

The Use of reclaimed Roman building materials in Norfolk churches. By Stephen Heywood.

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The value of bricks manufactured in Britain by the Romans was clearly great to the medieval builder from the 6th to the 14th century. The manufacture of brick ceased in this country with the departure of the Romans and did not begin again seriously until the later Middle Ages. This cannot have been due to the loss of the technical knowledge considering that bricks continued to be made uninterruptedly in Northern Europe. Of all the possible theories to explain this mysterious aversion to making bricks, the fact remains that there was an abundance of brick in the many defunct Roman buildings which almost littered Southern Britain. The chronicler Mathew Paris, a monk at St Albans, tells us how the abbey (now cathedral) was built by the first Norman Abbot with the bricks collected by his Anglo-Saxon predecessor from the Roman town of Verulamium. In large part this building survives today.

Re-used Roman brick is especially common in Essex due to major Roman developments like Verulamium and Colchester town. The Anglo-Saxon church of the Holy Trinity in Colchester is almost entirely of re-used brick and parish churches throughout the county commonly have re-used Roman brick.

In Norfolk, Roman villas, coastal forts and settlements provided a considerable amount of building materials. Most commonly seen in our churches are fragments of roof tile in particular the tegula. The tegula is a flat roof tile with two opposing edges turned up slightly. It is often recognised in medieval masonry as a tegula by the right angle formed by the turned up edge. The typical Roman roof had tiles laid turned –up-edge to turned-up-edge and the join was covered with an imbrex which is a tile, approximately semi-circular in section, similar to the tiles which still cover the roofs of the houses in the Mediterranean regions. The latter are rarely seen re-used in medieval masonry and yet there is a well preserved imbrex in the west wall of the round-towered church of St Peter at Brampton (The Round Tower XXIX, 3, March 2002). A small Roman town stood nearby and this was undoubtedly the source not only of the brick but also the stone quoins at the north west corner of the nave. The stone is a sandstone which is rarely used as a dressing in medieval Norfolk and probably comes from the Cretaceous beds of Lincolnshire. The same stone was used at the Roman fort of Brancaster and is re-used in the parish church and various buildings in the village.

The Roman brick is different to the tile and is less frequently seen in Norfolk churches. It is square and flat, similar in thickness to a parget. The side of the square brick is a sesquipedalium in length. That is one-and-a half Roman feet. The official Roman (Hadrianic) foot is of 29.57 cms. A large quantity is used at the site of St Mary at Houghton-on-the-Hill

which is on the Peddars Way and near to the site of a former villa. The bricks are used for quoins and for nearly all the voussoirs and jambs of the chancel arch.

The most remarkable church in Norfolk for the re-use of Roman materials is the church of St John the Baptist at Reedham where Roman brick, tile and stone are the principal building materials. There is a section built entirely of Roman brick laid in herringbone fashion while the nave and tower of the church of 14th and 15th century date are built with sandstone from the Cretaceous beds of Lincolnshire clearly of Roman origin with some surviving typical Roman tooling. This means that there was a very large Roman building near to Reedham capable of providing materials almost up to the end of the Middle Ages.

A full account of this church is published in the Journal of the British Archaeological Association by Edwin Rose (CXLVII, 1994, pp1-9).