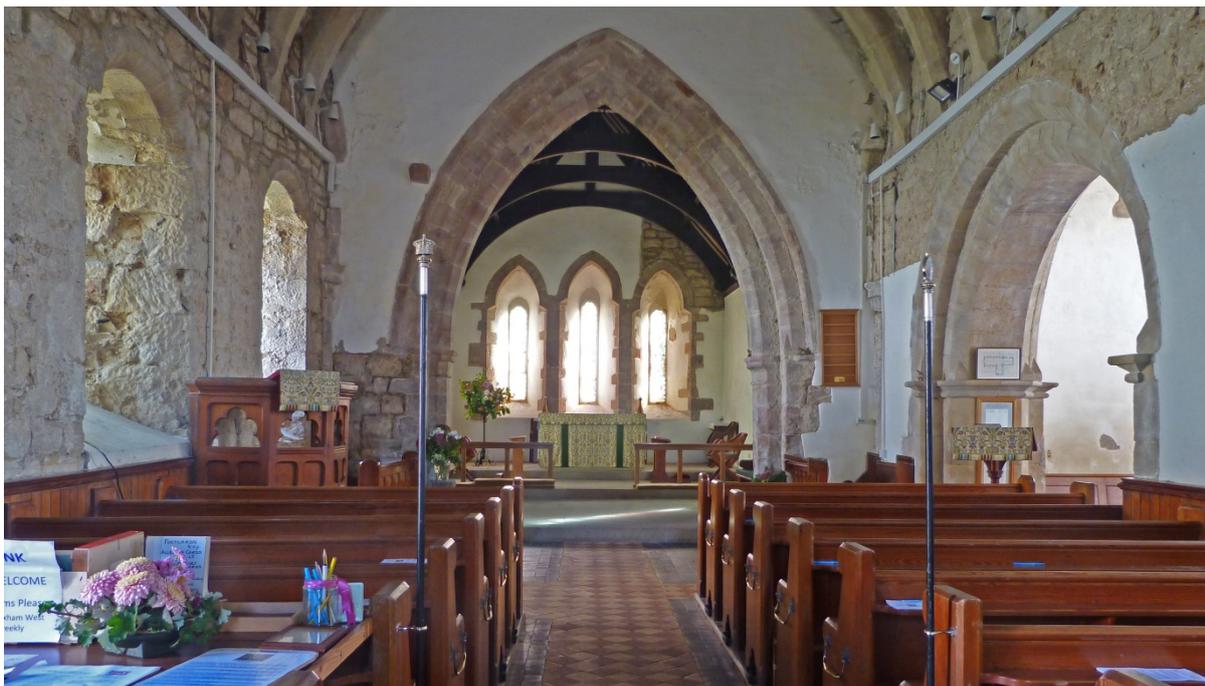
⁵ The 1823 Davison engraving shows a blocked arched doorway close to the east end of the chancel; there is no sign of this now, other than that it corresponds to the section of plinth re-cut to a step.

⁶ Hodgson's 1830 notes refer to this as lying 'within the altar rails'; Northumberland County Record Office SANT/BEQ/18/4/26 'MS Materials Z' p.57-9

The western third of the north wall is concealed by a small 19th-century pent outbuilding constructed built of re-used material, to judge from the variety of tooling types on its quoins and dressings, with a boarded door and a stone flag roof. The only feature in this wall, near the centre, is a window of three stepped lancet lights, all of parallel-tooled 19th-century ashlar.

The chancel roof is of graduated green Lakeland slates.

The Interior

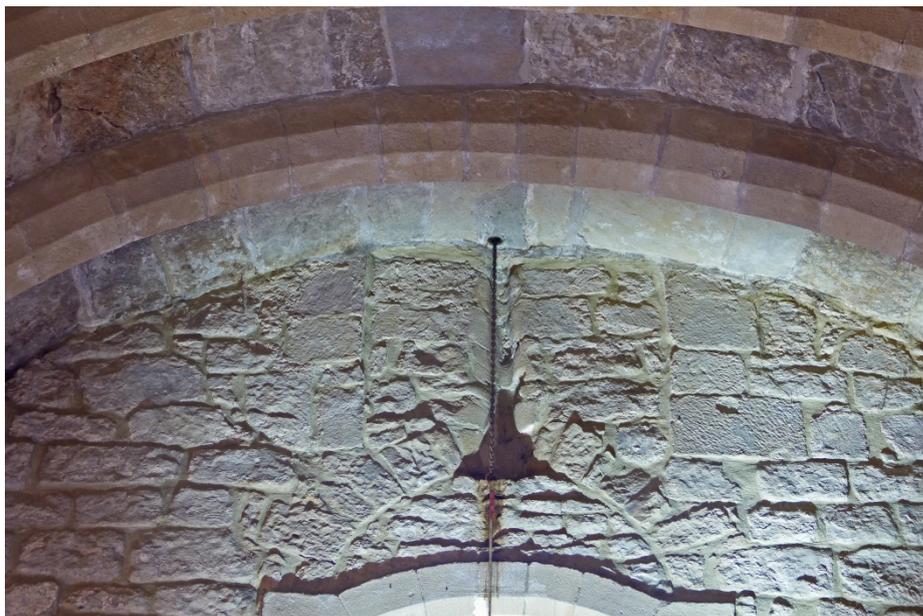


Interior looking east

The interior of the church is generally plastered and whitewashed (with exposed dressings), although at the time of this assessment plaster had been removed from several areas⁸; there is a boarded dado in the nave and transept. In the west wall of the **Nave** the west window has jambs (still plastered) that seem to be cut into the walling stone, but the sill and segmental rear arch, both with chamfers, are of 19th-century ashlar; directly above the latter is the semicircular rear arch of an earlier opening, its apex cut into by a deep groove, clearly worn by a bell rope, that drops down from the apex of the vault through the infill of a still-earlier opening, of which three or four stones of each jamb are visible. This opening has its north jamb is in line with that of the present west window, and its south c 10 cm within; its sill has been destroyed by the rear arch of the previous window, and its head is cut across by the nave vault.

⁷ The same picture seems to show the chancel roof as hip-ended.

⁸ At the west end of the nave from 2m above the floor, on the eastern part of the north wall of the nave, on the eastern part of the south wall of the nave from 1.5 m below the eaves, on the east wall of the nave below the springing of the chancel arch, at the west end of the north wall of the chancel, at the east end of the chancel above the southern of the three lancets, and in the south transept at the south end of the west wall. In addition the vaults of nave and transept were clear of any covering.

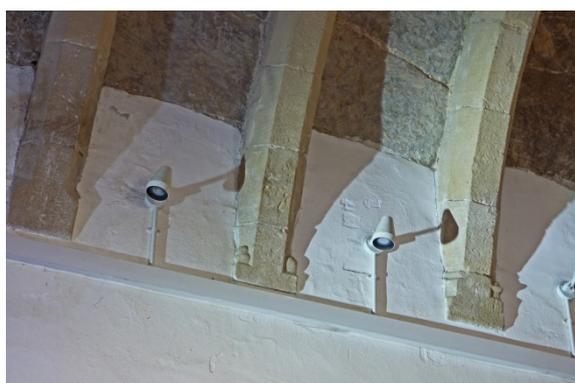
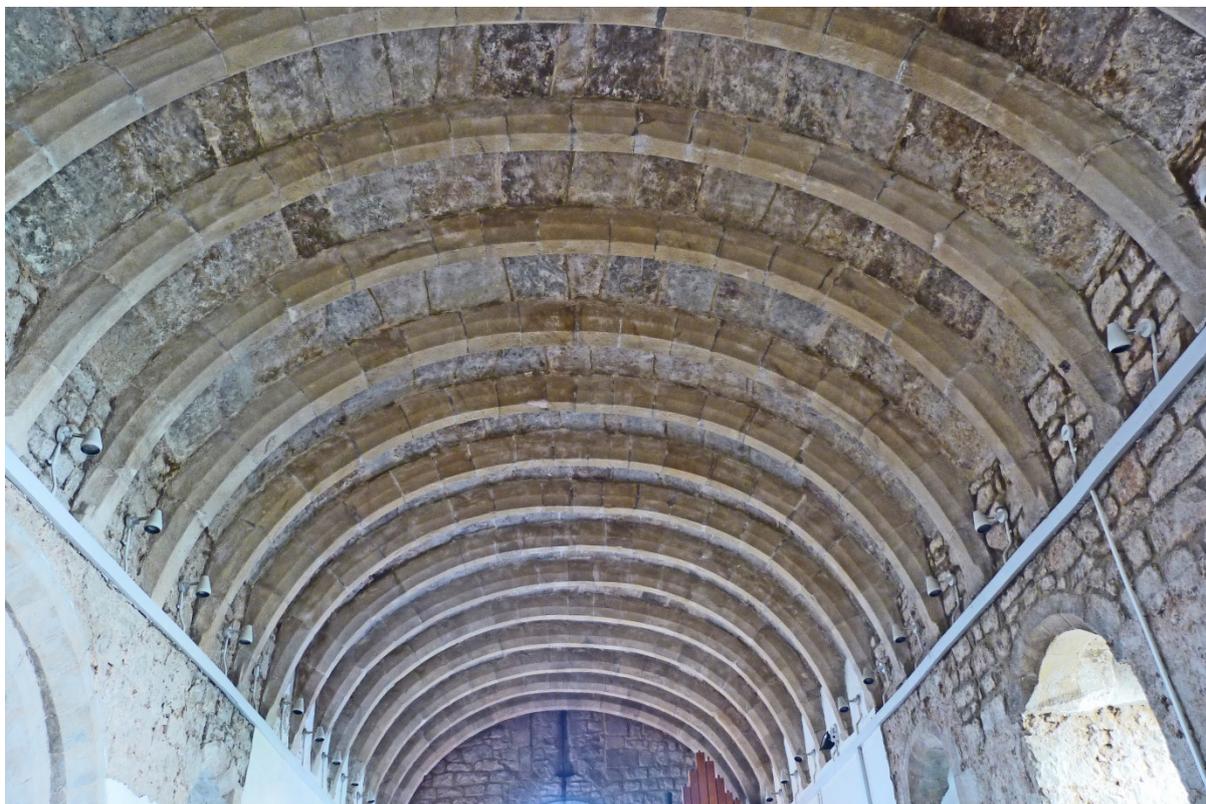


Features in the upper part of the west wall of the nave, revealed by recent removal of plaster.

At each corner of the nave the remains of responds of the late 12th or 13th century arcades, which were probably originally of four bays, are visible. The responds have semicircular shafts and simple moulded capitals, and the arches, of which just a voussoir or two survive, appear to have been of two chamfered orders; at the north-east corner a projecting stone of a chamfered hood remains as well. The lancet windows have rear arches of pendant four-centred form, with stopped chamfers, and jambs of large alternating blocks; the two lancets enlarged into segmental-arched windows in the 18th century retain their rear arches, but their jambs have been crudely widened. The lancet in the fourth bay of the north wall has several mason's marks on its internal jambs, in the form of a letter 'E'; that in the sixth bay has had its internal western splay crudely cut back. Three steps lead down to the floor of the nave at the north door, which has a similar rear arch to the lancets; its jambs, which one would expect to show evidence of drawbar tunnels, are concealed by plaster.

On the south of the nave only the rear arch of the blocked south door is exposed. Further east is the opening into the south transept, which the county history describes as 'a very crude Jacobean archway'; at first glance it looks well finished, although closer inspection shows that the two chamfered orders do have a rather strange relationship, the outer projecting beyond the inner much more at the sides than at the crown of the arch. The arch is slightly segmental in form, with broach stops above the simple moulded capitals; the voussoirs have a variety of types of masons' mark. On the jambs the inner order is square and the outer chamfered, with interesting stops; those on the east take the form of a double moulded square, and on the west a form of broach. On the south the outer order of the base is set behind the line of the adjacent wall face, which curves in to reveal it. The obvious interpretation is that the respond is earlier than the wall; the County History sees a change in plan as responsible, rather than two separate phases of work.

The nave has a near-semicircular barrel vault carried on fifteen ashlar ribs, with chamfered lower angles, the chamfers being stopped in a variety of manners, some broaches, other more elaborate; the ribs also display a number of masons' marks. There are several courses of roughly-shaped small stones above the springing of the ribs, above which the vault is of large roughly-tooled slabs of flaggy sandstone, varying in colour, some trapezoidal in form rather than rectangular.



The Nave vault (looking west)

Varied chamfer stops to the vaulting ribs (south wall)

Inside the **South Transept**, the lancet on the east has a rather different form of rear arch to the others in the church, in that the outer head has an internal stopped chamfer as well as the pendant rear arch. The window on the west has two medieval cross slab grave covers re-used as its internal lintels. On the south the large window has a segmental-pointed rear arch, with a chamfer, in 19th century ashlar, and plastered jambs; beneath the east end of its sill is a shapeless recess with a rough bowl, the remains of a piscina, again plastered. c.0.60 m from the west end of the south wall is a corbel that would appear to have carried the south end of a

western arcade; it is of trefoil plan, with a shaft ring and a moulded cap with nail-head, with the central shaft cut back at one point as if to take a screen⁹. The south end of the transept is now partitioned off by a low screen to form a vestry.

The vault of the transept is of identical form to that of the nave, but carried on seven ribs; at the south end a chamfered off-set in the wall face develops at the level of the springing of the ribs.

At the east end of the nave the arch into the **Chancel** is steeply two-centred, and of two chamfered orders, with a chamfered hood. The responds have a chamfered inner order, with a simple moulded cap (that on the south damaged) and a square outer. The outer order of the arch has broach stops above the impost, and there are simple moulded bases c 0;130 m above the floor. Above the northern respond, and at around the level of the springing of the ribs of the nave vault, is a projecting corbel. On the east face of the wall, towards the chancel, the details are similar except that there is no hoodmould; all the dressings of the arch show extensive fire-reddening.

The interior of chancel has relatively little architectural detail. The window in the south wall has no exposed dressings; the 19th-century one on the north has a segmental-pointed rear arch and an exposed ashlar sill, of the 19th century one on the north). The eastern lancets have shouldered two-centred rear arches; the exposed masonry above the head of the southern shows smaller rubble around the arch, almost as if it were an insertion. The piers of masonry between the lancets are rather different, the northern being made up of larger blocks.

The 19th-century chancel roof is of four bays, having simple collar-beam trusses with upper king posts, two levels of through purlins, ashlar to the eaves and a simple moulded wall plate.

The Structural Development of the Church

Bellingham church has had the benefit of a scholarly description and interpretation by H.L.Honeyman in Volume XV (1940) of the Northumberland County History (hereafter 'NCH'), to which it is difficult to add very much, although the current exposure of some internal wall faces allows some additional comment, in particular upon the west end of the nave. The basic phasing of the structure appears to be:

- (1) Late 12th or early 13th century, a church with a four-bay aisled nave and an aisleless chancel. The east and north walls of the chancel survive, chancel arch, end responds of the arcades and (probably) the bulk of the west wall.

⁹ The corbel looks perfectly genuine later-13th century work, and quite weathered as one might expect in a church that seems to have been a roofless ruin at times; nevertheless, there is an 1832 reference in a report by Archdeacon Singleton to 'putting up a new corbel at the SW angle of the S aisle'. Hodgson's 1830 sketch plan however shows the corbel (an illustrates it with a rough sketch) in its present position.

- (2) In the later 13th century a south transept (and possibly also a north, although no evidence of this survives) was added; the transept had a western aisle, as at Corbridge and Ovingham. It is possible that the church also had a western tower – the high-level opening now exposed in the west wall might have been associated with such a structure.
- (3) The church clearly suffered in the troubled later medieval centuries, the ‘Three Hundred Years War’ with Scotland; the extensive fire-reddening of the fabric bears witness. One recorded raid was in 1597 when the Earl of Buccleugh spoiled the town and church on Fair Day, the church being used as a centre for defence by the townsfolk ¹⁰.
- (4) It is recorded that the church still lay in ruins in 1609¹¹, placing its reconstruction, with the nave shorn of aisles and the south transept reduced in width, into the early 17th century. The new walls were all thicker (c1.20m) than the original 12th/13th century ones, presumably to take the weight of the vaults¹²; as the rebuilt south wall of the chancel, which was presumably never vaulted, was considerably thinner (0.60m). The prime intention of these vaults must have been to render the building fire-proof – so it would seem strange to vault nave and transept but not the chancel. Was there a vault here as well, but structural failure prompted another reconstruction? Honeyman assumes that the rebuilding in the chancel was more or less contemporary with that of the nave and transept, but the evidence of the blocked doorway shown on Davison’s 1823 engraving raises the possibility that the south wall was rebuilt – perhaps for a second time – in the earlier 19th century.
- (5) Honeyman in his NCH account dates the buttresses of the nave to the 18th century, comparing their off-sets to those of buttresses of the aisles at nearby Simonburn, which are known to have been rebuilt in 1763. The off-sets are indeed similar, but the general feel of the buttresses is quite different; those at Bellingham have many more off-sets, and semi-pyramidal tops, and generally have an earlier feel.
- (6) A number of alterations took place in the 19th century, and the picture is not completely clear. Honeyman records that in 1865 the Rev R.P.Powell carried out restoration work including the re-roofing of the chancel, the insertion of the window in its north wall, and the replacement of a sash window in the west end by the present lancet and the two big buttresses flanking it. In the Northumberland County Record Office collection there is an undated plan (now in very poor condition) for the restoration of the church¹³ which shows neither the chancel north nor nave west

¹⁰ Brooke, C (2000) Safe Sanctuaries; Security and Defence in Anglo-Scottish Border Churches 1290-1690, John Donald, 126

¹¹ In ‘the late Dr Charlton’s MSS’, NCH 227

¹² The west wall of the nave is of this thickness as well; the NCH plan shows it as refaced externally in the 17th century, but its external fabric is quite similar to that of the early chancel walls, and its thickness may have been due to its carrying a bellcote or tower.

¹³ EP 48/43

window, nor the western buttresses. (now in poor condition). However, in the Rev Joseph Hodgson's fieldbook¹⁴ in the same archive is an 1830 sketch plan showing both windows in both these positions, and the south nave door as still open. During restoration works in 1861 three cannonballs were found in the nave vault. In 1885 the church was re-floored and re-pewed, and the present vestry formed within the South Transept.

- (7) There was a 1902 scheme to add an organ chamber and vestry, by the architect M G Marlinson, either in the form of a full-length south aisle to the chancel, or as a projecting block on the west part of its north side¹⁵. None of this work was ever carried out.
- (8) The church experienced several structural problems in the mid-20th century due to movements occasioned by the weight of the nave vault; at one point the nave was declared unsafe and steel scaffolding had to be inserted beneath 'nine of the fifteen nave arches'; remedial works were carried out at considerable expense¹⁶.

Archaeological Assessment

The actual date of foundation of the church (sometimes quoted as 1180) remains uncertain; Reginald of Durham writing c1140 describes a recent miracle that had taken place at St Cuthbert's Well¹⁷ at 'Bainlingham', and specifically mentions a church, so an early church is a possibility. A 1982 dowsed survey¹⁸ identified two successive Pre-Conquest timber churches beneath the present building, partly beneath the present church but on a central axis close to its north wall. A date of 1180 is sometimes quoted for the consecration of the present church, which would more or less tally with the earliest extant fabric, but the earliest documentary reference is in 1297 when goods are recorded as being stolen from it, and it is mentioned again in 1360 and 1541; it remained a chapel in the parish of Simonburn until the 18th century¹⁹

It is clear from the above-ground fabric that St Cuthbert's is a church with a complex multi-phase development, and it is to be expected that significant archaeological evidence remains beneath its floors, so any future floor works will need to be accompanied by an archaeological watching brief. The floors themselves appear relatively recent – especially the cut stone slabs in the chancel – but there seems to be no record of archaeological recording when they were laid. There will clearly have been some disturbance from heating systems, although in much of the church the present pipes are above the floor, although there are

¹⁴ SANT/BEQ/18/4/26 'MS Materials Z' p.57-9

¹⁵ Northumberland County Record office EP 48/44

¹⁶ Hexham Courant 20 11 59; copy at Northumberland County Record Office EP 8/48

¹⁷ St Cuthbert's Well, now provided with an 18th-century stone pant, is situated to the south-east of the churchyard

¹⁸ Northumberland County Record Office MRO 2190/8

¹⁹ Bellingham. Northumberland Extensive Urban Survey (2009) Northumberland County Council, available as pdf online at www.northumberland.gov.uk/idoc.ashx?docid=4625b6e0-bd6b...

heating grates in the sanctuary²⁰. The nave has tiled floors, except for boarding beneath the pew platforms; pews have been removed from the northern side of the nave to the west of the door.

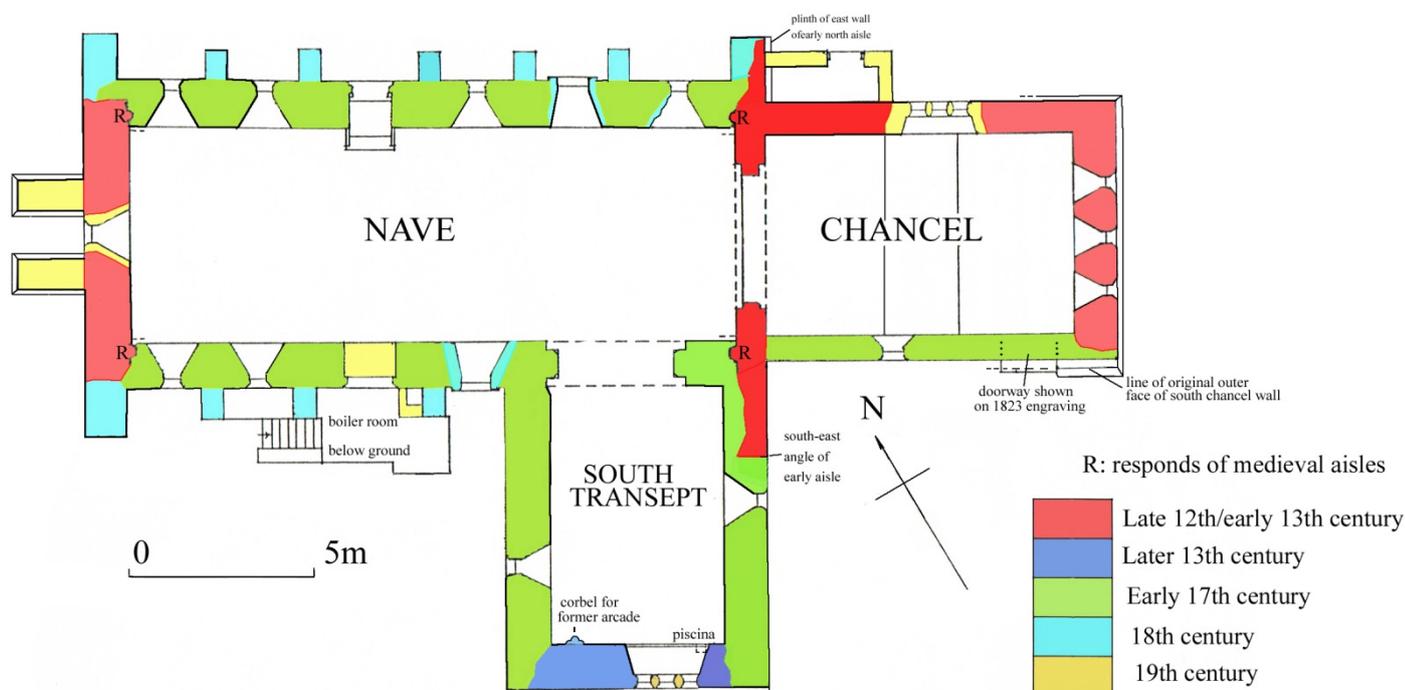
Above ground, it is possible that wall coverings conceal earlier plaster work, perhaps with mural decoration, or fabric with features of architectural or structural interest, so any large-scale disturbance of these should be monitored as well.

Bellingham is an important church, its significance being primarily in its witness to the vicissitudes borne by medieval churches in upland Northumberland both in the three centuries of Border Wars, and the subsequent years of general instability. Not only, like many other churches, does it show evidence of having suffered structural damage and loss, but also clear intentions of defensibility in its reconstruction with remarkable vaults – paralleled only at Elsdon, Kirknewton and (formerly) Corsenside and perhaps Ilderton. It is striking that this final remodelling seems to have taken place after the Union of the Crowns which should have theoretically reduced tension and fear. Rarely does a church building afford such an insight into the mindset of its builders and remodellers, living in a troubled time and place.

Peter F Ryder October 2014

ST CUTHBERT'S CHURCH, BELLINGHAM Provisional Phased Plan

based on 1937 plan by H L Honeyman in
Northumberland County History XV (1940) p.225
revised P F Ryder 2014



²⁰ The un-dated 19th century restoration plan shows heating grates throughout the church