

The Earliest Work in the Church of St Mary, Bedford

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SUMMARY

The earliest work in St Mary's Church, Bedford, it is argued, is of the so-called 'Saxo-Norman Overlap' period. This has been argued before on the basis of architectural features in the south transept; but features not hitherto recorded suggest a similar date for the central tower. The plan of the church lends support to this interpretation, and also indicates a subsequent slight alteration of the axis of the church.

Late Saxon Bedford was a 'double burh' of a type found elsewhere in England, for example at Buckingham, Hertford, Nottingham, and Stamford.¹ To the north of the River Great Ouse was the 'original "burgh"' where the ealdorman had his dwelling.² Of the several churches only St Peter's shows Saxon work,³ and this was possibly sited so that its tower formed a defensive tower to one side of the north gate into the northern burh.⁴ South of the river was a further burh, D-shaped and defined by the river itself to the north and by the artificial watercourse known as the King's Ditch on the other sides.⁵ 'The main purpose of the southern work,' it has been argued, 'was to provide a bridgehead or flank work to a fortified bridge blocking the Ouse at this point to Danish attacks from Huntingdon or Cambridge.'⁶ Bedford had been somewhat vulnerably situated on the Danelaw boundary since the time of Alfred's Frith with Guthrum the Dane.⁷

It is within the southern burh that St Mary's Church stands, near to the river and beside the principal north-south thoroughfare which runs from the site of the south gate of the burh to the bridge across the Ouse; the church stands at NGR TL051494. Its earliest work is, as I shall attempt to show in this short paper, of immediately post-conquest date and still largely within the Anglo-Saxon building tradition; that is to say, it belongs to that period of church building which is often designated the 'Saxo-Norman Overlap', a convenient if somewhat barbarous term.⁸

The church was not suspected of containing any Anglo-Saxon work until 1959, in which year the state of the fabric necessitated repairs to the building.⁹ Some time before this, however, the *Victoria County History* had conjectured, on the basis of the irregularity in plan of the Norman and subsequent building, that the Norman work 'early as it is, is not the first on the site, and that the tower is probably set over the lines of an earlier chancel.'¹⁰ Certainly the Anglo-Saxons often set out buildings without much concern for accuracy; this is well seen in the church of St Mary at Chickney, Essex,¹¹ or at the west end of St Mary's Church, Northchurch, Herts.¹² But later medieval builders could sometimes be equally inaccurate, and it would be temerarious to conclude *from this irregularity alone* (fig 1) that the present church is set out over Anglo-Saxon foundations.

Further light was shed on this problem as a result of the 1959 repairs. When the blocking of an early Norman window in the east wall of the south transept was removed it was found to have been cut through another window, which must therefore be of earlier date. This window is single-splayed without rebates; at the exterior wall-face it measures 51cm (20in) wide by 1.7m (5ft 6in) tall, and internally 0.8m (2ft 6in) wide by 1.9m (6ft) tall. The sill is horizontal and is some 4m (13ft) above the present floor. At the exterior wall-face the window has side-alternate jambs, although the stones are not through-stones. The voussoirs of the semi-circular head, both internally and externally, are neatly cut and radially-set.

In the west wall of the same transept (fig 1) a further window was revealed, above the later arch leading to the south aisle. Its features and dimensions are exactly similar to those of the east-wall window. Both windows are on the same axis through the transept.

The east wall of the transept is some 0.9m (3ft) thick; the west and south walls are a little thinner, but it seems likely that these have been cut-back a little internally at some time, their original thickness probably being reflected in the square

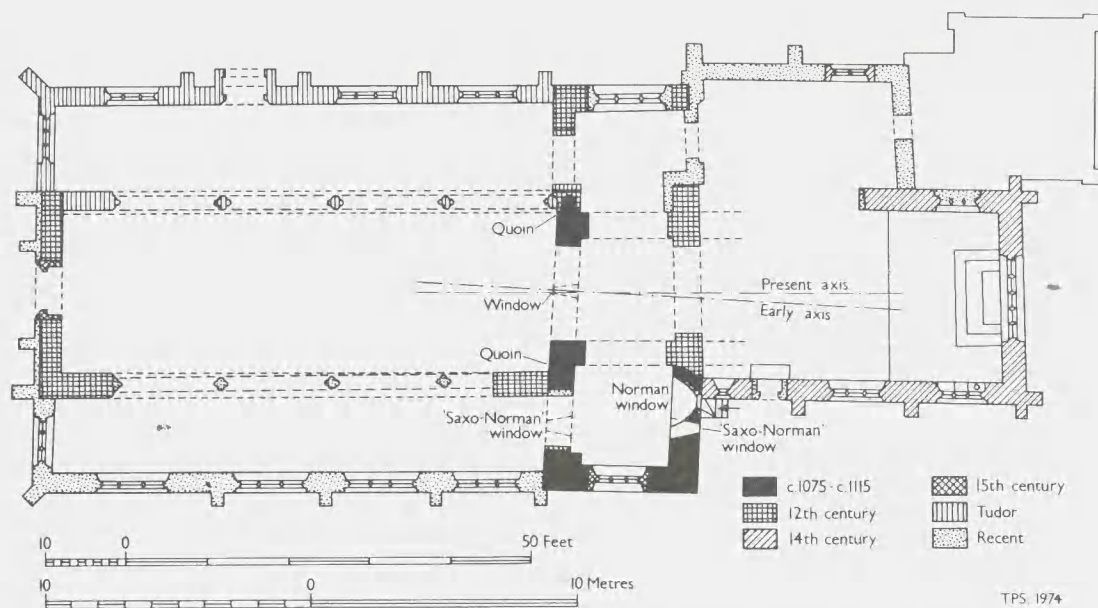


Fig 1 The Church of St Mary, Bedford, showing phases of building and realignment of the axis.

projection in the south-west angle (fig 1). The walling is of random rubble, and there are side-alternate quoins of small stones to the south-east angle. In the south wall there is a considerable amount of herring-bone masonry.

Plaster has been removed from the west face of the west wall of the central tower, between the top of the Victorian crossing-arch and the present roof. This wall is also of rubble, and contains features relevant to a discussion of the earliest work in the church. At the north and south ends of this wall, starting at a point about 7m (20ft) above the present floor, are the remains of former quoins of the tower. The straight edge formed by the northern quoin of this pair is about 15cm (6in) from the junction of this wall and the respond of the north arcade of the nave; the southern quoin, which has a less well-defined straight edge, is about 25cm (10in) from the junction of the wall and the south arcade of the nave (fig 1). Both these quoins are of large stones laid apparently in side-alternate manner, the largest stone measuring about 76 by 23 by 23cm (30 by 9 by 9in).

Midway between these quoins in the west wall of the tower is a small window opening, single-played and without rebates. In the west face of the wall the window measure 0.3m (1ft) wide by 0.8m (2½ft) tall to the top of the head; it is played towards the east. The sill is horizontal and is of stones undifferentiated from those of the general fabric, whilst the jambs are each of three

medium-sized stones (the largest about 30 by 23cm; 12 by 9in). The window has a semi-circular arch-head cut from the underside of a lintel-stone.

The width of the tower defined by the quoins is 6m (19ft), which is the width of the tower above roof-level externally. Clearly, as will be mentioned again later, the transepts on either side of the tower have been heightened at some period by building-up the flanking walls so that they abutted against the earlier quoins. The top stage of the tower had 'two or perhaps three small plain round-headed windows on each face.'¹³ These windows, which at some period have been blocked or in the case of the middle windows, if such there were, replaced by a two-light fifteenth-century window, were clearly of a very simple type and contrast markedly with the third-stage window of each face. These latter windows are of Norman type, with central shafts and responds all carrying cushion-capitals and with the two round-headed lights enclosed within a larger round-headed arch. There is thus good reason to suspect that the top-stage windows are in reality the belfry openings of an original Anglo-Saxon tower, and that the whole of the tower is therefore of Anglo-Saxon date in its general fabric, a point missed both by the Taylors¹⁴ and by myself,¹⁵ but noted by F.W. Kuhlicke.¹⁶

The date of the early building to which the described features belong must now be discussed. The side-alternate quoin of the south transept

suggests a date in the Anglo-Saxon period, although it *could* belong to a later (Norman) context. Of rather better diagnostic value are the large-stone quoins (probably side-alternate) which remain in the west wall of the tower below roof-level, for the use of such large stones does seem to be a characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon builders.¹⁷ Single-played windows occur in both the Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods,¹⁸ although the Norman examples generally show a rebate at the external wall-face; the absence of such rebates both in the transept windows and in the small window in the tower at St Mary's is amongst the strongest evidence for Anglo-Saxon workmanship. It is impossible to know whether the windows in the top stage of the tower were of similar type. Further evidence for an Anglo-Saxon date for the church is provided by the treatment of the arch-head of the tower window: such arch-heads, cut from a single stone, occur in a number of Anglo-Saxon buildings throughout the Christian period, for example at Great Hale, Lincs.¹⁹ and at St Peter-at-Gowts in Lincoln,²⁰ although they are not wholly unknown in Norman contexts, and occur, for example, in the Norman keep at Castle Rising, Norfolk.²¹

The herring-bone masonry in the south wall of the transept is, as some writers still fail to notice, no guide at all; herring-bone masonry was used from the Roman Occupation onwards and throughout the medieval period.²²

Far from being an indication of Anglo-Saxon workmanship, the neatly cut and radially-set voussoirs of the arch-heads of the transept windows point to the hand of a Norman master; on the other hand, the fact that one of these windows was later cut through by a window which is itself of early Norman date makes it abundantly clear that the more recently discovered windows are *extremely early* post-conquest work. The wall thickness of some 0.9m (3ft) also suggests a movement away from strictly Anglo-Saxon methods.

The mixture of Anglo-Saxon and Norman characteristics in the earliest work in St Mary's suggests a date in the so-called 'Saxo-Norman Overlap', that is the period of English building which lasted from c.1075 to c.1115 when Anglo-Saxon building traditions were still strong in the country and were not yet wholly displaced by the more cosmopolitan forms of Romanesque introduced, at first only in the major buildings, at the time of the Norman Conquest.²³ This interpretation of the evidence was suggested by H.M. and Joan Taylor²⁴

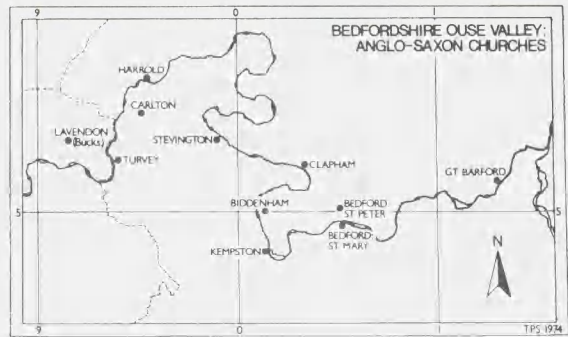


Fig 2 Anglo-Saxon Churches in the River Great Ouse valley.

and by myself,²⁵ and is further confirmed by the additional work described in the present paper.

In discussing the plan of Saxon St Mary's the *Victoria County History* conjectured that the central tower 'is probably set out over the lines of an earlier chancel.'²⁶ This was a reasonable suggestion at the time but is not confirmed by the more recent discoveries. The quoins in the west wall of the tower, and possibly the windows in its top stage, indicate that there was a central tower here from an early period. The alignment of the west wall of the tower is the same as that of the west and east walls of the south transept whilst the south wall of the transept is approximately at right-angles to this alignment. Because of this, and because of the general similarity in construction between the west wall of the tower and the east and south walls of the transept, it is safe to assume that all these walls — west wall of tower and east, and south walls of south transept — belong to one build; it is in just these walls that the surviving 'Saxo-Norman' features are found. All the other walls — in which no 'Saxo-Norman' features are found — are set out on a different alignment. It seems certain, therefore, that the irregularity of plan at St Mary's is due to a shift of the axis at the time of the building of the post-'Saxo-Norman' church. At some time too the transepts have been heightened, as mentioned above (*supra*, p. 95), perhaps as early as the Norman building period.

The earliest church at St Mary's seems, then, to have consisted of a narrow central tower with a south transept — or perhaps a *porticus* as Kuhlcke has suggested²⁷ — of equal width to the tower. Presumably there was a similar north transept or *porticus*. Further, one may safely assume a chancel to the east and a nave to the west of the tower, probably on the earlier axis. These may have been equal in width to the tower, or, like

their Norman successors, of greater width (fig 1). In either case, the church was clearly of a centrally-planned type.

St Mary's, Bedford is one of a number of towered churches along the Great Ouse from Bedford westwards. This distribution was pointed out in an earlier paper,²⁸ and has since been confirmed by the discovery of further Anglo-Saxon churches by Hare. This marked distribution is no doubt due to the availability of inferior oolite in the region (fig 2).²⁹

NOTES

- 1 D. Hill, 'Late Saxon Bedford', *Beds Arch J* 5, 1970, 97.
- 2 F.W. Kuhlicke, Introduction to new edition of C.F. Farrar, *Old Bedford*, 1970, ix-x.
- 3 H.M. and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, 1965, 58; T.P. Smith, 'The Anglo-Saxon Churches of Bedfordshire', *Beds Arch J*, 3, 1966, 9-11.
- 4 Hill, 1970, 98.
- 5 F.W. Kuhlicke, 'The First Bedford', in *Bedford: A Survey*, 1950, 3-7; cf. Hill, 1970, 97.
- 6 Hill, 1970, 97.
- 7 Of 878; see, for a translation of the relevant document, D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 1, 1955, 380; for the Danelaw Boundary in Bedfordshire see J.F. Dyer, 'Danish Earthworks', *Beds Magazine*, 8, 1962, 235-40; cf. Smith, 1966, fig 1, p.7.
- 8 This term is further explicated below, p. 97.
- 9 *Bedfordshire Times*, 6 February 1959; work was carried out by Major John Gedge; see F.W. Kuhlicke, 'A Twelfth Century Carved Head from St Mary's Church, Bedford', *Beds Arch J*, 7, 1972, 85-6; this paper reports on a carved head found during the 1959 work and dated by Prof. E.P. Lasko and Prof. G. Zarnecki to the second half of the twelfth century, possibly to c. 1160; the head is interesting for showing the late survival of distinctly Anglo-Saxon traits.
- 10 *Victoria County History of Bedfordshire*, 3, 1912, 27.
- 11 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 156-7; also A.W. Clapham *English Romanesque Architecture before the Conquest*, 1930, fig 34, p 105.
- 12 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 462-3; also T.P. Smith, *The Anglo-Saxon Churches of Hertfordshire*, Herts Local History Council Occasional Paper no. 3, 1973, 17-19.
- 13 *VCH Beds.*, 3, 28.
- 14 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 58.
- 15 Smith, 1966, 9-11.
- 16 Kuhlicke, 1970, x.
- 17 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 7; cf., for another post-

- conquest but Anglo-Saxon building with large-stone quoins; T.P. Smith, 'The Church of St Peter, Canterbury', with an Appendix by S.E. Rigold, *Arch Cant*, 85, 1971, 99-108.
- 18 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 9; for brief discussion of post-conquest examples see A.W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture after the Conquest*, 1934, 67-8; cf. also Smith, 1971, 105.
- 19 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 276-8; A.E. Fisher, *The Greater Anglo-Saxon Churches: an Architectural-Historical Study*, 1962, 277-80.
- 20 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 394-8; Fisher, 1962, 286-8.
- 21 Personal observation.
- 22 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 12-13; cf. their discussion of Diddlebury Church, Salop., 211-14.
- 23 Cf. Smith, 1971, 99; I am grateful to Mr S.E. Rigold for his thoughts on this topic. The term 'Saxo-Norman' does not appeal to him!
- 24 Taylor and Taylor, 1965, 58.
- 25 Smith, 1966, 9. The absence of through-stones does not militate against the dating here suggested in an area in which the natural stone to use (and which was used) was the inferior oolite obtainable from the Ouse valley; related considerations apply in, for example, parts of Kent: see Smith, 1971, 105.
- 26 *VCH Beds*, 3, 27.
- 27 Kuhlicke, 1970, x.
- 28 Smith, 1966, 8 and fig 2.
- 29 M. Hare, 'Anglo-Saxon Work at Carlton and Other Bedfordshire Churches', *Beds Arch J*, 6, 1971, 33-40; this ref. to 39: 'Smith noted that the Anglo-Saxon churches of Bedfordshire were grouped "close to each other and along the Ouse valley west of Bedford" . . . This pattern is now quite unmistakable, for Carlton, Kempston, Harrold and Biddenham are close to the River Ouse, while Riseley and Shelton are in the same part of the county, though not in the Ouse valley itself.' Hare is quite right to take me to task for explaining this distribution by reference to the transport of building limestone along the Ouse valley from the Northamptonshire Uplands (Smith, 1966, 8; Hare, 1971, 39). He rightly connects the distribution with the occurrence in north-west Bedfordshire itself of inferior oolite (39). Hare (38-9) dismisses Pevsner's claim that All Saint's Church, Great Barford has Anglo-Saxon (he actually says 'Anglo-Danish') quoins: N. Pevsner, *Bedfordshire and the County of Huntingdon and Peterborough*, Buildings of England series, 1968, 94. I should myself be inclined to include Great Barford amongst Bedfordshire's Saxon churches and may one day argue the case in a note; in the meantime I include it on my fig 2. (This paper completed July 1974).

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