

SHILBOTTLE

ST JAMES' CHURCH

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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The church from the south-east

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Shilbottle, St James' Church

Shilbottle (the church name has reverted to the medieval spelling 'Shilbotel') is a sizeable hilltop village 5 km south-east of Alnwick and 8 km inland from the Northumberland coast. The church stands at the east end of the village green, just east of the former vicarage which has a medieval tower. The present building, which is listed at Grade II*, is an attractive and good-quality structure of 1884, on the site of and re-using features from its much-altered 12th century predecessor.



Location Plan

from Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer sheet 332
Ordnance Survey map licence 100045703

Exterior

The present church is an aisleless cruciform building with a central tower; the nave has a south-west porch, and the south transept is balanced by a pent-roofed organ chamber; there is a vestry on the north of the chancel. In a free 14th century Decorated style, it is constructed of snecked tooled stone with ashlar dressings, with roofs of synthetic stone tiles. There is a plinth, more elaborate and moulded to the west end, south transept and chancel, and steep gables with moulded copings and foliate finial crosses

At the west end of the **Nave** the plinth is stepped up beneath a big four-light window with above it a square panel holding a round opening with whirling mouchettes. The south wall, east of the porch, has three two-light windows and the north wall one three-light one with reticulated tracery, at its east end; further west are two re-set 12th-century round-headed loops from the old church.

The **South Porch** has a moulded outer arch under a hood with square terminals, and a two-light mullioned window in each side wall; above a moulded cornice, with corner bosses, flower ornament and an inscription, carries is an embattled parapet.

The **Central Tower** has set-back buttresses with gabled tops to its upper stages, and a projecting semi-octagonal stair turret at the south-east corner with a moulded external basket-arched doorway at its base, and slit windows. The ringing chamber in the second stage has a two-light window on the south and slit vents; above is a moulded string, gabled over a clock face on the south, and then the belfry has a tall two-light opening on each face. There is an oversailing moulded cornice with square-flower ornament below the stepped and embattled parapet, with the stair turret being carried up higher, with its own embattled parapet.

The **South Transept** has stepped set-back buttresses, a simple arched doorway on the west, a large three-light window on the south and a two-light one on the east.

The **Chancel** has two square-headed two-light windows on the south, diagonal buttresses at the eastern angles, and a here-light east window with carved cusped panels below with the badge of St. James and sacred monograms; there is a cruciform loop in the gable. On the north the pent-roofed vestry has a two-light mullioned window, boiler room beneath, and the adjacent Organ Chamber has a three-light window on the north and a square-headed chamfered doorway on the west. There are a number of excellent Gothic-patterned rainwater heads dated 1884.

The Interior

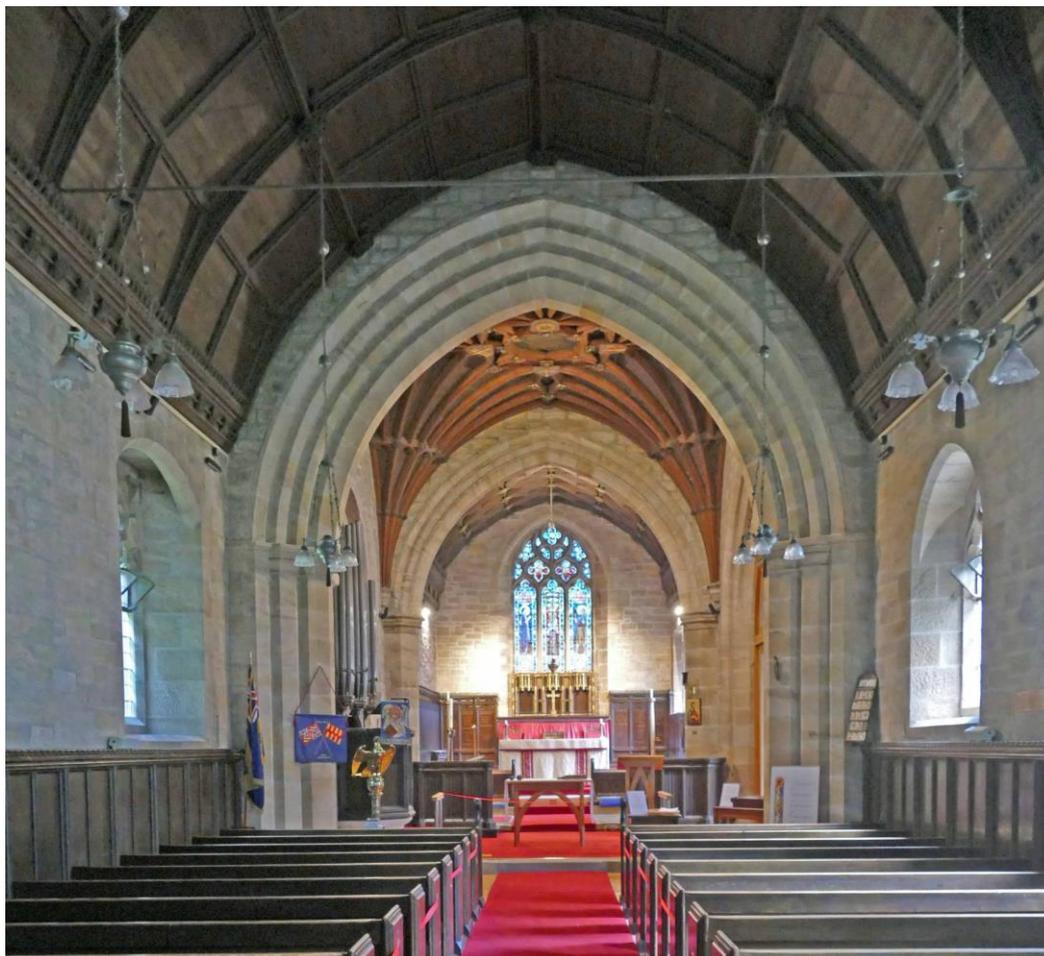
Inside the South Porch the walls are of exposed snecked stone, and the benches are of old weathered stone, clearly re-used. The inner doorway is also re-used from the old church; its inner opening is a chamfered three-centred arch of post-medieval date, but its outer is 12th century work; a segmental arch, moulded with an angle roll and a deep hollow on the vertical face, under a hoodmould that is grooved and chamfered beneath. The imposts, of similar section, are carried on jamb shafts with scalloped capitals, differing in form, and eroded moulded bases.

Within the church the walls are of exposed snecked stone, above boarded and panelled dados with brattished top rails; the western bay of the nave has a fine openwork screen, perhaps re-sited from the crossing. There are sunk panels beneath the east and west windows, and beneath the western of the two windows on the south of the chancel. The four arches of the

crossing are all different; that to the nave has four chamfered orders and that to the chancel three, with moulded capitals and bases to their jambs. A similar triple-chamfered arch to the south transept has no imposts, whilst the arch to the Organ Chamber on the north is the re-set chancel arch of the old church. It is semicircular, of two square orders, with jambs of the same section, and a chamfered hood and imposts. It has the look of having been re-tooled (Wilson describes it as being plastered over).

The fittings and furnishings of the church are largely of 1884, and of excellent quality. The nave and south transept have boarded wagon roofs with carved bosses and wall-plate, the crossing a wooden lierne vault with the Emblems of the Passion, and the chancel an elaborate wagon roof with carved wall-plates and bosses. The sanctuary is tiled in marble, with a piscine and sedile on the south; in the floor are some late 17th century ledger stones from the old church, commemorating members of the L'Isle and Strother families.

Interior looking east





The South Doorway



The re-used 12th century chancel arch, now opening into the Organ Chamber



Photograph of the old church (hanging in the present church)

The Medieval Church.

The church is thought to have been founded by one of the Tison family, in the 12th century, and belonged to Alnwick Abbey for most of the medieval period; it is known that in 1715 it had a flat leaded roof, and that c 1790 the roof was raised and slated¹. A detailed study of Ordnance Survey maps (the c1860 6":1 mile and the 1897 25":1 mile) shows that the old and present churches occupied the same site and much the same area, and were on the same orientation, aligned slightly north of east.

A brief description of the old church, based on the 1881 survey by William Newcombe² and a published smaller-scale plan and elevation by F.R.Wilson³, would seem to be in order. It consisted of an unaisled nave and chancel, both quite elongate in plan, with a south porch set a little west-of-centre on the south of the nave, and a vestry with a coal store to the east, on the north of the chancel. The church would appear to have basically been of 12th-century date, to judge from surviving architectural features re-set in the present building. A small

¹ Hodgson, J.C. (1899) *Northumberland County History*, V, 432-433

²Original drawing with C Downs, Cathedral Architect, Durham

³An Architectural Survey of the Churches of the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne 1870

window towards the west end of the north wall of the nave (only shown on the plan) may have been an original feature. There were also small blocked 12th-century windows on the south of the chancel - Newcombe's plan shows two and Wilson's an additional third, further west. The outer openings of two such loops have been re-set on the north side of the present nave.

The church appears to have been quite heavily altered in the later 18th century, to judge from its Gothick sash windows with intersecting glazing bars; three on the south of the nave and one directly above the priest's door in the chancel with four-centred heads, a large round-arched one in the east end and a smaller round-arched one in the west wall⁴. There were sunk quatrefoils above both east and west windows, like that shown by Wilson in his drawings of the late 18th-century nave at Netherwitton), an impressive stepped and crenellated bellcote with similarities to those at Longhorsley (1783) and Hebborn (1793), and spiky finials at the western angles of the nave and topping the eastern gables of nave and chancel.

The 12th century south door, was re-set in the same position in the 1884 church, and the old chancel arch, re-used as the arch from the crossing to the organ chamber on the north. The two small loops in the external face of the north wall of the nave have simple monolithic round heads, and square-edged surrounds.

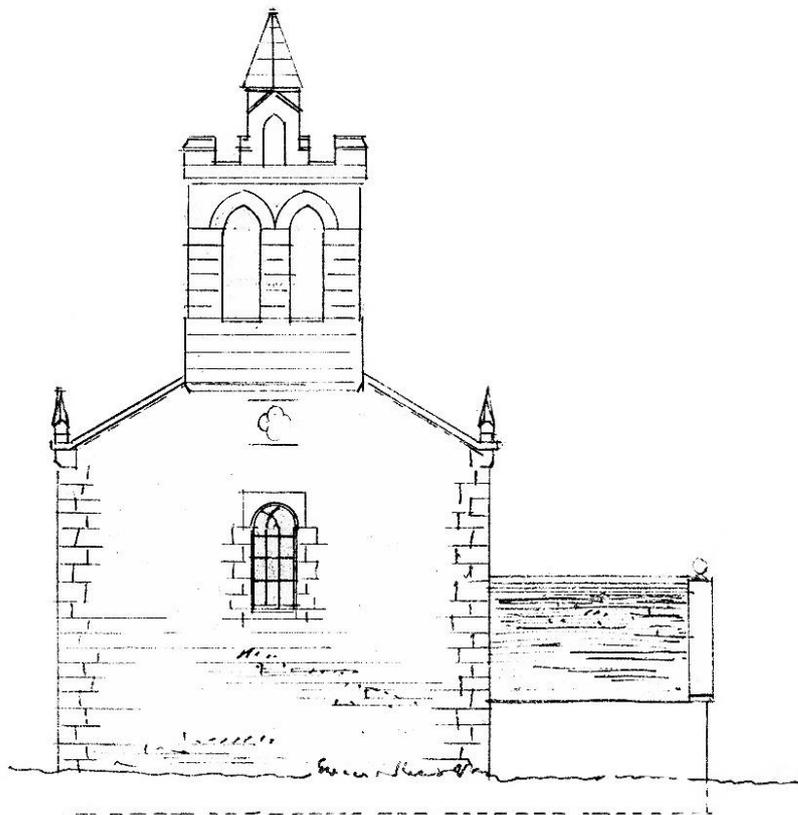


South Elevation

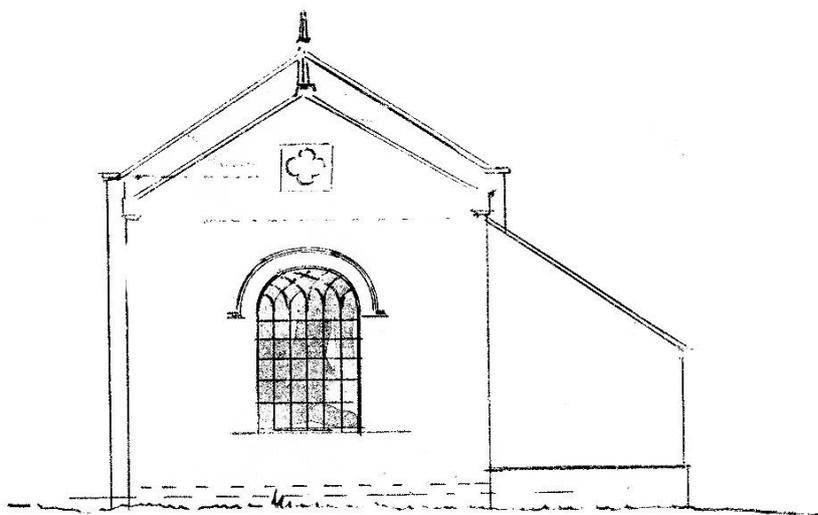
Newcombe's 1881 south elevation

⁴The plans also show another large window in the eastern part of the north wall of the nave, but its form remains uncertain. Wilson's plan shades it as an insertion.

Newcombe's West and East Elevations

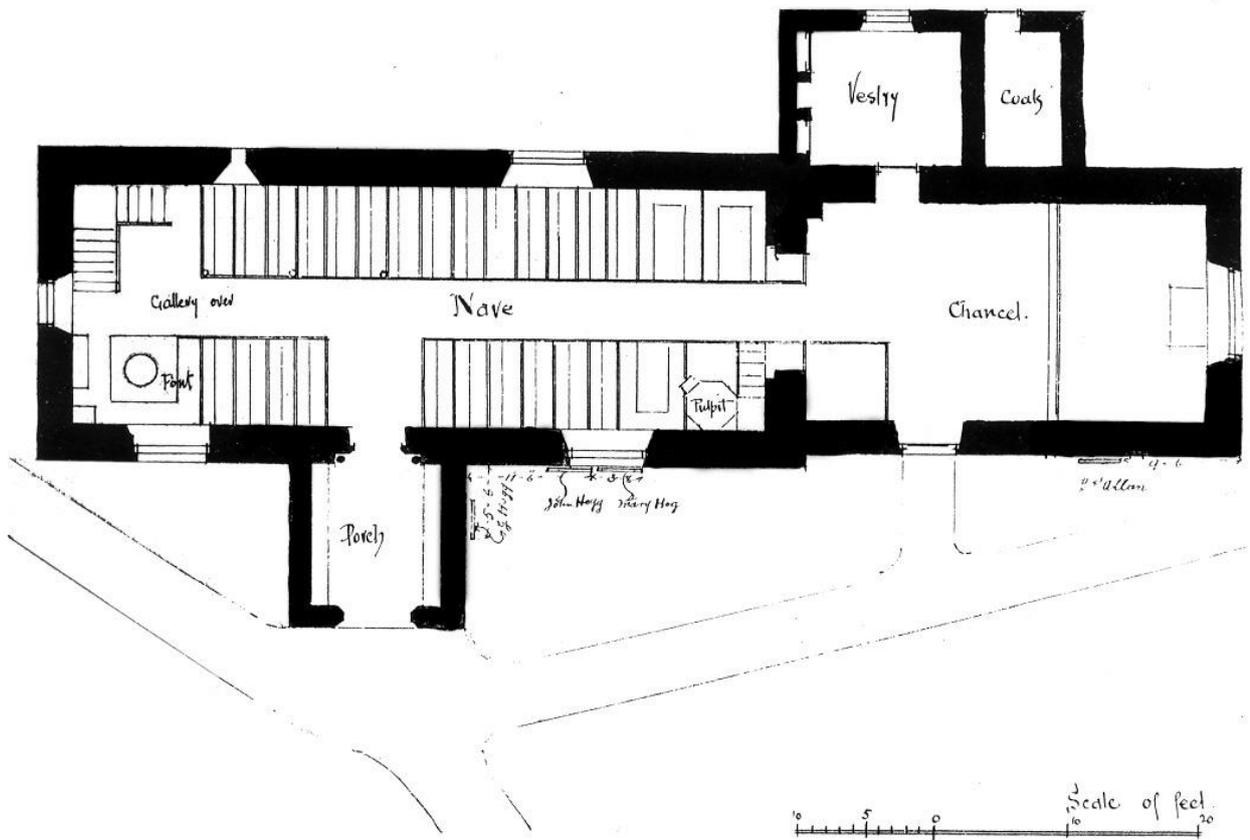


West Elevation.



East Elevation

Newcombe's 1881 plan



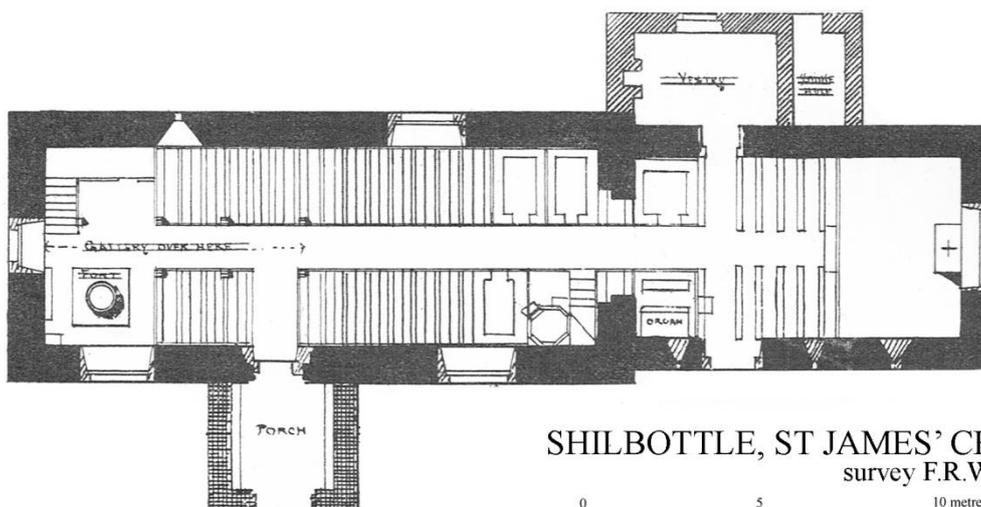
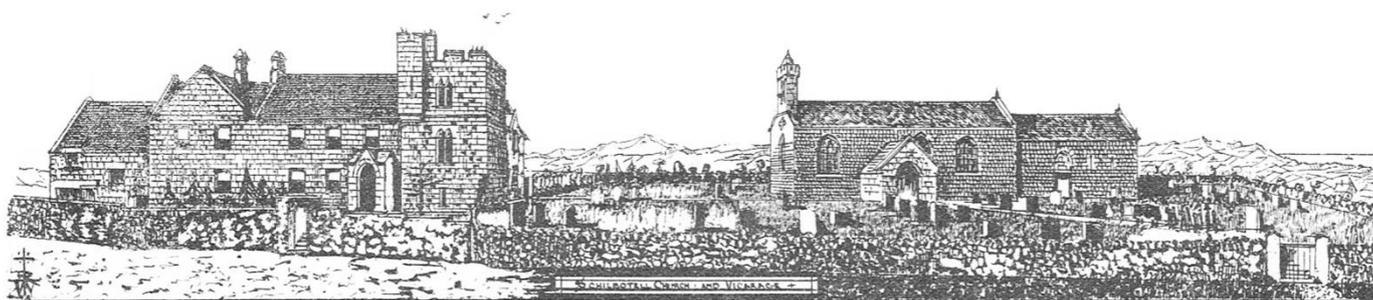
Davison 1824 print

Archaeological Assessment

Shilbottle is a Victorian church (and an uncommonly good one), and so would not usually be expected to be of archaeological interest; however it does stand on the site of a much older building. An 1881 survey of the old church plainly shows it as standing upon a site sloping down from west to east; as the present building seems to stand on a raised platform, it would seem likely that the original ground surface was raised rather than lowered at its construction, so there may well be to sub-surface remains of the earlier structure. Thus any ground works within the present building ought to be carefully monitored, as some lower-level deposits or structural remains probably survive.

Peter F Ryder July 2020

F.R. Wilson's 1870 plan and drawing



*The old church on the 1866 O.S. 6":1 mile map and
the present building on the 1897 25":1 mile edition.*

