

All Saints Church

Thorpe Abbots, Norfolk

Stephen Hart

Of about 180 round west towers on English churches, all except five are in East Anglia and most are flint built. Until recently it was widely accepted that most were Norman and that where the belfry stage was octagonal it was a post-Norman addition. Over 50 medieval round towers have octagonal upper stages and recent studies of their fabric suggest that in more than 20 the circular stage is post-Norman and the octagon contemporary with it. In all of these, except for three where the tower arch was probably originally a west nave entrance, or the whole tower replaces an earlier one, a pointed tower arch corroborates a post-Norman date.

The number of towers with octagonal stages with lancet or early-c 14th- belfry openings that are contemporary with the circular stage compared to those with added c 15th-century belfries suggests that the architectural trend of an octagonal belfry stage on a circular base first appeared as towers purpose-built to that design - to be followed later by those in which an octagon apparently replaced the original circular belfry of a Norman tower.

Thorpe Abbots Church, Norfolk, 156TM 188789

This case study is of a church with a round tower and an octagonal belfry stage in which it can be shown that the circular stage is post-Norman and that the octagon is contemporary with the circular stage. HM and J Taylor (Taylor, 1980) say that, although the circular stage of the tower is often said to be Saxo-Norman, they regarded it as part of a considerably later westward extension of a smaller Saxo-Norman church and that the nave was extended westwards and the lower stage of the tower added at the time of the building of the pointed north doorway. Pevsner (Pevsner, 1999) calls the tower c 13th century with a Perpendicular top but Cautley (Cautley, 1949) considered it probably pre-Conquest, with a late-c 14th century top. John Gage (Gage 1831), writing in 1829, noticed bricks or tiles in the tower's internal construction, commenting that *'it is remarkable that they occur in towers of the Pointed Style only'*. He was probably the first scholar to recognize that not all octagonal stages were later additions to towers, observing that *'the octagonal head to the tower of Thorpe Abbots seems to be coeval with the circular base'*.

Although there are a few instances of central doorways in nave walls, the blocked round-headed flint door in the centre of the nave north wall was more likely originally to have been in the conventional position. This study supports the Taylor's general conclusion that the early nave was extended westwards, though there is evidence to suggest that the tower is later, and that its circular and octagonal stages are contemporary. Any attempt to date the tower should firstly take account of relevant evidence of the nave.

The nave, north wall

The north wall is built of fairly well-coursed flint rubble; the west end has Barnack stone quoins and the north-east corner is of rubble flints marginally larger than the walling flints, and almost course with them. At about the mid-point of this wall is a blocked round-headed door whose arch and jambs are formed with flints; centred about 11ft or 3.35m from the west end is a pointed door formed in Barnack freestone. The wall contains two two-light windows of about the same size - one near the east end with Y-tracery and the other with Perpendicular tracery just to the east of the pointed door. From about the level of the heads of the two windows, the wall appears to have been raised, as a single row of medieval brick putlog holes can be traced at this level and the upper quoins of the nave north-east corner change from flint to stone. There are no other medieval bricks in the wall fabric.

At about 19ft 6ins or 5.93m from the north-west corner, between ground level and a large piece of limestone below the cill of the Perpendicular window is a vertical straight joint (Fig 1). The spacing of the flintwork courses to the west is closer than those to the east of this joint, producing a discernable difference in the scale of the texture of the flintwork on each side of the line; furthermore, the overall tone of the western flintwork is slightly darker. The flints immediately east of the straight joint, slightly larger than the walling flints, are vertically aligned directly one above the other in similar fashion to those in the north-east quoin, and must be surviving flint quoins of the north-west corner of an originally shorter nave.



Fig 1 The arrow indicates the straight vertical joint in the nave north wall flintwork, showing the position of the original quoins.

No flintwork differences or quoin indications appear above window-head level, the wall at that level being later. The visually-unifying effect of this later flintwork above the windows and the fact that the Perpendicular window separates the areas of different flintwork, tend to obfuscate the subtle nuances described and they could easily be overlooked. Collectively, they provide cogent evidence that the western end of the nave north wall which contains the pointed doorway is a different build from the eastern part, and the larger flints at a similar straight joint below a window in a corresponding position in the south wall also, at precisely the same distance from the south-west corner of the nave, puts the matter beyond doubt.

The flints forming these detected original quoins in the north and south walls are only a little larger than the typical walling flints, and compare closely with those of the nave north-east quoins. In most churches where corners are formed with flints the quoin flints are appreciably larger than walling material; here, they are exceptionally small and only short lengths remain as a result of later insertion of the windows, which is why the original nave west corners are hardly noticeable except by careful inspection. The position of these original western quoins is such that the blocked flint door would have been in the conventional location in the original nave, ie near the west end. Internally, the nave would have been about 34 ft or 10.36m long, not unusual for a small early church.

The tower

The tower is circular for about two-thirds of its height, the upper part being octagonal. The circular stage has a plinth weathered with medieval cant bricks on edge (Fig 2), and the main fabric is roughly-coursed evenly-sized rubble flints and non-flint erratics. Many putlog holes framed and bridged with medieval bricks are visible. Facing west, a cinque-foiled cusped lancet stone window on the ground floor has a medieval brick ray arch above it (partly obscured by crude modern pointing) and higher up, narrow rectangular stone windows face south



Fig 2 Medieval cant bricks as weathering to the plinth around the base of the tower.

and north, though the latter is blocked internally. A circular stone string course forms the base for the octagon.

The octagon is in two stages separated by another stone string course. The flint fabric of both stages is similar to the circular stage and the angles are formed with medieval bricks. The lower octagonal stage is about 8 ft or 2.5m high and its walls are plain except for a single narrow rectangular stone window in the west face similar to the south-facing one in the circular stage. The belfry stage above has two-light belfry openings in the cardinal faces and flushwork replicas in the diagonals. The lights of the belfry openings have trefoiled heads and a straight-sided quatrefoil reticulation unit in the apex. There has been considerable repair in later brick to the top of the belfry stage.

The tower arch is 5ft 2ins or 1.57m wide in reveal and 11ft 3ins or 3.43m high to the apex of its pointed arch; it is without stone embellishment, being plastered with small chamfers towards the nave. The tower wall thickness at the west window is also 5ft 2ins (1.57m). The internal diameter is 9ft 2ins or 2.79m and the east wall above the tower arch follows the curvature of the internal circumference.

The tower's internal walls are plastered up to 2nd floor level about 2ft 6ins or 0.76m below the level of the external change of shape from circular to octagonal; above 2nd floor level internal flintwork is small cobble rubble similar to the external fabric, with brick putlog holes. The circular shape is maintained internally nearly to the top of the lower octagonal stage and there is no change of material or workmanship internally at the level of the external change of shape (Fig 3).

Apart from the blocked north window there is no external evidence in the circular stage of any blocked openings; any internal evidence there might have been, or possible indications of an upper door are lost behind rendering. However, rendering does not extend into the reveals of the rectangular south window and its jambs can be seen to be medieval brick, similar to those of the rectangular window in the circular internal wall of the lower octagonal stage.

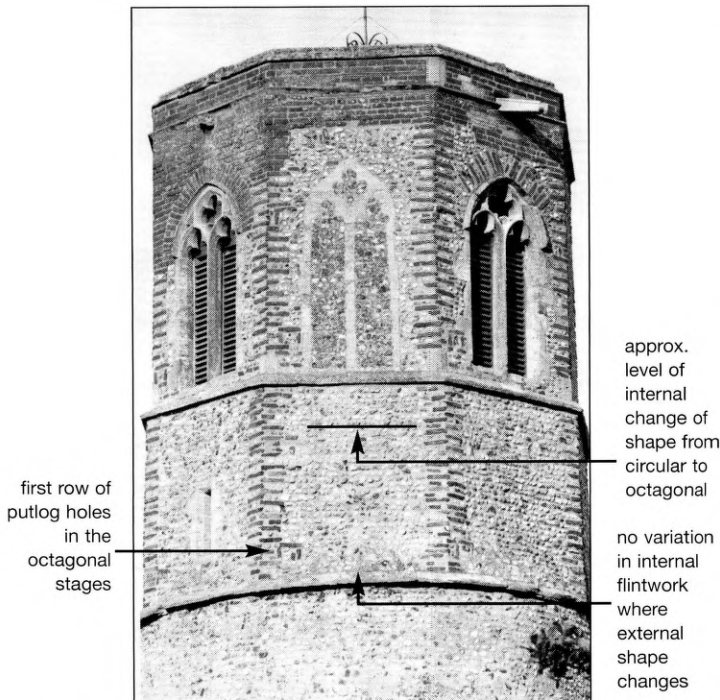


Fig 3 No change of material or workmanship can be seen internally at the level of external change of shape in the tower

Interpretation

On the evidence of the blocked flint door and the flint quoins in the north wall, that part of the nave wall is probably 11th century. The westward extension of an originally shorter nave, postulated by the Taylors and confirmed by identification of the original nave west quoins, can be dated by the pointed north doorway situated to the west of those quoins as probably early 13th century, and the tower cannot be earlier.

The tower has no pre-Conquest or Norman evidence, and a post-Norman date for its circular stage, established by the nave extension, is confirmed by the pointed tower arch, the medieval bricks in the tower plinth, in its putlog holes, at random in its fabric, in the ray arch over the west lancet, and in the internal jambs of the south rectangular window. As the earliest medieval bricks made in East Anglia are thought to be no earlier than late 13th century, the circular stage is probably 14th century, judged by the cinquefoiled west lancet and its brick ray arch. The complete absence of such bricks in the c 13th-century walls of the westward nave extension implies that the tower is a different, later build, perhaps of the same date as the raised section of the nave walls defined by the single row of medieval brick putlog holes seen at window-head level in the north wall.

The low height of the tower's circular stage and the absence of any evidence of former belfry openings near the top precludes the likelihood that the circular stage ever stood as a finished tower, and so, unless the octagon replaces an earlier post-Norman belfry, the circular stage and octagon must have been built together because a theoretical date for a conjectured replacement belfry would be unrealistically close

to the deduced 14th-century date for the circular stage. If the octagonal stages had been a later addition, it is likely that from the level at which the new shape would have started, either the internal walls would have been built as an octagon for the whole height of the two octagonal stages, or some variation in the walling would show internally at the level of the external change of shape.

On the other hand, there is considerable evidence for the octagon being contemporary with the circular stage. The most telling is the continuity of the circular shape internally within the octagon up to within two feet (0.6m) or so of the top of its lower stage with no variation in the internal flintwork where the change of shape occurs externally. This evidence of continuity of construction at the junction of the circular and octagonal stages is confirmed externally where the first row of putlog holes in the lower octagonal stage can be seen to be about a foot (0.3m) above the stone string course which separates the octagon from the circular stage. The height of this row above the topmost one in the circular stage is the same as the normal vertical spacing between rows. If the octagon had been a later addition, the first row of putlog holes for staging from which to build it would be likely to have been immediately below the start of the 'new' work, ie just below the stone string course, not just above it. Further evidence for a single build is the similarity of the design of the rectangular stone windows in both the circular stage and the octagon, and the similarity of flintwork in both stages.

If the circular and octagonal stages are contemporary, the tracery in the belfry openings can suggest a dating for the whole tower, but this can only be approximate because the tracery pattern is one that was used over a considerable period. The central quatrefoil motif in its apex is the straight-sided development of the typical ogee reticulation unit of the Decorated period; it came into use in the mid to late 14th century when Decorated was giving way to Perpendicular and it continued well into the 15th century. The narrow rectangular stone windows are inconclusive as diagnostic features but they appear in a few other round towers which are also probably 14th century such as Weybread and Rockland St Peter. On balance, and taking account of the flintwork workmanship, a late 14th-century date for the whole tower seems likely.

Stephen Hart is a retired architect with a life-long interest in church buildings, especially round towers. His two most recent books are The Flint Architecture of East Anglia, published in 2000 by Lucas Books, and The Round Church Towers of England, published in 2003 by Giles de la Mare

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