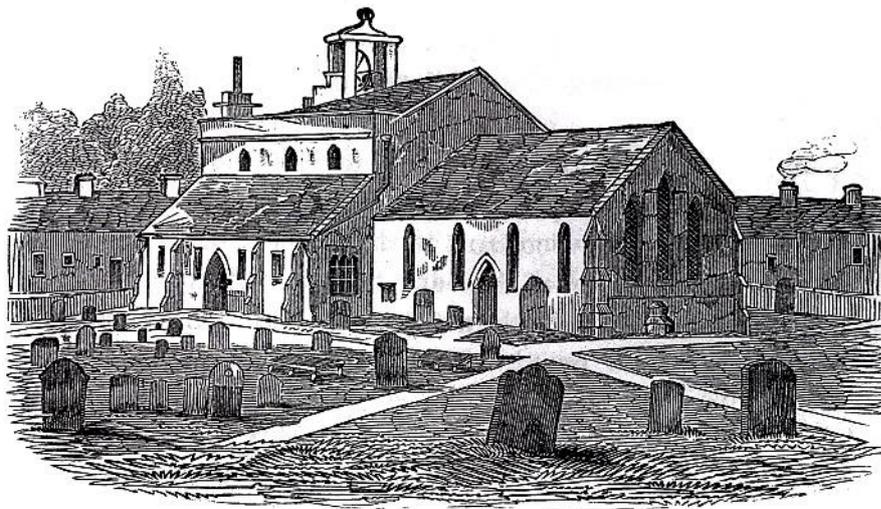


The Church of the Holy Cross Haltwhistle

Archaeological Assessment
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THE CHURCH OF HALTWHISTLE

PETER F RYDER
B.A., M.Phil, F.S.A
HISTORIC BUILDINGS CONSULTANT

1 Ford Terrace
Broomhaugh
RIDING MILL
Northumberland
NE44 6EJ

Tel (01434) 682644
E mail: PFRyder@broomlee.org



Holy Cross Church, Haltwhistle

The parish church of Haltwhistle stands a little to the south of the main street of the town, the churchyard being sited on a terrace looking out across the valley of the South Tyne. The church consists of a four-bay aisled nave, with a vestry projecting to the north of the north aisle, and an unaisled chancel.

Description

The Exterior

The external walls of the church are of roughly coursed rubble stone, varying considerably in size, with cut stone dressings, of tooled ashlar in the case of the 19th-century features; the roofs are all of graduated Lakeland slates.

The nave has a clerestory and a steeply-pitched roof, with a bell-cote on the western gable. The main body of the church has a chamfered plinth, and interesting buttresses, most of which appear contemporary with the original fabric. Those at the angles of aisles and chancel are broad and square in plan at the base, diminishing by means of broad off-sets on each face; the intermediate buttresses have off-sets on all faces just above the base and at mid-height, alternating with off-sets on the external face only. There are 19th-century oversailing courses to the eaves, chamfered on the lower angle, and 19th-century copings to end walls and gables.

The west end of the **Nave** has two big stepped buttresses of medieval appearance, but the smaller buttress between them and the pair of large lancet windows above it, together with the circular window in the gable, are all of 1870, as is the gabled bell-cote above; this contains a pair of two-centred arches for the bells, with an impost band chamfered on its lower angle, and a third much smaller arched opening above and between.

The side walls of the nave, above the aisle roofs, each have a clerestory of three small widely-spaced lancets, with chamfered hoodmoulds; these appear authentic medieval work. The upper part of the east end however is all of 1870, and has a short length of horizontal moulded parapet on either side of the gable itself, which has a wheel-cross finial.

The west end of the **South Aisle** has indistinct traces of a possible blocked window c 3 m above ground level, and there are also indications of another close to the west end of the south wall, only c 1 m above the ground, where one upright block might represent the west jamb of a small window. Stepped buttresses articulate the wall into three broad bays, with the south doorway in the second; it has a two-centred arch and a surround of two orders; the inner has two chamfers, of concave section in the arch but not in the jambs, with a square step between; the outer order is of similar form but is carried on jamb shafts with moulded caps (with nail-head ornament) and bases. Most of the arch is old but the shafted jambs, and the hoodmould, are all Victorian.

The wall has a series of small lancet windows, with paired hollow chamfers to the hoods. That in the west bay, and the pair in the central bay (to the east of the door) are all of 1870, but the two in the eastern bay seem genuine medieval work except for their hoodmoulds. In the lower part of the all are several shaped stones that seem to have been re-used from some earlier structure - one with a chamfered edge below the lancet in the first bay, and in the eastern bay part of the sills of a window and a curved block from an arch.



The church from the south-east, before the 1870 restoration



The church from the south-east

The east wall of the aisle has a pair of lancet windows with a linked chamfered hoodmould, original except for their restored sills and the broad mullion between the lancets.

The **North Aisle** has similar features to the south. In the west wall are faint traces of a possible opening, but less clear than in the case of the south aisle. On the north are a series of small lancets, like those in the south aisle (four to the east of the vestry and two to the west), but externally all are of 19th-century date; there are two old buttresses, one on each side of the vestry. The east wall has a pair of old lancets, with a restored mullion and sill like those in the south aisle.

The **Chancel** is quite lengthy, with a steeply-pitched roof. Each side wall is divided into two broad bays by a central stepped buttress, that on the south of 19th-century date but its northern counterpart apparently contemporary with the original fabric. Each bay has two tall lancet windows, with chamfered hoods; all are genuine medieval work, except for some renewed sills. At the west end of the south wall is a square-headed low-side window, now blocked, of two lights, with a double-chamfered surround; some of its dressings may be 19th-century restoration. Further east, a vague patch of renewed rubble walling beneath the third lancet indicates the position of a priest's door¹ blocked in 1870; in the corresponding position on the north wall there is a possible blocked window, although its form is indistinct. The east end has three stepped lancets with a linked and stepped moulded hood; the small buttress below the central lancet is Victorian, as are the upper parts of the gable with its coping and foliate cross finial.

The **Vestry** has a roof gabled north-south, and is built of rubble that closely matches the fabric of the medieval parts of the church. On the east it has a two-centred doorway with a continuous chamfer, and then a pair of lancets, above a stair descending to the boiler room beneath it; the west wall has a further pair of lancets, and the north gable a simple stack.

The Interior.

The internal walls of the church are plastered and whitewashed, except for exposed dressings. Unless otherwise stated all the openings have rear arches of segmental-pointed form, with chamfers to their heads only.

All the exposed features of the west wall of the **Nave** - the two tall lancets with the round window above - are of 1870. The arcades are each of four bays, with two-centred double-chamfered arches carried on circular piers with moulded capitals and bases, set on octagonal plinths; they have hoodmoulds which towards the nave have nail-head ornament and carved stops² well above the piers. The responds are more slender half-shafts with fillets, moulded bases and semi-octagonal moulded capitals. All the pier bases and plinths are 1870 restoration, as is much of the stonework of the piers. The pier capitals are of an unusual irregular octagonal plan, with the diagonal faces being the longer; this may be a result of repair and re-cutting at some time, although their generally fairly battered condition suggests that they were left along in the 1870 restoration. The responds have their bases set at a considerably lower level than those of the piers; the lower part of the eastern one of the south arcade has been renewed. Damage to the capital of the western respond of the north arcade and a socket cut into the arch directly above it probably relate to a former gallery.

¹Which cannot have been an original feature as it cut through the western part of the sedilia.

²That above the eastern pier of the south arcade in the form of a human head with some sort of hat.

In the **South Aisle** the only exposed medieval fabric is in the rear arch and south jamb of the paired eastern lancets in parts of the jambs of the two lancets in the eastern bay of the south wall, part of the head of the rear arch of the south door, and in a small trefoiled piscina (its projecting bowl largely broken away) beneath the easternmost lancet in the south wall.

In the **North Aisle** there is old stonework in the internal surround of the paired eastern lancets, the easternmost lancet in the north wall, and in the internal east jamb of the lancet west of the vestry. The original north door now opens into the vestry; it has a two-centred arch of three orders. The innermost has two continuous chamfers but the outer two have rolls with fillets and are carried on jamb shafts with moulded capitals and bases. Most of the stonework of the doorway is 1870 restoration; the jambs (and bases of the jamb shafts) and parts of the outer order are old.



Interior looking east

The floor of the **Chancel** is raised one step above that of the nave. The chancel arch is clearly of one build with the nave arcades; it is of the same form (a two-centred arch of two chamfered orders) and its impost mouldings link to the capitals of the eastern responds of the arcades; the inner order is carried on slender filleted shafts exactly like those of the arcade responds, whilst the outer, its chamfer stopped above the impost, is carried down jambs of plain square section. Towards the nave there is a moulded hood with decayed head stops about a metre above the imposts; above these, set in the eastern angles of the nave, are semi-octagonal corbels that carried the rood beam, and above that, at the level of the eaves of the side walls of the nave, there is a big horizontal set-back. There is a simpler chamfered hood towards the chancel.

The lancets in the side walls of the chancel all have continuous chamfers to their rear arches; the two in each wall have sloping and stepped internal sills, whilst the two eastern have horizontal ones; all these sills appears to be 1870 work. On the south of the sanctuary are three fine sedilia, stepped rather more steeply than usual. They have trefoiled arches each moulded with two hollow chamfers, and a hoodmould with stoips in the form of downward-pointing fleur-de-lys; the jambs and shafts between have clustered shafts with fillets. The western half of the western arch and jamb is 1870 restoration. To the east of the sedilia is a small piscina with a trefoiled arch in a restored surround with miniature attached shafts and a renewed projecting moulded.

The three lancets in the east end have shafted internal jambs, with richly-moulded capitals, bases and rings at mid-height, carrying moulded arches, under a hoodmould with nail-head.

The roofs of the church are all of 1870. That of the nave is of hammer-beam type, and is of three full bays with an additional half-bay at each end; the trusses are carried by stone corbels, and have upper king-posts, whilst the common rafters have scissor braces and ashlaring. The roofs of the aisles are each of seven bays with an additional quarter-bay at each end; the principals and purlin retain some of their original painted decoration. The ornate paintings of the chancel roof have recently been cleaned and restored; this is a six-bay collar-beam roof, again with upper king-posts, scissor braces and ashlaring.

Structural Development

There is a tradition that an earlier church stood on a separate site. The Northumberland historian Hodgson somewhat confusingly states that “*according to tradition (the church) formerly stood on the haugh by the river side where Wallis says there is a piece of ground, now part of the vicarage glebe called the church yard, where it is supposed the church anciently stood³; gravestones and bones being frequently dug up*” (1841, p 123); he goes on to quote a Mr Simon Musgrove as stating that “*when he was a boy, hunting in the old kirk yard, he often stood on coffins and large figured stones. The coffins were cut out of solid trunks of oak trees*” (1841, note p. 123). The etymology of the name ‘Eden’s Lawn’, applied to an area immediately to the west of the churchyard, has been derived from ‘Llan Aidan’ which would imply a link to the very earliest ecclesiastical history of the area; the church itself was dedicated to St Aidan at one time.

Despite these tantalising possibilities, the earliest hard evidence for the church, both in terms of structural remains and documentary references, comes from the 13th century, when the church was one of the possession of the Scottish Arbroath Abbey; it has been claimed as being the product of the same master mason as built Crail Church in Fife, another of the abbey’s possessions⁴

Haltwhistle Church is unusual in the area in being a building of a single period, of the mid-13th century. An earlier church, which seems to have stood on a different site, has left no physical evidence at all. The 13th century building survives intact, apart from, the addition of a vestry on the north of the nave; its overall appearance and architectural features today, although in part the product of Victorian restoration, must be very close to those of the original.

The only alteration to the church in the medieval period seems to have been the insertion of the low-side window in the chancel, which is very similar to one at Corbridge. This may be of 14th or 15th century date; Adamson (16) notes that ‘at the restoration traces were seen of a former window in nearly but not quite the same position’. One apparent anomaly is the absence of any

³The location of this now seems to have been lost; it may conceivably be under the railway.

⁴Adamson (15) cites ‘a Haltwhistle gentleman lately visiting’ (Fife) as drawing this parallel; the overall form of the church at Crail (six-bay aisled nave, west tower, short chancel) is nothing like Haltwhistle but there may be similarities in mouldings etc. Adamson also states that the architect W.S.Hicks thought some details at Haltwahitle ‘speak of a Scotch origin’.

medieval priest's door; the majority of medieval churches in the area have a priest's door on the south side of the chancel; that blocked up in the 1870 restoration cannot have been part of the original design as it cut through the sedilia. It is also puzzling to find a church of this size with no evidence of a medieval vestry or sacristy⁵.

Various post-medieval changes were, as often, erased by a restoration (1870). Fortunately a number of pre-1870 illustrations of the building survive, along with a plan of it accompanying the restoration faculty, together with various historical references .

A faculty (Morpeth Record Office ref 63.Ha 1793) survives for a series of alterations made in 1793. A leaded roof 'very much out of repair' was to be replaced by 'the best Westmorland blue slate'; other alterations included that the west end window should be enlarged, and the whole church ceiled. At the same time the north aisle windows were to be altered so as to correspond with those in the south, ie to convert them into the square-headed sashes seen on the pre-1870 illustrations.

In 1799 it was proposed to 'ceil and paint' the north and south aisles and in 1800 the outside walls of the church were roughcast and the inside whitewashed (Adamson 40), which gives a general idea of the character of the building at that time. The earliest illustration is probably Hodgson's print (1840, 123) although the church is shown in the same state on a series of old photographs currently displayed in the church (see p.2 for south-east view). The nave has a roof of relatively low pitch, and a west gable capped by a bellcote topped by a little gable and a ball finial, apparently of crudely Classical or Georgian character. The south wall of the south aisle has four square-headed sash windows; the east window of the aisle had also been converted into a sash (with Gothick arched tops to its panes) but its original head survived above. On the south side of the chancel was no buttress as at present, but instead a Gothic-arched priest's door. The chancel roof was also lower than at present, with the steeper roof line of its medieval predecessor clearly visible on the east wall of the nave. A photograph of the interior looking west shows a western gallery with a pair of broad lancet windows above it.

It is not clear when the vestry on the north of the church, enclosing the original north door, was built; the c1860 Ordnance Survey 25"1 mile map and the 'as is' plan accompanying the 1870 faculty both show a structure occupying very much the same footprint as the present vestry. It was almost certainly post-medieval, and possibly no older than the early 19th century,

A major restoration of the church was carried out in 1870, Robert Johnson being the architect ; the faculty papers and drawings for this survive (Morpeth Record Office ref 179 Ha 1870) and make clear the extent of the works⁶. In effect the building was completely gutted; gallery and all internal furnishings being removed; the roofs were renewed throughout, the floors lowered to the original level (with a new wooden floor being constructed on sleeper walls), and an open drain created around the external perimeter. A new bellcote was to be built on the west end, and

⁵It is possible that there was one on the north of the chancel, where there are various disturbances in the wall fabric; the 1870 'as is' faculty plan shows two small buttresses here, whereas there is now only one. Might one or both have been the stubs of the walls of an earlier vestry?

⁶Although, as often, there are certain major discrepancies between what was actually planned and what was actually carried out - and in fact between the text and the drawn plans. For instance, the 'as is' plan shows a single window in the west end (whereas an old photograph shows a pair) whilst the 'proposed' drawing shows the west end devoid of any openings at all, whereas two tall lancets were constructed.

a new vestry with a heating chamber beneath. The doorway on the south side of the chancel was to be built up, and the sedilia (which its insertion had partly destroyed) to be repaired.



Interior view looking east before the 1870 restoration, taken from the western gallery

It is not always easy to work out exactly how much fabric was rebuilt and how much retained at the restoration Adamson (15) refers to the whole west end being rebuilt, which seems probable (at least above the lower courses); the faculty also includes instructions to take down and rebuild the section of the south aisle wall to the west of the south doorway. These works were carried out in identical rubble masonry to the old fabric, and so the exact extent of the work can no longer be discerned without the use of sophisticated investigative techniques. Some old dressings survive in the surrounds of the present lancet windows in the aisles, but these are not necessarily in situ

Bulmer's Directory (1897) records that the 1870 works cost £3,000, and that in 1882 the building was 'tastefully decorated' under the supervision of Mr C Kempe of London, whose company was also responsible for several stained glass windows in 1903-4; the glass in the eastern windows of the chancel is an important composition of 1872 by Morris and Co, after designs by well-known artists of the period (Burne Jones, Philip Webb, Ford Madox Brown).

The 20th century has not seen any major alterations affecting the structure of the church., which remains today very much as it did after the great campaign of restoration and refurbishment at the end of the Victorian era.

Archaeological Assessment

Haltwhistle Church as it stands today is an amalgam of two periods; the basic fabric is the shell of a large church of the mid-13th century, but this is very much a gutted shell; all else is of the later Victorian period - and this includes some quite memorable stained glass, and the spectacular painted ceiling of the chancel, recently restored. It is difficult to assess the actual archaeological potential of the building and site. It seems highly likely that Haltwhistle had an earlier church, probably of Saxon origin, and whilst there is some historical evidence that this stood on a different site, an earlier structure on the present site cannot be completely ruled out⁷.

The 1870 works (which, seen from the point of view of a modern archaeologist, must have been very destructive) clearly extended to well below modern floor levels; however material of archaeological significance almost certainly survives below the 19th century disturbance, and so any intervention in sub-floor deposits will need to be accompanied by a watching brief. As it is known that the floor of the church had become raised over the centuries, and was then lowered back down to what was perceived as its original level, it is likely that burials made in the latter part of the Pre-Restoration period lie at relatively shallow depths below the present floor.

Turning to the above-ground fabric, the question of the survival of historic plaster and possibly mural decorations needs to be addressed. The interior of the church remains plastered, as it was before the 1870 restoration; it is not clear whether the walls were stripped at this time, or whether it was a case of new plaster over old. Any works that entail disturbance of plaster should only follow a preliminary investigation to ascertain the stratigraphy of the wall covering.

Peter F Ryder June 2005

Sources

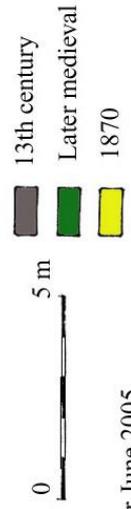
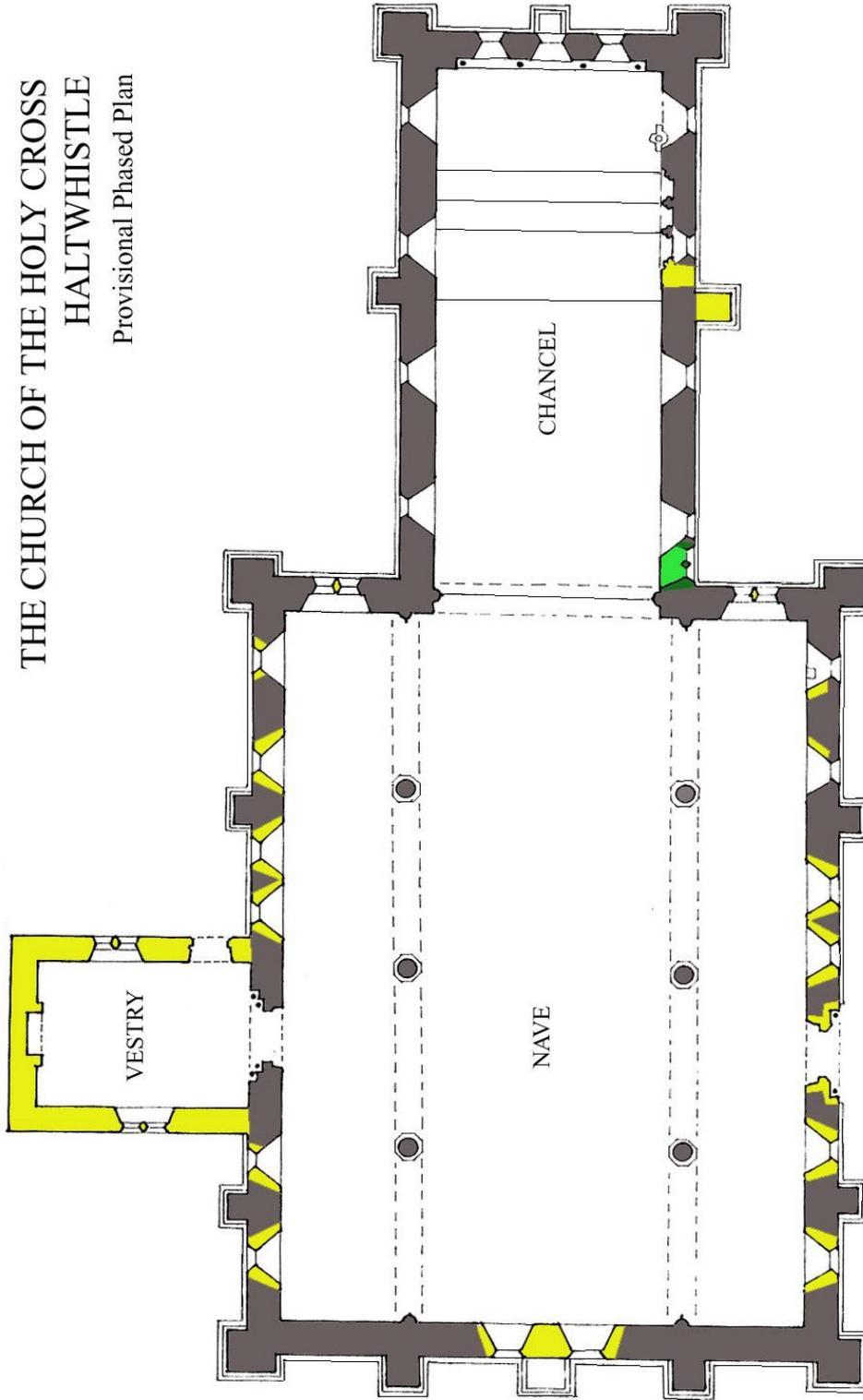
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⁷If there was a Pre-Conquest monastery here, than a multiplicity of churches is a distinct possibility.

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS
 HALTWHISTLE
 Provisional Phased Plan



note: 1870 rebuilding of the west end and south aisle all may have been more extensive than shown

Survey: P F Ryder June 2005