

St Mary's Church, Bingfield

Bingfield church is set back from the village street, behind farm buildings, and only accessible along a narrow footpath at the edge of the field to the south, which contains extensive earthwork of the shrunken medieval village. The building is a simple rectangle in plan, with a lower vestry to the west, its features a mixture of Georgian and Victorian (the 1992 revision of Pevsner's Northumberland opines 'some medieval masonry, the rest early C`18 and of 1875').

The south elevation is of close-joined buff sandstone blocks, and the other walls of coursed roughly-squared stone; the south wall has a neat chamfered plinth and the north one a crude stepped one of large blocks. The south porch is of squared stone, with clasping buttress and a pointed arch, and loos Victorian. The south wall of the nave has three windows, each of two trefoiled-headed lights, the spandrel unpierced, under a hoodmould; the east end has a window of three stepped trefoil-headed lights, with the spandrels pierced. All these look Victorian; a window of two round-arched lights on the south of the vestry may be older. By contrast, the south doorway, now inside the porch, has a simple round-headed arch and a raised surround with impost blocks and keystone, and is clearly of 18th century date. The moulded kneelers to the gables, and the western bellcote, which has rusticated sides and a ball finial (all recently renewed) are also Georgian.

The north wall of the church is absolutely plain, except for a stepped buttress set roughly at the centre. The heavy plinth ends dc 0.6 m to each side of this buttress, and there is a straight joint rising to c 1.5 m a few cm to the west of the buttress (and in fact in line with the plinth of the buttress); there may be a corresponding joint on the east but the wall is more heavily mortared here. Above the straight join a couple of stones with shallow square sockets have been re-used in the wall.

So what is the date of the building?. The immediate impression is that we have an 18th century church restored in the 19th. The use of better-quality masonry on the south 'show' side of the building is quite a common feature; the fabric of the other walls could be contemporary, and might include re-used material from an older buildings. The west and south walls of the building seem to be c

0.65 -0.70 m thick, which is around what one would expect for an 18th century building; as the north wall has no openings it is difficult to ascertain its thickness without accurately measuring up the whole building. The vestry seems to go with the building ; if it were a later addition one might expect evidence of an earlier west window, but none is apparent. Also, if the building were medieval one would expect an opposed pair of doorways towards the west end of the nave; there is no sign of any feature opposite the 18th century south door. The roof trusses, of rough king-post form with raking struts between post and principal, and between tie and principal, look very much of 18th century character. The square moulded font is again a very typical 18th-century piece.

So there seems nothing, apart from the general appearance of the heavy and irregular fabric of the north and east walls, to suggest a medieval date for the building. The straight joint(s?) adjacent to the north buttress is an oddity, but one that could be explained if one sees the buttress as secondary, and the cut made to tie it into the wall did not allow for its reduction in width above the plinth. It is probably best to regard Mary's Church as a dual-period fabric of the 18th and 19th centuries; it has many similarities to nearby Kirkheaton, where a similar rectangular chapel (with a rather more elaborate bellcote and carved kneelers) of 1755 was remodelled and Gothicised in 1866-7.

Peter F Ryder. September 17th 2016