

**ST MARY'S CHURCH, ASTON  
HERTFORDSHIRE**

**ASSESSMENT OF THE EAST FACE OF THE TOWER**

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## Aston, St Mary's Church

### **Introduction**

A faculty has been issued for works of repair to the Church of St Mary's Aston subject to English Heritage requirements. English Heritage asked for an assessment of the significance of the east face of the tower in order to inform decisions about the extent and methods of repair. A visual inspection of the tower, and the presence of vertically-set rectangular stones within the fabric, had raised the possibility that remnants of earlier construction might be present. The assessment was carried out in August 2004 in accordance with a brief issued by the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor and the subsequent specification produced by Albion Archaeology and approved by both the Diocesan Archaeological Advisor and English Heritage.

This document represents a preliminary assessment of the east face of the tower at St Mary's church, Aston. It outlines the results of the assessment in order that decisions can be made regarding the repair of the east face of the tower. A full report will be written in due course to include the assessment of the tower, detailed drawings using the rectified photographs and the results of any further watching brief and analytical work carried out during further works.

### **Methodology**

Following the removal of the scaffolding from the roof of the nave, an archaeologist from Albion Archaeology and a photographer carried out an initial survey of the tower. A series of medium format monochrome photographs was taken of the east face of the tower for the production of rectified, scale images. Additional colour photographs were taken of the east and the other faces of the tower. To aid interpretation, digital photographs were also taken.

### **General Description of Church and Tower**

The church consists of chancel, nave, south porch, north aisle, vestry and tower. Pevsner suggests that the tower is of fifteenth century date and that the chancel has 13<sup>th</sup> century origins<sup>1</sup>. Visual inspection of the nave roof suggests the current structure probably dates to the fifteenth century. This indicates a phase of re-building broadly contemporary with Pevsner's suggested date for the tower.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the building consisted of a chancel, nave with south porch and a western tower. Plans held by the Incorporated Church Building Society archives (accessed at [www.churchplansonline.org](http://www.churchplansonline.org)) record a phase of building work in 1851-1852. The north aisle and vestry were constructed as part of this work. The appearance of much of the remainder of the outside of the building suggests that it has been extensively restored in the modern period.

The tower is constructed of uncoursed flint and mortar with quoins and string courses in clunch. The string courses divide the tower into four stages. Diagonal buttresses with five offsets are situated at each corner. The upper stages are accessed via a spiral

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<sup>1</sup> Pevsner, N. (1953, revised Bridget Cherry, 1977). *The Buildings of England: Hertfordshire*



stair built into the southwest corner of the tower. The west door of the church occupies the ground floor of the tower and, above the door, a large window with perpendicular tracery lights the second stage. The tracery is likely to be a relatively late replacement, it retains sharply defined edges and is in a yellowish stone, differing from that used in the remainder of the tower. Adjacent to the large window, a narrow vertical slot cut in a single slab of stone lights the spiral stair at this level. The third stage of the tower has only a single narrow slot in the middle of its northern face. The fourth stage has a window in each face. The top is surrounded by brick built crenellations and surmounted by a short spire of the type often referred to as a Hertfordshire spike.

### ***Detailed Description: East Face of Tower***

On the east face of the tower, above the nave, the last two stages are visible externally, the base of the third stage being partly obscured by the roofline of the nave.

The render on the lower part of the east face survives in quite large areas, probably due to its relatively sheltered location. The flint masonry contains a proportion of medium sized dark brown to mid-reddish brown rounded pebbles. The mortar consists of a light, cream coloured matrix with rounded and sub-angular flint inclusions, mostly between 0.5mm and 2mm with some up to 15mm in size. Although large areas of the mortar are obscured by later render, the mortar used throughout the construction of the tower is consistent throughout. A lift in the masonry is visible in the east face, crossing just below the apex of a former roofline and sloping slightly downwards, from south to north.

Buttresses extend as far as the fourth stage of the tower. The buttresses are constructed in the same flint rubble as the body of the tower, with edges defined by irregular quoins of clunch. The sloping upper faces of the buttresses have been tiled and there is evidence of extensive repair work comprising brick infill, quoins with crisply cut edges that have probably been replaced and multiple layers of rendering.

A number of pieces of masonry occur at the angle where the face of the tower meets the buttresses on either side. These are finished flush with the face of the wall. Those in the third stage of the tower are elongated and set vertically in the wall, contrasting with horizontal rectangular stones at the same location in the fourth stage of the tower.

The current nave roof lies at an angle of approximately 10° from the horizontal. In the masonry above, there is evidence of an earlier, steeper roof with a slope of approximately 45°. Here a triangular area of masonry stands slightly proud of the rest of the wall, with the roofline along the apex of the triangle noticeable by the presence of brown / reddish pebbles and, within the fabric towards the base on the north side, a small strip of lead roofing material or flashing.

A line, parallel with the current roofline, was visible at the time of the survey on the masonry in the lower part of the upper stage of the tower. This was caused by a temporary roof structure that had been dismantled shortly before the survey took place.



The upper part of the tower, above the buttresses, has rectangular quoins set in a face-alternate pattern. A string course of masonry, marks the join of the third and fourth stage of the tower. Unusually, this is flush with the surface of the wall. The string course is tied in with the masonry at the join with the buttress at either side. The lower part of the window in the upper stage sits directly upon the string course, which is extended outwards to form a sill below the window. On either side of the window, there are rectangular irregularities in the masonry indicating the location of putlog holes.

### ***Comparison with North, West and South Faces***

Comparison with the other faces of the tower shows a similar pattern to that observed in the east face.

The stages of the tower are defined by string courses, set flush with the surface of the wall and tied into the buttresses.

At the junction of the tower and the buttresses, the masonry is similar to that on the east face and, again, defines the change in angle between the two faces. At the south-west of the tower, the corner is expanded to accommodate a circular stair. A vertical band of masonry, similar to that at the junction of the tower and buttress, defines the slight change of angle where the corner is expanded. These lines of masonry are irregular, consisting of rectangular stones of various sizes with some of the longer, elongated stones being set vertically along the change of angle. The string courses in the first and second stages of the tower are tied into the masonry defining the area of the stair.

### ***Phasing***

The masonry details on the tower suggest that it represents a single phase of construction. The string courses that define each stage of the tower are continued across the junction of the masonry with the buttresses. Elements of the masonry, found at the angles between the tower and buttresses, straddle that junction. This, taken together with the evidence of the string courses, suggests that the tower is likely to be of one build. Pevsner<sup>2</sup> suggests that the tower is of fifteenth century date, presumably based on the date of features such as the west door. Whilst later features can be inserted into earlier structures, the integration of features such as the spiral stair and buttresses with the string courses are all consistent with the suggested fifteenth-century construction date for the tower.

### ***Interpretation***

One of the objectives for the investigation of the east wall of the tower was to establish whether the masonry has features characteristics of Anglo-Saxon work. In particular, it was thought that closer inspection of the rectangular stones set vertically along the boundary between the masonry of the east face and the buttresses might reveal an earlier phase within the fabric of the tower.

However, examination of the vertical stones and their relationship to the rest of the structure suggests that they are part of a single phase. Although the long stones are

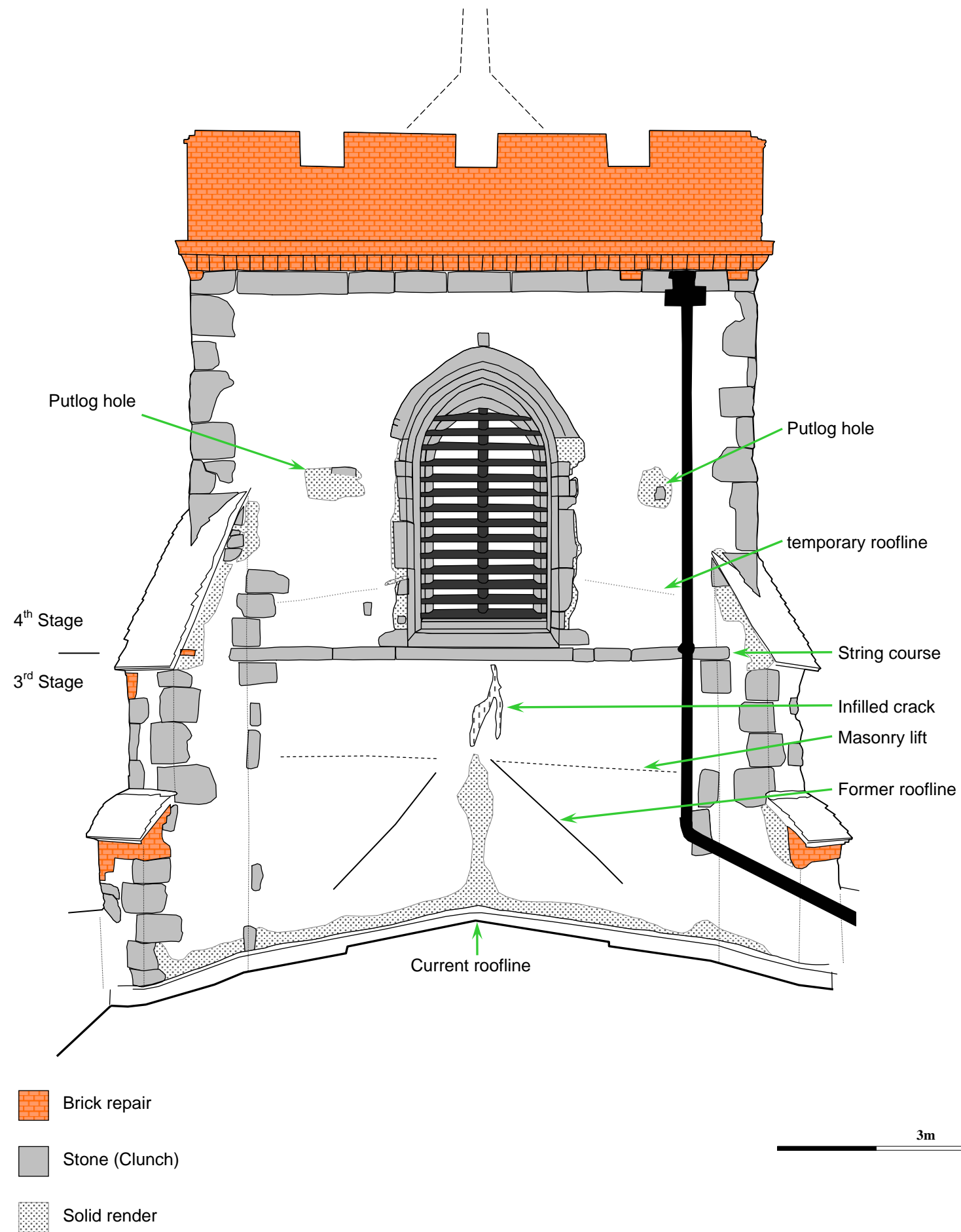
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<sup>2</sup> see <sup>1</sup>



set vertically, there is no evidence of the classic long-and-short-work typical of the Anglo-Saxon period. Any Saxon quoining on the outer corners of a tower would have been at least partially obscured by the subsequent construction of diagonal buttresses during the medieval period. When compared with details found on the other faces of the tower it becomes apparent that the long stones set vertically into the face of the tower are integral with the construction of the buttresses and spiral staircase, both of which are features of medieval construction rather than Saxon.

The structure of the existing nave roof suggests a fifteenth century date broadly contemporary with the proposed date for the tower. The scar of an earlier roof line within the fabric of the tower is indicative of the sequence of construction and suggests that the tower was built against an existing nave. Following the construction of the tower, the nave was re-roofed, possibly rebuilt, with the current roofline. Although the current tower may have replaced an earlier one, there is no evidence for any remnants of an earlier tower within the existing fabric. Furthermore there is no indication within the fabric of the tower, or the church itself, of any construction likely to pre-date the thirteenth-century date that Pevsner has given for the origins of the chancel.



**Figure 1:** East face of tower





**Plate 1:** West Face



**Plate 2:** North Face





**Plate 3:** South Face



**Plate 4:** East Face