

ST AIDAN'S CHURCH,
THOCKRINGTON
NORTHUMBERLAND
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
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ST AIDAN, THOCKRINGTON

The parish church of Thockrington stands in rolling upland country c 15 km north of Hexham and 4 km east of the A 68, and is accessed by a minor road running north from the B6342, the former Hexham to Alnmouth 'Corn Road' road. The church, standing close to the summit of a whinstone knoll at an altitude of c 220 m OD, commands extensive views in all directions, and stands in a landscape rich in earthworks but with only a farm and one modern house for company today. The dedication to St Aidan is a modern one, the original being unknown.



Description

The church consists of an aisleless nave with a south-west porch and north-west vestry, and a chancel. It is built of a variety of types of coursed and roughly-coursed stone, and now has a Welsh slate roof. The gables of nave and chancel have a 19th century coping, chamfered on its underside; the nave gables have copings chamfered on their undersides and kneelers of cyma reverse section; the chancel gable has a similar coping but carried on quadrant-section; the coping of the porch gable has no kneelers. The east gables of nave and chancel, and the porch gable, all have plain cross finials.

The west end of the **Nave** (right) is quite complex. A massive six-stepped central buttress rises (with a distinct lean to the south) to support the bellcote. To its north the wall is of coursed roughly-shaped stone, but the north-west quoins are quite regular and of 18th century character (except for the lowermost, which projects to the north and is



presumably an earlier survival). High up, against the buttress, is an area of disturbed stone, possibly a blocked opening. South of the buttress is a panel of thicker walling, which extends to c 0.60 m from the south-west quoin (which like the north-west looks 18th century). This panel is presumably surviving medieval work; it has a chamfered set-back/plinth at c 1.5 m above ground level, and a squared top at c 4 m. Above it there is clear evidence of an earlier roof-line, dropping to an eaves line c 1 m below the present one. On both side of the buttress are a few projecting through stones. The buttress rises to the picturesque bellcote, which is carried on a chamfered oversailing course and has two openings with narrow chamfered and shallow segmental-arched heads, and single much smaller square-headed ones to north and south; it has a truncated gable which merges into a pyramidal cap, with a worn finial.



The south side of the nave (above) is of close-jointed and roughly-tooled stone, of 18th century character. East of the porch, which is set close to the west end of the wall, it has two tall windows, each of two trefoiled ogee-arched lights, under a casement-moulded hood with turned-back ends, with smooth ashlar dressings, of 1873. The north wall has roughly-tooled fabric, the courses varying in height perhaps older fabric re-used) except for, in the section east of the vestry, the lower 1m or so which is of rather smaller stone, and set at a slightly skew angle, flush with the wall above towards the east end, but by the time

it disappears behind the vestry, standing c 10 cm proud¹. The only window is a small square-headed one of the usual two trefoiled ogee-headed lights, but without a hoodmould.

At the west end of the south wall of the nave is the gabled **Porch**, of tooled-and-margined ashlar, with in its south end another two-light window, with similar detail but much lower. The east return of the porch has a two-centred doorway with a continuous hollow chamfer, the string being carried up over it as a hoodmould, and its west return is featureless apart from the string course.

On the north of the nave, close to its west end, is the pent-roofed **Vestry** built of coursed roughly-tooled stone with ashlar quoins, dressings and copings. It has a two-light square-headed window in its east wall and a single-light one in the west, both with hollow-chamfered surrounds; near its east end a tall chimney stack rises on the line of the nave wall, with a band below its cap.

The **Chancel** is built of coursed roughly-squared stone, with rather shorter stones in the side walls, and some long slabs in the massive eastern buttresses. The side walls are of 12th century date; each has a single window, towards the east end, with a narrow chamfer to the jambs and monolithic round-arched head which is simply moulded with what looks to have been a roll between two grooves. Near the west end of the south wall is a blocked square-headed priest's door only 0.67 m wide, with irregular dressings of yellow and stone. At the eastern angles are massive four-stepped buttresses. The east wall has a single central lancet window, with a narrow chamfered surround, above, and just below the tops of the buttresses, is a horizontal set-back below the gable, which is of rather more regular stone and may be a 19th-century rebuild.

The Interior

The south porch has exposed ashlar walls. The south door has a plain round-headed opening with a raised ashlar surround, of 18th century character. In the main body of the building the walls are all plastered, the only exposed dressings being those of the chancel arch and a second arch at the east end.

When visited, the most recent plaster on the lower c 1.5 m of the west wall of the nave had been removed, exposing earlier darker plaster; in this section of wall, a little north-of-centre, was a small hole from which at times a strong draught blows. This is a bit of a

¹ Projecting the line of this west one more or less aligns with the projecting basal quoin at the west end of the aisle, presumably giving the line of the face of the wall before the 18th century rebuilding.

mystery; one possibility is that there is an internal shaft, perhaps for a bell rope (as at Lennel, in the Borders).

The rear arch to the south door has a narrow chamfer, and a neat square cut-out for the door to open into; opposite, the vestry has a plain square-headed doorway, chamfered round. The two south windows have narrow chamfers to their internal jambs and plain lintels, the north window has a chamfer to its lintel only.

The 19th century roof of the nave is of four bays, with king-post trusses that have chamfered tie-beams, and octagonal king posts which rise to a collar, which carries purlins, just below a boarded ceiling. Raking octagonal struts spring from the square base of the post to the principals, and there is a richly-moulded wall plate.



The chancel arch is of semicircular form (now a little distorted), of one square order, with some through stones being used; it springs from an impost band, square above and chamfered beneath, which is returned to the south wall of the nave, but not on the north. The jambs are of plain square section. Above the arch at the level of the nave eaves is a set-back, with a section making up about half its length, but set a little south-of-centre, stepped down by c 200mm . Set centrally in the all above is a plain doorway, without exposed dressings, with a slightly skewed lintel, giving access into the roof space above the chancel vault.

The chancel itself has a slightly-segmental vault (plastered over) springing from a string course, chamfered beneath, ie of the same section as the arch impost, but set c 300 mm

higher. The two windows have plain semicircular rear arches, which cut through this string, and into the haunch of the vault. At the east end of the chancel is a second arch identical to the chancel arch, with its northern impost being returned as a string for c 0.60 m along the east wall, ending a little short of the broad internal opening of the east window, which is of shouldered segmental-arched form. Cut into the northern jamb of the arch a little below the impost is a shallow and irregular socket of uncertain purpose; it is possible that there may have been a corresponding one opposite, in the south jamb, but this has been infilled with mortar.

There is no visible evidence of any medieval ritual features such as piscinae or aumbries, and the priest's door on the south is not evident internally.

Structural History

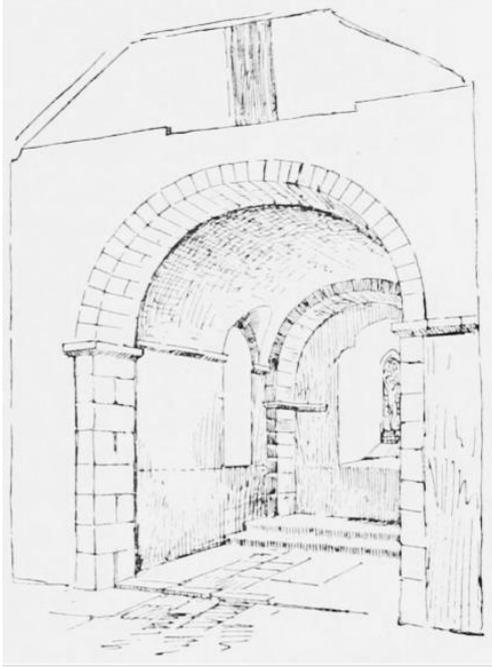
The church is said to have been founded c1100 by one of the Umfravill family, although it is no clear whether there is firm documentary evidence for this. In 1246 it was acquired from Richard de Umfravill by the Church of York, 'in compensation for his having violated the liberty and peace of the Priory of Hexham, and for having inflicted injury upon the Archbishop's land', after which Thockrington endowed a prebend in York Minster, and arrangement that continued until in 1851 (although there is still a prebend of 'Tockrington').

The best published account of the building is to be found in the Northumberland County History², and there is little in either its description or interpretation that needs to be queried. The earliest parts of the church, the chancel walls and the two arches, are generally thought to be of early 12th century date. Contemporary masonry may also survive in the lower courses of the north wall of the nave, and in the west end, although these lack any datable characteristics.

The additional arch at the east end of the present chancel is usually interpreted as evidence that this was once a three-cell building, with an additional sanctuary, probably apsidal, lost at a relatively early date. There are a number of examples of such plans in Northumberland – Old Bewick, Seaton Delaval, and formerly at Bolam, but there is one odd bit of evidence that suggest this may not have been the case, the continuation of the impost of the eastern arch for some distance on the present east wall. On the surface this suggests that the internal face of the wall at least is part of the original 12th century building, and that the eastern arch was no more than a frame to the altar. Alternatively there could have been an additional sanctuary, and the chamfered impost case from this and has been re-set – but why?. Outside the present east end the ground falls away fairly rapidly and there is no sign

² Vol IV (2899) ed. John Crawford Hodgson, 390-394

of any further structure³. The pair of huge diagonal buttresses look like an addition (they do not bond in with the masonry of the east end) and hint at a history of structural problems.



The high-level chamber above the chancel vault is interesting, being paralleled at Warkworth and Seaton Delaval, although it apparently retains no old features of any significance. It has been suggested⁴ that it might have formed a defensible retreat. The cut-out in the offset directly below its doorway is interesting, and might have been made for a wooden gallery or platform at the head of a ladder.

Turning to the west end of the church, medieval masonry appears to be present, at least on the south of the big central buttress, but apart from a chamfered set-back it has no features. The picturesque bell-cote again has no real architectural features that tally with any textbook, but is probably post-medieval, and is one of a group of Northumberland examples; it is very close in form to that at Felton. Bothal (which could be medieval) is also quite similar.

The remainder of the history of the building is post-medieval. The historian Wallis writing in 1769 mentions a recent restoration, which probably entailed the rebuilding of the side walls of the nave. The good-quality masonry of the south wall (and western quoins) looks of mid-18th century character, but the south door (now within the porch) is the only real architectural feature to survive. Then in 1864 the vestry was built, and in 1873 the porch added, and whatever windows the Georgian nave were placed by more seemly Gothic ones.

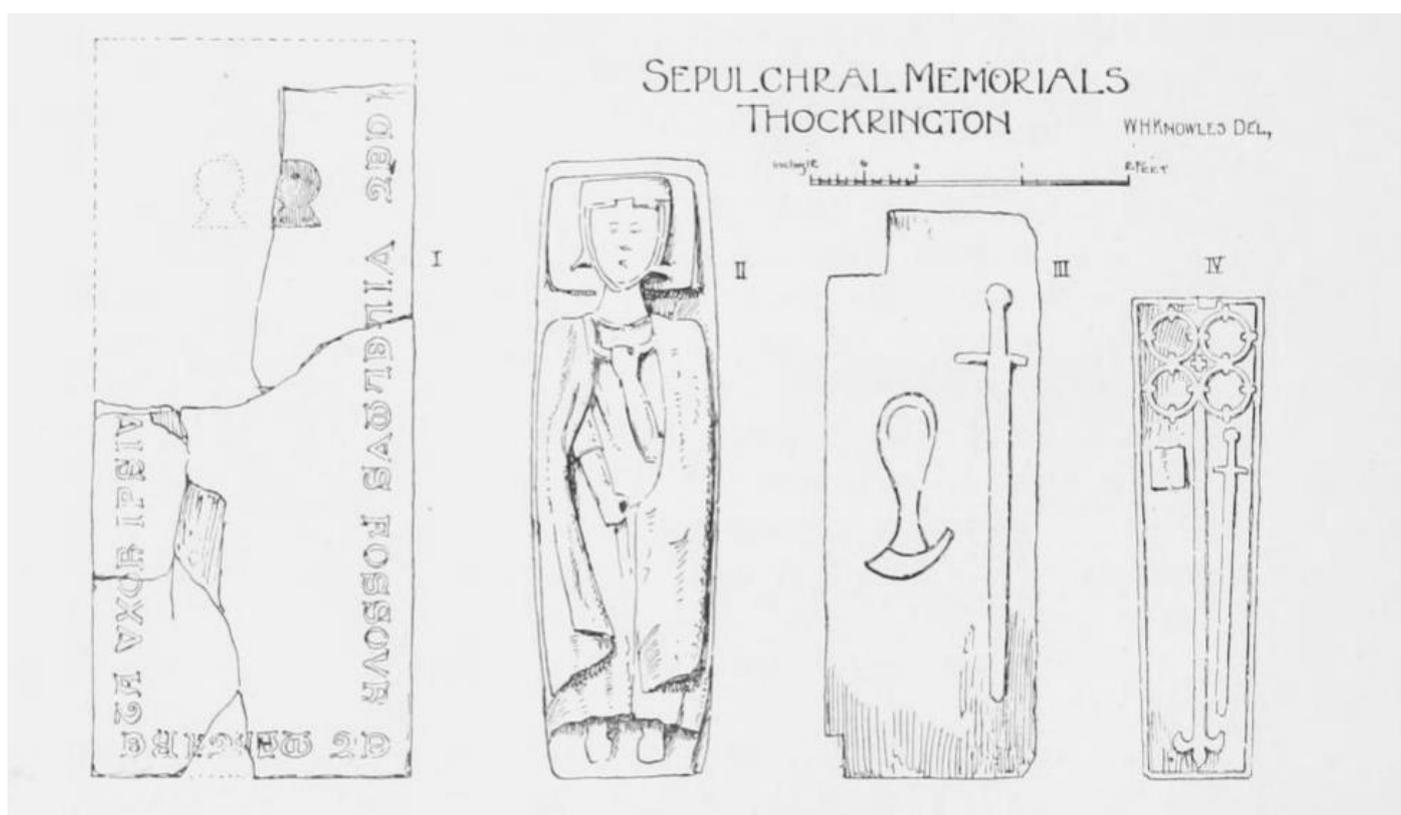
The church fell into a state of decay in the early 20th century, and was restored again in the 1950s.

The Churchyard

³ A dowsed plan of the church in Bailey, Cambridge and Briggs (1988) *Dowsing and Church Archaeology*, 168, shows a boldly-projecting apse beyond the present east end, an earlier apse midway along the chancel, and a projecting rectangular structure (tower?) at the west end. The latter especially seems most unlikely, given the way in which the ground drops away steeply to west as well as east.

⁴ Brooke, C (2000) *Safe Sanctuaries. Security and Defence in Anglo-Scottish Border Churches 1290-1600*, 133

The churchyard has some fame as the burial place of Lord Beveridge, founder of the modern welfare state and Connie Leathart, one of the first woman aviator's. A worn cross base lies in the churchyard c 10 m south of the east end of the nave; what at first appears like a shaft fragment is an eroded carved stone with the bent leg of some sort of beast on each side; it may have been a simulated gargoyle (there is only a shallow cavity in the heads end). Outside the east end lie several mossed stones including a broken grave slab with the indents for two brass portraits and a Lombardic marginal inscription (Hic iacet) *Villelmus Fossour at Mar(gar)eta uxoir ipso(s) orate pro eis*⁵



(drawing by W.H.Knowles, from the Northumberland County History. Stones II and IV now lie in the church, at the west end of the nave.

Archaeological Assessment.

This is a relatively early church, probably founded soon after the Norman Conquest, and it has the potential to preserve archaeological material and information of great consequence, both in the below-floor deposits and the standing structure. Beneath the floor, as usual it is almost impossible to assess the extent of the survival of archaeological material; there was apparently a 19th century heating system, 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

⁵ Reading from County History account.

may well be necessary.

Within the church wall surfaces are now largely plastered, and any removal of plaster will again require some degree of vigilance. It is possible that historic plasters, and remains of wall paintings, may survive, and beneath the plaster wall surfaces will carry evidence relating to the development of the building, and retain unrecorded architectural features (eg of ritual arrangement within the chancel. The wide walls of the nave are of a little less significance as they appear to have been more or less totally rebuilt c 1760, but the chancel walls, and west end (where interesting structural features may well be concealed, as hinted at by the small draughting orifice) remain sensitive areas. If plaster is removed it is desirable that a full archaeological record of the walls should be made, preferably in the form of stone-by-stone drawings based on photogrammetry or rectified photography.

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