

The Church of St John the Baptist Newcastle-upon-Tyne

An Archaeological Assessment
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The church from the south-west

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Newcastle St John the Baptist

The medieval parish church of St John the Baptist stands close to the centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Originally a chapel to St Nicholas Church (now the Cathedral) which stands c 400 m to the east, it is situated close to the line of Hadrian's Wall, on the north side of Westgate Road and immediately east of Grainger Street, which was created in the 1830s and removed the western part of the churchyard and vicarage.



LOCATION MAP

From Ordnance Survey 25":1 mile map 1940
Ordnance Survey map licence 1000045703

Description

St John's Parish Church consists of a west tower, a four-bay nave (with aisles extending west to engage the tower), a south porch, transepts (the northern with a two-bay western aisle) and a chancel with a south-western organ chamber and vestries on the north, linking to a 1955 century church hall.

The church is constructed of squared and coursed sandstone blocks, in places very eroded, with areas of ashlar re-facing; virtually all the dressings of the openings have been renewed. There are low-pitched metal roofs.

The **West Tower** rises in three stages, divided by string courses/set backs, chamfered above and below, with polygonal angle buttresses. The lower parts of the western buttresses have been altered and extended; the base of the south-western has a big chamfered plinth on its south-west face only, and; the west wall between the buttresses has an irregular stepped plinth/footing¹. The west window, all in renewed ashlar, has three trefoil-headed lights under simple panel tracery, within a chamfered segmental-pointed arch, and a moulded hood which is continued horizontally as a string course. On the south, just beneath the string between lower and middle stages, is a square-headed window with a surround of two hollow-chamfered orders. The second stage of the tower has a chamfered square-headed window on the west, clock faces on the side walls and a segmental-arched double-chamfered doorway on the east, onto the nave roof.

The belfry has a two-light opening in each wall, with segmental-pointed lights, now without any cusping, under simple panel tracery in a segmental-pointed arch with a broad chamfer. Underneath the southern belfry openings is a rectangular slab inscribed:

¹ Which includes part of a medieval cross slab, see appendix 2.

THIS STEEPLE
REPAIRED AND
POINTED WITH
ROMAN CEMENT
ANNO DOMINI 181(9?)²

There is a moulded string below the embattled parapet, above which the angle buttresses are carried up as crocketed pinnacles (all carrying weather vanes)

The **Nave** is completely surrounded by later additions, and only the upper parts of its side walls (the clerestory) and top of its east gable have external elevations. To both north and south the clerestory consists of four square-headed windows, each of two cinquefoil-headed lights, their heads all renewed but with older stonework in their jambs; three are set regularly but the fourth is close to the east end of the wall, to allow for the greater height of the eastern (transept) arches of the arcades beneath. Above them is a hollow-chamfered oversailing course and a parapet with an eroded moulded coping. At the west end of the northern clerestory are faint indications that the buttress which survives inside the aisle may have extended to a greater height.

A modern chimney stack now rises at the north-east corner of the nave, and there is an older crocketed pinnacle at the south-east corner. Between them the east wall, above the chancel roof, is of blocks laid almost in 'snecked' fashion, and seems to be a 19th-century rebuilding³. It has a coping of overlapping blocks and a tall cross fleury finial.

The west end of the **South Aisle** has some courses of quite small stones, little more than rubble, at mid-height. There is a window of three stepped trefoiled lights under a flattened four-centred arch, all in renewed stone. At the south-west angle of the aisle is a stepped diagonal buttress, carrying a crocketed pinnacle.

The south wall of the aisle has a chamfered plinth, and a hollow-chamfered string below the parapet which has a moulded crenelated coping. The western bay is concealed by the south porch; the bays to the east are articulated by stepped buttresses, carried up as diagonally-set crocketed pinnacles. Each has a renewed window of three stepped trefoil-headed lights under a hollow-chamfered three-centred arch.

The **South Porch** is of 19th century ashlar (decayed in parts) and has a small buttress mid-way along each side wall, with an attached triangular-plan shaft. The side walls have a moulded string below a crenellated parapet, and the south end a four-centred moulded arch with shield-shaped stops to its hoodmould, underneath a stepped gable with a cinquefoil-headed recess.

² The date is badly eroded, but would be difficult to read as '1837', the date at which Roman cement repairs are recorded (see p.12)

³ This is backed up by the fact that an early 19th century (?) painting, now in the Vestry, shows a central steeply-pitched gable, with the clerestory walls on either side clearly a later addition. The chancel arch is recorded as having been rebuilt in 1885, so presumably the wall above was renewed as well.

The west wall of the **North Aisle** is set at a skew angle, clearly having been truncated when the adjacent St John's Lane (later widened into Grainger Street) was formed in 1784⁴. There is no plinth. The three-light window here has stepped trefoiled lights under a flattened four-centred arch with a chamfered rather than hollow-chamfered; below its northern part are the remains of a blocked doorway, without cut dressings, which must be the doorway on the north of the tower referred to by Mackenzie in 1827⁵.



The north wall of the aisle (above) is of coursed squared stone, with large and clearly re-used blocks in the course above the plinth, and further up some smaller almost square stones; all this may be re-used Roman work. The wall is of three bays, and has a continuous chamfered plinth, which ends in a chamfered return a few cm short of the short wall which abuts on the north-west corner of the aisle; this return must relate to the medieval north door⁶. The only buttress is at the east end of the wall, and has the west wall of the North Transept aisle abutting against it. The irregular projecting footing now exposed below the plinth widens to form a broad base for this buttress. The windows are each of three lights, with cinquefoil-headed ogee-arched lights, and simple tracery over under a shallow segmental arch, with a chamfered frame. They are of 14th century character, although all their stonework is Victorian restoration. There is a chamfered oversailing course at the base of the parapet, which has a simple moulded coping.

The **South Transept** repeats the architectural elements of the South Aisle, with which its chamfered plinth is continuous⁷; there are stepped buttresses set diagonally at the angles, and articulating the three bays of the east elevation (the northern of which is now covered by the Organ Chamber); there are three-light windows like those of the aisle on east and west, and a

⁴ Atkinson 1949, 121

⁵ <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/newcastle-historical-account/pp342-357>

⁶ Although this is in the mid-15th century western extension of the aisle; it would seem reasonable to survive that the original 14th century aisle had a north door, although there seems no sign of it in the surviving north wall. Perhaps it was in the original west end of the aisle,.

⁷ In the southern bay on the east an irregular footing is exposed beneath the plinth.

four-light window with similar detail on the south. The southern bay of the east wall is narrower than the others, and its window, the same size as the others, only just fits in between its buttresses. At the north end of the west wall is a blocked square-headed doorway, without cut dressings. Above the south window (left) the moulded string below the parapet is interrupted by a renewed carved and painted panel with the Rhodes arms (three annulets on the chief a greyhound) and the inscription ‘Orate pro anima Roberti Rhodes’⁸. The buttresses are as usual carried up as crocketed pinnacles, and there is a broader pinnacle with panelled sides at the centre of the stepped south gable.



The **North Transept** (below, seen from the north) has an aisle on its west side, and is built of coursed squared stone. There is a continuous chamfered plinth on the north of transept and aisle (possibly renewed, as there is strong evidence that the aisle is an addition). The transept but

not the aisle has a string course, chamfered above and below, beneath its windows. There are a pair of set-back stepped buttresses at its north-east angle, a buttress between transept and aisle (which is oddly set so as to overlap the west wall of the transept by a few cm) and



⁸ The weathered original was presented to the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries, by Mr Spoor who carried out the 1861-2 restoration, see *Archaeologia Aeliana* VI (1865) 148. Protestant sensibilities meant that the first replacement omitted the phrase ‘orate pro anima’ (Fawcett (1909)58) but at some time since it has been replicated again, this time correctly.

stepped buttresses articulating the three-bay east wall. There is a parapet like that of the north aisle, with an oversailing course at its base. The north wall of the transept has a big window of four trefoil-headed lights under a depressed arch, with a hollow-chamfered frame; all its dressings are Victorian, and 30 cm to either side of it are the remains of the jambs of an earlier wider opening. On the east of the transept (where the southern bay is partly covered by the lower vestry block) are three three-light windows very like those in the north aisle.

On the north of the **Transept Aisle** is a window of three trefoil-headed lights under a depressed arch, with a chamfered frame; the walling below it includes some large squared blocks which may indicate a blocked opening, although its form is not clear. In general the masonry of this wall looks disturbed, and it may have been partly rebuilt. On the west side of the aisle a chamfered plinth at around a metre lower than that on the north wall commences about a metre from the north-west angle and runs south to abut against the footings of the buttress on which the aisle wall abuts – the implication is that the ground level here was lowered before the transept aisle was added. In the west side of the aisle is a simple square-headed mullioned window of two lights, one of the few in the church to have escaped the hand of the restorer.

The south and east walls of the **Chancel**, both rebuilt in 1848, are of coursed squared stone, and apparently closely replicate what was there before. There is a simple moulded plinth, and a moulded string below the windows. The bays are articulated by stepped buttresses (that at the south-eastern angle set diagonally), which are carried up through the parapet, which has moulded crenellations, to carry pinnacles, that at the north-eastern angle an octagonal one without crockets. Externally the south wall is of two bays, with a third western bay being concealed by the Organ Chamber; each bay has a four-light window, of the same form as those in the south aisle and transept. In addition the western bay has a priests' door with a shouldered head, and a surround of two orders, the inner with a filleted roll and the outer chamfered.

The east end has a big window of five stepped and trefoil-headed lights under a depressed four-centred arch; the gable above has a projecting coping chamfered on its underside, and a cross fleury finial. There appear to have been a pair of buttresses at the north-east corner of the chancel; the eastward-facing one has been rebuilt but the northern-facing is of older weathered masonry, with its string course weathered back flush with the face of the wall.

The north wall of the chancel retains much of its medieval fabric, but externally its lower part is covered by the vestry block. Above the vestry roof the wall is of roughly-coursed stone, with many quite square (Roman?) blocks. At its west end is a buttress which has been extended to the east to take the flue for the boiler room, and, a little west of centre, there is a stepped buttress carried up as an octagonal pinnacle. West of the buttress is a window of three trefoil-headed lights under a four-centred arch which has a casement-moulded hood with turned-back ends. East of the buttress is the medieval vestry; its pent roof has been lowered but its end walls remain upstanding. A line of small stones in the wall seems to indicate the original top of the roof, although a little below this are the remains of a projecting string. Features in the lower part of the wall are included in the description of the interior.

The Organ Chamber is an 1884 addition, set in the angle between chancel and south transept. It is of similar neatly-squared stone fabric to the rebuilt walls of the chancel and has a simple

moulded plinth and a mid-height string. Both south and east walls have windows of two trefoil-headed lights under a hollow-chamfered basket arch.

The column of medieval masonry adjacent to the northern of the buttresses of the chancel east wall abuts the east wall of the **Clergy Vestry** which is built of squared stone and has a square-headed window, in part old, of four segmental-headed chamfered lights with sunk spandrels, of 16th century character. Slightly set back to the north is a 2004 toilet block between the vestry and the 1955 church hall, which together cover most of the north side of the vestries.

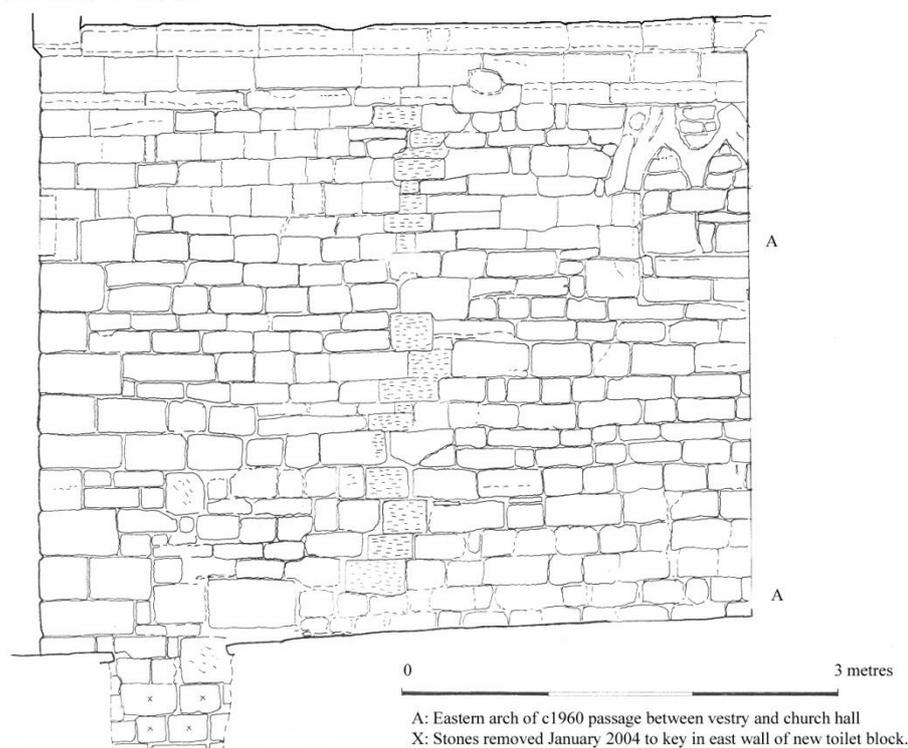
ST JOHN'S CHURCH NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE

Archaeological Recording
January 2004

Drawing 2

North Elevation of
Clergy Vestry, drawn
from rectified photographs

Peter F Ryder



The external face of the north wall of the clergy vestry (above) was recorded in 2004⁹; towards its west end (right) were remains of a 14th-century window of two ogee-headed lights and some sort of piercing in the spandrel, its monolithic head cut across by a later parapet, with a roll-moulded coping, suggesting that the original structure was lowered, perhaps in the 16th century.

A short section of west end of the north wall of the Choir Vestry (the western vestry) is exposed externally; it has a 12-pane casement window (probably originally a sash) and a flat slab coping; very close to the west end of the wall (which looks as it may have been cut back) is a short vertical straight joint. Behind it the north wall of the chancel shows an earlier roof-line, sloping down from the west end of the sill of the three-light window, indicating that there was an earlier structure, with a north-south gabled roof, set in the angle between chancel and north transept.

⁹ Rycer, P.F. (2004) *St John's Church, Newcastle. Archaeological Recording, January 2004*, unpub.

The Interior

The interior of the 19th century South Porch is whitewashed; it has a roof with arch-braced collar-beam trusses, and an inner doorway with a four-centred arch and a single broad chamfer, all plastered over.

The interior of the church is mostly plastered and whitewashed except for the external faces of all three arcade walls (north and south nave and west transept aisles) the base of tower, and the dressings of the arcades and chancel arch. Mid-20th century photographs of the church (eg Atkinson 1949) show the walls were then all of exposed stonework. The rear arches of the windows, mostly of shallow segmental form, all have chamfers to their heads only.

The **Tower** opens to the nave by a lofty two-centred arch with a continuous broad chamfer to its outer order, and an inner order, deeply recessed (and set west-of-centre in the wall) which has a narrower chamfer. At its base this inner order dies awkwardly into the walls and has the look of having been re-cut, and the inserted tower vault cuts across its apex; the jambs below are of quite rough stone, having been cut into earlier walling. In the west wall of the nave north of the tower arch is a small segmental-headed doorway, with an external rebate, giving access to the newel stair, which rises within the north-eastern tower pier and is lit by a vertical pair of chamfered loops looking north-west into the western bay of the north aisle, as well as having a tiny loop at a higher level towards the nave. High up, on either side of the tower arch the steep roof-line of the pre-clerestory nave is just discernible through the plaster.

On either side of the tower are arches into the aisles, which are of four-centred form and of two orders, the inner hollow chamfered and the outer with a straight chamfer. Both orders die into the broad chamfers of the jambs, which have splayed stops at their bases; towards the aisles they have hollow-moulded hoodmoulds with turned back ends.

The west wall of the tower has an old stone bench below the west window, which has a shallow segmental-pointed rear arch. The bases of the piers, and responds of the arches, have chamfered plinths, partly cut away. On the north of the north-eastern pier the plinth extends around a slender buttress projecting north into the aisle, and continues west around what seems to have been a westward-projecting buttress, the upper parts of which have been removed. This pair of buttresses would appear to mark the north-west corner of a 12th or 13th century (?) nave pre-dating the addition of aisles and tower. There may have been a similar pair at the south-west corner, where the southern survives, with a chamfered plinth that continues east along the south side of the western respond of the south arcade.

The inserted tower vault is of stellar or lierne form, three ribs springing from moulded corbels in each corner, and has a central boss inscribed 'Orate pro anima Roberti Rhodes'.

The newel stair risers only to the ringing chamber, directly above the vault; its treads might have been replaced, as they are broad and show little wear. Ascending the stair there are a number of features of interest. Adjacent to the fifth step is what appears to be a short straight joint in the side wall, and there is a much clearer one, which looks like the left-hand-side of an opening, adjacent to the seventh; does one or both of these relate to a door into an 18th or 19th century gallery?. The sixth roof slab from the base is part of a medieval cross slab, with an incised pair of shears and a cross shaft, and the tenth may be another part of the same stone, this time just with an incised cross shaft. The newel is continued up for c 0.60 m as part of a low protective wall to the stair-head lobby, from which a doorway, set diagonally,

opens into the north-east corner of the ringing chamber. The lintel of this doorway is another re-used grave slab, with remains of an incised sword and a probable pair of shears (see appendix 1 for cross slabs)



The upper part of the tower arch is the rear arch of a 13th century west window; above and to either side the steep slope of the contemporary roof-line is visible through the plaster.

The walls of the ringing chamber are plastered, and the single window on the south has a chamfered lintel. In the north wall a straight joint shows through the plaster but the most interesting feature is on the east, where there is a large segmental-arched recess, with at the foot of its rear wall the top of a two-centred arch (clearly that of the window now forming inner order of the main tower arch) which has a chamfer and a hoodmould of a hooded roll section.

A ladder at the north-west corner leads up to the clock chamber, lit by the small square-headed window on the west, its cracked lintels supported on a series of iron bars. On the east here there is a chamfered set-back c 0.5 m above the floor¹⁰, with, cutting down into it, the doorway out onto the nave roof, which has a crudely shouldered rear arch, and a sloping brick sill. In the wall to the south of the doorway a large roll-moulded voussoir has been re-used, and high up at the north-east corner there is a recess in each wall as if for a diagonal strut to the floor (or bell frame) above.

¹⁰ Quite unrelated to the side walls, and clearly part of the original external face of the west end of the nave prior to the construction of the mid-15th century tower.

A further ladder/stair leads through a sliding trapdoor into the belfry, where the bell openings have simple rear arches. The bellframes are all of steel, of 20th century date.

The **Nave** has four bay arcades (with the broader eastern arches, opening into the transepts). They have segmental-pointed arches, each of two chamfered orders, with hoodmoulds towards the nave. The hoodmould of the north arcade has with carved shields as stops; from west to east these show 'a letter W in chief and underneath the letters hu and the representation of a tun', 'a chevron between two pellets in chief, and a leaf in the base' and 'two fullers' clubs crossed' (Fawcett 1909, 31). The westernmost device is thought to be the rebus of a William Hutton ('Hu – tun') who is recorded locally in 1406. The octagonal piers have no capitals, and are slightly narrower than the wall above; those of the north arcade have simple octagonal bases, and those of the south have broach stops at the corners above square bases. The easternmost piers, from which additionally spring the north aisle arcade, and an arch in line with the west wall of the south transept, are more elongate north-south; the northern has clearly been extended to the north, but the southern seems all of one piece, although its quite complex base (partially concealed by the pulpit) is at a considerably higher level than the chamfer stops at the base of the southern respond of the arch spanning the aisle. The main responds of the arcades to east and west have broad chamfers. In general the arcades are very similar in detail, but the southern is c 0.30 m higher than the northern.



Above the arcades, the clerestory windows have shallow segmental rear arches. To the east the chancel arch is set well back, and the upper portions of the side walls are carried on oversailing chamfered courses at around the level of the springing of the arcade arches; higher up on the south wall a recessed panel; (behind plaster) represents the upper door of the former rood stair; sockets for the ends of the rood beam were filled in during the 1923 repairs¹¹.

Interior looking east

¹¹ Fawcett (1909, 19) comments that the circular stair to the rood loft was still visible, so perhaps this was infilled or sealed off at the same time.

In the **South Aisle** the south door has a flattened segmental rear arch; at the east end of the aisle is a broad arch into the south transept, of two chamfered orders. The outer order is a quadrant arch, between the arcade pier and west wall of the transept, but the inner is of Tudor arch form. Above the arcade a series of shaped corbels carry a plate, on which the principals and rafters of the aisle roof rest.

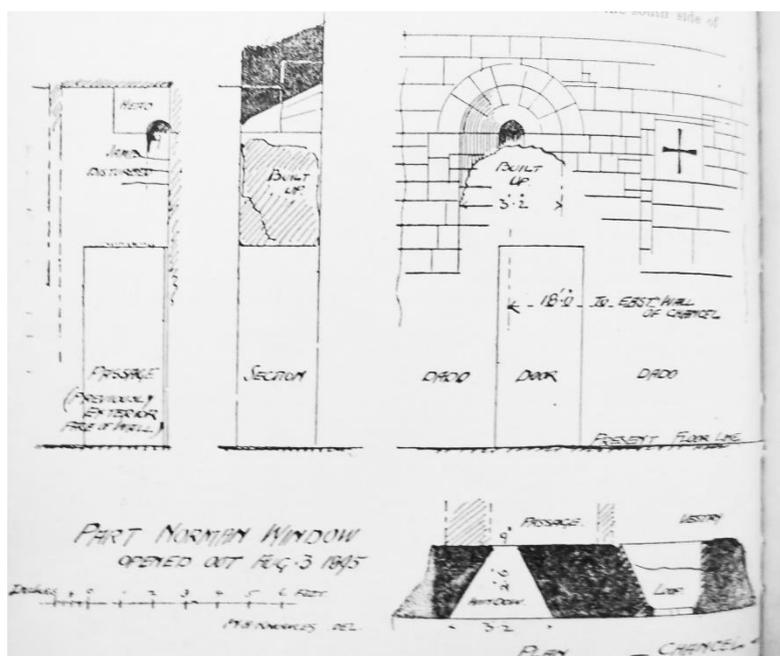
The **North Aisle** has corbels on both side walls supporting wall plates of the roof; some old and some clearly 19th century. The angle of the wall between aisle and transept has been cut back to a short face set at 45° to the axis of the church.

The **North Transept** has a two-bay arcade with segmental-pointed double-chamfered arches to its west aisle, which has an octagonal pier. This is the only pier in the church to have a moulded capital, but any base is concealed. At its north end the arcade arch simply dies into the wall, and at its south the two orders die into the single broad chamfer of a respond attached to the easternmost pier of the nave arcade. Towards the transept the arcade has a chamfered hoodmould.

The west face of the wall above the arcade (towards the aisle) has been left bare of plaster, and shows fabric with coursed quite elongate blocks. The east wall of the transept has three windows, the southernmost with its sill raised to permit the insertion in 1923 of a Tudor-arched doorway, in ashlar, to the vestries. On the west of the aisle the two-light mullioned window has a plain lintel.

In the north-east corner of the **South Transept** a diagonally-set panel of masonry is corbelled out at between the heights of c 2 m and 4 m, and may relate to the former rood stair. Close to it a brass shield bears an inscription stating that this transept, the clerestory windows and the north transept window were restored 1860 – 62. The southernmost of the three windows in the east wall has an odd internal splay; its internal southern jamb returns to a point recessed beyond the face of the south wall.

The **Chancel** arch, all of 19th century ashlar, is of segmental-pointed form and of two chamfered order, dying into a single broad chamfer on the jamb, and has a chamfered hood with turned-back ends. Within the chancel the opposed vestry door (north) and priest's door (south) both have 19th century timber surrounds. Above the former is the upper part of a 12th-century window, with a splayed round-head rear arch of ashlar blocks; a little to the east of it is a large block with a cruciform loop, said to have been a squint from an anchorite's chamber. (Illustration from PSAN, see footnote 11). Near the vestry door is a stone tablet stating that the church was repaired in 1824, with the churchwardens' names;



a corresponding tablet on the south wall relates to the 1848 rebuilding, and again has churchwardens' names. The sanctuary has a tall panelled dado; no old ritual features are visible.

On the south for the chancel a four-light window in the eastern bay, similar to the two further east, now opens into the Organ Chamber; its sill has been raised to allow the insertion of a segmental hollow-chamfered arch beneath it.

The **Roofs** of the main body of the church all look to be late medieval, although obviously patched and repaired. All are low pitched, with cambered tie beams, resting on substantial wall plates, and principals, which rest on the ties, carrying a ridge and one level of purlins. A straining beam is butted up against the faces of the ties, as at Alnwick and Lesbury. The roofs over the chancel (which seems to have survived despite the rebuilding of the south and east walls) and nave have moulded timbers, and those over the transepts and aisles chamfered ones.

Within the **Organ Chamber** the only significant feature is an early buttress at the west end of the south wall of the chancel, which has survived the rebuilding of the remainder of the wall, and has a raised band/string course with the remains of the typically 12th-century sunk star ornament, above a groove and a chamfered lower angle.

Entering the Choir Vestry through the 1923 doorway from the north transept, on the right immediately inside the door is an early buttress (a pair to the one exposed in the organ chamber), with a similar band/string course, but in this case decorated with a line of interlace. The left hand part of the buttress is more modern stone (with a small bricked-up opening), and is an extension to contain a flue rising from the boiler room beneath.

In the 20th-century passage on the north of the Choir Vestry, reached by the doorway at the east end of the vestry north wall, the external wall face of the vestry is exposed, with a blocked square-headed doorway and a covered-over sash window. On the east of the Choir Vestry (and dividing the two vestries) is a north-south passage giving access from the chancel to the 20th-century Church Hall further north. Above the door into the chancel the upper part of the 12th-century window seen on the opposite face of the wall is exposed

Structural Development

Quite a detailed and complex chronology has been constructed for the development of the church. This is put forward by W H Knowles in 1897¹² but was spelt out in greater detail by Fawcett (1909), and has seemingly been accepted by most more recent writers. This chronology runs as follows:

c1130 Original building of nave and chancel.

c1230 West Tower

c1325 Clergy Vestry (with anchorite's cell on upper floor)

c1350 Narrow north aisle.

c1370 Narrow south aisle (after gift to fabric by Nicholas Coke in 1369)

¹² Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle 2nd ser. VII, 118-121

- c1375 North transept
- c1380 Clerestory added (Atkinson) and north aisle widened.
- 1412 North transept west aisle, for chantry of St Thomas of Canterbury.
- c1450 Clerestory added (Fawcett)
- 1475 South transept, south aisle widened, tower vault inserted.
- 1710 South porch added, north gallery inserted
- 1736 Reference to a western gallery, renewed in 1785-6.
- 1818 Choir Vestry
- 1834 Hot water heating system installed
- 1836 A portion of the tower blown down and repaired.
- 1837 Repairs in Roman cement, most of pinnacles replaced
- 1848 Chancel south and east walls rebuilt, by Newcastle architect John Dobson
- 1862 Restoration costing £6000 by Edward Spoor. South transept restored, fourteen windows renewed, galleries removed, roof timbers exposed.
- 1875 Internal restoration with new floor and new pews, chancel arch rebuilt.
- 1884 Organ Chamber

Whilst the post-1700 dates are based on documentary evidence, some elements of the medieval phasing are dubious and seem based on parallels with other churches rather than structural evidence here.

The 12th Century.

The one partially-surviving window in the chancel and the decorated string courses on the buttresses at the west end of each side wall are good evidence of a Norman date, and c1130 has been suggested – this seems a little early, given that the chancel is quite elongate and seems of one build, whereas early 12th century seem to have usually been short. If indeed the present elongate chancel represents the first build, a date early in the second half of the century seems likely. Earlier medieval chancels were almost always narrower than the nave, but here nave and chancel are the same width – another possible pointer to it having been rebuilt.

It would seem likely that the nave walls are either earlier or of the same date as the chancel, although there is no hard and fast evidence of this. The features of the west end, such as they are, point to a 13th rather than a 12th century date.



Remains of 12th century string courses on the buttresses at the west ends of the chancel walls

Above, on the northern buttress, with interlace/plait-work which is more familiar as a Pre-Conquest motif, although the section of the string (with a groove and a chamfer below) is a very typical 12th-century one. Below, on the southern buttress, sunk stair ornament, a typical 12th-century form.



The 13th century.

The West Tower is said to be of c1230, but this can be strongly contested. The only evidence the date is the acutely pointed form of the tower arch, which a close inspection shows is actually an enlargement of an original window in the west end of the church, set under a taller arch in a thick wall that almost certainly carried a bell cote, not a tower.



The east side of the Ringing Chamber, with the head and hoodmould of the 13th century east window, within a rough semicircular arch of the same date, which probably carried a bellcote.

The 14th century.

Here things get complicated. Knowles' theory of narrow aisles being widened has very little to back it up. The arcades are of 14th/15th century character, and clearly pierced through 12th-century walls, so it is highly unlikely they replace earlier arcades¹³. The steep roof-line visible above the tower arch, if continued, would argue for narrow aisles, but is far more likely to simply relate to the nave itself.

The north aisle is probably of later 14th century date, as the style of its windows suggests; the broader eastern arch is an integral part of it, so a transept clearly went with the aisle.

¹³ One can insert an arcade in an existing stone wall (by building the arches into the wall, and the wall beneath them) but renewing a pre-existing arcade whilst retaining the wall above would be a difficult if not impossible task.

The 15th century

The west aisle of the transept is an addition, and could correlate with the recorded 1412 foundation of the Chantry of St Thomas of Canterbury – but a western aisle is hardly the place for a chantry, which would require an altar, and that usually needs an east wall.

Inscriptions and heraldry relating to Robert Rhodes, who gave money to the church in 1451¹⁴, provide a date that probably applies to the tower (not just its vault, as usually said), south aisle and south transept, and clerestory. The south and east walls of the chancel may have been rebuilt at the same time. The new south arcade of the nave was built to closely match the northern.

As already said, various post-medieval changes are reliably documented. The 1710 south porch had a shaped Dutch gable (shown on an old print hung in the Clergy Vestry) and was replaced in the 19th century, although the actual date has not been traced.



Early 19th century (?) painting of the church, now in the Clergy Vestry, showing the chancel before the rebuilding of its south and east walls in 1848, and the addition of the Organ Chamber in 1884

¹⁴ <https://www.stjohnthebaptistnewcastle.co.uk/visitors/history/>

Archaeological Assessment

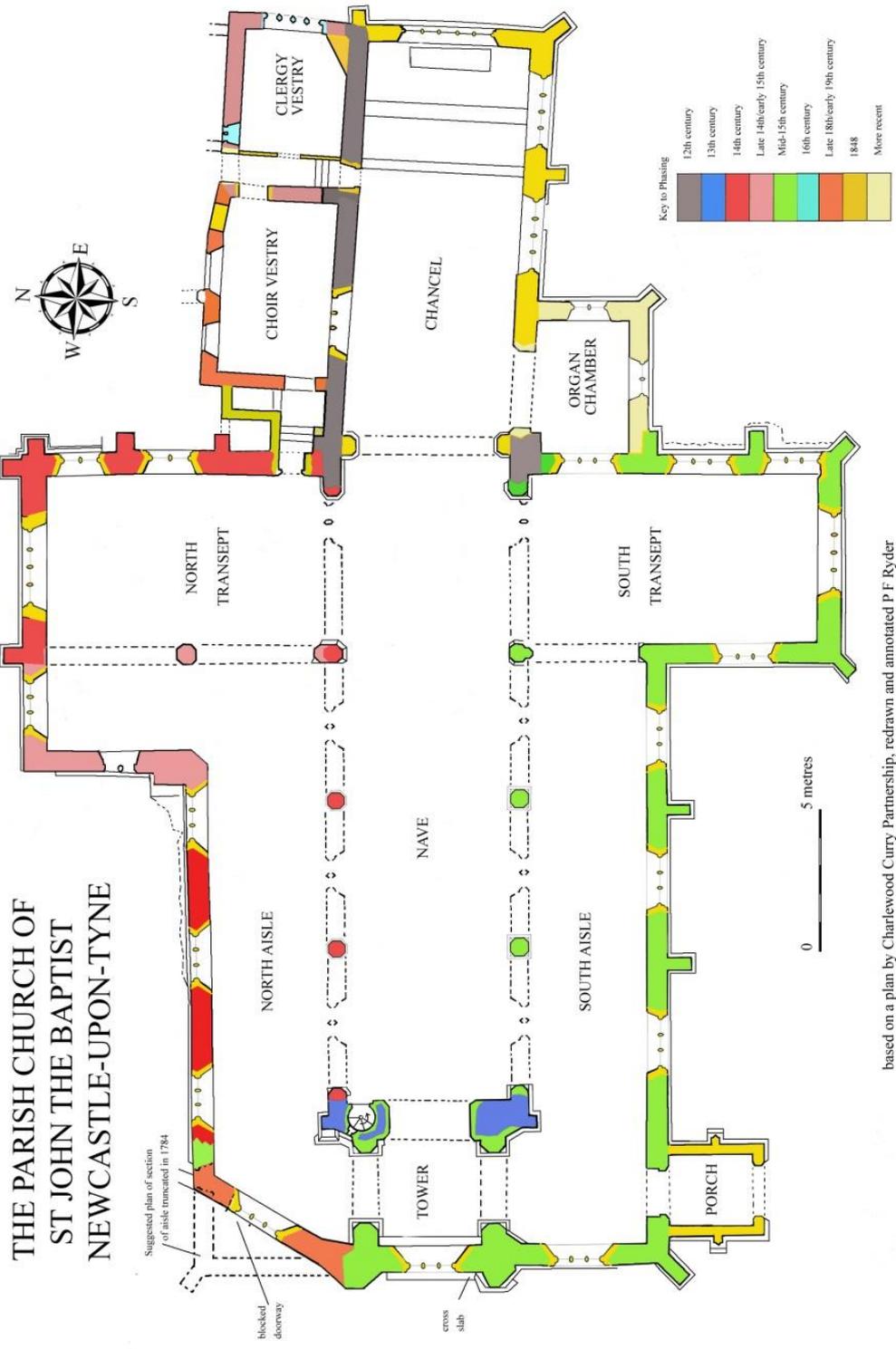
St John the Baptist is a church of considerable historical significance, and has the potential to preserve archaeological material and information of great consequence, both in the below-floor deposits and the standing structure. The building is complex, and its fabric retains a considerably number of unresolved problems, in particular relating to its medieval development. Within the church wall surfaces are now largely plastered, but photographs taken in the mid-20th century show them as exposed masonry, so it is unlikely that historic plaster or wall paintings survive; there are records of interesting features (eg potentially 12th century window jambs above the nave arcades) so if walls are stripped again it is desirable that a full archaeological record of them should be made (as was made of the north wall of the vestry in 2004, prior to its being covered by a new structure). Such a record would preferably be in the form of stone-by-stone drawings based on photogrammetry or rectified photography, but this is clearly a long-term project.

Beneath the floor, as usual it is almost impossible to assess the extent of the survival of archaeological material; inevitably a town-centre church like this will be packed with burials, many doubtless in vaults. Although relatively recent re-flooring means there is now little visual evidence of the 19th century heating system, it is clear that one existed, which will have disturbed underlying earlier deposits and structural remains to some extent. However, any works entailing disturbance of floor level will need to be accompanied by at the least an archaeological watching brief. In the event of any large scale works a preliminary archaeological assessment and investigation may well be necessary.

Peter F Ryder, January 2020

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- Fawcett, J.SW. (1909) The Church of St John the Baptist, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Descriptive and Historical. Newcastle Gazette

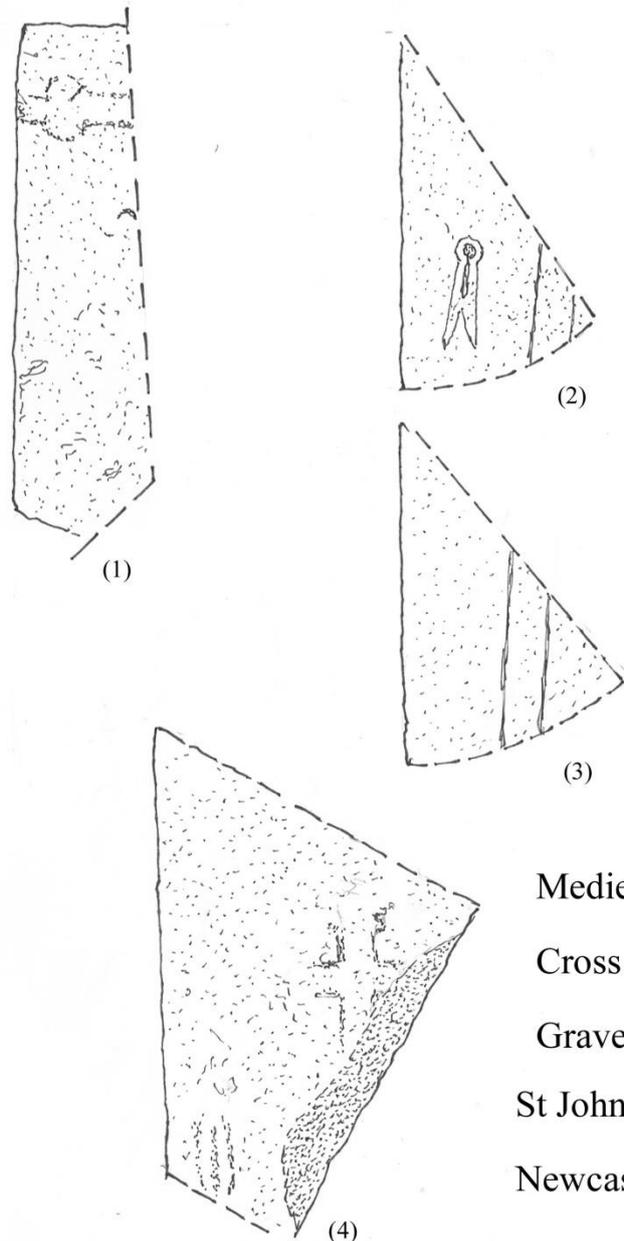


based on a plan by Charlewood Curry Partnership, redrawn and annotated P F Ryder

Appendix 1

Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers.

A number of slabs found in the church during the 19th century restorations were taken to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle museum in the Castle Keep, where they remain¹⁵. The slabs shown here do not seem to have been previously recorded.



- (1) Footing of west wall of Tower
 (2) Sixth roof slab from base of Tower Stair
 (3) Tenth roof slab from base of Tower Stair
 (4) Head of door into Ringing Chamber

Medieval
 Cross Slab
 Grave Covers
 St John the Baptist
 Newcastle

drawn P F Ryder January 2020

0 50 cm



¹⁵ Ryder, P.F. (2002) Cross Slab Grave Covers in Newcastle and South East Northumberland, *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th ser XXX 75-137