

FORD

ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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South-east view (compare old painting p8)

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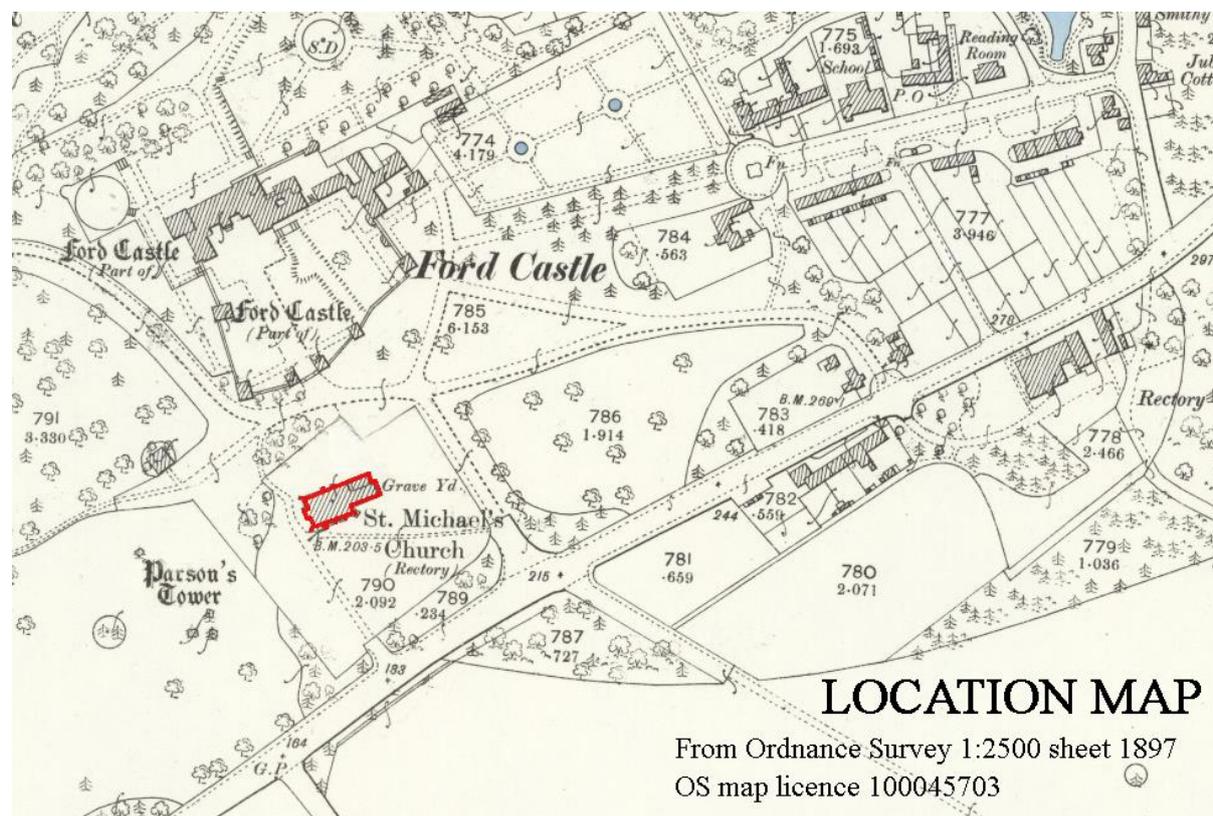
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FORD, ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

Ford parish church (NGR NT 9446 3740) lies towards the north side of a large narrow rectangular churchyard, immediately to the south of Ford Castle, and at the west end of the village, on a site commanding extensive views to the west and south-west, towards the Cheviots; in the field to the west of the churchyard are the ruins of the medieval Vicar's Pele.



Description

The church consists of a three-bay aisled nave with a south porch, and an elongate chancel with a north vestry.

The church is constructed of coursed squared or roughly-squared stone of a variety of types and colours, with a roof of blue fish-scale slates. Chamfered plinths run all round the church, stepped up several times as the ground rises to the east.

The west end of the **Nave** has a massive projecting bellcote, which is the most distinctive features of the church; it is enclosed by the plinth and appears of one build with the wall, and is built of coursed and squared stone, rising in three stages divided by chamfered set-backs, although the west face of the lowest stage has clearly been partly refaced in more orange roughly-pecked stone..



On either side of the bellcote are shallow buttresses with sloped caps, the northern slightly taller and with a single stepped offset; between it and the bellcote is a lancet window in a chamfered surround, with a monolithic head, the one surviving medieval window in the church; below its sill is another large patch of re-facing. The cap of the bellcote is two-storeyed; the lower stage has a pair of arches to east and west, and single ones to north and south, with chamfered two-centred arches, then there are sloping off-sets on north and south at the base of the narrower upper stage which has a similar but single arch on east and west, below a pyramidal cap. Both storeys of the upper section have roll-moulded angles.

The Bellcote from the north-west

At ground level the only other external walling of the nave is a square projection, which probably represents its south-eastern quoin, in the angle between south aisle and chancel. The plinths of aisle and transept butt up against its lowest block; this block and the four above it look old, although higher up the quoin is Victorian restoration, as is its sloping cap.

Above the chancel roof, the east gable of the nave has a square cooping, chamfered on the underside, and a cross-gabled finial.

At the west end the coursed stonework of the **South Aisle** seems to run through with that of the west wall of the nave (in contradiction of the apparent situation at the east end of the aisle where the aisle is clearly an addition to the nave); the wall has a 19th-century lancet window of the same form as seen throughout the church. Its ashlar dressings show a light diagonal tooling and it has a chamfered surround, alternating blocks to its jambs and a casement-moulded hood with

head stops¹, outside which is an arch of roughly-shaped outer voussoirs, a typically Victorian feature. Below the window the broad steep plinth of the west end changes to a smaller one, which is continued round the low but massive diagonal buttress at the south-west corner of the aisle; this buttress appears to be undisturbed medieval work².

The south wall of the aisle consists of three broad bays, with the south porch projecting from the centre of the western, articulated by buttresses with sloped tops a little below the eaves. East of the porch there is a two-step chamfered plinth, and each bay has two lancet windows, those in the western set on either side of the porch; there is a moulded string running beneath their sills, and a moulded eaves cornice. Below the string much of the walling looks old, although the western buttress and plinth around it seem all Victorian. At the south-east corner of the aisle is another big diagonal buttress, again genuinely medieval, with in its uppermost stage a vertical pair of trefoil-headed image niches, beneath a gabled top. The east wall of the aisle has a course of big square blocks immediately above the plinth, and a 19th century pair of lancet windows, which have linked hoods and foliage stops; above them is an odd course of smooth grey elongate blocks, perhaps re-used.

The South Porch is all of 19th century date, and has two steps up to a steeply two-centred outer arch which has continuous mouldings, a wave, a hollow, and a moulded hood with spiral stops, as well as an outer order of roughly-shaped voussoirs. The steep gable above has a coping, hollow-chamfered on its underside, carried on moulded kneelers and rising to a cross-gabled finial. Re-used in the west wall of the porch is a tapering slab of pink sandstone, with roll-moulded edges; it is probably a medieval grave slab.

The **Chancel**, low and long, almost burrows into the hillside, and is surrounded by a deep perimeter drain which exposes the footings below the plinth (which were intended to be below ground level). In places there is a concrete step below them as well. The south wall is built of squared coursed stone, with three or four courses of whiter pecked fabric at the wall top. There is a chamfered plinth, and a moulded 19th-century eaves cornice, The plinth steps down beneath a lancet, broader than usual, set low at the west end of the wall (very much a ‘low side window’ in position. although apparently all 19th century as regards its

¹ These all differ, and it could be they were carved to represent actual personalities.

² Dobson’s pre-1853 plan shows an opening into a ‘porch’ here, of which there is no visible evidence in the stonework.

fabric) then there are three lancets of the usual sort higher in the wall, and close to the east end of the wall and set higher still a small trefoiled lancet, without any hoodmould, seemingly in more recent stone. Much of the wall above the plinth is probably a 19th-century rebuild; below the plinth, between the first and second of the mid-height lancets there is a length of straight joint, possibly a remnant of a priest's door, and further east an area of projecting coursed large rubble, of quite different character to the lower wall face further west and possibly indicating an extension.

The chamfered plinth rounds the south-east corner of the chancel and then seems to die into the wall, which looks largely rebuilt. The east window is of three trefoil-headed lights with two quatrefoils and a smaller trefoil in the arched head, under a moulded hood with angel stops. The gable has a coping, chamfered on its underside, rising from moulded kneelers, and a finial like that of the nave east gable. At the north-east corner of the chancel is a low buttress-like feature, projecting to the north; one big block on its east face has several incised lines, and might be part of a medieval cross slab.

The greater part of the north wall of the chancel is concealed by the vestry. To the east of this is a short length of wall, of which the lower part looks old but the top six courses, of squared blocks with a pecked finish, are 19th century, as is a narrow trefoil-headed window like that opposite in the south wall. In the short length of wall west of the vestry there seem to be no old features

The **Vestry** has a pent roof, and is built of coursed roughly-tooled stone, with tooled-and-margined alternating quoins. There is a square-headed chamfered doorway set east-of-centre in the north wall, and a single broad lancet in the east wall, with square-flower stops to its moulded hood.

The **North Aisle** is all of 1853 and is of roughly-coursed squared stone, of a variety of colours (suggesting that old material was re-used) with tooled ashlar quoins and dressings. Its features largely copy those of the south aisle; there is a chamfered plinth, a moulded string, and stepped buttresses articulating the wall into three broad bays, each of which has a pair of lancet windows, and there is a big diagonal buttress at the north-west corner. The pair of lancets in the east end and the single one in the west follow those in the south aisle in their detail.

Interior

The **South Porch** has a simple roof with one level of purlins, a ridge, and ashlar eaves. The inner doorway is quite similar to the outer, with a moulded two-centred arch under a label with spiral stops.

The interior of the main body of the church is plastered, except for the west wall of the nave, and exposed ashlar dressings.

The west wall of the **Nave** is built of coursed squared stone, with some very large and almost square blocks quite high up. The lancet window has a trefoiled rear arch, and immediately to the south of it an irregular column of horizontally-

tooled blocks (probably infilling a former flue) ascends the wall. There are various disturbed areas and indications of former features, including a row of sockets for a gallery, at about the level of the rear arch of the lancet, and higher up the line of a low-pitched roof.



West end of nave

The principal medieval feature of the interior is the south arcade, of three broad arches, of rather irregular spans³ The arches are pointed, and each of two-chamfered orders, and the piers circular. The western pier has a ‘holdwater’ moulded base and a capital with two lines of nail-head; the western pier has a simpler and more damaged base, and a simpler capital. The responds are each corbels, with human heads at the base (the eastern obviously Victorian, the western perhaps medieval work that has been retooled) and a line of beading above. The north arcade is a close copy of the south, down to the irregular widths of the arches; the corbels have raised blocks which were perhaps intended to be carved.



Interior of the church looking east

In the aisle and chancel, all the single lancet windows have internal splays of tooled ashlar, and rear arches spanned by a rib chamfered on both lower angles. The paired lancets at the east ends of the aisle have a free-standing shaft on the line of the internal face of the wall; the lancet at the west end of the south aisle has a much larger rear arch, in consequence of its being set in a considerably thicker wall. Close to the east end of the south wall of the south aisle is a

³ From west to east, the pier-to-pier distances are 5.83, 5.33 and 5.57 m

medieval piscina with a trefoiled ogee arch, and a simple projecting bowl that may be Victorian.

Three steps up lead into the **Chancel** , under a richly-moulded two-centred arch carried on responds with triple attached shafts. Within the chancel the low-side window has a broad internal splay and a shouldered arch, but all its stonework looks Victorian; the small windows at the east end of each side wall, clearly inserted to light the reredos of 1892, have asymmetrical internal splays, their west jambs being set square to the wall. Under the southern there is a trefoil-arched recess with a piscina that has a tall trefoil-arched recess and a Romanesque-style bowl carved with fleshy acanthus leaves⁴, and a credence shelf to the west, again both Victorian. On the north the arch in to the Organ Chamber is largely concealed by the organ, and to the east of it is a very Victorian double-shouldered doorway into the vestry. Above the elaborate panelled and pinnaced reredos (1892 by W.S.Hicks) the east window has a tall two-centred rear arch, with a roll moulding.

The interior of the **Vestry**, a later-19th century addition, is boarded round; it has a square-headed fireplace on the south, to the east of the door, and a thin partition wall to the west, with a narrow doorway at its north end, into the Organ Chamber.

The **roofs** of the church are all mid-19th century; that of the nave is of three bays, with collar beam trusses that have cusped arch braces, collars carrying upper king posts, and wall posts rising from ashlar moulded corbels, one level of purlins, a ridge and ashlaring to the eaves; there are simpler intermediate trusses. The chancel roof is of 6 bays, with scissor-braced trusses that again have cusped arch braces.

⁴ This seems out-of-character; might it be a genuine 12th-century item imported from elsewhere?



Pre-1853 painting, in the church (compare with cover photograph)

Structural History

The best account of the history and development is probably that in the Northumberland Country History, Volume 11.⁵

From a distance the church, an important component in Ford's assemblage of historic buildings, looks a predominantly 13th century structure, but, apart from its dramatic western bellcote, the majority of its fabric is the product of 1853, then it was 'over-restored and much altered'⁶ by Newcastle architect John Dobson. Before being too critical of the architect, one should perhaps see the building that he had to deal with; two illustration⁷ show an irregular and much altered structure which had been subject to much post-medieval alteration; a tall Gothic gable with a big window projected from the a south side of the south aisle, virtually all the visible windows were square-headed sashes, and a 'porch' (vestry?) had been tacked onto the west end of the aisle.

⁵ (1922) ed. K.H.Vickers, 358-361. Hereafter referred to as 'NCH'

⁶ Grundy at al (1992), *Northumberland* (Buildings of England series), 282.

⁷ An 1835 sketch reproduced in the Northumberland County History 11 (1922)360 (along with Dobson's pre-restoration plan) and a near-identical view in a watercolour painting of around the same date, a copy of which hangs in the church

The oldest part of the building may be the east end of the nave; its lower south-east quoins survive and pre-date the addition of the aisle, and the narrow chancel arch shown on Dobson's pre-1853 plan is thought in the NCH account to be 'suggestive of an early date', although given that the chancel lay roofless in the post-medieval period it is possible that there was a later partition wall with a doorway. The only medieval features of the church are of 13th century date; as the west wall of nave and south aisle looks of one build it would seem that the early nave was extended to the west before, or when, the aisle was added. The chancel also appears to be of the same date; its elongate plan would suggest this, although all original architectural features have gone except for some of the plinth. The bellcote is probably of 13th century date as well; arguably the best of Northumberland's impressive group of bell-cotes, many of which are in fact probably post-medieval.

Following that we only have a scatter of documentary references (here quoted from the NCH account) that outline a chequered history.

1314 Burned burnt by the Scots

1431 Substantial repairs needed

1598 In decay.

1663 The chancel roofless.

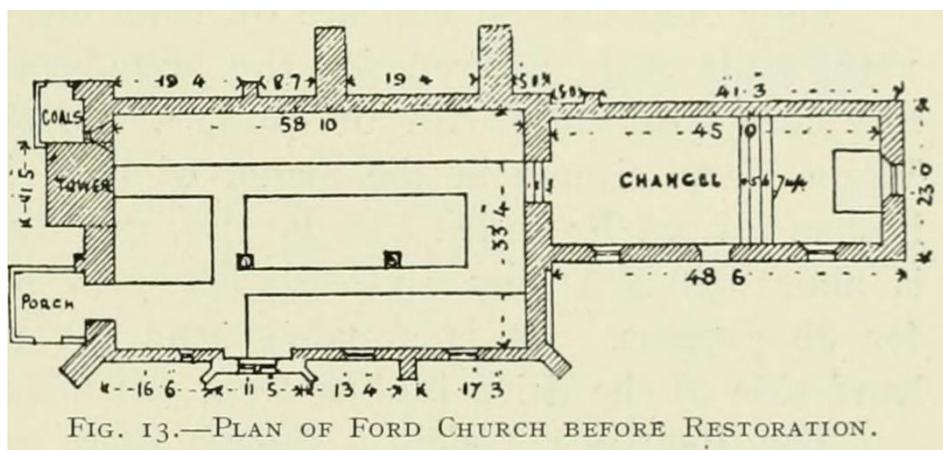
1725 'Regular and neat'

1752 Two Gothick windows, and one round one, inserted

1776 Roof rebuilt and three 'hewn rose windows' inserted.

1810 £93 8s 10d
spent on
restoration work.

*Pre-1853 John
Dobson plan
(Northumberland
County History)*



1853 Major restoration sponsored by Louisa, Marchioness of Waterford, John Dobson of Newcastle being the architect. He added the north aisle. Subsequent additions include the 1892 reredos (with which the eastern window in each side wall of the chancel is probably contemporary, as may be the 'low-side' at the west end of the south wall). The south porch and vestry are also not shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6":1 mile map, surveyed in 1860.

Archaeological Assessment

This is substantially a medieval church, which is largely plastered internally, so the usual caveats, that any significant disturbance of floor levels or wall surfaces should be accompanied by archaeological recording, must apply. It has to be admitted that there will have been considerable disturbance of underfloor stratigraphy through generations of burial, and almost certainly the construction of a Victorian underfloor heating system. Medieval masonry only survives in the lower walls of the chancel and south aisle; the west wall survives intact (and without plaster), and displays a considerable number of features which could usefully be recorded by rectified photography or stone for stone drawing.

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