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Alnmouth Old Church

A. Aspinall, F. Bettess and R. B. Connell

SUMMARY

S*t. Waleric's Church, Alnmouth, stood on the top of a small hill across the river from the village, but its exact location is unknown. The present size of the hill top seems to be inadequate for anything except a very tiny structure. The paper describes a multi-disciplinary investigation combining geophysical survey, architectural reconstruction, topographical survey and documentary search. The different approaches agree sufficiently well for the size and location of the church to be given with a high degree of confidence. To accommodate the church the hill must have been much larger than it is now.*

INTRODUCTION

Alnmouth Old Church has all but disappeared. Its existence is recorded in documents, and a few late eighteenth-century prints show its last ruinous phase. Two grave stones are the only indication that once there was a churchyard on the site. Knowledge of its exact location on the ground has been lost. Not only is its position forgotten but misapprehension as to its size is now widespread. Many local people think that it must have been only a small chapel, trying in their imagination to match it to the present size of the hill on which it stood. This is understandable when it is remembered that the last fragments of the church fell down in 1806.

Alnmouth is on the Northumberland coast, about 35 miles north of Newcastle upon Tyne and stands on a southward pointing peninsula, bounded by the North Sea to the east and the estuary of the River Aln to the west and south (fig. 1). Church Hill is on the other side of the

river, directly opposite the southern tip of the Village. It is a whale-backed narrow ridge running approximately north and south and falling away sharply to both east and west. At its northern end it rises steeply from an encircling retaining wall to reach the highest point from which it descends with a more gentle slope to the south (fig. 2).

The river used to flow round the southern side of the hill, which was connected to the village by a low lying neck of land. This neck was swept away during a gale which raged on Christmas Day 1806, and the Aln took a new course between the hill and village. At the same time the last fragments of the Old Church remaining on Church Hill fell down. It had not been used for many years and with the increased difficulty of access its site became overgrown and neglected, and knowledge of its location was lost.

THE SAXON CROSS

In July 1789, seventeen years before the river changed its course, two pieces of an Anglo-Saxon cross were discovered on Church Hill. The pieces, now in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne's Museum of Antiquities, although not forming a complete cross, have a combined height of 915mm (3ft), and greatest width of 430mm (1ft 5in), (Cramp 1984, I, 161; Okasha 1971, 47). On art historical grounds the cross has been dated to the ninth/tenth century (Coatsworth 1979, I, 209-13).

Unfortunately there is no record of the location of the find other than its being '...near the ruins of St. Waleric's Chapel', which is one of the names for the Old Church. As the two

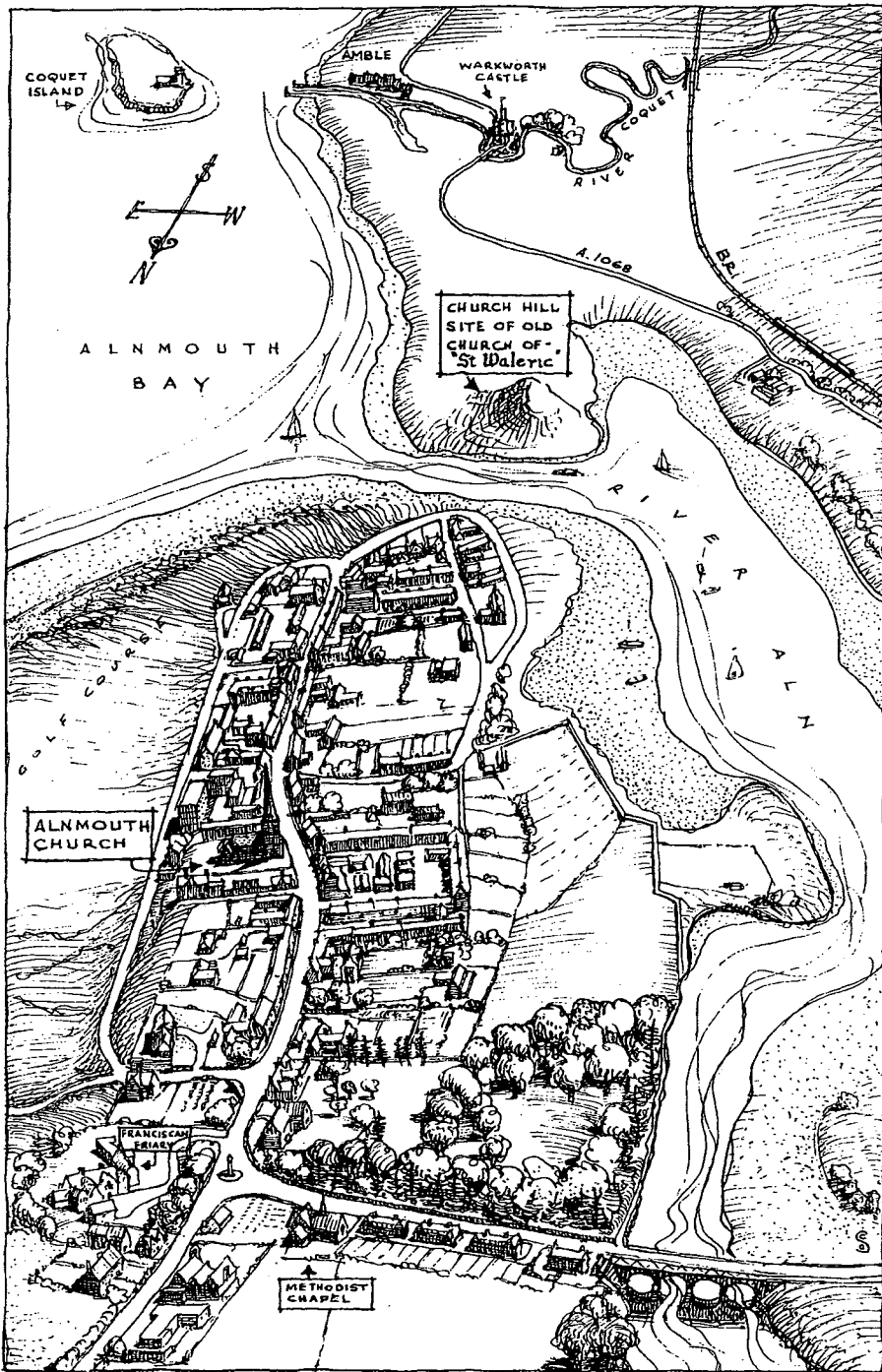


Fig. 1 Bird's eye view of Alnmouth. By kind permission of Mrs. Spence.



Fig. 2 Church Hill from village.

pieces that were recovered in no way represent a complete cross, there are other fragments which are either still buried somewhere on the site or have been lost in the erosion of the hill; the latter being more likely.

Wise and Ross in their attempts to find the position of the Church, emphasise the importance of the cross since it '...bears a runic inscription and English runic inscriptions are so rare that the slightest chance of finding another one must not be neglected' (Wise & Ross 1954, 24).

THE SITE TODAY

The hill is overgrown with wild vegetation and the most prominent feature on it is a wooden cross set in a concrete base, which was erected in 1984 at the instigation of Rev. John Rutherford, the then Vicar of the joint parishes of

Alnmouth and Lesbury. Its sole purpose was to draw attention to the fact that the site was one of religious significance and that at one time there had been a church on the hill.

A slab of concrete lies about 7m south of the wooden cross (fig. 3). This is hexagonal in plan and symmetrical about its longest axis which passes through two opposing vertices. Its length on this axis is 6m, its width is nearly 4m, and the thickness is 310mm. The condition of the concrete, and the general appearance of the slab, suggest that it is some military defensive structure from the 1939–1945 period. This is probably '...the remains of a gun-pit made in the last War. ...' reported by Wise and Ross. Two independent groups of student surveyors gave the National Grid co-ordinates of one of the corners of the slab with an agreement of 20mm so that its location and alignment are known with sufficient accuracy for this investigation.

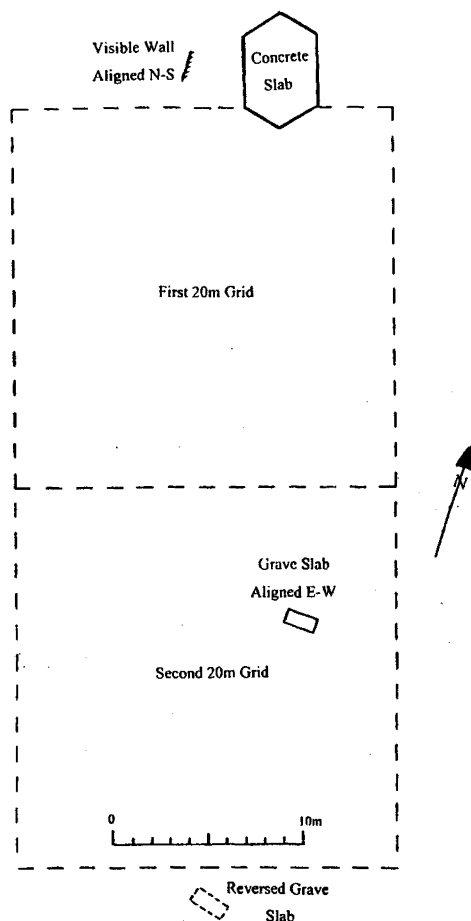


Fig. 3 Hill top.

At 26m to the south of the slab and just to the east of the prolongation of its main axis is a grave stone which has the appearance of the top slab of a table type tomb. It commemorates the burial in 1741 of a Robert Richardson, and from a magnetic bearing it was found to lie in a true east and west direction. At 41m south of the slab, and 6m west of the line of its axis, there is a second grave slab; this lies face down and so cannot be read.

Finally, almost lost in the grass, about 2m to the west of the concrete slab and on the crest of the steep slope to the west, there is a 2m length of stone wall. What little can be seen seems to be the external face of a wall looking towards

the west, and from a magnetic determination it lies on the true north and south line.

ARCHITECTURAL STUDY

Pictorial evidence for the physical appearance of the original Church comes from two prints of 1771, another of 1783 (fig. 4), and a sketch of 1804 (NCH 1895, II, 489–95), all made within a comparatively short period before the final destruction of the building. These illustrations show a cruciform church, with a chancel two bays long and a two aisled nave with a length of at least three bays and probably more (Betts G 1994). The transept had a clerestory, and both it and the nave appear to have been of considerable height. There is no evidence for or against the presence of a tower. Thomas Wilkin's map of 1791 (NRO MSM 15), when the village and hill were still connected, shows the transept and the stub of the chancel, and agrees well with the prints and sketch mentioned above. A comparison of the south east views of the church made in 1771 and 1783 (mentioned above), shows that there was a considerable amount of erosion in the 12 year period between them.

Based on the available evidence, an architectural reconstruction of the Church has been made showing the southern elevation and plan as they might have appeared in the fourteenth century (fig. 5). The illustrations mentioned above provide much evidence for the transepts and chancel, but while the width of the nave is clearly shown, its length is more uncertain. The dimensions were estimated from an architectural study of the illustrations. The overall dimension of the transepts, which was estimated to be 25m (82ft), was checked by scaling from Wilkin's map; this gave a value of 24.8m. (81ft 4in). Neither value is very accurate, but they confirm that the dimensions of the architectural reconstruction are acceptable.

DOCUMENTARY STUDY

The documentary evidence concerning the Church does not mention its shape or size, but



Fig. 4 View from SE 1783.

nevertheless there are clues as to its physical characteristics. The main references to the church, and the early history of the village, have been gathered together in the second volume of the *NCH*. The relevant information is summarised below.

When the new town of St. Waleric was founded in the mid-twelfth century it is stated that a church was already standing at the mouth of the river, which it was only necessary to enlarge or rebuild; no authority is given for this statement.

In order to create a borough called St. Waleric at the mouth of the River Aln, the Norman baron of Alnwick, took land from Lesbury. The borough itself is first mentioned in a charter, dated 1147, in which Eustace Fitz-John granted the tithes of its church to Alnwick Abbey; in a later confirmation of this gift he included a plot of ground in the borough of

Alnmouth. In 1307, a further confirmation of the gift of this plot states that the chief house of the canons was in Alnmouth.

A survey of Alnmouth, compiled in 1567, tells us that in ancient times the church always had an establishment of three priests and a clerk, and mentions that the church was all covered with lead. It was presumably this lead which figures in a later Visitation note of 1662 which accuses two men from Lesbury of taking away the church lead, bells and stone. Clearly by the latter date the church must have started to deteriorate, probably because of erosion of the hill on which it stood.

The erosion continued and in 1734 it was stated that:-

The church is of a very antique form and is supposed by most... to have been a Saxon temple which seems confirmed by the great quantity of bones daily washed out from a

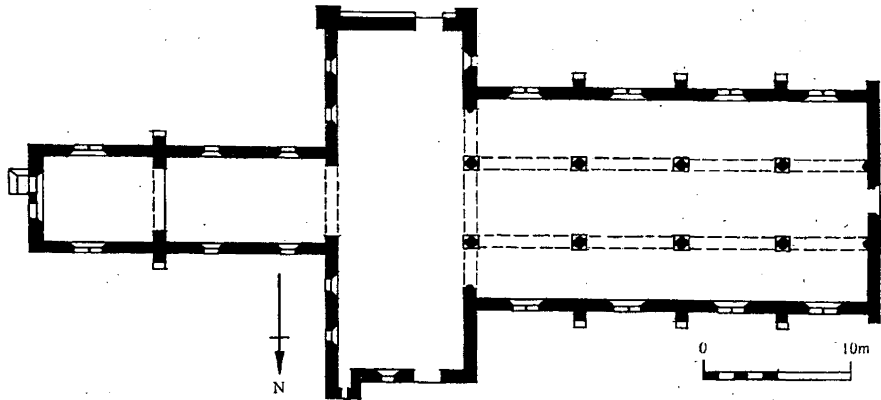
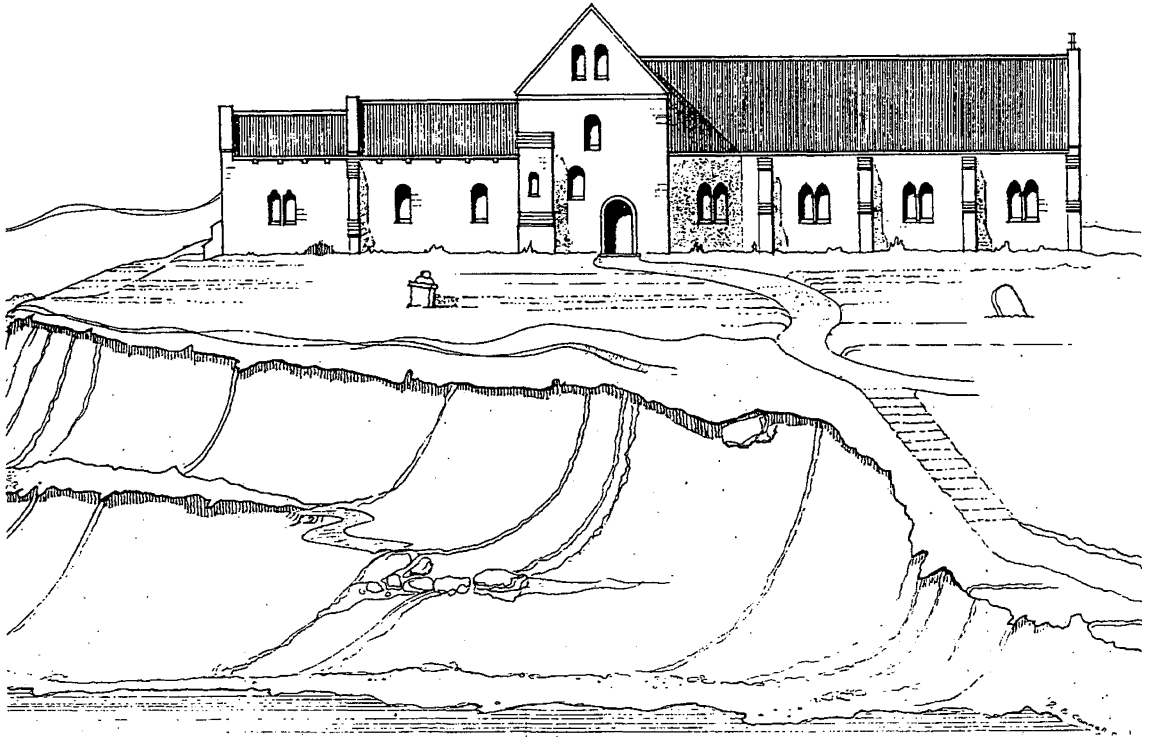


Fig. 5 - Architectural Reconstruction.

piece of ground to the east of the church by the sea at high water, which bones seem to be those of sheep, oxen and other cattle, which have been sacrificed (Mark 1734, 67).

Whatever else is made of this description it appears that severe erosion was going on, and it is possible that there were animal bones of some kind being washed out of the bank of Church Hill, as well as human bones that came from the churchyard.

LOCATION OF CHURCH AND GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

The 1865 edition of the Ordnance Survey 1:2,500 scale map of the area does not indicate a specific location of the Church, but the subsequent editions of 1895, 1921 and 1959 show a cross with the name St. Waleric's Chapel. According to Wise and Ross, the OS siting is tentative, and this is born out by the fact that the three maps of 1895, 1921 and 1959 put the conventional sign in distinctly different positions, though they do form a reasonably compact cluster. Wise and Ross used Wilkin's map to give a position for the Church which they then plotted on the 1921 edition of the 1:2,500 Ordnance Survey map. Unfortunately they did not record how this was done, but they show the site as about 76m (250ft) to the south east of the cross shown on the 1921 map.

For the present study a comparison was made between the location represented on Wilkin's map and the relevant 1959 OS sheet. A search was made on both maps to find two points that were identifiable on each and which coincided with intersection points of 100m grid lines. The two points then formed the hypotenuse of a right angled triangle, the other two sides being 100m grid lines. This triangle was then constructed on Wilkin's map and by proportion the grid lines were put in place and the grid projected to the area of the Church. The cross mark from the 1959 sheet was plotted on this grid and it was found to be approximately 15m (49ft) to the south west of the centre of the crossing of the Church. Thus the

two maps are in reasonable agreement, especially in view of the wandering nature of the OS location.

In an attempt to define the extent of surviving remains of this building, a geophysical survey of the hill was carried out and its results plotted in relation both to the visible above-ground features and the church's ground-plan as it could be inferred from the eighteenth century prints. The site is far from ideal for geophysical prospection since it is very restricted in the east west dimension, and the concrete slab prevents any investigation in a potentially important area; nevertheless a resistivity survey was carried out. The most practical procedure was to lay out two twenty metre squares down the spine of the hill, starting at the north end adjacent to the concrete slab. In this way an area of 40m by 20m was encompassed (fig. 3). The shorter dimension, orientated approximately east-west, was limited to 20m by the steep fall-off of the sides of the hill, and even so it could not be completely surveyed at its northern end. The southern extremity of the survey was limited by difficult ground-cover. Each square was divided so that measurements of earth resistance could be taken at 1m intervals on a regular grid, giving 400 readings per square. After appropriate processing the readings were presented as a plot in which high resistance features, such as walls, floors and other dense material appears as dark areas, and lighter ones denote ditches, pits, middens and other loose textured or damp materials. The plot shows a somewhat confused mass of high resistance values which seem to form two blocks running parallel in a N-S direction, flanking an area of low resistance. The visible length of wall to the north may be continued southwards as a block of high resistance whilst there is seemingly another parallel alignment 10-12m to the east. There is no well defined evidence of walling, but this would be in keeping with the disintegration of a building, possibly with a certain amount of robbing and the consequent scatter of building debris. Also the topography of the site will, almost certainly, give resistance variations relating to geology rather than archaeology.

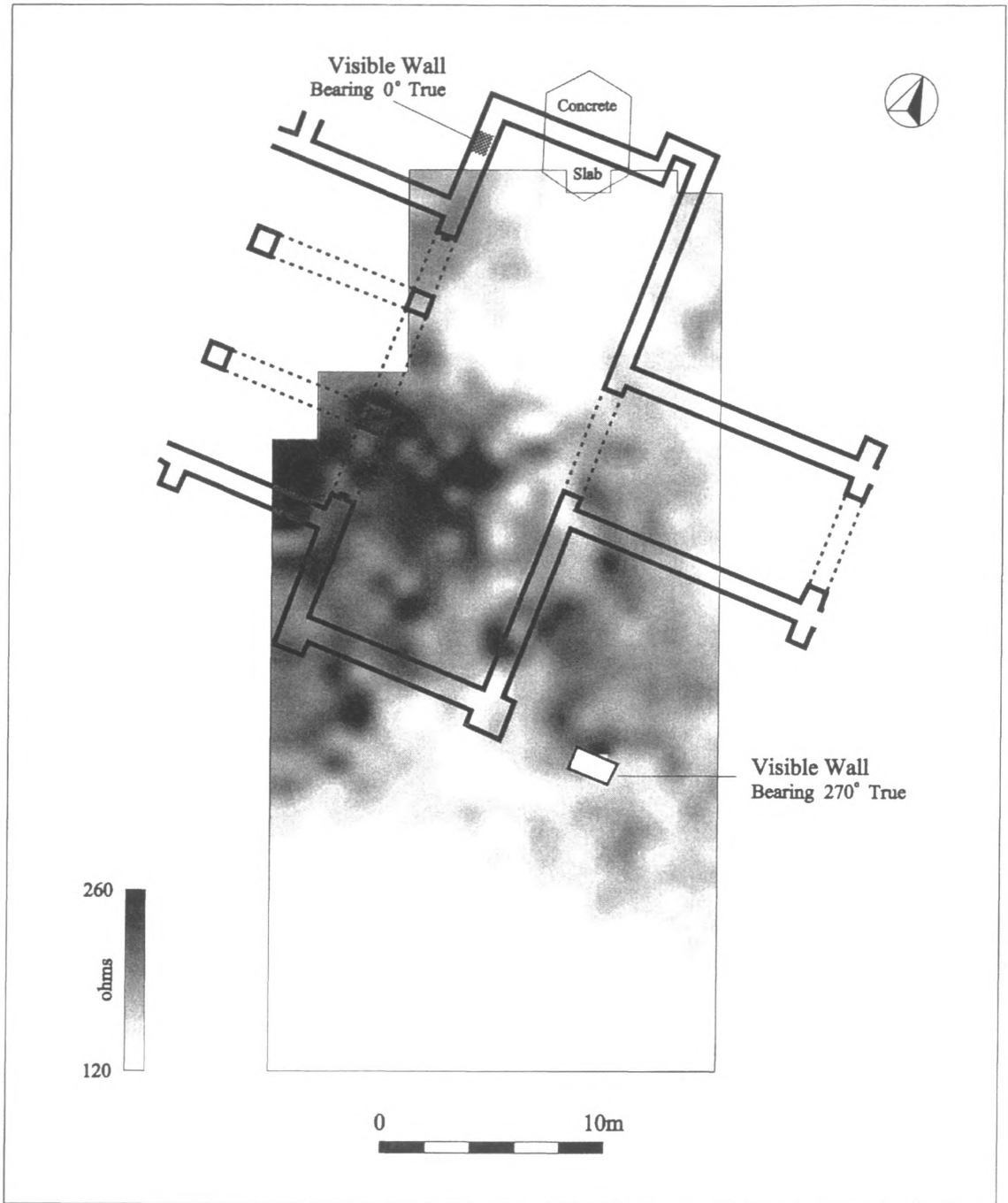


Fig. 6 Reconstructed plan on Geophysical plot.

The wall, the graves and the geophysical survey were all plotted on one sheet and an overlay of part of the Church plan, as deduced from the architectural study, was drawn on tracing film. The overlay was placed on the main plot with the west wall of the north transept over the short length of wall, and then it was moved backwards and forwards along this line to give the best correspondence to the geophysical results (fig. 6).

DISCUSSION

It is immediately obvious that the Church, at its greatest size, could not possibly fit on the top of the hill as it is now. In the fourteenth century the hill must have been considerably larger from east to west, and probably from north to south as well. In Anglo Saxon times it must have been a very large promontory site and, as such, the location here of ecclesiastical structures has been compared to the position of monasteries at Tynemouth, Jarrow, Hexham, Hartlepool and Ripon (Stocker 1993, 105–6 and fig. 9.3). The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of decay of the Church, and the finding of bones, support the picture of erosion and give an impression of it being particularly severe at that time.

The superimposition of the architectural plan helps to highlight the main features of the geophysical plot. It is remarkable that although they are products of different approaches they show such close agreement. It might be that a slight adjustment of the size of the architectural plan would bring them into closer harmony, but even without this they give strong support to one another. For example, the highest resistance values are concentrated in the region of the estimated nave-transepts crossing, where the greatest debris deposition might be expected to occur. The single undisturbed grave slab, while it can offer no precise linkage, does nothing to upset the picture and falls into a readily acceptable place.

CONCLUSION

The simple question, “Where was the Old Church?”, has been looked at from a number of angles, and each one has made a small contribution to the answer. The various elements – Wilkin’s Map, the short length of wall, the grave, the architectural plot and the geophysical survey – each taken separately have little weight, but when combined they build up into a convincing picture. This multi-disciplinary approach to finding the position of the Old Church has almost certainly yielded the correct answer. There would seem little left to do except wait for the possibility of putting the matter to the test of an archaeological excavation.

Although the original question has been answered, its solution prompts another one, namely “What was the Old Church”? The physical size of the Church, its complement of clergy in the medieval period, and the reference to the chief house of the canons, seem to point to something more than would be expected for a small seaport and fishing village.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to Mrs Spence for allowing us to make use of figure 1, which is from the original drawing done by her husband, Charles Spence.

This project arose as a continuation of work started by the late Gladys Bettess. It was her initiative which prompted the geophysical work, in which she participated, and she did much of the documentary study.

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