

HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

EMBLETON

An Archaeological Assessment

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The church from the south-east

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Holy Trinity Church, Embleton

The parish church of the Holy Trinity stands at the south end of Embleton village, a little to the north-west of the partly-medieval rectory. The church consists of a three-bay nave with a western tower, aisles (which extend westward to engage the tower), a south porch, and the small Craster Porch on the north of the east end of the north aisle, a three-bay chancel with a north vestry and small organ chamber.



The church from the south

The Exterior

The **West Tower** rises in three stages. The tall lower stage is made up of a variety of fabrics; the west elevation shows some red sandstone and patches of rubble in its lower part, which may be original, the squared sandstone above this probably being later medieval re-facing¹. There is a chamfered plinth on the west, and above it the west window, a 19th-century one of two trefoil-headed lights with a circle of three whirling mouchettes above, under a moulded hood with mask stops – these, like a number of others throughout the church, look as if they might be caricatures of ?local individuals. Below the window squared stonework extends down to plinth level, hinting that there may have been a western doorway at one time. The only other opening in the lower stage is on the southern, above the aisle roof, and is a single light with a trefoiled head of 14th/15th century character; its lower part has been infilled. A string and chamfered set-back mark the base of the second stage, the only openings in which are a vertical pair of narrow loops, in chamfered surrounds, on the west. There is another chamfered set-back at the base of the belfry, in each wall of which is an opening of two trefoil-arched lights, with a transom at mid-height and an quatrefoil piercing in the spandrel,, within a chamfered arch but without any hoodmould; on the west mullions and transom are recent restoration.. The attractive and unusual

¹ On the south the courses of this squared stonework slope downwards noticeably from east to west.

embattled parapet, one of the most distinctive features of the church, has open trefoil-headed panels, and the bases of pinnacles (removed in the 20th century) at the corners and midway along each side.

The only walls of the **Nave** exposed externally are of the clerestory and the upper part of the east gable; the facts that the aisle engage the tower, and the chancel is slightly wider than the nave, mean that no angle quoins are exposed. The clerestory is of large squared stone; there are three windows on each side, each of three trefoiled ogee lights; they look of 19th century character. Disturbed fabric between the western and central windows on the south side relates to an earlier window, more clear evidence of which is visible internally. The east gable has a 19th-century slab coping carried on elaborated moulded kneelers with cross-gables with roll moulded caps. The steep-pitched nave roof is of graduated Lakeland slates.

The western bay of the **South Aisle** is concealed by the South Porch. To the east of this the wall is of large squared stone, with a steep chamfered plinth (rather shallower in the eastern third of the wall – it is not clear whether this indicates a structural change – and a chamfered coping. There are two windows under segmental-pointed arches, each of two trefoiled lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, within a chamfered frame; both have ashlar dressings with a parallel tooling, of 19th-century character, although immediately to the west of the western is what appears to be the west jamb of an older window. The east wall of the aisle contains a third window of the same type, and is of similar fabric, but for some reason has no plinth, just above ground level at the south end of the wall is a block of pinkish sandstone c 1.5 m long, presumably a re-used piece; there seems to be a discontinuity in the fabric of the lower wall approximately beneath the southern jamb of the window, with elongate blocks to the south and squarer ones to the north. This might conceivably represent the south-east angle of an earlier (13th century?) narrower aisle.

The **South Porch** is built of large blocks of squared sandstone; it has a chamfered plinth on the east, and at the southern angles, but not on the west. There is a moulded course at the base of the flat-topped oversailing parapet, which has a moulded coping. The outer archway has a four-centred arch with a typical Perpendicular moulding of two rolls and a hollow; above is a canopied recess flanked by crocketed pinnacles, all now heavily eroded which rises to interrupt the base of the parapet; it now contains a modern sculpture of the Trinity. The Northumberland County History account (1895, 79) gives so further detail of sculpture now either worn or concealed by the modern sculpture. The hoodmould of the doorway had angels holding scrolls as its stops, and a demi-angel with spread wings at the apex; the recess had a bracket at the base carved with foliage and vaulting ribs and a central boss cut within the semi-octagonal canopy.

The eastern bay of the north wall of the **North Aisle** is concealed behind the Craster Porch; the remaining bays of the medieval aisle have been partly refaced in 19th-century fabric, and between them and the western extension of the aisle is a 19th-century stepped buttress/. The old walling has a steep plinth, and two two-light 19th-century windows (as in the south aisle). Below the western the east jamb of a former north door is visible, and below the eastern an elongate block with thin parallel tooling which seems to represent the sill of an earlier (c1800?) window; one block of its west jamb also seems to remain in situ. This aisle has a rather more elaborate

parapet on the south, apparently medieval, with a moulded oversailing course at its base and a moulded coping.

The east end of the aisle has a 19th-century window of two trefoiled lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel; the wall below has a steep medieval plinth only at its north end, the remainder having a shallow square step of c1800 character.

The **Western Bays of the Aisles** are both of 1849-50, and built of squared pecked stone, with ashlar dressings, with a steep plinth, stepped diagonal buttresses at their outer angles, and an oversailing parapet modelled on that of the north aisle. In their outer walls are two-light windows of the same type as those further east, but with diagonal tooling, suggesting they are of a different build. The windows in the west walls of the aisles are slightly different in character, and although no more than a decade or so older, may have been re-used from the earlier west walls of the aisles. Each is of two trefoiled lights under a steep two-centred arch, with quatrefoils in the spandrel (that in the northern window set diagonally), under casement-moulded hoods with mask stops.

The **Craster Porch** is rather lower than the aisle. It has a steep plinth and a square string course below the parapet, which has a moulded coping and a foliate cross finial to the low-pitched gable facing north. The north and west walls are of pecked squared stone, with well-squared quoins, and look of 19th-century date, although the window in the north wall is curious and may incorporate older material. It is of two cinquefoiled lights with a quatrefoil in the spandrel, under a chamfered hoodmould, and has its sill cut into an elongate block with L-shaped ends. The east wall retains medieval fabric, of big squared blocks, and has a contemporary massive stepped buttress at its south end.

The **Chancel** is entirely of 1866-7 and a fine example of High Victorian work in the Geometrical style beloved of its architect, F.R. Wilson of Alnwick. Its external walls are of pecked pink sandstone alternating with thin bands of rough-faced grey limestone, with ashlar dressings, and a steep-pitched roof of alternating bands of purple Welsh and green fish-scale slates. There is a chamfered plinth and a chamfered set-back below the windows, as well as a chamfered oversailing course to the eaves. The side walls are articulated by buttresses with cross-gabled lower stages and sloping tops; at the eastern angles are taller paired buttresses that in addition have sloping off-sets at a higher level and steep gabled tops.

The south elevation of the chancel is of three bays, with windows that have two trefoiled lights with variously-foiled circles on the heads, under two-centred arches with moulded hoods that have cross-paté finials. At the east end of the central bay is a priest's door under a cinquefoiled arch, set in a projection with a sloping top and a sloped off-set on its left return, shaped to accommodate the window above.

At the east end the chamfered off-set steps up beneath the sill of the east window, which has five trefoiled lights with geometrical tracery including three big circles above, under a hood with the same type of stops as the southern windows. The gable above has a slab coping and a ring-cross finial with a serrated outer rim that makes it look like a cog wheel.

On the north of the chancel there is a two-light window of the same type as on the south in the eastern bay, and then the pent-roofed vestry which has a big cusped spheric-triangle window in its east wall and a circular quatrefoil light on the north; a small arched doorway on the west is now blocked up. On the line of the chancel wall is a chimney stack with two circular shafts, the western having now lost its conical cap. The half-bay west of the vestry is occupied by a shallower pent-roofed projection containing the organ chamber, on which the mid-height off-set steps down to become an upper member to the plinth.

The Interior

The interior of the South Porch has old stone benches and five medieval cross slabs re-set in the side walls, three on the east and two on the west. The inner door is all of mid-19th century ashlar, and seems to be (loosely) copied from the outer arch; above is a deep groove indicating the roof-line of a lower and steep-roofed porch; reddening of the stonework hints that it might have been destroyed by fire.

The internal walls of the main body of the church are now clear of plaster.

The **Tower** opens into the nave by a two-centred arch of two chamfered orders, with a small chamfered hood that may be a 19th-century addition. The inner order is carried on responds with keeled shafts that have moulded capitals and bases, whilst the outer is continued down the jambs. The responds seems to have been re-tooled or re-cut in places, whilst towards the nave they are flanked by areas of 19th-century tooled ashlar. The west wall of the nave above the arch is of roughly-coursed and roughly-tooled stone, with a number of disturbed areas. The clearest feature is the old line of a shallow-pitched nave roof a little below the present one. To the north of the top of the arch is a possible blocked doorway – a couple of blocks of its north jamb seem clear – and to the south a ragged break including two big squared blocks that might be 19th-century stitching.



Interior of the tower looking south-west; the central vaulting rib cuts the rear arch of a 12th-century window.

The internal walls of the lower stage of the tower are of roughly-coursed rubble; in the side walls the internal surrounds of 12th-century windows are visible, their arches being cut into by the central of the three chamfered ribs of the present vault, of segmental-pointed section. The stonework of the vault looks rather 'fresh' but is presumably genuine medieval work re-tooled in the 19th century; an attractive mid-19th century wrought-iron spiral stair rises against the south wall and passes through a circular hole in the vault to give access to the ringing chamber. The 19th-century west window has rough stonework in its inner jambs, but a casement-moulded hood with mask stops, perhaps of plaster.

The external faces of the side walls of the tower are exposed within the western bays of the aisles; each shows the outer opening of the 12th-century windows; in each case the round-arched head is cut into an elongate monolithic slab. At the east end of the south wall is a vertical line of blackened masonry which must represent an old flue, perhaps from a vestry in this position pre-dating the 1849-50 aisle extension.

The Ringing Chamber is a lofty compartment that rises to the fairly modern floor of a low chamber directly below the belfry. At the base of its south wall is a the semicircular rear arch, of 12th century character, of the small window that now has a trefoil-headed outer opening of later medieval character. The infilling of the lower part of this window must relate to the insertion of the tower vault. Higher up is the lower of the two square-headed loops in the west wall, and then a former floor level indicates by the ends of pairs of sawn-off beams in the north and south walls and a slight off-set on the east. There may have been another floor lower down (between the head of the window in the south wall and the one on the west) but heavy pointing could obscure the evidence. Fittings make it difficult to inspect the lower part of the east wall, and no sign of the possible blocked door visible from the nave can be detected. At the east end of the base of the south wall is a ragged opening which brought the flue from the earlier vestry inside the tower; again the flue itself has been removed but the line of smoke blackening left by it rises up, veering towards the centre of the wall, and continues through the next chamber into the belfry, presumably once continuing to a chimney on top of the tower.

A ladder rises through a trapdoor in the ringing chamber ceiling, and continues top another in the belfry floor, which is again of recent timbers. The present metal bell frames were installed in 2000.

The side walls of the **Nave**, above the three-bay arcades, are of roughly-coursed roughly-squared stone (little more than rubble in parts) and are c 0.65 m thick; there is a pink tinge to the stone up to the level of the tops of the arcade arches, perhaps evidence of a fire..

The arcades have two-centred arches, each of two chamfered orders, of early 13th-century date and showing some interesting detail. The hoodmoulds have nail-head ornament; on the north they end above the piers in large mask stops similar to those of several of the windows, and almost certainly of 19th-century date, but on the south they have foliate cross terminals that may be genuinely medieval. The outer orders have unusual stops above the capitals, towards the nave in the form of single dog-tooth ornaments (except for the eastern pier of the south arcade which has more elaborate foliate motifs, now badly damaged) and to the aisle in broach stops. The octagonal piers have moulded capitals and bases. The eastern responds are corbels with stiff-leaf foliage and moulded bases.

Above the western pier of the north arcade there appears to be a blocked opening, almost certainly a splayed window, which from its position must pre-date the arcade; on the external face of the wall it is much narrower, but on neither face of the wall does any evidence of the form of its head survive. Higher up, the clerestory windows have internal jambs that simply seem to be cut into the walling, but rear arches in the form of shallow segmental ribs, chamfered on both lower angles. The only evidence

of an earlier window at this level is on the south, between the western and central openings, where the east jamb of an earlier window is clearly visible.



Hoodmould stop of the south arcade, showing dog-tooth ornament on hoodmould above.

Within the **South Aisle** the internal jambs of the south door have alternating blocks of 19th-century ashlar, but the chamfered segmental-pointed rear arch looks genuine medieval work. To the east of the door a disturbed area of fabric may indicate the former position of a stoup. Both of the 19th-century windows in the south wall have are clearly insertions in older fabric; between them, high in the wall is a large slab with an incised design, possibly a medieval grave slab with some sort of emblem (???a flail). The window in the east wall of the aisle is again an obvious insertion; to the north of it are a pair of corbels with female faces carved on their lower angles, and to the south a plain chamfered corbel; all of these seem too freshly-cut to be genuine medieval work, but a rebated rectangular aumbry adjacent to the eastern respond of the arcade seems old. At the west end of the aisle the double-chamfered arch opening into the western bay, which has a casement-moulded hood with foliate stops and springs from semi-octagonal responds with moulded caps and bases, seems all of 1849-50, as does the wall which contains it.

The internal walls of the **North Aisle** show a variety of interesting features. The two 19th-century windows on the north have quite different internal surrounds; the western is of rough stonework, like the other similar openings, but the eastern is of better-quality stone and is set slightly proud of the wall (as if to allow for plaster). The wall has a moulded oversailing course at eaves level, which ties in with this wall having a more elaborate parapet than that on the south. Further east there seems a clear break between the large stonework of the lower wall and the more thinly-coursed fabric of its upper 1 m or so. The arch into the Craster Porch, of shallow segmental-pointed form, its two chamfered orders springing directly from its jambs, is within the lower section; there is also a hint of an early roof-line on the east wall, again suggesting that the aisle has been heightened. In the upper section of wall, roughly above the west jamb of the arch and at its centre are two infilled slots that may relate to earlier roof trusses. There is also a horizontal groove in the wall, which presumably relates to some former fittings, just below the level of the springing of the arch; it also returns a short distance along the west wall of the porch.

In the centre of the east wall of the aisle is an area of 19th-century stonework containing a two-light window, but on either side of it a image recesses with simple moulded surrounds, trefoiled ogee heads and formerly-projecting sills now broken

away, set directly over piscinae, which have had projecting bowls, also now broken off. The southern piscina has an ogee arch and the northern a round-arched one, both with simple chamfers. Inside the Craster Porch the only old feature is a rebated square-headed aumbry towards the north end of the east wall.

The nave and aisle roofs are all of mid-19th century date, and are typical mid-Victorian work; the nave roof is of six full bays, with a half bay at each end; the scissor-braced trusses spring from wall posts carried on stone corbels.

The **Chancel** is entered under a tall two-centred arch of two chamfered orders, the inner, with bold dog-tooth ornament on its chamfer, carried on corbels which have short shafts with Transitional-style capitals – these look to be genuine late-12th century work re-used - and the outer continued down the jambs; there is a hoodmould with cross paté stops. The voussoirs of the arch are of alternating pink and yellow sandstone. In the rubble walling above the chancel arch above the chancel arch the line of an early steep-pitched roof is visible (pre-dating the clerestory) and, in the gable, the outline of a large and rather mysterious Gothic-arched window (see ‘The Development of the Church’, below).



The 1866-7 chancel arch and older walling above, with early roof-line and outline of large window of uncertain date.

Alternate banding of pink and yellow stone is used in the internal walls of the chancel, and in the rear arches of its windows. On the north the arch to the organ chamber is concealed by the organ pipes; further east the door to the vestry has a two-centred chamfered arch; opposite, the rear arch of the priest's door has a two-centred arch in a shouldered frame. The internal sill of the easternmost window in the south wall is lowered to hold a pair of wooden sedilia, with to the east paired trefoiled arches, with shafted jambs and gabled hoods, frame a piscine and credence table.

The chancel roof is quite elaborate; it is of three bays, with hammer-beam trusses; the eastern, framing the sanctuary, is of box section with patterned circular piercings to the soffit, and is carried on big brackets with pairs of shafts springing from corbels with cruciform panels; a second similar truss, with less elaborate corbels, is set against the east wall. The western truss is simpler, with arch braces and moulded ashlar corbels.

Inside the vestry a number of medieval architectural fragments (illustrated by Wilson) have been re-set in the south and west walls.

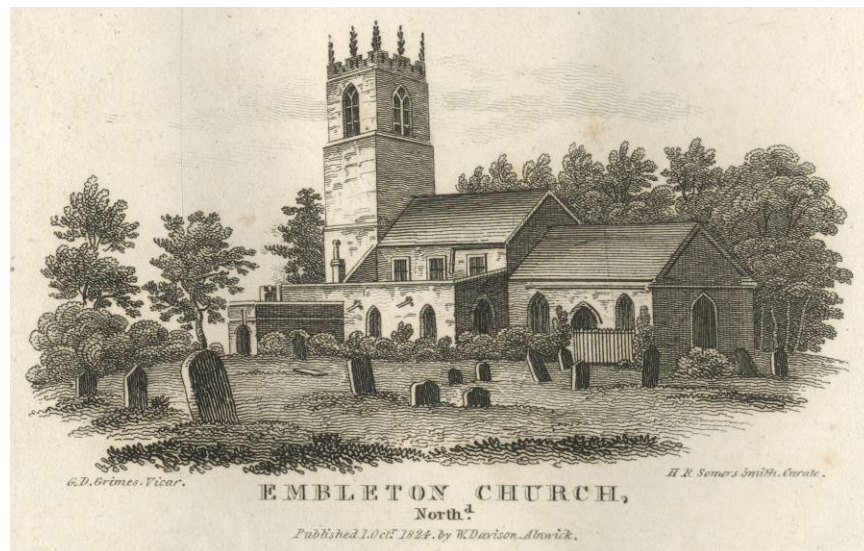
The Development of the Church

The most detailed account of the church is found in the Northumberland County History, Vol. 2 (1895); in brief, this sees the nave walls and lower part of the west tower as of late 11th or early 12th century date, the chancel as rebuilt c1180 (on the strength of the shafts re-used in the present chancel arch being ancient work originating in its medieval predecessor), the aisles added c1200 and rebuilt along with the upper part of the tower c1330-40, the Craster Porch being added at the same time. The present church guide (2005) draws on the 1982 History of Embleton Parish Church by Oswin Craster sees the lower tower and nave walls as 12th century, arcades as c1200, tower heightened (and vault inserted) in the 14th century, aisles widened (and clerestory added) in the 15th and south porch added in the 15th or early 16th century.

None of the published sources appear to mention the blocked window above the western pier of the north arcade; it has no real datable characteristics, but its inner and outer jambs are simply formed in the rubble of the wall, unlike those of the clearly 12th-century windows in the tower. The nave walls are only c 0.65 m thick, which would be more compatible with Anglo-Saxon than Norman work, but there are no other visible features which would help confirm this – the angle quoins are either concealed, or have been removed. All that can be said is the nave walls are probably the oldest part of the building, and of late Saxon or early Norman date, and the lower part of the tower a Norman addition. The rear arch of the window on the south of the ringing chamber looks to be of 12th century date, and would appear to be a relatively small light like those below rather than a belfry opening – which would imply that the belfry was at a higher level, and that the upper section of the tower – just possible a timber belfry – was rebuilt rather than added in the 14th century.

The nailhead ornament on the hoodmoulds of the nave arcades puts them into the early 13th century, whilst the re-used corbels from which the chancel arch springs are perhaps twenty or thirty years earlier; the responds of the tower arch are perhaps of the same general period, pointing to a remodelling and enlargement of the Norman church. Further remodelling came in the 14th and 15th centuries, perhaps in a number of phases. The upper part of the tower was rebuilt, along with its arch, and the present ribbed vault was inserted. What happened to the aisles is less clear; it is assumed that narrow aisles of c1200 were widened (as often happened at this period) but their walling now retains little in the way of original architectural features, and its fabric poses questions rather than gives answers. There are some peculiar changes in the plinths of both aisles (coupled with the total absence of any plinth at the east end of the south aisle) which would seem to point to several building phases, and raises the interesting possibility that what we have now represents a piecemeal later medieval

replacement, not of narrow aisles of c1200, but of the porticus (flanking chapels) of a Saxon building. The Craster Chapel opening off the north aisle looks as if is an addition, but has been largely rebuilt; the big buttress on its east side is very odd, being placed outside the line of the aisle wall it would seem to have been intended to support.



Davison's 1828 print

The County History account dates the remodelling of tower, rebuilding of the aisles and addition of the clerestory all to 1330-1340, which seems a little over-confident; the clerestory is dated from its rear arches which were seen as medieval, although in fact they seem more like early-19th century work. Davison's 1828 print seems to show an earlier clerestory of square-headed windows, which evidence on the internal face of the south wall seems to show were in different positions to the present openings².

It would appear that the chancel was also rebuilt in the 14th century. The antiquary Samuel Hieronymous Grimm made a tour of the North of England in 1783, making three drawings of Embleton Church – a south east view, and detailed sketches of the east window and tower parapet, now in the British Library³. These are labelled 'Embleton, Durham', which may be the reason that previous workers seem to have been unaware of them. The south-east view shows a large chancel (apparently a little wider than the nave) with a fine five-light east window that has similarities to those of Houghton-le-Spring and Sedgfield in Durham, both of which have been linked to Prior Fossor of Durham (1341-1374) and the great west window in Durham Cathedral. The east end has paired stepped buttresses at the angles, with gabled tops. At the west end of the south side of the chancel is a large arch, possibly evidence of a removed chapel (although the adjacent east end of the south aisle is shown with a two-light window very like the one there today); then comes a pair of single-light cusped windows with a priest's door between them – a string course running beneath the windows is stepped up over the door - and in the eastern bay, separated from the remainder of the wall by a stepped and gabled buttress, another single-light window. The parapet, pierced by two projecting drainage spouts, appears to have been raised above the original eaves line, as at Elsdon, where this modification appears to have

² Wilson's 1870 account states that the north clerestory was a new insertion in 1849-50.

³ The Embleton drawings are referenced 005ADD000015539U00064000 (SVC2) and 005ADD000015539U00066000 (SVC2)

been a deliberate defensive feature. The chancel roof had clearly been lowered – not one but two old roof-line appear on the east wall of the nave, the upper corresponding to the chancel gable which had been left unaltered.

Such a grandiose remodelling in the 14th century is something of a surprise in Northumberland, given the troubled state of the country and the Border region in particular. Possibly the village felt itself under the protective umbrella of nearby Dunstanburgh Castle, where major building works were carried out by Earl Thomas of Lancaster (1314-1322) and John of Gaunt (in the last quarter of the century).

The south porch – which clearly replaces an earlier and lower one – is probably of the late 15th or early 16th century, and represents the last substantial medieval alteration to the building.

Post-medieval changes are better documented. In 1608 it is recorded ‘the chauncell of the church is in decaie’ and in the Archdeacon’s visitation of 1723 it was decreed that ‘a breach in the wall by the west side of the church porch to be filled up’. Further works were carried out in 1734, and at around the same time a gallery was inserted under the tower. A major renovation in 1803-5 saw the medieval chancel replaced by a new one which Wilson described as ‘Georgian’ and which is illustrated in Davison’s 1828 print and in a small sketch in Wilson; it had simple Gothic-arched windows (with a large priest’s door between the two on the south) and a pedimented east gable.

The date of the blocked window above the chancel arch remains a mystery. It is not shown in Grimm’s drawing, and so must be post-1783 – but neither does it appear in either the 1828 print or Wilson’s sketch, so was it a short-lived late 18th century feature?

In 1849/50 the church was restored under the well-known architect John Dobson, who removed the galleries, rebuilt the nave roof, and extended the aisles west to flank the tower, removing a previous vestry which seems to have been sited at the west end of the south aisle; the evidence for the flue from its fireplace has already been noted, on the external face of the south wall of the tower. The windows in the west walls of the aisle look as if they may be earlier-19th century ones, presumably re-sited from the original west walls of the aisles. The remodelling of the other aisles windows, and of the nave clerestory, may have taken place at around the same time. Wilson relates that the Craster Chapel was rebuilt at the same time ‘from the same foundations, higher than before’⁴

The last major structural phases was in 1866-7 when the chancel was entirely rebuilt by Alnwick architect F.R.Wilson, at the expense of Merton College, patron of the living; he took at least some of his detailing (eg the buttresses) from the College chapel in Oxford (1424-50). Earlier architectural fragments – including a length of parapet moulding thought to have come from Dunstanburgh castle – were re-set in the internal walls of the new vestry. New bells and bellframes were installed in 1892; the frames were replaced again in 1997.

⁴ Although it is clear that medieval fabric was retained in the east wall.

Archaeological Assessment

As has hopefully been made clear, this is a church of considerable interest and is some archaeological importance. The complexity of its structural history means that evidence of earlier building phases almost certainly survives beneath the present floors, 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; there is an underground boiler chamber outside the west end of the south aisle. There are known to be family burial vaults beneath the Craster Porch and at the west end of the north aisle.

The present nave floor has areas of stone slabs, wooden, and boarded platforms beneath the pews.

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.

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Sources

Northumberland County History 2 (1895) p 72-79

A History of Embleton Parish Church (2005) (church guidebook)

Wilson, F.R (1870). Churches of the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne 134-5

HOLY TRINITY EMBLETON

Plan after F R Wilson, amended PFR

