

# ANCROFT

## THE CHURCH OF ST ANNE

### AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

JULY 2020



*The church from the south-west*

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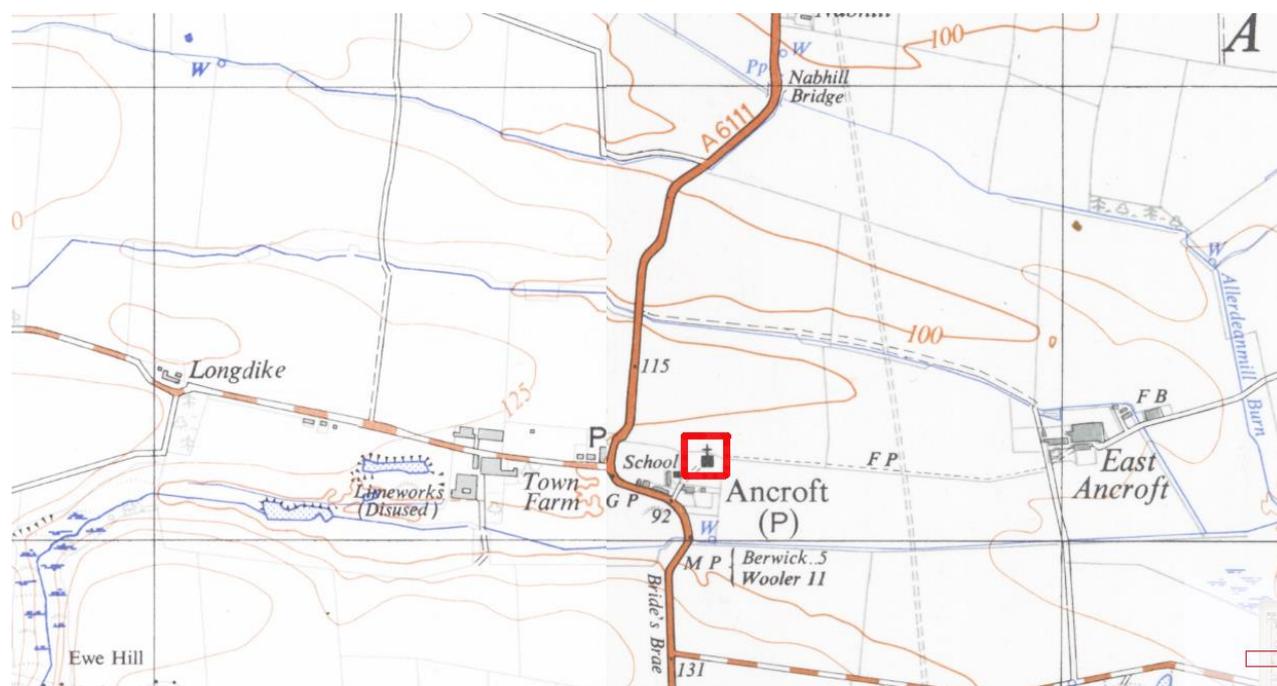
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## ANCROFT, ST ANNE

The small village of Ancroft lies in gently rolling countryside on a low ridge between two eastward-flowing streams 6.5 km south of Berwick, and c 3 km inland from the Northumberland coast; the Church of St Anne (NGR NU 0022 4518) stands at the west end of the village.

The church consists of a nave with a west tower, chancel, and north-west vestry, and is best known for its defensible west tower, often described as a ‘pele tower’ built into the west end of an older nave.



**Location Plan** from Ordnance Survey 1:25000 sheet 1954. OS map licence 100045703

### Description

In the following description the 12<sup>th</sup>-century nave with its Victorian extensions, and Victorian chancel and vestry, are described first, followed by a description of the tower, raised on top of the west part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century nave

The west end of the 12th century **Nave** remains, complete with its gable, beneath the later medieval tower. It is constructed of coursed square blocks of red sandstone, with an obvious added buttress of grey sandstone at the north-west corner, projecting to the north. Towards the south end of the wall there is a small round-headed window, chamfered round, in 19<sup>th</sup> century ashlar; north of this and in the centre of the wall is an irregular vertical column of whiter stone, patching a scar perhaps left by the removal of a buttress or external stair. North of this there are two elongate slabs four courses from the bottom of the wall, which also presumably relate to some secondary alteration. Higher up, c 3 m above the ground, at the



*The tower from the west*

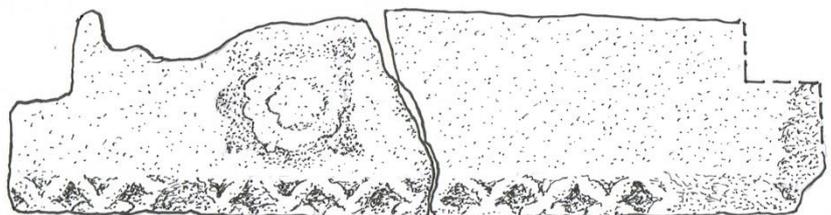
north end of the wall are four projecting stones that look like the remnant of a string course; there is a more complete string, which has been chamfered above and below, further up, interrupted by the monolithic head of a tall lancet-shaped opening set centrally. This looks like an insertion; its blocking is set well back from the wall face, sufficiently to show that its sill rises steeply, and that it splays out internally. It may represent a 12<sup>th</sup> century window (perhaps originally similar to the one above) later modified to form a raised doorway into the upper part of the tower, accessible by ladder or an outside stair. Above this the outline of the 12<sup>th</sup> century gable is still quite clearly visible, rising from shaped kneelers which project slightly from the side walls – the southern being the better preserved. In the gable is an original window with an arch of two orders, the outer on jamb shafts.

On the south elevation of the building, the lower part of the wall of the tower, and of the two bays of the nave adjacent to it, is of 12<sup>th</sup> century fabric, of coursed quite large square blocks mostly of red sandstone. There is a chamfered plinth; the quoins at the west are larger than the walling stones, and perhaps secondary. At the head of the original wall is an original corbel table with round arches and shield-shaped corbels. The present doorway into the base of the tower is of 1836, and has a round arch of two orders; the inner, square, is continued to the ground, the outer, with a big roll moulding, is carried on impost shafts with scalloped capitals and moulded bases; there is a hoodmould chamfered on its lower angle. Immediately to the east of it, now blocked and on the line of the east wall of the tower, is the original 12<sup>th</sup> century portal, a rather larger and more elaborate Romanesque arch, now badly weathered (below, right). It has had three orders, springing from imposts chamfered below, the outer two

orders having had jamb shafts. The inner order, with a roll and groove, the best-preserved, is set on plain square jambs. The second order, of mixed grey, pink and red stones, is so weathered that there is no hint as to its original form, and the outer has had carving of some type, but no discernible motifs remain. There has been a hoodmould chamfered above and below. There are remnants of the capitals of the jamb shafts on the west, but on the east shafts and capitals have completely gone. The doorway is set in a shallow projection topped by a shallow-pitched gable, now carrying an 18<sup>th</sup> century sundial. The threshold of the door is a slab of grey sandstone, almost certainly re-used from elsewhere, with a big dog tooth moulding on its edge and a carved rosette.



Ancroft. Slab reused as threshold of 12th century South Doorway



drawn 10 2 1994 P F Ryder

0 50 cm

The two bays of the nave beyond the tower both retain an old chamfered plinth and the corbel table at the wall head, and a few courses of old masonry above the plinth; immediately to the east of the old doorway, directly above the plinth is a large block, probably once a lintel, with the incised inscription M above RW and the date. It may have come from the former main doorway into the church, which was in this position prior to 1836. The windows in these bays are neo-Romanesque ones of 1870 with zigzag in their arches, and shafted jambs with scalloped capitals. A multi-stepped buttress in grey sandstone marks the south-east corner of the original nave; the two bays beyond, although identical in their features – plinth, windows and corbel table – are all 19<sup>th</sup> century work. There is a further stepped buttress, in pink ashlar, at the south-east corner of the present nave.

The north side of the nave (which is set well outside the line of its 12<sup>th</sup>-century predecessor) is also of four bays, with a central buttress; older masonry seems to have been re-used in the western two bays. This elevation is plainer, without plinth or corbel table, the round-arched windows having simple double-chamfered surrounds. A slight mound in front of the western part of this wall indicates the position of the short-lived 1836-1879 ‘aisle’ added by Bonomi.



All that remains of the north side of the original nave is the western section, now incorporated in the base of the tower. This is of squared red sandstone, with a big stepped buttress, clearly an addition, at its west end. Only the westernmost stone survives of the corbel table on this side; east of it there is an oversailing chamfered course carrying the upper section of the tower wall. At the east end of this section of wall, within 10 cm of the northward return of the widened 19<sup>th</sup> century part of the nave, there is a straight joint, which appears to represent the west jamb of a former north door, apparently with a plain lintel.

*The tower from the north*

The end gables of the nave (and chancel) have an ashlar coping, chamfered on its underside, carried on kneelers with big nail-head ornament, and carrying ring-cross finials. In the east gable, above the chancel roof, are a pair of small round-headed windows with chamfered surrounds.

The **Chancel**, all of 1870, is considerably narrower than the nave, and is built of typically Victorian snecked stone, with ashlar dressings. It is of two bays; its windows and corbel table are like those of the south side of the nave. The east end has alternating angle quoins and a stepped triplet of neo-Romanesque lights with scalloped capitals to their jambs shafts, and a broad enclosing arch with a hoodmould chamfered above and below. The north wall of the chancel, to the east of the vestry, is featureless.

The pent-roofed **Vestry**, on the north of the chancel, has a round-arched chamfered light in the east and a smaller one in the north wall; there is a round-arched doorway at the north end of the west wall.

### **The Tower**

The greater part of the west side of the tower is formed by the gable end of the original 12<sup>th</sup> century church; above that the wall has been heightened in more roughly squared and coursed stone. There is a slight set-back two courses above the head of the 12<sup>th</sup> century gable window. Above there is only one opening, a chamfered lancet (now blocked) set a little south-of-centre. The uppermost metre or so of wall, and the simple parapet, look relatively recent on all four sides of the tower.

On the south, at the east end of the wall a square-headed loop to the tower stair cuts down into the 12<sup>th</sup>-century corbel table, and a little higher and just west-of-centre there is a chamfered lancet, with ashlar dressings that look no older than the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Above is a blocked square-headed window, with a single block forming each jamb, and at the same level further east another square-headed loop to the stair. In the top stage of the tower, set centrally, is an old chamfered lancet, now blocked; there is a clear horizontal break-of-build immediately above its irregular monolithic head, the top section of wall looking relatively recent.

On the east of the tower, above the nave roof, there is only a square-headed loop, the highest of the three lighting the newel stair in the south-east corner

On the north, above the oversailing course replacing the 12<sup>th</sup> century corbel table, there is a central chamfered lancet, above it blocked square-headed light head light, and then a single thin course (more or less coincident with the slight off-set on the west) with above that and slightly further west a narrower square-headed loop, each jamb a single big upright block. At the base of the parapet and towards the west end is a square-headed opening with adjacent to it a worn projecting block, perhaps the only survival from a corbel table that carried an earlier oversailing parapet.

Set back in the centre of the flat leaded roof is a timber bell cage, in its present form of no great age.

## The Interior

Apart from the vestry door the only entrance into the church is the 1836 doorway on the south of the tower, opening into a north-south chamber with a vault of pointed section, all behind plaster and colour wash. On the west is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century round-headed loop, and at the north end of the east wall a square-headed doorway, or really a short passage, with a chamfered south jamb, through a thick wall into the main body of the church. On the north, in what is a secondary cross wall, is a square-headed opening with an old studded door into the Sibbit family vault, which occupies the north end of the original basement chamber.

In the south wall of the passage through the thick wall is a square-headed doorway onto the base of the tower stair, which initially rises south, with a narrow blocked loop on the east (into the nave) and then becomes a newel, lit by a loop on the south just before a plain square-headed doorway (with a wooden frame, and no exposed dressings) into the upper chamber.

This stone-flagged chamber now rises the full height of the tower; its walls are plastered, and whitewashed to mid-height, then yellow-washed above, although any evidence of an actual floor (eg beam sockets) if it exists is well disguised. The newel stair is housed in a curved projection at the south-east corner. There is a square-headed fireplace with a chamfered surround in the centre of the east wall, which has been later narrowed (in 19<sup>th</sup> century ashlar), and the lancets in north and south walls (the latter of which looks of 19<sup>th</sup>-century date, at least externally) have rear arches, behind plaster, of similar form to their outer openings. There is no sign internally of the high-level doorway on the west; above it the 12<sup>th</sup>-century gable window has a semicircular rear arch; a straight joint is visible in its internal jambs, indicating that the original wall was thickened internally when the tower was constructed.



*Interior of upper part of tower, looking south-east*

Rather more features are visible on the upper level, where quite an amount of plaster has fallen. Just below the ceiling (a modern one, carried on four east-west iron girders) there is a blocked window on the south with a heavy square lintel, and there are remains of a similar opening on the west. Less can be seen on the north, where further blocked windows show externally.

Continuing up the newel stair, one comes to a blocked opening on the east, which latterly appears to have been a window (its latticed glazing survives) looking down in the nave, although now covered over on that side of the wall with stoothing. Formerly this was probably a doorway onto a gallery. A little further up there is a second loop on the south, and then a blocked doorway on the west into the upper floor of the tower, now walled up and quite difficult to trace, except that one of the steps has been cut diagonally to allow access to it.

Above this there is a small loop on the east, and then a short passage in the thickness of the wall on the north, c 1.5 m deep, 1 m wide and 1.5 m high; the function of this remains uncertain; there are slight traces of some sort of opening, largely covered by mortar, in its north end wall.

In the uppermost section of the stair a few treads have been replaced, and the small doorway at the top, opening onto the flat roof seems recent.

*The tower stair*



*Former gallery doorway from stair*



## The Main Body of the Church

Everything beyond the doorway from the tower basement into the nave is of 1870; the walls are plastered, with exposed dressings of pink sandstone ashlar. The windows all have segmental rear arches, with chamfers to their heads only. The only opening in the west wall is a doorway with a segmental-pointed arch, chamfered round ; above it is a wall painting in the form of a foliate cross draped with a banner reading ‘O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness’ whilst above is an arch inscribed ‘ this is none other than the House of God and this is the Gate of Heaven’. There is an elaborate neo-Romanesque chancel arch, with chevron and billet ornament, and shafted jambs with scallop capitals, the inner order being carried on paired shafts supported by foliage-carved corbels; towards the chancel it has only a single roll moulding.. The vestry door, at the west end of the north wall of the chancel, has a chamfered round arch; the east window has its triplet of round- arched lights enclosed within a larger round arch.



*Interior looking east*

The nave roof is of eight bays, with arch-braced collar beam trusses alternating with hammer-beam trusses, all with wall posts on variously-carved corbels, and upper king-posts with raking struts. The chancel roof is similar; here the corbels are all carved with angels.

Inside the vestry the door has a chamfered segmental rear arch, with a plain stone fireplace alongside it to the east. The windows on the north and east have shallow segmental rear arches (behind plaster) and their recesses are carried on down to the floor. The external doorway at the north end of the west wall also has a segmental rear arch.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century many churches were adorned with scriptural texts painted on the walls; these only rarely survive today, but at Ancroft there are texts both on the west wall of the nave and above the east window; they have clearly been repainted, but may have their origin in the 1870 remodelling.

## Structural History

Detailed descriptions of the church are lacking, as the church falls into an area of Northumberland not served by any volume of the County History<sup>1</sup>

The original church belonged to Holy Island Priory; it is mentioned in a 1145 document confirming the priory's possession, along with the chapels of Lowick, Kyoel and Tweedmouth. It is sometimes quoted as of 11<sup>th</sup> century date (or even before the Norman Conquest) but its architectural features point to a date in the earlier 12<sup>th</sup> century. It appears to have been a simple two-cell building, of nave and chancel, although of some architectural refinement; the south door has been quite an elaborate piece, and the corbel table (cf Rock) and shafted jambs of the west gable window attest to the patronage of the Priory.

The only later medieval change of which evidence survives is the construction of the tower, on top of the west end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century nave; it has been called 'one of the most significant examples of ecclesiastical fortification on the east side of the Marches'<sup>2</sup> and is often cited as being of 13<sup>th</sup> century date, but this again is unlikely, and a 14<sup>th</sup> or even 15<sup>th</sup> century date is more credible.

In the 1541 survey it is recorded that 'there is a little fortresses standing nere unto the churche of the said towne of thinherytance of Gray of Chillingham scarcely being in good repair'; this reference is usually and rather dubiously taken as referring to the church tower; a more certain reference is in 1661 in the Survey Book of Norham and Islandshire it states 'in the same towne of Ancroft is one pile, builded to the end of the church...'

Subsequent alterations have removed any trace of later medieval work, except for the large buttresses at the north-west corner of the tower and the (original) south-east angle of the nave which again could be of the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century came two major remodellings. At the beginning the church consisted of a nave half the length of the present one (and only as wide as the tower) and a smaller and narrower chancel, with quite a narrow chancel arch and sash windows to south and east, without the corbel table of the nave. In 1836 the Durham architect Ignatius Bonomi enlarged the church by adding a transept-like projection north of the nave (which in Scottish terms would have been called an 'aisle') facing the pulpit, which backed onto the centre of the

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best modern account is in Brooke, C (2000) Safe Sanctuaries. Security and Defence in Anglo-Scottish Border Churches 1290-1690. John Donald, 58-60. The current guide leaflet (n.d.) is informative, particularly when it comes to the 19<sup>th</sup> century remodellings.

<sup>2</sup> Brooke, op.cit.

south wall of the nave. He also widened the chancel arch (which from its width could have been a 12<sup>th</sup> century, Gothicised the east window, remodelled the south side of the nave, replacing a plain square-headed doorway with the present Romanesque south door of the tower and replacing the earlier sashes with a pair of Gothic windows.

Bonomi's remodelling did not provide adequate for local needs, both as regards accommodation required, and theological taste, so in 1870 the architect John Hewitson<sup>3</sup> virtually rebuilt everything other than the tower in a rather garish neo-Romanesque which might have been more popular thirty years before, sweeping away Bonomi's transept and leaving only the south wall of the original nave, although Bonomi's windows there were replaced by new ones in keeping with the remodelled building...<sup>4</sup>

Subsequent alterations have been relatively minor. The tower is recorded as having been 'restored' in 1886<sup>5</sup>, which is when the upper floor may have been removed and the interior plastered; the bell cage is probably of this date (the larger of the bells was hung in 1883) but the present roof is more recent. Some pews have been removed from the west end of the nave, and the sanctuary re-paved.



*Ancroft Church, 1852*

*Old print<sup>6</sup> which despite the ascribed date must be pre-1836, showing plain square-headed doorway to nave, and tower parapet with corner pinnacles and earlier bell cage.*

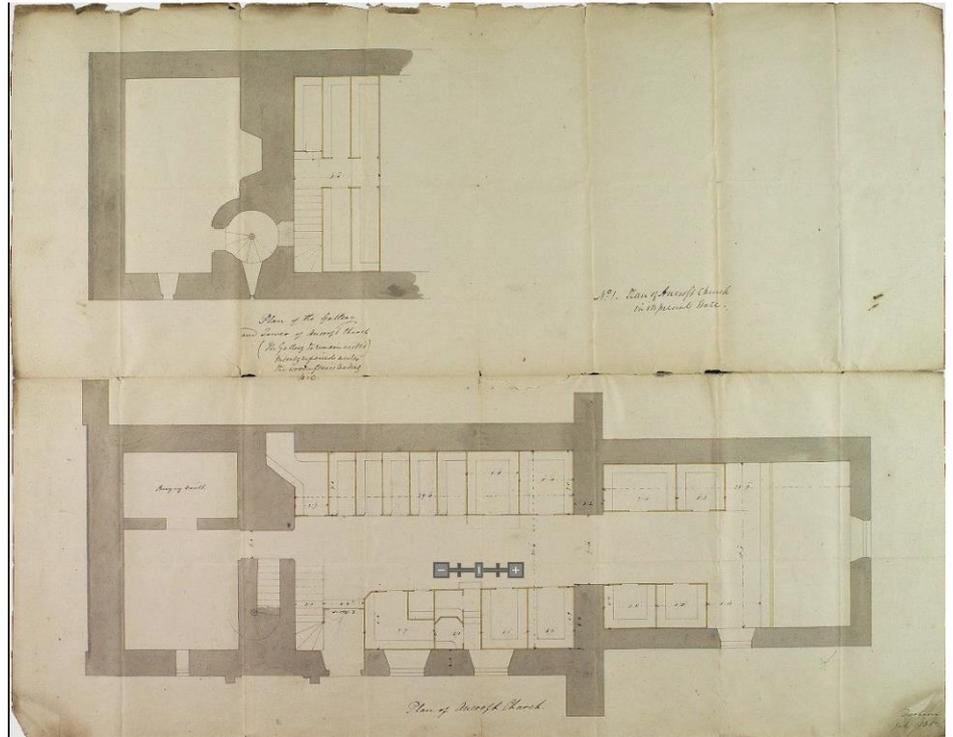
<sup>3</sup> Pevsner et al (1992) *Northumberland* (Buildings of England Series, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed) 146 incorrectly ascribes the work to F.R.Wilson.

<sup>4</sup> F.R.Wilson (1870) *Churches of the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne* provide 'before and after' drawings and plans. He opined that the old chancel and chancel arch had been 'unfortunately taken down'.

<sup>5</sup> <https://historicensland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1042234>

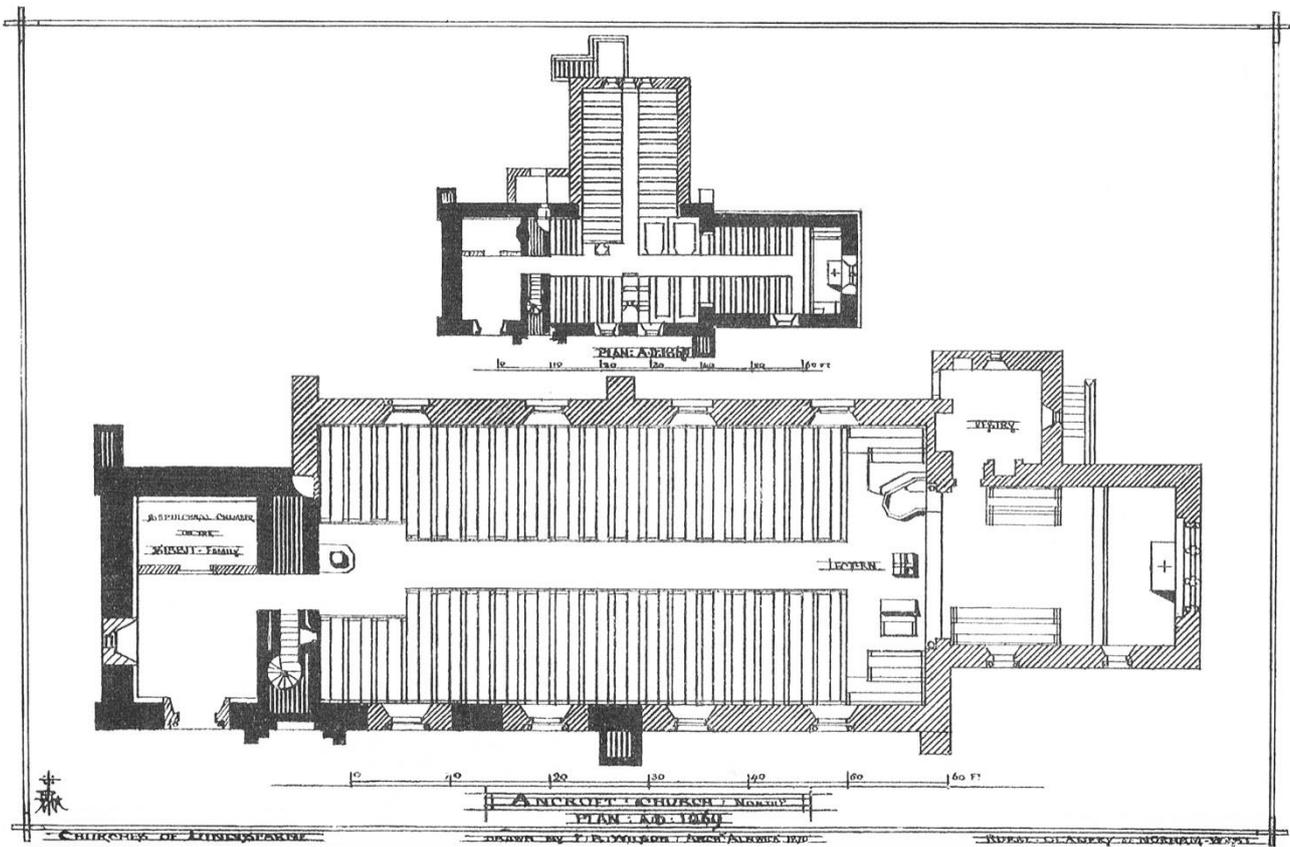
<sup>6</sup> Reproduced by Graham, F (1976) *Castles of Northumberland* 36

Plans prior to 1836  
remodelling



Plans from Wilson (1870)

Showing church before and after 1870 remodelling



## Archaeological Assessment

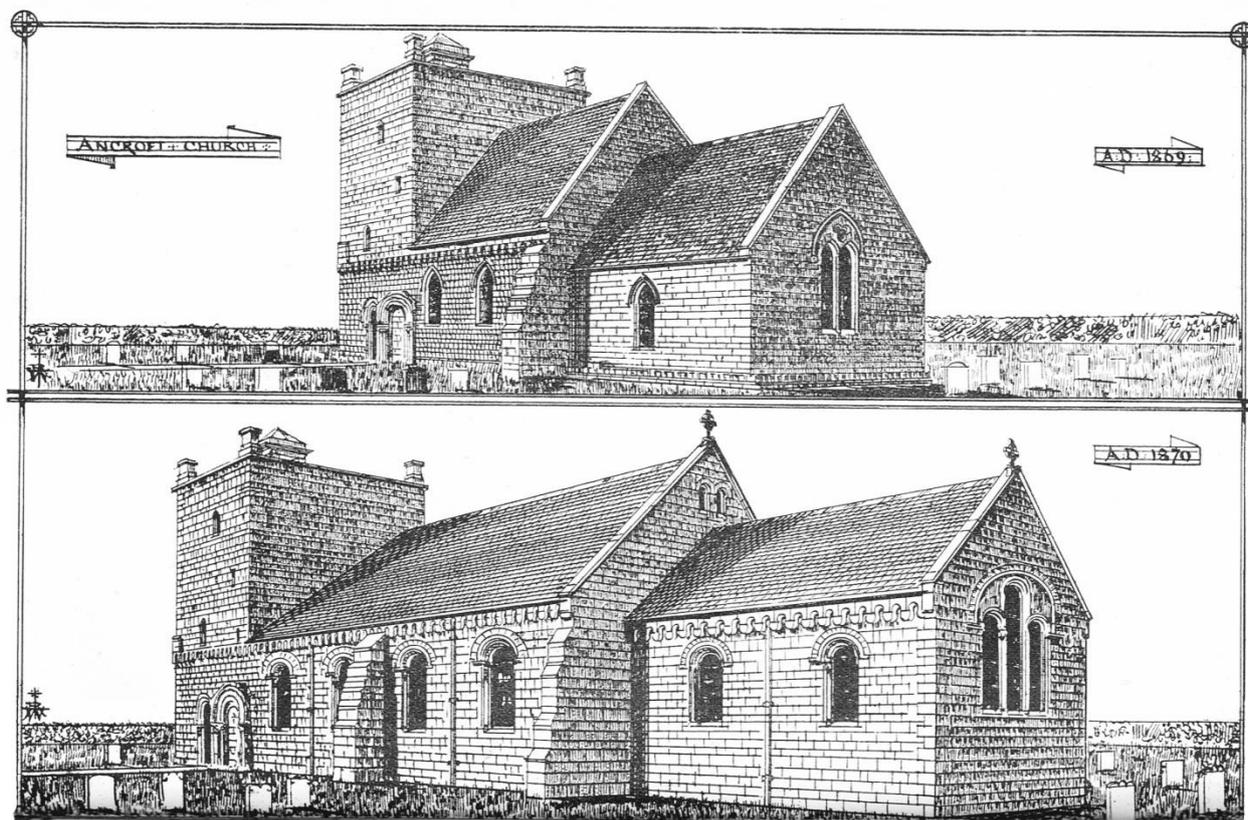
Despite its two-fold remodelling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this remains an important church, and arguably the best example of a defensible ecclesiastical structure in the North-East, which somewhat surprisingly has only been ascribed a Grade II\* listed building status.

As regards its actual potential for the survival of archaeological material, it is likely the remains of the original shorter nave and chancel survive under the present floors, although these will of course have been disturbed both by centuries of burial, and by the construction of a 19<sup>th</sup> century underfloor heating system. Any major works to the floor of the present building, especially within the known footprint of the medieval church (ie under the nave) should be accompanied by an archaeological watching brief.

Wall plaster may also conceal earlier feature, with earlier wall coverings, or structural features the fabric beneath. This is certainly the case in the interior of the tower, where most wall surfaces are covered by plaster. There is probably little chance of significant earlier plaster work, but it is a highly likely that there are structural features which would merit recording. The plaster on the upper sections of the internal walls is in poor condition, and in the event of repair or re-plastering the internal elevations of the tower should be recoded both as photographs and measured drawings.

**Peter F Ryder July 2020**

*Drawings from F.R. Wilson (1870)*

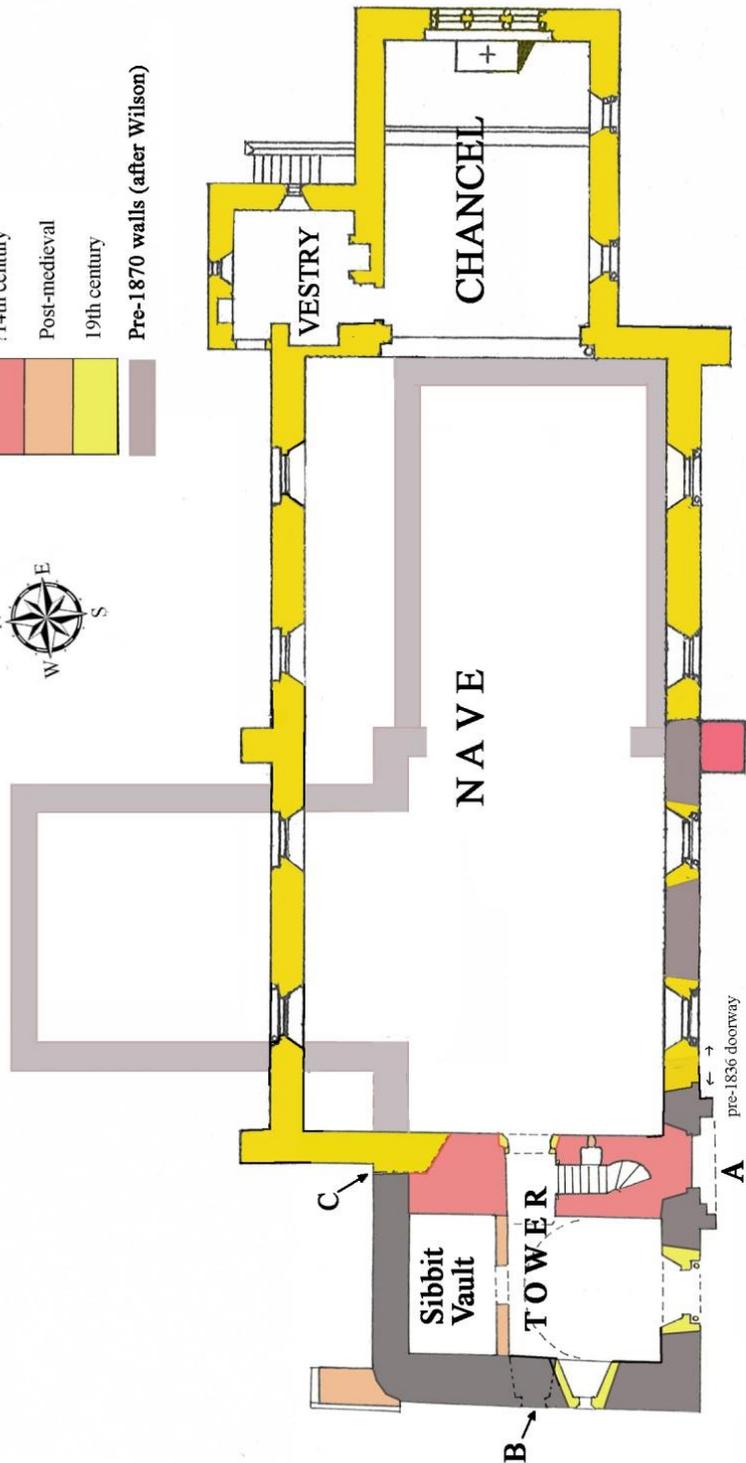
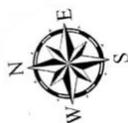
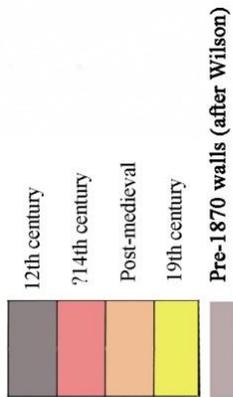


# THE CHURCH OF ST ANNE, ANCROFT

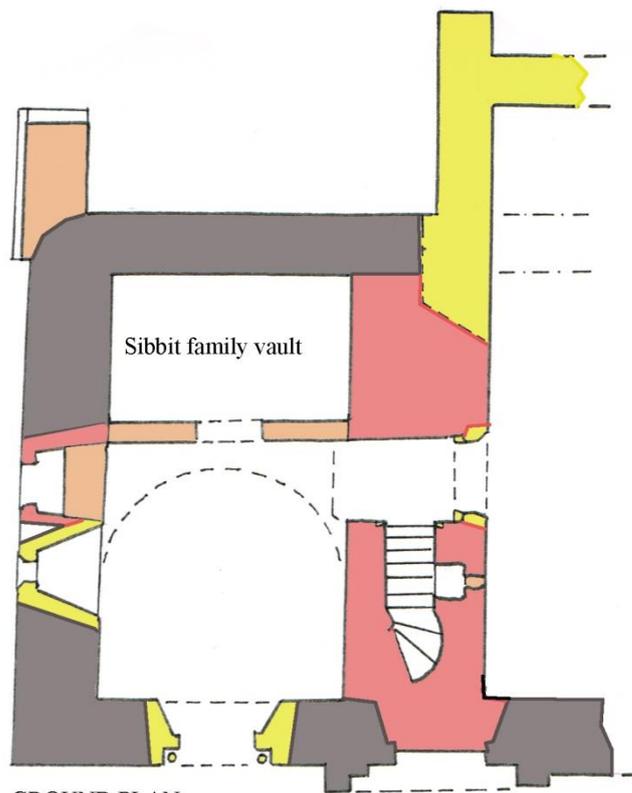
Phased Plan based on Wilson's 1870 drawings

A: 12th century south doorway (blocked)

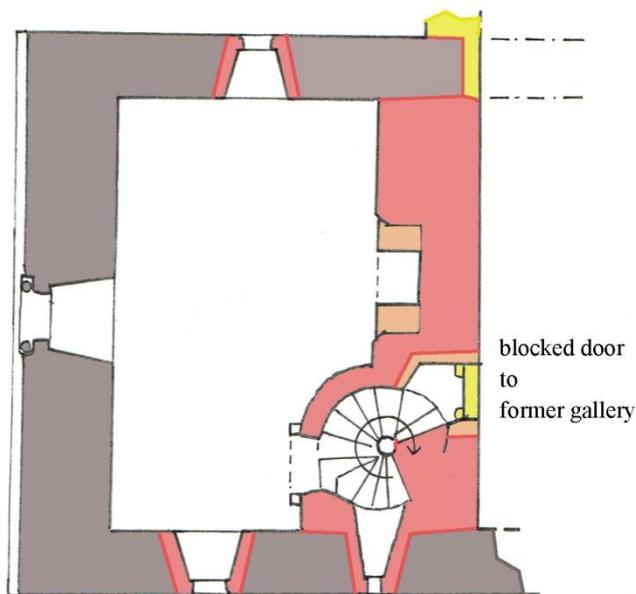
B: Doorway with sill 1.75 m above ground



PFR 2020



GROUND PLAN



FIRST FLOOR

0 5 metres

Sketch Survey P F Ryder March 2015

# ST ANNE'S CHURCH, ANCROFT THE WEST TOWER

	12th century
	?14th century
	Post-medieval
	19th century