

**The Parish Church of St Michael  
Warden  
Northumberland**

**An Archaeological Assessment  
May 2009**



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*The tower from the west*

## The Parish Church of St Michael. Warden

The church consists of an aisleless nave with a south-west porch and a tower set a little north-of-centre at the west end, transepts and quite an elongate chancel. The roofs are of graduated grey Lakeland (?) slate. The site has traditionally been linked with the 7<sup>th</sup> century hermitage of St John of Beverley mentioned by Bede, but there is no firm documentary reference to the church before the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Hodgson (1840, 405) refers to its post-medieval vicissitudes. In 1681 it was ‘ruinous and the windows unglazed’ and in 1759 Archdeacon Robinson found ‘the body ruined and divine service done in the chancel’. At the instigation of Sir Walter Blackett £390 was raised for works carried out in 1765 when the building was partly rebuilt. Further restorations, detailed below under ‘Structural Development’, were carried out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



*The church seen from the north-east*

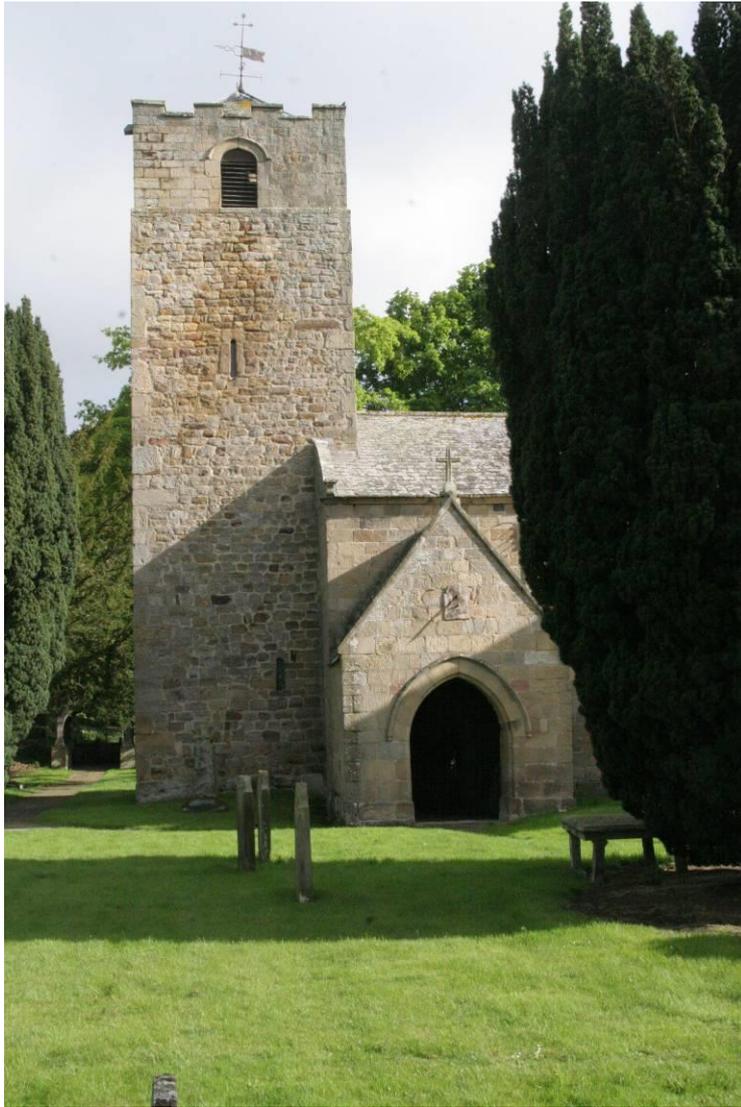
### The Exterior

The **West Tower** is the plainest of the well-known group of supposedly late Anglo-Saxon bell towers in Tynedale<sup>1</sup>, and rises in a single unbroken stage externally, up to a set-back at the base of the squat belfry; its walls are of coursed roughly-squared stone with quite a lot of almost square blocks<sup>2</sup>. The quoins are distinctly irregular; there is a massive block with a Lewis hole, betraying its Roman origin, at the base of the south-west corner, but between c 1.5 m and 4 m above the ground smaller blocks are used, with larger ones again further up. Internally this part of the tower has been

<sup>1</sup> The others are Corbridge, Bywell St Andrew and Ovingham, with Bolam a few km to the north.

<sup>2</sup> On the west there is a full course of ‘upright’ blocks c 3m above the head of the window to the former first floor and two other partial courses, one at the level of the springing of the window head and one three courses above the full one.

divided into four floors, although the first and third have now been removed. The basement is lit by a window set towards the east end of the south wall, a narrow round-arched light with a thin chamfer and its head cut into a shaped block, a little like the larger block, shaped like an inverted 'T', which forms the head of a larger window on the west side of the first floor. The third floor has a narrow round-arched loop on the south, each jamb a single upright block, and the fourth was unlit. The belfry is of neatly-squared and coursed stone, with a single slatted opening in each face, with a four-centred head formed from two blocks and a moulded hood with turned-back ends. Above is a simple embattled parapet with a plain square-edged coping, behind which rises a low pyramidal slated roof capped by a fine weather vane.



*The Tower from the south*

The **Nave** and South Porch are clearly of a single build, and are of good quality squared and coursed sandstone of 18<sup>th</sup>-century date, with a shallow square-topped plinth, and a hollow-chamfered eaves cornice (which extends round the whole body of the church). On the west there this walling abuts on the tower, it is pieced around a little older fabric, the plinth only starting c 0.60 m out. On the south side of the nave, east of the porch, are two simple chamfered lancets, with hollow-chamfered hoodmoulds linked by a string course extending to the east end of the wall, but not to the west; its westward termination is marked by a typically 19<sup>th</sup>-century

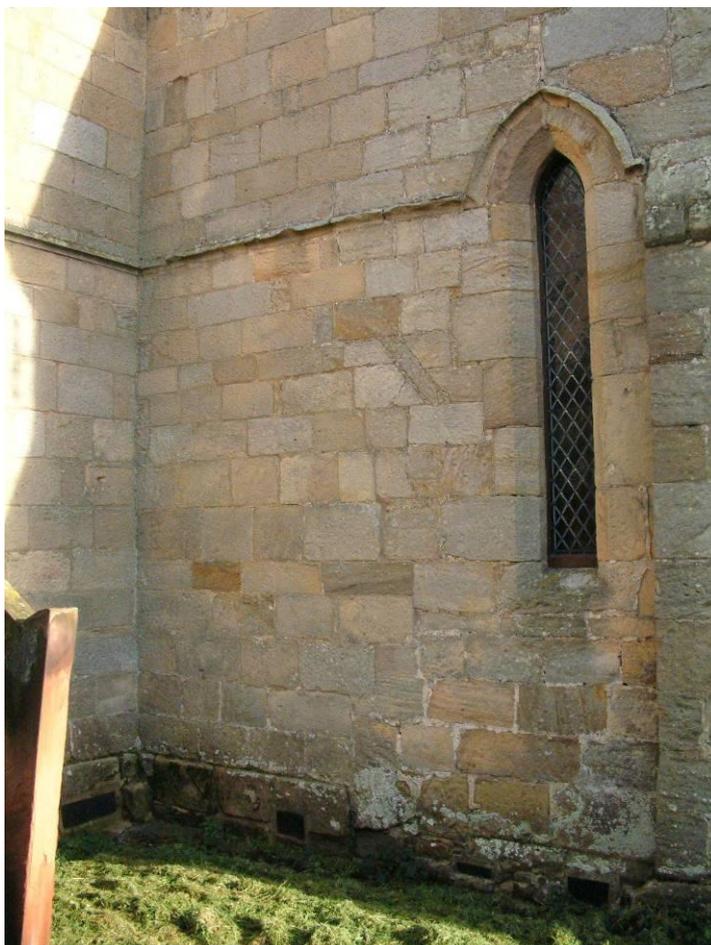
carved stop. The western lancet is in 19<sup>th</sup>-century tooled-and-margined ashlar, but the eastern has older chamfered jambs. On the north of the nave are two paired lancets, with a similar hoodmould; once again older stonework seems to have been re-used in the jambs of the eastern opening. There was formerly a north vestry balancing the south porch; plaster adhering to the wall marks the outline of its gabled roof<sup>3</sup>, a little to the west of the western pair of lancets, and an intermittent straight joint the inner

<sup>3</sup> Immediately below this is a worn slab, set horizontally, with some incised lines, probably the lower part of a medieval cross slab with a cross shaft and top of a stepped base.

face of its west wall. There is little sign of the doorway that must have opened into it, although the sandstone blocks immediately below the lancet pair look a little less weathered, and must have been carefully pieced in during the later-19<sup>th</sup> century restoration when the vestry was removed.

The **South Porch** has a broad two-centred arch with a hollow-chamfered surround, stopped abruptly by the square-edged plinth; the jambs look 18<sup>th</sup>-century but the arch and its hollow-chamfered hood (with carved stops like those of the windows) are of 19<sup>th</sup>-century tooled-and-margined ashlar. Above is a sundial, and the gable has a coping, chamfered on its underside, and a cross finial<sup>4</sup>. In the west wall is quite a large a blocked window, virtually square, with vertical parallel tooling of 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century character on its sill.

*The west wall of the South Transept, showing evidence for the medieval south aisle, presumably demolished in 1765. The break in masonry type corresponds with that between the taller and shallower 18<sup>th</sup> century plinth (left) and the medieval chamfered one, whilst the sloping roof-line of the aisle remains apparent.*



The **Transepts** are each of two bays, and virtually identical. The walls are of coursed and squared sandstone, with a chamfered plinth; on the west side of each there is a vertical break between this and the more closely-jointed fabric (identical with that of the nave, with the same shallow square plinth) of the inner third of the wall, indicating the positions of former aisles. On the south a little ragged fabric at the foot of the wall marks the position of the south wall of the aisle, and further up its roof-line is clearly visible. The side walls of the transepts are each divided into two bays by shallow buttresses, and have hollow-chamfered strings that pass above the sloped tops of the buttresses and are carried over the windows as hoodmoulds; higher up the top four or five courses of each wall is clearly an 18<sup>th</sup>-century heightening. The west side of the south transept has two single lancets, and the east side a single lancet in the south bay<sup>5</sup> and

<sup>4</sup> Hodgson's 1840 print shows the porch having a low embattled parapet and a hipped roof, so the gable must be of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>5</sup> Its south jambs has some upright blocks that look like later reconstruction

paired ones in the north<sup>6</sup>; the west side of the north transept has a single lancet in the south bay and a paired one in the north, and the east side two paired ones. It is not quite clear if all these windows are coeval with the walling; in some cases their jambs do not course in well with the adjacent fabric, but their stonework looks old, and has a rough pecking perhaps intended to prepare them for render.

The end walls of each transept have heavy clasping buttresses at the angles, and between them an upper steeply-sloping member to the plinth, interrupted by a pair of slender buttresses beneath the sill of a large window of three stepped lancets, within an arch with a hollow-chamfered hood that has carved stops of the usual type. In each case the chamfered outer jambs of the windows are clearly older than the tooled-and-margined ashlar of the head, mullions and sills. In the south transept gable is a quatrefoil pierced through a single block (18<sup>th</sup> century?; it is shown on Hodgton's 1840 print); both gables have a square-edged coping rising from moulded kneelers, and 19<sup>th</sup>-century foliate cross finials.

The **Chancel** is entirely of 1889 ; its south and east walls are of neatly-coursed elongate blocks of yellow pink and buff sandstone with a roughly-tooled finish, but the north wall is of re-used 18<sup>th</sup>-century squared stone like that in the nave, whilst the dressings are of yellow/orange sandstone ashlar with a fine diagonal tooling. The chancel is of three bays articulated by stepped buttresses, with clasping buttresses at the east end; a hollow-chamfered string, stepped up a little above the level of that of the transepts, forms a hoodmould to the windows, and there is the same hollow-chamfered eaves cornice as in nave and transepts.

On the south there are two lancets in the western and central bays, and one in the eastern; in the centre bay, which is narrower than the others, the sill of the western lancet is at a higher level so as to accommodate a square-headed priest's door beneath which has a broad chamfer, rising from broach stops, with big dog-tooth decoration to the lintel, and shaped corbels, carved with beasts, forming an inner shoulder head. , with a chamfered plinth, bays chamfered plinth string above windows same eaves. On the north the eastern bay is the narrower, without any openings, whilst the central and western each have two lancets.

The east end is very much modelled on the end walls of the transepts, except that the upper plinth, between the clasping buttresses, which is here split into three separate chamfered steps. Above, the pair of mall buttresses beneath a big window of three stepped lancet lights, and the coped gable and finial cross are virtually identical.

## The Interior

The internal walls of the **South Porch** – now home to an important collection of early carved stones<sup>7</sup> – are of bare masonry, and the boarded roof is set on simple collar-beam trusses with ashlar to the eaves. The inner doorway is of two-centred form with a simple continuous chamfer, and a hollow-chamfered hood with the usual carved stops; the jambs stand slightly proud of the wall. The doorway seems to be set within a disturbed area of fabric, perhaps the infill of an earlier opening; c 0.40 m

<sup>6</sup> In the south jamb is a large block with a Lewis hole.

<sup>7</sup> For the medieval grave slabs here (and also in the chancel) see Ryder 2000.

above the apex of the arch is a course of three large blocks, with splayed joints between them, evidently intended to act as a form of relieving arch (or 'keyed supra-lintel').



In the west wall of the nave, the arch into the **West Tower** (left) is a rather puzzling piece; it is small (2.37 m high), and is splayed in plan, being 1.66 m wide towards the nave and 1.59 m towards the tower.

Semicircular in form, the head is made up of two rows of very roughly-shaped voussoirs and the jambs, somewhat patched, is rather large squared stone. The only refinement is the moulded impost blocks (the eastern parts renewed) which may well be re-used Roman material. Inside the tower the basement has a stone flag floor and exposed stone walls; above the level of the former first floor (c 4 m up) the walls are more heavily mortared (with some remains of plaster) so that little stonework is visible. The inner face of the archway to the nave (which is set south-of-centre as regards the tower, although in the middle of the west wall of the nave) is largely

concealed by a modern wooden door frame, but the north jamb of the arch at least does not course in with the adjacent; is it an insertion?

The window on the south of the basement has its round-arched internal head cut into a single large block, clearly a re-used Roman piece from its Lewis hole; the rubble core between this and the block which forms the outer arch is largely covered by old plaster.

The first floor has been carried on four north-south beams; their infilled sockets are not immediately obvious, but can be discerned with care. This floor has a window on the west, the inner and outer heads of which are semicircular arches neatly cut into two large blocks, with only a narrow gap between them; there are further big diagonally-tooled blocks in the jambs. Opposite, in the east wall, there appears to have been an opening (a high-level doorway into the nave) but mortar and plaster obscure its form; the Taylors claim this to be 'an original round-headed opening' but this is unjustified. Many early towers do have high-level doorways into the nave, but doorways were also often made in this position during the post-medieval 'gallery era'.

A metal ladder rises to a trapdoor in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century floor at the level of the original second floor, carried on five east-west beams, the outer two set against the side walls. This floor, where the walls are again quite heavily pointed, is lit by a window on the south, once again with its semicircular rear arch cut into a large square block, and with large diagonally-tooled blocks in the jambs below. The second floor has been 3.1 m high to the level of the removed third floor which was carried by four north-south beams, and this time their sockets remain open in the side walls. There are also a number of smaller cavities, either sockets or just missing stones, as well as, a little below the present belfry floor, a pair of large rough sockets set east-of-centre in the north and south walls. The third floor was only 2.1 m high, to the level of the present belfry floor.

Within the present belfry, reached by a timber ladder from the floor below, the internal faces of the belfry openings are very crudely formed, with sub-circular arches constructed of very rough voussoirs in a manner rather reminiscent of the tower. The more neatly-coursed blocks of the external frames of the opening seem to course through with the internal face of the wall, evidence against the theory that the internal wall faces survive from the Pre-Conquest belfry. The belfry is roofed by two intersecting principal-rafter trusses set corner to corner, carrying the low pyramidal roof; the timbers appear of no great age.

Returning to the **Nave**, the walls are plastered, except for some exposed dressings. The south doorway has a segmental rear arch, and the various windows two-centred ones, in plain square-edged ashlar blocks. At the east end of each side wall is an arch to the transept, of virtually identical form. The actual two-centred arches, of two chamfered orders, under hollow-chamfered hoods with carved stops, are wholly of later-19<sup>th</sup> century date, as are their moulded impost, but the lower parts of the jambs – which retain the section of the arches – look medieval. In each case the inner order has a simple moulded base whilst the outer chamfers are continued to the floor, except in the case of the west respond of the northern arch where these have big convex stops at floor level. Over both arches the outer face of the wall (visible from the transepts) is of quite thinly-coursed stonework, probably 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The floors of the transepts are set one step above that of the nave; that of the **South Transept** is of stone slabs, with an elongate boarded opening at the north-east corner covering an old heating chamber, probably of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; this is brick-lined, and has its floor 1.66 m below that of the transept. The southern part of the south transept is now partitioned off to form a vestry, where furniture obscures some of the walls (a cupboard installed in 1997 concealing an original piscina on the south, which has a two-centred arch finished with a narrow chamfer); in its northern part the organ stands against the west wall. The two windows on the east have originally had their sills at a slightly lower level, whilst the large window on the south, which has broadly-splayed jambs, now has a plain square-edged rear arch replacing an earlier steeper one (like that of the corresponding window in the north transept), the springing of which remains visible on the east side.

The **North Transept** has a boarded floor, and its windows steeply-sloped internal sills of 19<sup>th</sup>-century ashlar. The large window in the north wall has a steep rear arch of roughly-shaped blocks, and the two windows on the east rear arches of well-squared

stone, perhaps restoration work. At the east end of the north wall is a large square medieval aumbry, rebated for a door.

The arch into the **Chancel** is of two-centred form, of two chamfered orders with a hollow-chamfered hood (towards the nave) with carved stops of the usual type; the inner order is carried on moulded corbels and the outer continued down the jambs; all of the stonework of the arch, and the ashlar wall in which it is set, is of 19<sup>th</sup> century date. Beneath the arch two steps lead up to the stone-flagged floor of the chancel, which has walls of diagonally-tooled ashlar; the lancet windows have broadly-splayed jambs and hollow-chamfered rear arches and the priest's door a chamfered surround. On the south the internal sill of the easternmost lancet is set low so as to form a sedile, which has a moulded sill string stepped up to form the sill of a niche alongside it on the east, which has a four-centred arch with pendant cinquefoil. The internal frame of the east window is enriched by jamb shafts with moulded caps and bases, and a moulded rear arch.

The roofs of the church are all of 19<sup>th</sup> century date. The nave has a boarded wagon roof of shallow segmental section, of eight-by-three panels, with carved bosses at the intersections of the axial and transverse timbers; above this is a scissor-braced roof structure. The transept roofs, set at a rather higher level, are of similar type, but each four-by-three-bays, without the carved bosses; all the roofs have moulded wall-plates. The chancel has a boarded wagon roof with foliate gilded bosses, and openwork traceried panels alternating with shields to the eaves.

### Structural Development

The west tower is usually seen as the oldest part of the church, although it is possible that the west wall of the nave – or rather what little of it escaped the 1765 rebuilding – is still earlier. This possibility is suggested by the fact that the archway into the tower is set central to the gable end of the nave, rather than the tower, which is set north-of-centre; might it have been an earlier west doorway?

The tower itself is generally seen as a member of a quite extensive group of towers of late Saxon character, although several recent workers have suggested that they actually date from shortly after the Norman Conquest. Although the tower quoins are quite irregular, they include many megalithic blocks broadly of Anglo-Saxon character, and the three small windows, like the quoins re-using Roman stone, also seem convincingly early. The tower arch poses problems. Its position – set centrally to the nave rather than the tower – is one. The re-use of Roman (?) mouldings as impost blocks is typically Pre-Conquest but the arch itself could even be post-medieval<sup>8</sup>, and looks suspiciously like the inner heads of the belfry openings which it now seems clear are part of the 1765 remodelling.

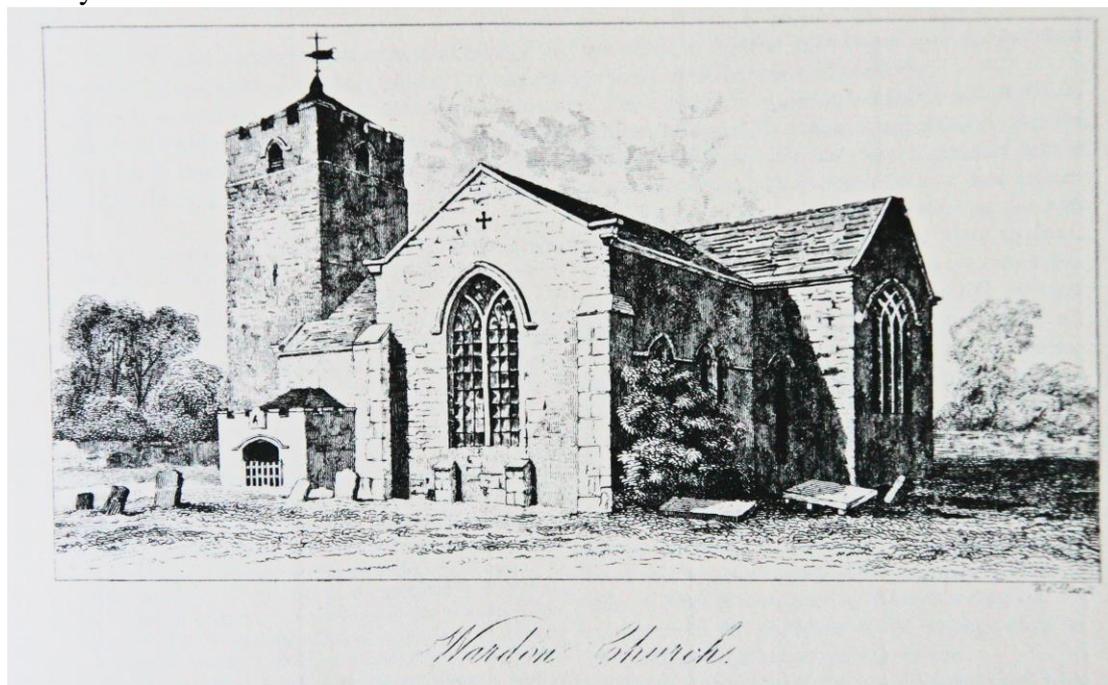
The date of the tower is discussed at some length by Gilbert (1946); he refutes the claim first made by C.C.Hodges in an article in the *Reliquary* (April 1893) that the inner faces of the belfry openings are Pre-Conquest, simply stating that 'the workmanship on the inside is indeed rough, but not ancient'. More controversially, he

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<sup>8</sup> Once again Taylor and Taylor make serious errors in describing the arch; their 'large intervening area of the soffit faced only with rubble' does not exist; there is only the odd stray piece of rubble as most of the eastern voussoirs extend to butt against the western.

sees the lower two of the three tower windows as ‘lancets in the Norman Romanesque manner’ and in addition he dismisses the quoins as ‘degraded’ although after this he rather surprisingly concludes ‘Warden may well be Anglo-Saxon, but it would be rash to base any arguments on the fact’

The most detailed description of the tower is provided by Taylor & Taylor (1965, 632-4) but they make some surprising errors, particularly in seeing the western part of the nave as being of early date, and its north-western quoin being ‘of much the same character as those of the tower’ date whereas nave quoins and plinth (which they also see as early) are absolutely standard Georgian work that tally well with the recorded rebuilding of the nave in 1765, and quite dissimilar from the tower fabric. They also claim the inner faces of the belfry openings to be older than the outer, when they are clearly not.



*South-east view of the church c1840 (Hodgson)*

Nothing is known with certainty of the remainder of the early church; a dowsed survey (Bailey, Cambridge and Briggs 1988) shows an earlier and slightly-narrower church underlying the nave and western part of the chancel, which looks to have originally consisted of a nave with a shorter square-ended chancel, and then being extended by a broader chancel with a narrow eastern apse<sup>9</sup>.

The only other medieval parts of the church are the transepts, of 13<sup>th</sup> century date. It would appear that these went with an aisled nave, clear evidence of which remains on their western walls, although the western responds of their arches seem to have always been responds rather than piers. This might either imply that the aisles were added after the transepts (two-bay arcades being pierced through the nave walls) or, a

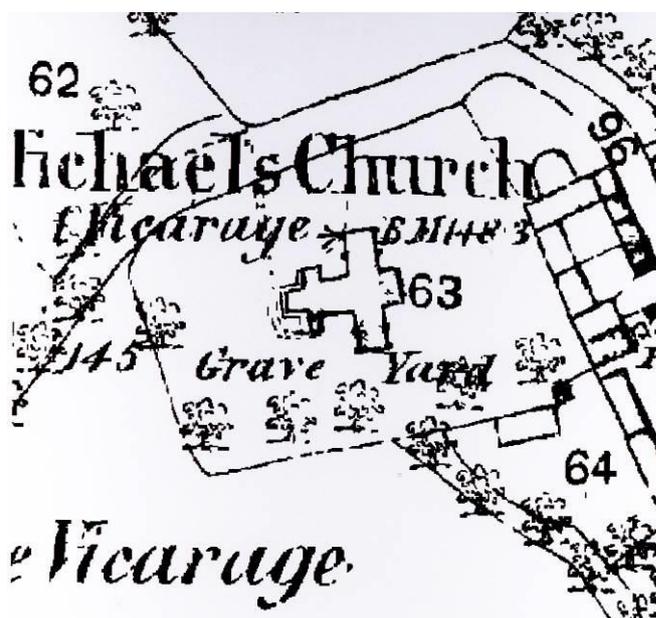
<sup>9</sup> Such dowsed surveys remain controversial, occasionally correlating with excavated evidence (cf Woodhorn) but at other times failing to indicate structural phases for which there is clear evidence, such as the aisles here at Warden.

more intriguing possibility, that a Pre-Conquest nave survived with its flanking porticus which were retained or perhaps converted into aisles.

However, all further medieval evidence was lost when the church was rebuilt, other than its tower and transepts, in 1765. The tower belfry was rebuilt at the same time. The 1765 church had a short square-ended chancel. The rebuilding was described by Hodgson (1840, 405): ‘the nave and chancel (were) nearly rebuilt from the foundations, but much of the old walls and windows of the transepts, which are in plain but neat early English style, remain.... The top of the tower has been made too fine for the simple Norman style below.... The vestry is placed on the north side of the nave, and corresponds in size with the porch that screens the great door on the south’.

The church as it stood in 1862 was described by Sir Stephen Glynne (1908, 322). The windows of the nave were ‘modern, of the worst kind’ and the transept end windows were ‘very bad’; Hodgson’s print shows the south transept one being of two broad lights with simple Y-tracery. The transepts opened to the nave by ‘wide pointed arches upon octagonal shafts’ but there was no chancel arch; the chancel had on north and south single lancets ‘apparently renewed’ and a four-light east window ‘of questionable character’ (Hodgson shows simple intersecting tracery).

A plan of the church by the Newcastle architects Austin and Johnson, dated 1868 (a copy now hands at the west end of the nave) shows the church with new windows in



the nave and transept ends, and the present chancel arch (as new work), and also the very short 1765 chancel. The new windows shown in the transepts look like groups of separate lancets (whereas those actually inserted are of three integrated lights) so the plan is probably a ‘proposed’ one, accompanying a faculty; as often it was not followed in detail. The north-west vestry is not shown, so it was presumably to be removed as part of the proposed works, although it appears on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey 6”:1 mile map of c1860. (left)

Further works took place in 1889 when the 18<sup>th</sup> century chancel was replaced by the present much more elongate one; it is not clear whether this was built on the foundations of its medieval predecessor.

## Proposed Works in the West Tower: Archaeological Considerations

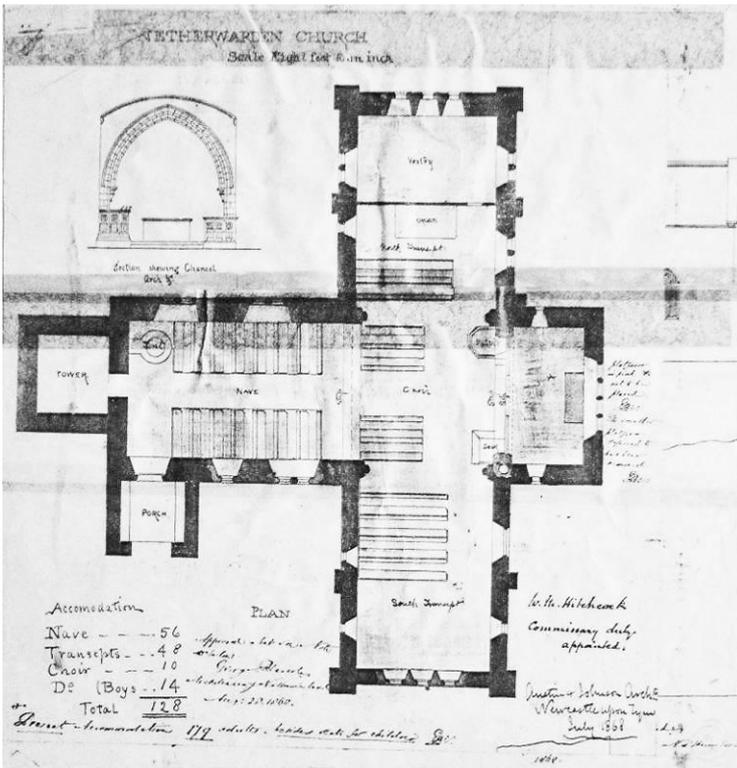
At the time of writing there are proposals to re-hang the bells in the West Tower, which will entail the introduction of new beams etc. Since the tower is one of the earliest in Northumberland, and little altered below belfry level, its fabric is clearly of great archaeological sensitivity. It is imperative that a proper record is made of the structure before any intervention is made; this should take the form of measured drawings of the internal wall faces, showing all structural features (notably beam sockets etc, the evidence for previous floor levels) and delineating joints and coursing where possible, although in some areas mortar and plaster will render this difficult. Such recording should also include a photographic survey.

If the missing floors are reinstated, it may prove possible to re-use the empty beam sockets in the walls and thus get away with very little damage to the existing historic fabric.

Peter F Ryder May 2009

## References

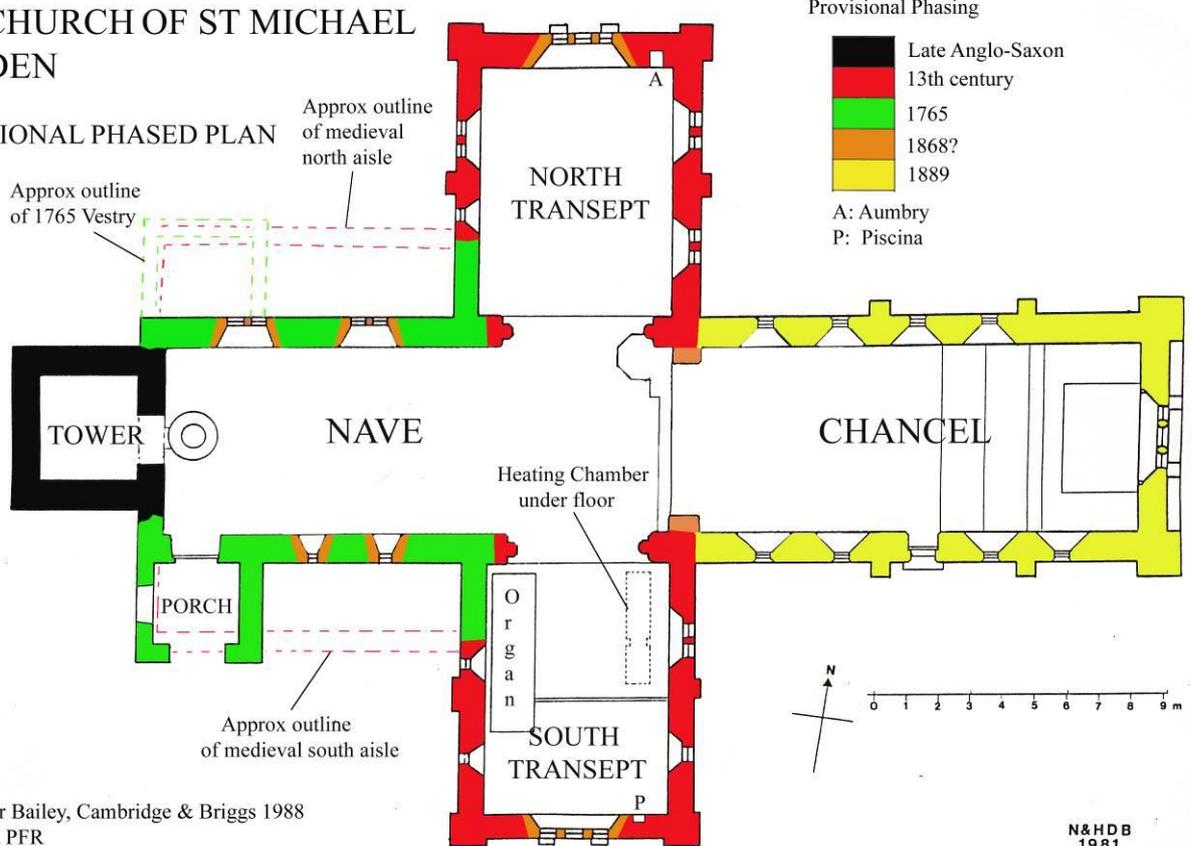
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1868 plan (now hanging in church)

**THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL WARDEN**

**PROVISIONAL PHASED PLAN**



Plan after Bailey, Cambridge & Briggs 1988 amended PFR