

ST GILES' CHURCH

CHOLLERTON

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT
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The church from the west

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St Giles Church, Chollerton

Chollerton parish church consists of a four-bay aisled nave with a west tower and a south porch, and a two-bay unaisled chancel with a boiler room on the north-west.

The Exterior

The **West Tower** rises in three stages, divided by a square-section band of vertically-tooled ashlar and above that a big moulded string course. The lower two stages have rusticated quoins, and the upper one alternating ones in ashlar. There is a casement-moulded string at the base of the embattled parapet of yellow sandstone ashlar, which has a moulded coping and a square crocketed pinnacle at each corner. Within the parapet rises an octagonal cupola with fish-scale slates to the sides and an open timber belfry at mid-height with a flat-pointed arch in each face, topped by a spire with a weathercock.



The lower part of the tower (left, seen from the south) shows two quite distinct fabric types. Up to c 2 m there is coursed roughly-shaped stone, and above that coursed better-squared and generally lighter-coloured more uniform fabric. The west face has no opening to the lower two stages; there is an OS benchmark on the lowest-but-one west-facing quoin at the south-west angle. On the south the lower stage has a window of two trefoiled ogee lights in a chamfered surround with alternating jambs and a monolithic lintel

in red sandstone ashlar, the lintel and sill being tooled-and-margined, set in a patch of secondary fabric. To the east of the window is a straight joint representing the south-west angle of the medieval nave, with substantial but not especially distinctive quoining adjacent to the east. The stage above has a single trefoiled ogee light, again in red sandstone ashlar, and set in the infill of a larger opening that came right down to (and possibly through) the band below; the band abuts against the old

quoins on the east. On the north the lower two stages rises unbroken, and are of the roughly-coursed and roughly-shaped stone, all the way up to the string at the base of the third stage. The lower wall is partly concealed by an external stair, rising from west to east to give access to a plain square-headed door, with a cut lintel, at first floor level.

The 19th-century third stage of the tower has large openings on the north, west and south, each of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a two-centred arch with a chamfered frame, and a casement-moulded hood with turned-back ends. That on the south has red sandstone dressings but those on the west and north are of yellow sandstone. On the east the ridge of the nave roof comes almost up to the parapet.

Apart from the quoining visible on the south of the tower, the only external walling of the nave is in its east gable, which has a coping (continuous with that on the east walls of the aisles) chamfered on its underside and is topped by a plain cross finial. The south slope of the nave/aisles roof is of graduated Lakeland slates, and the north of purple Welsh slate.



The **South Aisle** (right, seen from south-east) is built of squared and coursed stone; it has a chamfered plinth, and a string-course, rounded above and chamfered below, at window sill level. There are alternating

ashlar quoins at the south-west angle. In the west wall is a window of two trefoil-headed lights, with tooled dressings of grey sandstone.

To the east of the porch the south wall of the aisle is of three bays, divided by stepped buttresses that seem to be made up of older stone, and which contain various re-used medieval carved stones; the plinth is continued round the buttresses, but the string butts up against them. The lower part of the main wall also seems to be made up of older stone, with large squared blocks almost of 12th-century character; the first bay has a window of three stepped trefoiled ogee-headed lights, and the second two two-light windows of the same form, all with diagonally-tooled ashlar dressings. At the east end of the wall is a taller buttress, in 19th-century ashlar.

The **South Porch** is clearly of the same build as the south wall of the aisle, as the plinth and string are continued round it; on the side walls the string runs c 0.30 m below the eaves, then at the south end is carried up as a hoodmould over the two-centred outer arch, which has a single chamfer, with broach stops at the base of each jamb. Above it another horizontal string linked to the coping forms a triangular panel in the top of the gable, enclosing a small lancet; the gable coping, chamfered on its underside, rises to a ring-cross finial.

The south wall of the **Chancel** is of two bays, and built of neatly-squared stone, perhaps re-used, varying in colour from blue to yellow; its courses vary in height. There is a chamfered plinth and a string below the windows; the course of stone directly below the string is made up of more elongate blocks with parallel tooling of 18th-century character, clearly re-used. The plinth steps up one third of way along from the west end, and an earlier, presumably medieval, chamfered plinth then appears at the foot of the wall. The later plinth steps up a second time close to the east end, and the string steps up in the same section of wall. The two windows, each a pair of lancet lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a two-centred arch with a moulded hood that has the usual turned-back ends, are in tooled ashlar like those of the south aisle.

The east end of the chancel has a pair of clasping buttresses with steeply-sloping tops; between them the string steps up again beneath the sill of the east window, which is of three stepped trefoil-headed lights with two quatrefoils over and a cinquefoil in the apex, within a chamfered two-centred arch that has a moulded hood that with spiral terminals. There is a small lancet in the gable above, which has a coping chamfered on its underside, and a cross fleury finial.

The north wall of the chancel is of much rougher roughly-coursed masonry, and has no plinth or string; the western half of the wall may have rather more regular courses (and seems to be of darker stone) but it is difficult to be sure. The lower part of this section is covered by the boiler room with a steep pent roof of graduated stone flags; a flight of steps descends to the east end of the boiler room, which has a plain doorway and a small window above and to the left, and a small boarded hatch in its north wall. Above its east end a group of early crosses are built into the wall, below a 19th-century chimney that has a circular shaft and moulded circular cap. The chancel roof is of graduated Lakeland slates.

The west end of the **North Aisle** has a single trefoiled light, and alternating ashlar quoins at the north-west corner. The north wall of the aisle is of roughly-coursed and heavily-mortared stone and has a rough plinth/square off-set reducing in width as one goes east. The wall is of four bays; the first has a single trefoiled light and the others paired lights, all with tooled-and-margined dressings; there is a large stepped buttress at the east end of the wall. The east wall of the aisle, largely covered by the boiler room, has a chamfered plinth, but no opening.

The Interior

Inside the **South Porch** the walls are plastered ; modern fixed notice boards conceal a number of medieval grave covers and architectural pieces that were set into the walls when they were built; two further architectural fragments are set into the north-west corner - two voussoirs from an archway with a filleted roll moulding, and above them a fragment with a small capital that has a ring of dog-tooth at the abacus, and damaged stiff-leaf foliage. The inner doorway has a two-centred arch with a continuous chamfer, with triangular broach stops at its base, in lightly-tooled ashlar, and there is a medieval cross built into the wall directly above. The boarded ceiling is carried by collared rafter pairs with simple ashlaring to the eaves.

Within the main body of the church, the walls are plastered and cream-washed, except for exposed dressings. At the west end of the nave a 19th-century doorway gives access to the lower stage of the **West Tower**; it has an elaborate shouldered arch enclosed within a larger segmental-pointed opening, holding a boarded door with a latch in the form of a serpent. The room beyond now serves as a vestry; there is no sign of the internal staircase against the north wall shown on the NCH plan. There is

a panelled boarded dado, a sealed fireplace with a timber architrave set diagonally in the north-west corner, and a wall-safe in the west wall; on the south the two-light window has a chamfered inner lintel.

The 'Upper Room' on the first floor of the tower, reached by the external stair on the north wall, has plastered walls, the only exposed dressings being to the window on the south, which has a segmental-pointed rear arch with a chamfer only to its head. There is a 19th century fireplace set diagonally in north-west corner, with a basket arched cast iron surround, and a timber architrave with a pulvinated frieze and a beaded moulding below the mantelpiece. On the west wall just below the ceiling are a pair



of projecting corbel-like stubs of beams. The only access to the upper stage of the tower (not inspected through lack of a secure ladder) is by a trapdoor in the centre of the ceiling.

Within the **Nave** the arcades, the only substantial sections of the medieval church to survive, are each of four bays. The south arcade (left, looking south-east) has monolithic circular piers and semicircular responds; the heavy capitals are of simple form, with a ring at the base and a square abacus; the capital of the eastern respond has been renewed. The piers carry

two-centred arches of two chamfered orders, without any hood. The rather decayed moulded bases are set on square plinths with chamfered off-sets.

The north arcade has octagonal piers and semi-octagonal responds, with moulded capitals and 'holdwater;' bases, set on square plinths, with

chamfered offsets, that vary in height. The arches are of segmental-pointed form and again of two chamfered orders, without any hood.

The panelled wagon roof of the nave is carried on three trusses that have king posts and long arch braces.

Within the **North and South Aisles** all the openings have shouldered rear arches; that of the three-light window in the south aisle is rather more elaborate than the others, with a pair of corbels at each side. The internal sills of the windows are level, with a chamfer on the front angle. The roof structures are clearly contemporary with that of the nave.



The arch into the **Chancel** (left, looking west) is of two-centred form, and like the arcades is of two chamfered orders without a hood; the inner order is carried on responds in the form of moulded square corbels, whilst the outer is continued down the jambs to broach stops just above the floor. Everything is in lightly-tooled ashlar of late-19th century character. The south and east windows all have segmental-pointed rear arches with chamfers only to their heads; the internal recess of the eastern of the two south windows is continued down to hold a sedile with a level

stone sill, whilst the east window is set at a higher level, above the reredos made up of re-used 17th-century panelling. There is a simple wagon roof.

Structural History

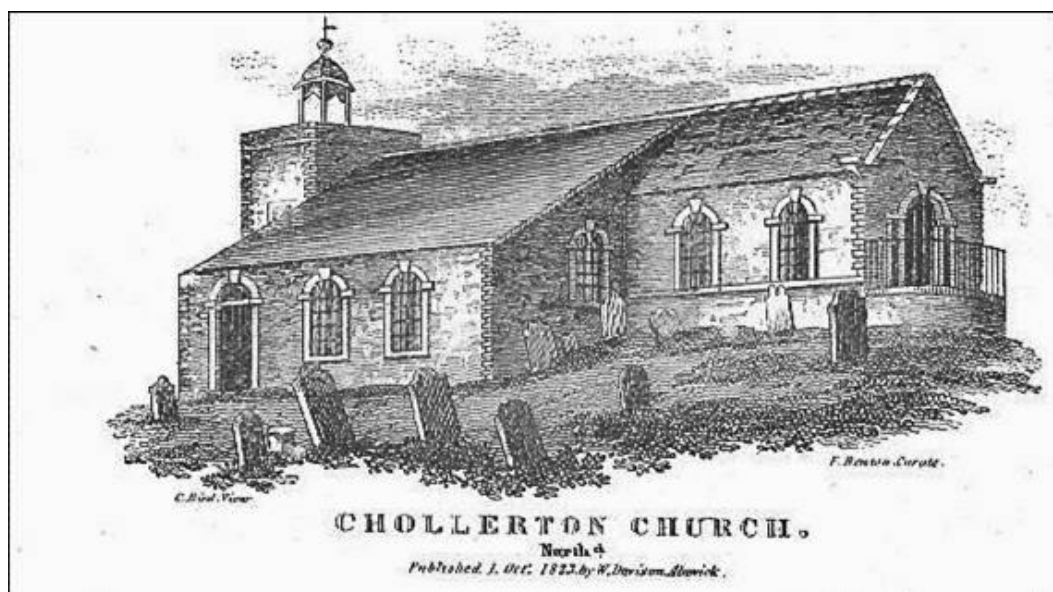
Thus us a much-altered and rebuilt church, in which only the nave arcades and west wall of the nave survive from the medieval building.

There is nothing concrete to indicate a pre-Conquest origin¹; the earliest church of which remains survive appears to have had an aisleless nave; its south-western angle quoins remain visible, on the south side of the tower, but are not of particularly diagnostic character. The NCH account terms them ‘Norman’ (ie within the late 11th or early 12th century) and this seems reasonable enough; early features may survive in the west wall, between nave and tower, but both faces of this are concealed by plaster.

The south arcade is seen as work of c1200, re-using Roman piers that probably come from the nearby fort of Chesters; very similar monolithic piers are seen at Lanchester in County Durham, where they are also thought to have been brought from a nearby Roman fort. The pointed double-chamfered arches put the date of the arcade to the very end of the 12th century, or beginning of the 13th. The north arcade also has double-chamfered arches, but of four-centred form, on conventional octagonal piers with moulded capitals and bases, seen as of c1300. Nothing remains of the original aisles.

The remainder of the building, as it stands today, is the product of the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1744 the chancel was in ‘a ruinous condition’ and would have cost £150 to rebuild; it was repaired or rebuilt in 1762, and at the same time or soon after the tower (which Wallis in 1769 describes as ‘newly erected’) was built. The use of two different types of building material poses a problem; might part of an earlier tower survive? Or was material from two different sources used? The latter hypothesis is probably the more likely. Both aisles seems to have been rebuilt as well – or possibly reinstated after being destroyed in the later medieval period, as happened elsewhere in the area.

¹ A dowsed plan of the church (Briggs et al, 1983) shows an early church with its nave flanked by porticus, and with an apsidal east end, under the present nave, as well as a presumably later apse midway along the chancel



An 1823 drawing (above) shows the church in its Georgian guise. The windows are round-headed sashes in raised surrounds with impostes and keystones, except that in the east end, which is of Venetian form; the low tower is topped by a cupola. The south aisle is unusually wide (4.5m) but its east window is set hard up against the north end of the wall, which could imply that it was inserted before the aisle was widened. A painting of c1860² shows the west tower completely shrouded in ivy, but having an external stair and doorway on the north, exactly as at present, which is puzzling as the NCH plan of 1897 shows only an internal stair³

It is known that works were planned out in 1838-9, under the surveyor Matthew Robson⁴; a gallery at the east end of the nave is shown on the drawing, and ‘repairs and reseating’ were proposed.

In 1873 the church was remodelled once more, to emerge in its present Victorian Gothic form. Virtually all 18th-century features were ruthlessly erased, with the exception of the rusticated quoins of the tower, which would have been difficult to remove anyway. The tower was raised by the addition of a new belfry stage and spire, the south wall of the south aisle rebuilt well inside its 18th-century line, with a new south porch, and the chancel shortened by c 1 m⁵. All the windows were replaced, in a free 14th/15th century Gothic style. It has not been possible to trace the architect involved.

² Northumberland County Archives ref EP 87/107

³ Of which there is absolutely no trace; was it planned but never constructed?

⁴ <http://www.churchplansonline.org/>

⁵ This shortening is represented by the gap between the present east wall and the wall of the adjacent semicircular burial enclosure, which is shown on the 1823 engraving as abutting on the then east end.

Archaeological Assessment

The nave has cement floors, except for raised boarded areas beneath the pews; a large heating grate in front of the chancel arch indicates that there was an underfloor heating system. There are two steps up into the chancel, which again has a cement floor, and a further step up into the sanctuary which is partly tiled; on either side of the altar are medieval cross slabs, currently showing active decay.

The complexity of the known structural history of the church means that evidence of earlier building phases almost certainly survives both beneath the present floors and in some areas (eg on the south) outside the present walls, although as usual sub-surface deposits and structural remains will have been disturbed by the usual centuries of burial, and also the creation of an under-floor heating system.

Any works that entail disturbance of underfloor deposits will require at the least archaeological monitoring; this also goes for works in the churchyard. It should be borne in mind that, especially in the immediate vicinity of a church building around which accumulated ground levels may have been reduced (to reduce damp problems), articulated burials may be encountered at relatively shallow depth.

Inside the church, it is possible that old plaster survives on the nave walls above the arcade, and at the west end; in addition interesting structural features might also be concealed in the same walls. If these wall surfaces are to be disturbed, a detailed inspection would be advisable to ascertain whether remains of early plaster or pigment survive, and also to inspect and perhaps record the underlying fabric.

Whilst this report is primarily concerned with the actual historic fabric of the church, two matters relating to the important collection of medieval sepulchral monuments currently raise some concern. The three cross slabs set in the sanctuary floor are covered in white salts, and in active decay; some sort of appropriate conservation treatment is an urgent requirement. In addition a number of early slabs and architectural fragments set in the internal walls of the porch by the Victorian restorer, have been recently concealed behind fixed notice boards, which is unfortunate. These comprise a significant part of the medieval building, which it would be much more appropriate to display (as originally intended) along with modern interpretative material.

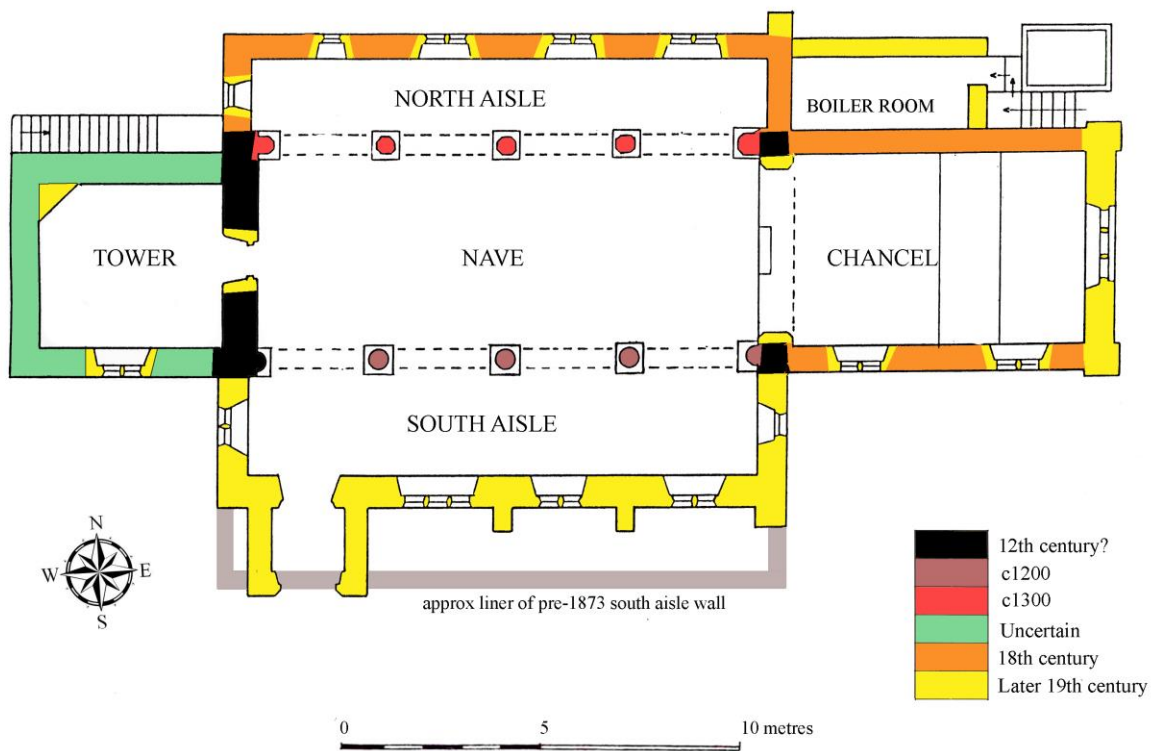
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ST GILES CHURCH, CHOLLERTON PROVISIONAL PHASED PLAN



Survey Briggs et al 1983, amended PFR