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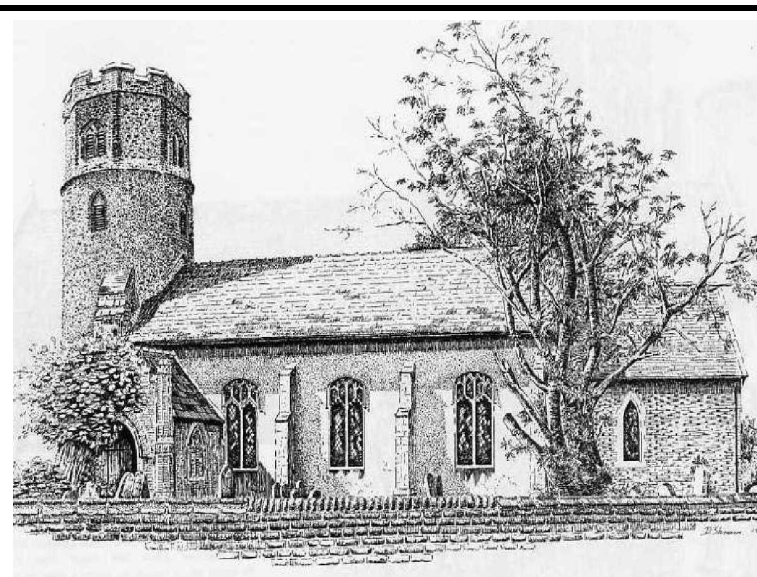
Vol. XXXV No. 2 December 2007



The Round Tower

Vol. XXXV No. 2

December 2007



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ROUND TOWER NEWS

Congratulations to Valerie Grose who won the competition at the Study Day and correctly identified the 12 churches.

A letter from Martin Stevens reminds us that the back copies of The Round Tower still make for interesting reading long after their issue date and, in this case, provoke an enjoyable memory:-

“...As I receive each issue it is often my custom to delve back to previous numbers for reasons of both education and research, and so it was with particular interest that I discovered in June 2004 the article by Mr H.T.Norris which related to churches in Belarus, a fascinating subject itself and especially the reference to the ‘Fortress Church’ as illustrated.

On recollection I now realise that I came across this site when enjoying a steam railway event in 1992 during the course of a circular tour in the Minsk area between Barnovichi and Lida.

Our train had just passed this unusually styled structure before arriving at an unadvertised station stop for timing purposes. Almost immediately cameras appeared to film the scene but unfortunately I had experienced a mechanism fault and so could not take advantage of this brief interval before the train began to move.

As a historical footnote, the locomotive rostered for ‘round robin’ tourism detail was an ex Trans Siberian semi streamliner along with others of this celebrated class, demoted to special charter operations but still maintained in green livery and looking most impressive.

Finally my thanks go to Mr Norris for enlightening me on what had formerly been and unexplained event...”

June issue 2007, page 88, line 19 should read ‘...in East Anglia where there is at least one very early church built in materials other than wood (i.e. stone, brick etc)...’

September issue 2007, St Benedict’s Church , Norwich, page 12, line 5...there have been several letters concerning the number of medieval churches still surviving within the city walls—the majority of opinion falls to a total of 31. To reach 35 would require the addition of St Benedict itself (tower only remains), St Peter Southgate (fraction of tower remains) and St Paul and St Michael at Thorn (both demolished after bomb damage).

September issue 2007, St Benedict’s Church, page 12, line 18...should read St Mary and not St Michael.

EDITORIAL

As the year closes we reflect on those journeys enjoyed to visit our favourite churches, gathered with friends as we cast a watchful eye over the buildings that continue to fascinate and please. Stephen Hart reminds us of the visit to Needham (page 28) and for those who missed the Study Day, Michael Pollit shares his own reflections on an interesting and thought provoking day (page 39). Christine Draycott takes us up to Scotland to look at two round towers built by the Caldees (page 42) whilst Richard Harbord looks at the evidence for a round tower at St Mary the Virgin, Houghton-on-the Hill (see page 36).

The next issue is March 2008 and the deadline for insertion is Friday 25th January 2008.

Please send all items to:-

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THE ROUND TOWER

**The quarterly magazine of the
Round Tower Churches Society**

Vol. XXXV No. 2 December 2007

Featured church, Needham 28

Needham interior 32

Syleham church 34

Houghton-on-the Hill 36

Study Day report 39

The Scottish Survivals 42

Round Tower News 46

Society Officers 47

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Minimum £10 (overseas £15) of which 40% is for the printing and posting of *The Round Tower* and administration, with the balance going to the Repair Fund.

Magazines are published on the 1st of March, June, September and December. Membership renewal date is the first of these dates following the application for membership.

To join the Society, please contact the Treasurer whose address and telephone number is on the inside back cover.

ST PETER'S CHURCH, NEEDHAM,

When the Society visited this church on 4 August this year, members were surprised to find that at 3.45 p.m. (2.45 GMT) the north wall was in sunlight! Its nave/chancel axis is about 45 degrees out of the normal east/west alignment, perhaps because it may have been built to be parallel to the road which has a south-west/north-east alignment. Is this road an ancient route between Bury St Edmunds and Yarmouth?

Needham church is aisleless and consists of a nave with round west tower, a narrower chancel and a south porch.

The nave is about 18'6" wide internally with side walls about 2'6" thick, and though awkward to measure, the west wall is probably about 3 ft thick. The north wall is of rubble flintwork with remnants of harling on its lower parts but its quoins are now lost behind large buttresses at each end, with another midway along the wall. There are two Perpendicular windows and above their tracery level a difference in the wall fabric is noticeable and contains some medieval brick. This suggests that the wall was heightened, probably when the windows were inserted. A blocked north door has a once-chamfered pointed arch which could date the lower part of the wall as c.13. A rood-stair projection at the east end with a brick buttress was probably a c.15 alteration – perhaps the same date as the raised wall and windows. The south wall has three stone buttresses but is otherwise entirely rendered. Its three Perpendicular two-light windows may be restored. The nave roof, said by Pevsner to be Perpendicular, is now covered with Welsh slate.

The remnants of a dressed stone weathercourse in the east wall of the tower above the present nave ridge level have a steeper pitch than the present roof: this is compatible with a former roof of thatch and with the lower eaves level of the north wall. Because of the impracticability of inserting a straight stone moulding into an existing curved rubble flint wall, this weathercourse would have been built in during the tower wall construction, and since dressed stone was unlikely to have been available before the Conquest, it implies a relatively later date for the tower wall.

Below these carvings is a semicircle filled with a further fluid motif. (Abernethy museum, opened in 2000 by Magnus Magnusson, has other such examples of Pictish art on display).

As at Brechin, the round tower's entrance is above ground level. The heavy stones of the doorway here are believed to be Norman. They lack embellishment of any kind.

The massive yellow sandstone blocks of which the tower is built are smooth, but much weathered. There is no conical cap like the one at Brechin; the top is quite flat.

The dedication of the church here emphasises the Irish origin of the Culdees, being dedicated to St Bride, whose Monastery was at Kildare and who died in 1525. But there is nothing Celtic in the architecture of the present simple church which dates from the mid-eighteenth century and is of pinkish orange and white brick with a modern roof and a very small plain bell-cote and porch; the windows, of plain glass are in three pairs: two tall central ones flanked by two smaller, one above the other.

The simplicity of the church and its site must have been very attractive to the Culdees with the river Earn below and the Tay not much further away: rich farmland and woods, plentiful fishing and water transport.

Perhaps because there was no See at Abernethy the uncomplicated life of this church continued and is strongly reflected in the plain modest building of today.

When I visited these two survivals of early Scottish monasticism their affinity to the round towers of Irish monastic foundations was clear. Yet this 'Irishness' does not divorce these treasures from those which we enjoy and support: St Fursa was Irish too!

Christine Draycott

Bibliography: ¹ Revd. D. Butler, M.A., *The Ancient Church and Parish of Abernethy*, Wm. Blackwood 1897

interesting streets (some paths along which are cobbled) is not a short one. But, like the Minster in its churchyard on the south side of the town, it is very rewarding; the closer view of the deeply ancient round tower is thought-provoking and fascinating.

Abernethy's Round Tower



The contrast between the urban setting of Brechin's Cathedral and that of Abernethy in its rural village street is reflected in the great difference between the two churches. It is their round towers which emphasises their similarity of foundation: Culdees erected both of them in the tenth century, having come over from Ireland to implant their secluded cells at several of Scotland's later cathedral sites, of which Dunkeld and St Andrews are two other examples.

The curvilinear boundary of Abernethy's churchyard has been somewhat straightened, notable along the narrow Wynd - an eloquent street name! However, the ancient importance suggested by the curving is re-enforced by the simple, aloof, round tower.

It stands some distance away from the church of St Bride, which is on the north side; the tower is at the south-west, by the gate, further up the hill on which the village stands.

At present, for reasons of safety, visitors are not allowed inside the tower, but, in his minutely detailed book, written in 1897 on the church, and the parish - of which he was then the Minister, the Revd. D. Sutler¹ describes evidence of five floors within it and suggests that, besides the belfry on the upper levels there would have been a treasury and scriptorium. Also, as from other round towers, watch was kept for raiders approaching.

There is one Pictish stone outside the churchyard gate at the base of the tower. It shows a hammer and a chisel-head between which is a Celtic tuning-fork decorated simply.

The chancel was rebuilt in 1735 in red brick in Flemish bond with burnt headers forming a chequer pattern. It has a two-light Y-traceried east window and lancets in the north and south walls. The roof is covered with plain tiles.



Needham church tower

without stone dressings, with a plastered finish, could imply breaking through an existing wall rather than building the arch with the wall.

The tower is circular for about three-quarters of its height and has a later octagonal belfry. It has an internal diameter of 8'6" at ground level and its walls are over 4 feet thick. The fabric of the circular part is rubble flint and erratics, mainly uncoursed. Indications of patching around the cusped lancet west window suggest that it may be a later insertion or recently restored; above that, about halfway up the circular stage, a rectangular stone slit window also appears to have been restored.

The four former belfry openings at the cardinal points near the top of the circular stage are single-light openings, and although restored

with brick jambs and arches, probably originally had brick dressings. The west-facing one has been lengthened downwards and its brick jambs rebuilt with three-course brick quoins alternating with knapped flint and an arch of knapped flints alternating with paired brick voussoirs. Internally, except for the one in the east wall, the openings have been altered to some extent but the east one gives an indication of their original construction. It has splayed reveals and a pointed, almost triangular arched head with medieval bricks incorporated in the soffit in such a way that the arch could only have been built like that – the bricks could not have been inserted later, and the opening exhibits no evidence of having been altered from an earlier shape. There are no signs of blocked possible earlier belfry openings lower down, and so the original belfry can be dated as probably no earlier than c.14. The blocked upper door opening in the east wall at first-floor level has a pointed brick arch; the opening has subsequently been widened.



The original belfry opening inside the tower in the east wall

As is normal where an octagonal belfry has been built on to a round tower, the tower's circular stage terminates with a circular stone string course, but here, instead of the octagon starting immediately above it, initially three courses of medieval brickwork maintain the circular shape above the string course. The reason for this is unclear; does it suggest that before the octagon was built there may have been a circular brick parapet? Inspection at this level inside may possibly throw light on this peculiarity.

The belfry walls are knapped flint and brick, with brick corners and two-light brick belfry openings in the cardinal faces. It dates from the late 15th or early 16th century, with a c.19 battlemented parapet. The

preserved and displayed inside the church. They are from the days of the earliest Culdean monks, who came to occupy these sites when both Brechin and Abernethy were centres of Pictish royal power and wide influence.

The cathedral itself is mainly of thirteenth century date. It was in 1218 that Bishop Gregory established a chapel of secular canons to work from the Culdees' monastery. Within some thirty years, the new-comers were in complete possession of the site and the discovery, during some restoration work, of a Romanesque arch of mid twelfth century date suggests that they built a church not long after their arrival.

The present building is of the mid-thirteenth century and most of the fabric dates from this time despite the addition of a west tower – not detached this one – and a major re-arrangement of the interior of the building, which took place in the early nineteenth century, and which gave it a hall-like appearance.

The choir lacks aisles, but is richly decorated; it is thought to be later than the nave, the piers of which are elaborate – in England, those at Hexham are similarly lavish – some clustered others flat.

There is a clerestory and the tall windows contain a rich mixture of both medieval and later stained glass.

After the Reformation, the Cathedral fell into disrepair. In 1689 its status as the seat of a bishop was removed.

The vast restoration which took place in 1806 simplified the internal lay-out, until then it had a hall-like appearance. This design was rectified later when the east end was given its present appearance having a round window above two tall deeply arched perpendicular ones. At the same time the north transept, called the Queen's Aisle, was designed in florid style to mark the reign of Queen Victoria. Since 1951 this has been treated as a side chapel for the simpler services.

Although Brechin's ecclesiastical treasures do not impose themselves on the eye of the traveller who approaches the town from the road to Forfar on the west, and Aberdeen to the north east, glimpses of the round tower appear. Even then the walk from the market place through the old and very

THE SCOTTISH SURVIVALS: Round Towers of Brechin & Abernethy

The church of St Andrew at Bramfield, and its detached round tower reflect a similar separation seen at the two churches on the Scottish mainland which still have a round tower within their churchyards: those of Brechin (in Angus) and Abernethy (in Perthshire).

Both of these take the history of such structures even further back than do the East Anglian ones; to the days of some of the earliest Christian centres in Britain. They date from the tenth century, on land chosen by austere, enigmatic monks called Caldees, who came over from Ireland to practise their simple religion during the supremacy in those Scottish tribal times of the Picts.

The Tower and the Cathedral of St Mary at Brechin



These two buildings stand close together, but the tower pre-dates the church by at least two hundred years. It was made accessible in the thirteenth century from inside the Minster, by a door being inserted at ground-level in the south-west corner of the nave.

Alas, both this, and the original door to the tower - which is some four feet off the ground - are no longer used, as the interior of the tower is considered unsafe for visitors.

The tower's tenth century door is arched over with two huge slabs of sandstone, the surface of which bears

sculptures: a crucifixion placed centrally on the arch; two robed figures, one at either side, which possibly represent saints, and parallel necklaces of pelleting framing the sides, the arch and the topmost step-stone. The strings of pellets are, considering the great age of the tower, remarkably complete for all of one side and string.

The two Pictish creatures found at either side of the bottom opening are of the same style as the figures on the carved stones, also Pictish, which are

added stair turret with chequer walls of knapped flints and brick on the south side of the tower may be the same date as the belfry.

The brick porch has a stepped gable, two-light brick side windows and polygonal corner turrets with castellated tops. Above the entrance arch, a niche has a moulded brick cinquefoil top and brick headstops. Of particular interest are the moulded bricks, some trefoiled, some quatrefoiled that are used decoratively on the plinth, on the gable below the coping bricks and above the brick entrance arch hood-mould. Pevsner records that bequests were left for its building in 1469 and 70, but its style seems more like c.16.

Stephen Hart

DISFIGUREMENT AT BARTLOW



The south-west corner of Bartlow church photographed in 1997, before restoration

At the south-west corner of the church and extending to about half the height of the round tower's lower stage, a right-angled salient of ancient flint masonry projects from the re-entrant angle between the nave west wall and the tower. This may have been the south-west corner of an original eleventh century church and the only surviving remnant of it. As the photo shows, its quoins until recently were rubble flints. Regrettably, they have now been replaced with dressed stone.

In these days of enlightened conservation and the availability of the necessary skills to carry out faithful renovations, it is unbelievable that such an unhistorical restoration could have been contemplated. Sadly, this work has destroyed important archaeological evidence and distorted a piece of architectural history.

Let us hope that a lesson can be learned from this disaster and that in other cases where flint quoins need renovation they are sensitively repaired with flints.

Stephen Hart

INTERIOR - NEEDHAM CHURCH

Compared to other parishes, the history of Needham church is rather unusual. What we now know as the parish of Needham was, originally, a hamlet forming part of the parish of Mendham. The village of Mendham is three miles away, to the north-east, across the River Waveney in Suffolk. The first church at Needham was built as a chapel-of-ease to save the residents of Needham the long trek to their parish church at Mendham whereby the former paid eighteen pence every Easter Day toward the repairs of Mendham church. This was done as an acknowledgement that the residents for Needham were still members of Mendham church.

By 1411 the agreement was under stress as, in that year, the inhabitants of Needham complained to no lesser person than the Pope that their chapel was not properly served by Mendham even though they still paid tithes to the Prior of Mendham. As a result, the Pope issued a bill commanding the Prior to always find a parochial chaplain, who should then reside in Needham and serve the chapel.

As a result of such history, it is no surprise that Needham church is quite a small building and the interior has a very comfortable and homely feel. The



Chalice carving on back of the fifth pew

nave contains a wonderful assortment of pews and bench ends. Some fifteenth century bench ends remain with their chamfers decorated with carved fleurons. When backs were added to the benches any timber that was handy was put to use. Look at the back of the sixth pew from the front, on the south side, and you see that it is fashioned from panels from an old chest—even the keyhole is still

visible! The back of the fifth pew on the same side, appears to include parts taken from an old screen and bears the wording 'use well thy time for dethe is coming. The sentence of God almighty is everlasting'. Below the wording are small carved shields one of which depicts a chalice. Depictions of chalices were savagely attacked by the iconoclasts, following the Reformation, so we must assume that they did not notice this one now forming part of a pew back. Continuing the re-cycling theme, some wall panels on the north side of the nave appear to have come from a Jacobean pulpit.

Helmingham, where Thomas Aldryche agreed to build a 60ft tower in 10 years by 1498 for £60. Dr Blatchly illustrated his talk with a number of examples and by the close most of the attentive audience were able to "decode" many of the symbols, especially "Marian" crowns, which were a constant feature on many churches and a particularly clever example of flushwork can be seen at Mendlesham. It has four "Marian" crowns with two clever reverses of the letter "R" after a patron. He emphasised that without the vital information about wills, it was virtually impossible to be accurate. It was often necessary to follow the money to identify the donors! His excellent book covers the topic in much greater depth.

The final topic of the day, which will be covered by a forthcoming book, looked at the key design changes of wall paintings over almost 400 years. Roger Rosewell, who had travelled 160 miles that day to lecture on medieval wall paintings, said that early images often featured the more dramatic biblical stories - for example Jonah and the Whale. But some of the early surviving examples from Deerhurst (950AD) showed angels, the figure of Christ and the Evangelists. And a century later, Houghton-on-the Hill in Norfolk (1080) the imagery started became more complex in nature with typical "Doom" imagery. While wall painting subject matter evolved, despite the challenge from the 1200s when walls were broken up by bigger windows and gothic arches, there was a gradual shift away from Old Testament subjects. So by the middle of the 13th century or after 1250, there are few, if any, examples.

Instead, the fashion started to concentrate more on the Saints, boosted by the decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council. No doubt, images of saints were better business for encouraging pilgrims! For example, a painting of St Catherine at Sporle in Norfolk.

Michael Pollitt

Footnote: Publisher Boydell & Brewer has two specialist books out on March 20, 2008.

Roger Rosewell, *Medieval wallpaintings in English and Welsh Churches*. Hardback £39.95.

Stephen Hart, *Flint Flushwork, A Medieval Masonry Art*. Hardback £30. Details, Boydell & Brewer, PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF.

roughly between the 1460s and 1480s that major investment in a richer style of church furniture had taken place, said Mr Paine. For example, many fine examples of highly-carved and decorated poppy-headed benches date from this period, and lecterns and indeed pulpits, as at Southwold, were the fashion. However, the decoration of the central rood screen had become the "touchstone" of even the plainest of late medieval churches and the march for more elaborate designs encouraged investment in bigger structures. Two churches in Suffolk including Gisleham even had projecting bays. The rood loft above the screen, which divided nave from chancel, included a walkway for a priest or cleric to light candles to the holy figures as at Shoreham Church, Kent, which was 4ft wide. Where a rood stairway was built, it obviously weakened the walls but left evidence for later generations to identify. Some must have used ladders but no evidence has survived.

There were often side altars, particularly if dedicated to Our Lady, typically on the north side, and often there was a guild altar on the other side of the nave. The most obvious example of often costly interior decoration were wall paintings, typically opposite the north door.

A great enthusiast, Dr John Blatchly, who is a former headmaster at Ipswich School, tackled his topic, Decoding Flint Flushwork. He had studied more than 90 churches in Suffolk and Norfolk to decipher some of the fascinating designs and subtle messages in the stonework.

A key to understanding flushwork had been possible because of careful study of North Lopham Church, the home of a highly skilled family business, thought to have been started by Thomas Aldryche.

In the middle and later years of the 15th century, there was a big demand for ornamental flushwork by richer patrons, keen to support church extensions including porches and even towers. And Thomas Aldryche and successors were quick to tap into this early form of medieval advertising - hence the "orb" - representing the universal appeal to "all" - a clear symbol - and even seen upside down at one church.

This evidence came from a "contract" with the churchwardens at



The font, at the rear of the nave, is typical of several in this Norfolk/Suffolk border area. It would have had four lions around the stem, their bodies are still present but the heads have long gone. The panels of the bowl show Tudor roses alternating with the symbols of the four evangelists. Some traces of original colour remain and there is damage on the north side where a device to lock the font cover has been removed.

The chancel is small and 'weeps' slightly to the north. This is now regarded as being the result of rudimentary building techniques rather than having any mystical significance. The chancel was rebuilt in 1735, at a time when little attention was being paid to church buildings, by William Freston. One of his ancestors was held responsible for the chancel being in a ruinous state as far back as 1602. William Freston died in 1739 and is remembered by a tablet with a Latin inscription on the south wall of the chancel. His wife Margaret died two years later and is recorded as 'indulging grief too much'.

Richard Barham

THE GUIDE TO NORFOLK CHURCHES

by D. P. Mortlock and C. V. Roberts

ISBN 978 07188 3064 9 The Lutterworth Press £25

After some years of being out of print, it is good to see Mr Mortlock's revision of the user-friendly Popular Guide, originally listing just medieval churches still in use and published in three volumes in the 1980s. This edition is in one volume, (no longer pocket-sized!), with some redundant churches and noteworthy Victorian ones being added. The round tower church of Moulton St Mary is in for the first time, but there are only 14 churches entered for Norwich! Bells that can be rung are now listed at the end of the description of their church. The Glossary has been amended, and the Saints and the Styles of Architecture each have their own Appendix, which simplifies matters. For RTCS members it may be confusing not to have the round towers dated according to our latest specialist research, but these authors, calling themselves church enthusiasts, are entitled to their own opinions. Alas not all the simple errors, such as the transposition of N and S in a few cases, have been rectified. Mr Mortlock is intending to revise his similar volumes for the Suffolk Churches, which have been much appreciated over the years. This will hopefully be published next year and is eagerly awaited!

Lyn Stilgoe

SYLEHAM CHURCH IN ITS SETTING

There are at least three ways to look at a Round Towered church - or any other church for that matter.

The first is the architectural features, the furnishings and the building's history. This is what interests all members of our Society.

The second is the uses to which the building is put - ranging from the worship of God, concerts, art exhibitions and in a few cases the provision of Post Office facilities! This is of great importance to many of us.

But the third way is to look at the church building in its setting and the landscape. This, I often find, is of great interest. Syleham in Suffolk, so well featured in the March 2007 edition of *The Round Tower*, is a good example. It is today in an extremely remote location - but how different it was in the past.



Today you approach the church from a "cross roads" outside the present village. At first glance it is a T junction of country lanes but one arm of the signpost proclaims the fourth turning is to 'Syleham Church only'. A gate bars entry to the lane. You have to get out of your car, open the gate, drive through, get out

again to shut the gate—and drive down a lane with beautiful daffodils on either side (if you are lucky enough to be there in the Spring) to get to the church. It is known locally as the Causeway.

The church is located on a very slight rise above the marshes of the River Waveney. There is a clear view of the river from the north wall of the church.

Round Tower Churches second annual study day

Saturday, October 6, 2007 Rickinghall village hall.

It could almost have been an examination question. Was Henry VIII responsible for radical changes to churches in England? Discuss.

Well, actually not, about 55 people heard at a special study day. While it is widely accepted that during the final third of Good King Hal's lengthy reign, the Reformation sparked an unprecedented economic revolution and probably the biggest state-sponsored land grab since William the Conqueror in 1066, the impact at parish level was more muted.

The first speaker, Clive Paine said that Henry VIII died in 1547 a catholic. Henry, the Defender of the Faith (1521) had engineered the split with Rome and went on to fill his Treasury with the proceeds of ecclesiastical lands. This booty was frittered away in a pointless war with the King of France - but he left parish churches alone. His son, Edward VI, who aged nine could speak Greek and Latin, and regents, Somerset and Northumberland, really gave the spur to the Reformation at parish level. And, so it was during the boy king's short reign, before his older and Catholic sister, Mary, succeeded him in 1553 that church furniture and interior decoration really altered and quite dramatically. While priests were allowed to marry in 1549, the next year altars had to be removed and were replaced by Communion Tables - a revolution lasting to this day. Churches had to dispose of their "surplus" ornaments, crosses and decorations. Rich pickings indeed if just one Suffolk church at Long Melford is typical. Churchwarden Roger Martin in 1553 noted that a total of 510oz silver (31lbs) including seven chalices, seven candlesticks, three basins, 20 copes and vestments - were sold. Then, it was all change the following year under Queen Mary.

So, within 100 years, roughly four generations, the brightly decorated interior of many churches had been transformed into starker and plainer designs. It was during the second half of the 15th century-

until they reach the stub walls of the sanctuary.

Only the foundations of the Norman chancel survive, but, these have been left exposed in the ground. They show that the apsed chancel was much narrower than the nave. That being so, it rules out the possibility of the side arches being open to the chancel and it means that they were always as they are now, just shallow recesses at the end of the nave. A summary of the buildings history would indicate:-

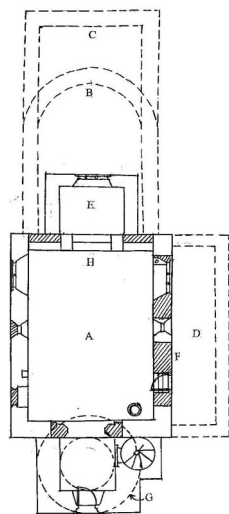


Figure 2. Layout plan.
A. the early Norman nave.
B. the early Norman apse.
C. the 14th century chancel.
D. south aisle of circa 1300.
E. 18th century altar chamber.
F. infilled walls shown shaded.
G. footprint of the Round Tower.
H. three-arched chancel wall.

c. 1090, a nave with an apsed chancel was erected with Roman materials and flints. The four nave walls are about the same thickness so there was probably no tower at this date.

c. 1300, a south aisle was added and two arched openings were cut through the south wall of the nave. The tower may have been added then or perhaps earlier. A Norman door was inserted in the north wall.

14th century, the south aisle was demolished and the openings in the south nave walls were blocked up except where a door and window were inserted. The walls of the nave were heightened from

about 13 to 16 feet. This may have triggered the replacement of the round tower with the present square one. The tower arch was also enlarged and rebuilt. The nave roof was to remain thatched until the end of the 19th century. The round end-wall of the apse was demolished so that the stub walls were retained (Report 585, contradicts Report 497 on this point) and extended to provide a much enlarged chancel.

1776, the chancel was demolished and the much smaller, thatched altar chamber was built.

1944, the village had disappeared except for one farm and the church was abandoned.

Richard Harbord

But what is now a cul de sac was in the past an important crossing point of the River Waveney from Suffolk into Norfolk. There was a bridge here over the river and the track led to Brockdish on the Norfolk side. The church stood beside that route crossing the river until the Bridge was taken down in the mid seventeenth century. But to this day the Ordnance Survey map shows a continuation of the track on the Norfolk side.



And it was near Syleham church that an important event in East Anglian history took place. On 22nd/23rd July 1174 King Henry 11 and his army were encamped at Syleham preparing to lay seige to Bungay Castle, the stronghold of the rebel Duke of Norfolk, Hugh Bigod. But Bigod was not prepared to fight. He came to Syleham to sue for peace. Local legend says that as he begged for mercy he clung to a old cross which was located near the road junction above mentioned. Hugh managed to escape with his life and was exiled.

The old cross was taken down in the seventeenth century. But to mark the millenium local people erected, a few years ago, a large wooden cross (see picture above) near the entry gate of the lane leading to the church. A plaque at the base of the cross commemorates these events. So, remote and out of the way Syleham church has not only been a place of worship for many hundreds of years. It has also watched over an historiacal event of national importance—and the comings and goings of local people along the Causeway into Norfolk.

Frank Howard

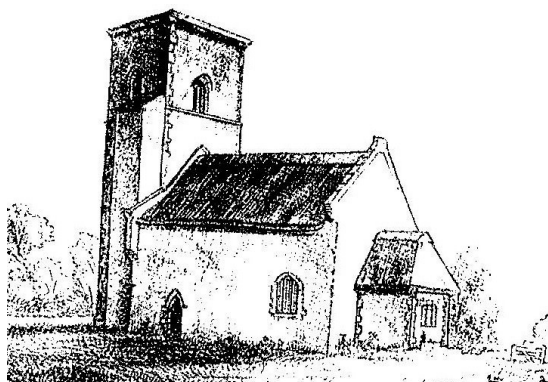
Your contributions in the form of articles, notes on visits, anecdotes, local activities etc., are all greatly appreciated to make each issue of the magazine an interesting and worthwhile read.

Please send material to:-

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St Mary-the-Virgin's Church, Houghton-on-the Hill

OS 4540, in a remote location south of Swaffham and near the village of South Pickenham.



St Mary-the-Virgin, Houghton on the Hill
John Ladbrooke (circa 1830)

The church consists of a western tower, a nave which is tall in comparison with its small size and a very small altar chamber. Although the present tower is square, its predecessor was round. The tower's circular foundations were found in 1997 when the floor was lifted as part of a general repair programme. After limited excavations on the site about the same time, two reports were published by Norfolk Landscape

Archaeology (Reports 497 and 583 by K. Penn, 2000). They estimated the date of the present church to be early Norman, circa 1090. This was based on a building sequence for the site given in the County Conservationist's report of 1996 (unpublished). The same date is also repeated in Pevsner's Buildings of England, Norfolk 2, 1999. The church was ruinous up to 1996 when the study and restoration programme began. Inside the church several layers of murals were uncovered. These have been subjected to intensive investigation by the Courtauld Institute of London and others. The first layer of murals have also been dated at about 1080 and are the earliest of any in Norfolk. These studies suggest that there was a general agreement about the date of the original church but that hides the intense controversy going on behind the scenes. At least one authority on early murals thought they could be 9th century in date.

The foundations of the nave were excavated and found to have been dug below the subsoil, built up and then capped with a course of Roman bricks. The building materials came from a Roman Villa that stood adjacent and on the north side of the church (County site no 29034). A lot of Roman brick, tiles, cut stone and even re-used flints were used in the walls of the church particularly in the reveals of the chancel arches and voussoirs of the openings.

It has even been suggested that the nave was built over the foundations of the bath-house attached to the Roman Villa. The Archaeology Reports say that the wall foundations need further investigation before that can be confirmed. Whatever the conclusion, it still places Houghton alongside the earliest churches built by the Anglo-Saxons in the ruins of Roman towns (like Canterbury) or Roman forts (like Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex). No other example is known in Norfolk so this could be a unique instance that deviates from the norm. Until twenty years ago William Goode, *et al*, stated that many flint-built churches and their round towers in Norfolk were Anglo-Saxon in date. Now opinion has shifted so far in the other direction as to say that all Norfolk churches built before 1066 were made of wood and only after that date was the use of flint introduced. Such a view allows for no exceptions but Houghton Church could be one of them. In fact, it could be the earliest surviving church in Norfolk.

In the centre of the north and south walls there are round headed, double splayed windows. Originally there may have been three on each side but several of them have probably been lost through changes made to the fabric. The opening of the northern window was historically blocked up but its timber frame was retained. A similar situation arose in the great Anglo-Saxon church of Brixworth in Northamptonshire. A timber fragment from its walls was dated at 910 AD. This begs for a test for timber-dating at Houghton which would settle the issue over the building's history. Another archaic feature in the church are the triple openings in the chancel wall. The central arch is well rounded but without the imposts found in 'key-hole arches'. The two side arches are lower and much less rounded. Their rear walls were lost when the church fell into ruins but have now been infilled with reused bricks. The lower parts of the infill panels are plastered over, so it is difficult to know whether these were built at the same time as the arches, or whether the arches were originally fully open to the chancel. If they were open then that would place Houghton in the company of the earliest missionary churches of Kent (eg Rochester, Reculver, etc) and also at Bradwell, Brixworth etc. It has been suggested that the arches were half open so that a priest standing on the sanctuary side of the arches could administer communion using them as a sort of hatch.

Outside the eastern end of the nave, the form of the building suggests otherwise. The Roman bricks and tiles in the quoins turn around the corner