

Archaeological recording to alterations to Overton church tower

Introduction

Archaeological recording of part of the tower of St. Mary's Church, Overton, Hampshire (SU 51484998) was made a component of conditions for planning permission for a new village hall (ref. CG (AE) REB E8/6). Overton Parochial Church Council commissioned the author to undertake the archaeological recording on its behalf. This was carried out in October 1998.

The work involved cutting a door through the north wall of the tower to connect the village hall with the church. There were no other structural alterations required beyond the removal of some internal plaster.

Historical and archaeological background

The church stands 150m to the north of the River Test at a height of 90m AOD, on the opposite bank of the river to the small market town of Overton. The place is first mentioned in two 10th-century Saxon charters granting royal land there to the Old Minster at Winchester, later Winchester Cathedral (Sawyer 1968, nos. 377, 824). The name '*Uferantun*' means 'the upper farm', although Ekwall (1960, 354) comments that the name may be derived from '*Ofer-tun*', meaning 'farm on the river bank', which suits the situation of the early settlement well.

After the Norman Conquest, the estate became part of the lands of the bishops of Winchester. It is possible that a royal grant of a market in 1218 signalled the beginnings of the medieval new town founded there by the bishop (Brough 1911, 211; Beresford 1959, 195-7). This appears to have been a similar 'double' settlement to the new bishopric towns at New Alresford, Hampshire, and Downton, Wiltshire, whereby the town was sited on the opposite side of the river to the original Saxon settlement (Beresford 1959, 195-7).

The earliest fabric of the church seems to date from the late 12th century, although the majority of the present building dates from the later 13th-15th centuries. The exterior has been much restored in the Victorian period, and in 1908 the west tower was rebuilt. The parish registers date from 1621, but coverage is uneven (Brough 1911, 216-7).

Earlier excavation work in the churchyard on the north side of the church uncovered evidence for late medieval quarrying and building work, beneath late post-medieval burials (Currie 1995, 1998).

Results

The tower at Overton is at the west end of the church. It was last rebuilt in 1908. It is considered that the structure to be altered dated entirely from that period, although older material may have been reused. The present structure comprises a stone tower with a broach spire. It was in three sections, divided by two horizontal string courses. On the SW and NW corners, there were three-tiered buttresses, the division between each tier being very approximately in line with the string courses. On the south side the south aisle has been extended by one bay alongside the tower causing an arch to be inserted in the south wall between tower and aisle. On the north side, there was a small stair turret built into the join between the north wall of the tower and the west wall of the north aisle.

Externally, the lowest section of the north wall of the tower was constructed in a chequer design with alternate stone and flint. This stands on a shallow brick foundation, the upper courses of which could be seen above ground level. The flint in the tower was cut square, unlike older flintwork in the aisle and chancel walls (although more recent patching with squared-off flint can be identified here). The stone used in the chequered section was of various types, suggesting reuse of old materials. It included local malmstone deriving from the chalk beds, as well as oolitic limestone of an undetermined source in an approximate 50-50 mix. The first string course was at a height of about 2.5m.

The second section of the tower (between the first and second string course) included three different layers. The lower two or three courses comprised a similar stone and flint chequerwork to that of the section below. This was succeeded by a few courses of a light brown stone that had been more roughly cut than that above it. The rest of the section comprises better cut light brown ashlar stone. The third section above the second string course was almost entirely well-cut light brown ashlar.

Preliminary work prior to inserting the new door had revealed that this chequered design was merely a thin facing to a much thicker brick wall. The stone face was approximately 19.5 cms thick, with the brick behind it being approximately 1m thick. Internally the brickwork extended the full height of the tower without interruption. It seems it had been covered by a plaster render, most of which had been removed prior to the recording. The brick work was unevenly faced, being alternate headers and stretchers set in alternate courses in a regular Flemish Bond.

On the west wall of the tower was a window in Perpendicular Gothic style. On the north side of the window, just above the first string course, was a reset Ordnance Survey bench mark, clear evidence that much of the lower stonework had been reused.

Internally there were a number of interesting features. The arch connecting the tower with the nave was probably earlier than the 1908 rebuild. Where it was not rendered it can be seen to be made of good ashlar in a late medieval style. Pevsner and Lloyd (1967, 367) date it to *c.* 1500, although Hare (forthcoming) has suggested it is slightly later. When this arch was built, it appears that a bay was added at the west end of the nave. Examination of the structure by the author and John Hare observed that the arches of this bay are in the same style and the same whitish ashlar as the tower arch, indicating contemporaneity.

On the south side of the tower, a more delicate Gothic arch of the late 13th or early 14th century style leads from the tower into the extended bay of the south aisle. The slender piers are surmounted by a simple bell capital. Both the capitals and the piers show signs of faded ochre paint.

The 1908 rebuilding of the tower

Detailed records for the rebuilding of the tower survive in the faculty records, the minutes of Overton Church Council, and other miscellaneous sources. These are outlined below.

The need to rebuild the tower was first mentioned at a meeting of the Church Council on 13th August 1907 when Sir William Portal suggested that Mr Jackson, the Diocesan Architect, should inspect its condition (HRO 81M72/PP1). A newspaper report of the Vestry meeting of 5th September 1907 recorded Mr Jackson's opinion that the tower was unsafe. Although he considered that it could be repaired as a temporary measure, the structure was not considered stable enough to allow the bells to be rung (HRO Top 245/3/4). The Church Council, led by the Reverend Canon Stenning, Rector of Overton (1896-1909), decided to act immediately, and applied for a faculty to pull the old tower down and build a new one. A petition was issued to this end on 19th September 1907. Such was the urgency of the work that the request was granted on 15th November (HRO 21M65/279F/6).

The architects for the new tower were Chancellor and Hill of 12 Jewry Street, Winchester. The work was put out to tender, with the contract being awarded to an Overton builder, Mr E Kersley, on a bid of £2030 (HRO 81M72/PP1).

It is worth noting that the fabric of the church had been surveyed for defects in April 1896. The report of the architect, E P Warren of Westminster, made comment on the tower, but had not then considered the structure, as a whole, unsafe.

'The existing portion of the old tower is of very good character, and handsome of its kind, it is however crowned by a modern wooden belfry and short spire of a very incongruous and weakly constructed character. I should recommend the removal of the belfry and spire, and the completion of the tower in brick faced with stone, or flint and stone, and with a lead covered roof and stone parapet.'

Warren also noted that the font was awkwardly placed in front of the tower arch, and he suggested that it should be removed to the west end of the south aisle. The walls of the tower were plastered, and this was in need of replacement (HRO 81M72/PW7).

By 1907 the tower itself had cracked, and was showing considerable sign of movement.

It was a matter of frequent comment in the records that the old stonework should be preserved and reused in the new tower. The accounts for the rebuilding demonstrate that quite considerable savings were made by doing this (HRO 81M72/PW9). The faculty plans only specifically indicate that the west window of the tower, and the west window of the south aisle should be retained and refixed (HRO 21M65/279F/6). A newspaper report of the dedication ceremony records that 'all' the old stones were reused, and new ones added to correspond, 'the whole being of

Chilmark stone' (HRO Top 245/3/5). The latter is inaccurate as other stone was used in the lower section of the tower, as is shown in the description given in section 4.0.

The Church Council took the opportunity to add a new baptistery to the west end of the south aisle. This resulted in an additional bay being added there. A stained glass window in the baptistery was dedicated by the Reverend Stenning to the memory of his parents. The window, depicting the virgin and child, together with Elizabeth and the infant John the Baptist, was by Meirs and Steinbank of London. It was further reported that many old fragments of stone were discovered and preserved in the Baptistery. These included a portion of a 'pre-Norman' font, a black marble base of a 'Norman' font reused as the base of the new font, and four 'Norman caps', one being placed in each corner of the Baptistery. The Reverend Stenning was said to have thought that they came from Wherwell Priory (ibid).

Discussion

Pevsner and Lloyd (ibid) consider the tower arch and west bay of the nave to be contemporary, and *c.* 1500. Hare (forthcoming) has identified evidence to suggest that a tower may have been built at Overton at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. This is based on a letter in the Public Record Office concerning the conversion of the Premonstratensian abbey of Titchfield into a mansion for Thomas Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. In this letter of the 21st January 1538 from Anthony Roke to Wriothesley, reference is made to the men of Overton coming to Titchfield to look at the south transept with a view to using the stone to build a bell tower for their church. The transcript of the relevant portion is as follows:

'... also we do take this weke far [four] men of Overton to come to see the south Isle for the buylding of a Towre for ther bells. We do think it good to sell it by grote (?) and lett them take it downe.' (quoted in St John Hope 1906, 236)

Roke refers to the south aisle at Titchfield, but there were no aisles to the abbey church. Many houses of both Augustinian and Premonstratensian canons were without side aisles. What is probably referred to here is the south transept, as this was the only substantial part of the church to be demolished, and not incorporated into Wriothesley's mansion, Place House.

The letter refers to the possibility of the men of Overton taking stone from Titchfield. There is no known confirmation that they reached agreement with Wriothesley's officials on this matter. However, as Hare argues, what remains of the early tower at Overton (the tower arch) and the adjoining extra bay of the nave use substantial amounts of good ashlar stone internally. The use of good building stone in an area otherwise devoid of such materials is unusual. It suggests a plentiful supply of stone that was not normally available. One only has to look at the aisle and chancel walls at Overton. These use mainly local flint, with occasional poor quality malmstone, in the main walls with ashlar reserved for the quoins. Despite the use of expensive materials in the west bay of the nave and the tower, this work is otherwise of a simple and basic construction, showing no signs of the more elaborate decoration normally associated with the extensive use of good stone (Hare forthcoming). Although there is no direct evidence, these arguments suggest that the structures under discussion were probably built with cheap stone that would have been available only during the Dissolution.

Hare (ibid) continues this argument to suggest that pre-1908 illustrations of the tower show a structure that was essentially of *c.* 1538 date. The church was restored in 1853-54 by Benjamin Ferrey, when the original belfry on the tower was replaced by a new wooden belfry and a singled splayfoot spire. An earlier illustration of *c.* 1800 shows S-shaped iron ties in the flint and chequered south wall of the tower, suggesting structural insecurity (Hubbock 1997, 24). A later watercolour by R H C Ubsdell of 1845, taken from the north, seems to contradict the earlier illustration (HRO 65M89/Z182/1). In the earlier picture, the chequerwork seems to extend most of the height of the tower. The Ubsdell painting only appears to have chequerwork in the lower portion, with stone not unlike that of the present tower in the upper two sections. In fact, the tower below the belfry in 1845 does not seem to be greatly different from that of the present day. The only major differences are the stair turret and where the upper stages have been altered to make allowances for the spire. The stonework of the walls and the buttresses suggest that even Ferrey's work of 1853-54 retained much of the old structure.

If there was any structural defect in the pre-1853 tower, Ferrey does not appear to have solved it. By 1907 a large crack had appeared in the south wall of the tower (Oram n.d., 12), causing it to need rebuilding. Exactly how much of the pre-1853 structure had survived Ferrey's rebuilding is open to conjecture, although the evidence cited above suggests that at least the lower walls may have survived from an earlier period. His work may have been restricted to restoring the lower stages and adding the wooden belfry and a spire.

This much seems to be agreed by previous commentators. However, Pevsner and Lloyd (1967, 367) seem to imply that the south arch of the tower was part of the early 16th century work. Their exact text is given here:

'The W tower is c. 1500, and so are the W bays of the two arcades, built to connect the old nave with the new tower. Only the typically Dec arch from the tower to the S was re-set. Where was it originally?'

Hare's more recent work has offered a possibly more precise date of c. 1538 for the building of the west tower and western nave bay (op. cit.), but what of the south arch of the tower, which is in an earlier style? It is clearly re-set, but Pevsner and Lloyd seem to suggest that it was part of the 16th-century work. When the author first looked at this part of the tower, he drew this same conclusion. Comparing photographs in Oram (n.d., 12-13) of work before and after the 1908 restoration, plus the 1907 faculty plans (HRO 21M65/279F/6), shows that this was impossible.

The photograph of the tower in 1907 shows that the west bay of the south aisle had not yet been added. The south wall of the tower was therefore external at this date. Only after 1908 was the west bay of the south aisle added. This would have meant that the arch designated as Decorated by Pevsner and Lloyd was inserted in 1908. An unattributed church guide says that when the tower was rebuilt in 1908 all fragments of medieval masonry found in the walls were preserved.

'Some of them were formed into the arch between the tower and the newly added baptistery [the west bay of the south aisle]. These were thought to come from Wherwell Priory when that was demolished.' (Anon, 1989, no pagination, but p. 8).

This arch does not appear to have been introduced to Overton until 1908. As it is difficult to see where in the pre-1908 tower it came from, this statement is probably hearsay and unreliable. However, it does suggest that there was an old tradition at Overton that the old tower was built from robbed monastic stone.

A careful examination of the present structure of Overton church makes it very difficult to place the south tower arch anywhere within the pre-1908 building. The good survival of apparent medieval paint on the piers and west capital suggests it must have come from a roofed structure. If it did not come from Overton church itself, which seems unlikely, it appears to have come from a medieval building, probably a church, that was being rebuilt or pulled down at roughly the same time that the tower was rebuilt. Its source is a curious mystery, but at least this study can clarify the date of its insertion.

Another outstanding question brought up by this study is how much of the pre-1908 tower survives in the present structure? The removal of the internal render has shown that the main part of the north wall is in brick from top to bottom, with only a thin external skin of stone. There is no trace of brickwork on the remaining south wall, and one might expect that north and south walls to be similar in the pre-1908 structure. However, it might be remembered that the architect's survey of 1896 stated that if the belfry and spire were removed 'the completion of the tower in brick faced with stone' might be undertaken (HRO 81M72/PW7). This seems to imply that the tower of 1896 was of brick faced with stone. An examination of the internal brickwork does not suggest that it was of any great age. When the records talk of reusing materials, this would always seem to refer to stonework. No mention of brick is made. If the earlier tower was internally of brick, there is a possibility that it was renewed in 1908.

If this is the case, it is unlikely that any part of the north wall was left standing. The external stone and flint chequerwork retained on the lower part of the tower would seem to be reused. Nevertheless, the reset Ordnance Survey benchmark in the west wall of the tower suggests that this wall was taken down to ground level and rebuilt. The south wall is clearly rebuilt as can be shown from the arguments given above. The records of the time repeatedly state that the intention was to effect a complete rebuilding, leaving 'all the old stonework' to be 'preserved', 'numbered' and 'replaced' in the new tower (HRO Top 245/3/4)

These arguments leave the west window and the buttresses. It seems likely that the west window was re-used, particularly as the faculty plans state that the old window should be 'refixed' (HRO 21M65/279F/6). The pre- and post-1908 photographs in Oram (op. cit.) show the buttress at the SW angle to be similar in both cases. This might suggest that pre-1908 structure was retained in the later tower. However, if the other walls were taken down to ground level, it may be difficult to argue that the buttresses remained intact. Although not impossible, it is better to suggest that the old buttresses were taken down and reused in the new tower.

Conclusions

Recording during alterations to the west tower at Overton church suggests that most of the present structure was rebuilt from the ground upwards in 1908. Contemporary archives record that the old stonework was reused, but there is little of the earlier edifice beyond the arch between the tower and nave that survives *in situ*. An Ordnance Survey bench mark reset in the west wall above the first string course seems to confirm this suggestion. External stonework on the north wall of the tower can be shown to be merely a thin skin encasing a brick wall c. 1m thick from foundations upwards.

Recent research has suggested that the original tower arch, plus the western bay of the nave, may have been built c. 1538 using monastic stone. Local tradition refers to this coming from Wherwell Priory, although there is better evidence that the source may have been Titchfield Abbey, despite it being some distance away. A letter of 21st January 1538 refers to the men of Overton proposing to visit the abbey to obtain stone to build a bell tower for the church. Examination of the internal structure suggests this may have been the case.

A reset late 13th/early 14th century arch leading from the tower to the south aisle is not part of the 16th century work. Both old photographs and the faculty plans clearly show that the west bay of the south aisle was added as a Baptistry in 1908. The source of this arch is a mystery. It is difficult to envisage where it could have come from in the Overton church of 1908, suggesting it may have been brought from another location.

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References

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