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Chillingham Church, Northumberland: the South Chapel and the Grey Tomb

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In 1995 it became apparent that the tomb of Sir Ralph Grey and his wife in the south chapel of Chillingham church was suffering from damp. At the instigation of the parish, led by Dame Pamela Hunter, and with financial support and professional guidance from English Heritage, in the persons of Henry Owen-John and the English Heritage sculpture specialist, Bill Martin, who provided detailed advice, a programme of conservation and recording was begun in the autumn of that year and completed in 1997. The tomb was recorded, removed, repaired, and replaced over a new lead membrane by Hanna Conservation of York, led by Seamus Hanna. Features revealed in the chapel by the removal of the tomb were recorded by members of the Newcastle City Archaeology Unit, Simon Wardle and Mark Hoyle, directed by David Heslop. The final report was compiled by Barbara Harbottle and the drawings prepared for publication by Mark Hoyle.

THE CHURCH

There has been a church at Chillingham (NU 062259) since at least the 12th century, and possibly earlier than that.¹ (fig. 1) It was granted to Alnwick Abbey by William de Vesci (d. 1184), and the earliest dateable masonry to survive, the south door of the nave, is undoubtedly 12th-century. Although Honeyman speculated that the building might have been Anglian in origin his reasons for this statement, a possible Anglo-Saxon cross fragment built into a buttress, a suggestion that 'many of the large blocks of stone used in the twelfth century walling of the nave are very probably Anglian material re-used', and the

existence of an early grave slab now built into the inner face of the west wall of the north transept,² have not been enough to convince the authors of the most recent description.³ Like most English medieval parish churches Chillingham was added to, and then altered, in almost every century to the present. The south wing was the principal addition and, as it too has undergone several alterations, the recent recording of its west wall and floor prompted a reconsideration of its structural and functional history.

THE SOUTH CHAPEL

It cannot be established with certainty when this wing was built, though a 12th-century date is unlikely. There is no doubt that it was added to the nave, since there is a clear butt joint between the north end of its west wall and the south wall of the nave. It may also postdate the present chancel though evidence for this within the church does not survive. Both Honeyman and Pevsner considered the tiny round-headed opening towards the north end of the west wall of the chapel to be 12th-century, thus suggesting a date of origin of the late 12th century, and on his plan Honeyman showed this wall extending south towards the later door. Although he is supported by a possible stub end of masonry visible on the recently drawn elevation, there is no other evidence for a 12th-century structure, and close inspection of the inner face of this wall shows the later blocking of the little opening to be confined within the jambs and lintel of a typical shouldered-lintel window, dateable to the latter part of the 13th century. The coincidence of these two features cannot be readily explained, since

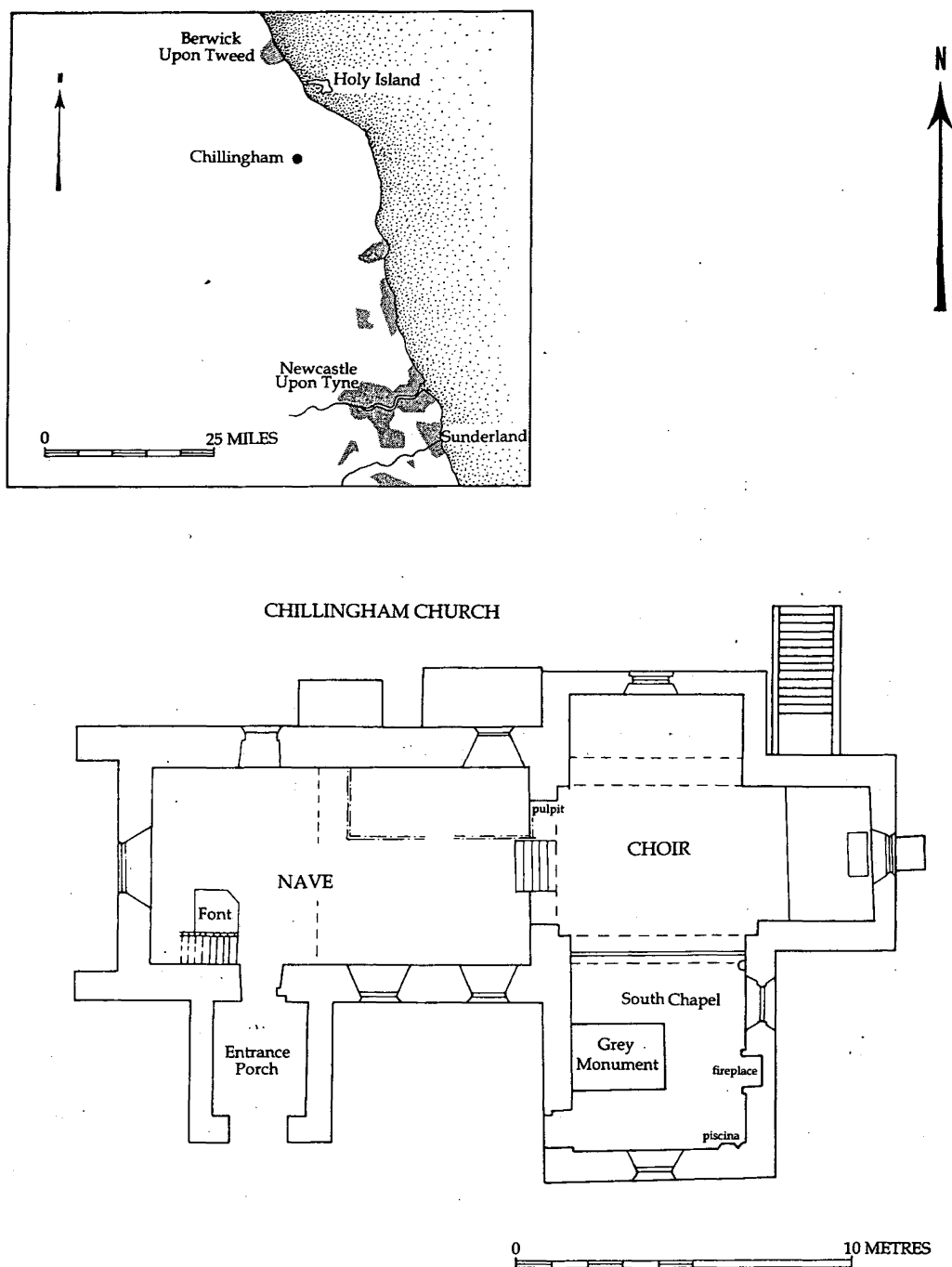


Fig. 1 Chillingham Church: location map and plan.

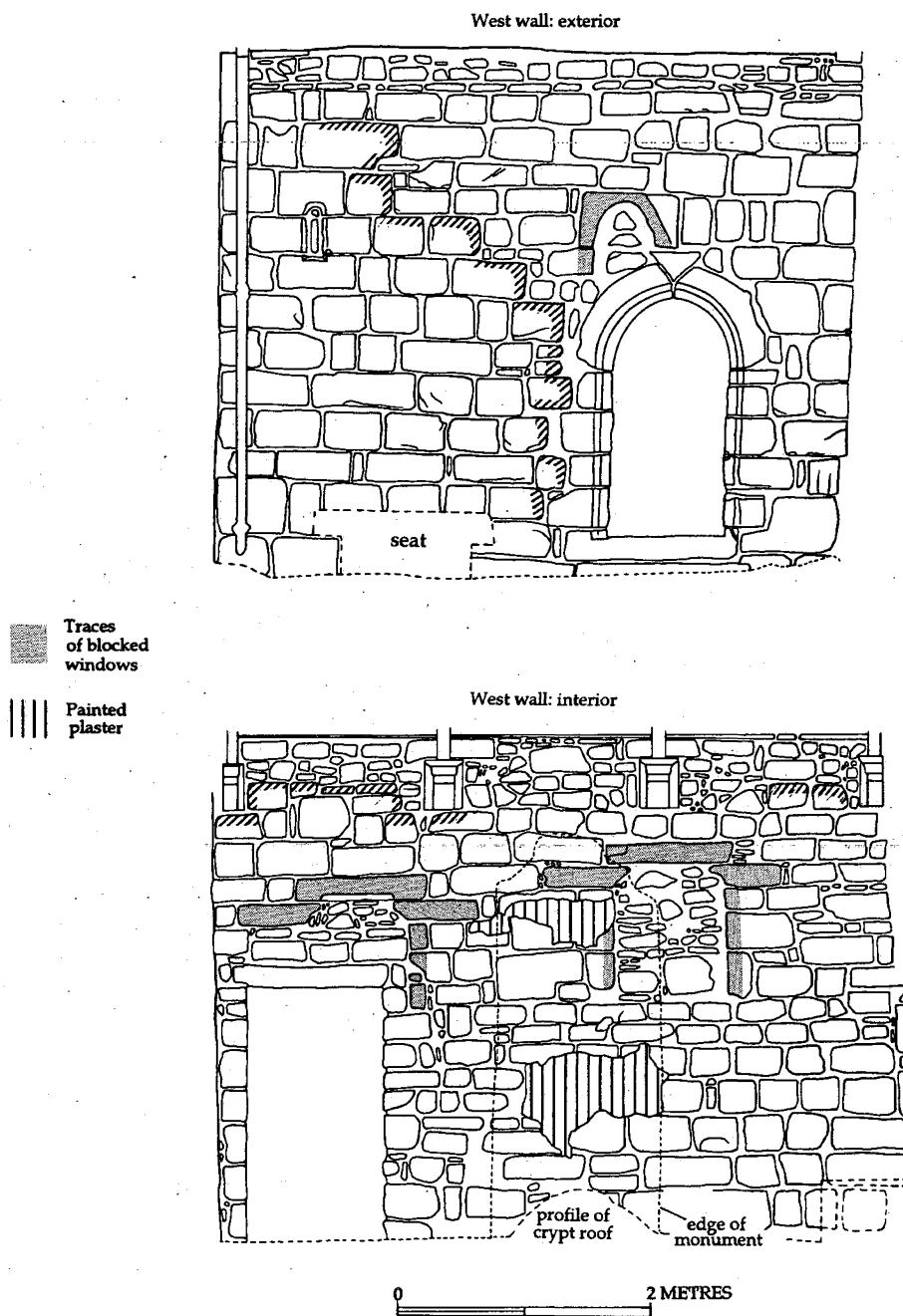


Fig. 2 Chillingham Church: South Chapel, West Wall.

there is no trace on the outer face of the wall that the jambs and head of the tiny opening have been re-used to fill a window of a style contemporary with the shouldered lintel on the inner face.

To refer to this room as a chapel predetermines its function, and this was by no means certain to Honeyman, who described it as the 'unusual feature of a projecting transept or chapel', and went on to say it was possible that the plan of the church was cruciform.⁴ This concept is unlikely, both because there is no structural evidence that Chillingham was cruciform at this date, and also because a pair of transepts was an unusual feature in the smaller medieval churches of Northumberland. While a chantry chapel must be the most probable explanation for the origin of the south chapel at Chillingham, since the addition of such chapels in the 13th century was quite usual in this county, as elsewhere, no deed exists to provide the name of the first founder, whose identity can only be guessed. The most likely possibility is Sir Richard Muschamp, lord of Chillingham, who died in 1250.⁵

The structural history of the chapel, even after these extended preliminaries, remains complex. Today it measures internally c. 5.50m north to south by 5.20m east to west, and these were probably its dimensions in the 13th century.⁶ At that time it was lit by at least two lancet windows, now both blocked, and there may have been others. One was at the south end of the west wall, its pointed head showing in the outer face above the door and its inner face being another, blocked, shouldered rerearch. The outline of the second lancet survives opposite in the east wall. An altar was presumably accommodated against the centre of this wall, with a 13th-century piscina close at hand together with two carved brackets for lights or images, but there is no evidence for the location of the tomb. The original access may have been directly from the chancel, though there is doubt as to the authenticity of the arch between the two.

In the early 14th century the chapel was partly refenestrated. One two-light window 'with cusped Y-tracery' was inserted in the

centre of the south wall, and a second at the north end of the east wall. These improvements may be the result of the acquisition of Chillingham in the 1320s by Thomas de Heton, with whose descendants it remained until the end of the century.⁷

The recent dismantling of the Grey tomb revealed patches of painted plaster on the west wall. (fig. 3) The whole of the interior of the chapel was presumably treated in this manner, though it is not certain whether it had been so from the beginning. The plaster followed the curve on the south jamb of the northern window, and is overlaid by the mortar of the window blocking, which itself pre-dates the construction of the tomb. The designs on the plaster are not figurative and contain little discernible detail. The graffiti, which it has not been possible to decipher, are unlikely in this position to have been formal dedications or masons' memoranda, and are more probably casual scribbles, perhaps signatures or 'moral saws'.⁸

The next re-ordering of the chapel was, it is supposed, initiated by Sir Ralph Grey II (c.1427-1464), described as 'the first Grey of Chillingham', to commemorate his father, Sir Ralph Grey I (1406-1443). It is not known how the Greys (of Wark) acquired Chillingham, or indeed when, though it seems likely to have been in or after the later 1440s.⁹ While Sir Ralph I had done little if anything to win fame and, since he is thought to have died in France, is possibly not buried at Chillingham at all, his wife was no less than the daughter of Henry FitzHugh (d. 1414), lord of Ravensworth in Richmondshire and chamberlain of Henry V. Her mother, also Elizabeth, was both the daughter and heir of Sir Robert Grey of Rotherfield, and the heir to her uncle, Sir John Marmion of Tanfield.¹⁰ It is possible that a tomb of such grandeur was less of a memorial to Sir Ralph and more of a statement by his son of the family's importance.¹¹ The monument, thought to date from c. 1450, consists today of a tomb chest of sandstone, on which lie the recumbent alabaster effigies of Sir Ralph Grey and his wife, Elizabeth FitzHugh. At the west, or head, end of the tomb and

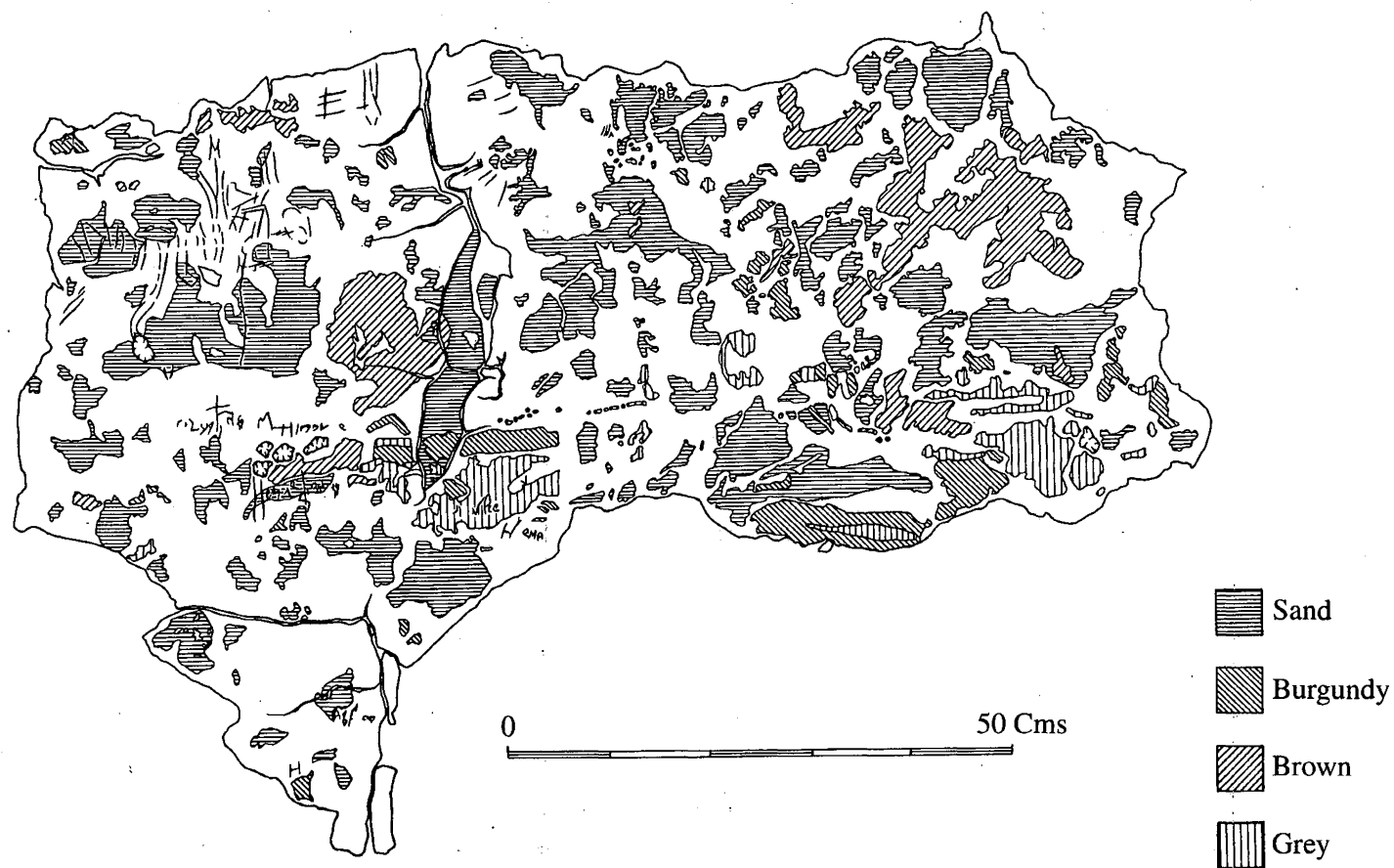


Fig. 3 Remains of painted plaster on the west wall of the chapel.

against the centre of the west wall of the chapel, there is a solid stone screen, and the recent work revealed a burial vault beneath the tomb.

To accommodate the monument the structure of the chapel had again to be altered. At this time, if indeed it were still open, the northern window in the west wall was blocked to allow the monument and screen to be placed against it, and the walls of the chapel were raised and the pitch of the roof increased, it is thought to provide more headroom. Any earlier memorials which might have survived above ground from the first foundation of the chantry were removed, and a substantial burial vault was constructed. Since it fitted so neatly under the tomb, the close relationship of the two cannot be in doubt.

The date of these alterations depends on whether the monument was erected on its present site in c. 1450 or whether, as has been suggested, it was moved there by Sir Thomas Grey (1549-1590) towards the end of the 16th century.¹² The single shield on the north-west corner of its plinth has been used to show that it had not been designed to stand against a west wall, but might perhaps have been on the south side of the chancel or even in the archway between the chancel and the chapel.¹³ While Hanna's statement that "the monument had not originally been built at right-angles to the west wall of the chapel" appears significant in this regard, he goes on to say that the position of the tomb chest was determined by the profile of the stonework of the crypt beneath it.¹⁴ It is therefore not clear whether the failure to align the tomb correctly occurred when it was first constructed, or if it could have resulted from a subsequent move. It must be said, however, that the recent dismantling produced no evidence that the hidden west end of the tomb had ever been decorated, let alone with "papistical" carvings, and the notion of its relocation must therefore remain unproved.

While Sir Thomas may not have moved the monument he clearly had an interest in the church, having asked in his will to be buried "within the tombe, wheer other of my auncestors doo lye", and having left £10 for the repair

of the choir,¹⁵ and he has been held responsible for those changes which appear to be 16th-century. The structure of the building was altered again by the blocking, and partial demolition, of the south lancet in the west wall for the insertion of a round-headed door¹⁶ to provide private access to the chapel, and the appearance of the monument may have been substantially changed. It is thought that the effigies had originally lain beneath a canopy, which was removed at this time,¹⁷ and that Sir Thomas was commemorated by the addition, on the top of the screen, of a strapwork cartouche enclosing a slab bearing the Grey motto, surmounted by the Grey shield and crest and flanked by wooden, not marble, obelisks. In spite of the recent statement that the cartouche was added in the 17th century, there seems no reason why it cannot be late 16th, contemporary with the death of Sir Thomas.¹⁸

THE BURIAL VAULT¹⁹

The burial vault is positioned against the west wall of the chapel, and it is probable that the foundations of this wall were replaced during the time of its construction with an ashlar lining when a drain, about 0.40m wide and at least 0.40m high, was provided through it. The vault consists of two spaces, a western burial chamber and an eastern ante-chamber providing access from the chapel, with a door connecting the two. The structure was surveyed through a small hole in the east wall of the burial chamber, and neither room was entered and no floor surfaces disturbed during the work.

The burial chamber, which is 2.75m long and 2.10m wide, stands 1.76m high from the existing floor surface to a vault carried on three massive, closely-spaced ribs springing directly from the side walls. The latter are largely covered with plaster which left only an occasional stone block visible. The original floor surface may be as much as 0.50m below the present one, since there is within the chamber a considerable accumulation of human bone,



Plate 1 The view from the north-east. [Copyright English Heritage Photographic Library/Jonathan Bailey]



Plate 2 The view from above. [Copyright English Heritage Photographic Library/Jonathan Bailey]



Plate 3 Angel holding the soul of the deceased in a napkin. [Copyright English Heritage Photographic Library/Jonathan Bailey]



Plate 4a St. Cuthbert, holding St. Oswald's head. [Copyright English Heritage Photographic Library/Jonathan Bailey]



Plate 4b St. Elizabeth or St. Zita. [Copyright English Heritage Photographic Library/Jonathan Bailey]

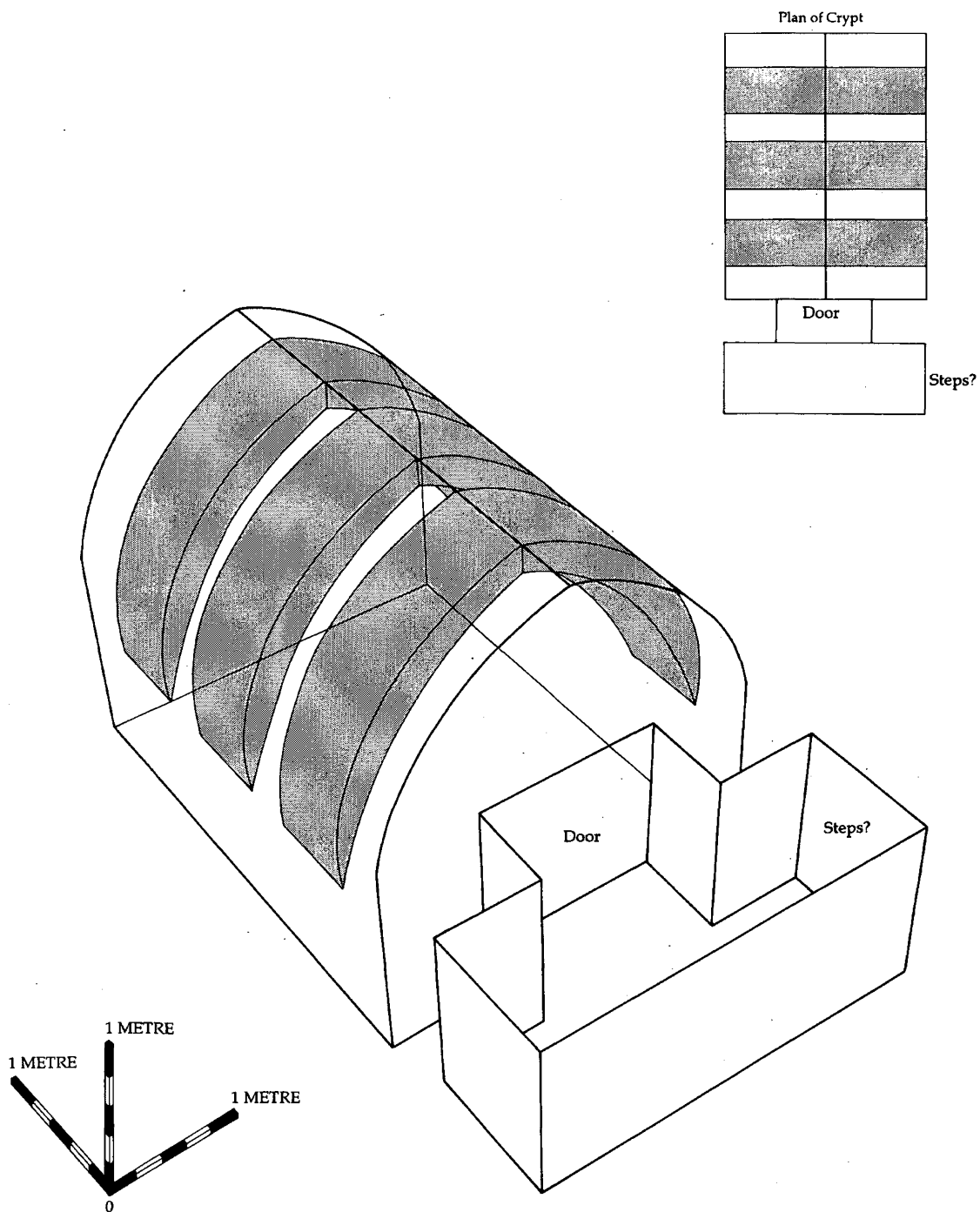


Fig. 4 The burial vault.

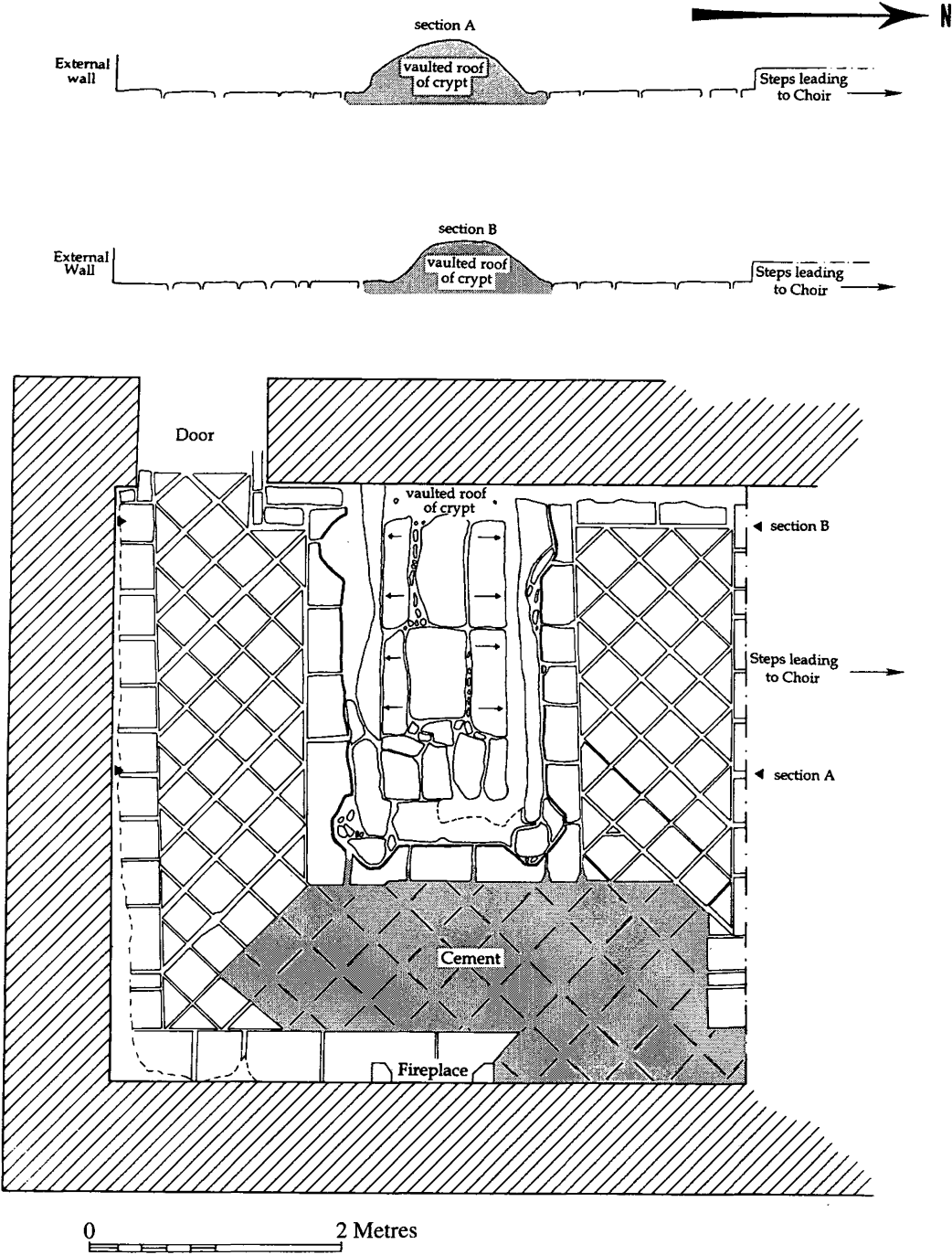


Fig. 5 Plan showing detail of floor and location of sections A and B across crypt.

parts of at least twelve individuals being visible, together with timber fragments, presumably from broken coffins, and black silt. While the bones showed signs of having been disturbed (see below), the ground surface was smooth, probably from periodic flooding through the drain in the west wall. The entrance to this room from the ante-chamber was a square-headed opening, 1.00m wide and 0.80m high, set in the east wall below the arch of the vault.

The ante-chamber measures 2.10m long from north to south, 1.20m wide, 1.00m deep, and lies largely under the floor at the east end of the tomb. Access to it was gained by a flight of steps, "the opening to which is near the Fire Place, at the east end of the monument".²⁰ It is not known how often the vault was used, or when its use stopped, but it had probably been closed for many years when Lord Ossulston and his companion, Mr Dodd, inspected it in November, 1853, and "found a quantity of bones and coffin lids in the last stage of decomposition. They counted eight skulls and found a lock of hair, discoloured but intire. No date or inscription of any kind was discovered. The Coffin Plates and every thing metallic had probably been abstracted". Lord Ossulston's desire to inspect the vaults (he entered the one under the chancel on the same occasion) presumably necessitated the removal of the tiles which covered the steps, and their subsequent replacement with the cement which today forms the floor surface. (fig. 5) In 1871, when he was sixth earl of Tankerville and one of the few earls of that family to live in Northumberland, he obtained a Faculty confirming his family's right to both vaults as burial places,²¹ but there is no evidence that the little one in the chapel was ever used again. He himself was buried in the south-east corner of the churchyard.

THE GREY MONUMENT

This monument has been described in detail on more than one occasion,²² and its significance is fully recognized. There is thus no need

here to do more than note some of its more important and interesting aspects. The effigies, and the angel and helmet in the centre of the screen (plate 2), are of alabaster, a massive form of gypsum or hydrated calcium sulphate, which in England was extracted in the later medieval period from quarries in the Midlands. Except for the Ogle tomb in Bothal church, the alabaster at Chillingham is the only medieval example of the use of this stone in Northumberland.

The effigies lie in the formal posture typical of the late Middle Ages, their bodies straight and their hands in prayer, and present fine examples of mid 15th-century armour and costume. Sir Ralph, bare-headed and with a clipped moustache,²³ wears full plate armour beneath a red tabard, and an 'S-collar' (a chain of Ss originally associated with support for the House of Lancaster (1399-1461)), and is armed only with a dagger (now broken). His wife is clothed in a kirtle with tight-buttoned sleeves, a sideless cote-hardie and, overall, a red mantle. Her hair, dressed in the horned style, is covered with a jewelled net, and her feet rest on two little dogs. Traces of colour, red, green, blue and gold, survive on both figures, and elsewhere on the monument.

The sandstone slab on which the effigies lie, and which forms the top of the tomb chest, is decorated with foliage on its cornice, and with the Grey badges of a ladder and a cloak on its plinth. The cornice also carries the family's armorials. On the north and south sides is the shield of arms of Grey, [gules] a lion rampant and a border engrailed [silver]. At the east end is a larger shield for both Sir Ralph Grey and his wife, Elizabeth FitzHugh, his arms impaling hers, 'quarterly I and IV [azure] three chevrons interlaced and a chief [gold] - Fitzhugh; II and III vair a fess [gules] - Marmion'.²⁴

In the centre of the screen at the head of the tomb is an alabaster angel holding 'a mantled helm with wreath and the Grey crest of a ram's head [silver with gold horns]'.²⁵ On each side of this central angel the crest is repeated on a helmet beneath which is an angel holding a napkin containing the soul of the deceased, a

detail which is easily missed on a cursory inspection (plate 3).

One of the most exciting aspects of this monument is that the effigies of Sir Ralph Grey and his wife are the only ones in Northumberland still to lie upon their original 'high tomb'. This is of particular importance because along its sides stand the alternating figures of saints and angels, beneath canopied niches with, in the words of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner himself, 'drapery folds just breaking, though not yet as crackly as generally late in the 15th century'²⁶ (plate 1). These are a rare survival of the iconoclasts of subsequent centuries, and one must wonder whether this was the result of the isolation of the church, or whether the chapel was rendered inaccessible for a time.

While some of the saints may be safely identified by their emblems,²⁷ three are in doubt and the figure at the south-west corner is too damaged to permit any identification. On the south side, and next to the headless man, there is a bearded male with a spear and a book in his right hand and, possibly, a maniple over his left arm. Bates thought this was St Paul, presumably because he is shown bearded, but St Paul is customarily portrayed as bald and carrying a sword. Blair's identification of the figure as St Thomas the Apostle is more probable since he is equipped with the usual attribute of the spear (or lance) with which he was martyred. The third figure is a crowned female, with a staff or spear in her right hand, and in her left an unidentified lump. This retains the remains of a wooden peg and so must have supported an object, now broken off. Blair suggested either St Margaret of Scotland or St Etheldreda (Audrey) of Ely, who is reported to have been one of the three most popular English saints, while Bates did not attempt any identification. The bishop holding a crowned head is undoubtedly St Cuthbert carrying the head of St Oswald (plate 4a), and next to him there is a nun, with a rosary on her right wrist, roses in her right hand, and in her left a board on which there are four keys (plate 4b). Bates favoured St Elizabeth, who was a Franciscan tertiary and had roses among her attributes,

but Blair thought St Zita of Lucca more probable. She is certainly associated with keys and a rosary, but is usually shown in working clothes. St Peter, with his key, stands at the south-east corner of the tomb. On its east end there is the figure of an archbishop in pontificalia and pallium, his right hand raised in benediction. This is almost certainly St Wilfrid who, though doubtfully an archbishop, is locally so represented in such places as Hexham. Beside him there is a bishop, in the same posture, but with a chain and padlock, and this is St Ninian. At the north-east corner, with her wheel and sword, is the crowned statue of St Catherine of Alexandria. On the north side the first figure, scantily clad and carrying the *Agnus Dei*, is St John the Baptist with, creeping out from beneath his feet, a tiny animal, hitherto unrecorded.²⁸ Next to St John there is a female, with a damaged object in each hand, thought to be St Mary Magdalene with a pot of ointment. The male at her left hand, holding a chalice containing a serpent with wings, scales and teeth, is St John the Evangelist, and beside him is St Margaret of Antioch standing on a dragon. Finally, on the north-west corner, there is a bearded male figure in wide brimmed hat, with a staff in his right hand, a book in his left, and a pilgrim's purse hanging on his left side. This could be either St James the Great or St Roche, and though Bates favoured the latter Blair was unwilling to decide between them.

Before leaving the subject of the monument itself we must note its suggested provenance. 'The alabaster effigies are, of course, English but the pedestal was almost certainly imported or made by alien craftsmen. Melrose is the likeliest source, but it is just possible that it was looted from Bishop Kennedy's barge, wrecked at Bamburgh, and that its original destination was his chapel in St. Salvator's college at St. Andrew's'.²⁹ While there is no doubt that the wreck did occur in 1472, the notion that part of the monument was on board is purely fanciful, and the barge was in any case coming from the Low Countries. A Scottish origin is highly improbable, both because 'very few Scottish monuments are free-standing' and

because there are no Scottish parallels for the rich and three-dimensional tabernacle work of Chillingham.³⁰

THE CONSERVATION OF THE MONUMENT³¹

The conservation of the monument by Hanna Conservation began in September 1995 and was completed in December 1996. The tomb was first recorded, and crumbly surfaces and fissures consolidated. Only then could it be dismantled, both hard cement mortar and softer lime mortar having to be cut out to allow the effigies, the elements of the screen and each course of the stonework of the chest to be removed. The close relationship of the tomb and the underlying vault was confirmed by the discovery that 'the backs of the plinth blocks on the north and south sides of the tomb chest had been dressed to fit against a barrel vault'. The core of the screen and tomb chest was found to have been filled with 6 to 7 cubic metres of rubble which 'became progressively wetter towards the plinth, confirming the absorption of rising and penetrating dampness'. Half a quern, and oyster shells used in some of the masonry joins were found among the rubble.

To allow the second stage of the work to proceed, the pieces of the tomb chest were removed in six van loads to the firm's conservation studio in Kirk Hammerton, Yorkshire. Once there, conservation began with the removal of all adhering mortar, early adhesives and cramps, followed by any necessary consolidation of granular surfaces, filling of cracks and re-securing of paint layers. The whole monument was then cleaned and some essential repairs completed.

Before the monument could be replaced, its site had to be prepared. 'An intervention layer composed of three layers of acid-free lens tissue was placed across the four fragments of wall plaster' which had been found behind the screen, and a membrane of lead 'was laid over the vault and up the wall behind'. The rebuilding of the tomb chest could then begin, course

by course, with a new internal core of dry hollow dense concrete blocks, strong enough to carry the heavy weight of the effigies. This part of the operation lasted four months to allow a pause between the assembly of each course of the stonework. The screen was the next section to be reinstated followed, finally, by the replacement of the effigies, each on a pad of lead.

CONCLUSION

This programme of conservation provided a rare opportunity to see beneath a medieval monument probably in its original situation, and the discovery of the crypt has added to the importance of the Grey tomb. Recent excavations on two of the fine 15th-century alabaster tombs *in situ* in Harewood Church did not reveal a vault, and this must not therefore be considered an essential feature of such burial places.³²

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to English Heritage for their financial support for this publication. They are also grateful to English Heritage, and their photographer Jonathan Bailey, for the photographs of the monument after its reinstatement, and to Dame Pamela Hunter for organising the scaffolding to make the photography possible.

NOTES

¹ H.L. Honeyman, 'Some Early Masonry in North Northumberland', *AA*, 22 (1935), pp. 168-9. He was also responsible for the description of the church in M.H. Dodds ed., *Northumberland County History* Vol. 14 (1935), pp. vi, 310-21. Rosemary Cramp, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture in England*, Vol. 1 (1984), does not repeat this assertion.

² This stone was seen by Honeyman in the churchyard, and I am grateful to Peter Ryder both for telling me of its present location, and for

commenting on its date, which is probably not later than c. 1100.

³ John Grundy, Grace McCombie, Peter Ryder, Humphrey Welfare and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Northumberland* (1992), p. 227.

⁴ *NCH* 311.

⁵ *NCH* 325.

⁶ Note that the *NCH* 311 says the chapel was twice extended and heightened, perhaps by Muschamp and Gloucester, i.e. in the C13.

⁷ *NCH* 325-7.

⁸ G.G. Coulton, 'Medieval Graffiti, especially in the Eastern Counties', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 19 (1915), pp. 53-62. I am indebted to Dr. Eric Cambridge for this reference.

⁹ *NCH* 328 and pedigree.

¹⁰ E.F. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century 1399-1485* (Oxford, 1961), 326-8. Christopher Clark, *The History and Antiquities of Richmondshire* (1821), 54-5. C.H. Hunter Blair, *Visitations of the North: Part III, A Visitation of the North of England, c. 1480-1500*, Surtees Society, 144 (1930), 132-3.

¹¹ Personal communication, Dr. Constance M. Fraser.

¹² *NCH* 313.

¹³ *NCH* 311-12.

¹⁴ Hanna Conservation, *Church of St Peter, Chillingham*, para. 2.5.

¹⁵ Rev. William Greenwell ed., *Wills and Inventories from the Registry at Durham* Part II, Surtees Society 38 (1860), 172. Sir Thomas' parents, Sir Ralph (d. 1564) and Lady Isabel (will dated 1581, *ibid.* 50), were certainly buried in Chillingham church, possibly in the vault in the chapel.

¹⁶ Honeyman, in *NCH* 317, considers this door to be late C16, and quotes a dated parallel. In Pevsner (1992) "a re-set C12 door" is preferred.

¹⁷ *NCH* 313. The obelisks at the east corners of the tomb chest were presumably replacements for the pillars of the tester. They are absent from the photographs in *NCH*, and in C.H. Hunter Blair, "Medieval Effigies in Northumberland", *AA*⁴, 7 (1930), plates IX.1 and X, and had probably been in store for many years before being rescued by Hanna, *op. cit.*, para. 11.4.

¹⁸ Pevsner (1992) considers the whole addition to be Jacobean, and dismisses the motto as Royalist. It has not yet been possible to discover how long this motto has been part of the family achievement; could it have been introduced after the Reformation? Brian Kemp, *English Church Monuments* (1980), 70-71, however, gives dated examples of both strapwork and obelisks of the late C16. See Hanna *op. cit.*, para. 12.4.10, and Blair *op. cit.*, 16-17.

¹⁹ The description of the vault is derived from David Heslop, *Recording at Chillingham Church, Northumberland* (1997).

²⁰ NRO Chillingham Parish Register, one of several reports between Register of Baptisms 1798-1813 and Register of Burials from 1768.

²¹ NRO Diocesan Records A/186.

²² *NCH* 312-13, 319-21, and Blair *op. cit.*, 15-17, 23-24, plates VIII-X.

²³ We are very grateful to Richard Knowles for reading this paper, drawing our attention to the Harewood article, and for noting the unusual nature of Sir Ralph's moustache.

²⁴ Blair *op. cit.* 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 16.

²⁶ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Northumberland* (1957), 123.

²⁷ There are two sets of identifications in print, C J Bates in *PSAN*², 3 (1887-88), 341, and C H Hunter Blair twice, in *AA*⁴, *op. cit.*, and also in *Northumbrian Monuments* (Newcastle upon Tyne Records Committee, 1924), Chillingham Church 116-119 and plates VII-X. The saints are listed again, without descriptions, in *NCH* 320.

²⁸ Frank McCombie must take the credit for spotting the little animal, and we are most grateful to him for discussing the saints with us.

²⁹ *NCH* 321, and *NCH* I 147.

³⁰ We are indebted to Dr. Richard Fawcett for commenting on both the suggested Scottish origin of the monument, and also on the date of the blank tracery on the half-piers at the rear corners of the tomb.

³¹ This section is based on the report by Hanna Conservation, *Church of St Peter Chillingham*...

³² L.A.S. Butler, "All Saints Church, Harewood", *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 58 (1986), pp. 85-108.