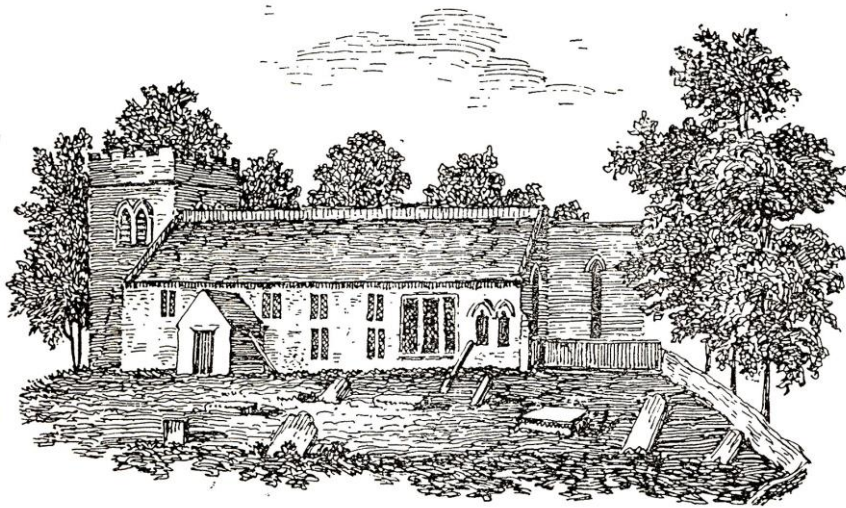


St Peter's Church Bywell Northumberland

An Archaeological Assessment

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BYWELL ST. PETER'S CHURCH IN 1824.

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St Peter's Church, Bywell

The two medieval churches of Bywell, now bereft of any village of such, stand close together on the north bank of the River Tyne c 20 km west of Newcastle; the northern of the pair, St Andrews is now redundant, but the southern, St Peter's, is still the parish church for Stocksfield, although its parish is largely on the south bank of the river.

Description

The church consists of a nave that has a west tower, a south aisle with a south porch, and a north-eastern chapel, and a chancel (which the south aisle overlaps) with a north-eastern vestry.

The Exterior



The church from the south-west

The West Tower is built of coursed roughly-squared stone, the stones varying in height, with fairly well squared but irregular quoins at the western angles. There are two chamfered offsets on the west side of the tower, one at about half height and the second a metre or so below the embattled parapet, carried on a hollow-chamfered string course, which has a moulded coping. The southern part of the west wall has what appears to be a projecting footing c 1.5 m long at its south end.; this is in fact the lowermost course of an earlier wall, and has, now concealed beneath gravel, a chamfered plinth. The earlier wall is set on a slightly different alignment to the present one, so that at the north end the present wall face overhangs the plinth.

The lower stage of the tower has a central doorway on the west with a two-centred arch of a single continuous chamfer, with a simple hoodmould chamfered below and rounded above;

there are some large blocks in jambs, clearly coursed in with the tower walling. Around 1.2 m to each side of the door and 2 m above the ground is a distinctive upright block, infilling cavities that apparently run through the full thickness of the wall. First recorded during repairs in 1924¹; there are three further infilled square holes in each side wall at the level of the first set-back. At the level of the original belfry, above the first set-back, the south, west and north walls each have a pair of chamfered lancets. A little below and to the south of the western pair is a blocked doorway (?) with a rough segmental head. The exact position of its jambs are not clear; it is possible that the disturbed area may extend down through the first set-back.

At the top of both north and south walls there is a metre or more of more regularly-coursed stone, lighter in colour, below the parapet, and on the west similar walling above the upper set back. On north, west and south are three areas of infill corresponding with the three square-headed openings more clearly visible on the internal faces of the walls, again first noted in 1924. On both north and south a projecting spout breaks the string at the base of the parapet. On the east, above the nave roof, there is a square-headed opening, almost certainly an insertion, set immediately below the parapet string; to the south of it there is a clear sloping line between darker and lighter masonry, probably indicating the former gable of the west end of the nave.

Only the very top – no more than the moulded coping of the parapet- of the south nave wall is exposed externally. On the north the lower part of the eastern half of the wall is concealed by the North East Chapel, and the lowest 1.5 m of the wall further west by a 20th century boiler room.

The north-west angle of the nave has two buttresses, one facing west – with the north wall of the tower built flush with its south face – and one c 1.5 m, further east that faces north. Both have chamfered plinths, and are constructed of large well-squared gritstone blocks. The base of the larger western buttress is set on a footing – a re-used cross slab grave cover (Ryder 2000, 59, 13) - that extends some distance further to the west. Both buttresses have an off-set, hollow-chamfered on its lower angle, at two-third height, and both have a sloping top c 0.6 m below the 19th-century parapet, which has an oversailing moulded course at its base and a moulded coping. The exact position of the north-western angle of the Saxon nave is not clear; there is one large block low down, midway between the two buttresses, that might conceivably be an early quoin, but this is not certain; it is more likely that the original west end lay further west, perhaps under the present west wall of the tower where towards the south end there is a metre or so of projecting footing that does not seem to align with the wall above

The main part of the north wall is of coursed quite small quite square stones, with some irregularities, and there is extensive reddening at mid height. Low down there are remains of a probable doorway; all that is visible, directly above the boiler house roof, are three voussoirs of the eastern springing of what seems to have been a semicircular arch. The lower part of the opening is concealed by the brick facing of the section of wall inside the boiler house. The rest of the head has been destroyed by the insertion of the eastern of a pair of 19th-century windows, each of two trefoil headed lights with a circle in spandrel, under a moulded

^{1 1} These were discovered during repairs in 1924, and are shown in 'diagram showing holes found in walls of the tower' drawn by Knowles, Oliver & Leeson, architects (Woodhorn Northumberland Museum Archives ref EP 45/83) where a suggested function was 'defence or observation'.



The North Wall of the Nave (West Part) showing early windows at high level

hood with foliate stops. In the upper section of the wall are a range of four round-headed single-light windows, two above the North East Chapel and two further west. The westernmost is the broadest of the four, and its head looks relatively freshly cut; there is one big upright gritstone block that seems old in the west jamb (although this does not relate well to the adjacent masonry) and the sill again looks patched up and untrustworthy. The next window has its head cut into the soffit of a very large gritstone block (perhaps a re-used Roman slab; it has what looks like the remains of a lewis hole?); each jamb has a big upright block of red sandstone, curving in at the top to join the head. Below these the lower jambs and sill look more recent. Above and to the east of this window the 19th-century parapet is corbelled out into what looks like a chimney stack. The third round-headed window again has its head cut into a big block, which this time extends some distance further east; the jambs again have large upright blocks, and this time the whole opening looks convincingly ancient, as does the easternmost window. Close to the east end of the wall and just below the parapet is a block c 2 m in length, difficult to make sense of unless it was the lintel of a further opening, although there is no other visible evidence of this.

The east face of the north-east quoin of the nave is exposed in a recess between the north wall of the chancel and the east wall of the North-East Chapel; the quoins are large well-squared alternating blocks of typical Anglo-Saxon form. The largest block of all, c 3 m above the ground, has an incised border, and may have carried a Roman inscription.

The **South Aisle** is built of coursed roughly squared stone, with tooled ashlar dressings largely of 19th-century character, and has a roof of graduated green Lakeland slates. The south wall looks to be entirely a 19th-century rebuild, but medieval fabric survives in both end walls. The west wall has a rough projecting footing, but no plinth; it has a 19th-century window of two trefoil-headed lights with a trefoiled circle in the spandrel under a two-centred

arch, and a chamfered hoodmould with foliate stops, inside an outer arch of roughly-tooled voussoirs. At the south-west angle of the aisle a buttress extending to the south is of tooled 19th-century stone; its west face is oddly set a few cm outside the face of the west wall, and it has a chamfered plinth continuous with that of the south wall.

The south wall of the aisle is of five bays (the last one being the eastward extension of the aisle alongside the chancel). The first bay has a pair of chamfered lancets; in the second, inside the porch, the south door has a two-centred arch with a continuous chamfer and a moulded hood on foliate stops. The remaining bays are articulated by stepped buttresses. The third has a single chamfered lancet and then a pair of rather smaller ones, and the fourth two pairs of lancets, the eastern with their sills set rather higher than the western. The fifth bay (the chancel aisle) again has a lancet pair with their sills at the higher level. Below the eastern window in the fourth bay an early sundial has been re-used just above the plinth. The buttress between third and fourth bays has an irregular projecting footings that may survive from an earlier predecessor; there are also footings that project both to the south and further to the east beneath the 19th-century south-east angle quoin of the aisle. On the north of the footing that projects eastward, and set north-south, is an unusual early medieval cross slab (Ryder 2000, 59, 11)

The east end of the aisle is largely of medieval masonry; it has a chamfered plinth at a lower level than the 19th-century one of the south wall, and this is continued around a short buttress midway along the wall, set below a window of two trefoiled lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel. This is largely of 19th-century ashlar, although part of the chamfered north jamb (and perhaps one block of the south) seem older. High up near the north end of the wall is a shaped corbel, with some appearance of a column of disturbed masonry beneath it.

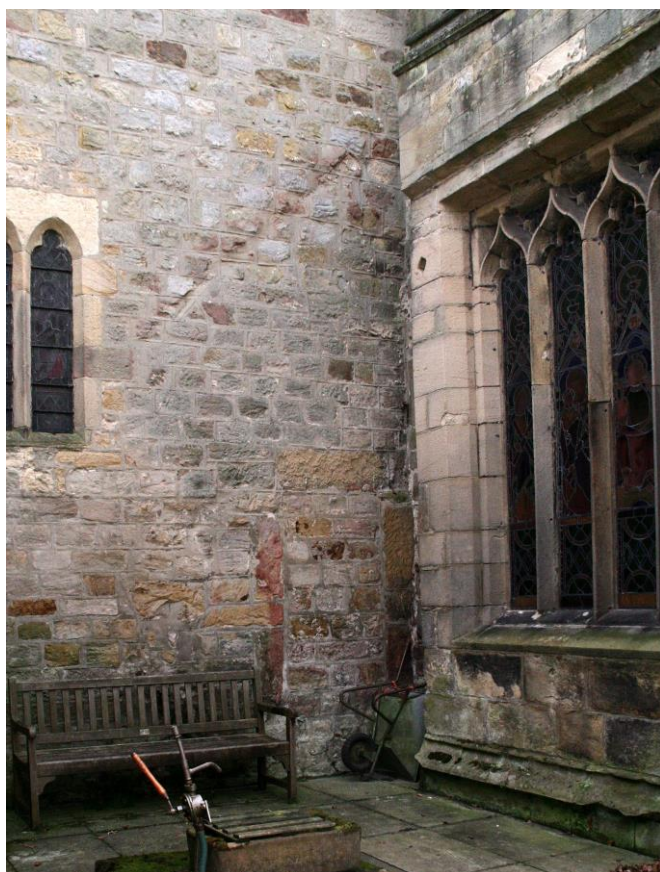
The 19th-century **South Porch** is of tooled and squared stone; it has a chamfered plinth and small buttresses at the south end of each side wall; at the foot of the western is a projecting footing re-using the base of a medieval cross slab (Ryder 2000, 59, 14). The outer archway is trefoil-headed and chamfered, under a steep gable with a coping chamfered on its under side, and moulded kneelers. In each side wall is a short window that seems to re-use the head of a medieval lancet.

The **North-East Chapel** is built of gritstone ashlar, and has a two-part plinth, the upper member moulded and the lower chamfered; large stepped buttresses project east and west from the northern angles, and there is an oversailing parapet with a chamfered course at its base and a moulded coping. The windows are all square-headed, with trefoiled ogee-headed lights in double-chamfered frames. Those in the end walls are each of four lights, whilst the north wall has two pairs of two-light windows, which have reticulated tracery in their heads; a patch of 19th-century masonry below the sill of the westernmost and its renewed sill and mullion indicate the position of a later doorway.

The north wall presents one of the most puzzling features in the church. Towards each end of the north wall and in the centre, between the two pairs of windows, are the springings of arches set at right angles to the wall; in each case three voussoirs of the arch remain (chamfered on both faces), and above these a series of blocks projecting from alternate courses. These look much more like a toothing prepared for a feature that was never completed than the remains of one that has been removed. Whatever features existed or were intended to exist disturbed neither the plinth nor the parapet.

The south wall of the **Chancel**, beyond the south aisle, is of two bays, and is built of coursed and squared stone; at the wall head is an oversailing chamfered course of 19th-century ashlar, with some courses of smaller stone below it that may be of the same date. There is a chamfered plinth above an irregular projecting footing, and a string-course below the windows, square above and chamfered below. Each bay has a single tall lancet with a simple hood, chamfered below and rounded above; below the western are the jambs of a blocked door with its sill a course above the plinth. This looks like an insertion, with its head cutting through the string and the base of the lancet above; in the 19th century string and lancet sill have been restored. The eastern lancet seems unaltered 13th-century work.

The east end of the chancel has clasping buttresses; there is an odd little irregularity in plan here, as the western return of the south-eastern buttress is much shallower than the northern, and than both returns of the north-eastern buttress. The eastern faces of these buttresses each have a series of chamfered set backs, and the plinth is continued round them; the plinth is also continued around a short central buttress that only rises to the string. As on the south there is an irregular footing, with one big squared block (Roman?) projecting beneath the central buttress. The east wall itself has some very large blocks in its lower courses; above the string is a stepped triplet of tall lancets² which have a common hoodmould, stepping up on either side of the taller central light; as Briggs (2002, 30) this is paralleled in the 134th-0century chancel at Haltwhistle. The gable above is of a very shallow pitch, and has smaller rubble in its upper courses, with a coping that is chamfered on its lower edge, and a 19th-century foliate cross finial.



The western part of the north wall of the chancel, to the west of the vestry, (left) is one of the most interesting parts of the church, being largely of Saxon date. It has no above-ground plinth³ and is constructed of coursed fairly well squared stone. At its west end is a blocked square-headed doorway, with its sill apparently c 0.3 m above the present ground level. Each jamb is made up of two big uprights with a horizontal block between, the dressings being roughly-tooled yellow gritstone. There is a second horizontal block at the head of east jamb, carrying a lintel that barely overlaps jambs. The jambs show considerable evidence of burning. A disturbed area of masonry c 1 m east of the doorway and extending up to c 1.5 m above the ground may indicate the position of the east wall of the porticus into which the doorway opened; its gabled roof line is very clear, cut into the walling stones and emphasised by

² The central lancet is off-set slightly to the south of the buttress below, giving an odd asymmetry to the elevation.

³ But see report on 1995 archaeological watching brief.

reddening, as if the roof was burned. Further east and set quite high is a medieval window of two trefoil-headed lights, their heads cut into a re-used medieval cross slab grave cover of whitish stone (Ryder 2000, 59, 10).

The eastern part of the chancel north wall is partly hidden by the 19th-century vestry; above the vestry rises the upper part of a tall buttress, which has a sloping top just below the 19th-century eaves cornice; on the west side of the buttress and c 1m from the top is a rough set back that dies into the wall c 1.5 m to the west; the walling above this is of smaller stone, and may be a 19th-century rebuilt. East of the buttress is a lancet window like those on the south. Later. The short length of wall exposed to the east of the vestry shows both the chamfered plinth and string course, absent further west.

The 19th-century **Vestry** is built of coursed and roughly-squared stone, with a steeply-pitched ridged roof of graduated slates, set east-west. It has a steeply-chamfered plinth; there is a short buttress at the west end of the north wall, and a rather taller two-stepped one at east end, capped by square stack with a circular shaft with a moulded cap rising from a steep chamfered base. The gables have a coping chamfered on the underside, rising on the eastern to a foliate finial. At the west end of the north wall is a doorway with a segmental-pointed arch and a hollow-chamfered surround, with alongside it to the east a pair of narrow square-headed lights in chamfered surrounds. The east wall has a pair of trefoiled lancet lights at its south end and the west wall is featureless.

The Interior

The interior of the church is plastered and whitewashed, with exposed dressings, except for the wall above the south arcade and the walls of the North-East Chapel.

Several pieces of early sculpture have been set in the internal walls of the 19th-century **South Porch**; in the east wall are three cross slabs (Ryder 2000, 58, 4-6) and in the west three more (ibid, 58-59, 7-9); built into the south wall, on either side of the springing of the outer arch, are two pieces of 12th-century ornament (perhaps from a hoodmould) with chevron incised into a convex moulding. On the north, above the south door, is a section of an arch with very deep parallel mouldings that have a Pre-Conquest (or even Roman?) look. Lying loose on the west bench are three further stones, one apparently the top of a Roman altar.

In the base of **Tower** the walls are heavily whitewashed. On the east is the old west doorway of the church, which has a chamfered two-centred arch that has been cut, presumably at some later date, with a square rebate for a door on this face of the wall, the hoodmould above it is strange, as it follows a more steeply pointed arch; it is chamfered below and rounded above, and has simple mask stops. On either side of the doorway is a rough projecting footing. Around 1 m to the north is a buttress with a chamfered plinth; there has been a second buttress further south, now virtually hidden by the south wall of the later tower, and cut back apart from some projecting masonry c 3 m above the floor.

On the west the present west door has a tall segmental-pointed rear arch with a chamfer to its head only; its internal jambs, set square to the wall, have a complex series of sockets and cuts for drawbars. On the south of the door there is a rough socket in the wall c 3.5 m above the floor; there is some sign of a corresponding one, now infilled, in the east wall opposite. A late 19th century wooden stair rise westward along the north wall and turns south to the first floor;

which is carried on five heavy square-section beams, the northern half of the western removed to accommodate the present stair.

On the upper floor of the tower the walls are of coursed stone, quite heavily mortared. North and south walls have a set-back of c 15 cm, but at the same level the internal face of west wall overhangs by c 5 cm, at least at its north end alongside the stair.

On the east at this level is a blocked lancet window in the earlier west end of the nave, with a hollow-chamfered surround, with what looks like a small infilled rectangular opening directly below it⁴. To the north is the upper part of the buttress seen below, its sloping top, c 2 m above the floor, intact, but the section below heavily cut back. Just short of the south-east corner disturbed masonry marks the position of a second buttress (of the same height), with a socket cut into it c 1 m above the floor.

The three old belfry openings have heavy timber internal lintels; those on north and south have inserted posts flush with the internal face of the wall, to help carry the central of three massive beams that form the base of the bell frame, and also carry a central boarded platform; the beams rest directly on top of the lintels. Part of a medieval grave cover is re-used in the internal west jamb of the southern opening (Ryder 2000, 59, 12). On the west the blocked segmental-headed opening near the south end of the wall is clearly visible; on this side the internal jambs of the belfry opening have the look of being inserted in earlier fabric.

Three further beams form the upper part of the bell frame, just below a low-pitched gable roof set east-west; the ridge is notched to accommodate the bell wheels below. At bell-frame level the three outer walls each have three square-headed openings, which penetrated the full thickness of the wall. Those on the north (now difficult to trace) and south have their lintels formed by a continuous quite thin timber plate, on which the upper tie-beams rest; those on the west have separate timber lintels. On the east at this level is the square-headed opening looking out over the nave roof.

In the **Nave** the west wall is relatively featureless; at its foot is the segmental-pointed rear arch of the pointed west door, and higher up a shallow recess, now truncated by the present roof, that is presumably formed within the rear arch of the blocked lancet seen inside the tower.

The south wall of the nave, above the arcade, is of quite large well squared and coursed roughly-tooled blocks. The four-bay arcade has tall two-centred arches, each of two chamfered orders, springing from circular piers with moulded octagonal capitals (with a ring at the head of the shaft) and bases; there is a hood mould towards the nave only, with above the central pier a hood stop in the form of a bearded and crowned head, reputed to represent Edward I. The western respond has a simple square chamfered base and a semi-octagonal capital, whilst the eastern has a very worn base with a concave moulding of archaic type, under-pinned in 19th century stone. The second and third piers have square plinths. As one proceeds eastward, the bases and plinths of the arcade are set at increasingly higher levels.

In the western part of the north wall of the nave the two 19th-century windows have rather odd shouldered segmental rear arches, the arches having exposed ashlar soffits. Higher up the four early windows have plain semicircular rear arches, all behind plaster. The two-bay

⁴ It is set close to the northern buttress rather than directly above the doorway below.

arcade to the North East Chapel is entirely of 19th-century ashlar and has four-centred arches, considerable lower than those of the south arcade, each of two chamfered orders, with a moulded hood, carried on an octagonal pier with a moulded capital and base, and respond in which the inner order springs from a moulded corbel and the outer is continued down to the ground.

In the **South Aisle** the west window has a segmental-pointed rear arch with a hollow chamfer head to its head; the windows in the south wall have near-triangular rear arches, again with a chamfer only to their heads, and the south door has a segmental rear arch, in diagonally-tooled 19th century ashlar.



Interior looking east

Inside the **North-East Chapel** the main feature of interest is a remnant of a piscina – one stone cut with part of its drain, incorporated in the eastern respond of the 19th-century arcade. All the windows have level shelf-like sills. Built into the centre of the north wall 1.5 m above the floor is a small medieval cross slab (Ryder 2000, 58, 1); in the floor near the north-east corner is a worn incised effigy of a 15th-century knight, now concealed by the flooring.

The **Chancel** is entered under the lofty two-centred chancel arch seems entirely of 19th century date, although supposedly a copy of its predecessor; it is of two chamfered orders, the inner carried on triple-shafted pilasters with moulded caps, shaft rings and bases, springing from foliate corbels c 2.5 m above the floor, whilst the chamfer of the outer order ends in carved stops 2 m above floor. The arch has a hoodmould, on both faces of the wall, that is rounded above and chamfered below, with carved foliate stops; towards the chancel these have been accommodated by roughly cutting back the side walls (more deeply on the south),

giving the misleading impression that hoodmould and stops pre-date the chancel walls.

The side walls of the chancel have an internal string course, set rather lower at the east end, square above and chamfered below, its top forming the level sills of the lancet windows. The string is interrupted at the west end of the south wall by a low-side window (now opening into the Organ Chamber); it is a square-headed opening of two lights, its eastern jamb, which incorporates a fragment of a medieval grave slab (Ryder 2000, 58, 3) is set square with the wall and its western slightly splayed jambs set almost square with wall; both seem to have been partly rebuilt, and the inner lintel and sill of tooled 19th-century ashlar. It is possible that this opening originated as a Saxon doorway, but it has been too much altered to show clear evidence⁵; . All the lancet windows have projecting corbel-like blocks at the head of each internal jamb; those on the south and east have two-centred rear arches in the form of a rib chamfered on both angles, that at the east end of the north wall a more conventional plain splayed rear arch.

Beneath the easternmost lancet in the south wall is a piscina with a chamfered semicircular arch (plastered over) and a square bowl with a drain; east of it is a 19th century credence table under a pair of trefoiled chamfered arches carried by a circular shaft with a moulded cap and base.

On the north the string course is interrupted by the vestry door which has a stepped and shouldered head; this rather unusual doorway is said to have been re-used from the North-East Chapel, although all its dressings now have parallel tooling of 19th-century character. Further west the two-light window has a medieval cross slab (Ryder 2000, 58, 2) as its internal lintel.

The roofs of the main body of the church are all of 19th-century date. That of the Nave is of four bays; its cambered ties carried on wall-posts with curved braces, springing from quadrant-shaped ashlar corbels, and in the centre of each bay is an intermediate tie simply carried by the wall-head; there is a ridge and one level of purlins. The roof of the South Aisle is also of four bays; the main tie-beams are carried by quadrant corbels and there are a intermediate ties with curved feet; the main trusses have struts springing from the arcade wall above the piers. The North-East Chapel has a simple coffered ceiling with moulded beams, carried on 19th-century corbels. The Chancel has a roof of four and a half bays (the additional half bay being at the east end), again with low-pitched slightly-cambered tie beams, carried on wall posts with moulded arch braces supported by moulded ashlar corbels; in this case there is carved openwork panelling to the wall-plate, a ridge and moulded purlins.

Structural History

(1) The Saxon Church

St Peter's Church is one of the most important Anglo-Saxon buildings to survive in the North of England; its early origins were recognised as early as Thomas Rickman's Styles of Architecture in England (6th edition 1862, p.96) but then queried by C.C.Hodges (1893, 15-16) whose position, that the earliest parts of the church were of late 11th century date, was followed by the Northumberland County History (1902) and several subsequent writers. It was left to Gilbert (1946) to point out the distinctive Saxon character of features such as the

⁵ Although this could still be investigated if plaster were removed from either face of the wall below.

blocked north door of the chancel; he memorably described the church as ‘one of those beloved by the genuine Anglo-Saxon student, which yields complexity after complexity the deeper that it is studied’. The best account of the Saxon parts of the building is in Taylor & Taylor (1965, 122-126).

As Gilbert pointed out, several features of the church, such as the length and thin walls of the nave, are paralleled at Monkwearmouth, suggesting that it may date from the same early period, ie the end of the 7th or early 8th century. In connection with this a historical reference to the consecration of Egbert as Bishop of Lindisfarne by Eanbald, Archbishop of York, took place at Bywell in 802, implying the existence of an ecclesiastical centre of some importance by this period.

The surviving Saxon parts of the fabric comprise the north wall of the nave with its high-level round-headed windows (although the westernmost seems to have been altered), the eastern angles of the nave and the side walls of the western part of the chancel. The blocked door on the north of the chancel opened into a porticus, the roof-line of which survives, indicating that it was lapped around the north-east corner of the nave. The roof-line of a corresponding porticus is also clear on the south wall of the chancel (now inside the organ chamber)⁶ and it seems likely that the ‘low-side’ window is a modification of an earlier doorway corresponding to that opposite.

The present nave is clearly shorter than the Saxon one; an earlier footing and chamfered plinth (not usually a Saxon feature; however the footings of the Saxon north wall of the chancel had been cut to a rough chamfer, so perhaps it represents a later modification) underlies, on a slightly different alignment, the west wall of the present tower and would appear to be associated with a footing, described by the NCH and the Taylors but now concealed, running parallel to the north wall of the tower, continuing the line of the north side of the nave. Both Gilbert and the Taylors also record ‘a vestige of a cross foundation’ which they saw as defining a narrow western chamber or narthex. Gilbert describes the cross wall as being sited 11’4” (3.45m) from the west end, giving a nave 66’8” (20.32 m) by 19’2” (5.84 m) and a narthex 11’4” (3.45 m) by 19’2” (5.84 m) whereas the Taylors give the nave as 66’ (20.12 m) by 19’2” and the narthex as 8’ (2.44 m) long.

When plaster was stripped from the internal face of the north wall of the chancel in 1995 (Ryder 1995) a discontinuous straight joint and other features were removed which almost certainly indicate the position of the north-east corner of the Saxon structure, which would make the early chancel 4.8 m long and 4.2 m wide internally

Thus the early church at Bywell seems to have been a surprisingly large one, and it is possible that it also had ranges of porticus flanking the nave, as suggested by the windows I the north wall being set so high, and perhaps also by disturbed and reddened masonry beneath the two western ones which could relate to the burning of roof timbers. It is possible that this church was monastic, and accompanied by other stone buildings⁷. Until a few years ago a massive stone slab, such as seen in the footings of the church, was exposed in the pathway a

⁶ Previous workers have not recorded this; Taylor & Taylor (125-6) argue that early masonry survives in the east end of the south aisle, implying that the southern porticus was broader than the northern, but, contrary to their observation, the east wall of the aisle is neither in bond with nor of similar masonry to the south wall of the chancel .

⁷ Gilbert (1946, 173) argues that the size and proportions of the church were ‘highly congruent to those of an early monastic centre’

little to the west of the south-west corner of the south porch, but has now been hidden under gravel.

Gilbert also debated as to whether there were in fact two phases of Pre-Conquest work in the north wall of the nave, based on a perceived change in character of the north-east angle quoin at mid-height, and the use of red sandstone only in the upper part of the wall; he suggested that the secondary phase could either relate to a rebuilding after the 793/4 Viking raids (in time for the 802 ordination) or perhaps one in the mid-11th century⁸.

(2) A Norman Remodelling?

In the post-Conquest period it appears that the church belonged first to the Benedictine monks of St Albans, and then passed to Durham Cathedral Priory, becoming known as the 'Black Church' from the black habits of the Benedictines⁹. Evidence for changes to the church in the earlier part of this period is fairly fragmentary. The base of the eastern respond seems stylistically earlier than the rest of the south arcade, and is seen by Gilbert and the Taylors see as of 'early Norman' character; this indicates that there was an aisle or some other lateral structure here (perhaps a remodelling of a range of Saxon porticus) before the construction of the present arcade in the 13th century. Built into the internal face of the south wall of the south porch are two sections of 12th century chevron moulding, of a rather unusual convex section (suggesting that they may be part of a hoodmould). Although the present chancel arch of 1849 (and of early 13th century style) has been said to be a copy of its predecessor, Sir Stephen Glynne (1908, 104), visiting 'before 1840' described it as 'a lofty but narrow semicircular arch upon impost' and the NCH (1902, 107) records that the architect (Benjamin Ferry) who replaced it dated the old arch to about 1160.

(3) The Early 13th century: the Chancel extended

It is generally agreed that the chancel was extended and remodelled in the early 13th century, a time at which many churches in the area had their chancels either rebuilt or extended (eg Bywell St Andrew, Corbridge, Ovingham); the simple lancet windows with their two-centred arches and chamfered surrounds are very typical of this period, whilst the round-arched piscina could be an earlier piece re-used.

(4) After the 1285 Fire

The Lanercost Chronicle records that the church suffered a serious accidental fire in 1285, which several writers have correlated with the truncation of the west end of the nave¹⁰. Although the NCH account seems to date the present south aisle to the earlier 13th century, its arcade fits so well with the present shortened nave that it is easier to see it as part of the same scheme of works. Several writers (eg Briggs 2002, 30) have pointed out the similarity between the arcade and those at nearby Ovingham. The new west end constructed is something of a puzzle in its asymmetrical arrangement of buttresses, only its doorway being central. The small size of the west window, and the apparent provision of an opening below –

⁸ Perhaps this is a presumption too far; was Gilbert confusing red sandstone with stone reddened by burning?

⁹ In contrast to nearby St Andrews, given to the Premonstratensians of Blanchland Abbey, and known as the 'White Church' from its canons' robes.

¹⁰ Gilbert (1946, 172) sees the nave being shortened at an earlier date, identifying both responds of the south arcade as being early Norman work.

possibly a ‘quenching hole’¹¹ - suggest that the threat of Scots raiding was already in mind. The eastern bay of the aisle continued alongside the chancel; it is not clear whether this was part of the 13th-century work or a later addition; it is thought that

(5) The Scottish Wars: A Defensible Church

This danger was obviously a prime concern a few years later – c 1310 has been suggested – when the west tower was built, overlying the footings of the earlier west end. There had been a major attack on the area in 1296 (when Hexham and Corbridge were sacked) and further raids on Tynedale are recorded in 1311, 1313 and 1315. The tower is a complex and puzzling structure that is not readily understood in detail, and its construction may have taken two or three phases. The manner in which the internal face of the west wall at first-floor level overhangs that below certainly suggests two phases of construction, and there seems clear evidence that the added upper stage has at some stage had an east-west gabled roof, with the wide walls being heightened and parapet added when the bells were raised to their present level. Defensibility is apparent in the obvious evidence of bolts and bars in the jambs of the west door, and also in the fact that the interior of the tower was never opened up to the body of the church by means of a tower arch, the earlier west doorway being retained, and adapted to take a new door on the west face of the wall. On the upper floor level, the enigmatic blocked opening in the west wall has been identified as an upper doorway through which, with the help of a ladder, a retreat could be made to the defensible upper stages, but this is rather dubious – the opening is a crude one, without cut dressings, and really has more the look of a constructional feature, through which building materials or perhaps the bells could be lifted, being closed when construction was complete¹². The upper parts of the tower are notably lacking in datable architectural features; the paired lancet windows are basically of 13th-century form, but could really be of any date, and in fact have the look of being inserted¹³.

(6) The North-East Chapel

The North-East Chapel is usually dated to the early 14th century, but is utterly different in character to the tower. It would appear to have been built as a chantry chapel, probably by the Neville family; it is constructed of good-quality squared stone, with reticulated tracery to its windows, and no sign whatsoever of defensibility, suggesting a perception that the threat of raiding had reduced. Sir Stephen Glynne records that the chapel opened to the nave ‘by a door of the depressed trefoil form, and an arch has been closed’. The springings of three arches on the external face of the north wall are a remarkable feature, without any local parallel. Although a dowsed survey of 1981 recorded a large rectangular structure extending north of the chapel, apparently crossed by three transverse arcades (Bailey et al, 1988) it seems more likely that flying buttresses of some type were intended.

(7) Later Medieval Work

There are several features in the church difficult to fit into any structural chronology. The plain square-headed and mullioned ‘low side window’ at the west end of the south wall of the

¹¹ A feature previously reported in bastle houses (defensible early 17th century farmhouses) but not in an ecclesiastical context.

¹² cf the ‘cart hole’ in the wall of the north choir aisle at Hexham Priory.

¹³ The tower certainly re-uses older fabric; compare the masonry of the lower part of its north wall with the very similar fabric of the Saxon north nave wall.

chancel looks of 15th or even early 16th century character, and has been glazed, yet it opens within the south aisle which seems of earlier medieval date. Sadly the 1849 rebuilding destroyed any evidence as to whether the eastern bay of the aisle was a later addition. The blocked doorway immediately to the east of the aisle cuts through the base of a 13th-century lancet and is clearly an insertion, perhaps replacing a previous priest's door at the west end of the wall when the aisle was added or extended – but if this is the case, the 'low side' must always have been internal, which is very strange.

Other later medieval and post-medieval changes were clearly erased by the rather brutal restoration which the church underwent in 1849. An 1824 print (NCH) shows the aisle before this; its western part has a series of two-light mullioned windows at two levels, presumably lighting a gallery that could be readily be accommodated beneath the tall arcade, but further east was a tall three-light window and then one of two trefoil-headed lights, mentioned by Glynne (who dismisses the other windows in the wall as 'modern'); he also mentions a 'small window, perhaps Decorated, of two lights' at the east end of the aisle, of which the outer jambs still remain. At some time the North-East Chapel had become the village school, with the arch by which it opened to the nave being walled off.

(8) Victorian Restoration

A major restoration was carried out in 1848-9; some sources (eg Pevsner et al 1992, 205) give Benjamin Ferrey (a pupil of Augustus Pugin) as the architect but the Churchwardens' Account book¹⁴ mentions 'plans and specifications finished by James Turner Esq, of the Vicarage, Bywell and Mr George Pickering, architect, of Durham' and, in a post-restoration leaflet¹⁵ appealing for funds details only a single expenses payment of £1.00 to J.T.Turner who is described as 'hon. architect' .

The restoration was fairly drastic. The south aisle, said to have been in a dilapidated condition, was completely rebuilt except for parts of its end walls, and a new south porch constructed. The North-East Chapel was 'opened into the church' to provide a 'convenient room for the schoolchildren and the choir', and two new windows opened in the nave wall further west.

Further changes came in 1873, Robert Johnston being architect; the nave roof was renewed, and the North East Chapel given a new roof and parapet, and 'thrown more completely into the church' by the construction of the present two-bay arcade¹⁶. In 1883 the south aisle had to be re-roofed, suggesting that the 1848-9 rebuilding had not been of the highest quality.

Archaeological Assessment

Enough has already been said to show that St Peter's Church is one of the most significant Pre-Conquest churches in the North of England, and both a structure and site of great archaeological importance. Although considerable archaeological damage has been done (as often) inside the building by the construction of an underfloor heating system, significant deposits and structural remains will still remain, and need safeguarding. Any works that entail a disturbance of the floor and deposits beneath will require archaeological monitoring.

¹⁴ Woodhorn Northumberland Museum Archives ref EP 45/19

¹⁵ Filed with the Accounts book

¹⁶ Leaflet describing the 1873 restoration filed with the churchwardens' account book.

This is also true for the area around the church outside. At some time ground levels have been reduced here, dropping the surface to below the medieval plinths, and exposing footings. Some of these have been concealed again, on the south by the laying of a new path and on the north by re-turfing (?) – both activities carried out, as far as is known, without attendant archaeological recording. Another cause for concern is the early grave slab outside the east end of the south aisle, partly covered by gravel and being damaged every time anyone walks across it. This should either be railed off and protected, or perhaps removed (under archaeological supervision) and preserved inside the church; its north-south alignment implies that it is no longer in situ over a burial, but it may have been re-used as part of the footings of some structure.

In addition to the sub-surface archaeology, the standing fabric is of course of great importance. Most of the internal wall faces are concealed by plaster; any disturbance of this covering will again require archaeological recording. In addition to the underlying fabric it is possible that historic plaster and perhaps remains of wall decoration may survive. Although the 1995 investigation of the north wall of the chancel showed only one layer of plaster, of 19th or 20th century date, overlying the fabric, it should not be assumed that this is the case for other walls. In the event of proposed large-scale plaster removal, a trial investigation of a small area will be a necessary prerequisite.

Given the national importance of the fabric, there is a strong case for the preparation of a detailed stone-for-stone record (based on photogrammetry?) of the external faces of the north walls of nave and chancel; this might well allow a more detailed interpretation of the visible features. At the same time it might be expedient to carefully uncover the footings on the north side of the tower (taking care to remove only modern superficial deposits) and to properly record the foundations seen by earlier 20th-century workers, and solve the problem of the discrepancy between their measurements.

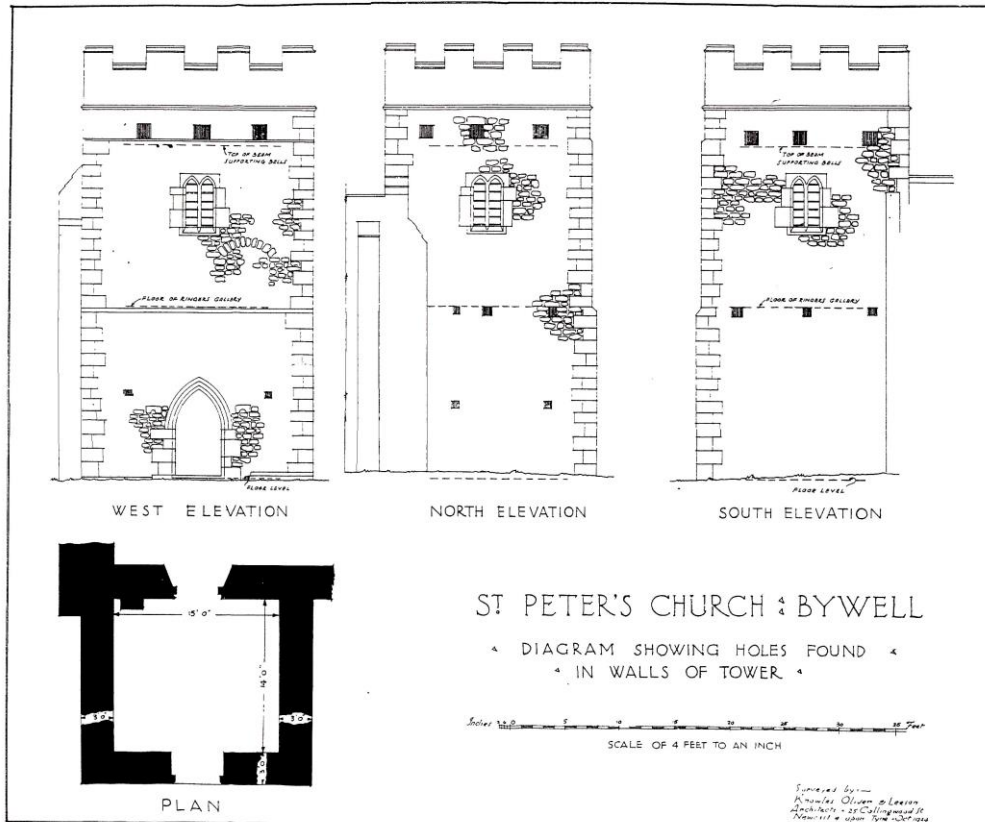
The Churchyard

The churchyard is of irregular plan; the curving boundary to the east and south is formed by a wooded flood channel of the River Tyne. On the north is a straight east-west fence-line with at its west end a gateway between two piers with bulgy rustication and ball finials – one is dated 1706, and there is also an inscription relating to a 1920 restoration. These originally stood on the west side of the churchyard where there is still a small 18th-century hearse house, rubble built under a stone slate roof, and with a monolithic lintel to its boarded doors. The churchyard has a number of interesting headstones of 18th century date; one of 1709 to Thomas Maznil, 10 m south of the south aisle, has an elaborate ground of ‘memento mori’ emblems carved in relief.

A little to the south of the church, and roughly following the curve of the river channel beyond, is a steep scarp which is probably in part a boundary of the natural platform upon which the building stands, but could also represent an early boundary.

The churchwardens’ account refer to extensions to the churchyard in 1847 and 1874, to the west and north respectively.

Peter F Ryder March 2007

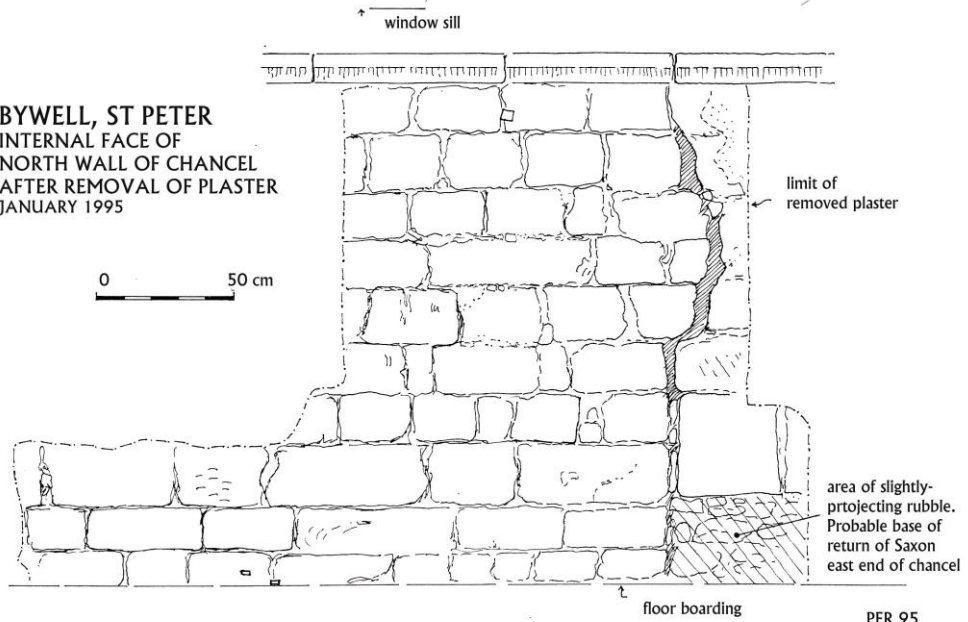


1924 drawings of tower showing features revealed during repair work

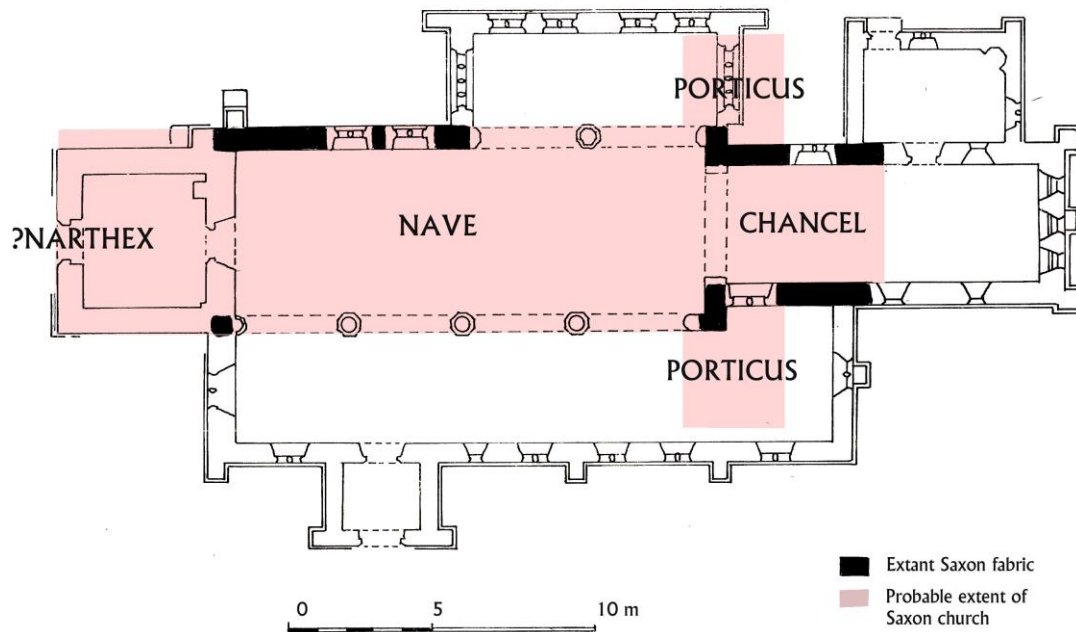


Upper stage of tower, east wall, previously west end of church as remodelled c1285) showing lancet window with ? 'quenching hole' beneath and, to left, remains of upper section of buttress

BYWELL, ST PETER
INTERNAL FACE OF
NORTH WALL OF CHANCEL
AFTER REMOVAL OF PLASTER
JANUARY 1995



PFR 95



ST PETER'S CHURCH, BYWELL THE SAXON BUILDING

- Extant Saxon fabric
- Probable extent of Saxon church

Note: it is possible that there were also ranges of porticus flanking the nave

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