

HALTON CHAPEL

(THE CHURCH OF ST OSWALD, ST CUTHBERT AND KING ALFWALD)

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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The Chapel from the south

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HALTON CHAPEL

The Church of St Oswald, St Cuthbert and King Alfwald, a former chapel in the Parish of Corbridge (NGR NY 9976 6783) lies immediately to the east of Halton Castle, 3.6 km north-north-west of Corbridge. The site, high on the north side of Tynedale, commands extensive views to the south.

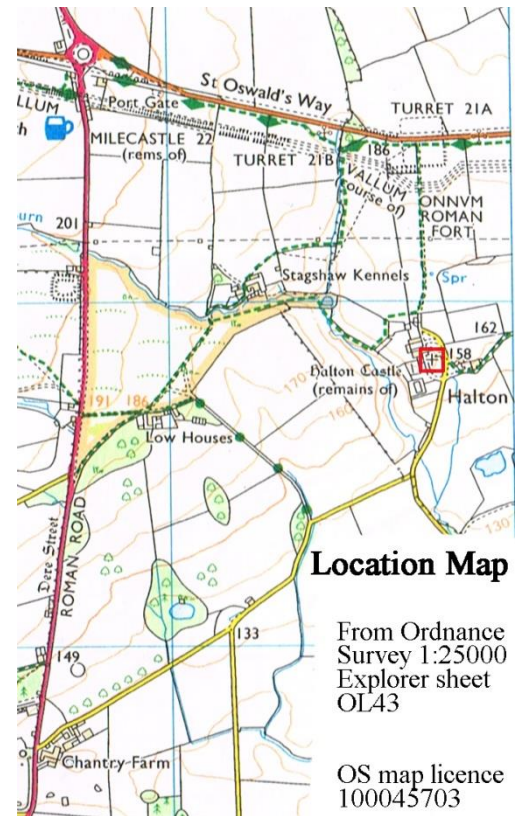
Description

The church is a simple two-cell building consisting of a rectangular nave and square chancel, with a small projection at the west end of the nave, formerly housing a gallery stair. It is largely constructed of neatly-coursed quite small almost square stones, obviously re-used Roman fabric, with substantial roughly-shaped alternating quoins, and cut sandstone dressings. The roof is of Welsh slate.

Exterior

The south side of the **Nave** has a doorway near the west end with a segmental head, and a surround moulded with a roll and a hollow; its head is in tooled-and-margined ashlar, and looks more recent. Further east are two quite large windows, each of two lights, with elliptical-arched heads and small sunk spandrel panels, the lights having chamfered surrounds, within a square-headed frame formed by a small square rebate. Above the doorway is quite a sizeable blocked opening, almost certainly a gallery window, which does not retain any dressings, and the wall is topped by an oversailing chamfered course carrying an embattled parapet with a simple chamfered coping.

The west end has a pent-roofed stair projection, set a little south of centre, its roof coming up to an oversailing course (a continuation of that on the side walls). Near its south end is a small round-headed window in a square frame, its head cut into a single block, and a single upright forming each jamb. Further north and rather higher in the wall are the remains of a small, apparently square window. The sill seems to remain in situ, and the blocking includes two sections of rebated jamb. Above the oversailing course is a plain parapet, with a central gablet that seems to have been raised around an earlier bellcote which has a round-headed chamfered arch (now partly infilled – there is no longer any bell) and a gabled top, with a coping chamfered on its underside.



Location Map

From Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer sheet OL43

OS map licence 100045703



The only feature in the north wall of the nave (left) is a blocked square-headed doorway towards the west end, with its surrounding chamfer stopped on the lowest block of each jamb, and a threshold that is now c 0.40 m above the present external ground level, which has been lowered to facilitate drainage. At the base of each of the northern angles of the nave is a very large well-squared block (Roman?) projecting slightly from the wall; the north-western has a second very large quoin directly above it, but otherwise the quoins are similar to those at the other angles, substantial and alternating but not of any diagnostic character. Over most of the length of the wall a single course of slightly-projecting footings is exposed; to the west the door this becomes a pair of courses, the lower projecting more boldly. The parapet is as on the south of the nave.

The south wall of the **Chancel** shows fabric virtually identical to that of the nave, and a two-light window of similar form as well; at its west end are indistinct traces of a blocked opening, either a priest's door or possibly a low-side window. The parapet is identical to that of the nave. The north wall is featureless (and again of regularly-coursed Roman stone); a few of the blocks of the north-east quoin have incised 'V's upon them. The only difference here is that a simple string course replaces the oversailing course of the nave and south chancel walls; the parapet is similar.

The east end of the chancel (right) is somewhat different to the other walls of the church, being of roughly-coursed more elongate blocks. It has a square-headed window of four elliptical-arched lights, broadly similar to those on the south except that its seems of rather earlier



character - its lights are rather narrower, the outer frame is chamfered rather than a square rebate, and there is a casement-moulded hood with turned-back ends. Directly above the window is a course of eight or nine large wedge-shaped blocks, perhaps re-used from the coping of a wall, and above those, towards the north end of the wall, is a blocked window, almost square, with a chamfered surround. At the foot of the parapet the chamfered oversailing course of the south wall return for a metre or so beyond the south-east angle of the chancel but then, after a short break, becomes a rougher projecting string (with another short gap near the north end). The parapet above has a central gablet, with a plain square-headed slit vent.

The Interior

The interior of the church is plastered, except for some exposed dressings; the nave has a fielded-panel dado. The south door has a segmental rear arch with a chamfer, which reduces in width on the east so as to allow the door to open. The two south windows have segmental rear arches, and exposed stone sills, that of the western being formed by two big blocks with chamfered edges. At the south end of the west wall is a segmental-headed doorway (behind plaster) with a wooden frame, into the vestry, a long and narrow room which was originally the foot of a stair to the former western gallery but now has an underdrawn plaster ceiling.

The nave roof is of eight bays, with heavy and irregular tie beams, later given the additional support of short stub ties beneath their ends, bolted into the older timbers above. There is a roll-moulded wall plate, one level of purlins supported by triangular wooden blocks resting on top of the principals, and a central short king-post, with scooped and chamfered sides, supporting the ridge.



Nave looking east

The **Chancel arch** is generally regarded as the oldest feature of the church, and is usually ascribed a 12th century although a Saxon date is sometimes suggested. It is an absolutely plain semicircular arch, of one square order (without any through stones) springing from imposts with a broad chamfer below, and absolutely plain square jambs. The imposts are each a single large slab, 220mm thick and 930 mm from east to west. Towards the nave they only return for c 0.30 m, but towards the chancel the southern returns for 800 mm

and the northern for 660 mm, roughly two-thirds of the way to the side walls. The dressings have a light diagonal chisel tooling.

In the chancel the south window again has a segmental rear arch; to the west of it the outline of a blocked doorway can be traced behind plaster. The east window (below) has a segmental rear arch; on the vertical face of the voussoirs are two monograms carved in relief, the northern a pair of the letter C, set back-to-back and overlapped, and the southern a combination of M and C. Incised on the soffit of the south end of the arch is a letter S with a vertical rod running through it, incised and infilled with some dark material. The monograms are thought to represent Cuthbert Carnaby (c1510-1586) and his wife Margery.

The chancel roof is of four bays, and very similar to that of the nave, except that the central truss is a relatively recent replacement.



Structural Development

Traditionally this is an early site, Halton being tentatively identified with the Scythlecester where King Alfwald I of Northumbria was murdered by his eolderman Sicga on 23rd September 788 (although Chesters has also been suggested). Halton is a prime site for an early hall, commanding extensive views over Tynedale, and with stone readily available from the nearby Haltonchesters Fort. The Castle does retain some fabric which could, just possibly, be Pre-Conquest. There is also a re-used medieval cross slab which may be of 12th century date.

The current guidebook to the church (Milner, L, n.d.) compares the wall fabric (and thicknesses) of the church to Escomb, with the chancel arch (which most authorities date to the 12th century) a later reconstruction. The earliest reference to a cleric here is to a curate (unlicensed) David Lawson, a Scot, mentioned in 1577. The chapel is said to have been ruinous in the 17th century, and is recorded as being rebuilt in 1706 by John Douglas, lord of the manor, and the freeholders of Great Whittington at a cost of £224.13s 10d.¹

While the superficial resemblances to Escomb must be admitted, the weight of the evidence seems to argue that Halton is really a post-medieval building. The chancel arch

¹ Historical references from Craster, H.H.E. (1914) Northumberland County History, X, 425

admittedly does look simple Romanesque work, but it could also be of 17th or even early 18th century date; its dressings have a simple diagonal tooling that does not look early, and the wall in which it is set is of exactly the same thickness – 690 mm – as the side walls of the church. Photographs taken with low angle lighting suggest that behind the plaster the wall is of rubble, unlike the coursed squared Roman stone of the external walls, but this is no surprise, given that it would have been intended that it was plastered on both faces. So what is the date of the rest of the fabric?

On the basis of the Carnaby monograms on the rear arch of the east window, the east wall would seem to be of mid-16th century date; it is both thicker than the other walls, and of markedly different fabric. Its high-level window seems to imply that it belonged to a two-storeyed structure quite different to the present chapel.

The likelihood seems to be that the reference to a 1704 rebuilding can be taken at face value, and that all but the east wall is of this date. It is difficult to prove this conclusively, so a possibility must remain that the chancel arch is of early medieval date, and that perhaps the basal quoins of the northern angles of the nave survive from an early church as well.

The 18th century building clearly had a western stair and a gallery – faint traces of which show through plaster on the west wall – which was probably removed in some unrecorded 19th century restoration, when the high level window which lit the gallery was blocked, as well as the priest's door on the south of the chancel.

West view, with projection for gallery stair (and topiary pig)

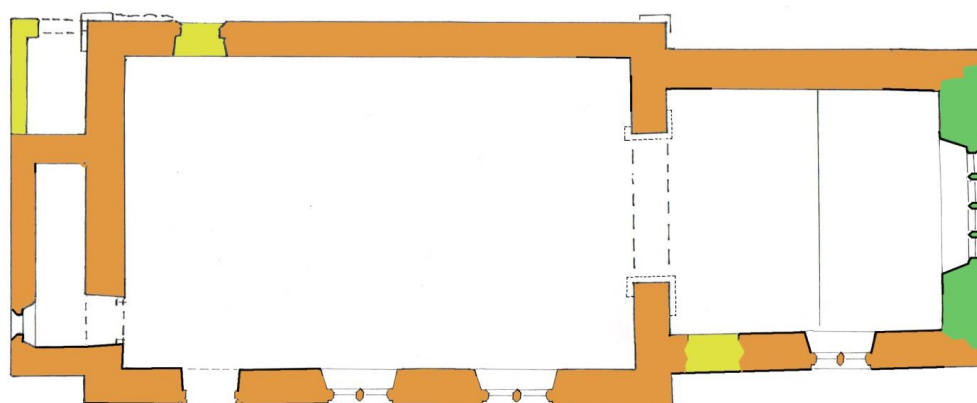


One objection to the theory that all but the east wall is of 1706 is that the parapets are of less well squared stone than the walls below, and that, with the eye of faith, an earlier gable line (putting the eaves just below the present parapet) can be seen high in the west wall. When photographs of both faces of the chancel arch wall, taken with low-angle lighting, were put through Wallis filtration² (which allows the underlying fabric to ‘show through’ the plaster) it seemed to imply that there was smoother fabric high up at both ends of the wall, which would go with such a heightening. In the church guide this heightening is recognised, and equated with the 1706 works, but it seems more likely that 1706 marks a general rebuilding and the raising of the parapet (and re-roofing?) a subsequent (later 18th century?) campaign of work.

Archaeological Assessment

This is an intriguing building, which appears to be on an early site although it seems questionable whether pre-16th century fabric survives. The floor is a fairly modern one of wood; archaeological material of interest may well survive beneath, so any disturbance should be accompanied by an archaeological watching brief. The same can be said for the above-ground walls, which are all plastered; it is conceivable that earlier plaster, perhaps with mural decoration, may survive beneath, and in any case the internal faces of the walls may reveal unsuspected structural or architectural features.

Peter F Ryder July 2020



HALTON CHAPEL

Mid-16th century
1704
19th century/recent



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Survey P F Ryder 24 6 2020

² Thanks to Chris Brooke for this high-tech approach.