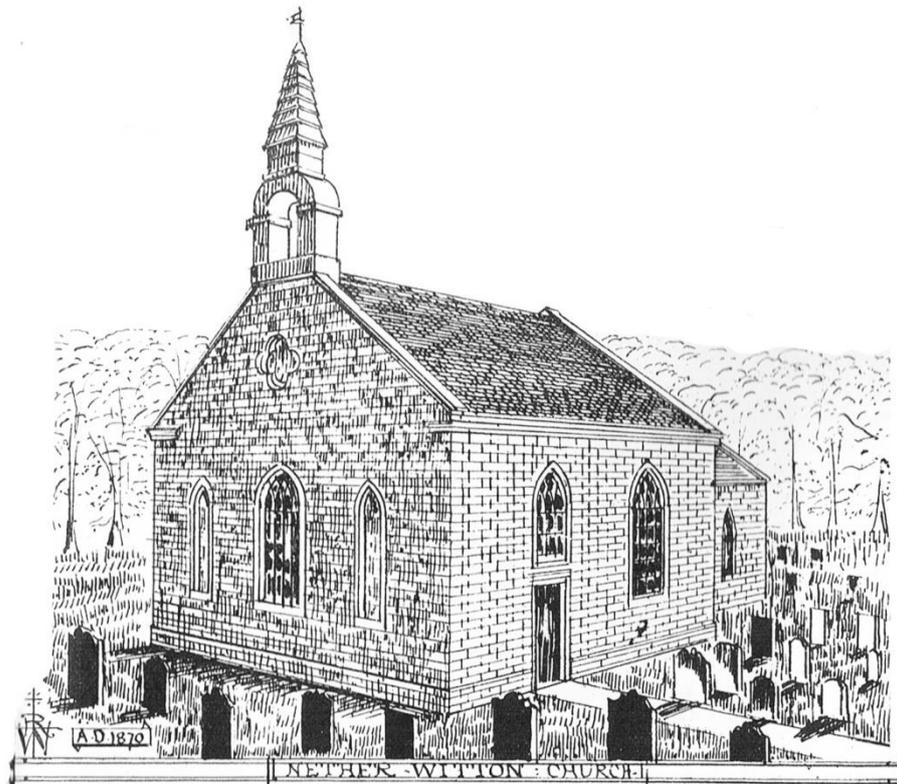


ST GILES' CHURCH

NETHERWITTON

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

AUGUST 2020



The church in 1870 (after F.R. Wilson)

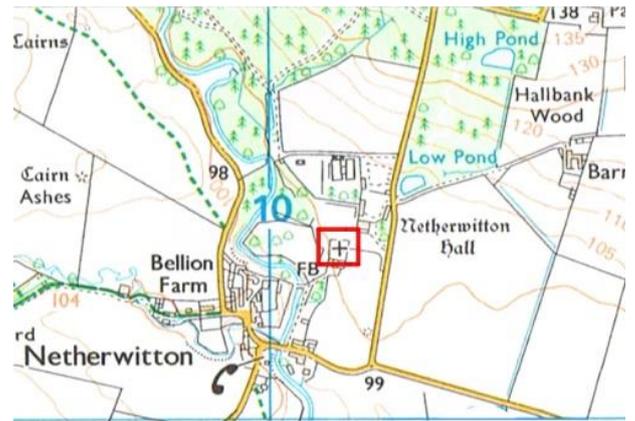
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Netherwitton, St Giles

Netherwitton lies c 13 km west of Morpeth, on the River Font. The parish church of St Giles (NGR NZ10159041) lies on the east bank of the little river, close to Netherwitton Hall and north of the site of the medieval village (which appears to have lain between the church and the Mill c 200 m to the south) and, accompanied by the former vicarage to the south, away from the present post-medieval village on the west bank.



Location Map

From Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer sheet 325
OS map licence 100044703

Description

The church consists of a three-bay aisled nave, with a south-west porch, and a chancel with a north vestry.

The nave is largely built of close-jointed lightly-tooled stone of 18th-century character, although there are two or three courses of larger and more weathered blocks at the base of the walls, above a chamfered plinth; slightly less-well-finished masonry, possibly older fabric re-cycled, is used for the whole height of the north wall. The 19th century features have smooth ashlar dressings. The roofs of the whole church are of Lakeland slate.



South-west view

The west end of the **Nave** is flanked by a pair of stepped 19th-century buttresses, and has a window of the same date with three cinquefoiled ogee-headed lights with tracery over, and a moulded hood with diagonally-set stops. Disturbed masonry below the window must relate to an earlier opening, although the courses of earlier masonry at the base of the wall seem continuous. Above the window is a square opening containing a quatrefoil light, set within

the incised outline of a larger quatrefoil.¹ The steep-pitched gable, with an ashlar coping chamfered on its underside, rises to an attractive 18th-century bellcote that has a single arch, semicircular, to both intrados and extrados, from which rusticated spirelet rises. In the second course above the plinth to the north-of-centre in the wall is a block which may be part of a medieval cross slab with traces of a splay-armed cross

The ends of the flanking aisles are of similar fabric, but have less-steeply-pitched roofs; the south aisle has a single-light window; it has a trefoiled ogee-headed light, with sunk spandrels containing raised balls, in a surround with two hollow chamfers.

At the west end of the south wall of the south aisle is a projecting gabled porch of 19th-century ashlar, which has a chamfered plinth and a low buttress at the end of each side wall; the outer arch is a four-centred arch one of two chamfered orders, dying into a single broad chamfer on the jambs, with moulded stops at its foot, under a moulded hood with turned back ends. The gable is coped, with a cusped cross finial. Above the west wall of the porch, and a little inside the line of its east wall, vertical columna of tooled-and-margined blocks in the aisle wall relate to an earlier opening shown on Wilson 1870 drawing. East of the porch is a square-headed window of three cinquefoiled ogee-headed lights with panel tracery above and a moulded hood with diagonally-set stops.

The east end of the aisle has no opening; as with the other walls, there is clearly older fabric re-used in the lowermost two or three courses, and above is a small projecting stone carved into the form of an hourglass, probably also re-used. The east gable of the nave, which rises well above the chancel roof, is clearly of more recent stone than the east end of the north aisle; it has a chamfered ashlar coping and across fleury finial

The north wall of the north aisle has two 19th century square-headed windows, each of three cinquefoil-headed lights, under moulded hoodmoulds with turned-back ends. Below the west end of the sill of the eastern of the two is a block which seems to be a re-used piece of a medieval cross slab, with an incised cross shaft and perhaps the upper step of a base.

The **Chancel** is built of coursed roughly-squared and roughly-shaped stone, quite different in character from the fabric of the nave and in a variety of colours; the side walls each have an obvious heightening in three or four courses of rather bluer stone, carrying an oversailing chamfered course in 19th century ashlar. Close to the west end of the south wall is a straight joint, extending to two-thirds of the height of the wall; it is not clear whether this represents the west jamb of an opening or (more likely) the south-east angle quoins of an earlier nave. Towards the centre of the south wall is a priest's door with a shallow triangular head and a chamfered square frame, bearing the incised date '1691' upon its lintel. On either side of it is a 19th-century square-headed window of two cinquefoiled ogee-headed lights; the western has plain panel tracery over, then eastern cusped panels. Below the eastern is a patch of

¹ Wilkson's 1870 drawing shows a quatrefoil-shaped sunk panel here

infill, which must relate to a previous window with a lower sill. Low down, midway between the priest's door and the western window, is a stone bearing what looks like a cup mark.

The east end of the chancel is the one unaltered medieval part of the church. Low down there is a benchmark at the south end, then in a course c 1 m above the ground a large incised letter 'C' a little south-of-centre, and a 'D' (followed by a smaller 'N') north-of-centre. The three-light east window has its sill set 3.2 m above the ground and has a four-centred arch, with a double-chamfered surround, enclosing three stepped trefoil-cusped lights, the central ogee-topped and the flanking ones with round arches. There is a hollow-chamfered hoodmould with turned-back ends. Above the window is a panel with a relief-carved coat of arms, and there is a smaller shields, with bearings, to either side (see p.10). The gable has a 19th century ashlar coping, and a cross finial.



Most of the north wall of the chancel is covered by the 19th-century vestry, but immediately to the east of that is a square-headed window of two round-arched lights, of uncertain date. It looks older than the various Victorian windows, but its jambs are upright blocks that look like insertions).

The pent-roofed **Vestry** has a two-light window in its east end and a single-light one close to the west end of its north wall, both with lights that have four-centred arched heads. Adjacent to its east wall is a descending stair to a boiler room, long disused, beneath it.

(above) Chancel from south-east

(below) East end of chancel



Interior

Inside the porch, the south door has a segmental-pointed arch with a continuous chamfer; rather oddly this doorway is set 0.85 m forward from the line of the external face of the aisle wall. The interior of the church is plastered and whitewashed, except for the exposed ashlar dressings of the chancel arch and arcades. The late-19th century nave arcades are each of three bays, with double-chamfered two-centred arches carried on octagonal piers with moulded bases and capitals; there are no responds, the arches simply dying in the end walls. The windows have segmental rear arches, with chamfers to their heads only.

The chancel arch is medieval; it is of segmental-pointed form and of two chamfered orders, with a hood towards the nave chamfered on its underside, the inner order being carried on semi-octagonal responds with moulded capitals and bases. The two capitals have different mouldings; the northern may be all restoration, but the southern looks old.

Within the chancel, the eastern of the two windows in the south wall has its internal sill carried down to form a sedile. On the north there is a tall opening to the organ chamber with a timber lintel on pierced Gothic brackets, with alongside it a four-centred chamfered doorway into the vestry. Set in the wall between the two openings is a medieval floor-stone cross slab (p.9).

The roof of the nave is of three-bays, with king-post trusses, carried on short wall posts supported by ashlar corbels; the king-post is halved against a collar, set high, with arch braces beneath it; the eaves have ashlaring. The chancel has a wagon roof.



Interior looking east

Structural History

Netherwitton, formerly a chapel in the parish of Hartburn, is not always recognised as a medieval building. F.R.Wilson² conclusively states ‘not a vestige of the ancient chapel is preserved in the present building’ which he described as ‘eighty or ninety years old’. It is not clear how an architect well versed in historic buildings was able to make such an error, as the chancel is clearly medieval.

The date of origin of the church is uncertain. Built into the internal face of the east wall of the vestry are two chevron-moulded voussoirs, which would indicate a stone building here in the 12th century, vestiges of which may survive; the straight joint at the west end of the south chancel wall (right) may represent later medieval masonry butting up against the original south-east quoins of the nave, which could well be quite early. If this is the correct interpretation, then the chancel is probably later, as 12th-century chancels tended to be a little narrower than their naves, and here the nave and chancel walls are now in line.

The quite elongate proportions of the present chancel indicate a 13th-century or later date. The two surviving medieval features, the chancel arch and the east window are generally of 15th century character. Roger de Thornton (d.1430), who rose to be a wealthy merchant and Mayor of Newcastle, in his will gave 6 marks to the chapel of ‘Witton-by-the-Water’ and the chantry in which was an altar dedicated to St Nicholas. A charter of Edward VI (second quarter of 16th century) endows Morpeth School with the revenues from the recently-dissolved chantry of St Giles in the same chapel³. Quite an amount of the south wall of the chancel has probably been rebuilt, perhaps in 1691, the date on the head of the priest’s door.

The nave seems to have been completely rebuilt at some time in the last two decades of the 18th century in a simple Gothick style seen again locally at Longhorsely (1783) and Hebron; it was square in plan, a ‘preaching box’ indeed, with simple pointed arches to its sash



² 1870, *Churches of the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne*, 162

³ Hodgson, J.F. (1827) *History of Northumberland Part 2 Vol.1* 320. A study of the heraldry on the east wall, which would seem to be contemporaneous with the window, might be useful.

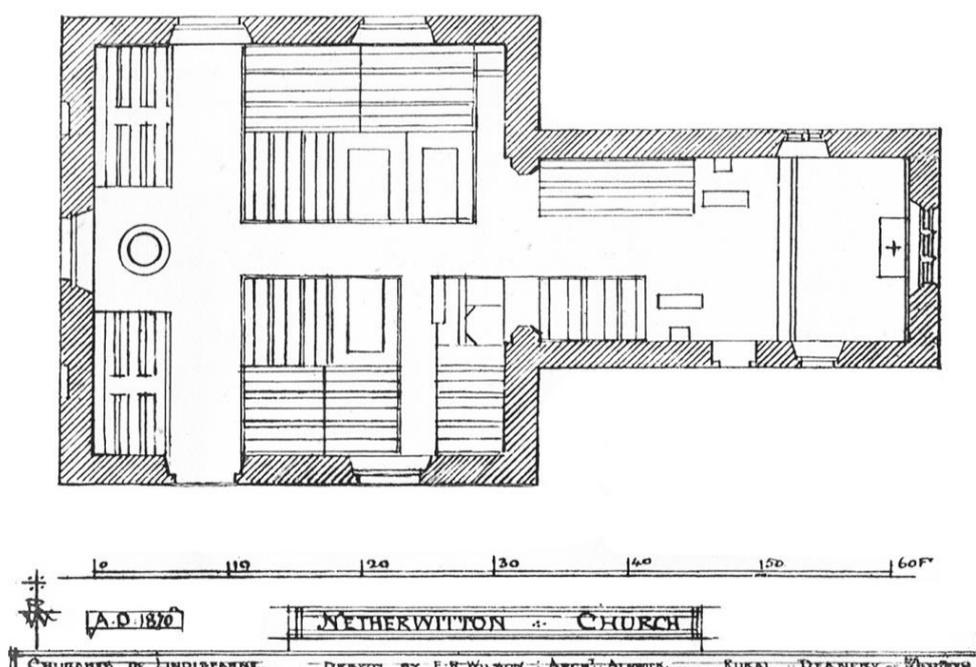
windows, and a quatrefoil high in the west gable. Its best feature, the rather fine bellcote, was thankfully left by the Victorian restorers. Wilson (op.cit) provides a useful plan and drawing.

It is possible that the medieval nave had received aisles, and that the 18th century walls were rebuilt on their earlier footprint, but the almost exactly square plan seems more likely to result from a new build.

The two-light window on the north of the chancel may be an early 19th-century insertion; it is later in character than the 18th century works (and is shown on Wilson's 1870 plan) but earlier than the main remodelling.

The list description of the church dates the inserted nave arcades to 1864 and a general remodelling of the building to 1886. It seems likely that the first date is an error⁴ and that the second is more likely for what was a comprehensive remodelling of the church, intended to return it to a medieval appearance. It is not clear whether the inserted three-bay arcades reinstate an original arrangement. New buttresses were built onto the west end in line with the inserted arcades, and all the Georgian sashes were replaced with windows in a free 14th/15th century style. The south porch was added – and this has an oddity in plan, since its inner doorway is set well forward of the line of the external face of the aisle wall, in effect producing a panel of wall 1.5 m thick.

1870 plan (F.R. Wilson)



⁴ Since Wilson in 1870 shows the church without them; the 19th century works look all part of a single scheme.

Archaeological Assessment

St Giles' is in origin a medieval church, and so any works involving its structure or underfloor deposits will demand some degree of archaeological vigilance. Any works entailing disturbance of the floors will require at least monitoring, as evidence of earlier phases of the building will almost certainly survive, although, as often it may have been disturbed both by the usual many generations of burial and the construction of a Victorian underfloor heating system, which is evidenced by the disused boiler room under the vestry and various heating grates (now concealed by carpets). When it comes to the standing fabric, the chancel walls, being extant medieval fabric, are of especial interest. The present plaster may conceal earlier layers, and possibly some with medieval or early post-medieval mural decoration. Beneath that, the fabric itself may well contain features of interest such as remains of medieval ritual features such as piscinae or aumbries, so any works affecting wall surfaces should be monitored, and earlier features exposed should be recorded.

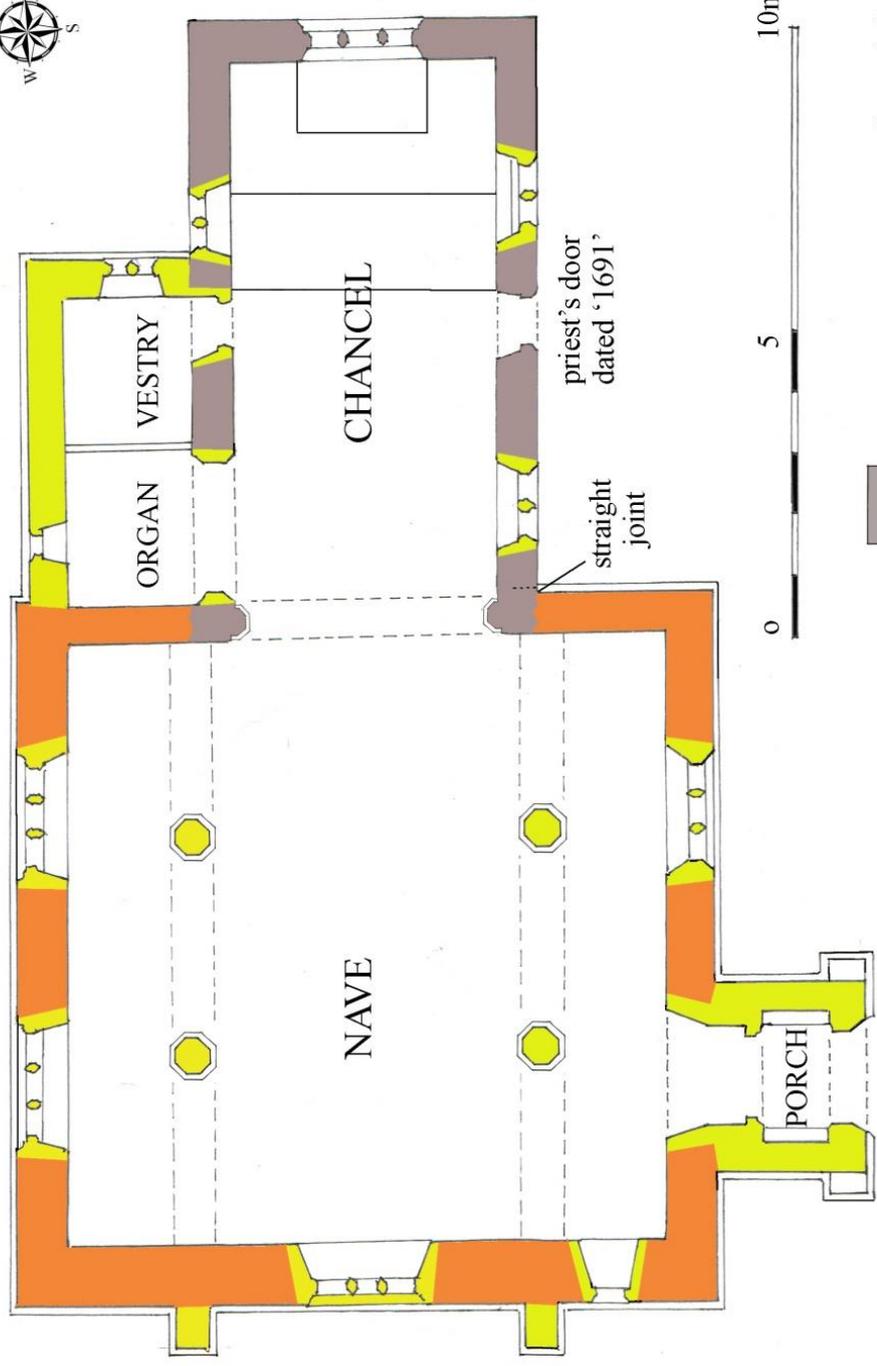
The internal faces of the walls of nave and aisles, being of 18th and 19th century dates, have less potential to retain significant historic features, although mural decoration, such as stencilled texts, may survive, and be worthy of some degree of recording.

Peter F Ryder August 2020

Re-set stones over the east window of the vestry:

cross slab head in centre, chevron voussoirs to sides



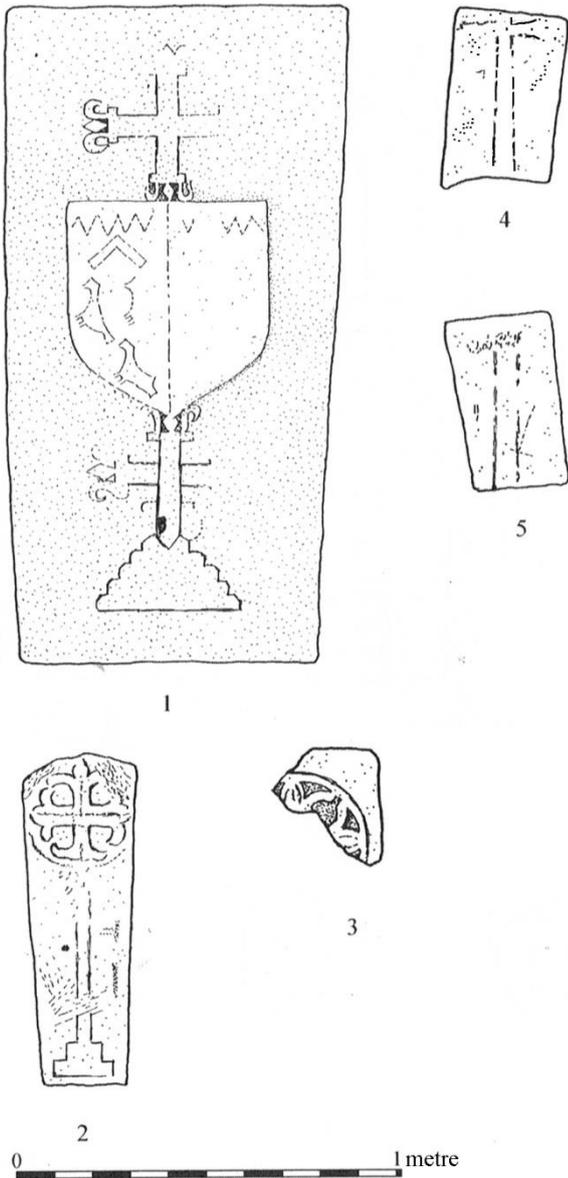


- Medieval/early post-medieval (?several phases.)
- Late 18th century
- Late 19th century

ST GILES' CHURCH NETHERWITTON
Provisional Phased Plan

Survey P F Ryder 2020

Netherwitton (St. Giles)



(above) Cross slab grave covers

(Ryder 2002) Cross Slab Grave Covers in Newcastle and South East Northumberland. Archaeologica Aeliana 5th ser XXX, 113

(Right) Female effigy in chancel



Medieval Heraldry on east end; centre shield above, south (left) and north shields below

