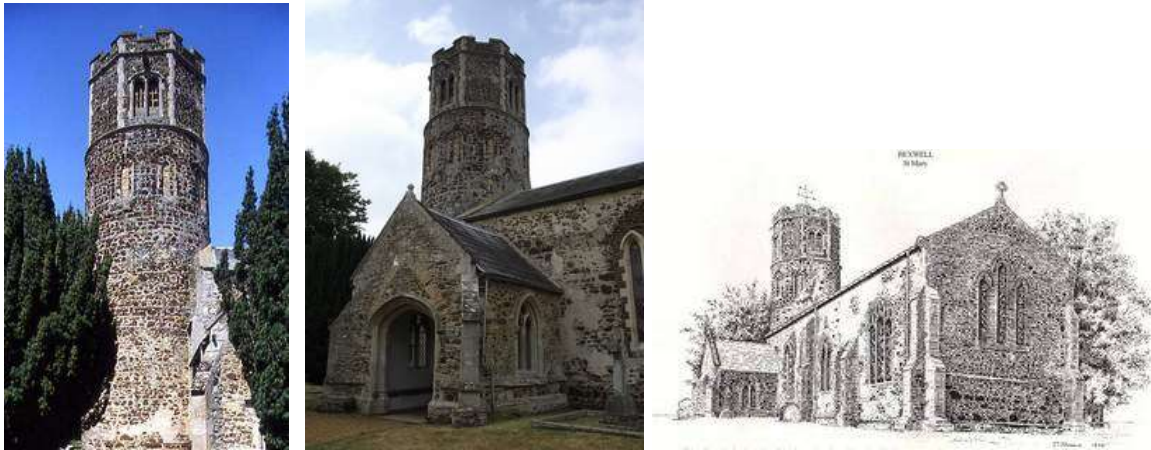


## Bexwell, St Mary by Stephen Hart.



*Bexwell tower and porch photos by Stephen Hart and Gary Troughton and drawing by Dorothy Shreeve*

Careful examination of the tower walls of Bexwell church reveals that the circular part of the tower is built with two different types of carstone in two distinct styles of stonework, with the change from one to the other occurring at irregular levels roughly halfway up the circular part.

The lower part is built with a type of carstone with a fissured surface, used in random-shaped pieces of all sizes and laid uncoursed, whereas the upper part uses a type with a pitted surface in more evenly-sized blocks, many of them squared, which are laid in definite, regular courses. This difference is particularly noticeable in the south wall.

Unlike the towers at Bessingham or Roughton for example, where abrupt changes of material occurring at definite levels probably indicate seasonal building phases or a deliberate decorative intent, the irregular levels at which the changes of material and workmanship occur on the Bexwell tower seem to rule out those possibilities and it seems likely that they could define the junction between the truncated original walls of an early tower and a later rebuilt upper stage.

The likelihood that the change of material and style of wall construction in the circular part of the tower could indicate two distinct building phases, is reinforced by a comparison of the heads of two blocked circular openings in the lower part with those of the ring of ten round-headed former belfry openings in the upper circular part. The lower arches are formed with thin, irregular, undressed rubble carstone of varied lengths in quite a different manner from the arches of the 10 former belfry openings where wider carstone voussoirs of uniform height are more or less wedge-shaped and laid radially.

Externally, these former belfry openings are framed by two orders of carstone stonework; the inner order is recessed 2ins or 3ins from the wall face and the jambs and heads of both orders are formed with even-sized, reasonably well-dressed stones and rough but definitely wedge-shaped voussoirs. The openings are about 14ins wide and inside the tower are framed with jamb stones and voussoirs similar to

the exterior ones but in a single order only and perhaps more roughly dressed. The openings are all blocked with medieval bricks except for the easternmost which is blocked with carstone.

The carstone used for the belfry arches and the upper part of the tower is not a freestone and cannot be dressed with such accuracy as is possible with Barnack or Caen limestone; it is shaped by hammer-dressing and the stone's texture makes it impossible to achieve sharp edges. It is understandable therefore, that although their original general character is still apparent, after centuries of weathering and repointings, squared and shaped stones of this material will not be sharply defined.

A blocked rounded-headed upper doorway at first-floor level internally in the tower east wall, 3ft 5ins wide and 8ft high to the crown, has straight jambs and roughly wedge-shaped arch voussoirs of even height that are radially laid. Opposite, in the west wall, an exterior upper door, located roughly at the level of the change in walling style, is a later alteration of a single-splayed window; the opening is about 1ft 9ins wide and is splayed within the tower. Above the crudely reconstructed external arch of the opening, carstone voussoirs are visible with corresponding ones internally. The apparent radius to which the external carstone voussoirs are laid and the presence of the smaller altered arch below them give reason to suppose that this window-head (which is in the upper circular part) was originally of two orders like the former belfry arches.

The present external jambs made up of small pieces of hard carstone, matching neither the upper or lower stone types, do not bond with the adjacent walling, presumably having replaced the original jambs when the window was converted to a doorway.

The tower has an internal diameter of 10ft 9ins and 3ft 5ins thick walls. The tower arch is 5ft 7ins wide and about 8ft high to the impost from which its semi-circular arch springs. The plastered imposts are chamfered and are returned about 2ft 6ins along the nave wall face but not in the tower, indicating that the opening was formed as a tower arch and had not been a former west door.

The church walls contain several types of carstone but the oldest walls, ie the nave west wall and the west parts of the side walls are mainly of the same type as the lower part of the tower, and at high level in the north wall of the nave, near the west end, a double-splayed round-headed window has an arch similar to those of the two blocked circular openings in the tower. This, and the fact that curved east wall above the tower arch in the tower is about the same thickness, about 2ft 9ins, as the nave west wall measured outside the tower suggest that the nave and the lower part of the tower were contemporary.

The change of walling material and the different methods of shaping and laying the stone in the lower and upper parts of the circular stage of the tower, the difference between the arch voussoirs of the blocked circular windows and those of the 10 former belfry openings, and the single splay design of the first floor tower window (now the upper west doorway) in contrast to double-splayed windows of the lower part of the tower and the nave are all convincing evidence for the proposition that the upper circular part was a different build from the lower part and the nave.

Double-splayed windows are widely accepted as being features of late Anglo-Saxon work (and indeed some can be shown to be Norman), and so, if the western parts of the nave and the lower circular part of the tower are considered as late Saxon, then it is unlikely that the upper circular part will be earlier than Norman.

The roughly-squared and coursed walling of the upper part of the tower's circular stage, the wedge-shaped arch voussoirs of about the same width as their radial length in the belfry openings, and the double order of stonework around the belfry openings with a recessed inner order, all point to Norman workmanship and it therefore seems probable that the upper part of the circular stage, which includes the west upper doorway and the 10 round-headed former belfry openings, is a Norman addition built onto the lower walls of a partially-collapsed or unfinished late Saxon tower. The later octagonal belfry was probably added in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.