

The Parish Church of St Michael, Alnwick
Analysis of the Fabric and Archaeological Assessment

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Early 19th century painting of the interior (between 1818 and 1863)

Peter F Ryder
1 Ford Terrace
Broomhaugh
RIDING MILL
Northumberland
NE44 6EJ
Tel (01434) 682644
E mail: PFYder@broomlee.demon.co.uk

Alnwick St Michael

The parish church of Alnwick (NU 1837 1372) stands on the edge of the old town, c 500 m to the north-west of the Market Place and 400 m west of the Castle, with the land on the north of the churchyard dropping steeply to the River Aln. The building consists of a five-bay aisled nave, with a tower forming the west bay of the south aisle and a range of vestries forming in effect an outer north aisle, a south porch and a three-bay fully-aisled chancel.

Description

The Exterior

The only wall of the **Nave** exposed externally is its west end, and this is constructed of squared sandstone, including some quite large blocks, the courses varying in height. There is a tall chamfered plinth c 1.2 m high, and the wall is flanked on the north by a larger stepped buttress rising to a stubby crocketed pinnacle, and on the south by the north-western angle buttress of the tower; the ashlar dressings of the buttresses have been renewed.. The west window is of three lights, with cinquefoiled heads above and below a transom at mid-height, and tracery above, under a four-centred head, with a deep casement moulding to the surround and hollow-chamfered hoodmould with head stops. All its ashlar dressings are of 19th-century date. The outline of an earlier gable line can be seen above, its apex at the present height but its eaves level considerably lower; the present gable coping, of overlapped slabs, is of some age.

The **Tower** at the west end of the aisle is of good-quality squared stone, and rises in three stages, divided by chamfered set-backs, above a tall plinth with a hollow-chamfered lower and a moulded upper member. At the south-west angle is a big diagonal buttresses, and there are buttresses projecting north and south at the eastern angles; that at the north-west angle is in its lower parts in effect of clasping form, but higher up projects only from the west face.

The lower stage has elliptical-headed three-light windows on the west and south. The former, set close to the big north-western buttress, has trefoiled lights and sub-lights, in a hollow-chamfered surround and under a casement-moulded hood with cross fleury terminals. The window on the south is similar but has cinquefoiled tops to its principal lights and hoodmould terminals with the Percy emblems of crescent (left) and fetterlocks (right). The newel stair at the south-west angle is lit by a series of square-headed loops, most with chamfered surrounds.

The second stage of the tower has a square-headed window on the west, with a chamfered surround and sockets for two vertical bars visible in its lintel; on the south are two narrower square-headed and chamfered windows, the larger eastern one in relatively recent stone; there has been quite extensive re-facing here, particularly around the clock face.

The belfry has an opening in each face with two broad trefoiled lights and trefoil-headed sub-lights, under a shallow elliptical arch, with two orders of hollow chamfers and a moulded hood. Above is a hollow-chamfered oversailing course at the base of the parapet, which has a crenellated moulded coping, with crocketed pinnacles at the angles.

The **South Aisle** is of four bays, the porch projecting from the first. The wall has a two-stepped moulded plinth (which slopes downwards, with the ground, at a marked angle towards the east) and is articulated by slender three-stepped buttresses, which are carried up

as crocketed pinnacles¹; the parapet has a moulded oversailing course at its base and a crenellated moulded parapet.

The westernmost bay, above the porch, has a ragged break to the right-of-centre; to the left is coursed purplish stone in large quite square blocks, of quite early medieval character; to the right is masonry like that of the rest of the aisle, less regularly coursed and of a lighter colour, with more elongate blocks. Above the porch is the weathering of a slightly higher porch roof. The three bays to the east each have a three-light window with a virtually-triangular head, with cinquefoiled heads to the light above and below a mid-height transom, below head tracery which varies, the middle window having a central quatrefoil, all in casement-moulded surrounds and beneath casement-moulded hoods with turned-back ends. All the dressings of these windows appear to be tooled 19th-century ashlar. At the east end of the wall, just above the plinth between the window and the heavier buttress that divides nave and chancel aisles, is a short straight joint around 30 m from the buttress); beneath the plinth steps down to a lower level.

The **South Porch** is built of large coursed blocks of sandstone, and has a big hollow-chamfered plinth. The outer arch has a segmental head and a continuous double wave moulding, with a moulded hood, once again with Percy emblems (crescent r., fetterlocks l.) as stops. Above is a rectangular carved panel now eroded into illegibility; the shallow gable has a coping hollow-chamfered on its lower angle, with moulded tops to its footstones, and a relatively recent cross fleury finial.

Only the westernmost bay of the **North Aisle** is exposed externally. Its west wall has a steep single-stepped plinth (quite different to anywhere else around the church) that steps down midway along the wall; above the step is an irregular vertical joint, the masonry to the right probably representing the west end of an earlier and narrower aisle; in this section of wall, hard up against the buttress at the north-west angle of the nave, is a narrow trefoil-headed window, its dressings all renewed. Above this is a semblance of the steep roof line for the narrower aisle, then further up evidence that the widened aisle formerly had a shallow-pitched gable, the area to the r. now infilled. At the north-west angle of the aisle is a diagonal buttress, and here a two-stepped plinth begins, although less elaborate than that on the south of the church; the lower step is a simple chamfer, and the upper a roll-and-hollow moulding of very little projection. In the exposed bay of the north wall is a window of three trefoiled ogee lights under broad chamfered segmental arch, at least part medieval. The parapet too is simpler than that on the south, having a hollow-chamfered oversailing course at its base and a chamfered coping.

The **Vestries**, which externally have the appearance of an outer north aisle, fall into two two-bay sections. The western part is clearly older, and appears to re-use medieval stonework, although this seems to have been re-tooled. It has the same simple two-part plinth as appears at the north-west angle of the inner aisle, which is presumably old work re-set, as is the parapet. There is a diagonal buttress at the north-west angle, and then two quite substantial stepped buttresses; the stonework of the first looks of medieval character². The west wall has a Tudor-arched doorway of simple square-edged section, clearly an insertion, and each bay of

¹These pinnacles, continued round the chancel aisles, are each made up of a single block, quite elaborately carved, and are worthy of some note.

² This cannot be in situ, as old plans show that the first (early 19th century) vestry had a diagonal angle buttress at this point.

the north wall a window of three trefoiled ogee-arched lights under a segmental head with a broad chamfer to its external surround, which is of older stone. The two eastern bays have no buttresses, and are of much more recent stone (c1990), although again an old plinth and parapet seem to have been re-used; the windows here are of 20th-century ashlar, and are still three-light segmental-arched ones, although here the mullions are carried straight up to join the arch without any cusping or tracery.

Only the east end wall of the **Chancel** is exposed externally, and this appears to be entirely of 19th-century stone. It has a plinth like that of the south chancel aisle, and is flanked by a pair of buttresses with panelled faces, rising to crocketed pinnacles. The east window, its sill set high to allow for the reredos, has five cinquefoil-headed lights above and below the transom, and a traceried head, with a moulded hood ending in carved stops in the form of crowned heads. The gable has a coping of overlapped slabs and is capped by an eight-terminal ring cross finial.

The **South Chancel Aisle** is of three bays, considerably longer than those of the nave arcade, with which it has much detail in common including the plinth, parapet and the slender buttresses between the bays. The three windows too are very similar to those of the aisle, down to the centre one having a different form of tracery with a central quatrefoil, but their heads have slightly steeper four-centred arches; once again all are, in their present form, of 19th-century ashlar. That in the central bay is set west-of-centre to allow for a priest's door to the east, which has a Tudor arch and a double wave-moulding (like the outer archway of the south porch), and, unlike the windows, seems unrestored medieval work. The window in the east bay is set west-of-centre. At the south-west corner of the aisle is an unusual octagonal turret rising to a corbelled-out top with some quite elaborate detail. A series of chamfered loops light the newel stair within the turret, and the moulded oversailing course at the base of the parapet is continued (albeit in a simpler hollow-chamfered form) round the turret top although above it and immediately to the west of the top of the turret proper more elaborate mouldings carry a narrow east-west gabled chamber sitting astride the wall that extends west from the turret proper, with has a blocked square-headed doorway in its west end and a square-headed loop on the south. An elaborate moulded string course runs at the base of the slabs that make up the chamber roof, and extends round the turret, stepping up over a chamfered square-headed window looking out to the south-east; above this string each face of the turret has a square-headed machicolation beneath a square opening with a moulded surround at the wall-head.

The east end of the aisle has a large window of five cinquefoil headed lights with the usual transom, the surround and hoodmould both having casement mouldings; all the dressings, and most of the facing of the wall, look of 19th-century date.

The **North Chancel Aisle** is of three bays, although the western is covered externally by the 19th-century organ chamber. The north wall has similar architectural elements to the south, except that the parapet has a moulded but not embattled coping. The lower part of the slender buttress between the two eastern bays is covered by the early- 19th-century Duke's Porch. The western bay has a four-light window and the eastern a narrower three-light one, all of the usual transomed form, with cinquefoil-headed lights, and 19th-century in their present form. The Duke's Porch is of diagonally-tooled ashlar with a plinth and parapet modelled on the main building, and a moulded Tudor-arched doorway. A recent stack rises above the west wall of the porch, to the level of the parapet of the aisle wall.

The east end of the aisle has an east window very similar to that of the south aisle, although its stonework looks rather older (but probably not medieval); at the north-east angle is a diagonal buttress topped by a crocketed pinnacle.

The **Organ Chamber** projects like a transept from the western bay of the aisle, to which it is clearly an addition; it is built of tooled ashlar and its east wall can be seen to be butt-jointed to an earlier buttress; it is flat-roofed, plinth and parapet being of the usual type. It has diagonal buttresses at its angles, and a transomed window of four cinquefoil-headed lights; its jambs do not fit in well with the walling, suggesting that it has been re-used from the aisle wall behind. The east wall of the chamber is rather odd, as there is a step-back c 1 m from the corner buttress, the wall to the south lacking any plinth (although there are a couple of odd projecting blocks at the wall foot); possibly this is part of some arrangement that was never completed

The Interior

Inside the **South Porch** the south-eastern buttress of the tower forms a projection from the west wall; there is a stone bench to the south of it, and another running the full length of the opposite (east) wall. The window on the east looks all of 19th-century date. The roof is under-drawn, but the cambered tie-beam of a central truss is exposed, resting on corbels either renewed or retooled in the 19th century. The outer opening of the porch has an elliptical rear arch. The inner doorway has a three-centred arch of two continuous hollow-chamfered orders, and a hollow-chamfered hood with flower stops.

Within the main body of the church the walls are plastered, with exposed dressings, except in the eastern arm and the interior walls of tower and south aisle.

The **Tower** opens to the south aisle and nave by four-centred arches of two broad chamfered orders, springing from responds with broad semi-octagonal shafts, moulded capitals and fairly simple chamfered bases. The arch to the aisle has a moulded hood with carved floral stop to the right and some other device to the left; that to the nave has a shield as its l. stop, and its r. stop missing. Towards the tower both arches have hoodmoulds chamfered on their lower angle, and mask stops where they join and at the south end of the eastern arch. A large internal buttress projects north from the inner angle of the tower, its stonework either renewed or re-tooled. Inside the tower is a quadripartite vault with chamfered ribs, springing from angle shafts, of different lengths; the shafts have moulded capitals, and rise from moulded corbels in the form of masks looking downwards.

The windows on the south and west each have shallow segmental rear arches with chamfers to their heads only; that in the west wall is displaced north to accommodate the stair, which is entered by a square-headed chamfered doorway at the head of a flight of four steps; built into the wall immediately above is a medieval grave slab carved with a padlock and a pair of shears. The doorway opens onto a newel stair that rises to a chamfered square-headed doorway into the first stage, with a small square lobby on the east of the door, lit by a loop in the south wall, with a small shelf below. The walls of the first-stage chamber are of neatly-squared stone; on the west is a chamfered window with on either side, a little above sill level, two large square sockets, as if for beams. On the east there is a similar window looking out across the aisle roof, and a corresponding series of sockets. There is another series of similar sockets, four in each wall, one course above internal lintels of windows, four on both east and west. There is also a window on the south (partly obscured by the clock) with above it a

section of the tower exposed just below the ceiling, which is carried by a single massive north-south beam which looks of 19th-century date, supporting stop-chamfered joists. The north wall has a set-back of c 0.2 m on c 1 m below the main beam.

Above the first stage the newel stair makes an awkward transition to a straight length rising eastward up the internal face of the south wall, to give access to the bell chamber, where the bell-frames, partly of pegged and partly of bolted construction, are of a long-headed type, without angle posts. The belfry openings have segmental square-edged rear arches; the tower roof has slightly-cambered tie-beams adjacent to the east and west walls, and a third in the centre, carrying a ridge and one level of purlins; the roof frame looks like genuine medieval work.

The internal walls of the **Nave** are plastered. The south arcade is of five bays and the north of four. The south arcade has four-centred arches each of two chamfered orders, the outer with broach stops, springing from octagonal piers with moulded capitals varying in detail. Most of the stonework is 19th-century restoration. The semi-octagonal responds are old, and the central pier (which has a square plinth) along with a few voussoirs of the arches that spring from it. On the south side of the wall are a series of large mask corbels, set above the three piers and the eastern respond; the easternmost, a lion, may be medieval work, but the other three masks, all human, are of 19th-century character.

The north arcade has similar arches and hexagonal piers with elaborately-moulded capitals and bases; each pier face has a pair of scooped trefoil-headed panels. These piers are clearly 19th-century work, but the semi-octagonal responds, with moulded caps and bases, look old, as does the westernmost arch. The eastern respond, the base of which is partly concealed by the pulpit stair, has various infilled sockets in its shaft.

There is only a clerestory above the north arcade; due to the width of the (extended) north aisle and the manner in which the ground falls away beyond it, it is virtually impossible to see externally. It consists of four two-light windows, each of two lights with depressed arched heads, the easternmost set hard up against the east end of the nave; two have medieval cross slabs re-used as their internal lintels. .

In the internal face of the **South Aisle** wall the break in coursing seen externally above the porch is visible as well; further east there is quite a lot of recent patching in the lower part of the wall, and the three windows east of the south door are all of 19th-century stonework internally, and have casement-moulded surrounds. At the east end of the aisle is a broad four-centred arch, richly moulded and with a moulded hood.

The internal walls of the **North Aisle** are all plastered. The small window in the west wall has a square head internally; those on the north have segmental rear arches with chamfers only to their heads, as does the north door. The rear arches of the three windows east of the north door look old, but the doorway at the east end of the wall, with a chamfered four-centred arch, is modern.

The nave has a roof of eleven bays, with arch-braced trusses carried on corbels; the trusses vary in detail, some with cusping. The wall-posts and braces are carried by corbels just above the arcades; there are moulded purlins but instead of a ridge, a moulded strainer beam c 0.30 m below apex. The roofs of both aisles are recent.

At the east end of the nave the four-centred **Chancel** arch of two chamfered orders, with broach stops to the outer order, all looks to be of 19th-century date; it springs from responds with deeply moulded capitals; the shafts and chamfered bases of the south respond look partly medieval work. On the west face of the wall above are two courses of re-used blocks with a diaper pattern, interpreted as 12th-century work.

The three-bay chancel arcades are a spectacular piece of late medieval architecture. Deeply-moulded four-centre arches have their hoodmoulds springing from corbels in the form of angels holding shields, above each pier; two on the south have the Percy cross, but those on the north are now plain. The piers are of octofoil section with fillets at end of each convex unit, each face ends in trefoiled arch with sunk spandrels elaborately moulded bases; the responds are in effect half-piers. The carved capitals are a particular delight; they have differing designs, mostly featuring stylised oak foliage in high relief; that of the eastern pier of the north arcade - known as the Hotspur Capital has the Percy crescent and fetterlocks. On the south and St Catherine (to whom the adjacent chapel is thought to have been dedicated) with her wheel on the north.

The internal face of the east end is all 19th-century stonework; the east window has a moulded rear arch.

The chancel roof is all of 19th-century date; it is of three bays, with arch-braced collar-beam trusses that have upper king-posts above their collar, the braces rising from stub-ties supported on carved brackets which in turn rest on big ashlar corbels carved with Percy emblems; in between are simpler intermediate trusses without the braces, but with ashlar posts from the moulded wall-plate.

The internal walls of the **South Chancel Chapel** are of good-quality squared stone. The internal stonework of the windows on the south, which have casement-moulded surrounds, is all of 19th-century date. The priest's door on the south has a flattened four-centred chamfered rear arch, whilst that to the turret stair in the south-east angle has a chamfered Tudor arch. Adjacent to it in the east wall is a small piscina with an ogee arch and a projecting semi-octagonal bowl. The casement-moulded internal surround of the east window looks old in part. The roof structure is of 20th-century date, but carried on old shaped corbels.

The newel stair within the south-east turret has been renewed, but the well walls are old; the newel ends a little below eaves level, and becomes a straight mural stair rising west to a square-headed chamfered doorway that now opens onto the chapel roof. At the junction of the two sections of stair is a panel of 19th-century walling on the south, and beyond that an old timber (presumably the wall-plate of the chapel) projects awkwardly from the wall-face, giving the impression that the stair is either secondary or at least an after-thought. The doorway is set in a raised and thickened section of wall which Brooke (2000, 102) terms a 'caphouse'; adjacent to the doorway on the west is a vertical slot, and in the west end of the structure what appears to be a blocked doorway on the line of the stair. From the roof a second plain square-headed doorway to the east of that at the stair-head opens into a small polygonal chamber in the upper part of the turret; this has a cupboard-like recess with a stepped sill above the adjacent stair-well, and a strange conical vault with an open hole at the apex.

The **North Chancel Chapel** has a large segmental double-chamfered arch to organ chamber at the west end of its north wall at W end, with to the east two windows with casement-

moulded surround and between them the doorway into the north porch which has a flattened four-centred arch (copied from the priest's door in the South Chapel); all these features are of 19th-century stonework, but parts of the shallow hollow-chamfered surround of the east window could be old.

Inside the westernmost of the series of vestries that in effect form an outer north aisle, the original north doorway has a four-centred arch with a continuous double-wave moulding; only its east jamb looks genuine medieval work. In the centre of the west wall is a good Adam-style fireplace, probably brought from the castle. In the east wall is a two-centred doorway with a continuous double wave moulding, put in this position in the later 19th-century but possibly an older feature re-used. It opens into a second vestry, where cupboards on the south hide a three-light window in the aisle wall -on the east again is a square-headed door a traceried window above it, all recent, giving access to a pair of 20th-century vestries.

Structural Development

The first reference to any ecclesiastical building at Alnwick is in 1147, when the church of Lesbury, together with the chapels of Alnwick, Alnmouth and Houghton, were given to the newly-founded Alnwick Abbey. During the 1863 restoration foundations were seen of an aisles building with an eastern apse, thirty feet to the east of the present chancel arch. There are re-used architectural fragments of 12th-century date, but there could well have been an earlier building.

The earliest fabric in the present building would seem to be the west end of the nave, which might be of c 1300. There is also a puzzling area of fabric of 'early' character at the west end of the south wall of the south aisle; might this be a survival of an earlier medieval tower or south-western chapel?

The addition of the aisles is usually dated to c 1325; the north aisle at least was much narrower than at present, and its west window survives³. The large carved corbels above the outer face of the south arcade are said to relate to the roof of a narrow early 14th century aisle but are not to be trusted; the western three looks of 19th-century character, and must in any case have been replaced as the arcade was removed (bar its central pier) in 1818 and only reinstated in 1863. Towards the end of the 14th century the north aisle was widened, and most of its north wall, with segmental-headed windows, survives.

The character of the church as it stands today is, despite much 19th-century restoration and renewal, very much that of a late medieval building in the Perpendicular style. This is usually seen as the result of grants made in 1464 to the burgesses of Alnwick by King Henry VI, to 'make and repair their church' – the implication being that it had been damaged in some conflict. The tower, south aisle and the chancel with its chapels all date from this period, whilst the south porch could be a little later. This remodelling left Alnwick as the most significant 15th-century church in the county, outside of Newcastle, and the only one to share the fully-aisled plan of Newcastle's St Nicholas' Cathedral (Morris 1916, 42).

One feature of the 15th-century remodelling that is now lost was a high-level chamber at the east end of the south aisle; the stair turret at the south-east angle of the aisle remains, but the

³ Its arcade now seems entirely work of 1863, apart from its responds, although Sir Stephen Glynne, writing in 1846, does describe the one pier that survived than as 'covered with paneling of rather a debased sort' (Proc.Soc Antiq.Newcastle 3rd series III (1907-8) 228.

chamber to which it led, or at least its remains, were removed in the 1863 restoration, including a 4-light window shown in old illustrations, high in the east wall of the aisle, and an embattled wall rising behind the present south parapet of the chapel. There was antiquarian speculation (Wilson 1870, Tomlinson 1888, 375) that this chamber may have been ‘a look-out station at the time of Scottish invasion’ (highly unlikely; it is lower than the tower, and only offers a view to the south and east, ie towards the town) or a priests’ lodging. Brooke (2000,100-103) discusses the turret and tower as possible defensible features,. And identified holes from musket balls in the external fabric of the turret, suggesting that it must have seen military action at some stage.

The patronage of the Percies, exemplified in the displays of heraldic emblems in the 15th-century chancel and its chapels, continues through the post-medieval period. As often, little is recorded, or evident in the fabric, from the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1782 Italian craftsmen, employed by the First Duke of Northumberland in the remodelling of the Castle, remodelled the chancel, giving it a new east window with looped tracery and a spectacular fan-vaulted plaster ceiling and screens, shown in some old illustrations.

Further alterations came in the early 19th century. The westernmost vestry on the north of the north aisle seems to date from this time. In 1818 John Dobson the Newcastle architect was employed to construct a large western gallery (there had previously been four smaller galleries in the nave), and this work included the virtual destruction of the medieval arcades. Alternate piers were removed, and new and much broader arches constructed, except for the western bay of the north arcade which was blocked up; access to the gallery was by a stair at the west end of the nave, and there were further smaller stairs against the aisle walls immediately to the east of north and south doors. The Duke’s Porch on the north of the north chapel is probably a mid-19th century addition; it is not shown on the Cholera Outbreak plan of 1849 (website <http://communities.northumberland.gov.uk/009198FS.htm>) but is shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey 25”:1 mile map of c1860.

In 1863 major works at the Castle were again followed by those at the church; the fourth Duke employed Salvin to carry out a major restoration, removing all the 18th-century work from the chancel (which sadly must have proved an offence to Victorian taste; in 1846 Sir Stephen Glynne (see footnote 3) referred to the ‘present frippery pseudo-Gothic fittings’, ‘poor Gothic’ screens and the east window as ‘bad’), refurnishing the whole building and renewing the majority of the windows. Further works were carried out in 1890, Hicks being the architect; these included the addition of a second vestry on the east of the early-19th century one, and the construction of the organ chamber on the north of the north chancel chapel.

In 1950 the northern clerestory windows were ‘increased in depth’ and the 1989-1992 a major scheme of restoration carried out, the nave aisle and chancel chapels being re-roofed, and further vestries added, infilling the gap between the 19th-century ones and the organ chamber.

Archaeological Assessment

This is an important church, of 12th century or earlier origins. It is not easy to assess the degree of preservation of archaeological deposits and structural remains beneath the present floors, although it is known that footings of what was assumed to be a 12th-century building were seen during 19th-century restoration work. There has been an underfloor central heating

system beneath the whole building, which will inevitably have disturbed earlier remains, and there will of course have been many generations of burials through the interior. It is known that concerns for the stability of the structure have prompted the construction of unusually deep foundations in places; it is said those of the tower go down to 10 m or more below the external ground surface. There was a subterranean boiler room on the north of the north chancel chapel, in between the Duke's Porch and the organ chamber, but this was dismantled and infilled some years ago⁴.

In the event of any disturbance of floor levels, or ground levels adjacent to the perimeter of the building, archaeological monitoring will be necessary. This should also take place in the case of above-ground works that disturb either the fabric of the medieval parts of the building, or the plaster that covers some medieval wall faces (largely in the north aisle and nave walls). The medieval roof structure of the nave is of importance, and merits a detailed record; dendrochronological analysis may well enable it to be dated.

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Peter F Ryder

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⁴ At this time a blind arch on the east of the boiler room (ie at the foot of the west wall of the Duke's Porch) was probed by drilling, but only natural clay encountered.