

East Lexham, St Andrew's by Stephen Hart



The present church comprises a nave and chancel of the same width under a pantiled roof, a round west tower and a south porch.

Except for the tower, the west part of the nave north wall, the west wall and a short length of the south wall west of the porch, all the others walls have a modern rendered finish. There are no fillets between tower and the nave west wall.

The north side of the nave where not rendered is well-coursed rubble flintwork up to about 8ft 6ins, above which the next 3ft or 4ft is clunch (chalk stone), clunch also above and in the immediate surrounds of the north door. Above the clunch band the top section of the wall reverts to rubble flint but uncoursed and different from the lower work, with mediaeval bricks for its NW quoins.

The nave side wall are about 2ft 6ins thick. The pointed north door blocked in brick, has Barnack stone jambs and an unmoulded arch with a hoodmould. The south door is equally simple – it has a plain chamfer on the jambs but none on the arch voussoirs, and at the arch springing where the profile changes from chamfered jambs to plain arch, an unusual inverted broach. The porch entry arch is pointed and once chamfered. The nave windows comprises three equal elliptical-headed lights devoid of any tracery under a stilted four-centred medieval brick hoodmould, the tympanum space above the light being rendered. The chancel's side windows are similar but two-light, and the east window is a three-light transomed Perpendicular pattern with restored tracery below a four-centred hoodmould. The pointed priest's door in the south wall has one hollow chamfer and is of Barnack stone.

The church has stone quoins at all four corners; those at the SW and NW are of Barnack stone laid in long-and-short fashion and start from a little above ground level. The lower 15ins of the SW corner is of flints built up on a footing of rough concrete, and at the NW corner 2ft of brick and erratics underpin the Barnack quoins which terminate about 8ft 6ins above the ground, above which they have been replaced by brick.

Despite the Taylors' opinion that the eastern quoins "look more like the work of 19th century restorers" (Anglo-Saxon Architecture Vol 1, HM & J Taylor. C.U.P. 1980, page 388), careful inspection reveals that only the upper half or so of those corners has been restored. The lower quoins, up to about 7ft high at the SE corner and 8ft 3ins high at the NE are Barnack stone like the western quoins, mainly large upright stones laid "random megalithic", a quoining method coeval with the long-and-short

style (see Taylor & Taylor. Op Cit page 7). At both corners they can be seen to rise from chamfered plinth stones, also Barnack. The upper quoins at both these corners are of different stone, smaller, and unconventionally laid.

The tower is of two circular stages with a later octagonal brick parapet. The lower stage extends up to an off-set at belfry cill level, and narrows slightly with a more pronounced taper near the top. The only window in this stage is a restored pointed lancet facing west to light the tower's ground floor. The upper stage also has a gentle taper and contains three belfry openings, at SW, E and NW, instead of the usual four. The SW opening has two round-headed lights separated by a stout cylindrical column with a heavy abacus of Barnack stone whose shape is reminiscent of a squashed cushion capital. The jambs of the opening and the arches of the lights, though formed with flints, are slightly recessed within an outer flint arch encompassing the two openings. The central column is near the outer face of the wall and the two small arches it supports are only the thickness of the column's diameter, behind them, the full width of the double opening is spanned by a single rounded-headed arch of flints. The east opening has a single Barnack stone slab in the outer face of the wall carved in the form of a two-light window with round-headed lights and a Maltese Cross as the mullion and is spanned internally by a round-headed, splayed, flint re-arch. The NW opening has a similar rere-arch, also faced with a stone two-light window, carved out of the solid, having round-headed lights separated by a bulbous shaft with a base and capital. None of the three arches over the belfry openings have set-backs for shuttering where the arches spring from the jambs.

With 3ft 8ins thick walls, the tower is constructed of rubble flints of all sizes with some large cleft flints randomly introduced in irregular bands; the bottom part of the lower stage is coursed and its coursing appears to coincide with the nave west wall flintwork on the north side. On much of the tower the coursing is less clear and compromised by later repairs or pointing. Internally, the plan shape is a good circle with a diameter of 12ft 4ins; the ground-floor stage is plastered but above first-floor level up to about 2ft above the belfry floor level the walls are mainly rubble clunch randomly laid with thick mortar jointing. In the east wall, the lower part of the former upper door opening has been altered to accommodate a modern access door to the nave roof space, but its upper part survives as a blocked recess with jambs of roughly-squared blocks of clunch and an apparently triangular-headed arch of undressed voussoirs of the same material developing from the jambs without imposts or set-backs for shuttering. Its apex is formed with thin bricks that are probably repairs, or possibly original if they are Roman bricks. Within the belfry stage the walls are of flint rubble, and near the top of this stage roughly circular mortared patches and partial arcs of apparently radially-laid flints may be indications of former circular windows, and indistinct discontinuities of the exterior flintwork near the top of the tower could indicate corresponding blocked openings.

The plastered tower arch is 7ft 9ins wide by 12ft 8ins high with irregular curvature above its springing level; it is of pointed shape but had a radiused apex, and with a low springing level of 6ft 6ins and no imposts, it could be fairly described as cruck-shaped. At the nave face, an infill wall reduces the width of the opening and incorporates a smaller pointed door. The overall thickness of the wall between nave

and tower, including the infill wall, measured at the apex of the arch, is about 3ft 7ins, a few inches thicker than the nave west wall measured outside the tower.

Interpretation

As a first step in deducing the constructional history of the church and tower, we should consider whether the tower and church were built together or whether the tower was a later addition. Here, comparison of thicknesses of the nave west wall measured at the tower arch apex and outside the tower shows that the thickness at the tower arch is the greater; this, and the curved east wall within the tower could imply either case, but the apparent flint coursing alignment of the tower and nave west wall on the north side supports the former case. Furthermore, it seems hardly likely that the style of the tower's belfry opening carvings could be later than the long-and-short quoin details of the nave. So, although there is no definite overriding proof, the probability is that nave and tower were contemporary. If that were so, the tower arch would almost certainly have been formed at the same time and would therefore be expected to be round-headed. It seems therefore that the present opening, pointed but with a rounded apex and wider than usual for an early tower opening, has been altered from the original, and the irregular shape of its arch is consistent with enlargement of an existing opening.

The nave and chancel have clearly undergone several alterations. The oldest surviving parts are probably the unrendered course flint sections of the nave north wall and the west wall north of the tower, and although later pointing of adjacent flintwork makes it impossible to be certain, there are no indications to suggest that the long-and-short Barnack stone quoins of the NW corner are not contemporary with those walls. The similarity of style and material of the SW quoins suggest the same date for them and their contiguous walling, although its flintwork seems to have suffered more renewal than on the north side.

In support of a theory that the Barnack quoins may not be the original ones, it has been suggested that the flints at the foot of the SW corner and the stones at the foot of the NW corner are evidence of their original form. But if the Barnack quoins had been replacements of flint or erratics originals, it seems unlikely that the "original" material would have been left at the bottom. The fact that the flints at the base of the SW corner are normal-sized walling flints, not large quoin flints and that they are built on a concrete footing effectively proves that they must be later insertions, and the different materials used at the bottom of the SW and NW corners suggests that those materials are more likely to be cheap replacements of stone quoins rather than original quoining. It is usually the stonework at ground level that is most vulnerable to deterioration and thus the place where renewals are most likely to have been effected. With no evidence of alteration to the lower quoining at the east end, it seems therefore that the Barnack stone quoins of Saxon styles at all four corners of the church are part of its original structure.

The original height of the church is probably defined by the level of the top of the long-and-short quoins at the SW corner, but the band of clunch in the north wall that appears to be continuous with the clunch surrounding and above the north door suggests that that section of wall may have been rebuilt when the 13th century north door was formed. As evidenced by the flintwork walling above the clunch, the walls

were subsequently heightened in later medieval times and larger windows installed whose medieval brick hoodmoulds extend up to the present eaves level. The existing plain lights of those windows, with blank tympana above, must be later cheap renewals. Since the later upper quoins of the east corners also extend almost up to the present eaves level, they may have been incorporated when the walls were raised.

Apart from localised deposits of crag stone near the coast in the Aldeburgh/Orford area, East Anglia has no indigenous limestone, and it is generally believed that no imported limestone was used in the region before the Norman Conquest. Although considered hallmarks of Saxon architecture, long-and-short and random megalithic quoins of dressed limestone also appear after the Conquest and their use in minor flint churches as at East Lexham, therefore, does not necessarily confer a pre-Conquest date for the church.

Although the tower has been attributed as Saxon by most authorities, there are two good reasons for a belief that it was built after the Conquest: the Norman method of forming twin belfry openings, particularly as seen in the SW one, and the use of Barnack stone in the belfry openings.

Saxon double belfry openings were formed with two separate arches extending through the full wall thickness with intermediate support from a through-stone on a central shaft, whereas in the Norman method the full width of the opening was spanned by a single arch below which a pair of thinner sub-arches within the opening, springing from a shared shaft usually at the wall face, carry only their own thickness of infill wall above them. At East Lexham all the arches of the belfry openings span the full width of the openings, even if constructional style of the double lights within the east and NW openings is unconventional.

Barnack stone is used in all three belfry openings – for the abacus in the SW one (the material of the stubby shaft is uncertain – possibly rendered finish), and for the monolithic stone slabs in the other two. If we accept that limestone was not imported into East Anglia or used in minor churches before the Conquest, then unless the stonework in the three belfry openings was all inserted later, this extensive use of Barnack stone must date the tower as post-Conquest. There are, however, several reasons why the belfry stonework is unlikely to have been inserted later: the Barnack abacus of the SW opening is obviously an integral part of the ensemble; the hefty monolithic slabs of the other two openings could not have been inserted into existing openings without considerable disturbance to the fabric but the rere-arch of the east openings is apparently undisturbed; if inserted, the Saxon style of carving of the east and NW openings would imply an appreciably early date for the structure, for which there is no reliable evidence, and finally, assuming that the church's Barnack stone quoins are contemporary with its construction, it would be unsurprising that similar stone was used in a tower built at the same time.

In the light of all the evidence, the church and tower could be considered as having been built either in the late 11th century or the early 12th century during the Saxo-Norman Overlap, by Saxon workmen but subject to some Norman influence. Church and tower both use Barnack stone and incorporate Saxon and Norman technologies (nave quoins and belfry arches respectively, for example) but the decorative style of

the east and NW belfry openings might be considered more likely to be that of Saxon craftsmen.

Irrespective of the problem of its dating, this church raises another interesting question. In the absence of local stone-carving precedents, from where did the Saxon masons get their inspiration for the belfry carvings? Are these designs perhaps echoes of a strong decorative timber tradition? Both can be understood as deriving from wood-carving.