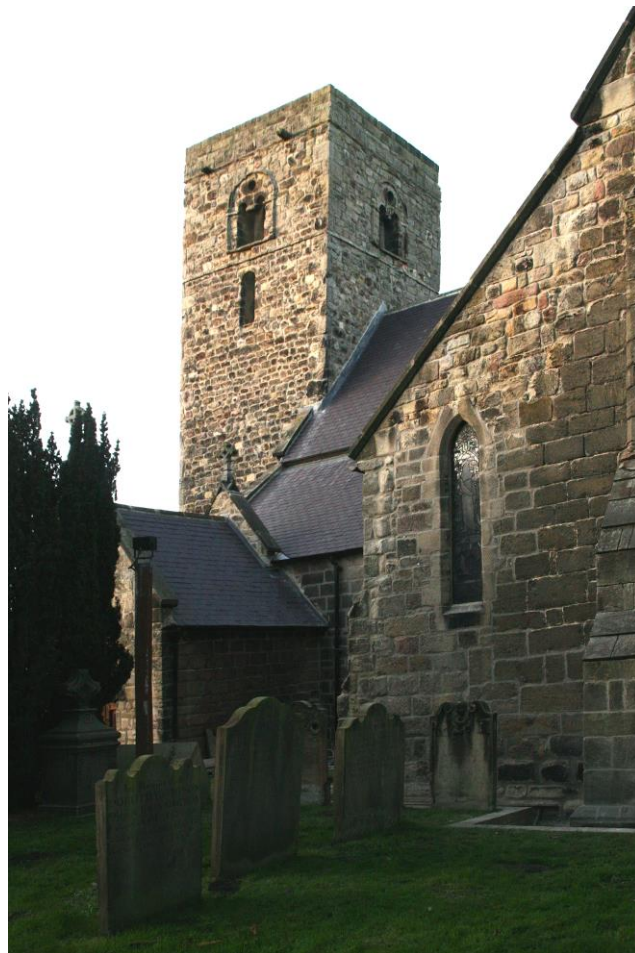


# St Mary the Virgin Ovingham Northumberland

An Archaeological Assessment

November 2006



**Peter F Ryder**  
**Historic Buildings Consultant**

**St Mary the Virgin, Ovingham  
Northumberland**

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Roof space above the Vestry, looking north-east, showing the south-western angle quoin of the Saxon nave.

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## St Mary the Virgin, Ovingham

Ovingham parish church consists of a four-bay aisled nave with a west tower, south-west vestry and south porch, transepts with two-bay western aisles and an aisleless chancel.

The **West Tower** is constructed in the main of coursed roughly-shaped stone in almost square blocks; there are occasional courses with much more elongate slabs, notably on the north<sup>1</sup>, often in almost square blocks, with megalithic angle quoins, roughly side alternate, more regular in upper levels. The tower consists of a tall lower stage that rises unbroken to a chamfered set-back at the base of the belfry; above that there is an eroded string, chamfered above and below, at the base of the parapet, which is constructed of better-quality squared stone. On the west side of tower there is no sign of any opening below a small window at around half the height of the tall lower stage; this has a semicircular head cut into a monolithic block, and jambs that are made up of a horizontal block at the head and a vertical one below.



(Left) General view from the south-west

The belfry openings each consist of a pair of round-headed openings, the head of each opening being cut into a separate block (cf Newburn), with very eroded impost, divided by a mid-wall circular shaft with a slab running the full width of the wall as its capital. Above the two arches is a separate block pierced by an oval opening. The impost is carried back to join the outer frame, which consists of narrow pilasters with a larger block at the head and foot of each, a semicircular stripwork hood above and a continuation of the stripwork forming a projecting sill below. The parapet has a large modern spout at its centre, and a plain level top.

The lower part of the south side of the tower is covered by the vestry; above its roof but still below the level of the window

in the west wall is a round-headed window with a rough chamfered surround that could be a later modification; it has a monolithic head and large irregular blocks in the jambs. Just below the belfry is a tall and narrow round-arched opening that appears to be a doorway; its head seems to be cut into a single block (now broken) and its jambs are of irregular blocks; it appears to have a worn threshold, with a later stone inserted.. The parapet on this side has two broken spouts projecting from the string course.

The north wall of the tower is unbroken by any opening below the belfry; in the re-entrant angle between tower and north aisle is a stepped buttress-like feature in tooled 19th-century stone that

<sup>1</sup>One at around a third of the height of the tall lower stage, and two more 2-3 m from the top of it; on the west there is a similar course c 1.5 m below the single window, and on the south one a little below the high-level doorway. There are quite a lot of elongate blocks in the upper part of the east face of the tower, above the nave roof.

carries a flue from the boiler room below; it has sloping off-sets, and two iron straps binding it together. Two spouts project from the base of the parapet, as on the south.



(Left) Western belfry opening

On the east side of the tower, above the northern slope of the nave roof is a rising line of squared blocks, possibly a relatively recent repair; they could represent an earlier roof-line, but there seems to be no corresponding feature on the south so this seems unlikely.

The only walling of the **Nave** exposed externally is at the west end; on the south of the tower the upper third of the original south-west angle quoin is visible above the vestry roof, and is of large alternate blocks of Pre-Conquest character. On the north the later boiler house flue conceals most of the quoin, except for c 15 cm of the west face of the uppermost part, which appears to be of

considerably smaller blocks than on the south. The steep gable has a cut coping chamfered on its underside, the lowermost section being integral with a big squared footstone; coping and footstone look of 19<sup>th</sup>-century character and are similar to those of the other gables of the church.

The east wall of the nave is, unusually, set some distance to the line of the east side of the transepts, with the result that none of its fabric is exposed externally except for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century stonework of its gable above the chancel roof.

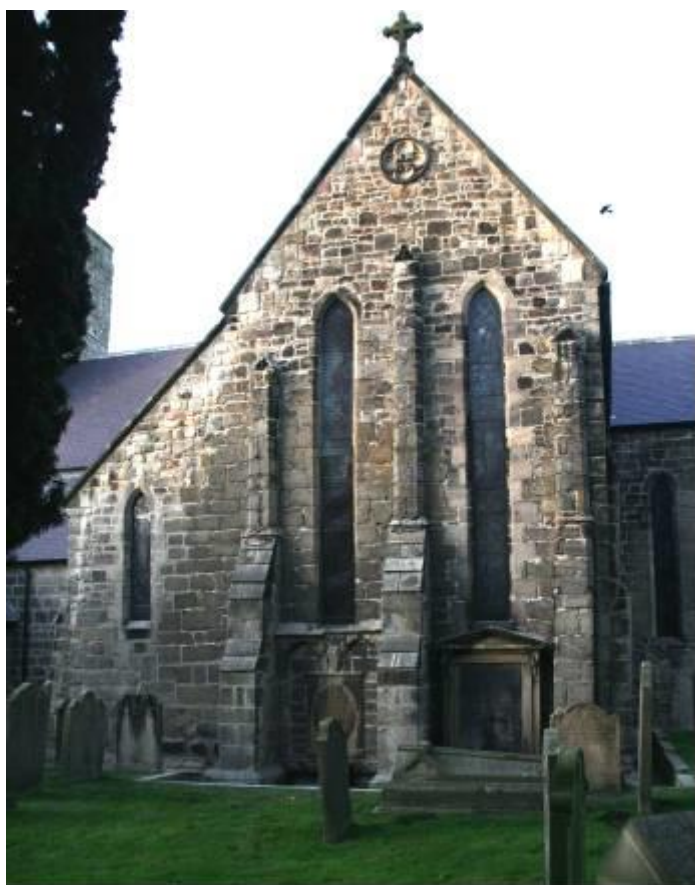
One bay of the south wall of the **South Aisle** is exposed to the east of the porch. Built of coursed squared stone, it has one course of particularly large and almost square blocks low down, above a simple stepped footing that for c 1.5 m at its east end becomes a roughly chamfered plinth. There is a possible infilled opening, or rebuilt area, beneath the window, which is a pair of lancets in a double chamfered surround, having a central attached shaft with simple moulded capital and base; the outer chamfer has scroll stops above the capital. Parts of the jambs look to be old stonework (although apparently inserted in the wall) whilst the head, sill and central shaft are all clearly 19<sup>th</sup>-century work, as is probably the area of walling directly above, and the chamfered oversailing course at the eaves.

The **South Porch** projects from the west part of the south wall of the south aisle although its west wall is actually set a little outside the line of the west end of the aisle. It is built of coursed and squared stone in quite large blocks. Its outer opening has a two-centred arch of one continuous double-chamfered order, with a simple hood, with a hollow moulding on its lower angle, that has very worn head stops at both ends, and a third similar one at the apex. Some of the dressings of the arch show parallel tooling of late 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century type, but its overall character is medieval. Directly above is a lancet-arched recess, chamfered round, with a later projecting sill, now containing a modern figure of the Virgin and Child. Unusually the north wall of the porch has its own gable, rising above and set a little forward from the eaves of the aisle wall behind. Both gables have 19<sup>th</sup>-century copings of the usual type, the outer with a ring cross finial and the inner with a cross fleury finial



The **Vestry** at the west end of the south aisle is built of coursed roughly-squared stone with substantial alternate angle quoins, and has a pent roof of Welsh slate set against the west walls of aisle and nave behind; the coping on its south side has a good swept kneeler of 18th-century character at its foot.. There are square-headed windows in the centre of its west and south walls, with roughly-tooled lintels but no other cut dressings; they now contain 12-pane casement windows, probably replacing earlier sashes. There is a truncated chimney stack at the south-east corner.

The **North Aisle** is of coursed rubble, including some fire-reddened stone; its chamfered plinth and the alternating quoins .at the north-west angle are of 19<sup>th</sup>-century character, as are the small lancet on the west and the two double lancets on the north; these are similar to those in the south aisle and west wall of the south transept, but rather simpler, in having surrounds of a single chamfered order. At the west end of the aisle, and set against the north wall of the tower, is a sunken boiler room with a stair dropping eastward to a doorway at the east end of its north wall.



The west wall of the **South Transept** is very similar to the adjacent bay of aisle wall, although it has no footing or plinth; once again there is a single course of large square blocks in the lower wall. At the south end is an old stepped buttress, rising to two third of the height of the wall, with a chamfered plinth continued along the south end of the transept. The one window is a double lancet very like that in the aisle wall, an apparent insertion remodelled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The south end of the transept (left) is quite complex; the end of the main body of the transept has three buttresses, the central taller than the others, with lancet windows between them, with a smaller lancet to the left in the end of the transept aisle. It is built of large squared and coursed blocks; there is a ragged vertical break in the end wall of the aisle with the

end section (clearly secondary) being in rather smaller stone; a chamfered plinth is continued along the wall and round the buttresses, with a lower chamfered member appearing towards the east. The three buttresses have originally been of rather shallow projection, with their lower parts rectangular in plan, and the upper semi-octagonal, rising to a trefoiled top, but structural concerns have prompted the addition of deeper stepped buttresses to the central and western; these additions have diagonally-tooled dressings of 19<sup>th</sup>-century character. Between the lower parts of the two extended buttresses is a raised panel of wall set slightly forward from the main wall face, and apparently secondary. It contains a pair of blind two-centred arched recesses, the

pier between them having been replaced by a monument dated 1796; removal of a stone during repointing work in November 2006 showed that the recesses formerly were c 0.45 m deep, with a mortared rear face. In the upper section of wall between the buttresses are two large lancets with chamfered surrounds; the dressings of the eastern are all in tooled 19<sup>th</sup>-century ashlar but the western seems authentic medieval work. The upper part of the steeply-pitched gable, with a circular ashlar panel containing a big quatrefoil, looks all 10<sup>th</sup>-century work. The lancet in the end of the aisle is again 19<sup>th</sup>-century work, although below it one stone of the chamfered east jamb and the turn of the sill of a predecessor, although this still looks to have been an insertion in the older walling to the right, although it could be contemporary with the smaller coursed stone of the west end of the wall and west wall of the aisle..

The east side of the transept is built of regular courses of squared block of olive/grey sandstone, with a two-part chamfered plinth. One shallow two-stepped buttress is set just short of the south end and another in centre, dividing the wall into two bays, each of which has two lancet windows; the buttresses have sloped caps topped by a roll moulding parallel to the wall. The windows have simple chamfered surrounds and heads made up of two blocks, and all look authentic medieval work; the only variation between them is that the two blocks making up the heads of the northernmost are broader, and their extrados together make up a semicircle.

The **North Transept** is a slightly humbler version of the south. Its gable end has three buttresses, but they are of simple stepped form like those on the side walls, without the more elaborate semi-octagonal upper sections seen on those of the south transept and chancel gable ends; the two lancets between them (with two-block heads) seem quite authentic although the upper part of the gable (with a ring-cross finial) is probably a rebuild. As on the south there is a ragged vertical break in the masonry c 0.60 m of the western buttress, implying that the greater part of the walling of the transept aisle is a later rebuild. The small lancet in the north end of the aisle is all 19<sup>th</sup>-century, as is that on the west. The lower member of the plinth disappears below ground level at the north end of the aisle; the upper member has been renewed from the north-west corner and for the full length of the west wall. This shows a break in its lower courses c 1.5 m from its south end; the fabric to the south of this is roughly-coursed rubble (apparently of one build with the adjacent north aisle), which extends rather further in the upper section of the wall. This break corresponds with the footings of what appeared to be the north wall of an earlier and wider north aisle seen in 2000 (Ryder 2000, 1 & 4).

The east wall of the transept is constructed of coursed squared stone and has, like the adjacent chancel wall, much evidence of burning in its southern parts and on the south face of the central buttress<sup>2</sup>. Very like the east wall of the south transept, it has a two-part chamfered plinth, two stepped buttresses with toll-moulded caps and four lancet windows, with monolithic heads. There is a large square socket, now infilled, between and a little below the two southern lancets, and other evidence of cuts and L-shaped blocks at the south end of the wall; a horizontal cut for the roof of some adjacent structure (at the same level as that on the north of the chancel) crosses the southern part, cutting across the bases of its lancets..

The south wall of the **Chancel** is built of coursed fawn sandstone in quite large blocks; there is a ragged vertical break c 0.6 m to the west of the east end of the western bay, carried up almost to the full height of the wall, although the topmost four or five courses seem continuous. The

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<sup>2</sup>Footings of an east-west wall abutting on this buttress were seen in 2000 (Ryder 2000, 2 & 4-5); this would appear to have been the north wall of the structure destroyed by the fire, the presence of which protected the east face of the buttress from any fire damage.

chamfered plinth (which extends right round the chancel) seems continuous with that of the adjacent transept, and the two-stepped buttresses that articulate the wall into three regular bays are again similar to those of the east side of the transept. Each bay has a lancet with a monolithic head. At the west end of the wall is a low-side window, a small lancet with dressings of a roughish grey stone, apparently set within a blocked two-centred arch partly concealed by the transept<sup>3</sup>. The low-side does appear to pre-date the transept, as the chamfer of its west jamb falls slightly behind the line of the outer face of the transept wall. To the east of the low-side is a priest's doorway, with a segmental-pointed arch, only c 1.5 m high, of a single double-chamfered order, all in 19<sup>th</sup>-century tooled ashlar; the archaeological recording in 2000 (Ryder 2000, 5) confirmed that this doorway was an insertion, cutting through the earlier plinth.

The east end of the chancel has four buttresses, the end ones set just inside the angles, which are rectangular in plan in their lower sections and semi-octagonal above, like those of the south transept. The inner buttresses are taller and have gabled tops, the outer with sloped caps topped by a roll moulding parallel to the wall. The three stepped lancets have heads cut from pairs of stones; the apex of the gable, with a cross fleury finial, looks to have been rebuilt. The kneelers at the foot of the gable are ancient, and each has a pair of heads on its lower angle, the northern being the better preserved.

The north wall of the chancel is constructed of coursed squared stone; there has been much reddening, almost certainly the result of fire. Like the south the wall is divided into three bays, but on this side they are irregular, the western being the longest. Each bay has a lancet window with a monolithic head, but the sill of the central one seems to have been re-set a little higher than the others, to allow for an inserted doorway beneath it that at one time seems to have opened into a vestry or sacristy. A low-pitched roof-line that must relate either to this room or some later structure rises across the western bay, and cuts across the lower part of the western lancet, the lower jambs of which are much patched in cement. The west end of the plinth has been cut back at some time.

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The east wall of the transept is constructed of coursed squared stone and has, like the adjacent chancel wall, much evidence of burning in its southern parts. Very like the east wall of the south transept, it has a two-part chamfered plinth, two stepped buttresses with toll-moulded

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<sup>3</sup>This remains somewhat uncertain; the extrados of the lancet head is certainly cut to a curve, but the apparent line of the 'arch' may be no more than an incision continuing this curve in the recent pointing. The plinth is continuous below the 'arch'.

caps and four lancet windows, with monolithic heads. There is a large square socket, now infilled, between and a little below the two southern lancets, and other evidence of cuts and L-shaped blocks at the south end of the wall; a horizontal cut for the roof of some adjacent structure (at the same level as that on the north of the chancel) crosses the southern part, cutting across the bases of its lancets.

### **The Interior**

The **South Porch** has stone benches on either side, each incorporating parts of post-medieval monuments (including a piece on the east with a 1671 date); the walls above are whitewashed walls and the roof, of no great antiquity but apparently re-using older timbers, has a central principal rafter truss and one set against the north wall that has two levels of collars. Inside the porch the South Door has a semicircular arch of three orders; the inner has a continuous chamfer, and the outer two each a roll on the angle, set between two hollows; these are carried on jamb shafts, with moulded capitals that are square at the abacus, below an impost band with a chamfer on its lower angle; the western impost also has a groove, whilst the eastern is badly damaged. Only the inner shaft on the west is of any age, but is probably not original; the western shafts have moulded bases but the relatively recent eastern ones simply rest on plain square-edged blocks.

The interior of the main body of the church has walls that are plastered and whitewashed walls, except for the west and lower parts of the east walls of the nave, and the dressings of the arcades..

The walls of the lowest stage of the **West Tower** are plastered and yellow-washed; a wooden stair of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century character rises alongside the south wall to a gallery on the west, and a further flight leading up to the first floor. Just below the underdrawn plaster ceiling the small window in the south wall has a round rear arch, behind plaster.

The first floor/second stage of the tower has exposed stonework in its walls, which show a variety of interesting feature. On the east, with its sill c 2.5 m above the floor, is the round-headed Saxon doorway that opens high in the west wall of the nave; its jambs, cut square with the wall, are made up of alternate long and upright stones, and its head cut into a single megalithic slab (now cracked). At the north-east corner, above the head of the stair, two shaped 19<sup>th</sup>-century corbels carry a brick flue that rises to the top of the tower; on the north wall, west of this, is a large socket a metre or so below the ceiling, that has a sloped top, with a smaller one alongside, and another smaller one directly below it. There is another large socket cut into the south wall, but towards its east end; lower down near the centre of the wall is a block with a series of incised lines, probably a re-used Roman piece. On the west wall is a small window with an irregular rear arch and a sill that seems to have been roughly cut down.

The second floor of the tower is carried on north-south beams of upright section, that do not appear of any great age; access in by a ladder to a hatch at the south-east corner. In the room above, the high-level doorway in the south wall is similar in form to that in the east wall on the floor below, but is rather smaller (c 1.3 m high by 0.50 m wide). Above it, towards either end of the wall are the remains of cut-back corbels, and there are a corresponding pair on the north. The present ceiling (belfry floor) is carried on three modern east-west girders, with bricked-up sockets directly beneath them, whilst in the west wall there are two further shallow cuts beneath the central and northern ones.



A further ladder rises to the belfry, which has timber bell frames of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century character. Internally the heads of the main belfry openings are identical to those externally, with round arches flush with the face of the wall, but the smaller opening above these, which externally are oval piercings in large blocks, have square heads internally, made up of uprights in the jambs and a stone lintel. The belfry roof is of 20<sup>th</sup>-century concrete, carried on a heavy north-south concrete beam set centrally; there are also concrete beams at the head of the east and west walls. The ladder from the floor below continues through the belfry to a hatch on the east side of the roof.

The west wall of the **Nave** is of coursed squared stone, although heavy ribbon pointing makes it difficult to examine. The east face of the tower arch is completely hidden by the organ; the arch is semicircular and quite large, with a continuous chamfered jambs and arch. The jambs are made up of coursed blocks, but the arch itself of through stones. All the stonework shows the distinctive parallel tooling common in the church, characteristic of surfaces that have been recut in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The use of through stones in the arch suggest that this is the original Saxon tower arch is a heavily re-cut form; it may well have once had projecting imposts, now cut back flush. Only the soffit of the arch and inner faces of the jambs are exposed. High above, just below the roof, is a round-arched high-level doorway into the second stage of the tower; its head is partly concealed by the adjacent roof truss, and the combination of old plaster and ribbon pointing obscure the form of its dressings on this side of the wall.



(Left) Interior looking east

The dominant feature of the interior of the church is the arcades - four bays ones to the nave and two-bay ones to each transept, all with unusually lofty two-centred arches. The arches are all of two chamfered orders, with hoodmoulds, chamfered below, to nave and transept. The nave hoodmould has good head stops, set c 1 m above the capitals of the piers below. The nave arcade responds are semicircular in plan and the piers circular, except for the eastern one on each side which is octagonal, and elongate north-south in plan show as to support both the main arcade and the transverse one dividing the transept from its aisle. The bases, where they survive, have mouldings of 'holdwater' type, and are set on octagonal plinths. The capitals, unless otherwise specified, have rings at the base and are octagonal at the abacus.

The eastern pier of the south arcade has an interesting capital, an elongate north-south octagon in plan, carved in relief with foliage of 14<sup>th</sup>-century character; its south-western quarter has been lost at some time and replaced by an uncarved block. The other capitals have rings at the base and octagonal abaci. The north arcade is similar, but here all three piers have similar mouldings to their caps, rather more elaborate in style, and usually thought later in date, than those of the south arcade. They also look suspiciously 'fresh'; it is not clear whether they have

been renewed or simply re-tooled like the faces of the piers below. The dressings of the upper parts of the arches on their north side look badly weathered, as if exposed to the elements at some time.

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century nave roof is of four bays, with collar beam trusses that have long arch braces coming down onto quadrant-section stone corbels, and upper kingposts with moulded capitals and bases; there are two levels of purlins ridge, and ashlar to the eaves. The transept roofs, each of four shorter bays, are very similar, and those of the aisles clearly contemporary as well, with arch braces rising to the principals from similar corbels, and short braces from the arcade walls.

Inside the **Vestry** the walls are whitewashed; any detail of the fireplace set diagonally at the south-west corner is now concealed, and there is a boarded dado; perhaps the most interesting feature is a wall-safe in the east wall, with a cast-iron door dated '1815'. There is an underdrawn plaster ceiling, with a trapdoor allowing a look into the roof space above, and a view of various interesting features. The mid-section of the south-west nave quoin is exposed, showing massive alternate blocks like those above the vestry roof. In the south wall of the tower is what appears to be a roughly circular opening c 0.3 m across, doubtless secondary, now blocked up; high on the west wall of the south aisle the principal rafter of the vestry roof is lodged in a socket that has clearly once been larger in size, but is probably too small to have been a window; lower down are indistinct traces of a possible curved window head.

In the **South Aisle** the South Door has a round-headed rear arch, behind plaster; the window to the east has a segmental-pointed rear arch with a chamfer to its head only, and a level sill with a chamfer to its front edge. The only feature in the west wall is a plain square-headed doorway to the vestry.

The two-bay arcade in the **South Transept** has similar detail to the nave arcades; the circular pier has no exposed base, whilst above it the hoodmould is stopped in a fine foliate boss. At its north end the arcade springs from the capital of the eastern pier of the main arcade, and at the south it is carried on a moulded shaft rising from a corbel, distinguished by two vertical lines of big dog-tooth ornament, below its moulded capital. The lancet windows have roughly semicircular arches, all behind plaster; beneath the south jamb of the southern of the northern pair is a small piscina with a chamfered arch of rough four-centred form, and a drain, but no remains of any bowl. The two windows in the transept aisle have rear arches of similar form to that in the south nave aisle.

The west aisle of the **North Transept** is considerably wider than that of the south; once again the details of the transept arcade follow those of the nave arcade, the central pier having no base exposed. In this case the junction between the two arcades seems to be handled rather more clumsily; the hoodmould of the transept arcade cuts awkwardly into the outer order of that of the nave. At the north end the arcade is again carried on a short shaft rising from a corbel, quite different from its counterpart in the south transept. Here there is a line of nail-head ornament in the semi-octagonal moulded capital, with a triple shaft beneath. The hoodmould stops here are carved heads, as usual around 1 m above the capitals, except for that at the south end is a small foliate boss. The rear arches of the lancets, behind plaster, are of roughly semicircular to three-centred form; those of the aisle windows again resemble those in the nave aisles.

The **Chancel** is entered under a large two-centred arch of two chamfered orders (without any hood), the inner carried on semi-octagonal responds with simple moulded capitals but no

surviving bases, and the outer simply resting on the top of a thicker block of walling; this has exposed stonework towards the nave, and is made up of large fire-reddened and somewhat damaged blocks. In the north-east angle of the nave, in the re-entrant angle between this walling and the cut-back south face of the eastern respond of the north arcade, a small 12<sup>th</sup>-century capital with acanthus leaves and grapes has been re-set c 2.5 m above the floor.

The walls of the chancel are all plastered, and there is comparatively little exposed detail. The lancet windows all have two-centred rear arches and stepped sills; the internal surrounds of the eastern triplet are distinguished by having a continuous roll moulding. On the south the low-side window has a three-centred rear arch and a horizontal sill; the priest's door alongside has a square head, and dressings that are all of tooled 19<sup>th</sup>-century ashlar. Between the two eastern lancets are a pair of sedilia; their moulded trefoil arches look old but their shafts and strangely-shaped bulbous capitals (with nail-head ornament) seem all restoration<sup>4</sup>. To the east of them is a piscina recess, with a monolithic two-centred chamfered head, now containing a modern aumbry. The east wall is faced in 19<sup>th</sup>-century ashlar, up to a big moulded string at the level of the lancet sills. At the foot of the side walls of the eastern section of the chancel, starting at the priests' door, is a low stone bench with a projecting slab top chamfered on its lower angle; this appears to be a genuine medieval feature, and to the east disappears beneath the present paving of the sanctuary.

The chancel roof is of five bays, and looks of later 19<sup>th</sup>-century character; it has arch-braced scissor trusses, all the members being richly moulded, with blank shields at the feet of the principals; there are two levels of purlins and a ridge. There are trusses set against the end walls, that at the east end having cusped panels in its upper section.

### **The Structural Development of the Church**

The West Tower and the walls of the nave - although the south-western quoin is the only visible feature of these - are of clearly Saxon character, although there is an ongoing debate as to their actual date. The tower is a member of a distinct Northumberland group; in Tynedale, nearby Bywell St Andrew has a very similar but slightly smaller tower, whilst the towers of Corbridge and Warden have been more heavily altered; nearer Newcastle Newburn is the latest member of the group, and is probably as late as the earlier 12<sup>th</sup> century; further north, Bolam is intermediate in character between Ovingham and Bywell and the more Norman Newburn.

The current consensus of opinion is that few church towers were built before the mid-11th century, and that many examples with 'Saxon' characteristics (eg in Lincolnshire) were in fact built in the later years of the century, after the Norman Conquest, but this is unlikely to be proven until some form of dating cut stone surfaces becomes readily available, as few such towers retain any contemporary timbers that might be suitable for dendrochronological analysis.

Although only the south-western quoin is visibly Saxon work, it seems that the nave walls of the early church remain; their height and relative thin-ness are characteristic of Saxon work. It was a common practice to insert arcades into earlier walling (as can be seen at Corbridge). The odd relationship between the transepts and east end of the nave furnishes another clue; the fact that the east walls of the transepts are set some distance east of the end of the nave shows

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<sup>4</sup>“Absolutely barbarous and worthy of immediate destruction” according to Morris (1916, 272, quoting *Archaeologia Aeliana* 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 123)

clearly that the nave wall pre-dates the transepts, and, more intriguingly, that the transept walls may have been raised on the foundations of earlier porticus, lateral chambers characteristic of Saxon churches which often (as can be seen at Bywell St Peter) overlapped or were ‘wrapped around’ the junction of nave and chancel.

A dowsed plan of the church (Bailey et al 1988, 162) showed the nave flanked by ranges of porticus, but with its east and west ends both within the lines of the current end walls; it also showed an east end formed by three apses set side-by-side, and a narrower western adjunct to the nave slightly shorter than the present tower, also with flanking chambers<sup>5</sup>.

Turning to the later medieval development of the church, overall the pattern is a common one in Northumberland; in the 13<sup>th</sup> century an early church is enlarged by the addition of aisles, transepts and a new chancel, before the Scottish Wars brought most ecclesiastical buildings works to a close for the remainder of the medieval period. During those troubled centuries many churches were reduced in size, to be only returned to their original extent by Victorian restorers. This pattern of enlargement, destruction and eventual restoration is well seen at Corbridge, a church that has many interesting parallels with Ovingham.

A detailed reconstruction of the medieval structural development of Ovingham church was put forward in the Northumberland County History (NCH) (1926,.60-67). There the tower is seen as of mid-11th century date; a general rebuilding of the remainder of the fabric began c1200 with the chancel and transepts, the older church being left standing as this work was carried out. A little later aisles were added both to the west side of the transepts and the nave; during this campaign of works it is suggested that the east responds of the nave arcades, and the pier and north respond in the north transept were built first, then the southern piers and west respond of the north arcade constructed, and finally the northern piers and all the arches were built<sup>6</sup>. It is suggested that various discrepancies in plan, such as the irregular setting out of the south transept and its arcade, resulted from the old church being retained whilst works proceeded, rendering the builders unable to get sight-lines from one part of the new structure to another. It is suggested that the old church may have had a south aisle; the present south door certainly seems late 12<sup>th</sup>-century work and earlier than anything else in the post-Saxon building.

The NCH scheme seems broadly credible, although a few points merit discussion. It would seem to imply only a short break between the construction of chancel and transepts and the remodelling of the nave, whereas some features suggest the works were spread over a longer period. One is the discontinuity between the main bodies of both transepts and their western aisles. In both cases the ragged break between the two different phases of fabric - the later using much smaller masonry - shows that the aisles were not simply added to earlier transepts; either the original builders had left a tothing of masonry to tie in with the proposed aisles, or, perhaps more likely (given the history of other churches in the area) the aisles were rebuilt after the original ones had been destroyed, perhaps in some Scottish raid. Tynedale suffered heavily in the first quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and C.C.Hodges (1925, 283) may be right when he saw the rebuilding of the transept aisles as part of a series of alterations in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which

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<sup>5</sup>Dowsing remains controversial. It could be argued that the dowsed plan indicates an earlier building than anything that now survives above ground; there is nothing in the present fabric, or in the sub-surface remains seen in the 2000 watching brief, to confirm any of its wall lines.

<sup>6</sup>If this supposition is correct, then it would seem to imply that the nave walls were taken down, the piers built and only later the arches constructed - thus Saxon work is unlikely to survive above the arcades.

included the addition of the south porch. It is possible that the nave aisles were rebuilt at the same time, and that the northern one was then lost again, perhaps in some later attack; there was no north aisle in 1834 when Sir Stephen described the church<sup>7</sup>, although footings for a nave aisle wider than the present one were seen in the 2000 watching brief (Ryder 2000) which lined up with the end of the medieval masonry in the transept aisle wall. On the south the west wall of the transept aisle is clearly of the same build as that of the adjacent nave aisle

If this is correct, then nave and transept arcades in their original form were all part of the same early-13th century scheme works; what is harder to work out is how much they have been altered subsequently, when the transept aisles perhaps south nave aisle) were reconstructed. Only the capital of the eastern pier of the south arcade can stylistically be ascribed to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but there could have been reconstruction using old materials; the re-tooling and re-cutting that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has further complicated interpretation. Briggs (2002, 61) suggests that the eastern piers of the arcades were rebuilt at this time; if this is the case then of course the arches above may have been reconstructed as well.

Another part of the church that has been lost at some time, and never rebuilt, is the vestry or sacristy on the north of the chancel. This was clearly an addition to the original 13<sup>th</sup>-century fabric; whilst it is tempting to ascribe its loss - it clearly burned down - to the troubled opening years of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it might even have been a post-medieval addition, and the fire taken place even as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the present vestry was built at the west end of the south aisle, another parallel with Corbridge.

Other post-medieval changes may have been swept away by the hand of the Victorian restorer. Late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century works at Ovingham are not well documented. The tower arch may have been altered early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Glynne speaks of it as 'a low plain round arch', which could refer to its present form. It is known that considerable works were carried out in 1857, including the reinstatement of the north aisle; the windows in the south aisle and west aisles of the transepts look of the same period. The roofs of the church are also of 19<sup>th</sup>-century date; the rather more elaborate one of the chancel looks like later 19<sup>th</sup>-century work but the others could well be of 1857.

## **Archaeological Assessment**

This is one of the more important old parish churches in Northumberland, both the Saxon west tower and the 13<sup>th</sup> century chancel and transepts being of considerable architectural significance. In terms of archaeological potential, the assessment of the relative importance of features and deposits that are concealed, is as usual fraught with difficulty.

The present floors of the church - stone slabs in the nave with boarding beneath the pews, stone slabs in the chancel (with some good ledger slabs in the sanctuary), with raised carpeted areas in both transepts - are of no great age; the slabbed areas include heating vents indicating that there is an underfloor heating system, served by the sunk boiler house at the west end of the

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<sup>7</sup>Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle 3<sup>rd</sup> ser III (1907-8), 108



north aisle.

This heating system, together with the usual many generations of burial, will obviously to some extent have disturbed sub-surface remains of earlier structure, but nevertheless the known importance and early origins of the church make it one of considerable archaeological potential; any works entailing disturbance of floor levels or re-flooring will require archaeological monitoring.

Turning to the above ground fabric, the fact that all almost all the internal walls of the church renders them rather mute from an archaeological point of view. Any works affecting this plaster will raise two areas of concern, one that lower layers of the plaster itself might be of significance (and preserve remains of mural decoration or texts, as at nearby Newburn), and the second that its removal may reveal fabric and features which themselves merit recording. Thus any significant plaster removal will also need to be accompanied by a recording scheme.

Outside the church, the building is encircled by a perimeter drain; the widening of this in 2000 brought to rather more significant archaeological information than had been anticipated (Ryder 2000); it is clear that there are structural remains of demolished parts of the church on the north of the nave (a wider north aisle) and between chancel and north transept (a former vestry or sacristy). A medieval grave slab buried at shallow depth close to the south-west corner of the south porch was seen in 2000; its presence should be taken into account if further works are carried out in this area, as may be prompted by the continuing structural problems suffered by the porch. Any further excavation work in the churchyard will thus require monitoring.

Although strictly speaking outside the scope of this assessment, the churchyard contains an important and varied collection of monuments, including some of both historical and artistic interest.

Peter F Ryder November 2006

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