

St Mary's Church, Morpeth

The parish church of Morpeth stands on Kirkhill, on the west side of the main Newcastle Road c 0.7 km south of the town centre; in a churchyard that has been expanded westward into an extensive cemetery, the church consists of a five-bay aisled nave with west tower and south porch, and a three-bay chancel with a north vestry.

Description

The **West Tower** is built of coursed square sandstone, the courses varying in height. There is a clear change in masonry type at around mid-height between almost square blocks (perhaps re-used 12th-century material) below and more elongate ones above. Heavy buttresses are set diagonally at the western angles, and set square at the east end of the south wall; at the west end of the north wall is a stair turret in the form of a broad buttress; buttresses and turret all have caps of overlapping slabs at the level of the base of the belfry. There is two-part plinth with a steeply-chamfered upper member; as the ground falls away the lower part of the plinth is stepped down a course on the north side. The western buttresses each have two chamfered set-backs but the south-eastern rises unbroken to its full height. The west window is of two lights with Y-tracery and a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a two-centred head (a common form in this church), with a casement-moulded hood that has turned-back ends; its jamb stones do not course in with the adjacent masonry, suggesting that it is an insertion. The stair turret has two plain square-headed loops on its north side.

The only opening to the first floor of the tower is a chamfered square-headed loop in the centre of the south wall. The belfry has an opening on each side, of two lights within a segmental-pointed arch that has a chamfer only to its head; set back beneath this are two trefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil above. The parapet has a casement-moulded oversailing course at its base, and a horizontal moulded parapet; behind it rises a low octagonal leaded spire.

The only external walls of the **Nave** are at the south-east corner, and above the aisle roofs. At the south-west corner the west wall of the aisle is butted up against the south face of the south-east buttress of the tower. At the south-east corner the foot-stone of the gable of a pre-clerestory nave survives, with an integral coping chamfered on its underside; beneath this is not the straight joint one might expect had this earlier nave been aisleless, but a ragged joint between the ashlar blocks of the early nave and the smaller and more roughly-tooled stones of the aisle wall, the most apparent explanation being that there was either a buttress at this point, or even a predecessor to the present aisle.

Visible above the roof of the south aisle are a series of irregularly-spaced clerestory windows, blocked in the 19th century. There appear to be a close-set pair above the second bay (from the west), another pair in the eastern bay, and a single one between; the chamfered oversailing course at the base of the parapet has been renewed above each one, rather suggesting that they were secondary insertions that had cut into this course. The parapet has a steeply-pitched coping with a roll-moulding at its apex.

The upper part of the north wall of the nave is not visible from ground level; its north-east angle is hidden behind the vestry, and its north-west by the tower stair turret.

The **South Aisle** is constructed of coursed squared stone, again with many almost square blocks that may be earlier work re-used; in the upper parts of both east and west walls are areas of smaller roughly-tooled stone. There are no buttresses, and no visible plinth. The parapet (which may be secondary) is carried on a chamfered oversailing course on the south wall, but rises flush with the end walls; it is constructed of large blocks, and has a steeply-pitched chamfered coping.

The west wall is bounded by two straight joints, to the left with the tower south-east buttress, and to the right with the west wall of the south porch. The west window is a square-headed one of two lights, with a chamfered surround; it looks late medieval or early post-medieval work, but offers little in the way of datable criteria. On the south, to the east of the porch, are four windows, each of two lights with Y-tracery and a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a two-centred arch. The westernmost has cinquefoiled lights, and its tracery set flush with the external face of the wall, beneath a casement-moulded hood with turned-back ends. The other three windows are slightly wider, and each have the tracery with trefoiled heads to the lights set back behind a broad chamfered outer order, without any hoodmould. In all the windows the tracery seems 19th-century restoration; their jamb stones do not course in well with the adjacent walling, and the westernmost window has a renewed sill.

The east wall of the aisle has a three-light window, similar to the eastern three in the south wall in that the tracery is set back and that there is no hoodmould; the lights have trefoiled heads and there is reticulated tracery above. The mullions have clearly been renewed.

The **North Aisle** is quite different from the south, and has seen much more extensive re-facing in the 19th and 20th centuries. The west end has been largely re-faced in diagonally-tooled ashlar, except perhaps for the lower courses and its parapet, which has a chamfered oversailing course at its base and a moulded coping. Also mostly of 'new' stone is its two-light window with trefoil-headed lights and a quatrefoil over, under a casement-moulded

hood with its terminals left uncarved as plain blocks. The rather odd way in which the masonry adjacent on the north side stands proud of the blocks of the window jamb would seem to imply that the latter are old work, albeit re-tooled.

The north wall is articulated into four bays by a series of stepped buttresses with gabled tops; four, of tooled-and-margined ashlar, are clearly of 19th-century date but that between the third and fourth bays is older. The westernmost bay is almost all re-facing; its window (two trefoiled lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, hood chamfered below) looks thoroughly 19th or even 20th century as well, although again its dressings are oddly recessed behind the plane of the adjacent walling stones. Below the window are the jambs of a blocked doorway; the lowest course of the wall, and the chamfered plinth (below ground level at the west end) are of medieval fabric. The second bay has rather more old stonework, and has an odd straight joint c 0.90 m east of the buttress, rising for three or four courses above the plinth. The window, which looks entirely restoration, is of three steeply-pointed cinquefoil-headed lights within a segmental arch, under a casement-moulded hood with rather odd turned-back ends. The next bay has only a few patches of re-facing; it has an ancient window with a monolithic segmental-pointed head and two trefoil-headed lights with a quatrefoil above, under a chamfered hood with turned-back ends; the tracery is set flush with the external face of the wall. The fourth, easternmost, bay, has two windows; the western is very like that in the third bay (except that its hood does not have turned-back ends) whilst the eastern is of three lights under a segmental-pointed arch; the central light is cinquefoiled and the side lights trefoiled, the mullions between them being continued vertically to intersect the arch; once again the tracery is flush with the wall face, and the hood, chamfered on its lower angle, has turned-back ends.

The fifth buttress is clearly of 19th-century date; c 0.30 m beyond it is a full-height straight joint with the north wall of the vestry.

The **South Porch** is built of near-ashlar quality stone, although the courses vary in height; on both side walls there are large blocks in the lower courses and thinner ones in the upper c 1.5 m. This upper section is in fact a parapet, which may have been added or rebuilt. The south wall however looks of one piece (except for some refacing); the outer archway is of near-semicircular form, and has a continuous moulding of a deep hollow between two chamfers. There is a hollow-chamfered string or cornice above, following the pitch of the shallow gable; the parapet has a steep chamfered coping.

The **Chancel** is built of squared sandstone ashlar. There is a two-part plinth, the upper member being topped by a bold roll-moulding, with c 1.2 m above it a casement-moulded string course; both plinth and string are continued around two buttresses, stepped at mid-height, which articulate the south wall into three bays. The buttresses have gabled tops capped by a roll-moulding continuous with that of the parapet, which has an oversailing hollow-chamfered course at its base. At the west end of the western bay the string is stepped

down beneath the sill of a low-side window, a single-light with a transom at mid height and a trefoiled ogee head within a two-centred arch; the casement-moulded hood has been broken away at both ends. To the east is a larger window of two trefoiled ogee-headed lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, the tracery set well back within a chamfered surround, and a casement-moulded hood broken at its west end but with a mask terminal, possibly restored, to the east. The head of this window, and of the other three similar ones in the chancel, is of monolithic construction, cut from a single block of sandstone. There has been considerable re-facing of the upper part of the wall. The centre bay has a similar window (without any hoodmould terminals), with to the east a priest's door with a casement-moulded surround, the string being carried over it as a hoodmould.

The second buttress has a piercing, perhaps for the gnomon of a mass dial, on its south face just below the string; on its east face at the same level is the incised inscription 'HERE LIETH THE BODY OF ROBERT MIDFORD SEXTON OF THIS CHURCH 46 YEARS HE DIED APR 12TH 1747 AGED 82 YEARS.

The easternmost bay has a third similar window, yet again with its hoodmould terminals broken away, set right-of-centre, with to the left of it a large sundial incised into the wall fabric, complete with gnomon; it looks to be of 18th-century character. Below the string course are two infilled sockets, probably relating to a former monument attached to the wall, with between them the inscription, incised into the walling stone, 'TO THE MEMORY OF ROB MOOR WHO DIED NOVEMBER 29TH AGED 80 YEARS WHO WAS 40 YEARS SEXTON IN THIS CHURCH'. Low on the easternmost buttress, just above the plinth, is a further inscription 'JOHN GEORGE ARNOTT SEXTON AND VERGER FOR 43 YEARS DIED 1954' carved in an identical style to the earlier inscription.

The east end of the chancel is flanked by stepped buttresses exactly like those on the south; the upper section of the southern, above the set-back, has a vertical pair of niches, each with a trefoiled ogee arch. The east window is of five lights with trefoiled heads to the lights and reticulated tracery above; the bowtell-moulded tracery is set well back in a surround that has a moulded arch dying into chamfered jambs. There is a moulded hood with quite elaborate terminals in the form of human busts, a man on the left and a woman on the right. The steeply-pitched gable above looks all restoration; the moulded parapet is carried up over it as a coping, and is topped by a foliate cross finial.

The majority of the north side of the chancel is covered by the vestry, but to the east of this there is just space for one more two-light window, of the same type as those on the south; it retains a mask hoodmould stop on the right, but the left stop is broken away.

The two-storeyed **Vestry** is clearly of one build with the chancel; its fabric type is identical, and the plinth, string and parapet are continued around. On its east side the string is stepped down beneath the sill of a two-light square-headed mullioned window; above at first floor level are two narrow square-headed loops in surrounds moulded with two hollows. In the centre of the north wall is a 19th-century doorway with a two-centred arch in a casement-moulded surround, with neat stops at the base of each jamb; the string is carried up over the doorway as a hoodmould. Two old gargoyles project from the moulded oversailing course at the base of the parapet, which is capped at the north-east corner by a 20th century chimney pot.

The Interior

The internal walls of the nave, aisle and the lower stage of the west tower are plastered and yellow-washed, except for exposed dressings. The walls of chancel, south porch and organ chamber are of exposed stone; the ground floor of the vestry is plastered, but the upper floor has bare walls.

Two steps from the nave lead up into the **Tower**, which opens under a segmental-pointed arch of two chamfered orders, dying into plain square jambs; above the arch, and just below the strainer beam of the roof, is a small square-headed loop. The west window has a shouldered rear arch, with alternating-block jambs; the character of its stonework looks suspiciously 19th-century, although the upper parts of the jambs do seem older than the lower. A medieval cross slab is re-used in the steeply-sloping sill. On the north is the doorway into the newel stair, which has a two-centred arch with a continuous chamfer. The lower stage of the tower has an octopartite vault; the ribs spring from the walling, without any real corbels, and are chamfered on their lower angles, the diagonal ribs being the broader.

The stair rises to the first-floor room of the tower; the doorway into the room, set in a slight projection, has chamfered jambs but has lost its head, perhaps in 1981 when major strengthening works were carried out and steel girders inserted at the level of the room ceiling. The slabs roofing the head of the stair include at least three medieval grave slabs (now decaying badly); at least one more has been re-used as a tread in the stair.

The first-floor room has exposed stone walls, showing what is clearly re-used fabric that includes some blocks with chamfered edges. The small opening onto the roof of the nave has a broad internal splay, the loop on the south a much narrower one. A modern ladder, boxed in at the north-west corner, gives access to the belfry, where again the internal walls are of exposed stone, now badly weathered.

The medieval bell frames, perhaps contemporary with the tower, are an important survival and consist of three parallel north-south pits (Pickford 1993 plan 3.1) . The frames are of the short-headed type (Pickford op.cit type 3 I) with king-posts, curved braces, struts from the braces to the head, and transom struts from the sill to the braces. The western pit is now redundant, and has lost its head. The king-posts are jowelled at their bases, and there is a central foundation beam as well as ones on north and south.

The side walls of the **Nave** are c 0.75 m thick; the south arcade would seem to built on the line of rather than pierced through the earlier wall; there is evidence of surviving pre-arcade fabric at both ends of the south arcade. At the west end, high up on the external face of the wall is a patch of projecting stonework which would imply that the earlier wall was c 0.10 m thicker than at present; at the east end, earlier and rather thicker walling seems to survive up to the level of the capital of the respond, again projecting on the external face. On the north the fact that the two western piers are set distinctly to the south of the centre line of the wall above suggests that the arcade on this side is inserted in earlier fabric.

In the west wall of the nave, on either side of the tower arch, are a pair of late 12th or early 13th-century moulded capitals from responds or imposts; Hodgson (1832, 390) suggested that they are in-situ remnants of the responds of the arcades of an earlier and narrower nave, but they are far too small for this and have clearly been re-set, like the three similar corbels in the north aisle wall (see below). In the western angles of nave are a pair of large quadrant shaped brackets, springing from the side walls, at the level of the springing of the head of the tower arch; their position suggests that they may relate to an earlier roof, before the addition of the clerestory.

The arcades are of five bays, and broadly similar. In both the two western arches are markedly narrower than the others (around 2.66 m span as against 3.26 m). The segmental-pointed arches, all of two chamfered orders, without any hoodmould, are carried by octagonal piers with capitals which are distinctly irregular both in their plan and the section of their mouldings; all the piers have chamfered off-sets at varying distances above their bases; it is not clear how much of these irregularities are due to re-cutting.

Both responds of the south arcade have capitals carved with oak-leaf foliage, the eastern the better-preserved. The eastern pier is octagonal to floor level but the other three stand on square plinths of varying heights. The north arcade has a square plinth to its eastern respond, extending south of the line of the wall and with a later bevel to its western edge; the western respond has a plinth that has been cut away. On this side the western pier is octagonal to floor level, and the other three have square plinths, the third chamfered on its top edge and the fourth with a big chamfer to wards the nave. The piers of the arcade retain some interesting

remains of medieval painting, notably on the lower part of the first, the upper parts of the third and fourth, and on the eastern respond.

At the east end of the north arcade, the external north-east corner of the nave is exposed within the Organ Chamber; the neatly-shaped and well-tooled angle quoins are quite substantial (up to c 0.45 m high), and appear to be virtually unweathered.

The nave roof is of five bays, and of relatively low pitch. The trusses have wall-posts rising from wooden corbels, which are oddly sited as regards to the arcades. The easternmost pair of corbels are conventionally placed in the spandrels over the pier, but as one proceeds westwards they are displaced further and further from the piers beneath; on the north the second clips the outer order of the arch beneath, and the other two actually cut through it in an ugly manner. The displacement is not so marked on the south.

The wall posts are tenoned into the principals, which meet in a vertical joint at the apex; arch braces, hollow chamfered on their lower angles, combine to give a semicircular form. There is a strainer beam (absent only over the eastern bay) set below the ridge, tenoned into the arch braces, butt purlins and a square-set ridge. The western two bays of the roof are treated in a more elaborate manner than the remainder, with square-flower ornament to the hollow chamfers of the arch braces and strainer beam, and solid wind braces in the angles between principals, purlins and straining beam, as well as pendants from the arch braces and bosses on the ridge.

The south doorway opens into the **South Aisle** from the porch. It has a segmental-pointed arch with a continuous casement moulding, with above the west jamb a small ogee-headed niche with a chamfered surround, now quite eroded. Modern doors cover what is probably the original south door; the outer face is formed by six massive overlapping studded boards (bearing old graffiti including the date ;'1779'), with an old closing ring set on a circular boss with a petalled margin. The rear face is formed by eight massive horizontal planks. The rear arch of the doorway is of segmental-pointed form, and rebated for the door; there is a drawbar tunnel in the west jamb and a socket on east.

The west window of the aisle has a shouldered rear arch, with a re-used cross-slab grave cover as its lintel. Below it, at the north end of the wall, is a plain square-headed opening, 0.80 m wide and 0.90 m high, set 09.30 m above the floor. Now utilised as a meter cupboard, it is c 0.80 m deep, and has a flue rising above through the full height of the wall; it has been

interpreted as a recess for an oven in which the sacramental wafers were baked, as in the sacristy at Hulne Friary (Morris 1916, 238). In the south wall of the aisle, the window nearest the south door has a shouldered rear arch with a chamfered lintel, and the other three two-centred arches with chamfered surrounds, and level sills. Between the eastern two, and cutting slightly into both, is a fine tomb recess c 2 m high with a two-centred arch that is richly moulded, with small moulded capitals at the head of each jamb, beneath a moulded hood. There is no sign of the piscina one might expect in an aisle/chantry such as this. The east window, like the southern windows, is of similar form internally to externally, the tracery being set near the centre of the wall; its upper lights contain important medieval glass. At the north end of the east wall, below the sill of the window, is a small buttress-like projection 0.40 m, wide and 0.09 m deep.

The roof of aisle is old and of five full bays with a half-bay at each end, there are simple principals, a wall-plate on stone corbels above the arcade, and a single purlin at mid height.

Two steps down beneath its outer archway lead into the **South Porch**, which has exposed stone walls (with some 18th century graffiti) and old stone benches on either side. There is a small and plain square-headed opening c 0.30 m high and c 0.20 m wide (covered with a metal plate on the external face of the wall) immediately to the east of the outer arch, possibly a niche for a lamp. The roof of the porch consists of a simple ridge beam and rafters.

In the **North Aisle** the west window has a chamfered surround under a moulded hood with head stops, and looks mostly of 19th-century date. The windows in the north wall have their internal splays and rear arches all plastered ; the first, starting at the west end, has a plain internal surround with its jambs cut square to wall; the second has splayed jambs and a segmental-pointed rear arch, and the third a shouldered rear arch re-using a cross slab grave cover as its lintel. On either side of it are two re-set late 12th or early 13th-century capitals like the two in the west wall of the nave, another similar but somewhat damaged one is re-set immediately to the west of the screen between the aisle and the organ chamber at its east end. The easternmost window in the north wall of the aisle has its jambs cut square with wall, and a crude elliptical head to its rear arch.

The roof of the north aisle is of medieval date., and of seven bays, and of the simplest construction with principals, rafters and a single central purlin. On the three western principals the peg-holes for the joint with the purlin and the present position of the purlin do not coincide, showing that some re-arrangement has taken place.

At the east end of the nave a single step leads up into the **Chancel**. The chancel arch is of a steeply two-centred form, and of two chamfered orders; the inner order is carried on semi-octagonal responds with moulded capitals that look like 19th-century work, and the outer on

plain square jambs that seem older. On both faces of the wall the arch has a hoodmould chamfered on its lower face, parts of which, including the carved stops, are obviously restoration. On the north side of the arch is a square-headed squint, plastered round, skewed through the wall so as to give a view of the high altar from the north-east corner of the nave. What has been termed a second squint on the south is simply a recess c 0.30 deep cut from chancel side of the wall; it may have been intended as a squint, but left incomplete.

The south wall of the chancel is of roughly-coursed and quite irregular stone, up to a distinct horizontal break c 2 m from the top, the uppermost section being of more neatly-coursed and better-squared sandstone. At the west end of the wall is the low-side window, which has a level sill bordered by a row of quite delicate flower ornament, now badly damaged. The recess of the window has a segmental-pointed head in the form of a pendant rib, chamfered on its lower angle; directly above this is a two-centred arch in roughly-tooled stone. As with the arches above the priest's door and sedilia, it is not clear whether this represents an earlier (13th century?) window in the same position, or simply a relieving arch. To the east of the low-side an internal moulded string course commences, running below the sills of the three large two-light windows in the wall; these have internal hoodmoulds with head stops. The western hoodmould stop of the central window is missing; directly above its eastern one is a vertical slot in the wall which must relate to an earlier roof truss. The string course ends in a single carved oak leaf against the west jamb of the priest's door, which has a segmental rear arch with a chamfer to its head only. East of the door are the sedilia, which, although damaged, are of considerable importance. There are three recesses, beneath crocketed ogee canopies with cusped heads, between square pinnacles; a variety of small figures, some grotesque, are carved in relief upon the faces of the pinnacles; there have also been finials, now broken away, above the arched heads of the recesses. The pilasters between the seats have their front edges shaped and scooped back and the seats have projecting sills, chamfered on the lower edge. Above but not quite central to the sedilia is a crude segmental arch, clearly a pair with a similar but smaller arch over the priest's door, which again is not properly aligned with the feature beneath. Like the arch above the low-side these present a problem; are they relieving arches, or do they relate to earlier openings in a wall re-faced externally and heightened in the 14th century?.

To the east of the sedilia is a piscina with a trefoiled ogee arch that retains its small finial; the sizeable bowl has been largely broken away; beyond it is a small projecting bracket that has been identified as a credence table, over which the internal string recommences, to return along the east wall. Above these features is the third two-light window, which retains the head stops to its hoodmould.

The north wall of the chancel is of coursed roughly-squared stone to its full height, without the horizontal break apparent on the south. The western end of the wall, with the double-chamfered arch to the organ chamber, is entirely of 1865. The pointed arch is of two chamfered orders, the inner carried on large moulded corbels and the outer continued down to the ground. Old walling resumes to east, and with it the internal string course, which is carried up as a hoodmould over the doorway into the vestry, a two-centred arch with

continuous mouldings of a chamfer inside a hollow; the door itself is probably original, with good ironwork and of latticed construction to the rear. East of the door is a blocked feature 1.2 m above the string, which could either be a squint from the vestry or perhaps more likely relates to some removed wall monument. Below the string is a square-headed aumbry with old doors, unusually hinged in the centre, that retain their original ornamental ironwork, then above the string the two-light north window which retains the head stops of its hoodmould.

The string is continuous across the east end, directly below the horizontal sill or shelf below the moulded tracery of the east window, which like the other large chancel windows is of similar form internally and externally, the enclosing arch having chamfered jambs, a moulded head and a hoodmould with head stops. The window itself is a Jesse window, contemporary with the stonework, and, despite 19th-century restoration, is one of the most important pieces of medieval glass in the North of England

The 19th-century chancel roof is of four bays; the trusses have collars set high, with big cusped arch braces beneath, and a pair of raking struts above; the braces are carried by large stone corbels in the form of angels.

The **Organ Chamber** on the north of the chancel has its north wall plastered; the three-light window here has a rear arch of flattened segmental-pointed form, which looks all 19th-century. The east wall is formed by what was originally the external face of west wall of vestry, and is in immaculate almost-unweathered ashlar. The plinth and string course remain in fine preservation; just above the plinth is a strange little circular opening, formerly with quatrefoil cusping but now somewhat mutilated. Above is a square-headed loop, like those in the east wall, with a moulded surround.

The lower room of the **Vestry** has plastered walls and an underdrawn ceiling, its (concealed) north-south beams carried by a plate on either side wall, which in turn is supported by stone corbels (two are exposed on the north, one on the south). The east window has a broad chamfered stone surround to the jambs and head of its rear arch; immediately beneath it is a recess extending below down to the floor, perhaps indicating that this was once a doorway. The rear arch of the doorway to the chancel has chamfered lintel; its dressings look of 19th-century character; the rear arch of the outer doorway, in the north wall, is similar, and in this case certainly is of mid-19th century date. In the west wall, partly hidden by the stair, is the rear arch of the strange little quatrefoil opening; this is certainly unusual. It rather resembles a fireplace, with splayed jambs; the exact form of its head is concealed by the stair, but the rear arch is set at a lower level than the actual opening, precluding it having been a window. The function of this strange little opening aroused some debate in the 19th century; F.R. Wilson (1870, 153) was of the opinion 'that this opening was a chauffoir, where the priests greased their sandals'. There was formerly a fireplace at the north-east corner of the vestry, now replaced by a stove.

Against the west wall of the vestry a 19th-century wooden stair leads up to the room above, which has its walls stripped of plaster. The two windows in the east wall and one in the west all have chamfered lintels. At the south end of the west wall is an infilled socket or small locker, c 0.15 m square, and there is a similar one at the same level near the west end of the north wall. Four big quadrant shaped corbels at the head of the south wall have obviously carried a wall-plate like those in the room beneath, but this has now gone; the present roof seems recent.

Structural History

Although Morpeth church clearly has quite a complex structural history, there have been few serious attempts to explain it. Hodgson Fowler in his 1865 plans (Northumberland County Record Office ref (E) NRO 626/7) saw the greater part of the building as of c 1340. Wilson (1870, 152-3) thought the lower part of the tower 'Transitional Norman'; the aisles added and chancel rebuilt (with the addition of the sacristy/vestry) in the 'Decorated period', the nave reroofed 150 years later, and then the west end of the north aisle 'renewed' and the south porch built. More recently, Pevsner et al (1992, 393) sees the church as essentially of the 14th century, with some ex situ Early English fragments and evidence of an 'earlier' aisleless nave (of unspecified date) with the south porch being added in the 16th century.

1. Origins

Despite the fact that we have no hard and fast evidence of any structure on the site before c1200, it would seem likely that there has been a church on the site from before the time of the Norman Conquest. The rather strange site, 'Kirk Hill', so far removed from the river crossing and town centre, is one pointer to a fairly ancient origin; it has been suggested that the earliest settlement in the area was sited between the church and the Castle to the north, the main focus gravitating north to the present site, after the foundation of the market at the end of the 12th century (Tyson, 1976, 189). By the early 13th century All Saints, apparently founded as a bridge chantry, was serving the new centre. If credibility is given to the 1984 dowsed survey (Bailey et al 1988) then an apsidal Saxon or at the latest very early Norman building underlies the present one.

2. The Aisleless Nave

There is good evidence that the nave originally stood without any aisles, but no clear evidence of its date. Its north wall seems to survive, pierced by a later arcade, but the south wall has been rebuilt, except for its ends. The walls are c 0.75 m thick - a little thin for Norman work, and a little thick for Pre-Conquest. The original angle quoins are exposed at the north-east corner; the lower ones are almost substantial enough to suggest Pre-Conquest or at least 'Overlap' work (ie pre-1100) but there are no other features to confirm such an early date.

The visible evidence at the south-east angle is more ambiguous; here, where one would expect the original quoins to be exposed externally, there is simply a ragged break between the east wall of the nave and that of the 14th-century south aisle. The most obvious explanation is that there was a buttress at this point, which would argue for a post-Conquest date at least.

The amount of re-used late 12th or 13th century material, notably the five moulded capitals in the nave and north aisle and the re-cycled fabric in tower, south aisle and the internal wall faces of the chancel, all show that there was already a substantial church on the site by c1200. Another possible relic from this period is seen in a window in the east wall of the 1861 lych gate; this has two lancet lights within a round-headed arch, and has the look of being, at least in part, a genuine medieval feature re-used.

3. The Tower

The earlier antiquarian accounts (and the modern guide pamphlet) see the lower part of the tower as 12th century work, probably on the basis of the clear change in masonry type at mid-height, with the squarish blocks characteristic of the period in the lower section. The large diagonal buttresses at the western angles however are late 13th or 14th century in character, and show both types of masonry; they are clearly contemporary with the tower. There is a clear straight joint between the south-eastern buttress and the west end of the south aisle, which would seem to prove that the tower is earlier than the aisle.

4. The Chancel

The chancel, and attached sacristy/vestry, are a little-altered example of mid-14th century architecture; Wilson (1870, 153) opined 'there are but few instances of Decorated work of such richness, purity and ripeness as this in the archdeaconry'. There is some evidence on the internal face of the south wall (the change in build 2 m from the top and the odd arches above low-side window, priest's door and sedilia) which could be read as implying that earlier

fabric had been refaced externally, but on balance the most likely explanation would seem to be that earlier masonry was simply re-used in the lower wall, and that the arches, imprecisely positioned as they are, are simply relieving arches to the 14th-century feature beneath.

5. The Aisles

The addition of the aisles to the nave is usually seen as of 14th century date, although they would appear to be of a different build to the chancel. The wall masonry is generally of rougher and more varied character, clearly re-using much material from some earlier part of the building.³ Apart from the leaf ornament on the responds of the south arcade, the arcade details are irregular and crude, although in part this might be due to re-cutting. The fenestration poses some problems, too. The east window of the south aisle with its reticulated tracery is clearly contemporary with the chancel, whilst the eastern three windows in its south wall, are of broadly 14th-century type, with their tracery set towards the mid-point of the wall in the manner characteristic of the period, but do not have the ogee curves of the chancel and aisle east windows. The other aisle windows, with the exception of the rather dubious west window of the north aisle, all have their tracery flush with the external wall face, although their overall character remains of the same period, except the very plain square-headed mullioned window at the west end of the north aisle which offers little stylistic information.

The discrepancy in height between the arcades is most unusual, and is best explained by the need to accommodate a clerestory on the south.

Hodgson Fowler's 1865 phased plan shows the north wall of the Organ Chamber as work of c1400, but externally it looks very much the same build as the aisle wall, although clearly butted up to the earlier sacristy/vestry. This relationship is simply further proof of the chancel and sacristy/vestry phase pre-dating the aisles.

Wilson's plan also differentiates two periods of build in the north aisle, but places the join between them on the line of the second buttress from the west; although the situation in this area has been confused by re-facing, there is no real visible evidence for this either.

As already stated, both aisles are additions to the earlier nave.

6. The Nave Roof

Wilson (1870, 152-3) saw the nave roof as of 'perhaps a hundred and fifty years after the first high-pitched roof was reared on the new building in the fourteenth century'. The only evidence of an earlier high-pitched roof is in the surviving fragment of the early aisleless nave at its south-east angle (perhaps of 13th century date). The present low-pitched roof seems to go with the construction of the aisled nave; the roof tabling on the east wall of the tower (where one might have expected evidence of any earlier roof) seems to relate to it there is however no evidence of any such high-pitched roof. The discrepancy between the heights of the arcades would make no sense unless the clerestory (and with it the present low pitch of the roof) were part of the same scheme.

7. The Porch

The south porch, very clearly an addition, is generally seen as of 16th century date

8. Post-Medieval Changes

The church survived the post-medieval centuries without any major structural alteration and, as often, such changes as they were have been largely erased by Victorian restoration. Their reconstruction depends largely on documentary rather than extant physical evidence.

In the 18th century galleries had been inserted in the nave; plans of those over the north aisle and western two bays of the nave survive (Northumberland County Record Office NRO 626/7/2) showing that access was by a stair at the west end of the aisle. These were removed in the 1865 restoration; a third gallery, one over the western part of the chancel was taken down a few years earlier; Hodgson (1832, 390-1) records that it had an inscription on its front 'This gallery was built at the expence of Mr Edward Fenwick, formerly a schollar at Morpeth School'. Access to this gallery was by a stair contained in 'a sort of aisle or porch' at the east end of the vestry (op.cit 393-3)⁴. Other alterations seem to have taken the form of changes to windows, as in the tower where the 'lower windows have been deprived of their stone mullions, and are now closed by wooden lattices' (op.,cit 390) and works to remedy structural failure, as in the buttresses added to the north aisle c 1817 (Creighton 1994/2001)⁵.

9. Victorian Restoration

The church underwent several phases of restoration during the Victorian period. In an address given in 1887 (reprinted by Ferguson & Gillespie, 1930), the rector, Canon Francis Richard Grey, relates how he removed the chancel gallery soon after his incumbency began in 1842, at the same time as taking down the 'Perpendicular' chancel screen, which he himself then 'deeply regretted' as 'an act of vandalism' action he later regretted. At around the same time the chancel was re-roofed; Whellan (1855, 748). The old roof - 'low and of very objectionable appearance' was replaced by the present one 'of high pitch and excellent design'. The interior was cleared of whitewash, and the clerestory blocked up⁴

The major restoration came in 1865, the architect being C Hodgson Fowler of Durham, responsible for many such works throughout the North East, and fortunately one of the more sensitive when it came to handling medieval buildings. He made the present large arch between chancel and organ chamber (replacing a smaller one) and re-seated the entire church.

There have been other more minor works since 1865. The westernmost window in the north wall of the north aisle (above the jambs of the former north door) is not shown on any of Hodgson Fowler's plans or the ground plan reproduced by Ferguson & Gillespie (1930), and looks of no great age. The same plan shows a boiler room beneath the north aisle, now filled in and sealed off.

Archaeological Assessment

St Mary's Church is one of the best-preserved medieval churches in Northumberland. Whilst most authorities are agreed that its architectural merit lies in its being a predominantly 14th-century building, there is little agreement on the detail of its structural development, and no recent analysis seems to be available, other than a dowsed survey of 1984 Bailey et al 1988, plan 29, 158; this purports to show an earlier structure, apparently with a south aisle², with an apsidal east end beneath the western section of the present chancel. Even the most modern sources perpetuate some of the errors of 19th-century interpretation (such as the lower part of the tower being of 12th century date).

The phased plan accompanying this report is based on one of Hodgson Fowler's 1865 drawings, with some corrections; several ground plans have been seen, but not proved wholly satisfactory; a good modern survey would be helpful. Features of the church that would merit detailed recording are the medieval roof structure of the nave, and in particular the bell frames in the tower, a rare survival of short-headed type. The medieval doors and their

ironwork also merit proper recording, if this has not been carried out. These timber features would also benefit from a programme of dendrochronological analysis, which would hopefully provide some firm dates that could be linked to phases in the development of the building. The medieval grave slabs re-used in the tower stair are in poor condition, that at the heads of the stair in particular being in an actively disintegrating state; they were photographed and drawn in the course of this assessment.

Whilst the structural fabric of the church is obviously of prime importance, there are a number of areas of potential archaeological interest and vulnerability. First among them is whatever deposits and structural remains survive beneath floor level. Whilst these will have been disturbed to some extent both by generation of burial, and an underfloor heating system, any floor works will need to be accompanied by archaeological recording; major works should merit a preliminary investigation and physical assessment of the area to be disturbed, and minor at the least a 'watching brief'.

Apart from the chancel and upper floor of the vestry, the internal walls faces of the church are covered by plaster. It is difficult to assess whether this may conceal earlier plaster layers and remains of painted decoration. That such decoration existed (and was the norm in medieval churches) is confirmed by the remains of painting on both arcades. It is recorded that 'whitewash' was removed from the walls and piers during the 19th century, but not whether the walls, apart from those of the chancel, were actually stripped.

This also goes for areas adjacent to the external perimeter of the building, although, as often, a drain around most of the exterior will have disturbed the relationship between the building and associated deposits (eg layers of masons' chippings).

Peter F Ryder December 2003

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Plan after F.R.Wilson (1870)

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Morpeth

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South-east view after F.R.Wilson (1870)

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St Mary's Church

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Medieval incised grave slab at head of tower stair,
now in an advanced state of decay

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1Their irregular form would also support this interpretation, as would the monolithic head of the window, and various infilled sockets in its jambs.

2There are quite a number of examples of this in Northumberland, most notably the elaborate head of the east window of the south aisle at Felton.

3As does the lower part of the tower, suggesting that the 14th century works entailed the rebuilding of an already-substantial church rather than simply additions to a small one.

4It is difficult to see how this was accommodated; there is no evidence of any high-level doorway on the north of the chancel, which such an access would surely necessitate.

5Although Hodgson Fowler on his phased plan dates all these buttresses (one is clearly older than the others, and probably medieval) as of 1845.

6Creighton dates this to 1844, but an old painting of the interior of the church (currently hanging on the wall of the nave) shows the eastern clerestory window open, and the chancel with its present roof)

7Although this is only shown extending eastwards as far as a little west-of-centre of the easternmost bay of the nave, so the visible 'early' masonry at the south-east angle of the nave cannot relate to it.