

BELFORD
THE CHURCH OF ST MARY
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
JULY 2020



The church from the north-east

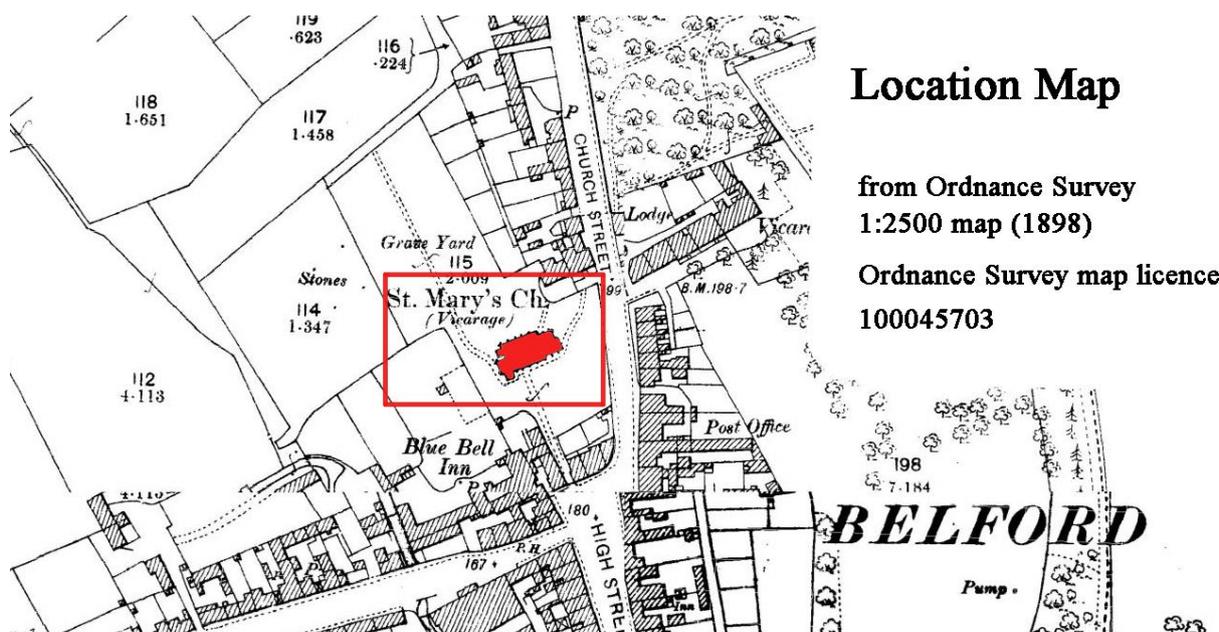
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Belford, St Cuthbert

Belford is a large village, on the old Great North Road (but bypassed by the modern A1) midway between Alnwick and Berwick in Northumberland and c 5 km from the coast. Once known for its coaching inns, the village has a central market place, on the north side of which stands the parish church (NGR NU 1085 3400).



Description

The church consists of a four-bay nave with a slightly-longer north aisle, of equal width, a west tower with a south porch, and a chancel with a north vestry.

The majority of the church is built of close-jointed tooled-and-margined grey sandstone, with finely-tooled ashlar dressings. There are chamfered plinths all round the building, and unless otherwise stated openings have double-chamfered surrounds and casement-moulded hoods with turned-back ends. The building is articulated by stepped buttresses, paired at the angles, which rise to cross-gabled tops at the level of the parapets, which are carried on hollow-chamfered oversailing courses and have moulded copings.

The West Tower rises unbroken in four stages, with paired stepped buttresses at the western angles, which change to octagonal section at mid-heights, at which they are joined by octagonal buttresses at the eastern angle as well. The

lower stage of the tower has an added porch on the south, and a square-headed window of two trefoil-headed lights on the west. The second stage has a two-light window with Y-tracery on the south and a blind broad lancet. The third stage has a moulded stone roundel for a clock face on south, west and north, and the belfry a tall and broad lancet on each side, with a string course that is carried up over their heads as a hoodmould; above is another string, and then the parapet, which has a moulded cornice. The pinnacles rise considerably higher, and each has a bold brattished and casement-moulded cornice below a final octagonal spirelet.

The **Porch** has a single broad lancet on the south, and a doorway on the east with a broad segmental-pointed arch with a double-chamfered surround.

The four-bay south elevation of the **Nave** has a pair of tall lancet windows to each bay. The low-pitched roofs of nave and aisle are concealed behind a continuous level parapet, with a moulded coping. The west end of **the North Aisle** has no openings; on the north the elevation of four main bays, with a half-bay at the west end overlapping the tower and a quarter bay at the east end overlapping the east end of the nave; it is articulated by simpler buttresses than on the south, with sloped tops just below the parapet. The four main bays each have a single large lancet window and the west end bay a smaller lancet at gallery level only. The east end of the aisle has a sharply two-centred doorway and a large lancet above, with a smaller square-headed window at gallery level to the north.

*The Chancel
from the
south*



The **Chancel**, considerably lower than the nave, has a south elevation of three irregular bays. The narrow western bay has a priest's door with a Tudor arch within a square frame: in the spandrels of the head is the incised date '1615'; above is a square-headed window of two trefoil-headed lights. Although, according to old illustrations both these openings seem to replicate older features, their stonework all seems 19th century. The central bay has a larger window of two cinquefoil-headed lights under an elliptical arch, in a hollow-chamfered surround. The narrow eastern bay is blind.

The east end of the chancel has a window, set quite high in the wall, is of three stepped cinquefoil-headed lights; the masonry below it is disturbed, as there has been an earlier opening at a lower level. The paired buttresses at the east end are set slightly back from the actual corners, and those facing east have sloped rather than gabled tops, below the gable parapet, which is carried on an oversailing chamfered course and has a moulded coping, and a cross finial.

On the north of the chancel is the **Vestry**, built of large squared blocks of a bluer sandstone, without the usual tooling. It has a chamfered plinth, and in the east wall a square-headed window of three trefoil-headed lights; its head is eroded and looks of some age. On the north east-of-centre there is a blind or blocked window with a flattened arch within a square frame. The vestry has a pent roof, with a stepped coping to its east wall.

Interior

The internal walls of the Porch are of ashlar; the doorway into the base of the tower has an arch with a square step and a chamfer, and a moulded hood with discoidal terminals. The basement of the Tower is plastered; the west window has a chamfer to its lintel, and at the east end of the north wall is a chamfered round arch onto a stair in the west end of the north aisle. On the east is a four-centred arch into the main body of the church.

Within the nave, the south and east walls are now of exposed stone, above a boarded dado. The south wall is of roughly-coursed rubbles; the four pairs of lancets have rough double-chamfered surrounds, their dressings clearly intended to be plastered over. In between the lancet pairs, and high up, are

several infilled sockets, which must relate to a roof structure prior to the present one. The west wall and tower arch is partly concealed by an elaborate organ loft, its rear supported by arch-braced wall-posts springing from shaped ashlar corbels on either side of the west door, and is front, just short of the westernmost pier of the north arcade, on a pair of wooden posts. The gallery, which is probably of later-19th century date, ends c 1.5 m short of the south wall. The north arcade has four lofty segmental-pointed arches with chamfered surrounds, the chamfers being continued unbroken down the octagonal piers, which had high chamfered bases.



The nave looking north-west

The aisle is now occupied by a gallery, screened from the nave by a modern timber-and-glass partition. The principal access is by an L-plan stone stair from the tower basement, and there is also a straight stair at the east end. The north wall is of exposed rubble; 1 m west of the third lancet (from the west) and 2 m above the floor is a re-used stone with a human head; the church

guide describes it as a of 'early' date but it has the look of a piece of an 18th-century gravestone. The aisle like the nave has an under-drawn plaster ceiling.

The east wall of the nave is of roughly-coursed stone, with some larger and better-squared blocks in the upper courses, and towards the south ends. The **Chancel** arch is large, and semicircular; its jambs are all of 19th century ashlar; the outer order is carried on jamb shafts with scalloped capitals, and there is an impost band., grooved and chamfered beneath. The arch is of two roughly chamfered orders; at the apex of the outer there are five voussoirs with chevron ornament and there is a hoodmould, roll-moulded above and chamfered below. About 1.5 m above the northern impost there are two blocks with relief-carved beasts, possibly a lion (l) and centaur (r) and c 2 m above the southern are three re-used chevron-moulded voussoirs. High above, just beneath the ceiling, is what looks to be a shallow triangular relieving arch made up of eight big blocks.



*The Nave
looking east.*

*Re-used
Romanesque
stones l. and
r. of arch*





East face of chancel arch

On the east face of the wall, towards the chancel, there are two orders, the inner with abroad hollow chamfer, the outer all chevron. The jambs are of the same section.

The internal walls of the chancel are plastered, except for exposed ashlar dressings. At the west end of the south wall the priest's door and window above are contained within a tall recess, with a chamfered jamb and a rough triangular head, all behind plaster, but slightly irregular, giving an impression of some age. The window to the east has a hollow-chamfered three-centred rear arch, and that of the east window is similar. On the north of the Sanctuary is a wall monument to William Clark, d.1837, in an elaborate Romanesque round-arched recess, with further west a plain doorway in to the vestry. The vestry is plastered round and there are no old features exposed, which is unfortunate as this is probably one of the earlier parts of the building.

Structural Development

There was certainly a church in Belford in the 12th century, attested both by architectural evidence (the chancel arch) and an 1174 reference recording that 'women fleeing to the church for safety were captured' during a raid by Flemish mercenaries¹. There is some question as to its exact site; an early chapel stood within a defensive earthwork on a crag c 800 m of the village (NGR NU 1037 3463).

It has been stated that the present church was built in 1700², and also that it was rebuilt in the mid-17th century re-using materials from an earlier chapel³ using material from the earlier building. There is also a record of repairs in 1701⁴. Most of our knowledge of the pre-1820s church comes from a drawing dated 1763 and an 1823 engraving, both south/south-east views, which tally together well. They show a building of nave and chancel. The chancel has a round-arched corbel table (cf Rock) which looks very much a 12th century feature, and the south door has a round arch as well, which could have been

¹ Brooke, C.J. (2000) Safe Sanctuaries: Security and Defence in Anglo-Scottish Border Churches 1290-1600, 71-

² Randall, Thomas (1779?) A State of the Churches under the Archdeaconry of Northumberland

³ Smith MSS Alnwick Castle 187 A/33. Both these references are cited by Bateson, E (1893) History of Northumberland, I, 365, footnote 1) who argues (with doubtful logic) that a record in the Belford Parish Registers for Dec 8th 1713, relating to the laying out of a sess for the defraying of debts for the rebuilding of the church, proves them to be incorrect

⁴ Bateson op.cit.366

of the same date, or conceivably a 17th or 18th century feature. Both nave and chancel have windows of three stepped lights under odd triangular hoodmoulds, which could be of large medieval or post-medieval date.

Most of this was swept away in 1826-9 when, after the church had been considered too small for the local population, Newcastle architect John Dobson was called in. The nave was completely rebuilt, with the addition of a new west tower; contemporary sources suggest that the chancel was retained, although re-faced and with buttresses added.



1763 sketch (copy displayed in church)

Looking at the building as it stands now, there are two questions that still arise. The first is whether the church Dobson remodelled was a 12th century structure, or a post-medieval building constructed with medieval materials brought from the old chapel on the hill. There is some evidence that suggests that the latter may be the case; in addition to sources quoted in the NCH account⁵, a total reconstruction is suggested by the way in which the chancel arch has been reconstructed back-to-front; for the more ornate side of the arch, with a complete order of chevron, to face east rather than west is more or less unparalleled. It seems highly unlikely that John Dobson would have done this. The wall in which the arch is situated does not have the character of

Northumberland County History 1 (1893) 365-6. Randall states that 'a new church was built in 1700' and Sir David Smith that the church was built in the mid-17th century of materials brought from the old chapel.

12th century fabric. The old illustrations show a Romanesque corbel table to the chancel (cf Rock) but without the usual pilaster buttresses which would normally accompany such a feature. The '1615' date on the head of the priest's door (recut by Dobson but hopefully copying an original) might mark the initial building of the church on this site, which both Smith and Randall placed a little later. The 1701 works would then be repair or restoration of a building almost eighty years old..

The second question is to how much earlier fabric survived Dobson's 1826-1829 remodelling. The chancel would appear to have been refaced rather than completely rebuilt. Wilson⁶ gives a drawing of the church taken from the 1823 print, alongside one as it stood when he wrote, and it is clear that the south and east windows of the chancel were retained, although they have subsequently been replaced. The vestry is also a pre-1826 structure, and could be as early as the c1700 repairs that are on record.

The porch is recorded as having been added in 1845.

Archaeological Assessment

It has to be admitted that Belford is only dubiously a medieval church, as there is reasonable evidence that it was built in the 17th century re-using materials from the older chapel on the crag to the north. However, any significant disturbance of underfloor deposits should be attended by archaeological monitoring. The only pre-19th century parts of the building are the chancel and vestry, and the internal walls of these are covered by plaster; if this is removed or renewed, once again some degree of recording is advised, which may help to elucidate the date of these portions of the fabric.

Peter F Ryder July 2020

⁶ Wilson, F.R. (1870) Churches of the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne, f.p.85

THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST MARY, BELFORD

Provisional Phased Plan

after F.R. Wilson (1870) amended PFR

