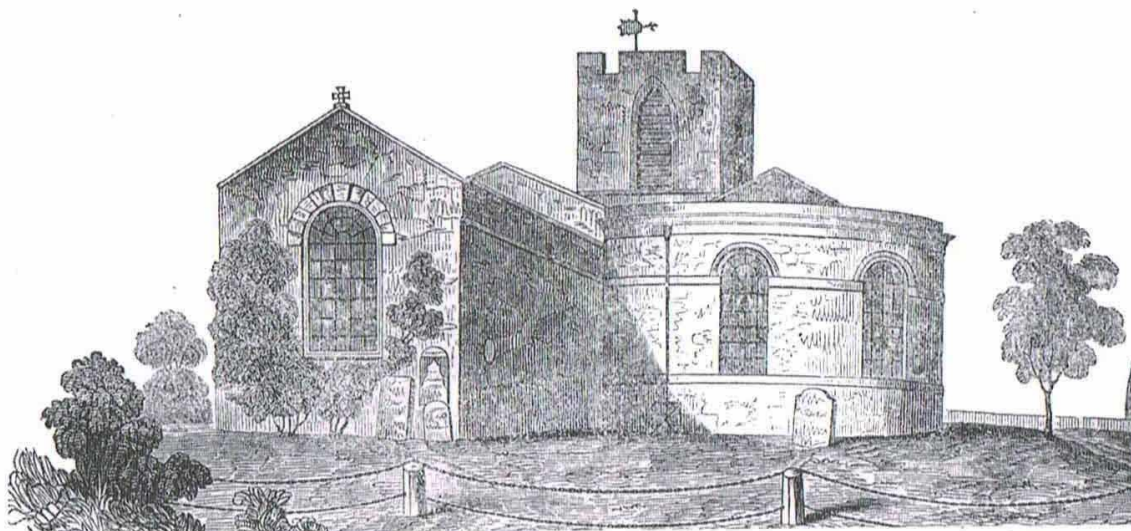


St Cuthbert's Church
Bedlington
An Archaeological Assessment
January 2015



The church as illustrated by Hodgson in 1832;

Note the 1736 chancel, and the apsidal 1817 extension

on the north of the nave

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St Cuthbert's Church, Bedlington

The parish church of St Cuthbert (NZ 26058180) stands on the south side of Front Street, the main thoroughfare of Bedlington, which runs on top of a low ridge on the west side of the incised wooded valley of the River Blyth, 5 km inland from the coast. As it stands today the building consists of a nave with a south chapel, west tower and a broad north aisle, and a chancel with vestries on the north.



Location Map based on Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer Sheet 325. OS map licence 100045703

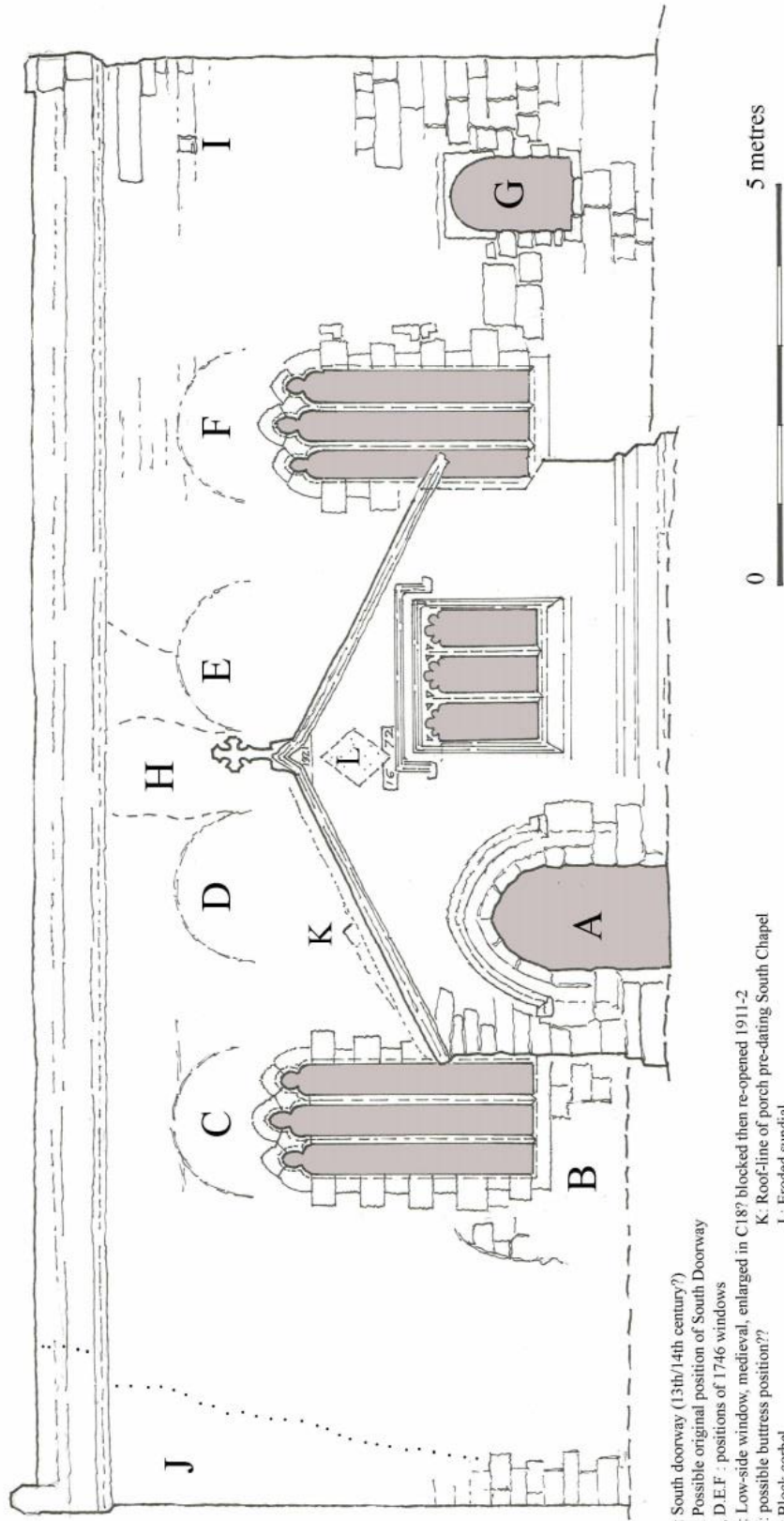
Description

The Exterior

The lofty neo-Romanesque **West Tower** of 1868 is built of tooled-and-margined ashlar and rises in two stages, a lofty lower one and a belfry; there is a triple-chamfered plinth and clasping buttresses to the angles, and a larger square stair-turret at the south-west corner, lit by small round-arched loops, which rises to a roof of overlapped slabs at about three-quarters of the height of the lower stage. The west wall has a doorway that has jamb shafts with scalloped capitals carrying a moulded arch with a billet hood mould, with a window above with chevron in the arch; higher up is a circular window and other mouldings. The first floor is lit by a circular window on the west and a round-headed one on the south. There is a moulded set-back at the base of the belfry, which has in each wall a typical Romanesque opening of two lights within a larger round arch, with jamb shafts that have cushion capitals and an impost band continued as a string course, interrupted by round-arched recesses in the corner buttresses. The parapet is set forward on two oversailing courses, and has a moulded crenelated parapet.

Only the south and the upper parts of the east wall of the **Nave** are readily visible – the upper part of the north wall (which is entirely of 1911-12; the original wall had been completely removed in 1817) is concealed from most viewpoints by the pitched roof of the aisle. The bulk of the stonework is in coursed almost square blocks, very much of 12th century character, apart from the south-west angle which has been rebuilt in tooled-and-margined ashlar clearly of the same build as the tower. The coursed masonry continues round the south-east angle, without any larger quoins; the upper parts of the east wall (above the chancel roof) may have been rebuilt; there are four areas of red tile patching here. The lower part of the central section of the wall is concealed by the South Chapel; on either side of this has been a large round-headed window, with two more, their sills at a higher level, above its roof; these appear to date to 1746 and are all now blocked; within the openings of the two outer ones, but with their heads a metre or so lower, are 1911-12 windows of three stepped trefoil-headed lights, with diagonally-tooled ashlar dressings. Close to the east end of the wall there is a smaller window, set quite low (a 'low side'?) with a round-arched head cut into a single large

ST CUTHBERT, BEDLINGTON
 SKETCH ELEVATION OF EXTERNAL FACE OF SOUTH WALL OF NAVE P F Ryder January 2015



- A: South doorway (13th/14th century?)
 B: Possible original position of South Doorway
 C, D, E, F: positions of 1746 windows
 G: Low-side window, medieval, enlarged in C18? blocked then re-opened 1911-2
 H: possible buttress position??
 I: Block corbel
 J: Rebuilt quoins and walling, 1868
 K: Roof-line of porch pre-dating South Chapel
 L: Eroded sundial

block – in fact very little of the block survives, suggesting that the window was originally smaller and has been enlarged. There are vestiges of earlier features in the wall; c 1 m to the west of the western window is a ragged break which might result from the dressings of an arched doorway being removed¹ and there is a straight joint under the window which might represent its eastern jamb. Above the chapel roof are some inclined stones which might indicate the roof-line of a former porch relating to the doorway that now opens from the nave into the chapel, and between the two central blocked windows is a vertical feature that may indicate an early buttress. High up near the east end of the wall is a projecting corbel-like block, and there are one or two elongate blocks in this area, whilst lower down, around the east jamb of the eastern three-light window are a number of L-shaped blocks which similarly must have some significance, which at present remains elusive². The top of the wall is an oversailing chamfered course carrying a low parapet with a moulded coping.

The shallow-pitched east gable of the nave has an oversailing chamfered coping; there is no finial.

The **South Chapel** is quite a low structure with a broad but shallow gable, built of roughly-coursed squared blocks, with some very large ones in the lower courses. The south and east walls have a two-stepped moulded plinth of late medieval/early post-medieval character, in part restored; this returns on the west as a simple chamfered step and then dies out. Towards the west end of the south wall is a doorway with a four-centred arch and two continuous chamfered orders, under a chamfered hood with turned-back ends; it seems to interrupt the plinth in an awkward manner and may have been re-used from elsewhere. In the centre of the gable is a square-headed window, probably of 1921, of three cinquefoil-headed lights under a hoodmould with turned-back ends. In the gable is a lozenge-shaped stone which was probably once a sundial, and below it a small stone with the incised date '1672'; the gable has an old moulded coping; at the apex is a stone dated '1921' (when the structure was remodelled as a War Memorial Chapel) and above it a cusped finial cross, perhaps of the same date..

The North Aisle and Vestries are all of one build, and constructed in 1911-12 of snecked roughly-tooled stone with diagonally-tooled ashlar dressings and green Lakeland slate roofs. The aisle is of six bays, articulated by northward-facing stepped buttresses' all openings have casement-moulded hoods and the gables have a coping set on moulded kneelers, with trefoiled finials above them. The west end has a window of five stepped lancet lights with cinquefoil cusping to their heads, under a hood with turned-back ends; below is a foundation stone dated 1911 (?) laid by Mrs Burdon of Hartford House. The north wall has a doorway in the second bay from the west, with a steep two-centred arch of two wave-moulded orders under a hood continued to the buttress on either side; the windows are all of two-lights, all under pointed arches with alternating tracery patterns and hoods like that of the door. The east end has another similar window, but is partly covered by a small block linking it to the main vestry; above the roof of the link is a circular window with whirling mouchettes. The

¹ Its curve is similar to that of the arch of the present south doorway of the South Chapel; was this removed from here?

² See 'recommendations' section.

link block has a tall two-centred doorway with a chamfered surround, with a cinquefoil-headed lancet alongside, with linked hoodmoulds. The vestry block is set north-south; its north end has diagonal buttresses, a three-light window with rather eccentric tracery in its arched head and a gable capped by an octagonal chimneystack. The short west return has a steep stair descending to the boiler room beneath, and the two-bay east return two square-headed windows of three cinquefoil-headed lights, with a buttress between them.



The **Chancel** (above, seen from south) is built of tooled ashlar, in a neo-Romanesque style, with a steep-pitched roof of Welsh slate; it has a chamfered plinth, and shallow stepped buttresses articulating the three-bay south elevation and clasping the eastern angles; there is a chamfered oversailing course to the eaves. On the south there is a priest's door that has attached shafts to its jambs, with carved capitals, and a moulded arch with a billet hoodmould. The windows – one in each end bay on the south, an equal-height triplet in the east end and one at the east end of the north wall – all have similar detail; the central section of their sills is stepped down as a blind panel below the bases of their jamb shafts. The east gable has moulded kneelers and a coping chamfered on its underside, and is topped by the base of a missing finial.

The Interior

In the base of the **Tower** the internal walls are all of tooled ashlar. The west doorway and window above have plain round rear arches, and at the west end of the south wall is a small chamfered square-headed doorway to the newel stair. On the east a modern screen and doorway close the tower arch, which is two-centred and of two square orders, their section continued down the jambs below the impost, which are chamfered on their lower angle. The ceiling has heavy beams against all four walls and one set axially, all with stopped chamfers, carrying square-section joists which in turn support diagonally-set boarding. On the south wall is a tablet stating that the tower 'was built by public subscription to replace a decaying one of unknown date' in 1867, with the names of vicar and churchwardens, the architect Thomas Oliver and builder Richard Oliver.

The newel stair rises to a plain square-headed opening into a lofty chamber below the belfry, which has internal walls of squared roughly-tooled stone and a chamfered square headed doorway on the east, now bricked up. A steep wooden ladder/stair rises against the north and then the east walls to a hatch into the belfry which is set between the east wall and a single heavy transverse beam. The belfry has long-headed wooden frames of bolted construction, with incised carpenter's numbering, now just with a single bell. The tower roof is of four narrow bays with low pitched king post trusses carrying three levels of purlins.

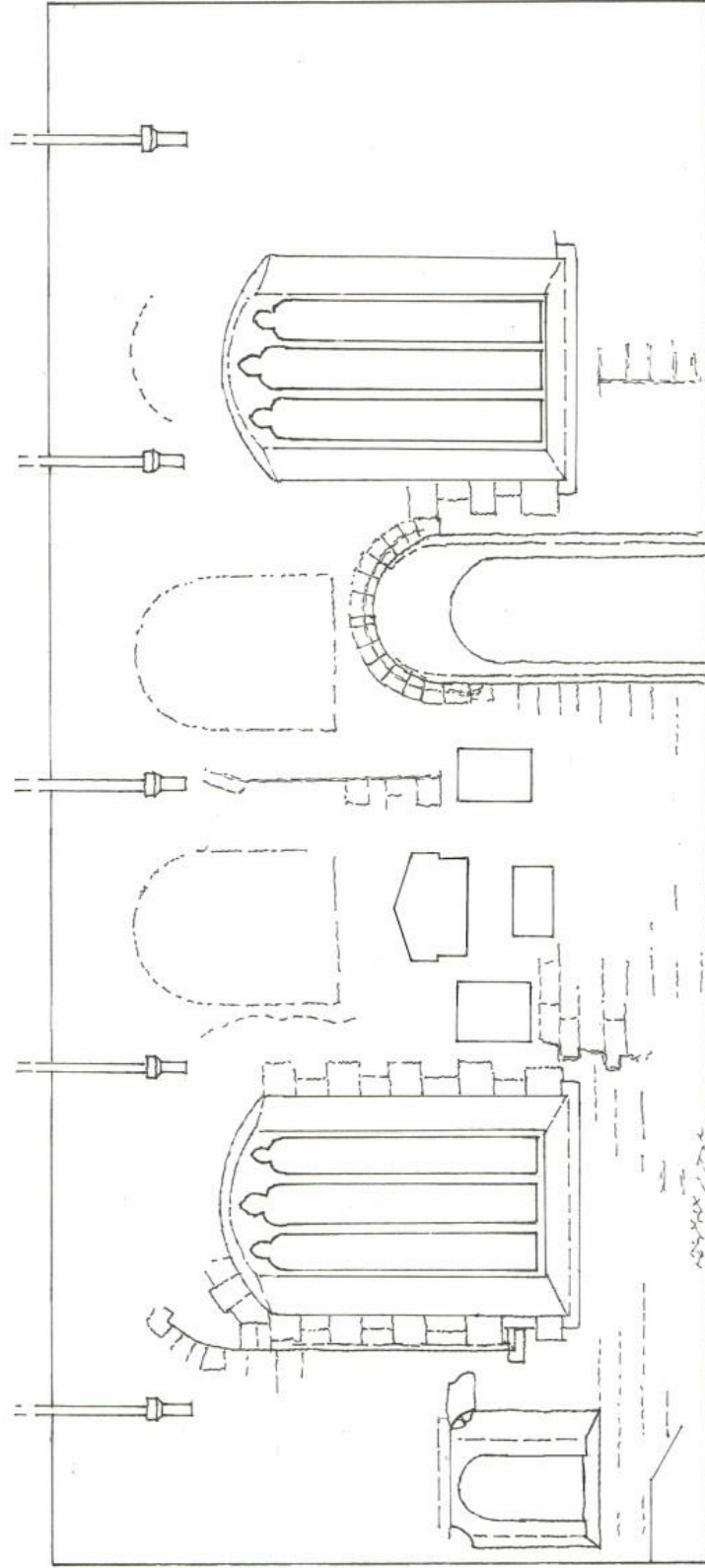
Inside the **Nave** the medieval south and east walls are of exposed stonework. At the west end, the inner face of the tower arch is now largely concealed by the modern west gallery. Much of the internal face of the south wall is of regular squared stone of 12th-century character, and many blocks bear mason's marks, often a simple incised cross. The masonry is worth a detailed study³ and shows some irregularities including a strange ragged break a little to the west of the eastern three-light window, to the east of which the lower courses are eroded and damaged. On the south the doorway into the South Chapel has a semicircular rear arch with an angle-roll to its head. The two 1911-12 three-light windows segmental rear arches with ashlar alternating-block surrounds, and the small window set low towards the east end of the wall has a shouldered rear arch, with a recent lintel carried on the east by a simple corbel and on the west by one in the form of a large nail-head motif. There are also evidences of earlier openings; the outlines of the central two of the four round-headed windows of 1746 are very clear, but the outer two only show as areas of general disturbance. A little to the east of the eastern three-light window is a tall jamb, and turn of the chamfered sill, of a window which was presumably of 12th century date as its jamb stones course in with the walling to the east. The curve of its rear arch survives, although it ends in a stone shaped like an inverted 'V' which presumably is out of place, as if this was really the apex of the opening it would make this a very narrow lancet which, with the observable splay of the jamb, would be too narrow to pierce the thickness of the wall. Further west, in between the central two 1746 openings, is another straight joint which again seems to be the east jamb of an early window, with just the beginnings of a possible arched head visible. Of the possible blocked doorway towards the west end of the wall, the eastern jamb is visible beneath the western here-light window, but

³ See recommendations section

ST CUTHBERT, BEDDLINGTON

SKETCH ELEVATION OF INTERNAL FACE OF SOUTH WALL OF NAVE

P F Ryder January 2015



0 5 metres

the lower wall west of this is hidden by monuments now set upright against it, a post-medieval slab and two cross slabs.

The east wall of the nave (below) contains the chancel arch which is now of four-centred form, which must be the result of some reconstruction; in its original form it would have been semicircular. It has jambs with bold half-shafts that have renewed moulded bases set on plinths c 1.5 m above the floor; the plinths are of tooled stone of late 18th or early 19th century character. The simple capitals have abaci, chamfered beneath, which may have been cut to their present semi-octagonal form, and are carried back as a string course for some distance on either side of the arch, with some worn carved decoration. The arch itself is of two orders. The inner has a soffit roll between two hollow chamfers, the vertical face towards the nave having varying incised decoration including interlace and four-petalled flowers. The outer order has deeply-carved chevron but is very badly eroded; there is also a hoodmould, carried on the impost band, which also has remains of carved ornament.



On either side of the arch are ogee-arched openings, perhaps of 14th century date, with their sills c 1.5 m above the floor. The larger northern one is a squint, cut obliquely through the wall to give a view of the altar, and has a trefoil-cusped head. The southern is a shallow recess which unlike the northern has the moulding continued round its sill. Both have their heads cut into single blocks, and both have had an outer moulding that has been trimmed back flush with the wall.

Higher up the wall there appears to be a disturbed area towards the south end, with two elongate blocks with a close horizontal tooling, and then there is a set-back at the level of the eaves of the side walls.

The north side of the nave has a five-bay arcade of 1911-12, in tooled ashlar. Octagonal piers with simple chamfered bases and boldly-moulded capitals carry four-centred arches with a single broad chamfered order and a casement-moulded hood; above is a clerestorey (hidden externally to normal view by the pitched roof of the aisle) of four circular windows with tracery in the form of whirling trefoiled mouchettes.

The nave has a roof of four full bays with a half bay at each end; the roof structure may be of early 19th century date, and consists of king-post trusses with tie-beams of plank-like section. Arch braces rise from stone corbels of quadrant form, with an impost chamfered on its lower angle, and there are cusped panels behind them. The king posts have jowelled bases and are flanked by X-braces and upright struts, with variously-cusped panels between.

The **South Chapel** now forms a War Memorial Chapel; the walls are of exposed stone but their lower parts are largely concealed by panelling; it is roofed by a four-centred barrel vault of roughly-tooled stone. The doorway into the nave is set so awkwardly close to the west end of the north wall as to imply that it is an earlier feature, and has a round arch with a narrow chamfer; this chamfer seems secondary, from the manner in which what seems to have been an arrow-shaped mason's mark on one of the voussoirs has been partly cut away by it. The south doorway in the outer wall has a segmental rear arch with a chamfer only to its head. In the west wall is a shallow recess with a segmental arch that has a broad chamfer, which appears to be an original medieval or sub-medieval feature. Old plans show another recess in the centre of the north wall, but this is now concealed by fittings. The early-20th century window in the south wall has a shouldered three-centred rear arch with a hollow chamfer to its head.

In the **Chancel** the walls are plastered and cream-washed, with exposed ashlar dressings. The east face of the chancel arch is, interestingly, much better preserved than the west, perhaps suggesting that at some time the nave lay roofless when the chancel did not. The hoodmould on this side is decorated by a series of raised medallions; whilst the inner order does not have carving on its vertical face, as on the west, the impost band runs the width of the wall, and has some ornament.

There is a panelled dado, except in the sanctuary, and woodwork conceals the inner face of the priest's door. The windows all have billet moulding to their inner orders, and there is a billet-moulded string course beneath the eastern triplet. At the west end of the north wall is a

1911 arch to the former organ chamber, now blocked; it is of four-centred form with a single broad chamfer and alternating voussoirs, whilst its responds have moulded capitals like those of the arcade.

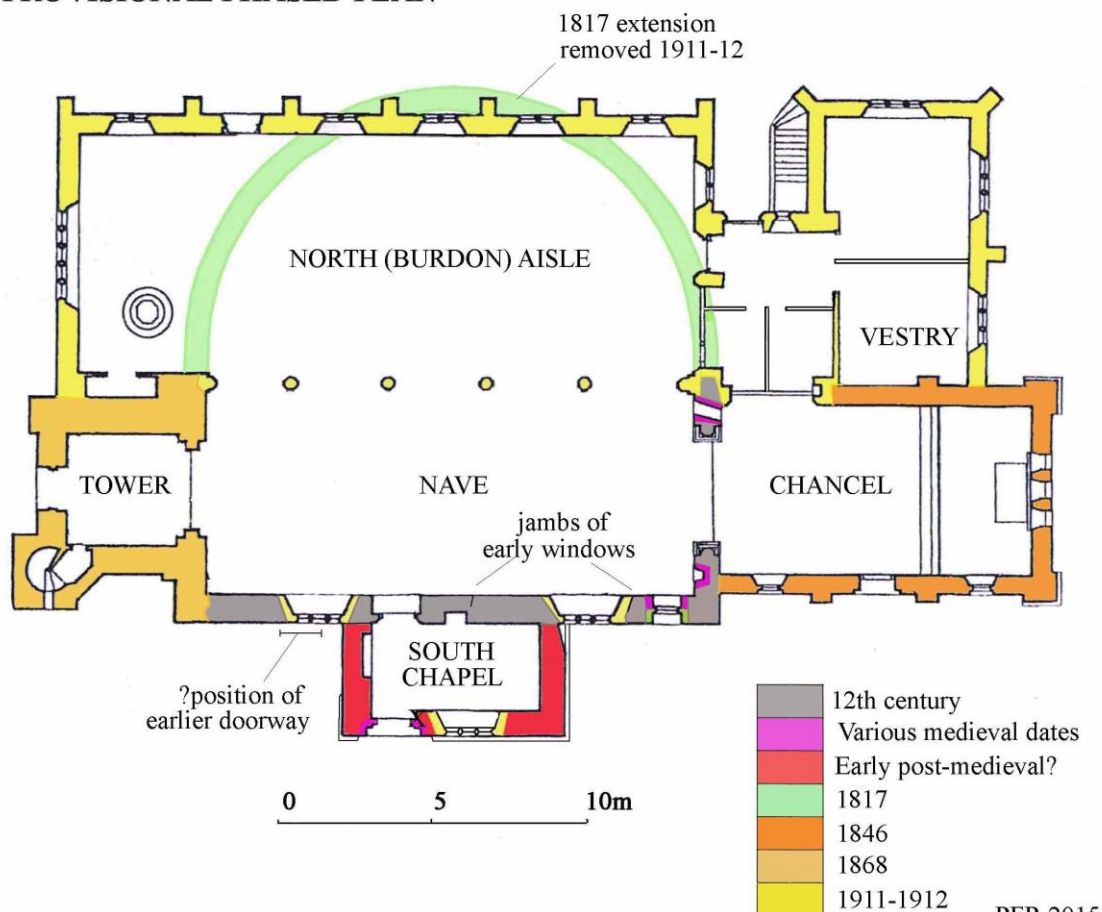
The three-bay roof is interesting, being carried on stone ‘trusses’ in the form of semicircular arches with chevron, springing from pilasters that have fluted bases and scalloped capitals; these arches in turn carry a ridge and purlins with Romanesque mouldings, and the rafters have ashlaring to the eaves..

The **North Aisle** is now divided from the nave by a modern glazed half-height screen with double doors in each end bay on arcade, double doors in each end bay. It has plastered walls with exposed ashlar dressings. At the east end there is a central two-centred doorway to the vestries, with to the south an arch to the organ chamber, like that to the chancel, and similarly now blocked. The windows all plain plastered-over rear arches, but the north door has a chamfered surround and a casement-moulded label with turned-back ends. The roof is of six bays, with scissor-braced trusses central posts and arch braces, which on the outer wall are carried on moulded stone corbels and on the inner by the capitals of the arcade piers; there are three levels of moulded purlins, carrying boarding and a moulded wall plate.

The **Vestries** have no old features of any significance, except for the attractive ironwork of the north door; the former organ chamber has been sub-divided and contains toilets.

ST CUTHBERT’S CHURCH, BEDLINGTON

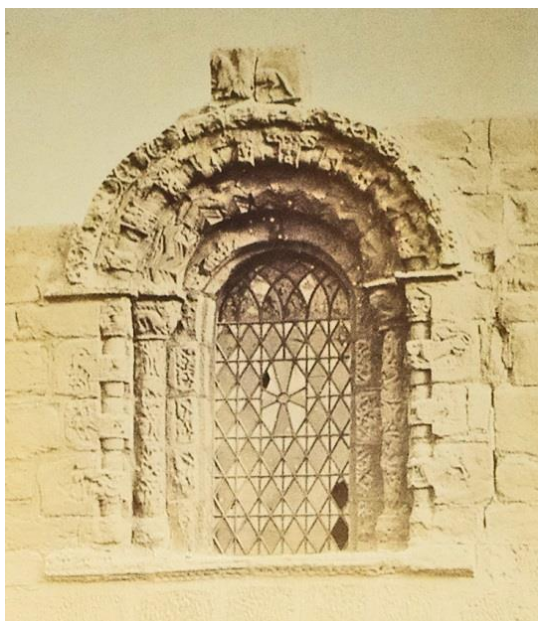
PROVISIONAL PHASED PLAN



Historical Notes and Structural Analysis

The early ecclesiastical history of Bedlington is closely tied up with Durham and the Community of St Cuthbert, ever since the ‘ville’ of Bedlington was purchased by Cutheard, last Bishop of Lindisfarne and first of Chester-le-Street (900-915); Bedlingtonshire remained a detached part of the Diocese of Durham until the 19th century.

Whilst a carved stone with two figures, now built into the internal face of the west wall of the nave, has been dated to the 10th century, the earliest parts of the fabric of the present church, the south and east walls of the nave, are of 12th century date⁴. The nave was probably aisleless; before its 19th-century enlargement the church was described as ‘small, covered in lead, and having an old tower’⁵. The chancel arch is clearly Romanesque, but looks to have been taken down, at least in part, and re-set, perhaps in the later medieval period. The doorway into the south porch looks 12th-century work as well it seems to be set a long way east to have been the original south door, and too plain as well, at least to have ever been the principal entrance into the church⁶. There are vestiges of a doorway further west, but without any surviving detail.



This tower, demolished in 1868 would appear to have been contemporary with the nave, to judge from descriptions and a surviving photograph⁷ of its west window (left), which Hodgson describes as ‘beautifully moulded and fretted’ although its ‘enrichments’ had ‘certainly suffered much by the mouldering hand of Time’. Perhaps as a justification for its rebuilding an inscribed tablet in the present tower specifies that its predecessor was both ‘decaying’ and of ‘unknown date’; the large and plain Gothic-arched belfry openings shown on old illustrations suggest that its upper parts may have been a post-medieval reconstruction. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey 25”:1 mile map of c1860 shows the old tower as

having a projecting stair turret at its south-west corner, as its successor does. The medieval chancel was rebuilt in 1736, although Hodgson makes an intriguing reference to it having a window which may have been Romanesque, as the tower window already mentioned is said to have served as a model for its repair.

⁴ A 1982 dowsed survey of the church showed the plan of a putative Saxon building, with a nave flanked by porticus and an apsidal chancel (Bailey, Cambridge and Briggs, 1988, *Dowsing and Church Archaeology*). Denis Briggs’ dowsing on occasions seems to have been vindicated, eg at Woodhorn but on other occasions can be shown to be misleading, eg missing the evidence for aisles at Warden, which is very evident in the fabric, so one needs to be circumspect.

⁵ Randal, quoted by Hodgson (1832, *History of Northumberland* Vol.II part II, 352)

⁶ Its rear arch is moulded but the other face of the opening seems to have been severely plain – yet there does seem to be evidence for it having had an external porch at one time – see description of external face of wall.

⁷ A copy hangs in the vestry

The south chapel has been variously dated to the 14th century and to 1672, the date of an inscribed stone in its south gable; it is really quite a puzzling structure. Its stone vault links it with churches like Bellingham, Elsdon and Kirknewton where vaults of late medieval or even early post-medieval have been associated with making the church fire-proof and perhaps defensible, a reflection of troubled times. The one thoroughly-medieval looking feature of the porch is the south door, which could be of the 13th or 14th century, but there is some evidence to suggest that this may be *ex situ*, and could possibly have been removed from the nave wall further west. The odd fact that the eastern face of the chancel arch seems much less weathered than the western, suggesting that the nave may have lain roofless at one time, also suggests that the church suffered undocumented vicissitudes, as may the ragged break in the coursing of the south nave wall. The chapel as built seems to have had very few if any windows; illustrations before its 1921 remodelling show a single small round-headed light, of 18th century character, in the south wall close to the doorway. One could speculate further; the date of the chapel must remain uncertain, although an early post-medieval one seems quite possible.

Moving on to documented works, Bedlington Church certainly received a great deal of structural change in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1736 the chancel was rebuilt, and in 1746 five large sashed windows were inserted, including the four still evident in the south wall of the nave. Then in 1817 the north wall of the nave was removed and replaced by an apsidal extension, the pulpit having been moved to the centre of the south wall of the nave, changes reflecting both the theological shift in the predominance of Word over Sacrament, and the increase in congregation brought about by the growth of local industry, primarily the iron works. In 1847 the 1736 chancel – all we know of which is that it measured 32 by 17 feet and had a big round-arched east window, was rebuilt once more, in Romanesque style, and in 1868 the west tower followed suit, with the sad loss of its remarkably ornate Romanesque west window.

In 1911-12 the church was remodelled again, Arthur B Plummer being the architect, the much-criticised 1817 extension being replaced by a broad north aisle, and attached vestries, and most fittings and furnishings – font, pulpit, altar, choir stalls and pews – being renewed. The old west gallery was taken down and, the organ moved to a new organ chamber on the north of the chancel. The four 1746 windows on the south of the nave were blocked up, and new three-light Gothic windows inserted to replace the outer two.

In 1921, in the aftermath of World War I when many men from the area died, the South Chapel was converted into a War Memorial Chapel, and a new three-light Gothic window replaced its small Georgian predecessor.

In 2001-2 the building was again altered, without major structural changes although a new western gallery was constructed and the organ moved back to it; new floors and a new heating system were installed. The north aisle has been cleared of its pews, and a glazed partial screen placed between it and the nave.

Archaeological Assessment

As with any medieval church, any disturbance either of internal floor levels or the external ground surface adjacent to the building will require archaeological monitoring; it is highly likely that sub-surface structural remains of earlier phases of the building survive, as well as numerous burials. It is not clear how much works such as sub-surface heating systems have disturbed underfloor deposits and structural remains; the present floors – stone slabs in the nave, 20th century wooden flooring in the South Chapel and carpeting in the chancel/sanctuary and aisle - are all recent. Archaeological recording was carried out in 2001-2 when the present western gallery was constructed.⁸; significant features found were two blocks with cuts for the bases of the pillars that carried the previous gallery, and a soakaway for the pre-1911 font.

Although no historic wall surfaces retain plaster, any substantial works to the fabric of the two medieval walls should also be monitored.

Recommendations

As already outlined, the surviving medieval east and south walls of the nave retain a complex series of structural features which as yet are not fully understood. Measured sketch plans have been prepared in the course of this assessment, but there are of a very provisional nature and in no way a substitute for what is really needed, proper stone-for-stone drawings which should properly depict changes in coursing ,remains of early architectural features, tooling and mason's marks. Only by this rather painstaking means will further light be shed on the structure, and the long and complex development of the building. The fabric of St Cuthbert's Church undoubtedly has more to tell us, but the coaxing-forth of this information will take time and effort.

Peter F Ryder January 2015.

Other Sources

The Story of St Cuthbert's (guide pamphlet available 2015, summarising several earlier guides)

Bedlington. Northumberland Extensive Urban Survey (2009) Northumberland County Council and English Heritage. Online at www.northumberland.gov.uk/idoc.ashx?docid=0a73e39f-3b96...

⁸ St Cuthbert's Church, Bedlington, Northumberland. Archaeological Excavation November 2001. The Archaeological Practice Project Code 01/11/685

Appendix 1. Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers

(from Ryder, P F (2002) Cross Slab Grave Covers in Newcastle and South East Northumberland. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th ser. XXX , 76-7, 105

Slabs (1 - 3) are set upright against the walls at the south-west corner of the nave, (1) and (2) on the south and (3) on the west. A wall plaque nearby relates how the three stones were found on March 10th 1818, 5 feet below the surface, in removing earth for the foundations of the semicircular part of the church (an addition on the north of the nave, replaced by the present aisle in 1912). The bases of (1) and (2) and the lower two thirds of (3), are partly hidden by heating pipes, the proximity of which appears to have caused considerable flaking of the stone.

(1) Relief design on brown sandstone within raised border. Bracelet cross with trefoil terminals, fleur-de-lys springing from shaft and sword on r. Base missing. Probably early thirteenth century.

(2) Incised slab of brown sandstone. Simple Latin cross with longer sword on r. A trace of design at the top of the slab looks like the upper terminal of a splay-armed cross, mostly tooled away when the slab was re-cut with its present design. A very simple slab difficult to date; perhaps twelfth century. Ryal (12) is a close parallel.

(3) Relief design on dark grey sandstone, within raised border. Elaborate cross head with the outer leaves of each terminal uniting to enclose heart-shaped 'bracelets' from which further diagonal fleur-de-lys spring towards the upper corners of the slab. As with further fleur-de-lys spring from the cross shaft and there is a sword on the r; in addition there appears to have been a belt wound round the sword, but this part of the stone is badly damaged. On the l. side of the slab is the beginning of an inscription in Lombardic capitals:

ORA : PRO.....

A high-status slab of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.

(4) Lower half of a yellow sandstone slab now built into the west wall of the nave to the north of the tower arch. Relief design. Broad cross shaft with stepped base, with paired flowers or leaves on long curved stems, as on several slabs at Newbiggin. Key on l. of shaft and shears on r., indicative of a woman's grave. Probably fifteenth century.

Slabs (5) and (6) are built into the south wall of the west end of the north aisle.

(5) Incised design on grey sandstone. Greek cross with cross bars and late-form fleur-de-lys terminals; a rectangular emblem, perhaps a book or work-box, on the left of the shaft. Fourteenth or fifteenth century.

(6) Slab of buff sandstone with cross head carved in relief in sunk panel and remainder of design incised. Design a cruder and simpler variant of 3. Sword on r. of shaft. Thirteenth century?(7) The upper part of a small slab of coarse grey sandstone now built into the internal sill of the small window at the east end of the south wall of the nave. Incised design except for sunken panels between arms of cross head. Cross pate in circle, tapering shaft. Roll-moulded edge. Good-quality workmanship, perhaps later twelfth century.

(7) The upper part of a small slab of coarse grey sandstone now built into the internal sill of the small window at the east end of the south wall of the nave. Incised design except for sunken panels between arms of cross head. Cross pate in circle, tapering shaft. Roll-moulded edge. Good-quality workmanship, perhaps later twelfth century.

Bedlington (St. Cuthbert)

