

St John the Baptist
Edlingham
Northumberland
An Archaeological Assessment
March 2016

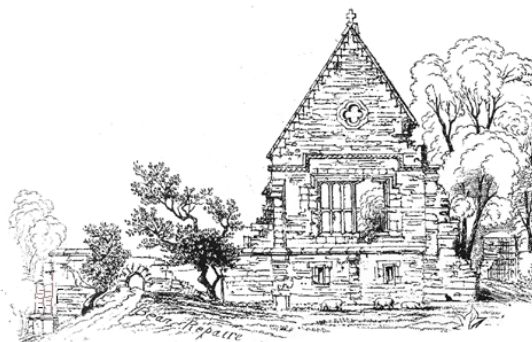


The church from the south-west.

PETER F RYDER
B.A., M.Phil, F.S.A
HISTORIC BUILDINGS CONSULTANT

**1 Ford Terrace
Broomhaugh
RIDING MILL
Northumberland
NE44 6EJ**

**Tel (01434) 682644
E mail: PFRyder@broomlee.org**



St John the Baptist, Edlingham

Edlingham lies 8 km south-west of Alnwick, in the valley of the Edlingham Burn, which flows north to join the Aln near Bolton. The church ((NU 114092) lies at the lower end of the single street of the village, about 200 m south-west of the ruined Edlingham Castle, home of the Felton and later Swinburne families. The church consists of a nave with a west tower, a four-bay north aisle (with a vestry at its west end), a south porch, and an aisleless chancel.

Description

The church is built of squared and coursed stone of a variety of types; the low-pitched roofs of nave and chancel re of metal, and the others of Welsh slate.

The Exterior

The **West Tower** is constructed of coursed squared sandstone in various shades of grey, pink and yellow; at the foot of the wall is a bold plinth, consisting of here stepped-and-chamfered courses, with a string-course, chamfered above and below, directly above; on the west the southernmost block of the course above the plinth bears an Ordnance Survey benchmark. The tower is otherwise a severely plain piece of architecture, and rises in two stages, divided only by a simple set-back around a metre below the eaves. The only window of the lower stage is a small and narrow lancet, with an external square rebate, set well above the ground. The first floor has larger square-headed windows, in a simple chamfered surrounds, on south, west



and north. The belfry, above the set-back, has smaller but similar openings in the same three sides – that on the west is set a little to the north of the line of the first-floor window below. On the east an earlier gable, outlined by a raised roof-tabling, is incorporated in the tower, its apex rising a little above the set-back; the only opening is the rear arch of the oculus visible internally (now blocked), and this is quite remarkable, a megalithic block around 1 m square with a circular opening c 0.50 m across cut into it. The tower is topped by a low-pitched pyramidal roof.

The tower from the west



Location Map

from Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Explorer sheet 332
OS map licence 100045703

The **Nave** is built of coursed roughly squared stone. At the base of the south-west quoin are two megalithic blocks, but the quoins above are shallower, although some are up to 2 m long, and might be re-used grave slabs; this section of walling is of very similar fabric to the tower, and may be of the same build. A couple of courses of large blocks run the length of the south wall of the nave, stopping short of the south-eastern quoins which are mostly normal walling stones, but at their base is a broad chamfered plinth, which abruptly ends to the west; has it been cut away? The plinth returns to the north along the east wall of the nave, and appears to be overbuilt by the south wall of the chancel. The wall is topped by a simple chamfered coping. The south porch projects from the south wall, west-of-centre; west of the porch is square-headed chamfered opening, now containing a c1900 timber window of two trefoil-headed lights. Above and a little to the east of the ridge of the porch is a small rectangular light, with chamfered jambs but a plain square lintel (with a socket for a central bar), now holding a small timber trefoil-headed light. East of the porch is a tall rectangular window with horizontally-tooled dressings of 18th-century character, again holding a c1900 timber window; directly above it is a blocked square-headed opening with a chamfered lintel and jambs that look to have been roughly hacked back. Near the east end of the wall is a large window with a two-centred arch, of two orders, the inner chamfered and the outer with a concave chamfer, under a slender casement-moulded hood; this all appears medieval, and it probably once contained tracery; it now holds 20th-century leaded glazing. At the north-west corner of the nave some substantial quoins are visible above the vestry roof; at the north-east corner two or three megalithic quoins survive low down, above which the wall seems to have been refaced; just within the lowermost quoin is a squared block c 0.40 m square projecting c 0.15 m from the wall face, its significance now obscure.



The Nave from the south

The **North Aisle** is built of roughly-squared and roughly-coursed stone, heavily pointed in parts. Its west end is largely covered by the later vestry, above the roof of which it is evident that the pitched of the aisle roof has been increased at some time. The north wall has been at least partly rebuilt. About a metre from the west end is a full-height straight joint; some distance beyond is the north door, of segmental-pointed form

with a continuous chamfer; it is blocked, the blocking being set c 0.20 m back, just inside its internal rebate. About 2 m east of the door is an area of patching, distinguished by more recent tooling. The final 2 m or so of wall have a chamfered plinth, which extends around a low buttress at the east end of the wall, and continues along the east wall, which has a square-headed window with horizontally-tooled dressings of 18th-century character.

The Vestry, set in the angle between the north aisle and the tower, is built of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone, except for some larger blocks at the south end of the its west wall, where it looks as if some walling from an earlier structure may survive. In the west wall is a square window, without cut dressings, holding a timber quatrefoil frame, and topping the north-west corner is a low chimney stack.

The **South Porch** is built of roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone, and has a bold chamfered plinth; the archway on the south is semicircular and of one square order, with imposts chamfered above and beneath an a slightly dropped keystone; above is an almost-square window, all but its sill cut from a single block, with a chamfer to jambs and head; on either side are small corbels (perhaps re-used voussoirs) with human heads, very worn. One of the south-western quoins, in the second course above the plinth, projects southwards to form a shelf c 0.30 m square, with a central iron insert; it is not clear what it supported.

The **Chancel** is constructed of coursed squared stone – with some quite large blocks – without any plinth of buttresses. Midway along the south wall is a window with a segmental-pointed head and a raised tooled surround of 18th-century character; below it are the jambs of a former priest's door, with some upright blocks making it look like an insertion. In the east wall the only opening is a large neo-Norman window of 1864, with dressings of brown ashlar, a single round-arched light with a chamfered inner order and an outer of chevron over a roll, carried on jamb shafts with volute capitals, moulded shaft rings and bases; the hoodmould is chamfered above and below and has cruciform disc stops. The north wall is quite featureless; there is a possible disturbed area in the lower courses midway along, and, only c 0.15 m from the west end, an apparently straight joint between c 1.8 and 3 m above ground level.

The Interior

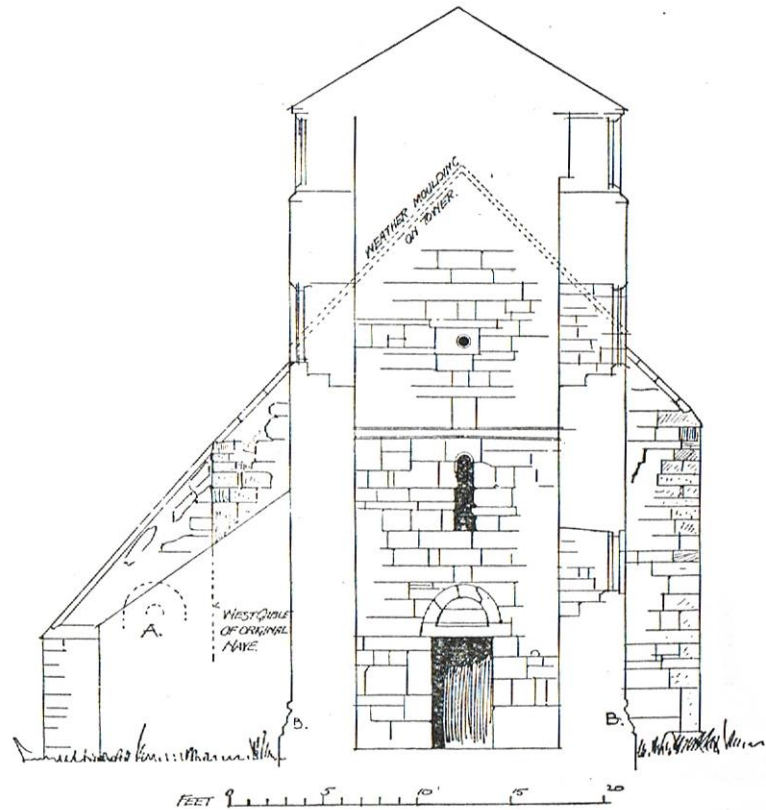
Inside the South Porch are old stone benches, chamfered on their lower edges, carried on rough stone supports at their ends and centres; the walls above rise to a string course, chamfered above and below, above which is a stone barrel vault, with large squared blocks at the sides and narrow slabs towards the apex.

The south doorway has a semicircular arch with a roll moulding between two hollows, under a hood with two lines of billet; the impost band and jamb shaft capitals are all so worn as to make their original form difficult to discern. Inside the doorway, and slightly off-centre to the west, is a 17th century opening with a chamfered surround, flat-pointed heads and sunk spandrels. The threshold of the door is formed by a medieval cross slab ¹ (Ryder 2003, 125, 1) with an incised sword flanked by a sword on the r. and a pair of scissors on the l.

The Interior of the main body of the church is plastered and whitewashed, except for exposed dressings, which include those of several fragmentary openings in the south walls of nave and chancel, which have been obscured by patching and refacing externally.

¹ Ryder, P.F. (2003) Cross Slab Grave Covers in North Northumberland. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th ser.XXXII, 125

The interior of the **West Tower** has walls of exposed stone, and a modern concrete floor. The east wall, the west face of the original gable end of the nave, is of coursed roughly squared blocks, quite large, and markedly different in character to the south wall. The opening into the nave, on the east of the ground floor, I was originally the external west door of the church. It has a simple square-headed opening, with some very large squared blocks in its jambs, with a slightly-recessed semicircular arch and plain tympanum above the lintel. Towards the nave the jambs have a deep rebate, with old hinge pins on the north and a deep drawbar tunnel on the south (and a shallower socket on the north); the internal head is formed by heavy lintels, and there are more massive square blocks in the inner jambs. Above the doorway is the original west window; its external opening has been somewhat mutilated, but has its heads cut is a single block, curved on both intrados and extrados; its sill has been cut away with a large and irregular socket below, with remains of another at the same level at the south end of the wall, and a shallower socket below, close to the south end of the wall and just below the level of the doorway head. On the opposite face of the wall the semicircular rear arch is partly concealed by the western tie beam of the nave roof.



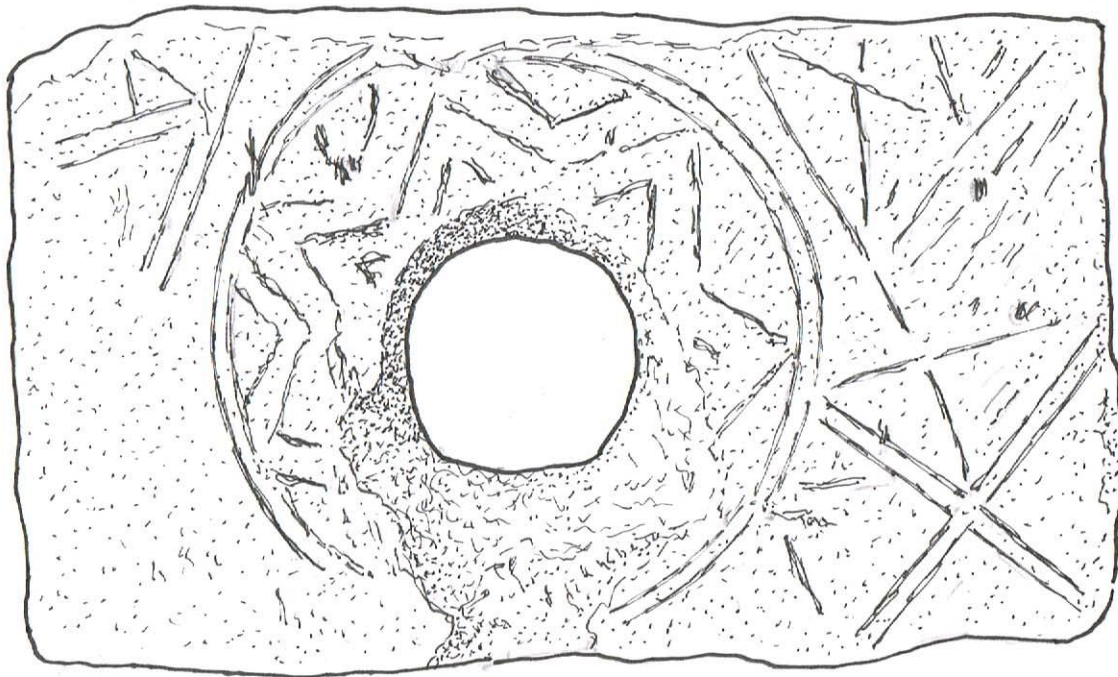
External elevation of original west end (after Knowles)

On the south of the ground floor of the tower the lancet window has a broad internal splay with well-cut diagonally-tooled blocks in its sides, stepped sills and a series of well-squared stone lintels – the windows of the second stage are all of this type, whilst those of the former belfry have timber internal lintels. In the west wall of the ground floor is a large and crude socket set centrally, taking a beam, the opposite end of which would have been lodged in the opening of the original nave west window. The north wall has a disturbed area set centrally and c 2 m above the floor, with another at the same level near the west end, and a vertical line of cut-back masonry a little above and to the east.

The only floor in the tower is a modern one, of narrow boards carried on north-south beams; access to the area above is by means of a modern metal ladder and a trapdoor.

The three windows of the second stage of the tower all have internal splays like that of the lancet on the ground floor but on the east here is an interesting small oculus window, in the west gable of the original nave; the oculus, c 150 mm in diameter, is cut in the centre of a rectangular slab c 730 mm long by 430 mm high, the surface of which bears incised patterns, a double concentric circle around the oculus enclosing chevron patterns, and outside this a series of saltire crosses, a motif seen again in early Norman work at Bolam and Hartburn.

St John the Baptist, Edlingham
 Oculus window in west gable of original nave



0 30 cm

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An internal set-back marks the base of the former belfry; any floor, and its bell frames, have been removed (apart from two old beams set east west, one flush with the south jamb of the western belfry opening, and the other close to the south wall); otherwise the upper part of the tower is open right up to the low pyramidal roof, the supporting structure of which is of relatively modern sawn softwood. The internal sills of the belfry openings cut down a course below the set back, and a series of rectangular sockets in the walls must relate to the former bell frames; there are sockets just below the eaves at each end of the north, west and south walls, and an additional pair of large irregular sockets beneath those on the north, directly above the set-back. Two of the large blocks in the internal jambs of the western belfry opening have incised chevron patterns on their faces flush with the main wall; it seems likely that these have been re-used from some earlier context. The east wall does not have any set-back, but has sockets just below eaves level at each end and also in the centre (where there is no corresponding socket on the west)

Inside the **Nave** there are three full-width stone steps descending eastward, two very close the west wall, and the third in line with the western side of the westernmost pier of the north arcade.

On the south of the nave, the south door has a plain square-headed rear arch, and a drawbar tunnel in the east jamb. The window to the west of the door has a very broad internal splay and an elongate lintel; 0.30 m to

the east of its east jamb is the internal east jamb of an earlier window, which seems to have had a double-shouldered head. The high-level window above the south porch seems to have internal s-plays quite like those of that further west; however the larger window east of the porch is plastered round, and so presumably did not have internal cut stonework. The larger window beyond has a segmental-pointed rear arch, with a hollow chamfer, and the remains of a predecessor immediately to the west, the upper part of a west jamb and one block, curved on both intrados and extrados, of what seems to have been a semicircular rear arch. At the east end of the wall, above the pulpit, are the remains of what looks like a blocked doorway (presumably associated with the rood loft) with a shouldered head and lintel c 4 m above the floor.

Beneath the sill of the larger pointed window is a medieval tomb recess with a chamfered segmental arch; over it, and directly under the window sill, is a stone shield with a relief carving of two lions, the arms of Felton.

On the north of the nave is a four-bay arcade with circular piers, semicircular responds and round arches, with detail consistent throughout its length. The piers and responds have squared chamfered plinths and 'holdwater' bases with a line of nailhead ornament; the piers have capitals with vertical lines of nailhead simulating scalloping, and grooved and moulded abaci; the arches are of two orders, the inner with a narrow chamfer, the outer square. There is no hoodmould.

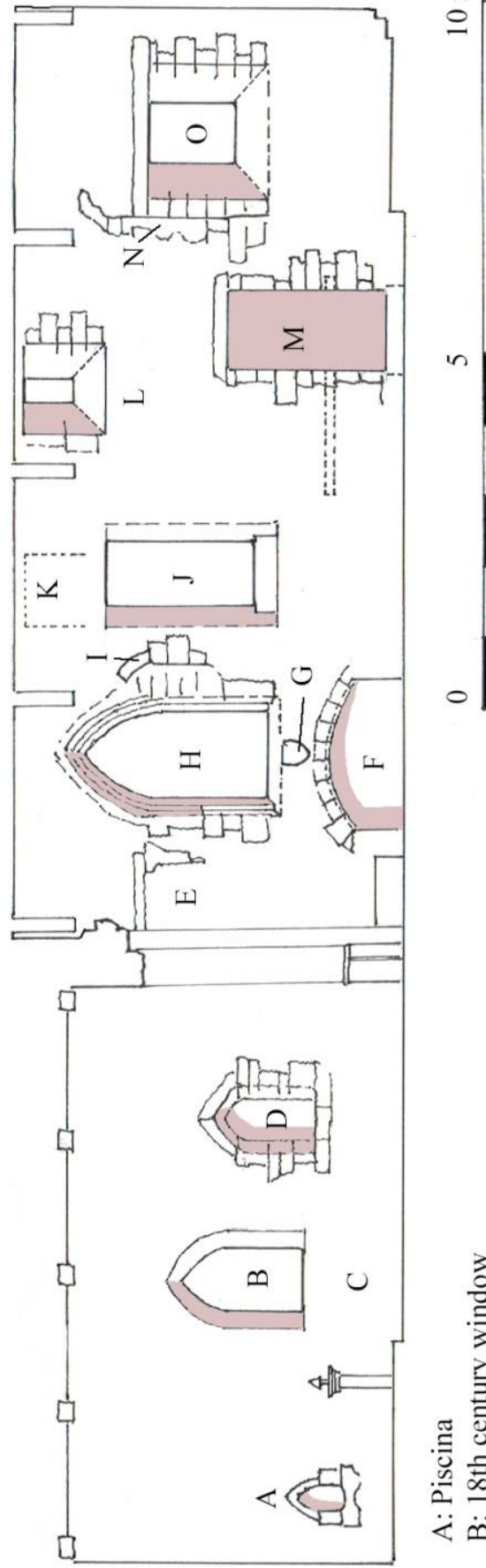


The Nave looking north-east

Inside the **North Aisle** there are two steps up to a doorway in the west wall giving access to the vestry; above its timber lintel is the rear arch of a round-headed window, parts of the jambs of which survive on either side of the door. The north wall of the aisle is featureless except for a rough internal plinth of exposed stone; towards the east plaster has been removed from parts of the wall above, exposing roughly-coursed and roughly-squared stone with modern ribbon pointing. At the east end of the aisle there is a string course chamfered above and below immediately below the level sill of the window.

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, EDLINGHAM
 SKETCH ELEVATION OF INTERNAL SOUTH ELEVATION

P F Ryder 11 3 2016



A: Piscina

B: 18th century window

C: Site of priest's door (jambs visible externally)

D: Blocked 14th century window

E: Rood loft door?

F: 13th century tomb recess

G: Arms of Felton

H: 14th century window

I: Remains 11th century window

J: 18th century window

K: Blocked window visible externally

L: High level window, post-medieval

M: South doorway (16/17th century)

N: Remains of 14th century window

O: Post-medieval window

Inside the **Vestry** the only feature is a fireplace, now blocked, set diagonally at the north-west corner, under a simple stone mantelpiece with rounded corners. The walls are plastered, obscuring potentially significant detail of the lower part of the nave north-west quoin.

In the east wall of the nave the arch into the **Chancel** is a semicircular one of two square orders, with a hoodmould chamfered beneath; it springs from an impost band chamfered above and below, below which the jambs follow the same section as the arch; on the north there are remains of a mutilated chamfered base course. The arch is partially closed by a wall c 0.80 m high (now capped by boarding) with a central opening that has chamfered and rebated jambs. Above the arch is a rough set-back a little below the ceiling. Towards the chancel the arch is of a single square order and the imposts are cut back flush with the wall.

In the western part of the south wall of the chancel is a recess formed by a blocked window, with splayed jambs and a roughly-triangular head. Further east the present window has its surround plastered and whitewashed; near the east end of the wall is a piscina with a simply moulded plain two-centred arch and a bowl, its front edge broken away flush with the wall, with an open drain. The neo-Romanesque east window has a keeled roll moulding to its internal arch, and shafted jambs like those on the exterior.

The north wall of the chancel is quite featureless.

The **roofs** of the nave is of 1902 and is of four bays, with cambered tie-beams against the end walls as well; they have solid knee braces, and carry the ridge and one level of purlins of a very low-pitched roof. The aisle roof is a little earlier.

The chancel roof, also of four bays, is older, and perhaps of the 17th or early 18th century, but of similar low-pitched form. Two of its tie-beams rest on simple quadrant-section corbels on the north wall.

Historical Notes

Edlingham (as 'Eadulfingham') was given to St Cuthbert in 737 by King Ceolwulf, who resigned his kingship to become a monk on Lindisfarne. It is not clear whether a church was built at this time; one here was consecrated by Bishop Ecgfred (831-847); these references, together with the discovery of early sculpture, indicate that there was a church of some significance here at an early date. At the time of the Conquest Edlingham was one of the holdings of the powerful Gospatric family; in 1130 it was granted to Tynemouth Priory but in 1174 transferred to Durham Cathedral Priory. In the medieval period the church was used as a burial place for the Felton family, lords of the adjacent Castle. The medieval building almost certainly suffered in the Anglo-Scottish wars; damage to the tithe was recorded in 1402 when the Earl of Douglas raided Northumberland. Continuing vicissitudes in the early post-medieval period are attested by various evidences in the fabric.

Structural Development

The overall picture of the development of the church has been recognised for a long time, and an excellent structural account is provided in the Northumberland County History 7 (1904) 150-156²; however a number of questions remain unanswered, in particular the important one of the date of the earliest phase of the building.

² This is largely taken from an article by W.H.Knowles, 'The Church of St John the Baptist, Edlingham, Northumberland' in the *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland* V (1907) 37 et seq.

There is no question that there was a Pre-Conquest church, and perhaps an important one, on or near the site. The early documentary references have already been quoted and an important piece of mid-8th century sculpture, part of a cross shaft, was found in 1901 near a spring in the Glebe Field about 500 yards from the church.³ Two cross bases that lie outside the south porch are also probably Pre-Conquest, whilst a grave cover found in 1977 in a field east of the church⁴ has similarities to examples from early monastic sites such as Hoddum and Jedburgh.

This earliest work is represented by the walls of the nave, although these have been largely rebuilt except for the west gable, the survival of which may be in part due to its being incorporated in the later tower. The fabric of this phase is of large roughly-squared and roughly-coursed blocks, with megalithic quoins and dressings to its architectural features. The original quoins can only be seen to survive at the base of the south-west and north-east corners of the nave; at the north-west they may be hidden by plaster inside the vestry, and the south-east corner seems to have been rebuilt in the 12th century to judge from its chamfered plinth, perhaps when the chancel arch was constructed. The surviving features are the original west door, the window above and the oculus in the original west gable, all indicative of a building of some status and characterised by the use of megalithic blocks; the huge one through which internal opening of the oculus is pierced is particularly impressive. Some features of these openings – the use of megalithic fabric, the jambs of the doorway being set square to the wall rather than splayed, the way its arch is made up of four blocks neatly curved on intrados and extrados rather than the usual wedge-shaped voussoirs – are all Pre-Conquest in character, but the presence of a tympanum, and the incised ornament on the outer face of the oculus, are more reminiscent of early Norman work. So what is their date? Some of the older workers saw this as the west end of the church consecrated by Egred c840 but more recent opinion puts it as c1050 or simply ‘11th century’⁵.

More clearly Norman work is seen in the south door, chancel arch and north aisle. The door and arch are perhaps of mid-12th century date and the arcade, with its early use of nailhead ornament, perhaps around 1190-1200. The west tower could be of the same date, or a little later; it is usually ascribed, tentatively, to the 13th century, but has little in the way of datable architectural features other than the one small lancet window and perhaps its plinth. Its overall appearance, a very simple structure with small windows, usually leads to it being described as a defensible feature, but unlike some other Northumberland towers it shows no sign of being a defensive retreat in its own right as its only access, the original west door to the church, can only be barred from inside the church⁶. The absence of conventional belfry openings may reflect the fact that a belfry stage has been removed; the present low pyramidal cap is relatively recent.

The tower may have been added after the church had suffered serious damage, as the south-west angle of the nave looks to have been rebuilt, above its lowest course, in very similar fabric, except that several very elongate blocks are included which could well be re-used grave slabs.

³ Described in Cramp R (1984) *British Academy Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture* Vol. 1 170-171. It is now in the Great North Museum, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

⁴ Ryder, P.F. (2003) Cross Slab Grave Covers in North Northumberland. *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5th ser. XXXII, 98-9, 125

⁵ H.M and J Taylor's *Anglo Saxon Architecture* (1965, 717-8) is disappointing; they include the church in a list of ones for which the found Anglo-Saxon claims unconvincing, but from their description do not even seem to have been inside the building, making no mention of the features in the west wall..

⁶ Which has led to suggestions that it was used as a prison for ‘moss troopers’; the drawbar tunnel may simply be a feature of the original doorway.

The tomb recess in the nave of the church has been linked to the request in the will of William de Felton II to be buried in the church; his arms remain above it, although his monument has long gone. The window above the recess, now stripped of its tracery⁷, is probably of the same date. A blocked window and piscina in the chancel may also be 14th century work, but there has been so much re-facing and rebuilding here that it is difficult to say much about the fabric. The north wall of the north aisle has clearly been largely rebuilt as well – the original chamfered plinth only survives at the east end, and there is a full-height straight joint in line with the east face of the west end wall.; the only old feature in between, the north door, could be of the 14th century.

All this patching and rebuilding points to one or more phases of serious structural damage during the Anglo-Scottish wars, or in early post-medieval times of lawlessness. Some features seem to relate to the latter period; the present south door, set within the larger 12th-century opening, looks of late 16th/17th century character, and is still provided with a long drawbar tunnel. There are two windows – one still intact and one blocked – set very high in the south wall of the nave, perhaps for defensive purposes (were the larger windows blocked at this stage?). The low ‘screen’ across the chancel arch seems to be a remnant of a blocking wall, with a central doorway; was there a period when the nave lay roofless and only the chancel was in use? The porch may also be of early post-medieval date, although some authorities have seen it as 12th century; the dropped keystone to its outer arch certainly looks post-medieval, and the degree of weathering of the 12th century south doorway seems to imply that it was long exposed to the weather.

By the 18th century needs for security had lessened and the church would appear to have been in conventional use once more, with larger windows, with sashes, being inserted in the south walls of nave and chancel, and at the east end of the north aisle. The nave roof is thought to have been renewed c 1781 A vestry was built onto the west end of the aisle⁸ and the still rather jarring neo-Romanesque east window is an insertion of 1864⁹; apart from this the church escaped ‘restoration’ until 1902 when A.B.Plummer, the diocesan architect was involved. He lowered the floors to their original levels, except at the west end of the nave where a step was introduced to avoid disturbing burial vaults close to the west wall¹⁰. His substitution of wooden tracery (now weathered) for the sashes in various windows and new nave roof were quite fitting to the building, and he removed relatively little in the way of historic features, although the fireplace in the south-west corner of the chancel was too much even for Edwardian tastes. A heating chamber on the north of the chancel was planned, but never constructed through lack of funds.

Further restoration work has been carried out during the 20th century, during which the remains of earlier openings in the internal face of the south wall of the nave have been cleared of plaster and exposed to view.

Archaeological Assessment

Edlingham is clearly a church of some considerable importance, there was a significant Pre-Conquest church here, and possibly even a monastery, although whether they stood exactly on the present site is not clear; early sculpture has been found in the fields nearby.

Structural remains and deposits of archaeological importance almost certainly survive beneath the present floor, which in their present state appear fairly recent. Although there is a partly infilled north-south channel in the floor in front of the chancel arch there seems to be no other evidence that there was ever an underfloor

⁷ Perhaps when it was deliberately blocked up as a defensive measure?

⁸ ‘later than 1726’ Hodgson (1904) 155

⁹ Inserted by the vicar as a memorial to his son who died at sea on the SS Nemesis, perhaps an unwise choice of name for a vessel.

¹⁰ Notes by Plummer are appended to Knowles’ 1907 article.

heating system. Clearly there will have been many generations of burial within the building, and we know from Plummer's notes that there are vaults under at least the western section of the nave. Any works entailing disturbance of floor levels inside the building will clearly require archaeological monitoring.

The internal wall faces are generally plastered; it is not clear whether this was stripped and renewed at the time of the early-20th century restoration; if not, it is possible that earlier plasters, and perhaps remains of medieval or post-medieval mural decoration, may survive, and even if they do not, the present plaster may conceal structural features of significance.

The only detailed plans and drawings of the church available date from c1900, and although reasonable for their time are not up to modern standards. In view of the importance of the early fabric in the west wall, it is desirable that good-quality elevation drawings, or rectified photographs, are prepared of the internal elevations of the tower, and west end of the nave, including the tower wall above the nave roof, which merits close examination but can only be accessed from the roof.

Peter F Ryder March 2016



The east side of the tower, showing the roof tabling of the early gable and the internal face of the oculus

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, EDLINGHAM



Plan after W H Knowles 1901, amended PFR 2016