

# ST MUNGO SIMONBURN

## AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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*The church from the north-east*

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## St Mungo's Church. Simonburn

The parish church of St Mungo<sup>1</sup> consists of a four-bay aisled nave with a north porch, and an unaisled chancel; it is built of squared sandstone, in a variety of forms, and has a roof of graduated grey Lakeland slates. The architectural features of the church are primarily in a quite elaborate 13<sup>th</sup> century style although virtually all are of 19<sup>th</sup> century date in their present form; unless otherwise stated, the windows are lancets which generally have moulded arches carried on jamb shafts with nail-head capitals, sometimes mid-height rings and moulded bases, under hoodmoulds with foliate stops.



The west end of the **Nave** (above) is built of coursed sandstone in quite large blocks, and has a two-part chamfered plinth which is continued round the two massive stepped buttresses; these look medieval, although they seem to have been restored to some extent and their off-sets look to be 19<sup>th</sup>-century stone. The big west window is all in finely-tooled 19<sup>th</sup> century ashlar and of five stepped lancets within a larger segmental-pointed arch; the gable above has a 19<sup>th</sup>-century bellcote with a pair of arched openings with chamfered surrounds and an impost band, beneath a gabled top with a weathercock. The east gable of the nave has a plain cross finial.

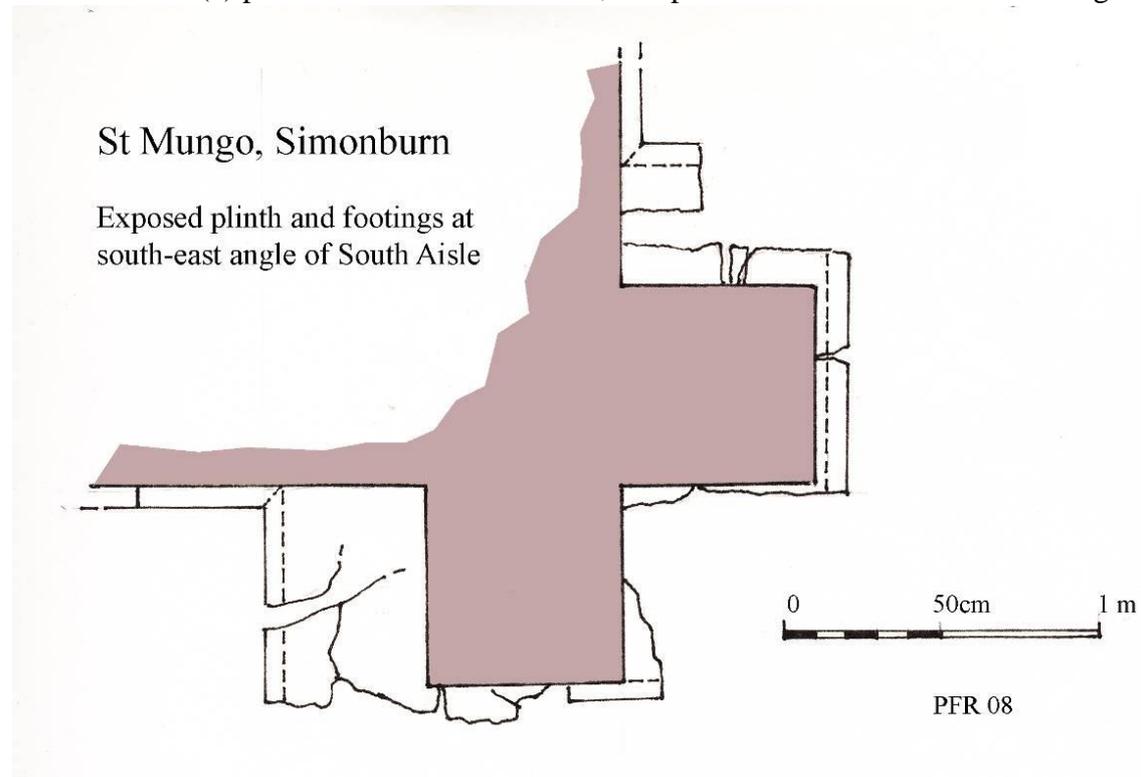
The **South Aisle** is articulated into four irregular bays by stepped buttresses, with pairs at the corners. These buttresses, like those of the north aisle, are made up of rather damaged blocks of stone, almost certainly re-used, and have cut off-sets that look neither of medieval nor Victorian character. The west end of the aisle has the same two-part plinth as that of the nave, which appears medieval, but the squared

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<sup>1</sup> A 19<sup>th</sup> century dedication, after a vicar decided that the name of the nearby 'Muggers Well' was a corruption of 'Mungo', an early Bishop of Glasgow. A former dedication to St Simon from, 'Simonburn' is probably more likely.

stonework above may be a later rebuild – there is certainly a discontinuity between it and a vertical series of large blocks which appear, quoin-like, at the north end of the wall. At the south-west angle of the aisle are a pair of buttresses, clearly raised on older footings; these seem to relate to a preceding pair of buttresses which, unlike the present ones, were slightly set back from the corner<sup>2</sup>.

On the south are, from west to east, a paired lancet, a single lancet (set between the fragmentary jambs of a former doorway) a triple lancet and then another pair; all the windows look like insertions in older walling. Beneath the eastern light of the triple lancet in the third bay there is a clear break between two masonry types, with what is presumably in-situ medieval fabric to the east and re-used medieval blocks to the west. Towards the east end of the eastern bay a chamfered plinth has been exposed when a recent (?) perimeter drain was created; this plinth returns south on the footing



of the south-eastern buttresses. These footings (plan, above) are a little difficult to interpret, but appear to survive from a rather different and larger pair of buttresses. In the east wall of the aisle, which has a stepped triplet of Victorian lancets, the plinth and a couple of courses of walling above have the appearance of undisturbed medieval masonry..

The **North Aisle** is very like the south; the west wall has old squared stone that may be in situ medieval work, but no openings; there is a ragged vertical break c 0.20 m from the south end. The two-part chamfered plinth continues from the west end of the nave. As with the south aisle there are a pair of buttresses at the north-west corner, which look to be have been rebuilt apart from their footings; the chamfered plinth seems genuine medieval work, and clearly relates to an earlier pair of buttresses slightly set back from the angle. Immediately to the east of the buttresses the plinth steps down vertically below the present ground level; the current plinth butts up

<sup>2</sup> A form which survives at the north-east angle of the north aisle

against this. Its date is uncertain, and it appears to go behind the present buttresses. Above the plinth a course or two of earlier masonry may survive. At the north-east angle of the aisle are a pair of buttresses set back slightly from the corner, but their lower parts, along with the foot of the east wall, are submerged in the concrete of the boiler room. The east end of the aisle, like that of its southern counterpart, has a stepped triplet of lancets.

The **North Porch** is entirely of 1877; it is built of finely-tooled ashlar, and has a chamfered plinth, a moulded string at mid-height (forming an impost to the outer arch) and an oversailing hollow-chamfered cornice to the eaves. The outer door is an elaborate one of three richly-moulded orders, the outer two on jamb shafts, under a moulded hood foliate terminals; a further string course crosses the steep gable, which has a cross finial; the porch walls rise well above those of the aisle, and its ridge is at the level of the nave eaves..

The elongate **Chancel** is of three irregular bays, articulated by buttresses of semi-octagonal section<sup>3</sup> with gabled and moulded caps. There is a two-part chamfered plinth (stepped down on either side of the priest's door), and two moulded strings, the lower below the windows and the upper carried over them to form their hoodmoulds.



The south wall (above) is of good-quality coursed and squared stone, often tooled-and-margined. At its west end is a low-side window consisting of a pair of small lancets divided by a circular shaft with a moulded cap and base, within a larger two-centred arch with nail-head moulding and jamb shafts; the hoodmould in this case is former by the lower string, carried over the arch and then returning vertically down to its normal level. Old illustrations make it clear that this window is a restoration of an older feature, but it is not quite clear how much of the original survives. Further east is a tall lancet with a moulded head and jamb shafts, and a deep casement moulding to its outer jambs; parts of its head look as if they might be ancient. The priest's door

<sup>3</sup> On the south there is only one buttress, defining the eastern bay

has an ornate two-centred arch of three moulded orders, the middle one with nail-head and the outer two on jamb shafts with nail-head in the capitals and 'holdwater' bases (one of which seems old); the lower string is stepped up over the doorway to form a hoodmould. Then come two much plainer lancets in chamfered surrounds and finally in the eastern bay, beyond the buttress, a second plainer chamfered lancet.

At first sight the north wall of the chancel (including its buttresses) looks to be medieval, with 19<sup>th</sup>-century stonework only above the upper string, but the fabric in the mid-section of the wall is said to be re-used. The plinth, and part of the lower string, look old, as may be the walling between them. In the end bays are simple chamfered lancets, the upper string forming their hoods.

The east end has paired set-back buttresses and a triplet of stepped lancets, their jamb shafts having mid-height rings, below a richly-moulded oculus in the gable; all the stonework appears relatively fresh, although there are some unusual elongate ashlar blocks in the lower wall, with a tolled-and-margined finish,. That may be late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup>-century work re-used. The gable is topped by a ring-cross finial.

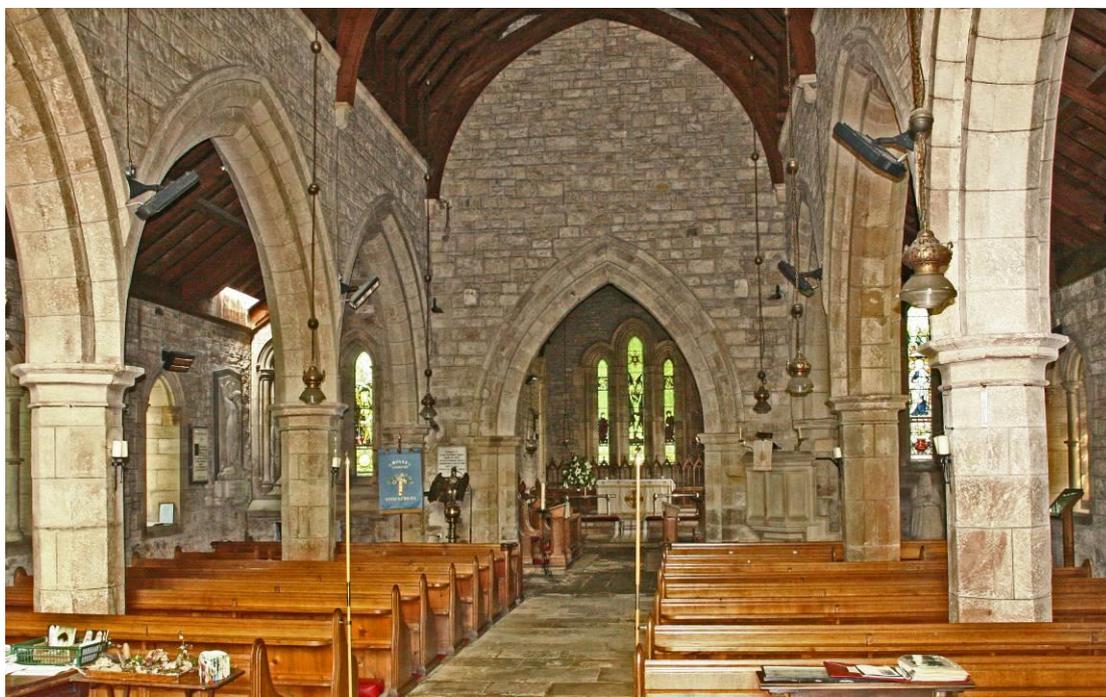
### **The Interior**

The **North Porch** has stone benches; a section of pre-Conquest cross shaft is set against the wall in the centre of the western bench, and opposite is a recess containing a variety of early carved stones, with a medieval coped grave-cover forming a central upright. The simple trussed roof has ashlar to the eaves. The inner doorway has a moulded two-centred arch, the outer order on jamb shafts with nailhead in the capitals and 'holdwater' bases, under a casement-moulded hood.

The internal walls of the church are all of bare stone, masked to some extent by the unfortunate ribbon pointing. The west end and side walls of the **Nave** are of coursed squared stone. The five stepped lancets of the west window and the larger moulded arch enclosing them all have jamb shafts. The arcades are each of four bays, and seem virtually identical. The arches are two-centred and each of two chamfered orders, with a hoodmould towards the nave chamfered on its lower angle; some of the voussoirs bear traces of red painting. The piers are octagonal and responds semi-octagonal; the simple moulded capitals have a ring at the base, and the moulded bases are set on stepped and chamfered octagonal plinths. Sockets for former screens are cut into the piers and responds in the eastern bay of the south and western bay of the north arcades.

The internal walls of the **Aisles** are largely of snecked stone of 19<sup>th</sup>-century character, although there is clearly older fabric (retaining some plaster) in the lower courses of the eastern part of the south wall, and probably in the west walls. In the west wall of the south aisle (within the present vestry/organ chamber, formed by the enclosing of the western bay with a 20<sup>th</sup>-century part-glazed screen) are a pair of stone lockers under a common chamfered lintel. The windows in the side walls of both aisle have rear arches in the form of separate arcades carried by free-standing shafts and carved corbels on the line of the inner face of the wall, with plain slab lintels between these and the outer openings. The north door has a rear arch of segmental-pointed form with a chamfer that is broader on the head than on the jambs; its moulded hood has foliate stops. There is no visible internal evidence of the former south door.

The roof of the nave is of four bays, with collar-beam trusses, collared rafters with intersecting scissor braces and ashlar to the eaves; there is a band, hollow-chamfered on its lower angle, at the head of the side walls, and quadrant corbels a little below that carry the trusses. The aisle roofs are contemporary, but simpler but contempt; each is of eight bays, with a single level of purlins; on the arcade walls simple corbels carry a plate that takes the heads of the rafters.



*Interior looking east*

The arch into the **Chancel** is of steep two-centred form and of two chamfered orders, with a chamfered hood towards the nave only which has 19<sup>th</sup>-century head stops – a bishop (St Mungo) on the left and a queen (St Katherine) on the r.. The jambs follow the same section as the arch, with broach stops at the base of the chamfers; the upper part of each jamb, and the moulded capitals, are all of 1875, when the arch was reconstructed and heightened

The wall above the chancel arch is all snecked stone, and was rebuilt in 1875, although the two old quadrant-shaped corbels that carried the roof beam have been re-set; the hoodmould has also been patched where the roof-beam cut through it.

The internal walls of the chancel; are all of snecked stone, except for the lower part of the north wall, below the string course, which is of thinly-coursed stone and may be in-situ medieval fabric; it has a noticeable curve, less pronounced in the upper parts of the wall. The string course, rounded above and chamfered below, runs below the windows, and is continued around all three walls at the same level; sections of this on the north look like genuine medieval work. The low-side window at the west end of the south wall is much plainer inside than out; its simple arch looks like medieval work that has been re-cut. The internal surrounds of the four lancet windows – and indeed the eastern triplet and the two in the north wall - all have richly-moulded arches and jamb shafts and seem largely if not all Victorian. However, the crudely-cut two-centred rear arch of the priest's door and the truncated length of casement-

moulded hood or label above it (with foliate stops) must be old, as is another foliate boss terminating the string on its east side. Between the eastern two lancets the string interrupted by a big double piscina, largely genuine 13<sup>th</sup> century work but apparently re-set at a higher level when the floor was raised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The two bowls are set within a square moulded frame, and formerly had a circular shaft (the moulded base of which remains) between them; the head in effect forms a shelf beneath a deeply-moulded trefoiled arch, under a moulded hood with foliate stops..

The chancel roof is of eight narrow bays with hammer-beam trusses and ashlaring; the trusses have trefoil cusping above the collars, and the rafters carry diagonally-set boarding. The long arch braces spring from shaped corbels set well below the moulded wall plate.

### **The Development of the Building**

Simonburn Church has had the benefit, perhaps slightly dubious in some ways, of a detailed historical reconstruction compiled by the architectural historian H.L.Honeyman, first printed in *Archaeologia Aeliana* (1937) and then reprised in the *County History* (1940). Honeyman's accounts are detailed and informative, but perhaps a little prone to over-certainty, as his treatment of Simonburn illustrates. His first article was written in response to an earlier one by C.C.Hodges (1925).

Whilst the present dedication of the church (which if genuine would imply an early origin) must be regarded as highly doubtful, the presence of Pre-Conquest sculptural material does imply that there was a Pre-Conquest church on or near the site; Honeyman suggests this may have been nearer Nunwick. The 1983 dowsed plan (Briggs et al) shows an early church with porticus beneath the nave.

Honeyman saw the nave arcades as work of c1200, followed by the rebuilding of the chancel in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, and that of the aisles a little later, together with the addition of a south-eastern chapel to the south aisle. It is probably safer to simply place all the surviving medieval work into the 13<sup>th</sup> century; extensive rebuilding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has really left us with very little definitive evidence.

Honeyman was certainly wrong about the south-east chapel, the outline of which he reconstructs in dotted lines on his plan. He argues that the footings beneath the south-eastern angle of the present aisle represent the remains of a buttress midway along the east side of his putative chapel, extended by 18<sup>th</sup>-century re-use of old materials. However there is certainly a medieval plinth course surviving beneath the eastern bay of the south wall of the aisle wall, and returning south on the west side of the said footings, which it is difficult to explain as anything other than having always been the base of an external buttress or buttresses<sup>4</sup>.

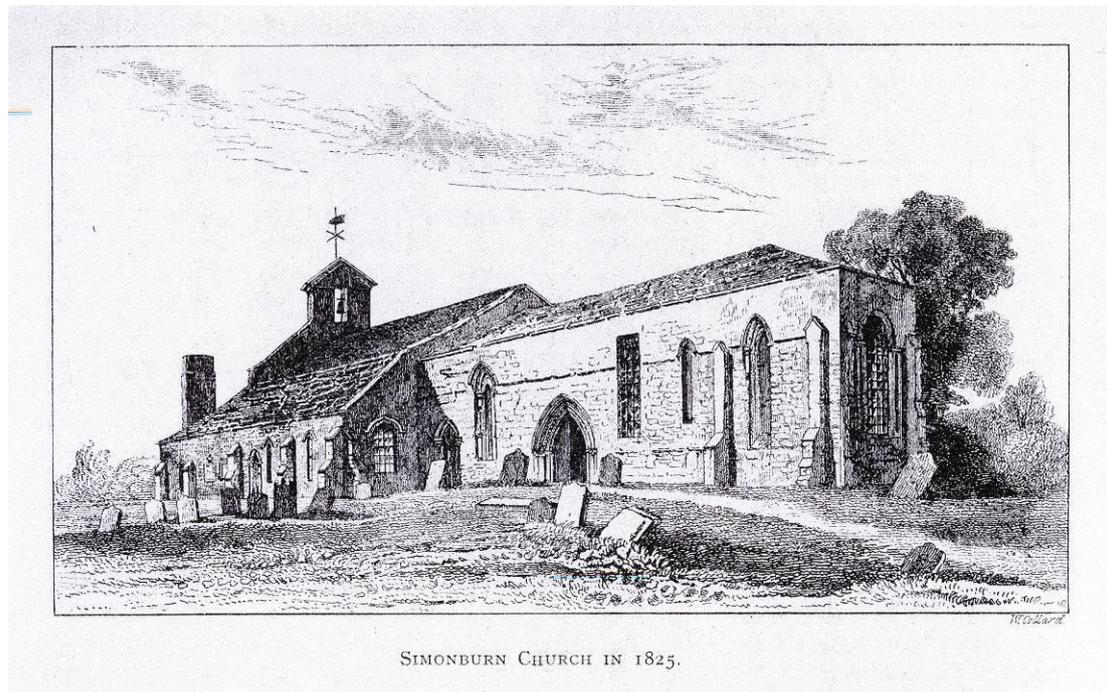
Honeyman argues that the 13<sup>th</sup> century nave as provided with a clerestory, apparently on the strength of the form of the west gable as shown on an 1825 print<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The dowsed plan of the church (Briggs et al 1983) shows the transeptal chapel much as Honeyman depicts it- the reader may draw their own conclusions.

<sup>5</sup> Reproduced in the *County History* account (p180) although there labelled 'Simonburn Church in 1840'

Whatever changes may have been made to the church in the later medieval period have been erased by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century alteration and rebuilding. The next documented phase of work is the rebuilding of the aisles. The NCH account quotes a 1762 vestry minute to the effect that it was proposed that ‘the Side Isles (be) bared and sacked’; the work was to be carried out by the architect Robert Newton. Honeyman took this to mean that the aisles were to be taken down and rebuilt, but possibly they may have already been destroyed during the troubled later medieval year – as happened with many Northumberland churches - and the reference implies that their foundations were to be bared, and new walls raised on top. The irregular levels to which medieval masonry seems to survive in plinths and footings would correlate well with this.



The NCH reproduces two drawings of the church made in 1823 and 1825, a south-west and a south-east view respectively, which show it in its early 19<sup>th</sup> century state, with the aisles as left by Newton with vaguely Gothic sash windows, and the old west window converted into a sash after its mullions (‘muntons’) were removed. The chancel had also been altered in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; it had a Venetian window in its east end and a square-headed sash to the east of the priest’s door; the east end of its roof was hipped, probably a reconstruction made after its lead was replaced by slate in 1809.

In 1863 the chancel was largely rebuilt by Salvin, an eminent Victorian architect but one disapproved of by bodies such as the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings on account of his treatment of medieval fabric. Apart from the replacement of the Venetian east window by a stepped triplet of lancets, and of the sash in the south wall by a plain lancet (and the restoration of a gable to the east end) the south and east walls of his chancel looks externally much as shown in Collard’s 1825 drawing. However, an 1844 sketch of the interior, ‘labelled S. side of Chancel, Simonburn Church’<sup>6</sup> is utterly unrecognisable. It shows a door with an elaborate

<sup>6</sup> Northumberland County Archives, ref SANT/BEQ/15/6

shouldered rear arch, apparently just within the altar rails, with to the west of it a moulded tomb recess (containing a knight's effigy) partly concealed by a larger post-medieval tomb. The internal string course is the only feature that tallies with the chancel as it stands today.

Honeyman states that the lower part of the north wall, and the lower part of the western section of the south wall escaped rebuilding, and that the floor was relaid at a higher level, the piscina being taken out and re-set at a higher level.

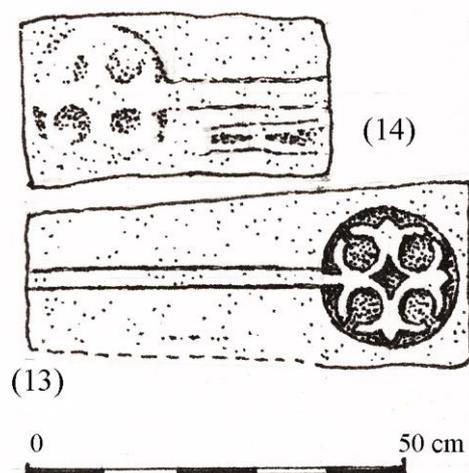
The final phase of restoration came in 1877 when the nave was restored by R.J. Johnson of Newcastle; the west gable was rebuilt, and the aisle given new windows in a 13<sup>th</sup> century style to match the chancel; the south door was blocked, and a new north porch built. The chancel arch was reconstructed and heightened, the wall above being rebuilt, and in addition the nave was re-roofed. Honeyman suggests that the nave arcades may have been reconstructed at this time, as an 1838 sketch by John Hodgson shows them with five rather than four bays<sup>7</sup>, but this seems highly unlikely. There is nothing in the arcades as they now stand to suggest reconstruction (eg curvature of voussoirs) – and it would seem a pointless exercise anyway.

### Archaeological Potential

As with any church on an ancient site, this is a site of considerable interest and is of some archaeological importance. The complexity of its structural history means that evidence of earlier building phases almost certainly survives beneath the present floors, although as usual sub-surface deposits and structural remains will have been disturbed by the usual centuries of burial, and also the creation of an under-floor heating system, as shown by gratings and the sunken boiler chamber outside the west end of the north aisle.

The floor of the nave is mainly of stone slabs with an area of Minton tiles around the 19<sup>th</sup> century font in the western bay of the north aisle, and with cement areas under the pews. At the east end nave an underfloor heating system is indicated by patterned cast-iron floor grilles, by 'Dinning & Coope, Hot Water Engineers, Newcastle on Tyne'. There are further heating grilles in the chancel, where the areas of stone slab flooring include a number of ledger stones and some re-used medieval grave covers. The area east of the first step has a central walkway in coloured marble, with old grave slabs on

Cross Slabs re-used in west face of western buttress on south side of South Aisle



<sup>7</sup> A search at Northumberland Count Archives failed to locate this; other sketch plans of churches in Hodgson's notebooks are not notable for their accuracy.

either side; the sanctuary itself has more panelled flooring in coloured marble and old grave slabs.

Any works that entail disturbance of floors and underfloor deposits should be accompanied by archaeological monitoring, as should any interventions that affect the standing fabric, although the majority of this was rebuilt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### References

- Hodges, C.C. (1925) Simonburn Church in Archaeologia Aeliana 4<sup>th</sup> series I, 179-188
- Honeyman, H.L. (1938) 'Supplementary notes on Simonburn church' Archaeologia Aeliana 4<sup>th</sup> ser. XV, 137-148 (also Northumberland County History XV(NCH) 1940)