

The Church of the Holy Trinity

Widdrington

Northumberland

An Archaeological Assessment March 2020



South-east view

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The Church of the Holy Trinity, Widdrington

Widdrington parish church (NGR NZ 25489575) stands to the south of the little village, on the east side of the modern A1068 road, c 12 km north-east of Morpeth. It is set on a low ridge around 2 km inland from the sea, and stood immediately to the west to Widdrington Castle, a major fortified house and family seat, but this was demolished in the 1770s, leaving only level pasture¹.



Location Map

Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer sheet 325
OS map licence 100045703

Description

The church is of unusual proportions, consisting of a two-bay aisled nave and a rather longer chancel, which has a south-west chapel, and a north organ chamber and north-east vestry. It is built of coursed and roughly-coursed stone, of a variety of types, and the present roofs are all of Welsh slate.



West End

Most of the openings have ashlar dressings and alternating-block jambs; the windows have chamfered jambs, and all (except for that in the east end) have their tracery and mullions set flush with the outer face of the wall, and their hoodmoulds chamfered above and below. The gables all have a 19th-century ashlar coping, chamfered on its underside, with nutmeg ornament at their ends²; the east gables of nave and chancel have ring-cross finials.

¹ A mound a little further to the east is the site of a lesser house-cum- folly which replaced the Castle, but was demolished in the 19th century bar a few wall footings.

² This may reproduce an older feature; Longstaffe (1859, 192) comments that 'the coping at the east end of the chantry (South Chapel) ends with a stone bearing the dog-tooth ornament'.

The west end of the **Nave** has some large roughly squared blocks of quite early character in its lower courses, with a very worn chamfered plinth c 0.50 m above the present ground level. Further up the wall is of roughly-coursed and roughly-tooled stone, and has a tall 19th-century window of two trefoil-headed lights with a big octofoil above, under a two-centred arch. The steep gable is capped by a bellcote with a plain two-centred arch, and an old weathered coping; this is of uncertain date, but certainly looks to pre-date the 1874 restoration. The gable is flanked by tall stepped buttresses, with sloped tops at just below the nave eaves level; these look wholly 19th century.

The west end of the **South Aisle** has similar fabric to that of the nave (although without the large blocks of the lower courses) and also has an old plinth, except for c 1.5 m at its south end where the wall has been patched in roughly-tooled stone. To the north, hard up against the buttress, is a straight joint representing the south-west corner of the original aisleless nave. Its window, clearly an insertion, is a lower version of that in the nave, but with a quatrefoiled circle in the head.

The south walls of the South Aisle and South Chapel look of a single build, and are of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone. Close to the west end is the porch, with to the east of it two 14th-century windows, each of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights, with pierced spandrels, under a square head that has a hoodmould chamfered above and below, returned vertically down each side of the head as far as the springing of the arches of the lights. A large block of the east jamb of the western of the two windows has the worn remains of what is probably a Mass Dial (right), with an infilled socket at the centre and perhaps a full rather than half circle of radial incised lines.



East of these is a stepped buttress, which seems old – it has a length of chamfered plinth on its west side - then another pair of identical windows lighting the **South Chapel**. Prior to 1874 the east wall of the Chapel was the west wall of the vestry, with a doorway and a fireplace; unsurprisingly it has much disturbed fabric, and a Victorian window of three trefoiled lights, with two shorter but similar sub-lights above, under a pointed arch.

The **South Porch** is built of coursed and quite neatly-cut blocks, with a chamfered plinth exposed on the west (the main wall does not appear to have a plinth). It has a four-centred arch with a continuous hollow chamfer

The **North Aisle** is all of 1874, and is of regularly coursed and squared roughly-tooled stone, with a chamfered plinth, stepping up in level midway along the north side of the church and then being lost beneath the ground surface. Its west wall has a window matching that at the west end of the south aisle, with alongside it, close to the buttress, evidence of a straight joint (as on the south)³ which indicates that the nave was originally aisleless., and its north wall (continuous with that of the **Organ Chamber** to the east) has four two-light windows closely modelled on those of the south aisle; there is no north door.



North view

The south wall of the **Chancel** is of similar fabric to the south aisle and chapel, but unlike them has an eroded chamfered plinth; it has another two-light window of the same form as those in the aisle and chapel, although of rather taller proportions, and at its east end a stepped buttress which is clearly an addition of the 1874 restoration, prior to which this section of wall was covered by a vestry.

The east wall has an old window of three trefoiled lights, with curvilinear tracery in the form of two trefoiled mouchettes with a quatrefoil above, under a two-centred arch; only this window has a chamfered outer order, with the tracery being set back a little from the wall face. At the north end of the wall is a northward-facing buttress, clearly an addition but of some age, with the east

³ This might indicate that the nave was originally aisleless, or simply represent the north-west corner of the church after the original north aisle was demolished.

end of the **Vestry** abutting against it, although set back slightly. This wall has a small square-headed and chamfered light on the east, and the north end has a gable capped by a large stepped stack, with set centrally below it a window of two shoulder-headed lights, which was probably transferred here in 1874 from the west part of the north wall of the chancel; most of its dressings look 19th century, but the head may be older. To the east of it is a two-centred doorway with a continuous chamfer which is clearly a re-set medieval piece; Wilson's plan shows what was almost certainly this doorway on the north of the chancel set a little to the west of the internal tomb recesses⁴.

The Interior

Inside the South Porch there is an old stone bench on either side. The south doorway of the aisle has a two-centred arch of two orders, each moulded with a filleted roll between two hollows. The inner order is continuous to the ground, but the outer has an awkward join with the jambs which have only a simple chamfer. There is a moulded hood with carved flower stops, which are now partly hidden by the side walls of the porch.



Interior looking east

⁴ Longstaff (1859, 192) mentions a medieval cross slab above the 'north door of the chancel', which is doubtless the same one as forms the internal lintel of this doorway.

In the interior of the church, the walls are all now bare stone. The three 1874 windows in the west wall, the tall one to the nave and lower ones to the aisle, all have segmental-pointed rear arches with chamfers only to their heads. The nave arcades are of two bays, although that on the south is really of three bays as it extends beyond the single pier from which the arcade arches, chancel arch (and the arch dividing south aisle from south chapel) all spring.

The north arcade is the earlier, perhaps of c1200, having a heavy circular pier and semicircular responds, with holdwater bases and swept capitals with broad square abaci, chamfered below. Wilson thought the western repond was in fact a pier, encased in the present west wall when the nave was truncated, but the manner in which its base mouldings are stopped (on the north) argues that it has always been a respond. The arches are pointed, and of two chamfered orders, with a chamfered hood towards the nave. The moulded base of the eastern respond (partly obscured by the 19th century stone pulpit) is set at a higher level, and may have been altered.



North arcade pier

The 14th century south arcade has octagonal piers and semi-octagonal responds, with moulded bases and capitals; its pointed arches not dissimilar from those opposite, except that the inner order has a much narrower soffit.

In the South Aisle the south door has a pointed rear arch of two square orders, with a little to the east the hacked-back remains of a stoup. The windows in the south wall of both aisle and chapel have broad internal splays, and recent chamfered lintels. The arch at the east end of the aisle is similar in form to the arcade, except that it is near-semicircular in form.

The South Chapel has a piscina at the east end of its south wall, with a hollow-chamfered pointed arch and a circular bowl. Longstaffe (1859, 192-3) records that there were 'tokens of a screen between it and the choir', and also that he was told there was once a second piscina beneath the western of the two windows in the south wall.

The North Aisle is all of 1874; the windows in its north wall have narrower splays than those in the south aisle. At the east end of the aisle is a semicircular

arch, a copy of the corresponding one on the south, which opens into the Organ Chamber.

The chancel arch, springing between the arcade pier on the south and a more massive block of masonry on the north, is of segmental-pointed form and two chamfered orders, with a hood, chamfered above and below, on both sides of the wall.

On the south is another arch identical to those in the nave arcade, with an 1874 copy of it on the north opening into the Organ Chamber. The eastern part of the chancel has some interesting 14th-century features. On the south the recess of



*Sedile and Piscina
on south of Sanctuary*



*Tomb Recesses on north
of Chancel*

the two-light window is continued down to form a broad sedile, undercutting the splays of the window which each have at their foot a shelf, hollow-chamfered beneath. At the east end of sedile is a pillar piscina, on a small detached circular shaft, its bowl rather damaged; immediately to the east is a

second larger piscina, with a trefoiled arch, a circular bowl (its projecting front lip damaged), a small locker in each jamb, and a shelf in the head.

On the north are a pair of tomb recesses. The lower western one has a segmental arch of two moulded orders, with a casement-moulded hood; its sill incorporates a small cross slab (see appendix, no.3). The much taller eastern one has a segmental-pointed arch moulded with a filleted roll between two hollows, with a moulded hood that has a raised shield at the apex with the Widdrington arms. Its floor is at the level of the sanctuary floor, which is raised two steps above the chancel; the lower step has the incised letters ‘WIDDRINGTON FAMILY VAULT CLOSED 1874’.

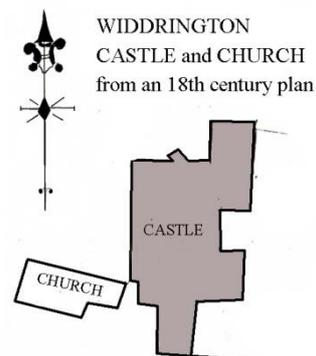
The east window has a pointed rear arch, with a chamfer only to its head; below the window sill is a string, simply moulded above and chamfered below, which steps down c 0.50 m close to its south end. There is now no sign of the ‘three corbules’ which [Hodgson (1832, 223) records as perhaps having supported the ciborium or canopy above the Pre-Reformation altar.

On the north of the chancel is the Organ Chamber; at the south end of its east wall is a two-centred doorway into the Vestry which has a plain stone fireplace, now blocked, set diagonally at its north-west corner, and a doorway at the north end of the east wall into a lobby inside the external doorway (the re-set medieval one), which has a good 13th-century cross slab as its internal lintel (appendix, no.1). Another piece of cross slab has been re-used (appendix no.2) as the sill of the small window in the east wall, which lit a steep stair descending to the south to enter the brick-lined heating chamber (now empty) beneath the vestry, which seems of 20th century date in its present form.

The roofs of the church are all of 1874. That of the nave is of two full bays, with a half bay at each end, whilst the chancel is of three bays with a half bay to the east. They have arch-braced trusses spring from shaped ashlar corbels, rising to collars which carry upper king posts; there are carved pendant panels on the braces and beneath the feet of the king posts, and ashlaring to the eaves. The roofs of the aisles each have a single raking strut, carried by a corbel above the

Some Historical Notes

The history of the church, which was originally a chapel in the parish of Woodhorn, is inextricably bound up with that of the Widdrington family of the adjacent castle which it stood so close to⁵. The following notes are largely taken from Longstaffe (1859) and Saul (2017, 272). The name 'Wdringtuna' first occurs in the mid-12th century. In 1281 John de Widdrington obtained a papal licence to have a portable altar for use 'in places suitable to the purpose) and in 1307 John, Lord of Widdrington arranged for Sir Henry Thornton, chaplain to celebrate masses at the altar of St Edmund in Widdrington Church.



In 1341 Sir Gerard de Widdrington both alienated lands to a chantry priest, to pray for his and his family's souls, and obtained a licence to crenellate his manor house and create a park, both religious and secular actions celebrating the ascendancy of his fortunes, and the Widdrington's status amongst the Northumberland gentry. He is clearly responsible for the rebuilding and extension of the church, which was to become the family burial place. The two recesses in the chancel were to be occupied by monuments to himself (he died in the late 1360s) and his brother and heir, who died ten years later.

There were several altars in the church, and their exact whereabouts is debated by Longstaffe (1859). In 1539 it is recorded that there had been two chantries of the Holy Trinity founded at Widdrington, and it is suggested these were both in the South Chapel (where previously there had been an altar dedicated to St Edmund) and where it appears there were formerly two piscinae.

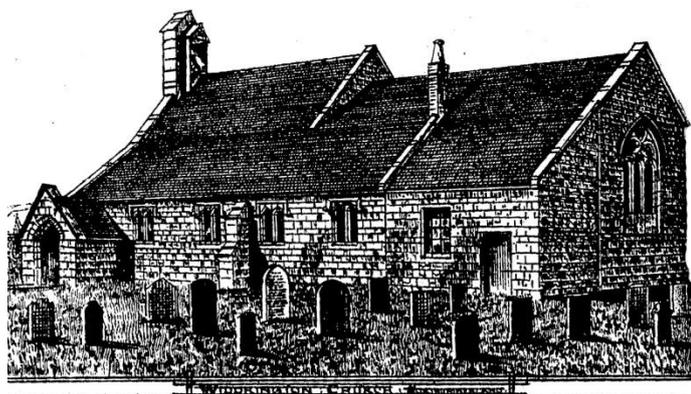
William Widdrington (the fourth Baron Widdrington took part in the 1715 rebellion, and thus his estates were sequestered and the fortunes of both Castle and Church abruptly declined. In 1723 Archdeacon Sharpe found 'an old surplice, a quarto bible, and a prayer book, old pulpit; font, and communion, table, scarce any of them fit for use, and two old pews. But the roof is tumbling down, and all the chapel in other respects is in a lamentable condition'. In 1764 matters were even worse and it was proposed that Sir George Warren, should rebuild the edifice. But instead he simply repaired the fabric in 1766, in the same year as the chapel became parish church. Sir George also demolished the

⁵ 'the churchyard had no very clear boundary from the lands of the castle' (Hutchinson 1859, 194)

Castle in the early 1770s, then building a new house which was destroyed by fire before it was completed; a further building, described as more folly than house, was then built some distance to the east.

Hodgson (1832, 222) gives an engraving of the church, seen from the south; it has a rather odd perspective, with the porch shown greatly enlarged, but it is possible to see that the vestry had not yet been added to the east end of the South Chapel.

Wilson (1870) gives a description, plan and drawing (right) of the church. He thought that the nave had been truncated at its west end. The north arcade was blocked, with within its eastern arch a window of four trefoil-headed



lights ‘composed of Decorated heads which are fragments of ancient work wrought up’. Longstaff (1859, 192) refers to ‘a pair of shears’ (part of a medieval grave slab) in the head of this window, and states that it was ‘partly made up of the south-east window of the chancel when the vestry was made’.

The church was brought very much into its present state by a major restoration in 1874; Wilson himself seems likely to have been the architect (the attractive leading of the windows is very much his trademark) but this has not yet been confirmed. The long-destroyed north aisle was re-instated, extending the full length of the building with the Organ Chamber and Vestry north of the chancel.

The Development of the Church

The structural history of the building is more straightforward than some. By c1200 there was a small church with a two-bay north aisle to its nave – whether this was an addition to an older building is not clear. Wilson thought the nave had been truncated, perhaps primarily because of the proportions of the building; there does seem to be quite early masonry in the lower part of the west end, and the western respond of the arcade is just that, not a full pier partly encased in the wall.

The unusual proportions of the church are due to the size of the chancel, as it was rebuilt c1340 by Gerard de Widdrington, as a burial place for his family.

The south aisle and south chapel are all of the same build. 14th and 15th century work is quite rare in Northumberland churches, due to the troubled medieval history of the area, except for in a handful of churches, of which this is one, that sheltered under the umbrella of an adjacent castle. The south porch looks a later medieval addition, perhaps of the 15th century, as may be the buttresses between south aisle and chapel, and at the north-east corner of the chancel.

Sir George Warren's 1776 repairs are no longer apparent, but it may be that he rebuilt the upper part of the west end, where Wilson shows what looks to have been a plain sash window. The bellcote could be of this date as well, and it is possible that he removed a ruinous north aisle; its arcade seems to have been infilled with a windowless wall (in which Longstaffe tells us a four-light window was inserted using material from the south-east window of the chancel, which was blocked by the construction of the new vestry at some time between 1832 and 1859).

The 1874 restoration, probably by Wilson, was relatively careful and conservative. The reinstated north aisle (it is not clear whether it was actually rebuilt on the old foundations – one might expect an aisle of c1200 to have been somewhat narrower) followed closely the mid-14th century style of the majority of the building, although the new windows in the west end are more in a late 13th century Geometrical style favoured by Wilson elsewhere. The east window of the South Chapel, also of this date, is a less-successful attempt at a Neo-Perpendicular style. A new vestry was built on the north of the chancel, its plan a mirror image of that which it replaced; was the narrow eastern compartment of its predecessor a boiler-room stair as it is now?

Archaeological Assessment

This is a church of considerable historical significance, partly through its links to the powerful Widdrington family. Most of the building is the product of a remodelling that can be dated to around 1340 by documentary evidence, but the

actual origins of the building remain a mystery, and whether it is a Pre- or Post-Conquest foundation. It has the potential to preserve archaeological material and information of great consequence, primarily in its below-floor deposits, although these may have been damaged by 19th-century underfloor heating system; the boiler room (now empty) under the vestry (and a possible predecessor under the earlier south-eastern vestry) may have been associated with a system of underfloor hot-air flues. A remodelling of the heating system probably took place in the earlier 20th century, when the present boiler room received its brick lining.

There will of course be a considerable number of burials under the floor, and we know that there is a Widdrington vault under the sanctuary. In 1826 Dr Singleton entered this ‘saw the dust of a male and female, and a child, in decayed coffins, and was told they were Lord and Lady Widdrington (Longstaffe 185, 192); the inscription on the sanctuary step suggests the vault as not been entered since the 1874 restoration. His vault is perhaps post-medieval, but if ever re-opened would certainly be of archaeological interest, cf the Delaval Family Vault in the Church of Our Lady at Seaton Delaval.

However, any works entailing disturbance of floor level anywhere in the church 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.

It is perhaps fitting to F.R.Wilson (1870 ,166) a last word, describing the church (admittedly prior to its restoration’) as he saw it:

‘Though it has been much abused by monstrous churchwardenisms, there are few edifices, that, with these exceptions, so completely serve to delineate the knightly, devotional, characters of its founders, as this interesting fourteenth-century church’.

Peter F Ryder March 2020

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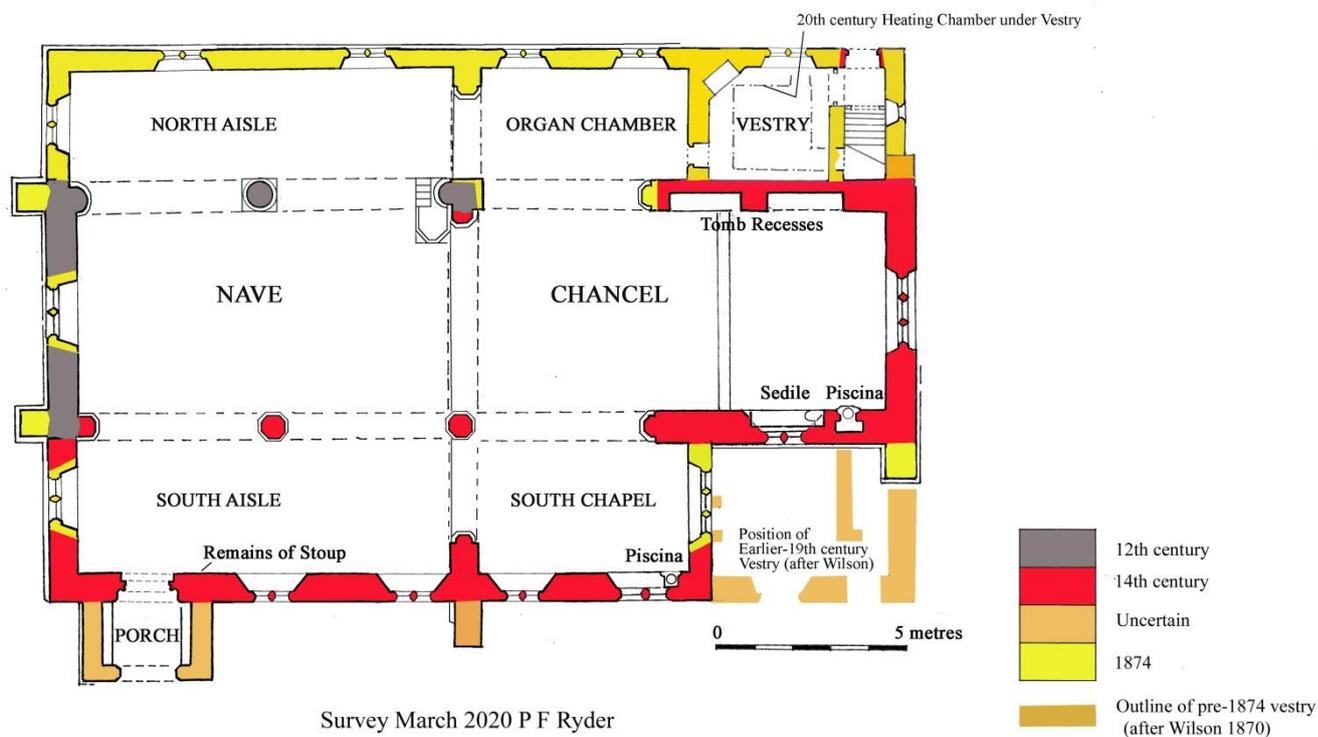
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HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, WIDDRINGTON



Appendix 1. Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers

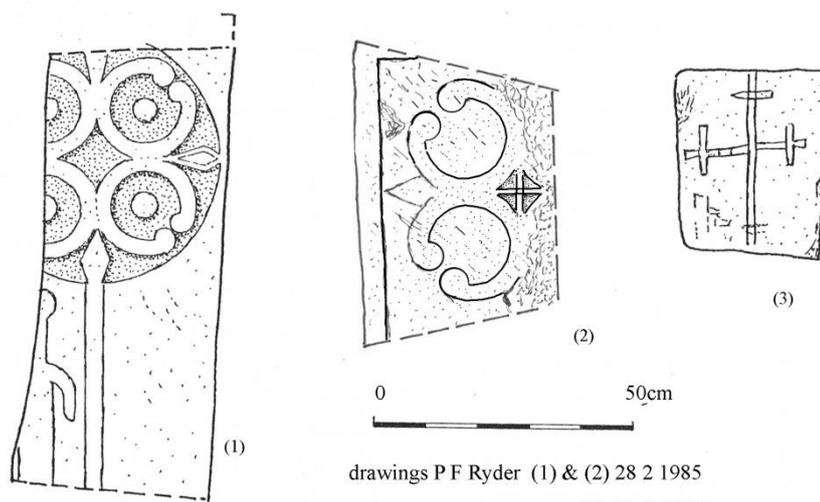
(Slabs 1 and 3 have been described and illustrated by Ryder (2002, 101, 135)

Longstaffe (1859, 192) describes four ‘Early English tomb slabs’ built into the north wall. ‘Above the north door of the chancel is one with a cross and sword: another forms the sill of a window, and in the head of *four* trefoiled lights- in the blocked arches is a pair of shears’ and also (op.cit.193), after describing the western of the two tomb recesses in the chancel, ‘in the flagging below it a very rude incised slab, bearing what is heraldically termed a cross-crosslet is inserted’.

- (1) The internal lintel of the north door of the vestry is a sandstone slab of c1200 with a round-lead bracelet cross, its head carved in relief within a circular panel but otherwise incised. There is a small raised disc at the centre of each bracelet, and on the l. of the shaft part of a sword with down-curved quillons and a round pommel. This is clearly the first slab Longstaffe mentions, and was moved when the door was re-sited in 1874.
- (2) Forming the sill of the small window lighting the boiler-room stair, part of the head of another round-leaf bracelet cross, this time all incised except for four small sunk panels at the heads centre. Probably late 12th of early 13th century.
- (3) The slab still in the sill of the western tomb recess. A roughly-incised cross crosslet, date uncertain.

Longstaffe’s fourth slab, with a pair of shears (the conventional emblem of a woman) is no longer apparent.

Cross Slab Grave Covers, Widdrington



drawings P F Ryder (1) & (2) 28 2 1985

(3) 18 3 2020