

# EVIDENCE FOR THE ANGLO-SAXON DATE OF THE CHURCH OF ST LAURENCE, WALTON-ON-TRENT

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this note is to describe a fragment of pre-Norman masonry included within the fabric of the church of St Laurence, Walton-on-Trent (Derbyshire Sites and Monuments Primary Record Number 27503), and to propose that the fragment is only one of several indicators that the building is of Saxon origin.

## THE CHURCH

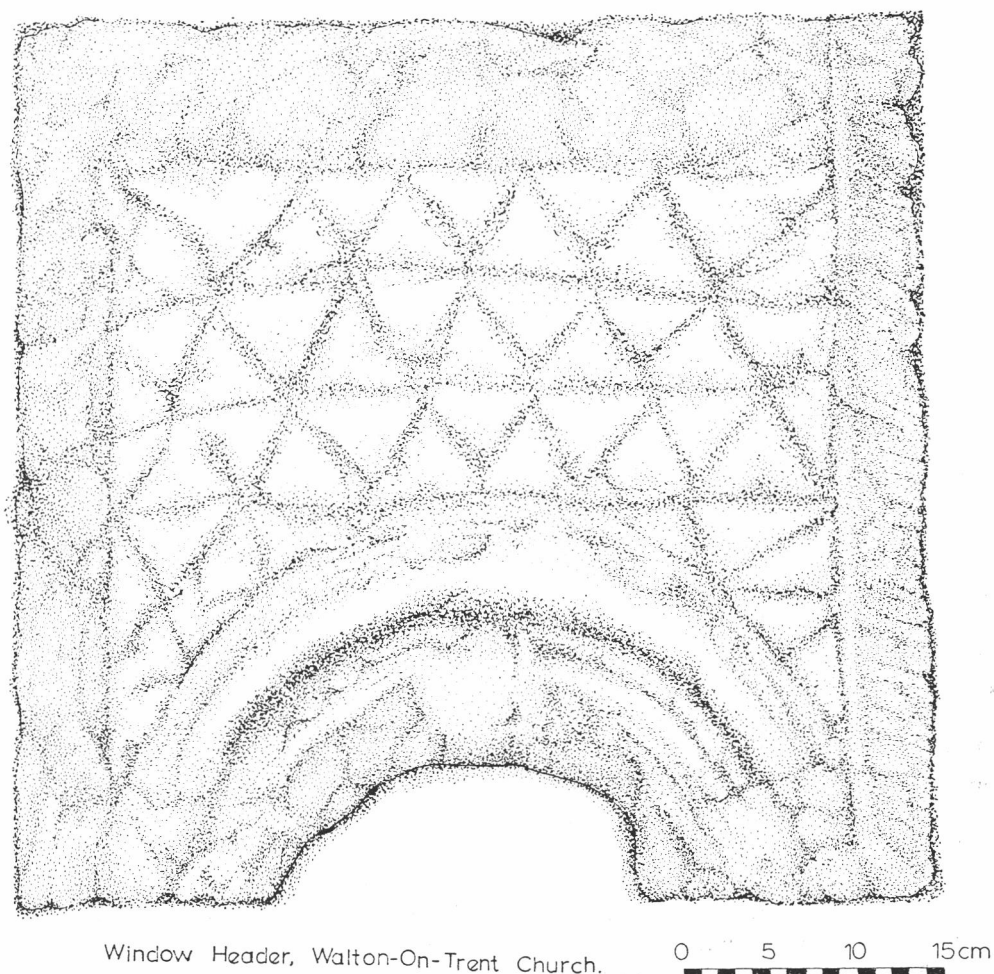
Walton-on-Trent is situated on the eastern bank of the river Trent where the present course of the river runs close to the western margins of a Mercian Mudstone plateau (BGS Map), producing a bluff slope which extends down to a very narrow first terrace. A hollow-way runs down this bluff towards a single-track bridge which spans the Trent. Walton appears to stand on a long established river crossing. Although the present bridge dates from the 1940s, and the earliest recorded bridge at Walton was built as recently as 1834 (Wesley, 1847: 147-8), there is a tradition that Edward II crossed the Trent at Walton after the battle of Burton Bridge (Lysons and Lysons, 1817: 281).

The church of St Laurence is located on the western fringe of the village, overlooking the Trent some 150 metres from the bridge (SK216183). It is an attractive church consisting of a west tower, a nave, a south aisle, a south chantry, a chancel and a vestry offset to the north. Cox (1877: iii, 505-13) provides a detailed analysis of the fabric of the church, which he visited shortly after the restoration by George Street (Lichfield J.R.O. B/C/5/1867), and so an extensive account of the church is not required here. It is worth noting, however, that Cox suggested that what was then a blocked-off round-headed doorway at the western end of the north wall of the nave was likely to be of Norman date, and that since Cox's day a number of alterations have been made to the fabric of the church, some of which have provided further evidence of the earliest phases of the building.

## THE EVIDENCE

One of these changes has been the removal of the stucco which hid the detail of the arcade on the southern side of the nave. This consists of two circular pillars and three pointed arches in two steps, and is described by Pevsner (1968: 348-9) as being late Norman — i.e. transitional — in style. The removal of the stucco has also exposed the remains of a second blocked-off round-headed aperture, presumably a former window, on the inner face of the south wall of the nave, situated high above the westernmost pier.

An unusual masonry fragment is to be found in an elevated position on the outer face of the south wall of the nave in a position almost opposite to the blocked-off round-headed aperture on the inner face of the same wall (Fig. 1). It is approximately square in shape, 52.5 cms long and 50.25 cms high. An arch of roll-moulding on the lower portion of the stone respects a missing



Window Header, Walton-On-Trent Church.

0 5 10 15cm

Fig. 1 Church of St Laurence, Walton-on-Trent: window header.

semi-circular segmental section. Much of the face of the stone is decorated with a crudely executed beaded pattern of interlocked triangles, but the top margin and two side margins have been slightly cut back. This stone is likely to have served as a monolithic external head to a window, and was identified as being of Saxon work towards the end of the last century (Cox, 1894: xix). A similar window header is to be seen at Skipwith church, where it is positioned over a narrow external aperture which broadens out in the interior wall to form a round-headed opening. Taylor (1978: iii, 856) suggests that this form of window is a late Saxon feature. It is tempting to regard the window header as being *in situ*, and directly associated with the interior round-headed aperture. However, such a conclusion would be unsafe, since Cox not only failed to mention the header in its present position, but also refers to a stone ‘with saw tooth moulding’ found ‘in the outer south wall of the nave, just above the foundations’ (Cox, 1877: iii, 510).

The geometric triangular decoration of the stone may not be an original feature. The poor execution of the design indicates that it was produced by an inexperienced mason, whilst the work on some of the other features of the stone, such as the rolled moulding and cut back margins is of a higher standard. Triangular patterning is to be found in the four diapirs on the gatehouse to Tickhill Castle in South Yorkshire. This gatehouse is said to date from the early twelfth century, possibly to the reign of Henry I (Clark, 1884: 494). Although the motif in these diapirs is rather similar to the pattern carved onto the header, Tickhill does not prove a very useful parallel as the decoration is in tile. A more relevant parallel can be found at Chepstow Castle in Gwent, where a pattern more similar to the decoration at Walton is carved in stone as the principal motif of a fine geometrically decorated doorway. The doorway at Chepstow is a very early example of Norman work, dated to the period 1067-75, and is said to be similar in style to examples in Normandy (Knight, 1991: 38). This suggests that the decoration represents an early, and badly executed, attempt to use a Norman motif, but what cannot be demonstrated is whether this motif was carved onto an existing feature of the church.

Perhaps the most substantial evidence for the pre-conquest origin of the church is provided by another alteration to the church made after Cox's survey. Some time after June 1905, a vestry was constructed just beyond the north-western corner of the nave (D.R.O. D1129 4/PI 11/12). This vestry was linked to the body of the church by a short passage, and access between it and the nave was provided by the re-opening of the round-headed doorway mentioned above. It can be seen that this doorway was cut straight through the wall, with parallel sides and no external recessing or internal rebate — a form characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon period rather than the Romanesque and later periods (Taylor, 1978: iii, 801).

Further examination of the north wall of the nave reveals another remnant of the pre-conquest church. Although this wall has been much altered, it is clear that the present two large square-headed windows have replaced three sizable pointed-arch windows. The outline of these features, which probably date from the thirteenth century, can be traced in the fabric of the wall. Yet these pointed-arch windows were not the first. Approximately 0.5 metre above the round-headed doorway there are the remains of a string course made up of large blocks of green sandstone. This course appears contemporary with the masonry around the door, and extends for some distance from the north-western corner of the nave, where it was broken when the most westerly of the square-headed windows was inserted. On the far side of the window, the wall has been disturbed by the insertion and subsequent removal of one of the pointed-arch windows, but the line of the string course can be observed for a short distance beyond this disturbance, where it is terminated by a green sandstone block standing on its end. This sandstone block may be the foot of a narrow window, similar to that in the south wall.

Documentary evidence does not contradict the interpretation of Walton church as Saxon in origin. The first reference to Walton appears in a Saxon charter of AD 942 (Cameron, 1959: iii, 667). It is recorded as a royal manor in Domesday (Morris, 1978: 1, 16) where, despite Cox's assertion that there is no mention of the church (1877: 505), the relevant phrase from the entry reads *ibi aeccle & pbr*, presumably an abbreviated form of *ibi aecclesia et presbyterium* — 'here there is a church and a priest's house'.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCES

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