

St Mary's, Appleton, Norfolk by R.Harbord.
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Bill Goode in his standard reference book on Church Round Towers seemed reluctant to describe ruined churches. This is understandable if their structure has not been stabilised and then they can be dangerous places to visit. Appleton Church is no exception but most of its architectural features can be appreciated from the roadway on the north side of the church. These include a prominent round western tower; a short nave and a south porch. *Faden's* county map of 1790 shows that the road was previously on the south of the church where there was also a Holy Well in the adjacent field. That may explain the position of the south porch. Francis Blomfield writing in the late 18th century said the church was 'a single pile', meaning only the tower and nave survived. The medieval chancel and possibly a south aisle had already disappeared.



The *Domesday* Survey of 1086 lists a church and its glebe in Appleton, which may have existed before the Conquest. The tower is broad and has short thick walls. Robert Ladbroke drew the church from the south-east in the early 19th century. His sketch (above) suggests belfries each with twin openings under a round arch. The four arches have now gone but the circular middle column on the north, south and west sides survive. These are made up of about twenty, thin car-stones stacked about a metre high. The column is set back from the wall face and placed in the middle of the wall thickness. On the western side of the tower in the middle stage is a narrow slit window with a rounded head. It is capped by a large block of car-stone. All these features appear to be Norman in date. The inside of the tower is plastered above 2.5 metres with large sandstone blocks below. The same type of stones also appear externally on the north and south sides up to a similar height as well as in the west gable internally and externally. There are approximately square or rectangular in shape. How can they be explained? Were they robbed from a nearby Roman villa like the numerous red bricks and tiles inter-mixed with these stones? The change in materials probably reflects different building phases but they seem to have been generally all of one historical period. The upper third part of the tower tapers in diameter externally. There are no fillets between tower and gable wall.

Inside the tower space on the eastern side, the circular form of the walls is flattened out where it meets the west gable of the nave. This is a strong indication that

the tower was added to an earlier building. The original north-western quoin of the gable was disturbed when a brick buttress was added. The south-western quoin has also been disturbed but near the base there are long and short pieces of sandstone. This could be a relict from the Anglo-Saxon or Norman overlap periods.



The tower arch

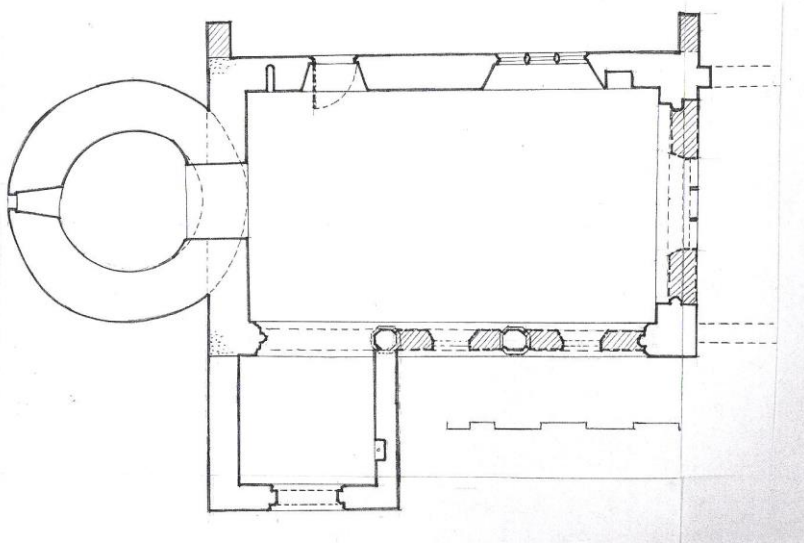
The tower arch is tall and narrow. It has sandstone and Roman bricks in the jambs. The stone impostes are decayed but there was no inset in elevation at the spring point of the arch. The tilting stone *vousoirs* are laid 'Escomb style' without using a key-stone at the top of the arch. This too could be an early Norman feature. There is no sign of an upper opening between this arch and the eastern belfry, blocked or otherwise. The upper half of this wall, facing east is coursed with smaller stones than below. The north wall of the nave survives. It is built of a third material - white chalky *clunch* so it may have been rebuilt long after the tower was erected. It is similar in thickness to the west wall of the nave, which adds to the conclusion that the nave predates the tower. The first priest was appointed to the church in 1310, which may have been when a small north door with a pointed head was inserted. It has chamfers with a hollow mould. At the same time a lancet window was inserted into the lower western part of the tower also with a sandstone frame. Neither the door nor window has a weather hood. All three openings on that western side of the tower are vertically aligned.

In the 15th century the south side of the nave was removed in order to provide a three-bay arcade. Its existence is the only evidence to suggest that a south aisle was also built – perhaps it was not. The arcade has octagonal piers; elaborately moulded plinths and capitals, as well as double chamfered arches with hollow moulds. The chancel arch had a similar character and date though the scant remains are much decayed. A three-light window was inserted into the north wall of the nave. No tracery survives but the low eaves of this wall suggest that the window had a flattened Perpendicular style arch of a similar date to the south arcade.

The Church Goodes Survey of 1552 (*Norfolk Archaeology*, vol 28, p 133) says there was still a bell in the tower but the church was already in decay. By 1571, Admiral Clement Paston had bought the manor and *advowson* for the church. Either he or his nephew and heir, Sir Edward Paston carried out extensive repairs and brought the church back into use. At the same time, Sir Edward rebuilt the manor house, (recently demolished) and a gate-house with a date-stone of 1596. The chancel arch and those of the arcade were blocked except for the insertion of square headed windows. The outline of the arcade arches could still be seen externally. The western bay of the aisle was filled with a new porch. It has a very low, red brick Tudor opening, sandstone

quoins and a buff brick string-course below the gable. Inside, the large stone blocks seen in the tower and west gable are again visible. There is also a medieval *stoup* that appears to be reused from elsewhere. The external features described above can be seen in *Ladbooke's* drawing. Three members of the Paston family were buried in the church in the late 17th century but the last priest to be presented there was in 1705. At some date a lead roof was installed on the nave and porch. When this was stripped off, all fell quickly into decay. By the 1770s the access door had gone and the building was occupied by livestock (*Blomfield*). The infill walling inserted in the late 1500s had also disappeared.

The very fact that it has now, long been ruined has helped to preserve the church's archaeological features unlike many others in the surrounding area that were harshly restored in the late 19th century. The tiny chapel-sized nave suggests a pre-Conquest date for that part of the building but why add such a large tower to it? The single 3¾ cwt bell suggests that the wide Norman tower was meant to accommodate more than just bells – perhaps it was a baptistery with a newly fashionable, free standing font that did not fit comfortably into the tiny nave.



Data in metres;

Tower, 3.05 internal diameter; wall at the west window 1.17 thick.

5.4 diameter externally; approximately 10.5 high.

Tower arch, 1.35 thick; 1.65 wide by 2.47 to the imposts; 3.40 to the arch.

Nave, west wall by estimation, 0.9 thick; roof ridge about 7.10 high,

north wall 0.85 thick; eaves 4.27 high; north door 2.54 inside.

Overall internal width, 5.10; length 8.89

Chancel arch; 4.07 clear opening; 2.38 high to the capitals.

South arcade, three bays 2.41 wide between piers

South Porch, 3.55 by 4.21; outer door 1.76 high clear opening.

Previous *RTCS* features on Appleton Church; March 1991, December 1998; March 2000.

Other photos of Appleton.



SPAG visit 2008



Photo by Simon Knott