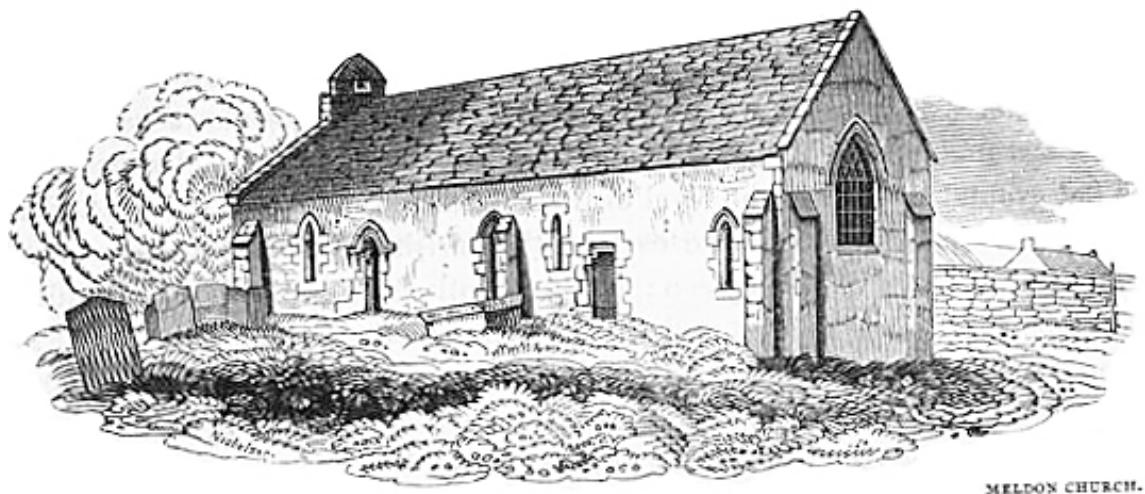


St John the Baptist

Meldon



MELDON CHURCH.

The church c1832, after Hodgson

An Archaeological Assessment

July 2014

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St John the Baptist, Meldon

The hamlet of Meldon lies on the south side of the Wansbeck valley c 8 km west of Morpeth, on a minor road running north from Whalton towards Hartburn; the church (NGR NZ 11958390) stands on a low ridge on the east side of the road. The church, now a Grade I listed structure, is today accompanied only by a former Victorian Rectory immediately to the south, and a farm to the north-west; only slight earthworks now indicate the position of Meldon Tower, once a seat of the Fenwick family, in the field beyond the Rectory (NGR NZ 12028380).

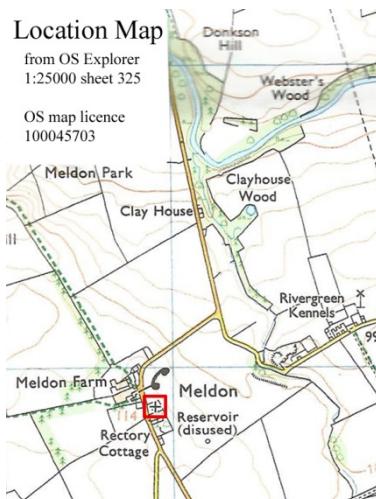
Historical Notes

Hodgson provides some basic historical information¹; he states that there was a tradition that the church was founded by Roger Bertram of Mitford and its advowson given to Robert Stichhill, Bishop of Durham; in 1310 a dispute between the priories of Durham and Lanercost as to whether Meldon was a dependent chapel of Mitford was resolved in favour of the former, with Meldon declared an independent parish in its own right. The building clearly suffered in the Scottish Wars; in 1317 it was classed as of no value, being, like other churches in the archdeaconry, ‘penitus exilia et destructa’; Brooke² points out that ‘there are no features in the present building, nor indications in documentary sources that the building was ever used or intended as a refuge’, suggesting that this role, often fulfilled by churches in this area, was taken by the tower house c150m to the south-east, recorded in the 1415 list as being owned by Nicholas Heron.

The Exterior

The church is a very simple building, a rectangle with a 19th century north-western vestry, set on ground that falls away to the east. It is built of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone, including some quite large blocks (especially in the east end); some areas of fabric show extensive reddening, as if burned, notably around the priest’s door on the south of the chancel and at mid-height in the south wall. There are plain buttresses with sloped caps a little below the eaves, set back at each corner and placed east-of-centre on the side walls, articulating the division into nave and chancel. A mutilated footing appears the foot of the east wall; a further exposed footing (at a higher level) and runs most of the length of the north wall, terminating abruptly c 3m short of the east end. The present roofs are of Welsh slate.

The windows are mostly short lancets with monolithic steeply two-centred heads and chamfered surrounds. In the west wall is a single lancet, unrestored medieval work, but the upper parts of the gable are all 19th century - the slab coping, chamfered on its underside, and the bellcote which has twin lancet openings and an open circle above, under a steep gable on moulded kneelers that rises to a trefoiled finial and carries a wrought-iron cross.



¹ Hodgson, J. *A History of Northumberland*, Part II Vol II 1832, 19-20

² C.J.Brooke 2000, *Safe Sanctuaries. Security and Defence in Anglo-Scottish Border Churches 1290-1600*, John Donald, 142



The church from the south-east

The south doorway has a two-centred arch of one chamfered order, with moulded imposts carrying a hoodmould, chamfered above and below, with shaped stops; parts of the jambs have clearly been renewed. There are five lancet windows; the first, set west of the door, is markedly taller than the others, with its head just below the eaves. The second is 19th century work and the fourth, just beyond the buttress marking the division between nave and chancel, has a shallower four-centred head; in effect this (together with an identical opening in the north wall) is a ‘low-side window’³ although its sill is in fact set slightly higher than the others. Between the two lancets on the south of the chancel is a priest’s door on the south of the chancel, which has a simple chamfered shouldered arch.

There are three lancets on the north of the church, all to the east of the 19th-century vestry which covers the original north doorway, two to the nave (the western 19th century) and one, a second ‘low-side’ with a shallower arch, at the west end of the chancel wall. Near the east end of the wall there are two courses of 19th-century ashlar at mid-height, indicating the position of the rear wall of the Cookson tomb.

The east end of the chancel has a larger window of here stepped lancets enclosed by a larger two-centred arch, lancets and outer arch having chamfered surrounds, and the outer arch having a hoodmould chamfered above and below, with shaped stops like those of the two nave doorways.

³ A window set at the west end of the chancel wall, often low down, and usually with a level internal sill; there was great debate in the 19th century about their function, the most likely suggestion being that they housed a lamp to shine out into the churchyard at night and discourage evil spirits.

The outer arch is old, but the three lights are Victorian restoration, bar for parts of their jambs. The gable coping and cross finial are of 19th century date as well.

The vestry is built of roughly-coursed and squared stone with lightly-tooled ashlar dressings, with neat alternating quoins and a chamfered plinth on north and west, absent on the east where there has been a pent-roofed outbuilding, now removed; the line of its roof remains obvious, cutting the dressings on the adjacent lancet in the nave wall. On the north are a pair of lancets, their heads and sills being cut into the same elongate blocks, and on the west a single lancet.

The Interior.

The church is entered through the south door, with three steps down to the nave floor; the door is enclosed by an internal wooden porch of 1892. The interior of the building is a simple rectangle, divided only by an attractive 1892 openwork timber screen; the walls are plastered, except for exposed dressings (and the lower part of the south wall to the west of the entrance). The opposed north and south doors have shallow segmental-pointed rear arches with chamfers to their heads only; the side walls of the nave are only 0.63 m thick, and neither doorway shows any evidence of a drawbar tunnel. The north doorway now opens into the 19th century vestry, and is identical to the south door, but generally better preserved although parts of the imposts have been cut back.



Interior looking east

Most of the lancet windows, both medieval and 19th century, have two-centred rear arches with chamfered heads, and level sills, but the opposed pair of 'low sides' at the entrance to the chancel have plain stone lintels. The priest's door has a renewed stone lintel, and here there are remains of bar sockets (but not seemingly full-scale drawbar tunnels) in the internal jambs. To the east of the door is a square aumbry with a rebated surround, and an old wooden door with decorative ironwork

(the hinge is said to be dated '1819'); at the east end of the wall, beyond the easternmost lancet, is a piscine; the recess has a chamfered two-centred arch and the bowl, placed in front of it on a moulded shaft, has a drain at the rear. On the north just below the sanctuary step is another small recess with an unmoulded square-edged two-centred arch, and east of that an elaborate wall monument to Isaac Cookson of Meldon Park, who 'departed out of his life at Munich in the Kingdom of Bavaria' in 1851. The monument, in a free 14th-century style, takes the form of a slab with a foliate cross inlaid in brass, set in a broad recess with an elaborate cusped arch with two orders of ball flower and a richly-carved hood rising to a central pinnacle, and flanked by panels with crocketted trefoiled arches, both the hood and the moulded front edge of the tomb slab ending in balls of carved foliage; the back of the recess bears an inscription, with above it the Cookson arms set on a background of geometrically-patterned foliage.

The east window has a two-centred chamfered rear arch; the panelled reredos is carried round its splayed ashlar internal jambs, which look largely restoration. The chancel furnishings seem to go with the screen; the sanctuary floor has elaborate Minton tiles with various emblems and inscriptions.

In the baptistery at the west end of the nave a recumbent effigy of Sir William Fenwick d.1652 (one arm supporting his head in what has been termed 'the toothache position') rests on a table tomb against the south wall beneath the lancet window; set into the wall to the west is a worn stone with the Fenwick arms carved in relief, thought to have been brought from the Tower. Set into the wall below the west window is a ledger slab, with arms, to Arthur Skinner d.1665

The roofs of the church are all 19th century; that of the nave has four bays, with arch-braced trusses carried on shaped stone corbels, and a panelled and boarded ceiling painted white. The chancel ceiling, east of the screen, is of two bays, and more elaborate; the central truss is similar but springs from moulded corbel with nailhead ornament; there is a brattished wall plate, and the ceiling is panelled and painted, each panel having the 'ihc' monogram and leaf decoration.

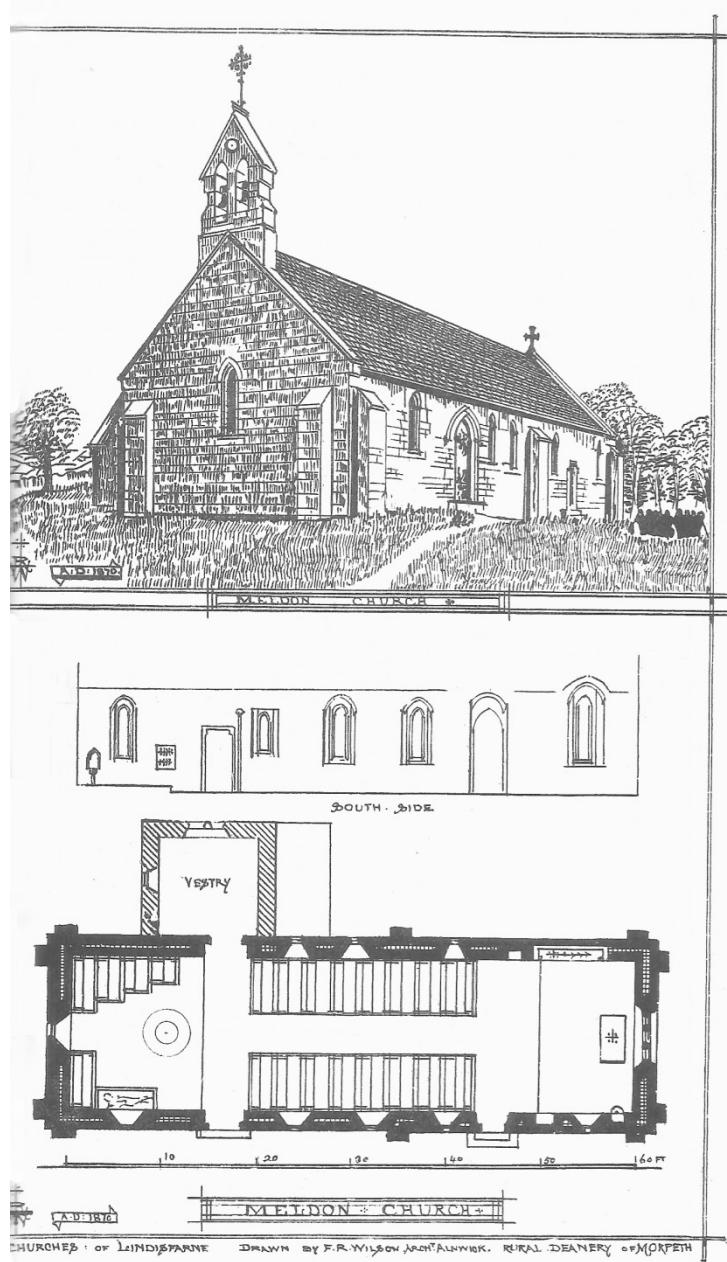
Inside the vestry the walls are plastered; the two lancets on the north are set in a broad recess with a chamfered lintel, and the single one in the west wall has a plain lintel. The two-bay roof has a simple collar beam truss with arch braces, carrying two levels purlins and a boarded ceiling.

Structural History

Meldon is far more a chapel than a church in form, and one that has, apparently, a quite simple and straightforward structural history. It would appear to have been built very much in its present form, in the earlier 13th century; despite Macleod⁴ argument that the walls are of early Norman date, there is really nothing to disprove contemporaneity between fabric and features. The thin walls and lack of any defensive provision argue a date before the commencement of the Anglo-Scottish wars in the 1270s. The only evidence of any later medieval alteration is seen in the pair of 'low side' windows with the shallower arches to their heads and plain internal lintels rather than rear arches; they could be of the late 13th or 14th century. Otherwise there is nothing else in the fabric pre-dating the 19th century, other than the reddening of the wall stones which looks very like evidence of burning, suggesting that the building did indeed suffer in the troubled years of the Border Wars.

⁴ Macleod, R.C. c1930? *Meldon Church*, MS account in Northumberland County Archives NRO 2290, 152/14

The church clearly fell into poor condition; Hodgson⁵ cites it being recorded as ruinous and unslated both in 1599 and again at the beginning of the 18th century. When he wrote (1832) the north (or ‘baptismal’) door was walled up, and the stone mullions of the east window had been ‘taken away only lately, to admit a window of wooden frames’. It was covered with ‘freestone slate’ and unceiled; the bell cote ‘has either never been finished, or has lost the usual ball and triangular head of such erections, nothing of it remaining but the bare stones of its arch’. His reference to ‘the great door in the west end’ must refer to the south door; there is no sign of any opening in what looks like unbroken medieval masonry below the west window.



19th century repair and renovation came in two main phases. In 1849 the Newcastle architect John Dobson restored the building⁶; the faculty for this work does not appear to survive, but the changes included the insertion of two new lancet windows in the nave, to the west of the doorways, the rebuilding of the bellcote and the addition of the vestry; the architect was not known for his sensitivity in handling medieval fabric, and we can be grateful that his hand was relatively light. Wilson⁷ provides a plan and illustration of the church in 1870 (left). A second restoration took place in 1892 and the faculty⁸ lists works including ‘a new internal roof leaded and planked with ribs and enriched with bosses in the chancel An internal porch... a new chancel screen, pulpit and lectern, prayer desk, altar rails and a new altar table...’

In the early 20th century the ground around the church was lowered and several old gravestones revealed⁹.

⁵ Op.cit

⁶ Faulkner, T & Greg.A.(1987) John Dobson, Newcastle Architect 1787-1865, 106

⁷ Wilson, F.R. (1870) Churches of the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne, 172

⁸ Northumberland County Archive NRO 2290 EP152/12. No drawings survive.

⁹ Mcleod op.cit

The Churchyard

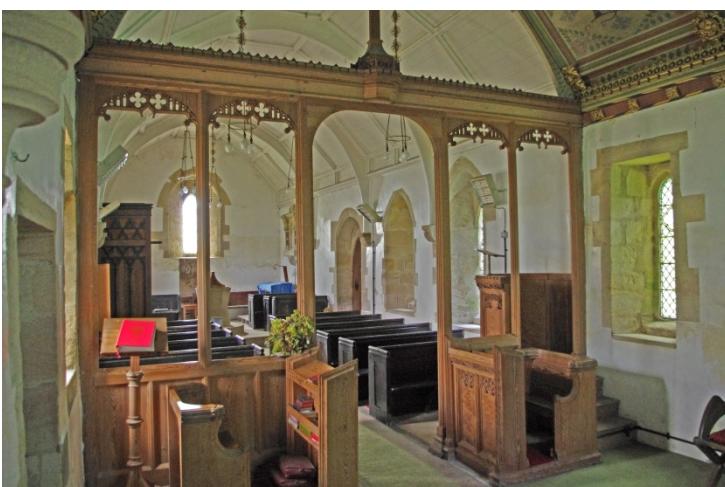
The church stands west-of-centre in a rectangular churchyard, enclosed by stone walls which are clearly of some age; their fabric including some large squared blocks, probably re-used material; they have a flat stone coping. The entrance on the west has a pair of plain stone piers with low pyramidal caps. Most of the monuments are of 19th century date, but there are a group of older ones close to the church a little to the east of the south door. A pair of shaped headstones, commemorating various children of James Thompson (dates between 1691 and 1729) have rustic carvings of a standing skeleton, crossed bones and an hourglass on their backs, and are set upright in slots between octagonal stone posts. To the east is a worn 13th-century cross slab with a simple headstone cross at its west end (perhaps original and if so an almost-unique in situ survival of a medieval composite monument). Headstones and cross slab are now individually-listed structures (Grade II)

Archaeological Assessment

Although visual evidence suggests this is a simple single-phase building, it is quite possible that sub-surface deposits and structural remains might tell a very different story. As with most old churches, the creation of an underfloor heating system in the 19th century¹⁰ will have disturbed these some extent, but much of value may remain. Any works entailing opening up floors, within the main body of the church should be subject to archaeological monitoring. Similarly, plaster on above-ground wall faces might conceivably conceal remains of earlier mural decoration, and any disturbance here should also be monitored.

Summary

Meldon is a much simpler building than most Northumberland churches, a well-preserved single-cell chapel of the earlier 13th century, with good quality Victorian fittings and furnishings (which, together with attractive 18th/19th century heraldic glass) are largely outside the scope of this report).



Peter F Ryder July 2014

The interior

Looking north-west

¹⁰ A transverse heating duct crosses the nave in line with the two doorways, and continues east down the centre of the building, beneath fitted carpets. The boiler room was probably the pent-proofed structure on the east of the vestry.

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST
MELDON

Survey July 2014 P F Ryder

