

BELTINGHAM
THE CHURCH OF ST CUTHBERT
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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BELTINGHAM, ST CUTHBERT

Beltingham lies on the south side of the valley of the North Tyne 16 km west of Hexham, on a bluff on the east side of the Beltingham Burn. The church (NGR NY 7897 6396) stands on the north side of the hamlet in a churchyard famous for three ancient yew trees, the ground falling steeply away on the north towards the river and the east towards the burn.



Location Map

from Ordnance Survey 1:25000 map OL43
OS map licence 100045703

Description

First, to quote the Northumberland historian Rev Joseph Hodgson¹

‘the architecture is of the perpendicular kind, and the inside, from the number and form of the windows, a beautiful cage of light’

Formerly a chapel-of-ease to Haltwhistle, this is a quite atypical church for the county, an aisleless rectangle in a style that has been described both as Perpendicular and Tudor ; it has been suggested that it may have been at one time a private chapel of the Ridley family of Willimoteswick, a fortified manor house 2 km further west.

South Elevation

The south side of the church is of six bays, and presents a symmetrical elevation, articulated by narrow stepped buttresses and with a chamfered plinth. There are doorways in the second and fifth bays, the sills of the windows above them being set at a higher level. From a distance the architectural features look uniform over the length of the wall, but close inspection shows some differentiation between the eastern and western three bays.

¹ (1840) History of Northumberland Part 2 Vol..III, 335

In the western section the wall is of squared coursed and horizontally-tooled stone, markedly more close-jointed and of better quality in the three western bays; and the buttresses are of tooled-and-margined stone; their off-sets are each a single slope. The plinth looks relatively fresh, and there are two courses of ashlar above it that can be no older than the late 19th century. The windows each have three stepped lights with trefoiled heads, and sunk spandrels, under a three-centred arch that has a double-chamfered surround, and a casement-moulded hood with turned-back ends. Their dressings are of parallel-tooled ashlar. The doorway in the second bay has a basket arch and a surround moulded with an ogee and a hollow, with each jamb being formed by a single upright tooled ashlar block; the head is in a whiter stone and looks relatively unweathered; there is a casement-moulded hood with turned-back ends.

The older eastern section of wall is in more roughly-shaped stone, with many almost square blocks (some of those in the jambs of the windows bear incised mason's marks), and the buttresses are in more weathered stone, with stepped offsets and some big blocks the full width of the buttress. The eastern doorway, now walled up, has a three-centred arch; although its moulding is very similar to that of the western door, it is considerably more heavily weathered, and cut around by sharpening grooves; its jambs are made up of separate blocks of differing lengths, which do not course in well with the adjacent masonry. In the spandrels of its arch are the incised initials 'W I A' and 'B A L' and on the head the figures 16 91 6 (?3); as with the western door there is a heavy casement-moulded hood with turned-back ends. Two courses below the sill of the window in the fourth bay (from the west) is a rough incised cross, possibly an early grave marker.

West Elevation

The west end of the church is of roughly-coursed roughly-shaped stone/rubble; at the south-west angle is a buttress, like those on the south front but set diagonally, in tooled-and-margined stone, but the north-west corner has no buttress. Its lower quoins look old, then there is a mid-section in more recent stone (19th century), then the very top is in relatively recent ashlar. The gable has a simple square-edged coping, and is topped by an attractive bellcote, with an oversailing rounded course at its base on all four sides. East and west faces have chamfered basket arches whilst the narrower north and south sides have narrower openings with a similar arches and transom at mid-height; above is a swept pyramidal spirelet, with a broken finial.

North Elevation

The north side of the church is in two parts. The western part is a quite featureless wall of similar fabric to the west end, except more heavily mortared, with some patching in recent stone towards the west end. Midway along an old buttress (rising from a large irregular block forming a footing) marks the division between the two sections; the older eastern part again has similar fabric (roughly-coursed stone/rubble) and is partly covered by the vestry of 1884. West of the vestry is a single three-light window, just like those on the south, and to the east is a short length of wall featureless except that it does have a chamfered plinth.

East Elevation

The east end of the church is of coursed stone, like the eastern bays of the south elevation; it has angle buttresses set diagonally, the south-eastern having a five-petalled flower carved in relief on its lowest section, and both having random incised grooves traditionally said to have been created when arrows were sharpened (with bows being provided by the yew trees in the churchyard). The east window is of five lights, under a three-centred arch and hoodmould like those of the other windows, but with the lights have cinquefoiled heads, and with simple panel tracery above in which the heads of the sub-lights are similarly treated. The gable above, with a blind chamfered square-headed loop, is of 19th century stone, and has a square-edged coping with a cross finial.

The Vestry

The Vestry of 1884 is built of snecked stone, with tooled ashlar dressings and a graduated stone slab roof. It has a chamfered plinth. At the north end of the east wall is a chamfered square-headed doorway; to the south of this is a re-set medieval window, with a broad chamfered surround and an odd triangular head with a raised ball in the angle of the chamfer. Below a flight of stone steps descends to the boiler room under the vestry, The north wall has a square-headed two-light window; behind the vestry and straddling its roof ridge is a projection, probably a stack, with a truncated slated top.

The Interior

The interior of the church is plastered, except for exposed dressings. The south door has a plain internal lintel, and is covered internally by a small timber porch. All the windows have three-centred rear arches, of exposed ashlar, and

the internal splays of some of those on the south are decorated with rather mysterious motifs carved in relief (see below).



Interior looking east (above) and west (below)



The Carvings

- (1) The easternmost window has a double-ended fleur-de-lys half way up its east jamb, and on the soffit of its arch an eight-spoked wheel and an animal which looks like a rabbit, although it could be a donkey.



- (2) The next window has, on its soffit, a human head, mouth open, wearing a cap of some kind and a rather anguished expression; to the east of this there is an octofoil leaf.



- (3) The third window has two raised half-balls at the apex of its rear arch.



- (4) The fourth window (in the extended section of the church) has a roundel with a central raised disc, nine radiating lines and a moulded edge.



On either side of the east window are corbels, the southern sub-circular with large toothed or indented ornament, and the northern semi-octagonal with sunk panels containing geometrical patterns. It is difficult to date these – they could be 13th century work, or late medieval pieces reviving earlier motifs.



There are two steps up to the sanctuary. The organ is set within (and partly conceals) a tall three-centred arch, which looks 19th century work except for the lower part of its east jamb which is chamfered and clearly survives from an earlier doorway.

The fittings and furnishings of the church, the fielded-panel dado to the main body and more ornate panelling to the eastern part, and the attractive panelled ceiling (with carved bosses) are all good-quality work of 1884. There is some excellent late 19th and 20th century stained glass, including an east window of 1891 by Kempe, another installed in gratitude for the survival of Maud Bowes Lyon rescued from a ditch after one of the first Rolls Royces overturned in 1904², and a more recent piece by L.C. Evetts.

Inside the vestry there is a fireplace on the west with a recent lintel, carried on pairs of older shaped corbels. A massive east-west beam now supports the stack-like feature which rises through the roof; perhaps its lower part was removed when the arch which now frames organ and vestry door was created.

² <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=36272>. There may be an error here; the window states the accident took place on 27th August, but the first Rolls Royce car was only unveiled in Paris in December of that year. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rolls-Royce_Limited#:~:text=Henry%20Royce%20started%20an%20electrical,4%20May%20of%20that%20year.

The Medieval Grave Slabs

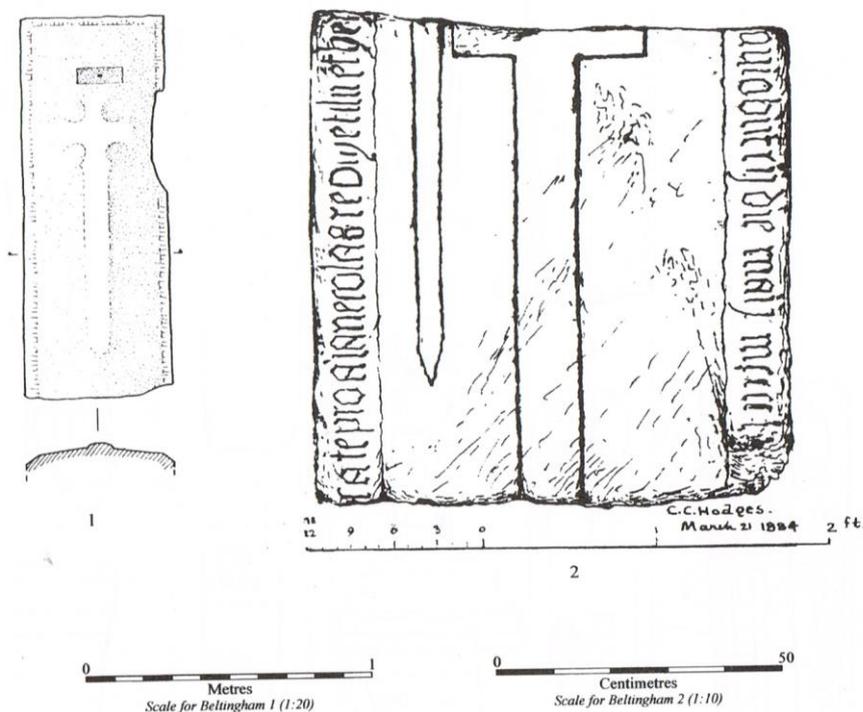
Two slabs have been described³. One, now set in the internal recess of the eastern of the two doorways in the south wall, is a slightly-coped slab carved in relief (and now very worn) which bears a cross with a broad shaft and circular armpits, with a sunk panel (perhaps for a brass inscription and probably secondary)) above its head. It could be of pre-Conquest, or perhaps late 11th century, date.

A second slab, now lost, is described by Hodgson⁴:

‘near the vestry door an ancient marble, on the floor, and in black letter, implores the prayers of he faithful for the soul of ‘Necolas Rediye, son and heir of who died May 12, 14.....’

Gibson⁵ gives an 1884 drawing of the slab, by C.C.Hodges – the same drawing occurs in a collection of Hodge’s drawings in the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries’ collection with an appended note ‘now lost’. Is it concealed beneath the present floor? (drawings below from Ryder 2000)

Beltingham (St. Cuthbert)



³ Ryder, P.F. (2000). Cross Slab Grave Covers in South West Northumberland. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th ser XXXVIII, 53, 81

⁴ Op.cit

⁵ Op.cit

Structural History.

Beltingham Church is a somewhat enigmatic building; whilst its overall development – a late medieval chapel with a post-medieval western extension – the actual details of its chronology remain elusive.

There has probably been a church here long before the present one. The dedication traditionally marks it out as one of the site that St Cuthbert's body rested when it was being carried by the Holy Island community when they fled the Vikings, in the last quarter of the 9th century. The grounds on which the church guidebook describes a 'Saxon' cross shaft which stands just outside the east end of the church as 'dated c AD 680' are unclear⁶; it does not figure in the Cambridge University Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture, and is a completely plain shaft devoid of any carved detail. It is not really safe to say anything other than that it is probably medieval. A plan of the church, now framed and hung on the south wall, produced by 'archaeological dowsing' in 2006 shows a smaller Saxon wooden building underlying the present church. Gibson⁷ suggests that 'the rudely-fashioned window discovered in the north wall of the chancel' (by which he presumably means that now re-set in the east wall of the vestry) 'closely resembles Pre-Conquest work' but this, although of somewhat eccentric form, seems likely to be contemporary with the older part of the church.

A cross slab grave cover now set in the inner opening of the south-eastern doorway could be of Anglo-Saxon or 11th century date (see p.7), and a worn capital lying outside the east end may be earlier medieval work as well. Otherwise the only thing that can be said about the oldest part of the present building is that it is Pre-Reformation, on the grounds that the skewed 'squint' in the north wall, contrived to give a view of the altar from a chamber on the site of the present vestry, is highly unlikely in a Post-Reformation building. The architectural features of this part of the building – basically its windows and buttresses – would tally with an early 16th century date. What was probably a simple three-bay chapel probably had its entrance in the west gable, and a vestry/sacristy (and perhaps priest's chamber) on the north. The church website describes the building as of late 15th century date, but with some earlier parts (which it does not specify) dating to c1260.

⁶ <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=36272>

⁷ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle* 4th ser. II (1925), 79-81

The relief-carved motifs on the rear arches of the south windows (and the south-eastern corner buttress) are another enigma; they may be of some significance, other than merely decoration, but any interpretations would be pure speculation.

It is what follows that is the real puzzle. Here we have some dates⁸;

1650 the chapel is described as ‘almost quite ruinate’.

1663 a Major John Ridley of Hardriding and Willimoteswick rebuilds the building.

1691 The date on the head of the south-eastern doorway.

1722 Sir Edward Blacklett restores the church

1812 Restoration works are recorded, organised by the Rev. W.Hollingsworth, then vicar of Haltwhistle.

1884 A further restoration, which more or less left the building as it is today.

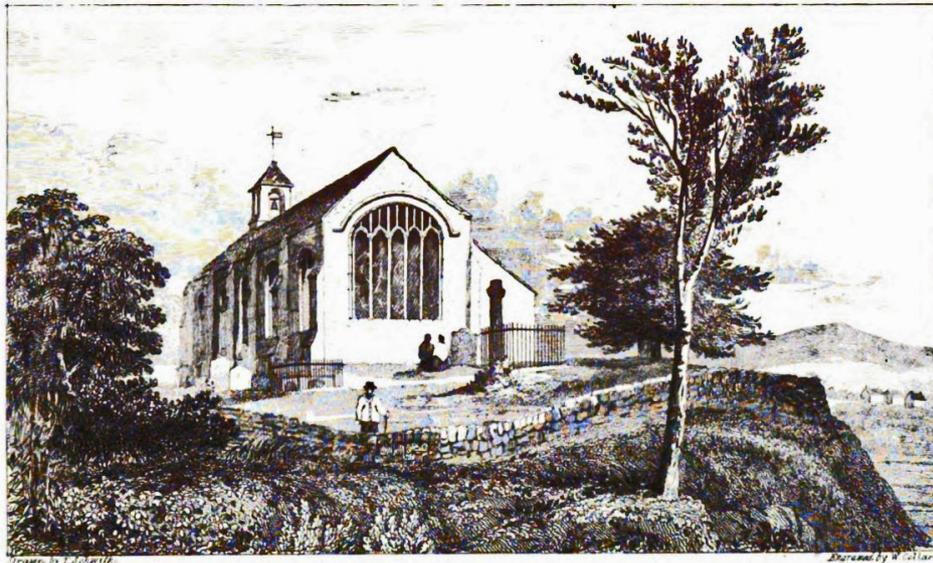
The problem is in correlating the visible evidence in the fabric with these dates. There is nothing that is clearly of 1663; the south-eastern doorway, which appears to be dated ‘1691’, looks like an insertion, and its stonework is disfigured by knife sharpening grooves, and is quite weathered.

In contrast the stonework of the western half of the church looks relatively fresh; its openings have tooled dressings, and its buttresses a tooled-and-margined finish that one would not expect before the 18th century. So is this all work of 1722 or 1812?. It can hardly be as late as 1884; an early 19th century print in Hodgson’s History of Northumberland, admittedly from a distance, shows the building looking very much as it does today. The vestry is clearly of 1884 (replacing a pent-roofed structure shown on Hodgson’s print) and is quite different in character to the western section of the main building.

Further research is needed into the 18th and 19th century works at the church; until then the date of the western part of the building must remain uncertain. It is not clear what Major Ridley’s 1663 rebuilding entailed; the fabric seen today suggests a major remodelling took place more recently; the bellcote could well be of 1722, but the tooled-and-margined fabric of other parts looks more like 1812. What is remarkable, for either of those dates, is the careful copying of

⁸ Gibson, op.cit

not only the windows and buttresses of the c1500 eastern part of the church but also the 1691 doorway.



*Print after
Hodgson
(1840)*

Archaeological Assessment

This appears to be a church with early origins; there are several Roman stones (eg an altar that stands outside the west end) although that is hardly surprising so close to the Wall. The dedication, and the more dubious ascriptions of an early date to the churchyard cross, and a dowsed plan, suggest an Anglo-Saxon foundation.

Whether or not there was a Saxon wooden church, the deposits beneath the church floor are obviously of prime archaeological significance, although they will of course have been disturbed both by generations of burial and an underfloor heating system. The present floors (partly under carpets) seem relatively modern. Any disturbance of floor levels will necessitate at least an archaeological watching brief. Hodgson records a 15th century medieval cross slab of 'marble' in the floor near the vestry door, which C.C.Hodges drew in 1884. Some accounts suggest that this was destroyed in the restoration of that year, although Gibson in 1925 seems to imply it still existed.

The internal walls of the building are plastered; any disturbance of wall coverings will again need archaeological vigilance. It is possible that wall paintings remain (especially in the eastern part of the church), and also possible that plaster may conceal interesting structural features.

Peter F Ryder June 2020

ST CUTHBERT BELTINGHAM

