



Bolton Chapel

An Archaeological Assessment

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Bolton Chapel

Bolton Chapel, a chapel-of-ease (its dedication unknown) in the Parish of Edlingham, stands on an intriguing site, on top of a little hill and roughly in the centre of a sub-circular churchyard. The building consists of a nave with a south porch and north transept, and a chancel with a north vestry.

The earliest references to the chapel are in the later 13th century; in 1291 the ‘capella de Boulton’ was annexed to the vicarage of Edlingham¹. The village chapel was quite distinct from a second chapel to the Hospital of Bolton, which stood a few hundred metres to the north, the masters and brethren of which held the lordship and manor of Bolton between 1225 and the Dissolution²; the site of the hospital, evidenced by earthworks, is now a scheduled ancient monument.

Description

The **Nave** is largely constructed of coursed squared stone with a pecked tooling, and has tooled-and-margined quoins and dressings of grey sandstone; the roof is of Welsh slates with a stone tile ridge. The west end has a substantial chamfered plinth of older more-weathered stone; the wall face above is set back a little from its chamfer, suggesting that the plinth belongs to an earlier rather thicker wall; the plinth now ends in a straight joint c 0.80 m from the south end of the wall, as if a buttress here has been removed. At its north end the plinth ends in a broken return c 20cm beyond the line of the present north wall of the nave. In the centre of the west wall is a round-headed window with a double-chamfered surround. Both gable ends of the nave have copings of interlocking slabs, hollow chamfered on their lower



edge. On the western gable the hollow chamfer of the coping is continued across a short string below a bell-cote, which has a simple arch, semicircular on both intrados and extrados, springing from square imposts; the sides have smaller segmental-headed openings and it holds a single bell.

The church seen from the south-east

¹ Hodgson, J.C. Northumberland County History VII (1904) 226

² *ibid.* 201

The south side of the nave is of five bays; to the west of the porch, which covers the second bay, there is a rough and shallow plinth, and what looks to be some older stone (probably re-used) in the two courses above; east of the porch the ground level rises and any plinth is concealed. The bay west of the porch and the three to the east all have identical round-arched windows with double-chamfered alternating-block surrounds and heads formed from three blocks. The north wall of the nave has a simple single-step plinth set a course above that on the west wall, and ending a little to the west of the eastern of the two windows, which are of the same type as those on the south.

The **South Porch** is built of rough-faced stone with ashlar dressings; its outer opening has a trefoiled arch with a broad chamfer and a hoodmould continued as a string around the outer angles of the porch, above which chamfered and stepped corbels carry a boldly-oversailing gable coping, topped by a cross finial. The side walls each have small square-headed windows with stop-chamfered jambs, which look like later insertions, and low buttresses at their south ends.

The **North Transept** is built of close-jointed squared stone, the courses being rather taller than those in the nave, although with a similar pecked tooling; there is nothing to distinguish quoins or dressings. There is a shallow plinth. The north gable has a triplet of round-headed windows, the central one slightly taller than the others, with monolithic heads and chamfered surrounds, but no hoodmould; the gable above has a coping of interlocked slabs, hollow-chamfered on their lower angle, but no finial. The west wall has a ragged straight joint c 20cm from its south end; the masonry beyond this clearly goes with the nave wall; the interpretation is that the transept pre-dates the last rebuilding of the nave, and that the joint represents the line of the outer face of the previous nave wall (also indicated by the return of west end plinth).

The **Chancel** is built of roughly-squared and coursed stone, with some large squarish blocks in the lower courses; the eastern quoins are roughly shaped blocks, some quite elongate; there is a shallow plinth with a continuous groove just below its chamfer. The roof is of Welsh slate, with three bands of fish-scale slating (the lower two in green slate) on the south. Close to the west end of the south wall, above the chamfer, are the remains of the chamfered jambs of a doorway, three stones of the west jamb but only one of the east – a little above, c 1.2 m above the ground, is an elongate block with a cut-out on its upper surface that looks to have formed the sill of a window, the infill of which remains faintly visible above although the dressed stones of its jambs have been removed. In the centre of the wall is a round-arched window, similar to those in the nave except that it has a monolithic head, and that its dressings, of a rather browner stone, are not tooled-and-margined. Below the window the second course above the plinth is of massive blocks, with a slight set-back above them, giving the impression that the all above this level is a later rebuild.

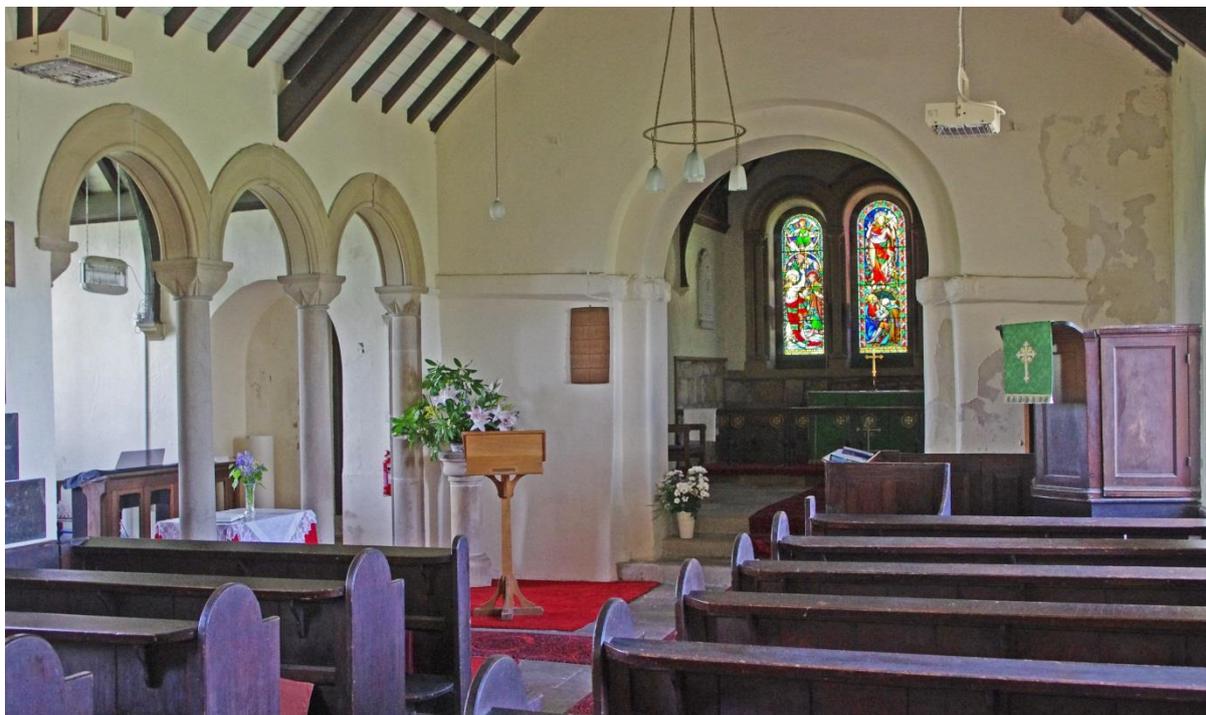
The east end of the chancel has similar large blocks in its lower courses, and a very worn plinth. There is a triplet of round-headed lights, the central one slightly taller, in stepped-and-chamfered surrounds, with a hoodmould chamfered above and below; above in the gable is a

circular window within a moulded label. The gable coping is of ashlar blocks chamfered on their underside, with a finial that has a cross within a foiled circle.

The **Vestry** covers almost all of the north wall of the chancel, and is built of squared and coursed stone with a Welsh slate roof. It is of quite irregular form, with a northward-facing gable that has a pent-roofed outshut (fuel store) on the east, and is overlapped on the west by a pent-roofed porch giving access to a stair down to a vault underlying the vestry. The main gable has a peculiar two-light window with corbelled jambs and a stop-chamfered lintel, and the porch has an outer archway of similar form; the outshut on the east of the vestry has a plain square-headed door at its north end.

The Interior

Inside the **South Porch** the roof has simple collar-rafter pairs and ashlaring to the eaves. The inner doorway has boarded double doors and a lattice-leded fanlight in a semicircular arch with an inner step and outer chamfer, springing from simple moulded impostes above jambs of the same section; there is a hoodmould with a recessed chamfer.



Interior looking north-east

The interior of the church is plastered, except for the lower walls of the sanctuary and the ashlar of the arcade to the transept and rear arches of the eastern triplet of the chancel. The windows, and south doorway, all have plaster beads to their rear arches; the north transept opens to the nave by an arcade of three narrow round-headed arches in an odd hybrid of Romanesque and Classical styles; the slender circular piers and semicircular responds have scalloped capitals, but the arches have architraves of classical section with a roll-moulding and a shallow step. The nave roof is of six bays, having collar-beam trusses with upper king-posts, with stop-chamfers to the collars and posts, and vertical bolts holding the post to the

collar; there are two levels of purlins and an upright-section ridge, and boards carried on the rafters.

In the transept a large round arch near the south end of the east wall is partly occupied by a square-headed doorway into the vestry. The two-bay roof has arch-braced collar beam trusses, with the simply moulded arch braces carried on shaped ashlar corbels; there are upper king posts, one level of purlins and an upright-section ridge.

The vault beneath the vestry, now empty and perhaps never used, is reached by the stone stair entered from the external doorway on the north, and lit by a small window on the east. At its foot the stair opens directly into a chamber 4.90 by 3.06 metres, orientated east-west, with a brick barrel vault of shallow segmental section. The only feature is a projection in the centre of the west wall with what looks like a simple square-headed fireplace, but lacking any flue; it would appear to support a peculiar projection in the north-west corner of the vestry, which, plastered over, lacks any features to explain its function.



The vault, looking west, showing structure of uncertain function

The chancel is entered up three steps under a distorted semicircular chancel arch which appears genuine 12th-century work but is all plastered over, the jambs and arch having one square step towards the nave. There is a much eroded impost band,

carried back along the east wall of the nave (although ending c 0.50 m short of the south wall). There is one further step up to the sanctuary, within which the lower 1.5m of the walls are of exposed masonry, large roughly-squared blocks with a deep tooling of irregular grooves; there is evidence of disturbance in the centre of the east wall, and a smaller disturbed area near the east end of the south wall where there may once have been a piscina. The east windows have shafted internal jambs and moulded rear arches, and the oculus above a moulded surround. The chancel has a three-bay roof with arch-braced collar-beam trusses carried on shaped ashlar corbels, with a board to the eaves decorated with pierced quatrefoils, and panels flanking the upper king-posts that have pierced splay-armed crosses in circles; the roof slopes are painted with gold stars on a blue background.

The 2013 Archaeological Watching Brief

During drainage works in June 2013 the footings of what appeared to be a small tower were uncovered at the south-west corner of the nave. The structure had a two part plinth, a small chamfered step with a taller one above, which was of general 13th century character; it measured 2.78 m east-west by 2.23 m north-south and projected 1.46 m beyond the south and

1.00 m beyond the west walls of the present nave. The plinth on its northern return in fact continues beneath the plinth of the west end of the later medieval nave, whilst that on its eastern return is cut short 0.50 m from the 19th century south wall. The lower member of the plinth remained intact except where cut away on the east; the upper member only remained around the south-west corner. On the south one of the large blocks of the upper member appeared to have been prised out of position, so that it overhung the lower. At the north-west corner, and in the centre of the east return, were blocks with faces that rose vertically above the lower chamber, interpreted as remains of later buttresses coeval with the rebuilding of the nave.

Further details of the watching brief are to be found in a separate report.



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Structural History

The site of Bolton Chapel – on top of a small hill within the sub-circular churchyard – is enough to suggest an ‘early’ site and the discovery of an ‘ancient British burial cist

containing an urn' on the north side of the churchyard c1855³ suggests pre-Christian origins. A dowsed survey in 1995 identified what was claimed to be a Saxon church beneath the present structure⁴ with a short nave and a segmental apse cut across by the present chancel arch; this may not justify much credence, as the survey failed to identify the substantial sub-surface remains of the south-west tower seen in 2013.

The earliest part of the present building is the chancel arch, which may be of mid-12th century date; it is possible that the lower parts of the chancel walls could be contemporary. The plinth of the small tower at the south-west corner of the nave seen in 2013 looks to be of 13th century character; it looks to have been destroyed down to ground level before the west wall of the nave was rebuilt at some time in the later medieval period. The upper parts of the chancel walls also look to be a late medieval or perhaps post-medieval rebuild.

It would appear that by the early 19th century the chapel retained few medieval features other than its chancel arch. Wilson writes 'kept in repair by village masons and joiners, all the old features of the ancient church had been replaced with meaningless blanks, or renewed with those of a village cottage type, long before the days of the present generation'⁵. One illustration of the pre-restoration chapel has been traced, dated 1836⁶, showing the building seen from the south; both ends are hidden by trees, but there is a large square-headed two-light window under a label near the east end of the nave, and a plainer window at the west end of the chancel. The 1847 tithe map⁷ shows the building as a simple rectangle. The chapel is recorded as being 'rebuilt' in 1852⁸ which presumably relates to the rebuilding of the nave; structural evidence shows that the north transept pre-dates the nave rebuilding so that presumably dates to the late 1840s. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6":1 mile map shows the church with nave, transept and chancel; the south porch and vestry seem to have been added in 1869, when the chancel was 'restored' by Matthew Burrell, vicar of Chatton⁹. A small boiler room, now removed, was built in the external angle between transept and nave. There do not seem to have been any major structural changes since this date; panelling was removed from the interior in 1962¹⁰.



1836 drawing

³ Church guide leaflet, n.d., available 2013

⁴ Northumberland County Archives, Woodhorn, ref E)P114/83/3/2 'Report and plans regarding dowsed survey of Bolton Chapel by H Denis Briggs'.

⁵ Wilson, F.R. (1870) An Architectural Survey of The Churches in the Archdeaconry of Lindisfarne

⁶ Northumberland County Archives, Woodhorn, ref SANTY/BEQ/15/3, p.13

⁷ Northumberland County Archives, Woodhorn, ref DT57M.

⁸ Whellan's Directory of Northumberland (1855), 642

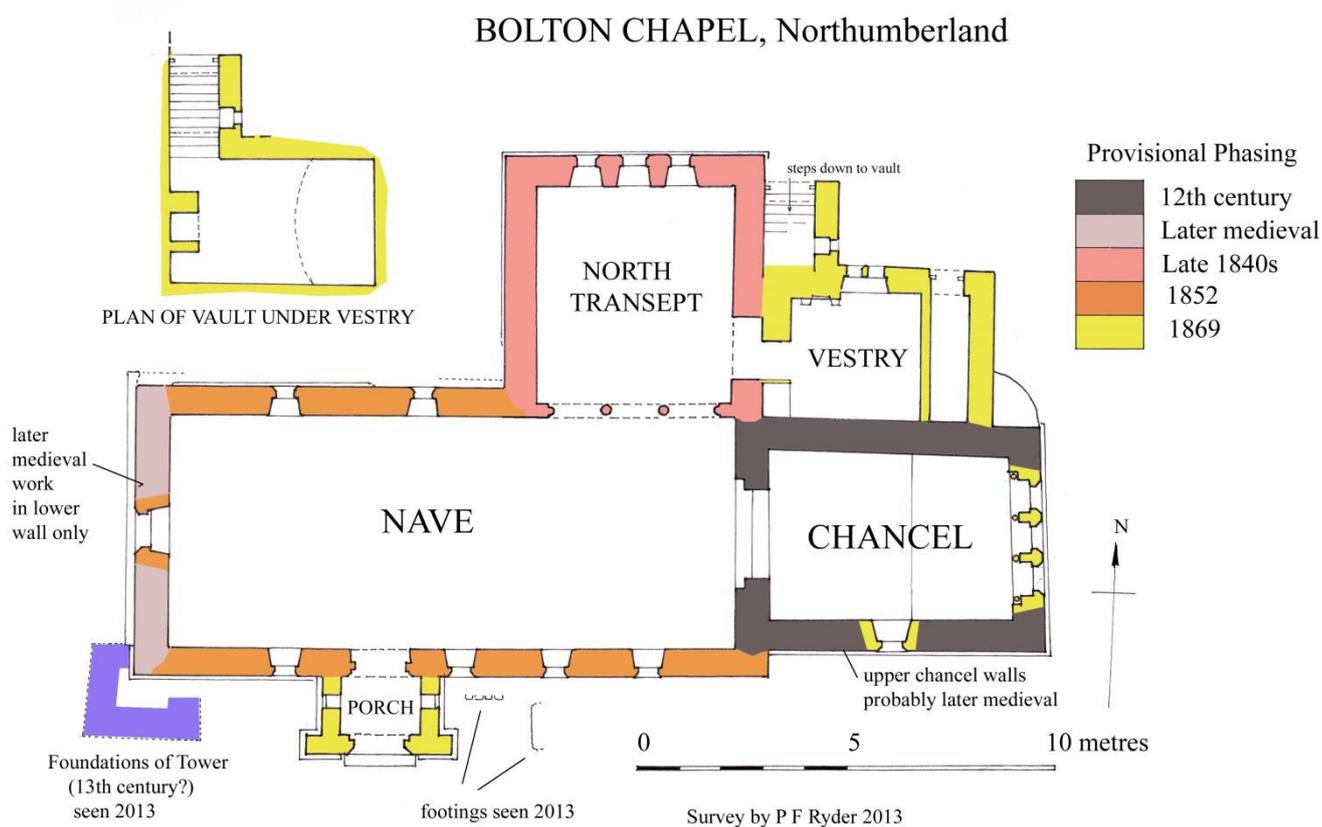
⁹ Kelly's Directory of Northumberland (1897), 115, and also Wilson op.cit

¹⁰ Northumberland County Archives, Woodhorn. No faculties appear to survive from before the mid-20th century.

Archaeological Assessment

As in many old churches, there remain two areas of uncertain archaeological potential - the sub-floor deposits (which will have been disturbed to some extent by the creation of an underfloor heating system, evidence of which remains in a grille in the transept floor) and the above-ground fabric. Although much of the latter is of 19th century date (apart from the chancel) this does not mean it is without interest, both in its potential for the remains of Victorian mural decoration etc and in the possibility of re-used earlier material within the fabric itself¹¹.

Any disturbance of sub-floor deposits or internal wall surfaces will thus clearly necessitate an archaeological watching brief. This disturbance of ground levels outside the building may also require monitoring; the 2013 watching brief showed that there were burials at shallow depth close to the south wall of the nave, hardly surprising given the common history of burying close to a building, and then the reduction of ground levels during Victorian restoration.



¹¹ During the 2013 works a carved stone, probably a small medieval grave cover, was found re-used in the footings of the boiler room.

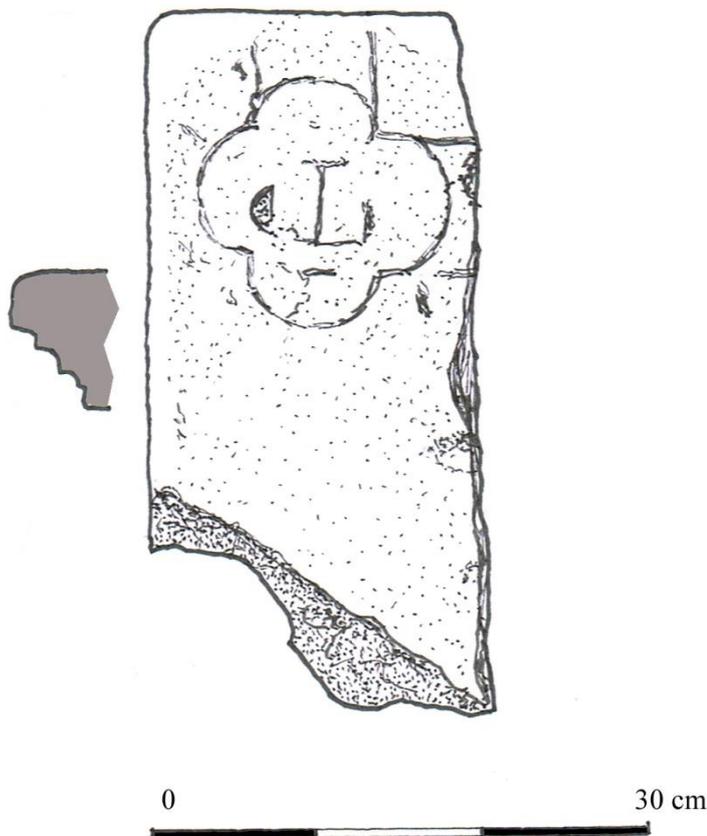
Carved Stone from Bolton Chapel, June 2013

This stone was found re-used in the walls of a small boiler room set in the angle between the nave and north transept of the chapel. It is a slab of buff sandstone, overall 420 by 220mm and c 90mm thick. Its two worked edges, here taken as the top and l. side, are set at approximately right angles, and are slightly rounded; the other two sides are fractures. The incised design consists of a quatrefoil, perhaps set at the centre of a straight-armed cross, although only the r. and upper arms are shown; in the centre of the quatrefoil is an incised motif rather like a capital 'L', with other sinkings below and to the l.

The stone is probably a small grave slab, possibly unfinished, although it is difficult to find any real parallels. Taken on its own, the design looks like one corner of a larger slab that had a border (perhaps with an inscription and a quatrefoil panel at the corner, but it is difficult to relate such a scheme to the shape of the stone, with the 'lower' half of its face devoid of any carving; just possibly it might be a small portion of a much larger monument. It is difficult to suggest a date, other than to say that quatrefoils were a popular motif, ie in window tracery, in the late 13th and 14th centuries.

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Stone from Bolton Chapel June 2013



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