

Portpatrick Old Church, Portpatrick, Dumfries and Galloway
Building record
May 2015



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Portpatrick old church, Portpatrick, Dumfries and Galloway

1 Location

The ruins of Portpatrick old parish church are situated on the north side of St Patrick Street in the centre of the village (NGR NW 99976 5421). The graveyard lies to the west of the church and the 18th century manse and gardens are on the east side. The church is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (ID SAM 16743) and the graveyard is a Category B listed building (ID 16744).

2 Historical background

The church, dedicated to Saint Andrew rather than Saint Patrick, was built in 1628-29 to serve the newly created Portpatrick parish. It was built in a cruciform or Greek cross plan and may be the earliest cruciform church in Galloway. The church continued in use until 1842 when the current parish church was built at the east end of the village. The adjacent graveyard continued to be used for burial until the later 19th century when it was replaced by the New Cemetery on Portree Terrace.

There are very few surviving historical accounts of the church. The Old Statistical Account of Scotland compiled in 1791 states that the church 'has lately been repaired' (OSA Vol 1, 1791-99: 46) and Gifford (1996: 491) gives the same year for the construction of the slated cupola on the roof of the church tower.

The only contemporary description of the church was written in 1842 by the then minister, Rev A Urqhart, as part of his parish contribution to the 'New Statistical Account of Scotland':

'It (the parish church) was built in 1628 and 29. It is at present in indifferent repair; but it has been resolved by the heritors to erect a new one, of sufficient size to accommodate the parish. The present building, which is in the form of a cross, with a round tower as belfry, contains 300 sittings, none of which are free except those in a form placed in the middle passage'. (NSA 1841Wigton Portpatrick: 156)

In the same report Urqhart mentioned that the manse had been 'thoroughly and comfortably' repaired in 1838 and 'at the same time the garden was enclosed with an excellent six feet wall'.

There is documentary evidence for an earlier chapel on or close to the old parish church. An Act of 1626 from the Synod of Galloway requests permission 'for rebuilding the decayed kirk at Portpatrick' (Scottish Record Office GD 214/502) and Urqhart (NSA 1841: 156) records that a chapel dedicated to St Patrick 'formerly stood either on the site of the present church or near to it.' Until 1628 Portpatrick formed part of the parish of Inch and, given the large size of that parish, there may well have been a chapel of ease in the village to meet the needs of local people as well as travellers crossing to and from Ireland. It is not known if the 'decayed kirk' in the 1626 Act was the remains of a medieval chapel or a Post Reformation church.

It has been suggested (Cunninghame 2004: 20) that Portpatrick had a monastery but there is no evidence to support this. The nearest monastic house was the Premonstratensian abbey at Souleseat, Castle Kennedy.

The Rev Urqhart's 1841 report also includes a fascinating account of discoveries pointing to prehistoric activity on the site:

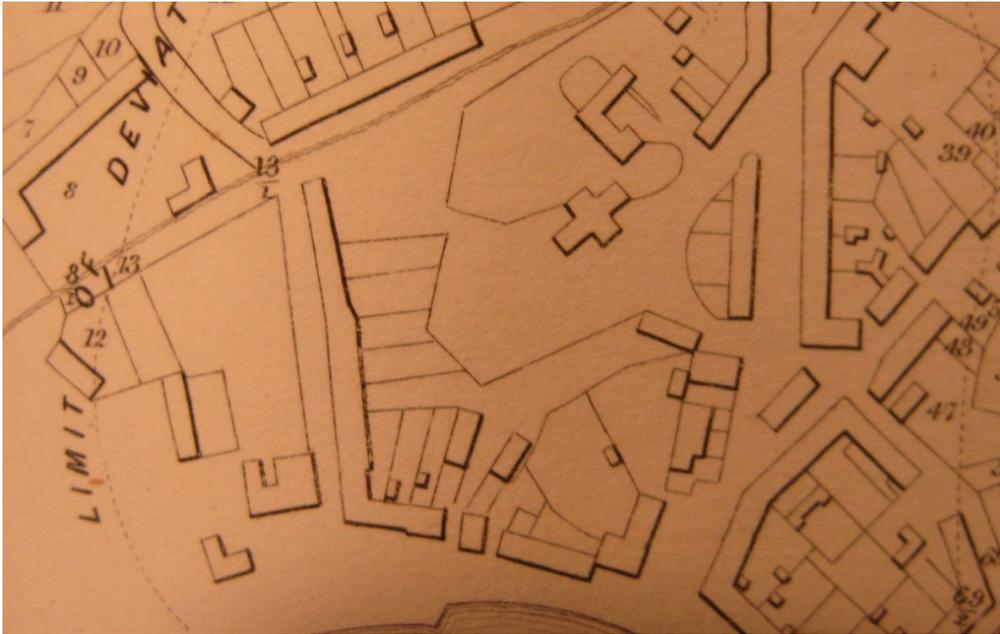
'Circular pieces from two to three inches in diameter are frequently dug up in the churchyard, along with rings, out of which these pieces seem to have been cut. Both of these are supposed by the people here to have been used at one time as money.' (NSA 1841 Wigton Portpatrick: 156)

Urqhart's 'circular pieces' and 'rings' are in fact waste material from the manufacture of shale jewellery. The 'rings' are broken bangles and wrist ornaments and the 'circular' pieces the blank produced when a bangle is cut to shape. Shale can be easily cut and shaped with a sharp knife and when polished resembles jet. A considerable number of shale fragments were found in the graveyard during the 19th century and are now held in Stranraer Museum (the Anderson Collection), Glasgow Museums and Galleries (Man Collection) and the National Museums of Scotland (Wilson Collection). The style of the bangles indicates an Iron Age date (approximately 800 BC – 400 AD). Polished shale jewellery is occasionally found at later prehistoric settlements in south-west Scotland but the large quantity of pieces from Portpatrick plus the presence of production blanks suggests that this was a shale workshop.

3 Historical maps and other images

A number of 18th century maps mark the approximate location of the church and graveyard but none are large enough in scale to accurately show individual buildings and boundaries. The most comprehensive is General Roy's Military Survey of Scotland produced in mid 1750s which depicts the church and graveyard in their present position. The Roy map is too small to pick out the details of individual buildings.

The first accurate, large scale survey of the village is contained in the 'Plan and section of a proposed railway from Dumfries to Portpatrick to be called the British and Irish Union Railway' surveyed in 1845 (Stranraer Museum: WIWMS WCC/4/3 and Fig.1). The map of the final section of the proposed line contains an inset plan of the village which includes the outlines of the church, graveyard and manse. The boundary wall around the graveyard is also shown with an apparent entrance or break to the north-west suggesting that there may have been access to the graveyard from Blair Terrace. Interestingly, no boundary wall is shown on the west side of St Patrick Street which is the site of the modern entrance into the graveyard. This is curious as the wall is shown on a sketch of 1811 (see Hutton's sketch below). Either the wall had been demolished by the 1840s or the 1845 map is inaccurate.



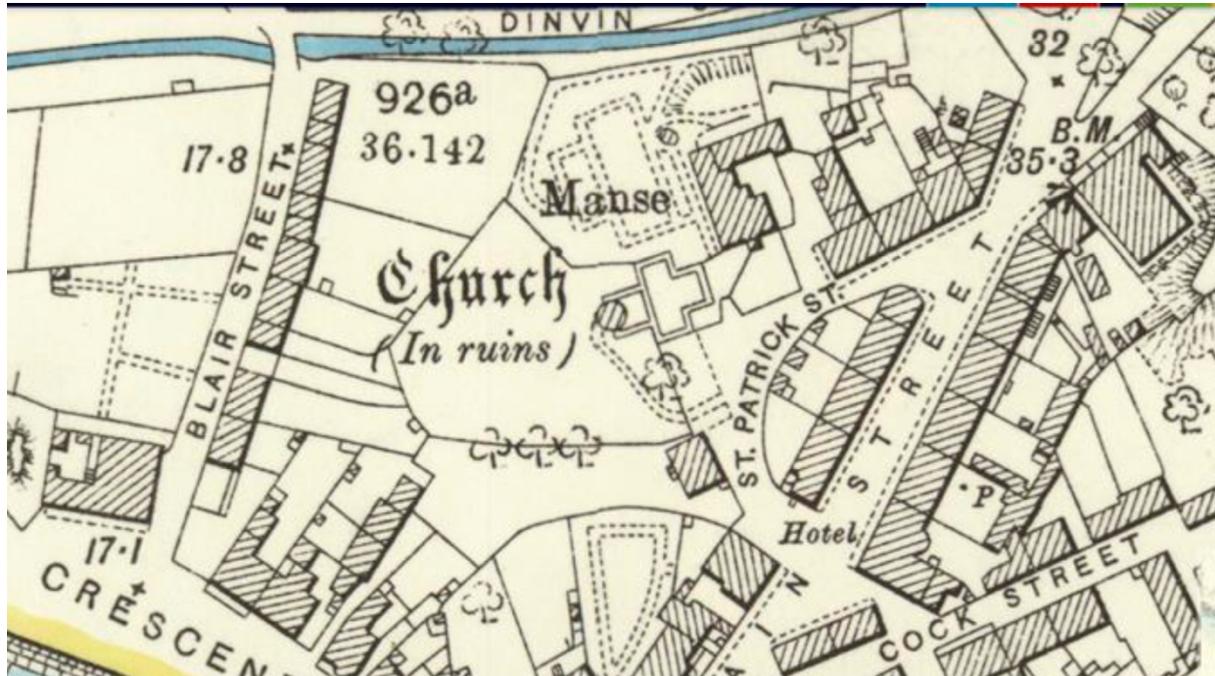
1. Extract from the British Irish Union Railway map of 1845

The First Edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map of the Portpatrick area (Fig. 2) was published in 1849 and is based on survey work undertaken during 1847-48. The central and east sections of the church are shown in outline (signifying an unroofed structure or ruin) but the west end is shaded which means this part of the building was roofed. Curiously, the tower is not depicted. The graveyard boundary is shown as a complete enclosure with exactly the same outline as survives today. The map also shows a small square enclosure to the south-east of the church in what is now the manse garden and depicts a long narrow building at the southern end of St Patrick Street with one end close to the south-east corner of the graveyard boundary wall.



2. Extract from OS six-inch map of 1849

The 1894 25-inch Ordnance Survey (Fig. 3) map depicts the site in more detail but shows little change to either the church or graveyard since the 1849 survey. The tower is marked as a roofed structure and the church is shown unroofed. The cross wall at the east end of the west transept is also marked. There are some minor alterations to the layout of the manse garden, there is a new building on St Patrick Street close to the south-east corner of the graveyard wall and there have been some changes to the garden walls between the graveyard and Blair Terrace.



3. Extract from the OS 25-inch map of 1894.

Later Ordnance Survey maps show no alterations to the church or graveyard.

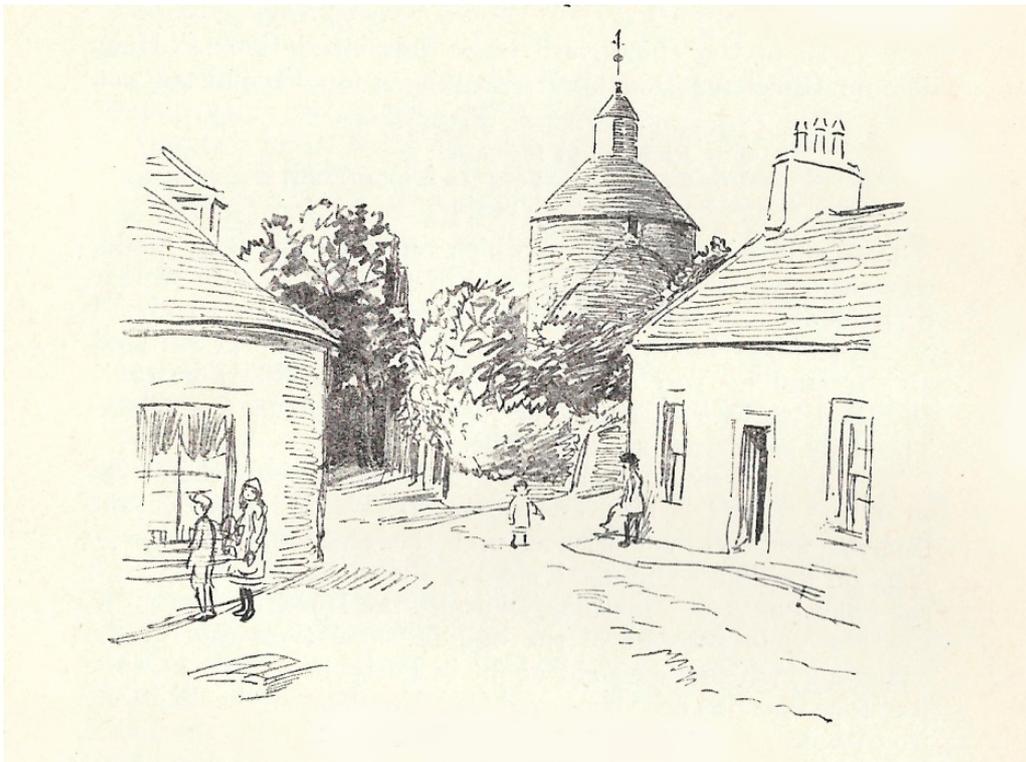
The map evidence demonstrates that there has been no significant alteration to the church or the graveyard boundary wall since the 1840s. It is likely, although it cannot be demonstrated from the map evidence alone, that the graveyard has been in the same position since the construction of the church in the 1620s.

The only known image of the church when it was still in use is a sketch made in 1811 by George Henry Hutton. This view of the church is from the south and shows the gabled end of the south transept with a double door below a rectangular window with open shutters. Above the window is a square recess for a heraldic stone and a finial is shown at the apex of the gable. The building appears to be harled or rendered and the roofs of the tower and church are tiled. The graveyard enclosure wall is to the left of the south transept and there is noticeable drop in ground level from east to west. The sketch also shows the manse and a now-demolished building on the east side of St Patrick Street. George Henry Hutton (d. 1827), was a professional soldier with a strong interest in Scotland's historic churches and abbeys. His collection of drawings is held by the National Library of Scotland.

Despite the large number of postcard views of Portpatrick village there are very few images of the church. Stranraer Library has just two undated – but probably early 20th century - postcard views of

the church (Gwa4 28). One is a colour image with the title 'Old Church Ruins, Port Patrick' which shows a number of monuments in the graveyard with the tower beyond. Some of the monuments appear to be painted and have railed enclosures, the tower has a rendered exterior and there appears to be a wooden (?) bird box attached to the outer gable of the church's south transept. The second image shows the unroofed church from the south, a view very similar to Hutton's sketch of 1811. The walls are rendered and the main surviving architectural features of the south transept can be seen.

A number of late Victorian and Edwardian guide books include simple illustrations of the church tower. One of the better examples is Hugh Thomson's sketch in Dick's 'Highways and Byways of Galloway' published in 1916 (Fig. 4).



4. 'Tower of the old church, Portpatrick' from *Highways and Byways of Galloway*

4 Previous descriptions of the church

The curious round tower and the church's cruciform plan have attracted the attention of a number of historians and architects. The earliest and one of the most detailed accounts is in McGibbon and Ross's 'Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland' published in 1892. This includes a full description with dimensions, a measured plan and two sketches (Fig. 5). The window mullions are described as 'away' but are shown – presumably as reconstructions – in both sketches. The sketch elevation of the doorway is particularly interesting as it shows the moulded lintel above the door; this feature is now lost. Mc Gibbon and Ross (1892:193) describe the tower as a 'singular structure – quite riddled with windows' and remark 'there is a prevailing belief that it was built as a lighthouse

on an exceptionally dangerous coast; and it is worthy of remark that a similar round tower at the church of Cockburnspath also occupies such a position as this, looking out on the sea’.

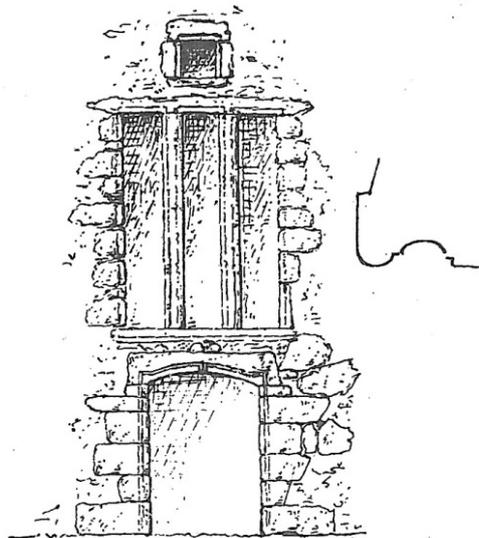
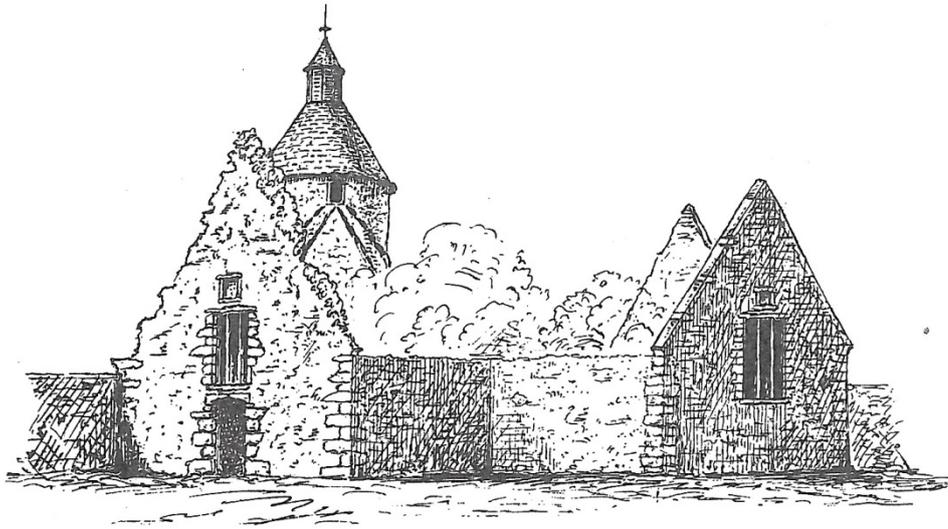


FIG. 1308.—Portpatrick Church.
Elevation of Doorway, &c.

5. *General view of church and detail of south door from MacGibbon and Ross, 1892*

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland’s description in the 1912 Wigtownshire inventory is equally detailed and also includes a ground plan. This account also refers to a bell dated 1748 in the tower ‘but particulars of it are not ascertainable, there being no means of access to the bell-staging, the floors having all disappeared’ (RCAHMS 1912; 137). The tower is described having been ‘erected originally as a watch tower, or possibly in connection with an older church’ and mentions the different stonework used in the windows of the tower and those of the church. Interestingly the RCAHMS plan, unlike the MacGibbon and Ross plan, does not show the doorway in the screen wall at the west end or the blocked door in the west transept. This is

probably because the interior of the building at the time of the visit was ‘totally neglected’ and a ‘mass of tangled vegetation’ (RCAHMS 1912: 138).

A further description of the church was made by RCAHMS in the mid 1980s:

‘This church, now a roofless ruin, is cruciform on plan and incorporates a four-storeyed round tower on the W. It measures 17.3m from E to W by 5.8m transversely, and 14.6m from N to S by 5.8m transversely, within walls 0.9m thick; there is a blocked S door to the S aisle and the fabric of the building incorporates a number of moulded stones in re-use. The tower (2.8m in diameter within a wall 1.1m thick) appears to antedate the church and may originally have been free standing; it possibly served both as a navigational beacon and as a belfry.’ (RCAHMS 1985: 29)

The blocked doorway is actually in the west aisle not the south and the re-used moulded stone may be fragments of red sandstone used as pinning.

The most recent description of the church is in Gifford’s ‘Dumfries and Galloway – the Buildings of Scotland’ published in 1996. This description includes the information that the window mullions were removed in 1791 and the slated cupola on the roof added in the same year (Gifford 1996: 491). Gifford also suggests that the moulded margins of the tower windows are 16th century.

A survey of the graveyard was undertaken by A Linch in 1966 and a full survey with detailed transcriptions of all the memorials was produced by the Dumfries and Galloway Family History society in in 1995 (DGMHS 2013). Neither of these surveys examines the church building.

5 Description of the church

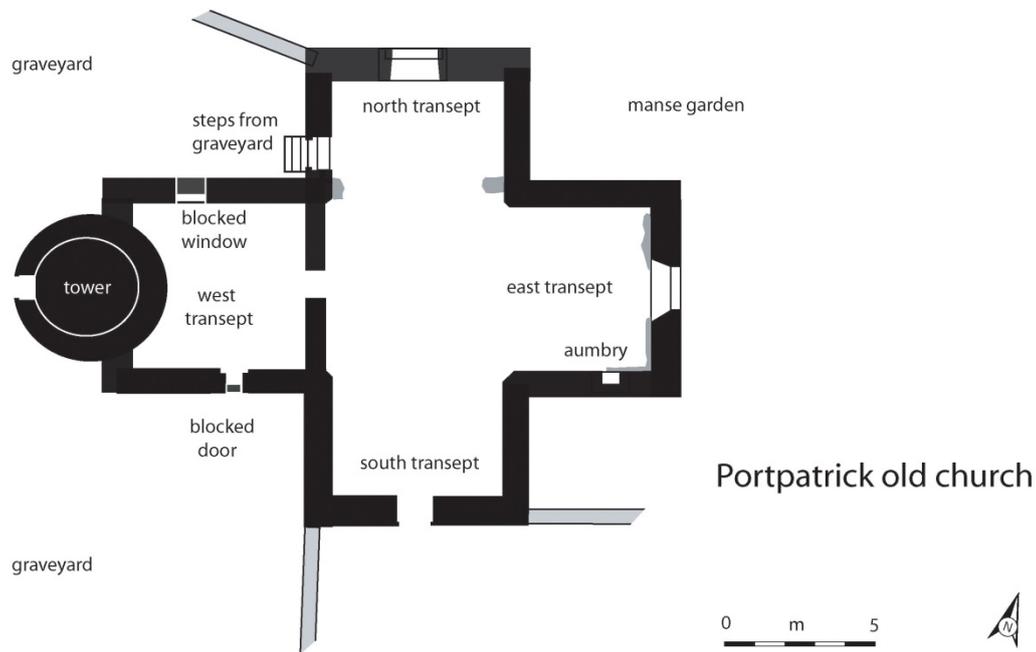
The church is cruciform in plan with a four-storey round tower at the west end (Fig. 6). It comprises four transepts and internally measures 17.4m east to west and 14.5m north to south. The tower is 2.8m diameter within a wall 1.1m thick. Both the church and tower are local greywacke in random rubble construction and the skews and window and door surrounds are sandstone.

The church was restored by the former Regional Council in the 1980s. This work appears to have included the clearance of rubble and vegetation from the interior of the church, pointing the walls with cement mortar and the installation of concrete lintels in the north, east and south transept windows.

External description

The main entrance is in the south gable and comprises a centrally placed door, 1.2m wide and 2m high with red sandstone margins. Above is a centrally set rectangular window with regular sandstone margins (Fig. 9). The door lintel and window sill are absent but the MacGibbon and Ross illustration of 1892 (Fig. 5) shows the lintel as having a slightly concave bottom edge and incised line decoration very similar to the surviving lintel on the west door in the north transept and the first floor window in the east face of the tower. In the gable space is a recess with sandstone margins, probably for a coat of arms. There is a similar recess in the centre of the east gable. The wall head on the south gable is incomplete but well-cut sandstone skewputs survive at eave level and there are cut sandstone quoins beneath.

The north and east gables follow a similar design with large, centrally set windows (Figs. 10 & 12). The best preserved is the north gable where some of the plain sandstone skewers are still in place as are the sandstone ridge stones at the gable top. Skewputs survive on all corners (Fig. 11) and the one on the southern corner of the east gable has the carved date 1629. In the west wall of the north gable is a doorway, 2.3m high x 1m wide, with set of stone steps leading from the graveyard into the church (there is a difference in height of almost 1m between the church interior and the graveyard). The doorway has sandstone margins and an intact sandstone lintel with a concave underside.



6. Plan of church

The west transept is built against the tower and the two short connecting walls at the west end are in dressed red sandstone with narrow moulded windows under the eaves. In the south wall is a blocked door, 1.9m wide x 0.8m wide (internal measurements) with an intact lintel which is covered by a repositioned 17th century grave slab. In the north wall is a blocked rectangular window, 1.14m x 0.7m, which has been used as a recess for a vertically set grave monument dated 1770.

Internal description

The floor of the west transept is 0.17m higher than the rest of the church interior and there is a low cross wall with a central doorway at the east end of the west transept. In the south wall of the east transept is a rectangular recess (0.56m x 0.50m x 0.4m deep) which probably one held a wooden cupboard or aumbry (Fig. 13). The inner corners or crossings of the transepts are quoined sandstone with chamfered faces and stepped chamfers at the bases (Figs. 13, 14 & 15).

The floor is covered with modern gravel but traces of what may be an original stone flagging survive against the base of the east gable. There are also traces of stone work at the southern end of the

north transept which may be flagging, the remains of a cross wall or possibly even part of an earlier (pre-church?) structure.

The only modern feature in the church is a circular raised flower bed in the central area. This probably was added during the 1980s restoration work.

Description of tower (Figs. 18-24)

The tower is four storeys with a conical slate roof topped by a slated cupola with wooden louvres. At the second floor is a moulded stone string course. There is a ground level door to the north leading into the graveyard and above this are three windows, one to each level. All the windows and doors have moulded, red sandstone surrounds. The surrounds are very worn and the external lintel above the door is now missing. To the north-west are a further three windows on the first, second and third floors and a similar set of four windows with an additional second floor opening on the south-west side of the tower. A small additional first-floor window on the north-west appears to be partly overlain by the northern return wall of the west transept and this is the best structural evidence for the tower being earlier than the church (Fig. 22). Traces of harling survive on the tower.

There is no internal connection between the church and tower but there are two blocked windows at first floor level. The larger window measures 1.7m x 0.6m and has the same type of curved lintel and incised decoration as seen on the west and south doors in the main church; it was probably inserted when the new church was built. The roof line of the west transept is marked on the east side of the tower by a line of broken slates beneath which is a mortar line corresponding to the transept ceiling. There are also a number of rectangular slots on the east face of the tower which held the rafters for the transept roof. Beneath the eaves on the tower's east side is a single top-floor window.

The lower part of the tower's east side appears to have been rebuilt to take the northern return walls of the west transept and possibly for the insertion of the first floor windows. These areas of repair are marked by mortar patching with small stones and red sandstone pinnings.

There is currently no access to the interior of the tower

6 Condition

The church is in fair condition although some saplings have taken root on the wall heads of the west transept. The tower, however, is in need of consolidation. The front lintel on the west door is absent and the door's stone relieving arch, although appearing in good condition, is unsupported. The stone surrounds on the first-floor window above the door are absent and a number of other windows on the tower are also missing their lintels. The main roof appears complete but slates are missing from the cupola and this means that the internal timber roof structure is at risk from weathering and rot. The interior condition of the tower is unknown.

7 Interpretation

Portpatrick Old Church is a good example of a Post Reformation Scottish church. In the reformed church there was no longer an altar at the east end and the pulpit, often placed in a central position, became the focus of the congregation's attention. Church design changed to meet these changes in liturgy and a number of cruciform-plan churches were built during the 17th century. Portpatrick is one of these and other examples are Lauder (Berwickshire) and Kirkintilloch (Dumfriesshire).

A curious internal feature at Portpatrick is the cross-wall in the west transept. In a standard cruciform-plan church there would be no need for a blocking wall like this nor for a change in floor height. Perhaps this division marked an area set aside for the special use of a particular group or individual, maybe the local laird. Or possibly the western section of the church was always designed for alternative purposes with only the east, north and south transepts used for worship. This would effectively create a T-plan church with an additional space against the tower. In this interpretation the blocked door and window in the west end would have provided access and lighting to a separate space.

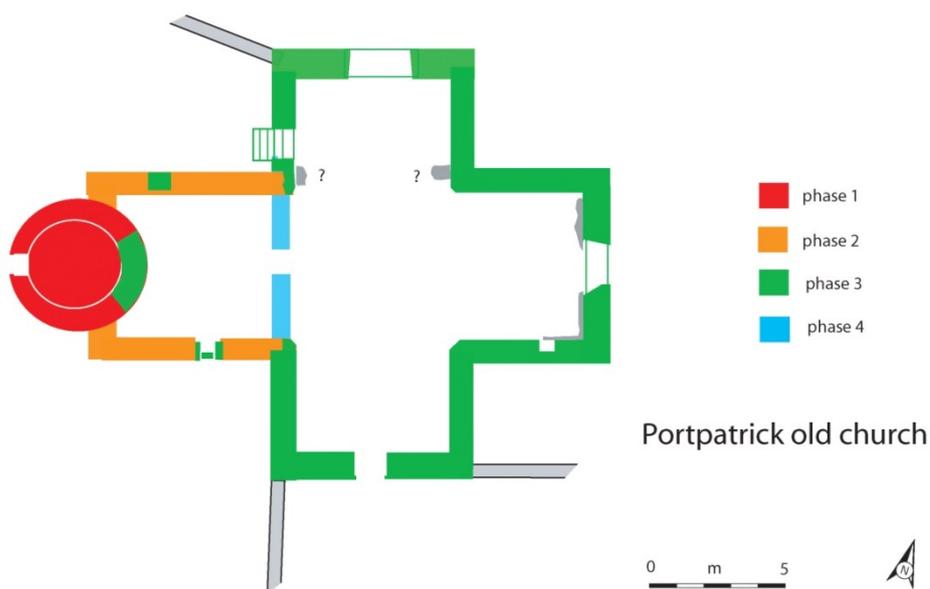
The blocked door and window in the west transept are also hard to interpret and the doorway in particular would have been unnecessary for standard church use. One possibility is that the west transept belongs to a slightly earlier structure, perhaps part of the 'decayed kirk' referred to in the Act of 1626. The window and door could have been blocked when the remains of this structure were incorporated into the later church. The margins of the door and window are in a style that is unlikely to be earlier than the late 16th century.

The other unusual feature at Portpatrick is, of course, the round tower. The evidence points to this being earlier than the present church and Gifford dates the windows to the 16th century. The local tradition that this was an early lighthouse or watch tower may be true but there is no way of knowing if it was a free-standing structure or formed part of a larger building. It was later incorporated into the west end of the church and used as a bell tower (bells were legal requirements in Scottish parish churches after 1642 (Gifford 1996: 37)). A similar round tower is attached to the coastal church of Cockburnspath in Berwickshire and Crossmichael in Dumfriesshire and Galloway also has a circular belfry dating from the early 17th century.

8 Possible building phases

An initial examination of the fabric of the church and tower suggests a number of possible building phases (Fig. 8). Phase 1 relates to the construction of the tower, probably in the 16th century; it may have been free standing or attached to a now demolished building. Phase 2, represented by the west transept, relates to a building attached to the tower and probably dating from the later 16th century. Phase 3 is the construction of the main church in 1628-29 and includes the replacement or construction of window(s) on the tower's east face; the other tower windows may also date from this phase. Phase 4 is the construction of the internal cross wall, probably during the later use of the church.

More detailed examination and survey of the building would help to refine these phases.



8. Possible building phases

9 Summary

Portpatrick is an interesting example of a relatively unchanged 17th century church with an unusual, earlier round tower. There is documentary evidence for an earlier chapel on or close to the church and there is some indication that the west end of the church may incorporate earlier features. The site's archaeological importance is increased by the discovery in the 19th century of a large number of Iron Age worked shale fragments. The site's value and setting are enhanced by the attached graveyard with its well-preserved collection of 18th and 19th memorials, including a number of memorials to named shipwrecks.

10 References

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11 Images



9. South gable with window & doorway.



10. North gable



11. North-east corner of east transept



12. East transept with window and heraldic recess.



13. Internal view of south transept with doorway and window. Aumbry in east transept to left.



14. Internal view of east transept.



15. Internal view of north transept. Door to graveyard on left.



16. North wall of west transept with blocked window.



17. South wall of west transept with blocked doorway.



18. View of tower from north-west.



19. South-west corner of west transept with skewput. Tower beyond.



20. West transept and tower from north-west. Doorway in north transept to left.



21. Tower doorway.



22. Tower window overlain by north-west corner wall of west transept



23. View of tower from east showing former roof line and west transept cross wall.



24. Detail of windows on east face of tower.