

St Mary's Church, Ponteland

Archaeological Assessment

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The church from the south

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St Mary's Church, Ponteland.

The parish church of St Mary (NZ 7295 1649) stands in the centre of the old village of Ponteland on the north of the A696 road and east of the minor road heading north to Blagdon and Morpeth, with the east side of its churchyard being formed by the River Pont. Nearby are two other significant medieval structures; on the opposite side of the Blagdon/Morpeth road the Blackbird Inn incorporates part of the medieval manor house and a little further to the south-west is the ruined tower of the Old Vicarage.



Location Map

From Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer sheet 316
Ordnance Survey map licence 100045703

Description

The church consists of a four-bay nave with aisles and transepts, west tower, south porch and three-bay chancel. The building is largely constructed of squared sandstone, varying in character, and has Welsh slate roofs.

The **West Tower** rises in three stages, the third (belfry) being rather shorter than the others, divided by chamfered strings/set-backs, now quite eroded. There is a two-part steeply-sloping chamfered plinth. Up to c 5 m above ground level the walling of the lower stage is of well-coursed quite small squarish blocks, which it has been suggested may be of Roman origin. Above this there is larger coursed masonry up to the belfry, which is of rather more roughly-shaped stone. At the south-west corner is a big buttress of c1880, of rock-faced ashlar, with its own two-part plinth; it commences as a heavy clasping buttress but c 4 m up divides into a pair of stepped buttresses rising to gabled tops just below base of the belfry. At the east end of the north wall, set in the angle between tower and north aisle, is a c1880 stair turret of pecked squared stone, with lightly-tooled ashlar dressings. It has a chamfered shoulder-headed doorway on the west, above two steps, and a series of square-headed chamfered loops, and is topped by a semi-pyramidal roof just below the belfry.

On the west of the lower stage is the 12th century west door, set in a slightly-raised panel of walling; it has a semicircular arch of two orders of chevron, enclosing a plain sunk tympanum above a plain lintel; the damaged intrados of the inner order suggests that an earlier tympanum has been cut away. The impostes are chamfered on the underside, and the outer order is carried on jamb shafts with capitals now so weathered that their original form is hard to determine; the shafts below have probably been renewed, although the southern is quite badly eroded. Directly above is a round-arched window, the sill of which cuts down into the chamfered top course of the raised panel of masonry in which the doorway is placed; it has the appearance of being an insertion, and its head and sill are relatively recent stone.



The West Doorway

On the south the lower stage has a single-light window, set slightly east-of-centre, that has a pointed trefoiled arch, head and sill being restoration. There is disturbed masonry below; it is not clear how the present window relates to a large round-headed one shown on pre-1880 illustrations. On the north and set rather higher (at the top of the earliest phase of fabric) is a small round-arched light that looks to be original; here again there was a larger round-headed light, lower down, before 1880.

The second stage of the tower has a narrower round-headed window on the west, and a square-headed one on the north, both of which looks is if they might be coeval with the walling. On the south is a large clock face, with above and a little to the west a single light with a pointed trefoiled head, with old weathered dressings.

The belfry has openings on the west and south which each consists of a pair of trefoil-headed lights; both seem to some extent restoration, and before 1880 the southern one was concealed by a clock face. On the north and east are single trefoil-headed lights; the ridge of the nave roof rises to directly below the eastern opening. There is a chamfered oversailing course above, broken by a pair of stone spouts on the north, and openings from which spouts may have been removed on the south; the parapet above has a plain flat coping.

The tower is topped by a modern openwork metal spire carrying a weathervane.

The only external walls of the **Nave** are above the aisle roofs, and at the east end above the chancel roof. The upper part of the south wall has a clerestory, entirely of c1880, with six small trefoil windows above the aisle arcade and two small round-headed ones above the transept¹, with above a hollow-chamfered oversailing course, which looks old. On the north the wall at this level has no openings, but a similar oversailing course, but is all of 19th-century fabric. The east gable is also largely 19th-century, but on the south incorporates a section of roof tabling from an earlier gable at a rather lower level.

The **South Aisle** is of three bays, with the south porch oddly overlapping its south-west corner. The west wall of the aisle is quite complex, and shows two different fabric types. The earlier is coursed squared stone, in the northern third of the wall; this section has a chamfered plinth a little above the level of that on the tower, which runs for c 2 m and then either drops to a lower level (now buried) or terminates. This section of wall also has a chamfered set-back c 4 m above ground level. The remainder of the wall is of more roughly-coursed and irregular stone. The present west window is of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a chamfered arch with a hoodmould that has turned-back ends. All its stonework is 19th-century restoration; above and to the south of its head, in the more irregular stonework, is what looks as if it could be the south jamb and part of the arched head of an earlier opening, but without any properly cut dressings. The wall has a 19th-century coping, chamfered on its lower angle; its south-west angle is concealed by the porch, the west wall of which is set c 0.30 m outside the line of that of the aisle, against which it clearly butts up.

The western bay of the south wall of the aisle is covered by the porch; the two bays to the east are of coursed stone with some very square blocks, probably re-used, in the lower courses; they have an old stepped buttress between them, and each has a window of three stepped trefoil-headed lights under a three-centred arch, with a hollow-chamfered surround; their tracery is recent restoration but their surrounds are old. The parapet is set on a bold hollow-chamfered oversailing course, and has a chamfered coping.

The side walls of the **South Porch** rather strangely have much larger and better squared stones in their upper parts; the outer openings is a roughly four-centred arch of two chamfered orders, under a chamfered hoodmould with turned back ends. In the gable above is

¹ An engraving published in the Illustrated London News for December 1854 shows a single small arched light, under a hoodmould with turned-back ends, at the east end of the southern clerestory.

a renewed sundial (inscribed '1686 renovated 1985') in a moulded surround; the coped gable has a restored finial cross.

The **North Aisle** is of three bays, but on the north the end bays are both partly concealed by added structures – a boiler house on the east and a 20th-century vestry on the west; the west end of the aisle is also partly concealed by the stair turret to the tower. There is an old stepped buttress – with its own chamfered plinth (above a square footing) at the north-west corner of the aisle, and another one between the western and central bays, partly overbuilt by the east wall of the vestry. The west wall has a single-light window with a trefoiled ogee head and a chamfered hood with turned-back ends, awkwardly sandwiched between the stair turret and the angle buttress; all its stonework is relatively recent. On the north, the central bay has a large square-headed window with rudimentary reticulated tracery above two trefoiled ogee-headed lights; it is an insertion of c1880 replacing a plain square-headed sash window.

The flat-roofed 19th-century **Boiler House** only rises to half the height of the aisle wall, and has a simple arched doorway and lancet window on the west. The taller 20th-century **Vestry** is also flat-roofed, and is built of rock-faced stone; it has square-headed windows on east and west, and a doorway with chamfered jambs and a plain lintel at the west end of the north wall.

The **South Transept** shows a mixture of fabrics. Coursed and quite square stone of 12th-century character is seen in both side walls, on the west as far as a ragged break c 1.0 m from the gable end, and in the northern parts of the east wall where there is a semblance of a straight joint 0.90 m from the north end, but there is a scatter of reddened stones, as if used in some rebuild. The upper parts of both walls, including two or three courses of well-squared gritstone blocks below a moulded string at the base of the parapet – look to be 19th-century restoration. The south end wall is of larger stone (with some quite elongate quoins) and has a three-light window with Perpendicular-style tracery under a casement-moulded hood with turned back ends, that looks all 19th-century work in its present form; above and to either side of its head two ragged breaks define an area of rebuilt fabric under the shallow-pitched gable. In the centre of the east wall is a window of three lights, with plain pointed heads, under a shallow segmental arch; the tracery is restoration (and the hoodmould seems to be artificial stone) but the chamfered jambs are old and weathered, although they appear to be an insertion in still-earlier walling.

The **North Transept** is largely built of well-coursed and squared stone, of a regularity which gives away that much if not all of its walling was taken down and rebuilt c1880, although the old openings were re-set; the short west wall has rather smaller and squarer stones, but these too are laid in very regular courses and may have been re-used. The north end has three stepped lancet windows, with a chamfered circular window in the obviously 19th-century gable above (and a re-set carved stone of some sort) and the east side three similar lancets.

The three-bay **Chancel** is of good-quality squared stone, with some smaller squarish blocks, presumably re-used, in the lower courses, especially of the central and eastern bays on the south. The side walls are articulated by simple stepped buttresses, with a chamfered string

course which runs beneath the sills of the windows, and is stepped up to form a square hoodmould over the small priest's door in the central bay on the south, which is set in a slightly-recessed panel of walling and has a segmental head and chamfered surround. There is also a chamfered oversailing course a little below the eaves. On the south each bay has a 14th-century window of two trefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a pointed arch with a broad chamfered surround and a chamfered hood with turned-back ends; their jambs do not course in with the walling. The central one has its sill set at a higher level to allow for the priest's door beneath.



The chancel from the south

The east end has pairs of stepped buttresses at the corners; the ground drops away towards the river, so the string course is c 2.5 m above the ground, and there are two smaller buttresses beneath it. The big east window is of three trefoil-headed lights, with a large quatrefoil above flanked by two trefoiled mouchettes; the pointed arch has a moulded frame, and there is a moulded hood with turned-back ends. Only the mullions are recent restoration. Above the window the gable looks 19th-century, with an oculus window with a nutmeg surround, and a coping chamfered on the underside, and finial cross.

On the north side the central and eastern bays have single quite broad lancet windows, under chamfered hood with turned-back ends; the western bay has a two-light 14th century window, exactly like those on the south.

The Interior

Inside the **South Porch** there are old stone benches with modern wooden tops, and the stone roof is carried on three ribs in the form of pointed arches, chamfered on their lower angles. The inner door, set at the east end of the north wall has a simple two-centred arch with a narrow chamfer, and a chamfered hood carried down to imposts chamfered on their lower edges.

In the main body of the church the walls are bare of plaster. At the west end of the Nave the **Tower** opens by an arch is of two-centred form and of two orders, with broad chamfers, springing from what may be older jambs that only have a narrow chamfer, and impost blocks (the southern renewed) hollow-chamfered on the underside. Otherwise the only feature visible in the wall is a ragged more or less vertical joint c 0.50 m from the north end; a large Royal Arms conceals part of the wall face above the arch. This stage of the tower is now divided by an inserted floor, which cuts the heads of both the window on the south and the west doorway, which both seem to have 19th-century rear arches. A Saxon head stone has been inserted in the south wall c 0.30 m beneath the ceiling and 0.50 m west of the window. A modern stair rises to the room above, where the window in the north wall has a semicircular rear arch that seems one build with the fabric, but the wider round-headed light on the west has 19th-century internal dressings.

The floor above, of the Ringing Chamber, is carried by a series of north-south beams, resting on ashlar corbels with sunk cruciform patterns, all work of c1880. A modern stair rises against the east wall to gain the Ringing Chamber, which also has a separate access through the stair turret; this has a stone newel stair and walls of tooled stone, the small loops lighting it being chamfered inside as well as out; at its head is a shoulder-arched doorway. The south and east walls of the chamber are featureless, but the windows in the north and west walls have old semicircular rear arches.

Another modern stair rises against the south wall to a low mezzanine floor beneath the belfry; alongside the stair a small window in the south wall has a stone internal lintel; at the level of the mezzanine floor there is an opening in the east wall into the roof of the nave. This has splayed jambs, as if it was originally a window; its external opening (into the nave roof) has a deep hollow moulding to its jambs but a plain square lintel which is in fact a re-used medieval cross slab.

The belfry floor is carried by four heavy north-south beams, two being old timbers re-used; all rest on shaped timber corbels of c1880. In the belfry the openings on the east and north have plain lintels, that of the former a re-used cross slab; the larger south and west windows have segmental rear arches which may be of 19th-century date. The east and west walls each have a range of old corbels c 12m above the floor, the innermost pair flush with the jambs of the openings; these presumably carried the original bell frames; the present frames are modern metal ones.

The tower roof, low-pitched and with its ridge set east-west, is ancient, and has three crude trusses with short king posts.

The **Nave** has four-bay arcades, the easternmost arches opening into the transepts. The north arcade is continuous but on the south there is a short rectangular block of walling in between the aisle arcade and transept arch.

The aisle arcade on the south has two-centred double-chamfered arches which simply die into the octagonal piers without any capitals; the piers have tall moulded bases of late 14th century

character. At the west end the arch simply dies into the wall², but at the east end there is a respond, with a moulded base like that of the piers, although apparently renewed. The separate arch to the transept is lower, and of segmental-pointed form, but again of two chamfered orders; in this case, unlike the remainder of the arcade, much of its stonework is reddened, as if by burning. On the west it springs from what looks like an earlier respond that has only a narrow chamfer to the angles, and an impost block with a square fillet above a quadrant moulding; on the east the inner order has been carried on an impost or corbel of some form but it has been hacked back so that all detail has been lost.

On the external face of the arcade there are the usual c1880 corbels carrying the principals of the aisle roof, but also two smaller quadrant-section corbels on either side of the head of the central arch, which must survive from some previous phase.

The east end of the south aisle is spanned by a distorted pointed arch of two chamfered orders, opening into the transept, springing from the south face of the column of walling between the two parts of the main arcade, and dying into the aisle wall on the south.



The nave looking east

The north arcade is a copy of the south, but in tooled 19th-century ashlar; the arch to the transept is again lower and segmental-pointed. Only the western respond looks ancient, and this is very much like a taller version of the western respond of the south transept arch, and thicker (0.95m) than the arcade wall (c 0.60m) so that its northern face projects. Its impost, worn and mutilated, is of the same quadrant-and-square-fillet section as that of the transept

² Although below the springing is a length of straight joint marking the north face of an earlier generation of respond.

arch. However, the respond has a chamfered plinth on the north only, suggesting that it might be fashioned from the stub of a pre-aisle north wall. The base of the western pier of the arcade is somewhat mutilated, with a slot on the north aligning with a slot cut into the aisle wall, showing that there must have been a partition at this point. At the east end of the arcade, on the east wall of the north transept, the arch now dies into the wall, but below is a rough column of blocks that have obviously been hacked back indicating the position of a former respond of some sort. On the external face of the wall a rough string course runs just above the crowns of the arches, which at least superficially looks older than the 19th-century stonework beneath. In addition to the usual corbels carrying the 19th-century roof timbers there is a corbel a little to the east of the crown of the third arch of the arcade, which now does not carry any timber, but may be simply a relic from an earlier 19th-century phase.

In the **South Aisle** the west window, which otherwise looks a 19th-century piece, has an old shouldered lintel rather like those of the northern lancets in the north transept, with an odd triangular recess above it formed by two inclined slabs, the northern a re-used piece of a medieval cross slab. At the level of the lintel is a rough set-back of c 10cm in the wall face. The south door, awkwardly set at the extreme west end of the south wall, has a roughly semicircular rear arch; the two three-light windows have three-centred rear arches and stepped sills. Close to the east end of the wall is a full-height straight joint in line with the western face of the arch into the transept, further evidence that the transept pre-dates the aisle.

In the **North Aisle** the present west window has a chamfered rear arch; c 0.60 m south of its south jamb is a straight joint, probably the south jamb of an earlier window, any remains of which are hidden externally by the tower stair turret. Close to the south end of the wall is a straight joint on the line of the north face of the arcade respond, suggesting that the aisle is an addition. Three steps up lead to the north door which has a square head, formed by a probable medieval grave slab³ although only the merest traces of design survive. The large c1880 window in the north wall has a shouldered rear arch, and at the east end of the aisle a double-chamfered 19th-century arch opens into the north transept. The outer chamfer on its east face is continued down the angle of chancel and transept walls to a broach stop at floor level; the lower 3m of this angle is old fire-reddened stone. As in the south aisle there is a straight joint in line with the western face of the arch into the transept.

³ When drawn by the writer in the 1990s traces of the stepped base of a cross were visible, but they are no longer apparent. For this and the other re-used medieval slabs see Ryder 2002 97-8, 132)



The South Transept looking east

The **South Transept** has some intriguing features in its east wall. There is a raised panel of masonry at the north end of its east wall, extending 0.86 m south of the corbel carrying the transept arch, rising to a height of c 3 m and set forward c 0.13 m from the main wall face. Its south edge, although interfered with by a 20th-century wall monument, has some large cut ashlar blocks, as if it has been the jamb of an opening. It does not extend all the way to the floor, 0.85 m above which more ragged masonry projects a further 0.40 m to the south. There is also a straight joint c 0.55 m north of the northern jamb of the rear arch of the three-light window, the shallow segmental-headed rear arch of which looks old. The siting of the organ, together with several 18th century wall monuments, makes it difficult to inspect the walls of the southern part of the transept. There is an old square-headed aumbry close to the south end of the west wall, rebated for a door.

In the **North Transept** the three lancets in the east wall have level sills c 1.5 m above the floor, and trefoiled rear arches; the lintel of the central one is an re-used medieval grave slab with a faint pair of shears. In between the central and northern is a piscina with a simple chamfered two-centred arch and a broken bowl (the 1896 Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle report suggest this may not be in its original position). The three lancets in the north wall have shouldered rear arches. There is a clear break c 1m from the south end of the west wall between old fire-reddened masonry and the presumably rebuilt fabric of the remainder of the wall.

The **Chancel** is entered under a two-centred arch of two chamfered orders, with a chamfered hoodmould that ends around a metre above the springing. The outer orders is continued down the jambs, and the inner is carried on corbels, each with a pair of carved heads. Those on the

south represent Adam and Eve (with a serpent between them) before the Fall, and those on the north (wearing woebegone expressions) afterwards; now there is a grinning cat-like devil between them. Unfortunately the carvings look very much of early 19th-century character in their present form; it is not clear whether they replicate earlier ones.

Above the arch on the west face of the wall the fabric (except for a few courses of Victorian restoration in the apex of the gable) is all of small square blocks, very like that in the lower walls of the tower; the courses dip towards the centre, as if the chancel arch is an insertion. On the east face of the wall there is no hoodmould, but the line of an earlier chancel roof, c 0.50 m below the present one, is very evident; the wall is largely of small squared stones (like the lower part of the tower) except for several courses of 19th-century ashlar high up. Once again there is evidence that the arch appears to have been inserted into an earlier wall, the east face of which has been roughly cut back above the level of its springing; at the south end of the wall is a column of roughly-hacked masonry which might represent the cut-back stub of the south wall of a narrower chancel, for which there is also some external evidence.

In the side walls of the chancel the two 13th century lancets on the north have trefoiled rear arches, whilst the four two-light windows of 14th century date have broad chamfered surrounds, their tracery being set on the mid-line of the wall; all four have fragmentary medieval glass surviving in their heads. The lancets have reddened dressings to their internal surrounds, whereas the 14th century windows do not. There is considerable variety in the form of the sills of the windows; the westernmost window in each wall has a level stepped sill, the central one on the north a stepped sill replacing a sloping one (clear evidence of which is visible), the eastern window on the north a roughly level sill and the central and eastern on the south sloped sills. The priest's door on the south has a segmental rear arch, and at the east end of the wall, beneath the easternmost window, is a fine 13th-century piscina (not far above the floor, which must have been raised), the trefoiled arch and projecting sill of which are both ornamented with bold dog-tooth ornament; the bowl remains complete. Its stonework is all reddened. Opposite in the north wall is an aumbry, but modern woodwork hides any detail.

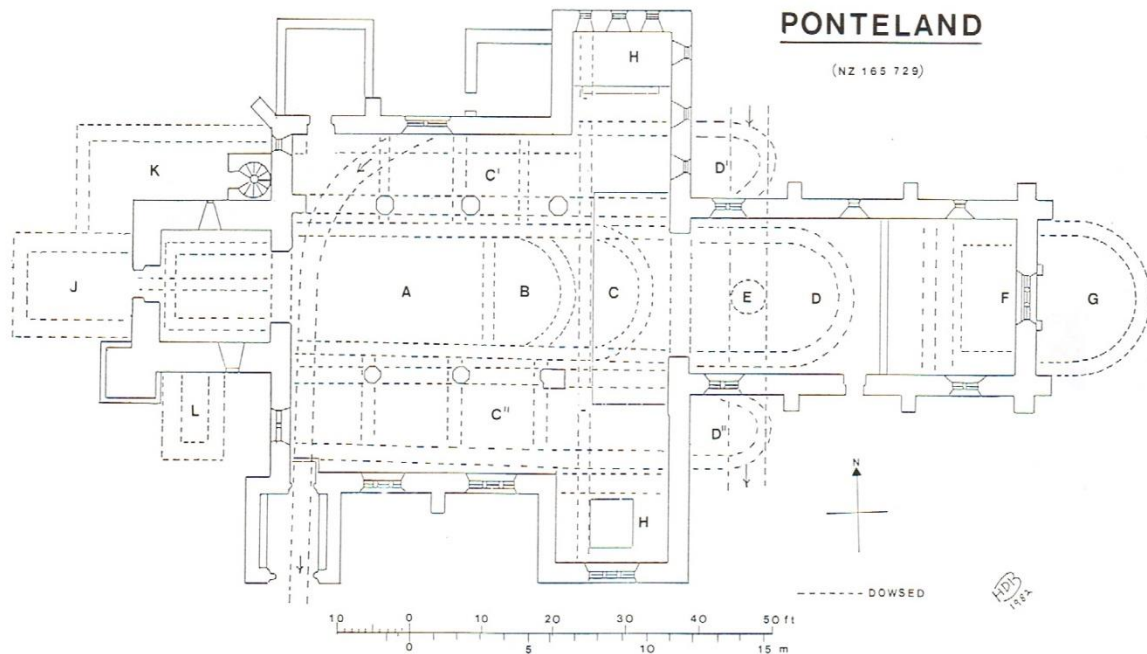
The roofs throughout the church are all of c1880 and have some quirky mid-Victorian detail, typical of the work of the architect F.R. Wilson. The nave has a wagon roof of four bays (with collars and upper king-posts in the roof void above), and the chancel a collar-beam, one of five bays, with ashlar to the eaves; trusses are carried on carved ashlar corbels.

The Structural Development of the Church.

It is clear that the church is the product of a whole series of building phases, but their exact order and dating is not clear.

For many years the only evidence of any Pre-Norman building on the site was one 10th century grave marker found in the c1880 restoration and re-set in the south wall of the tower. Then in 1982 a dowsed survey of the church by H. Denis Briggs produced a plan that appeared to show that there had been a major Pre-Conquest building, itself the product of a multi-phase development, underlying the present structure; the main body of the building had

no less than four successive apsidal eastern terminations; there were also apses beyond the east end of the nave aisles, porticus flanking the early nave and a series of structures around and underlying the present western tower. In 1983 an excavation was carried out to test the validity of the dowsed evidence, in the angle between north transept and chancel, where the northern of the two subsidiary apses had been traced. The dowsing survey and excavation have been published (Briggs et al 1983 and 1985) and considered again against the wider background of similar surveys and investigation (Bailey et al 1988). To very briefly summarise the results of the excavation.. rubble footings were found beneath the western part of the chancel which clearly pre-dated the wall above, with irregularities in plan which would correlate with the removal of the dowsed apse to the north although this, if it existed, had been cleared away prior to the construction of the north transept. It was commented that the putative triple-apsed phase of the church would 'best fit into a Norman milieu' (Bailey et al 1988, 101). Early burials beneath the site of the putative removed aisle apse were set skew to the present axis of the building, but might have been aligned to an earlier Saxon apse further to the west.



Dowsed plan of the church (Bailey et al 1988, 163)

The first church of which above-ground remains survive, of mid-12th century date, was clearly a substantial building, but its exact extent remains unclear. Fabric of this date clearly survives in the west tower, the west respond of the north arcade, the east respond of the arch into the south transept, and the east wall of the nave, coupled perhaps with some masonry at the north end of the east wall of the south transept. It would seem most likely that this church had the postulated tri-apsed east end. In addition to the circumstantial evidence for an apse to the north aisle provided by the 1983 excavation, there is evidence in the east wall of the south transept that can be interpreted as indicating an archway, presumably framing an apse,

there as well. Rather more survives of a 12th-century arch in precisely this position at Mitford, which provides a useful parallel.

The question arises whether the 12th-century church had transepts as well as aisles. The western respond of the present arch into the south transept looks as if this has always been its function, rather than having been an arcade pier, but the north transept seems to have been entirely of 13th century construction (as confirmed in the 1983 excavation). There is 'cubicular' masonry in the south transept, but, as with similar fabric in the chancel, the fact that only occasional stones in it are fire-reddened suggests re-use.

This fire-reddening is a major clue in unravelling the subsequent structural history of the building. It is simple to distinguish areas of fabric that have extensive reddening, ie form in-situ parts of a church subject to a serious fire, from those in which scattered reddened stones indicate post-fire re-use. Both chancel arch and the arch into the south transept are thoroughly reddened, and must survive from a 13th-century remodelling of the Norman church. It seems likely the chancel was rebuilt at the same time as well. There are indications of the stubs of the side walls of a chancel a little narrower than the present one, although whether this was the presumably apsidal 12th century one or a 13th century successor it is difficult to say.

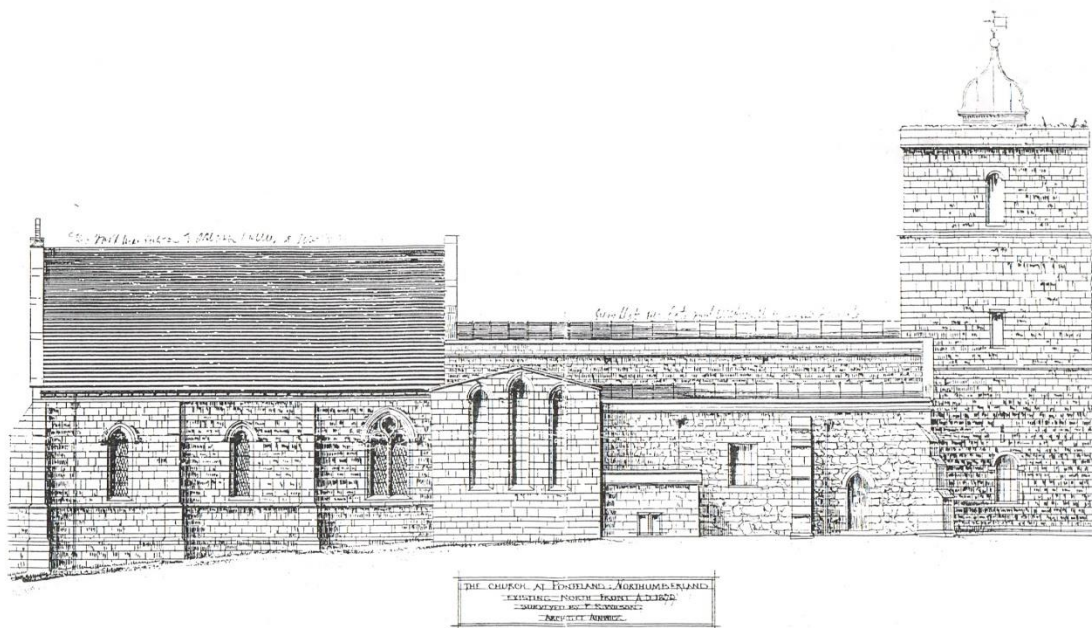
It is hard not to correlate the later fires and subsequent remodellings of the church with the outbreak of the wars with Scotland towards the end of the 13th century. The present chancel is usually ascribed a 13th century date, with new windows inserted c1320 but the evidence of the fire-reddening seems to suggest that it was in fact completely rebuilt in the early 14th century, re-using features - the piscina and the two lancets in the north wall - from its fire-damaged predecessor. It is difficult to see the features of the central bay of the south wall, the priest's door and the manner in which the string course steps up over it, and the way they relate to the two-light window above, as anything other than a unified and contemporary composition .

A second remodelling, which produced the present south arcade and south aisle would correlate almost too well with the recorded raid on Ponteland by the Scottish army immediately prior to the Battle of Otterburn in 1388. Newcastle churches provide useful parallels to the south arcade (St Nicholas' Cathedral) and south aisle windows (St Andrew's Church); H.L.Honeyman dated arcade and aisle to c 1390 (Pevsner et al 1992, 543). Once again older features were re-used - the south doorway and its porch, set rather awkwardly overlapping the corner of the aisle so as to allow space for the new aisle windows, seems late-13th century in origin but was re-located a hundred years later.

The west tower poses its own problems as well. The well-coursed small 'cubicular' blocks, seen again in the east wall of the nave, are only found in the lower 4 or 5 metres of the external walls, but seem to extend to the full height of the west wall of the nave. The upper parts of the first and all of the second stage of the tower have quite different fabric, but their architectural features still look conventional Norman work. Might these have been re-used as well? It is difficult to say. The pointed tower arch may well sit on earlier jambs. There is less

fire-reddening in this area. The third, belfry, stage is obviously a later addition, perhaps of the 14th or 15th century.

The north aisle is said to have been rebuilt in the 15th century, but it has suffered so many vicissitudes since that it is difficult to say anything conclusive about it, although parts of its walling and its two buttresses could well be late medieval. The high-pitched earlier medieval roof of the nave was probably replaced by a low-pitched leaded one later in the medieval period as well, which survived until c1880.



North elevation of the church prior to the c1880 restoration, after F.R.Wilson

Then comes the usual late medieval/post-medieval hiatus in significant structural works to churches which were either recorded, or allowed to survive, to be followed by later post-medieval works attested by documentary sources survive. An account of the church by Rev J.Walker, read upon the occasion of a visit by the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries on 30th May 1895⁴ provides valuable information: in 1744 a new screen was placed under the tower, and in 1760 parts of the east window, which had been built up, were to be re-opened and glazed. Around 1820 the north aisle wall fell down and had to be rebuilt⁵ and in 1853-1854 came a major restoration when the north arcade was ‘all rebuilt substantially’; earth piled against the north wall was removed, a new external perimeter drainage system installed⁶, the building re-floored and the whole church re-pewed; despite all this structural problems continued and the north arcade was rebuilt in 1861 (Bailey 2005). Walker tells us that the

⁴ (1896) *Proceeding of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle* 7, 202-7

⁵ Grundy et al give 1810

⁶ Celebrated in an article in the *Illustrated London News*, see footnote 1.

south transept had been ‘completely altered’ and was ‘not improved by a mullioned south window put in by Miss Bates of Milburn’⁷

In 1880-1882 came a major restoration carried out by the architect F.R. Wilson. The surviving papers⁸ include ‘as is’ and ‘proposed’ drawings for both the ground plan and the north elevation. Wilson added the present stair turret on the north of the tower; the drawings show he intended to rebuild the whole south-west corner of the tower, which was suffering structural failure, but instead he added the present large buttress; he also intended to add a full spire.. He also took down and rebuilt the north transept, which also had major structural problems, replacing the old features. In the north aisle he replaced a plain square-headed sash window in the north wall with the present two-light window, and made a new window at the north end of the east wall, replacing one further south now covered by the new turret. A new window was made at the west end of the south aisle. Inside the church he removed a western gallery in the western bay of the nave, which had been erected by a Mrs Barbara Coates and had panels painted by the ‘local poet Whittle’ in the style of ‘poker paintings’. The roofs of the nave and north transept were replaced, that of the nave being returned to its high-pitched earlier medieval form, which was evidenced by an old roof-line on the tower. An older leaded cupola on the top of the tower was replaced by a slated spirelet. The chancel was restored in 1885, its floor being raised, new organ, stalls and panelling being provided and a new roof constructed (Bailey 2005).

In the 1970s the church was re-ordered with a central altar, the old chancel furnishings being removed and a new organ installed in the south transepts. The tower was screened off to provide a vestry; more recently an extension containing a kitchen and toilets has been added on the north of the north of the western bay of the north aisle. Wilson’s slated spirelet on the tower has been replaced by an openwork metal successor.

The Archaeology of the Church

St Mary’s Church, with its Anglo-Saxon origins, is clearly a church of considerable archaeological importance. However much weight one gives to the dowsed plan, the complexity of the structural history of the visible structure means that evidence of earlier building phases almost certainly survives beneath the present floors, and in the churchyard adjacent to its walls, although as usual sub-surface deposits and structural remains will have been disturbed by the usual centuries of burial and perhaps the construction of an underfloor heating system- there is now no clear evidence of this, as the church has been re-floored.

Any works that entail disturbance of underfloor deposits will require at the least archaeological monitoring; this also goes for works in the churchyard. It should be borne in

⁷ A pre-1880 photograph (Almond & Stobbs 1984, 2) shows the present Perpendicular style three-light south window in the transept, but the ‘as is’ plan with the 1880 faculty shows a two-light window here, suggesting Miss Bates’ short-lived window was replaced (and the photograph taken) after the plan was made but before the main restoration was carried out..

⁸ Northumberland County Record Office, Woodhorn ref DN/E/8/2/1/106

mind that, especially in the immediate vicinity of a church building around which accumulated ground levels may have been reduced (to reduce damp problems), articulated burials may be encountered at relatively shallow depth.

The internal wall faces of the church are now clear of plaster, so it is unlikely that any significant remains of early wall finishes and paintings exist.

Peter F Ryder January 2016

(who would like to acknowledge helpful discussion with Professor Richard Bailey)

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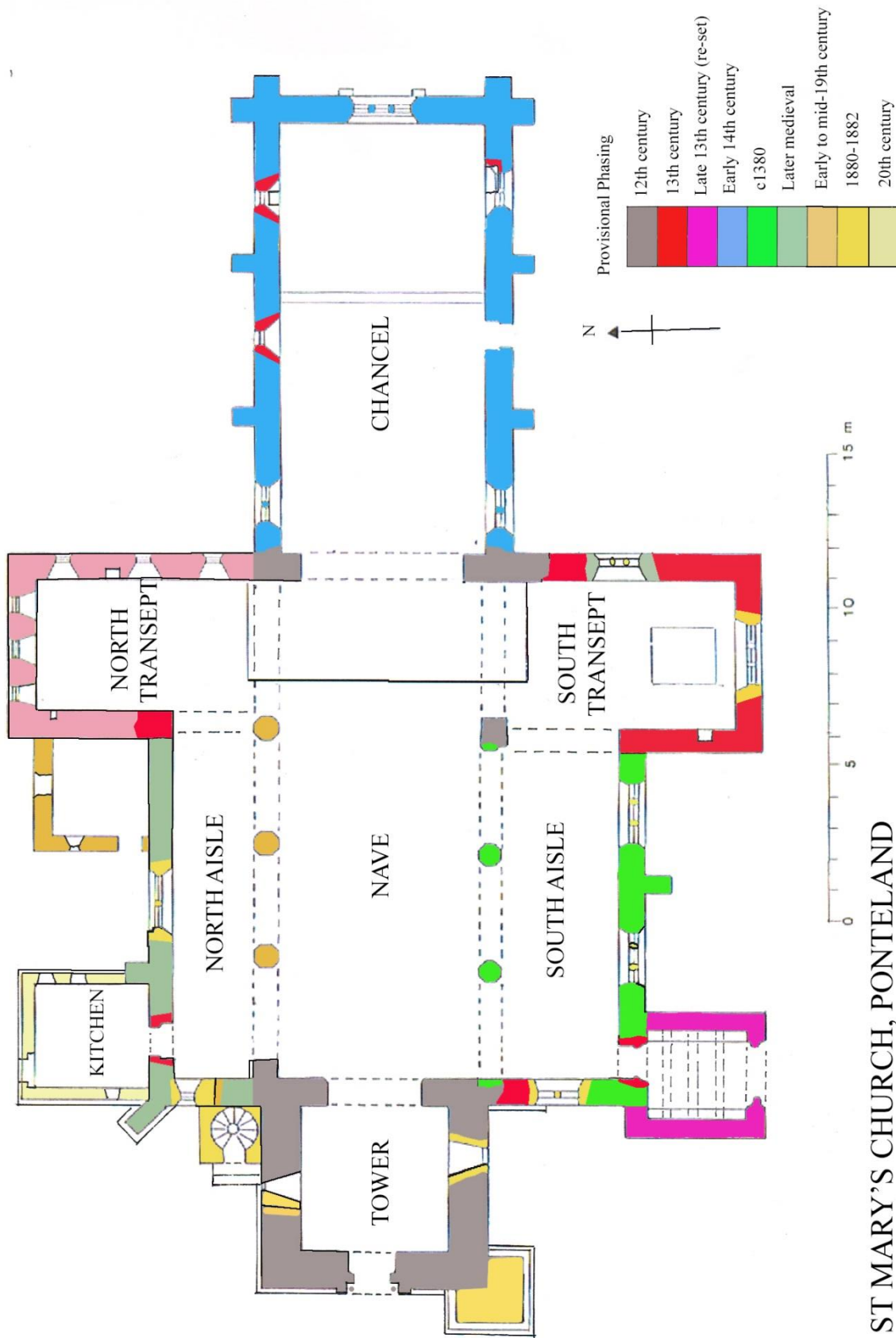
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Appendix 1 Medieval Cross Slabs (illus from Ryder 2002)

- (1) Internal lintel of central lancet on N N transept.
- (2) Internal lintel of N aisle N door
- (3) Lintel of opening from tower into nave roof.
- (4) Lintel adjacent to (3)
- (5) Lintel of E belfry opening
- (6) Pre-Conquest headstone set in internal face of S wall of lower stage of tower.
- (7) Slab forming side of gabled recess above rear arch of S aisle W window
- (8) Fragment built into Vicar's Tower.

Ponteland (St. Mary) Slabs 1 and 7 are of approximate size and scale

