

XII.—THE WEST TOWER OF ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, CORBRIDGE

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In the previous volume of this journal an attempt was made to explain briefly the presence in the walling of the west tower of Corbridge church a number of stones with incised saltire ornament.¹ The examination of this detail suggested that the history of the tower is more complicated than generally supposed, and that it is necessary to unravel this as far as possible before making any further attempt to settle the question of the saltires.

Several assumptions have been made about the date of the Saxon parts of the church. The only documentary evidence available is the statement of the Northumbrian Annals, quoted by Simeon of Durham, that in 786 Aldulf was consecrated bishop at the monastery of Corbridge.² The earliest parts of the building—the west porch, which was later built up into the present tower, the nave, now pierced by later arcades, and a chancel, of which no trace is left—have therefore been assigned to a date previous to this event, either to the eighth³ or the seventh century.⁴ It is customary to associate this phase of the building with St. Wilfrid, the founder of Hexham and Ripon abbeys; there is no real evidence to support this, although the notice of the consecration suggests it as a strong possibility. Whether or not

¹ AA 4, xxxix, 363-366.

² R. Forster, *History of Corbridge and its antiquities*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1881, p. 82, mentions evidence of the existence of a monastery at Corbridge in 771, but unfortunately does not quote his source. In any case, it would bring the *terminus ante quem* forward so little as to be inconsiderable.

³ NCH x (1914), 178.

⁴ C. C. Hodges, *The Reliquary*, N.S. vii (1893), 12; E. Gilbert, AA 4, xxiv, 162.

the attribution to Wilfrid is correct, there is nothing against accepting a date before 786 for the earliest extant parts of the building. There are marks of older gables on both the exterior and interior of the tower, which indicate that this is not of one build, but grew out of an original west porch. This in itself seems to be an early feature. The principal examples of the west porch in Saxon church planning are Brixworth (Northamptonshire) and Monkwearmouth, both of demonstrably early date, and in both cases the porch seems to have been erected with, or shortly after the commencement of, the original church building. For the date of the addition of the tower to this porch there is no evidence, as unfortunately the original belfry openings, which might have given some indication, were rebuilt in the eighteenth century.⁵ There is no justification for Hodges' assumption that the original openings were similar to those at Ovingham and Bywell, since there is nothing else to indicate that the upper stages are a pre-Conquest addition. The part above the porch is usually dated to the eleventh century,⁶ and this seems reasonable in view of similar developments about this time at Brixworth and Monkwearmouth. The tenth and eleventh centuries saw a spate of tower-building all over Europe, and there is sufficient evidence to show that in this sphere Northumbria followed the general tendency.⁷ This is therefore a likely period for the addition at Corbridge, but, in default of positive evidence, we must be prepared to assign it to a later period if further evidence comes to light.

So far it would appear that there are two well-defined building periods in the tower, and that its history is fairly straightforward. However, a number of features suggest that a rather more complex sequence of events took place. The first of these is the west entrance, which is now blocked. In the first place this was possibly an open arch leading into the porch, as at Monkwearmouth. In the brief consideration of

⁵ C. C. Hodges, *op. cit.*, 14; *NCH* x, 188.

⁶ *NCH* x, 179.

⁷ cf. the towers at Ovingham, Bywell St. Andrew, Billingham, York (St. Mary Bishophill Junior), etc.



ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, JARROW. BLOCKED NORTH DOOR.

the saltires I suggested that at some stage this arch was rebuilt, and its head lowered in the process. This rebuilding is apparent from the masonry belonging to the original opening. The small stones of the arch directly above the modern window are quite out of keeping with the huge jamb-stones which carry them; the jambs are obviously intended to support a much more substantial arch. The lower parts of the jambs are well constructed, but the transition from jambs to arch—above the third jamb-stone on either side—is most illogical and unsatisfactory, and suggests that the masonry has been tampered with. The lack of imposts as such is not necessarily significant; referring to the churches at Jarrow, Escomb and Monkwearmouth, Gilbert notes that “the lack of imposts marks nearly all these early doorways, in fact all of them”,⁸ and accepts the west door at Corbridge as belonging to the same typological group. However, the jambs of the west door of the nave at Monkwearmouth and the blocked north door at Jarrow, which Gilbert must have in mind, are considerably different from the one under examination.⁹ In the case of Jarrow, the jamb-stones are of the same depth as the voussoirs, so that the opening appears to be lined with a band of stonework of constant thickness (Plate XXIII). In the jambs of this opening there is a tendency to use long, upright stones, but there is no attempt to place alternate stones horizontally to bond into the wall. At Corbridge, on the other hand, the lowest jamb-stones, which are set in an upright position, are surmounted by horizontal bonding-stones, so that the jambs form a rough example of the upright-and-flat work typified by the chancel arch at Escomb. I know of no Saxon round-headed arch with this type of jamb which lacks imposts, or has not at least a plain horizontal member immediately below the springings of the arch; such a horizontal stone surmounts either jamb of the west door at Monkwearmouth, which is otherwise similar to the

⁸ *op. cit.*, 163.

⁹ The north door at Escomb has no relevance to the discussion, since its head is formed of a flat monolithic lintel; the technique of the whole opening is entirely different.

north door at Jarrow, and has no imposts as such. Given the remaining parts of the original jambs, I should expect the complete opening to look like a reduced version of the chancel arch at Escomb, and cannot regard the arch containing the modern window as original. The general appearance of the conjectured original opening can be seen from the accompanying diagram (fig. 1), which shows the reconstruction as suggested by H. M. Taylor. The only detail of this reconstruction with which I would disagree is the retention of the so-called relieving arch as a hood-mould. It does not seem likely that the original arch could have been either damaged or deliberately taken down without disturbing the hood-mould, if this had formed part of the original fabric. I should reconstruct the arch without a hood-mould and with the voussoirs set back on the imposts, so that their extrados would follow that of the present upper arch and their intrados continue the line of the jambs. Thus I should continue to interpret the "relieving arch" as the last stage of the crescent-shaped filling added above the lower arch when that was fitted; there may have been some idea of extempore decoration in the minds of the rebuilders who had the saltire stones on their hands. These stones would therefore ante-date the rebuilding of the arch at whatever period this took place.

If the west entrance was rebuilt at some stage, there must have been a reason for the alteration. Taylor thinks that the archway may have been damaged in border raids by the Scots; such attacks took place in 1296 (when the nave of Hexham Abbey was destroyed) and 1311-12.¹⁰ Forster, writing in 1881, claims to have seen marks of burning on the church fabric, and associates them with these events.¹¹ The church may have been damaged in the Anglo-Saxon period, however, perhaps during one of the battles at Corbridge in the early part of the tenth century, or even in the ninth century, when the Danish army under Halfden ravaged the area during the winter of 875-6. It is believed that Wilfrid's buildings at

¹⁰ *NCH* x, 78 and 84.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, 92 n.

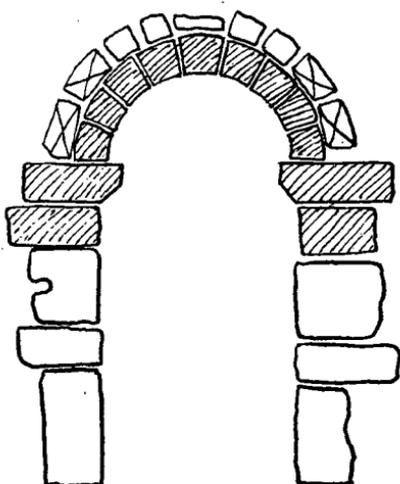
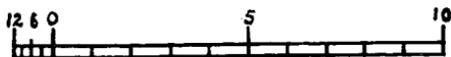
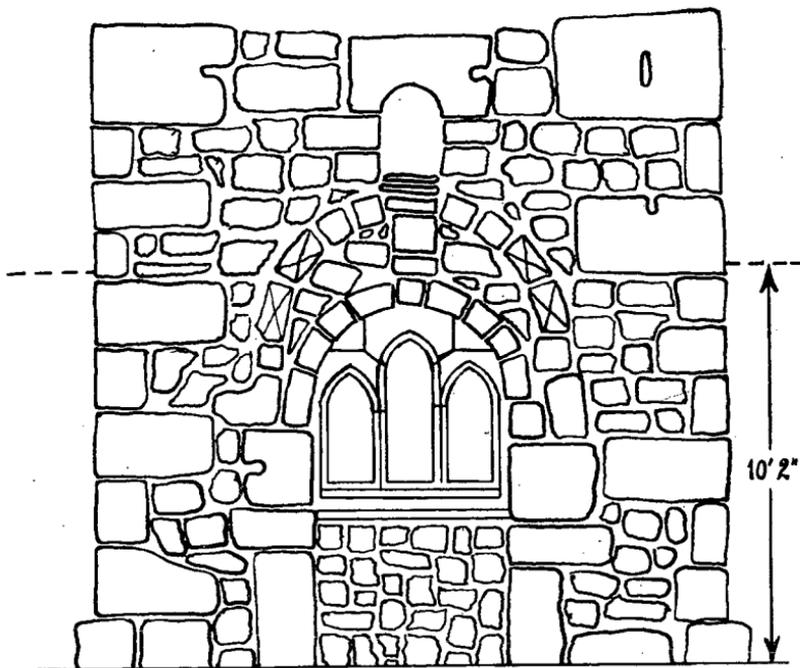


FIG. 1. ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, CORBRIDGE.

- (a) Lower part of the west wall of the tower: present state.
 (b) Suggested reconstruction of original west doorway.

Hexham were destroyed on this occasion, and the monastery at Corbridge may have suffered a similar fate.¹² It is certainly quite possible that Corbridge church suffered in the course of these events, but it is most likely that if the arch had been slightly damaged in the way that Taylor suggests, it would have been rebuilt in its original form since most of the disturbed material from it would probably have been available for the reconstruction. A comparison of the reconstruction diagram with the present state of the wall shows that the removal of stones from the original fabric was highly selective, in that only the voussoirs and the impost and one jambstone from either side of the opening are missing. This suggests a deliberate scheme of alteration rather than wanton damage, and I think it is most likely that the entrance was purposely reconstructed with a lower arch because of arrangements inside the tower. In the north wall of the tower is a blocked doorway, whose sill is 10 ft. 2 ins. above the level of the tower floor. This suggests that there was at some time an intermediate floor in the tower at this height. From the reconstruction diagram it is clear that such a floor would have cut across the original arch of the west entrance several inches below the key-stone, but would have cleared the intrados of the lower arch. The height to the centre of the lower arch is 9 ft. 2 ins., and that of the conjectured original arch would have been approximately 10 ft. 8 ins. The insertion of a floor at 10 ft. 2 ins. would have provided the motive for lowering the head of the west entrance.

Another interpretation of the blocked north door is possible, namely that it could in Saxon times have led out of the tower or porch to the upper floor of a subsidiary building. It is tempting to think in these terms, and connect the arrangements at Corbridge with those at Monkwearmouth, where the tower has a blocked door in a very similar position. But at Monkwearmouth and at Brixworth, where the porch is also believed to have been flanked by subsidiary buildings, there are doors at ground floor level connecting these buildings

¹² *NCH* x, 20-24.

with the porch. There is no such door at Corbridge, and any building of this sort, if it existed, must have had a separate external entrance at ground level. It does not seem likely that a building of this nature would be kept separate from the porch at ground level, but be accessible from it at first floor level. Further, it appears that excavations at Corbridge did not reveal any foundations which would indicate that buildings had existed round the tower.¹³ Of course, the blocked door could be interpreted in connexion with the adjoining building which still exists, viz. the west part of the north aisle, which has been made into a separate compartment by means of a transverse wall (marked A on plan, fig. 2). This appears to have been divided into two storeys at some stage,¹⁴ although the level of the upper floor cannot now be

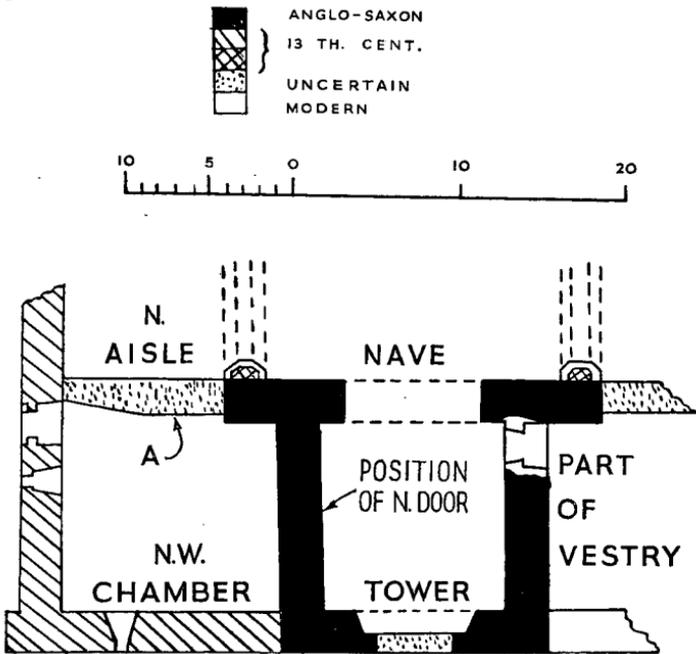


FIG. 2. ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, CORBRIDGE: PLAN OF WEST END.

¹³ *NCH* x, 188.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 191.

ascertained, since the interior has been plastered. However, the arrangement of an independent chamber with an external entrance at ground level and one from the church at first floor level is illogical, as has been noted above. In any case, the evidence of the fabric of the doorway itself seems to imply a means of access to the tower, rather than to a chamber north of it. The opening has been filled in such a way that it is possible to see the rebate and the hangings for the door, which show that it opened into the tower, while the facing of the doorway, decorated by a plain chamfer, is on the north face of the north wall (i.e. the outside) of the tower. If one assumes an approach by ladder or wooden stair from one side or the other, this suggests that the doorway was an entry to the tower, rather than to the north-west chamber.

The possibility that a floor once existed in the tower has already been noted. Gilbert considers that it may have been fitted in the Saxon period before the porch was raised to form a tower, and concludes that in this case the tower arch is not original.¹⁵ There is some indication that the tower arch may be a later insertion. The lateral penetration of the jamb-stones is considerable, as one can see from the nave, so that the overall width of the fabric of the arch is greater than the interior measurement of the tower from north to south. Thus the jamb-stones and the lower voussoirs of the arch overlap the ends of the north and south walls of the tower, which is clearly shown by the sectional diagram in the *Northumberland County History*.¹⁶ The jambs are made up of through-stones, many of which are thus partially covered by the north and south walls of the tower, and seem not to be in bond with them; if there is any bonding, then it is incomplete and haphazard. This suggests that the tower arch and the porch, whose fabric forms this lower part of the tower, are not contemporary. Is the porch an addition to the original church building, or is the tower arch an insertion, or both? The question relating to the porch cannot be answered,

¹⁵ *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *NCH* x, 186, fig. 3.

as unfortunately the chambers built in the angles between the tower and the nave are well plastered on the inside, so that the joints cannot be examined. As far as the arch is concerned, we have just noticed that it is possibly of a different date from the porch: it is most unlikely that an opening of this size would have existed on the exterior wall of the church, since it would have been virtually impossible to close it, and we may assume that it is later than the porch. The voussoirs are some 3 ins. short of the thickness of the west wall of the nave; this could mean that the wall was in existence before there was any thought of building the arch, which involved the re-use of material cut for another building. It is noticeable that the two stones which stilt the arch and do not belong to the original head are of the correct size for the wall; presumably they were cut specially for the function which they still perform. These suggestions are very tentative, but if neither the arch nor the porch were part of the original fabric, then Corbridge bears comparison with two other Northumbrian churches, Monkwearmouth and Ledsham (Yorkshire). In both cases the west porch seems to have been added shortly after the main fabric was begun, and at Ledsham a tower arch was inserted in Norman times.¹⁷ Monkwearmouth still preserves an open arch as the entrance to the porch and a closed door as the means of access to the nave. It is possible that there was a similar arrangement at Corbridge, and that a floor existed in the porch during the Saxon period, although there is no direct evidence of this: the blocked north door I do not believe to be of Saxon date.¹⁸ A porch with an upper floor lighted only by the small window immediately above the blocked west entrance, which would have been almost at floor level, seems rather unlikely, but it is equally difficult to imagine a porch of such a height¹⁹

¹⁷ For Monkwearmouth cf. G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, ii (1925), 471; for Ledsham, H. M. Taylor, *Some little-known aspects of English pre-Conquest churches*, in: *The Anglo-Saxons, Studies presented to Bruce Dickins* (1959), 146.

¹⁸ cf. *infra*, p. 182.

¹⁹ 26 ft. to the eaves, 37 ft. to the ridge; cf. *NCH* x, 187.

without any intermediate floor at all. The absence of an intermediate floor would raise the question of the need for the window in the west wall of the porch, as Gilbert noted,²⁰ but if the west entrance were fitted with a door, the reason for it would become apparent. Whether or not the Saxon porch was divided into storeys, there is still the slight evidence in the fabric that the tower arch may not be original. If this is so, then when was it inserted? Monumental arches of this sort usually seem to be associated with the building of a tower—chancel arches of the Saxon period are normally of different character; the tall, narrow arch seems to have been something of a fashion in tower construction, especially in the case of the “Lincolnshire” type.²¹ If the arch were inserted when the porch was converted into the present tower, this would accord well with the events at Ledsham.²²

Returning to the subject of the floor in the tower associated with the blocked north door, we find two other possible interpretations, neither of which depends on the acceptance of the tower arch as an insertion. The *Northumberland County History* mentions a gallery which projected into the west end of the nave from the tower.²³ This gallery is not assigned to any period, but is mentioned in connexion with the wall which continues the west wall of the nave in a northerly direction (A on plan); this wall makes no sense except in relation to the north aisle, which was added in the thirteenth century, and must therefore be contemporary with, or later than, this. The other possibility is suggested by Forster's record that the tower arch was walled up previous to the restoration in 1867.²⁴ When the arch was sealed off is not certain, but the floor in the tower may date from the time of the block-up. There seems to be nothing against accepting that at some stage there was a floor in the tower;

²⁰ *loc. cit.*

²¹ e.g. St. Peter-at-Gowts, Lincoln, over 20 ft. high, cf. G. Baldwin Brown, *op. cit.*, 335, fig. 151; cf. also the tower arch at Whittingham, 17 ft. 10 ins. tall, *ibid.*, 404.

²² H. M. Taylor, *op. cit.*, 144.

²³ *NCH* x, 191.

²⁴ *op. cit.*, 85.

the question is: why at this level? Much has been made of the ineptitude of the Anglo-Saxon builders, but it seems inconceivable that, given a free hand and their originally very simple building, they should insert a floor at such a level that the west entrance had to be rebuilt. Certainly the dimensions of the Saxon porch would not have prevented the north door being placed at a higher level, since the eaves were some 26 ft. above ground level, i.e. more than 10 ft. above the head of the door. The curious placing of the door is more comprehensible at a later date, when the church had grown by accretion, and other parts of the building had to be taken into consideration. The builder of the north door must have been limited from above in some way, so that it was not possible to insert it at a more convenient height, which suggests that the north aisle was already in existence when the doorway was broken through to the tower. It may well have been the aisle roof which prevented the construction of the doorway the vital few inches higher. The north aisle wall has a height of 15 ft. 9 ins. here; the compartment is partially floored at a height of 7 ft. 1 in., and the head of the blocked door measures 8 ft. 7 ins. above this floor, so that the top of the aisle wall and the door head are roughly on a level. If at the time of the fitting of the door the aisle roof was supported by horizontal beams, these would have dictated the maximum height of the door head. This is a likely solution, although the final proof is lacking: there is no evidence of put-log holes or corbels on the exterior of the north tower wall, which would be required by this arrangement, although the remains of such may exist beneath the plaster. The drawback to this explanation seems to be the size of the door itself, which appears to measure 6 ft. 7 ins. from sill to head; if this were the original size of the door, then the argument that the floor in the tower could not have been built at a higher level is invalidated. Clearly the door would have been tall enough to allow the sill to be raised sufficiently for the floor in the tower to be placed at a more convenient height. However, the doorway was not originally 6 ft. 7 ins.

tall, as can be proved on closer examination. The stone facing of the doorway on the exterior of the tower wall is plain chamfered. The chamfer runs up the complete north jamb and across the head, but down the south jamb only for a certain distance, stopping about 1 ft. 4 ins. above the apparent sill; the jamb continues square to the sill. The point where the chamfer ends is approximately 3 ft. 3 ins. above the intermediate floor in the north-west chamber, that is, some 10 ft. 4 ins. above ground level. On the interior of the tower the sill of the blocked opening is 10 ft. 2 ins. above ground level. Allowing for slight discrepancies in the measuring²⁵ and for possible differences of ground level between the north-west chamber and the tower, these measurements are close enough to indicate that the end of the chamfer represents the original sill level, and that the north face of the doorway has been extended downwards, possibly since the blocking and in connexion with heating and electrical fittings attached to this wall. Thus the original height of the door was only 5 ft. 3 ins.—hardly sufficient to allow the sill and the upper floor of the tower to be raised to the extent required to clear the original west entrance arch. On this showing, the blocked door, and hence the tower floor, must date from the thirteenth century (date of north aisle) or later. There is nothing in the construction of the north door itself to indicate one period rather than another, since the type with a flat head is common to almost all periods of architecture in this country, at least in openings of secondary importance. At all events, the north door and the floor associated with it cannot date from the Saxon period, although this does not mean that there never was an upper floor in the Saxon building. If the sequence of events took place as suggested, then the west entrance was rebuilt in or after the thirteenth century.

Another feature which appears to have been rebuilt is

²⁵ Conditions in the north-west chamber are not ideal for accurate measuring with a tape, owing to permanent obstacles, such as the intermediate floor and the stairway; for instance, a slight slope in the floor would produce the discrepancies obvious from a comparison of the various measurements.

the window immediately above the blocked west entrance. The *Northumberland County History* notes that its sill was lowered by cutting through the upper arch, and raised again to its present level.²⁶ An increase in size was no doubt desirable when the floor was fitted, since there was no other opening in the tower to admit light. A larger window would be all the more necessary if the tower arch had already been blocked, as it would then have been the only source of light. Alternatively, the enlarged opening could be interpreted as an additional door to the upper chamber, and would bear comparison with the door connecting the first floor of the tower at Monkwearmouth with the nave; this opening is also splayed, since it, too, was probably intended as a window in the first place, and is 1 ft. 5 ins. wide without the splay. The opening at Corbridge measures 1 ft. 7 ins. externally. On the whole it is more likely to have been a window than a door, as additional light was surely more desirable than an extra entrance; as a doorway it would presumably have been closed by a wooden door, which would have effectively reduced the light available in the upper chamber. A further possibility is that the whole window was an insertion at the time of the fitting of the floor, and that it has been altered only once, i.e. reduced in size. This would explain the roughness of the jambs and would obviate the need to find an explanation for a Saxon porch of one storey with an additional light above the entrance.²⁷

By way of summary, I should like to suggest the following sequence of events, which I think explains the features to be seen in the tower at the present time :

- I. Anglo-Saxon monastery church with porch (before 786).
- II. West porch raised to tower; tower arch inserted ??
(? eleventh century).
- III. Addition of north aisle (thirteenth century).

²⁶ *NCH* x, 188.

²⁷ cf. E. Gilbert, *loc. cit.*, and *supra*, p. 180.

(IV. Blocking of tower arch ??).

V. Construction of intermediate floor in tower at a height of 10 ft. 2 ins. with or without gallery in nave, involving insertion of north door in tower wall and lowering of head of west entrance (saltire stones re-used in crescent-shaped filling); enlargement or insertion of west window.

VI. Removal of intermediate floor, blocking of north door; unblocking of tower arch (1867); blocking of west entrance; raising of sill of west window.

The order of events included in Phase VI is purely arbitrary and is not intended to represent a chronological sequence. Phase V, however, does imply chronological order, since the enlargement of the window necessitated cutting through the upper "arch" of saltire stones, which were introduced when the entrance was rebuilt.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Dr. H. M. Taylor, of the University College of North Staffordshire, for permission to use his reconstruction diagram as fig. 1, and for much helpful and encouraging critical comment during the preparation of this paper; and to Rev. R. Malden, Vicar of Corbridge, for invaluable practical assistance during my visit to Corbridge.