

Holy Island House, Gilesgate, Hexham

Archaeological Recording during Partial
Reconstruction of North Gable, November/December
2015



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Contents

Introduction		2
History		2-3
The Proposed Works		3
The Exterior		3-5
The Interior		5-6
Recording during Works		7
The Reconstruction		8
Architect's Plans and Elevations		8
North Gable before works	1	9
North Gable after works		10
Location of Photographs		11
Further photographs		12-13

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Introduction

No.2 Holy Island ('Holy Island House') is a substantial 17th-century property standing close to the Cockshaw Burn at the west end of Gilesgate, Hexham (NGR NY 93334 6436); the 'Holy Island' name derives from the town's Catholic community once having a mass house in the area, and on the site being almost an island between the Cockshaw and Tanner Burns. Along with the adjacent 1 Holy Island ('Toad Hall') this is a Grade II* listed building.



Location Map

Ordnance Survey 1:25000 sheet OL 43
OS map licence 100045703

History

The history of the house has been researched by Richard Young¹ who suggests that the property may be a decade or two older than the '1657' date over the front door indicates; this inscription may be a retrospective addition as it is of very similar character over the door of the '1738' on the adjacent. no.1, and is accompanied by the same initials T.B.K which almost certainly refer to its 18th century occupants, Thomas and Bridget Kirsopp. The 1664 hearth tax returns records one large house in this area – with 6 hearths, which would tally with this property – and that was held by Thomas Fenwicke. Bridget Kirsopp had been a Fenwicke. The Kirsopps were well known as a recusant (Roman Catholic) family, and an article in the Hexham Courant for 22nd February 1936 confidently identified the southern second-floor room as a Catholic Chapel, and a priest's hiding place in the chimney above the main ground-floor fireplace.. In 1835 the house passed to the Robert Leadbitter, who let it out to various families including the Civils, who were tanners; in 1860 William Civil purchased it, and lived here until his death in 1910. Later it was subdivided into a number of tenements and fell into poor condition; it was listed as a building

¹ (2001, MS report 'Holy Island House, 1-2 Holy Island, Gilesgate, Hexham')

of historical or architectural importance in 1951, which saved it from demolition when it was condemned as unfit for habitation in 1957.

The Proposed Works

The north gable end of the building, rising above the roof of the adjacent no 1 Holy Island, was in poor condition and the chimney stack thought to be in danger of collapse; an application for listed building consent was made for works involving the rebuilding of the gable-end chimney stack (which is of brick and thought to be secondary to the building) along with partial re-facing of the weathered stone wall surface beneath, which entailed the renewal/reconstruction of the surrounds to three small windows.

The Exterior



(1) The Front (East) Elevation

Holy Island House is arguably the most impressive of a number of 17th century houses in Hexham. It is built of roughly -coursed heavy rubble, with. Roughly-shaped quoins and sandstone dressings that are now quite weathered; the present roof is of welsh slates. The east elevation, to the street, is of two storeys and attics, and four irregular bays. Continuous string courses serve as

labels to the mullioned windows, which survive on the ground floor, two-light ones in the first and third bays (the latter set alongside the door) and four-light in the second and fourth. The doorway, which the string steps up to clear, has a flattened Tudor arch in a square moulded frame, on its lintel, set right-of-centre is the incised inscription K above TB and the date 1657. On the first floor the windows have been similar (except that the one in the third bay is of three lights) but they have all been replaced by 12-pane sashes, the original heads and jambs surviving. At attic level there are gabled dormers to the second and fourth bays, the first with a four-light window and the second now of two broader lights, having lost its intermediate mullions; they have straight hood moulds. The main gable ends have moulded kneelers ' wand they and the dormers have ashlar comings. The ridge has three stacks, one at each end and one between the first two bays; all are of old brick, with a stone offset at mid-height.

One peculiarity of both side elevations of the house is that the ends of the heavy first- and second-floor beams are exposed in the external wall face.

Later buildings adjoin both ends of the house, so only the upper parts of their gable ends are exposed, above their roofs. The south gable end has been refaced, perhaps relatively recently, in rough-faced stone; it has two windows at attic level, partly hidden by the adjacent roof, and two more higher up lighting an upper attic room in the south end bay. The north gable end is the focus of the current works; it had a single-light window with a stepped-and-chamfered surround, somewhat decayed, to the attic, set near the east end of the wall (P3), and two small windows higher up (P5/12 and P6/13), recently reopened, that had upright square-edged blocks to their jambs (which appeared relatively recent, except for the east jamb of the eastern window) and old timber lintels, that to the eastern window deeper and with a rough chamfer. The brick chimney above (P8-10) projected slightly from the wall face, and had the appearance of having been carried on a pair of corbels, the space between them having been later infilled with thin flagstones(P7). The gable had a cut stone coping, chamfered on its underside, which appeared coeval with the old kneelers on the front and rear elevations, yet there was clear evidence of an earlier and slightly steeper roof-line beneath it which must

either have related to a slightly lower eaves line, or a step between wall-top and coping so as to allow for a thicker roofing material, quite possibly heather thatch.

The rear elevation of the house, onto a yard, has been considerably altered, and prior to a recent pent-roofed extension (enclosing what was an external stair) was a complex patchwork of blocked openings, mostly without cut dressings. Some have now been reopened; three windows to the attic seem relatively recent.

The Interior

The interior of the house follows a classic three-unit plan; the entrance led into a cross passage, now occupied by a later stair, with the main living room to the south and a parlour beyond, and a service room to the south. The main living room has a big square-headed fireplace with a moulded surround, with a lobby to the west which has a triangular-headed door on the west, re-opened to give access to the new outshot but presumably originally opening into a wing containing a stair. On the north of the lobby is a plain opening in a rubble wall, which presumably once held a timber doorway like that on the floor above, into the parlour. This has a good moulded fireplace on the south with a wall locker on the east, and at each end of the wall a further recess formed by a blocked window. On the north of the stair the service room has a plain late 18th or 19th century fireplace with a wall locker on the east, and, again, recesses at each end of the wall formed by blocked windows.

On the first floor there are remains of an old stud partition, now converted into a book case, on the north of the present stair. The bedroom to the south has a plain late 18th or 19th century fireplace, with to the west of it an original door, set in a wooden frame with a flattened triangular head, with indented decoration, opening into the southern bedroom which has a good original fireplace with a flattened Tudor arch, with a wall locker to the east and beyond that a recess formed by an original window, cut skew through the wall presumably to clear an adjacent property but now blocked, although it's

chamfered stone surround, with a central vertical iron bar, is exposed. The northern first-floor room has a plain 19th century fireplace of told ashlar.

The second or attic floor has had later partitions removed to produce one large room, open to the roof, save in the southern bay where there is a loft floor accommodating an upper chamber. The roof structure over the main room is of four bays, with impressive upper cruck trusses, springing from the walls c 0.50 m above the floor, with collars halved onto their north faces, two levels of purlins and a square-set ridge. The northern truss supports the ridge between the overlapped ends of its blades, whereas the other two have their blades rising to saddles which carry it.



(16) Second (Attic) floor looking north showing upper cruck roof trusses (P16)

Recording during works

An inspection of the wall from scaffolding, on the 13th November 2015, prior to the commencement of works, allowed the chimney base (P7) and three openings (P4-6) to be photographed from close quarters. A second visit was made on 25th November, when much of the wall face had been removed, including the external surrounds of the openings, and the chimney had been dismantled. There had not been any corbels; the front face of the chimney had been barely supported on the slab beneath; the contractor's opinion was that 'would not have lasted one more winter'. There were only two flues in chimney (P11) showing that the second/attic floor had been unheated. The two upper windows each had two-light timber frames (P12-13), of morticed but not pegged construction, which were set well back from the external wall face; their jambs and mullions were chamfered, lintels and sills left square. The window at attic level, near the east end of the wall, had a modern casement window, and its stone surround was badly decayed (P4).

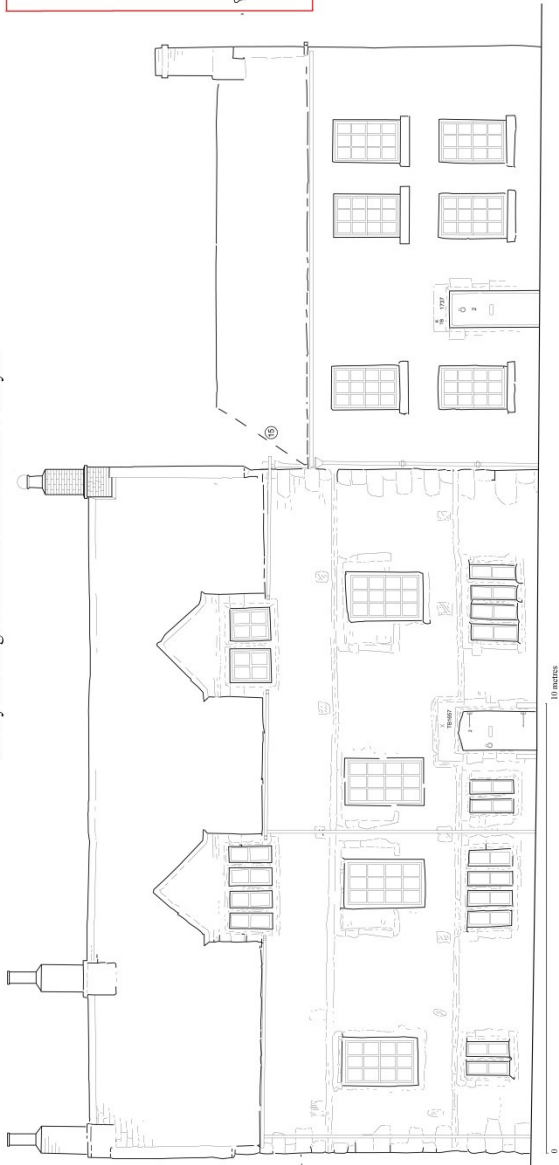
The Reconstruction

The wall was photographed after works when the scaffolding had been finally removed. The chimney was rebuilt (P14/15) more or less following of its original form (with 12 courses below the stringcourse and 10 above, as against the original 16 and 14, with a new ashlar string-course, chamfered above, and the wall below was refaced in squared sandstone blocks, laid in a slightly snecked manner. New triangular blocks were introduced beneath the gable coping, erasing the evidence of the earlier roof-line. The surrounds of all three windows were renewed, that at attic level with a surround following the original stepped-and-chamfered profile, those at a higher level with new oak lintels.

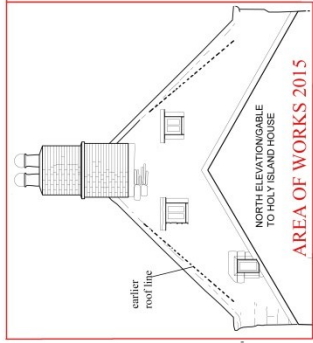
Peter F Ryder January 19 2016

HOLY ISLAND HOUSE, HEXHAM

Survey Drawings Kevin Doonan Architect/ P F Ryder



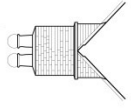
EAST ELEVATION (NB The Cottage drawn square)



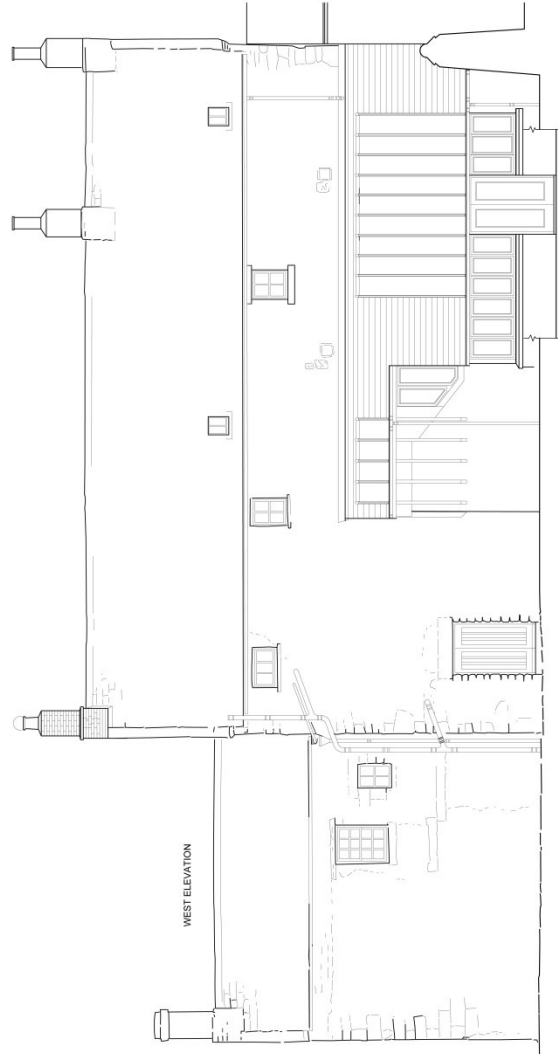
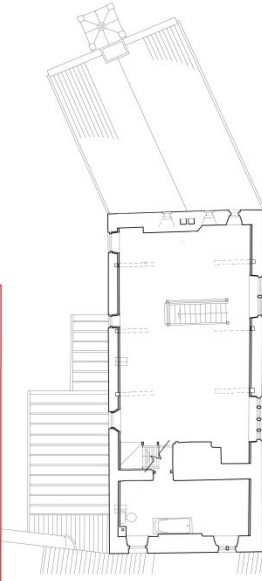
AREA OF WORKS 2015

earlier roof line

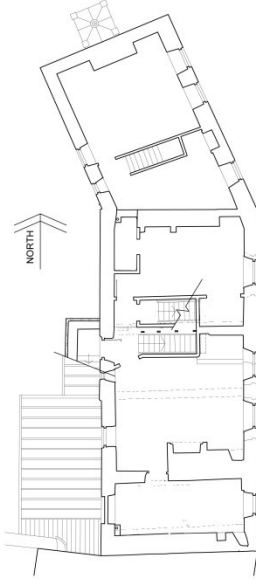
NORTH ELEVATION
TO HOLY ISLAND HOUSE



SOUTH ELEVATION
TO HOLY ISLAND HOUSE



WEST ELEVATION



NORTH

10 metres



(2) North gable end before works, November 2015 (P2)



(14) North gable end after works, February 2016

(3) North gable end from north-west, before and (15) after works

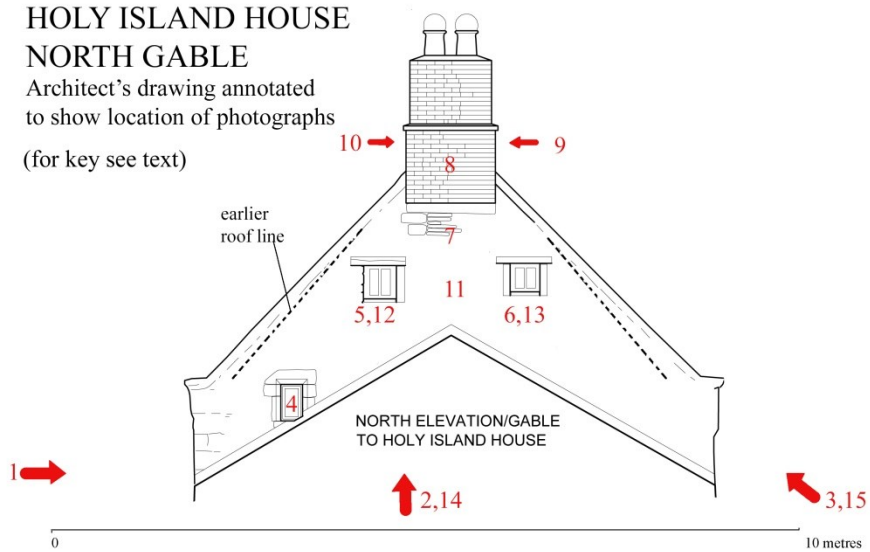


Locations of Photographs

- (1) Street (East) Elevation
- (2) North Gable before works
- (3) North Gable from north-west, before works
- (4) Second floor/attic window before works
- (5) Eastern of upper windows, before works
- (6) Western of upper windows, before works
- (7) Chimney base before works
- (8) Chimney north face before works
- (9) Chimney from south-west before works
- (10) Chimney east face before works
- (11) Chimney flues when outer face of wall removed
- (12) Upper eastern window when outer face of wall removed
- (13) Upper western window when outer face of wall removed
- (14) North Gable after works.
- (15) North Gable from north-west, after works.
- (16) Second floor and roof trusses looking north
- (17) Attic window after works

HOLY ISLAND HOUSE NORTH GABLE

Architect's drawing annotated
to show location of photographs
(for key see text)



(5) Eastern upper and (6) Western upper windows before works



(12) The eastern upper window in the north gable end, with timber frames revealed when the outer face of the wall was removed

(13) The western upper window





The Chimney Stack before rebuilding, from the north (8) , south-west (9) , and east (10)

(11) The twin flues of the chimney revealed by the removal of the outer wall face.





(4) Attic window in north gable end before works.

(17) Attic window after works





(7) Base of stack before works