

Gayton Thorpe, St Mary's by Stephen Hart



Architectural description

The tower had a 9ft 3ins internal diameter and 4ft thick walls, but pronounced flattening of the external circumference on the east above the nave gives the upper part of the tower a marked D-shape. The lower 6ft or so of the tower is built mainly of roughly-squared blocks of carstone and silver carr; above this the walling is flint rubble, and from about 6ft below the belfry the flintwork style noticeably changes, containing larger pieces with cleft faces. H.H & J Taylor (Anglo-Saxon architecture, C. U. P. 1965) thought there was a blocked window in the east face of this stage but, although there is some roughish flintwork in the area which could be repairs, no suggestion of a window shape is discernible nor is there any evidence of a blocked opening internally. A stone string course with chevron decoration forms the base of the circular belfry stage, above which the belfry wall material reverts to flintwork not significantly different from that on the main body of the tower.

The tower's lower stage has two round-headed windows facing west, both double-splayed. The smaller lower one differs from the normal type of double-splayed window in that its narrowest point is not at the middle of the wall but only extends about 15ins from the outer face. It has narrowly-splayed reveals outside and inside; its rough round external arch has a concave soffit and internally the soffit is splayed at two different angles. The large upper window has wide splayed flint reveals and its round arched heads inside and out both show board-marks of the shuttering on which they were built; it has a Barnack stone "frame" set in the aperture near the centre of the wall. Apt from this stone frame which may be later, the window is almost identical to the double-splayed flint windows in the 11th century square tower of Great Dunham church in which dressed limestone is simultaneously used for the long-and-short tower quoins. Ladbroke's drawing of the 1820s of Gayton Thorpe church shows a single west window in the tower in place of the two we now see and it appears to be a pointed lancet, set flush with the wall face without any splays.

The four belfry openings are of two orders formed in limestone. Shafts in the outer order, each flanked by a vertical band of chevron, support a round arch with chevron decoration; in the recessed inner order, a central column and corresponding respond shafts support sections of interlacing, moulded, round arcading which produce the pointed arch shapes where they meet. Although the resulting pointed lights have caused some commentators to call it Transitional (i.e. Norman/ Early English, circa 1190), the belfry should probably be dated half a century or more earlier. The motif of interlacing round arches as used in these lights is a Norman feature and can be

seen in the west front of nearby Castle Acre Priory which has been dated as early 12th century; this may well have been the inspiration for the Gayton Thorpe belfry which could even have been by the same masons. Internally, the belfry openings have jambs of dressed limestone but their round arches, encompassing both lights like the outer order externally, are formed with large flints roughly radially laid, with an occasional piece of carstone, demonstrating that flint arches were used by Norman builders.

The tower arch, which passes straight through the wall without rebates, is plastered on the nave side and faced within the tower with dressed stone; its squared jambs, some of carstone and some of limestone are 6ins, 8 ins and 10 ins high. The arch voussoirs are laid radially and don't appear to be wedge-shaped although it isn't possible to be certain because of rather wide and coarse pointing at the joints. The arch springs form one-piece chamfered imposts of limestone, returned within the tower but not on the nave side. Above the tower arch, the wall is flat, and at the jambs and arch springing where the tower walls meet the nave west wall, they partly cover the jamb stonework, imposts and lower voussoirs of the arch. In their book, (op. cit.) the Taylors write of "an earlier arch whose outline can be traced about 2ft above the present arch. The long rough stones of the earlier arch form a sharp contrast with the carefully dressed Norman arch beneath it." However, although there is a small repair to the crown of the arch in the tower, no recognisable outline of an earlier arch above it can be seen, nor any evidence of the reported long rough stones. This area of wall is roughly plastered and the apparent age of this finish gives no reason to believe that it is more recent than when the Taylors would have seen it, and so they seem to have been mistaken in postulating an earlier, taller arch.

Within the tower at first floor level, there is a blocked upper door in the nave west wall; it is formed in flint, without stone, and has a triangular-shaped head whose sides are set back about 2ins on the jambs. Above this, the original gable line of the nave west wall can be seen, with the upper part of the tower east wall built directly on it.

There is no evidence within the tower of any blocked early belfry openings or other windows but at about 6ft below the belfry cill level there is a change in the character of the flintwork corresponding with the external flintwork change referred to above.

The tower is off-centre southwards relative to the nave, and in the nave west wall north of the tower, three 8ins high squared and dressed carstone quoin stones,, 11ins and 1ft 5ins wide, and laid "side alternate" indicate the original position of the NW corner of the nave.

Interpretation

Almost all commentators have called this tower Saxon but can we be certain that it is? In attempting to date the church and tower, it is necessary first to try to establish the sequence of construction, and then from this and the evidence which some parts can provide, seek to arrive at probable dates.

The flat wall above the tower arch in the tower, the former nave gable visible in the upper part of the tower, and the tower wall cloaking the tower arch stonework all

provide indisputable evidence that the tower was added to an earlier nave, and the off-centre position of the tower and the carstone quoins in the nave west wall indicate that the nave was widened later by the rebuilding of the north wall about 3ft 6ins further to the north.

The nave

The size, shape, dressed finish and side-alternate laying of the three-squared carstone quoin stones in the nave west wall are typically Norman in size and style; they are similar to the carstone quoins of the square Norman tower at Flitcham about five miles away and are quite uncharacteristic of pre-Conquest quoins. Likewise, the squared stones in the jambs and head of the tower arch, the chamfered limestone imposts and the arch proportions suggest early Norman construction, an opinion shared by the Taylors (op. cit).

The tower arch stonework and fact that the impost mouldings are returned along the west face of the nave wall, formerly the outside wall, but not on the nave side prove strong indications that the opening was originally an external west doorway to a towerless church, with the door hung to the nave face of the wall. If the opening had been formed as a tower arch when the tower was added, it is more likely that the stone imposts would have been returned to enhance the nave face of the wall rather than the tower side.

If, as thought by the Taylors, there had in fact been an earlier arch formed without dressed stonework, that could imply that the nave was pre-Conquest, but it would not affect the sequence of construction except to introduce an additional phase between nave and tower construction during which the conjectured earlier arch was modified with Norman stonework. It would in fact reinforce a Norman attribution for the present arch, confirming that the tower could not be earlier than Norman. The present arch is 9ft 8ins to the crown and if an earlier arch had been 2ft higher as suggested by the Taylors, its crown would have been very close to the threshold of the upper door which is just visible below the present first floor structure; that seems improbable, and an opening of that height seems more applicable to a tower arch than an entrance doorway. So, if an earlier arch had existed, was there an earlier tower than the present one? Anyway, despite the Taylors' comment, there is no visible evidence to suggest that there ever was an earlier, taller west entrance or tower arch.

When the tower was built, thus shutting off the west entrance, a door or doorways would have been formed in the nave north and/or south walls if they hadn't already existed. The north door would have disappeared when the nave was enlarged later and the south door perhaps converted to its present pointed shape at the same time; alternatively, there may not have been a south door originally.

The nave south wall (i.e. the remaining original nave side wall) is 3ft 3ins thick, a thickness which to those who regard wall thickness as a means of differentiating Saxon from Norman, would favour a Norman attribution.

On balance, therefore, the evidence seems to favour a Norman attribution for the nave. A Saxon attribution for it has nevertheless been claimed, on interpretation of

the three former NW quoins as Saxon and a rebuttal of a Norman attribution for the stone tower arch on the grounds, firstly, that the stones used are bigger than those used by Normans, secondly that the impost stones are single stones (claimed to be a Saxon practice in contrast to Norman use of multiple ones) and thirdly that the voussoirs are not wedge-shaped.

This Saxon claim can be challenged on the grounds that the three former squared NW quoin stones are quite unlike any of the East Anglia types of quoining normally recognised as Saxon such as the crudely-shaped megalithic ferricrete quoins at Bessingham or Great Ryburgh for example. As regards the tower arch, all the objections to a Norman attribution for it can be refuted by reference to many instances of Norman stones of the sizes used here, and of single impost stones and non-wedge shaped voussoirs in the undisputed Norman arches elsewhere.

The Tower

In their book (op. cit.) the Taylors claims that Ladbrooke's drawing shows only the lower west window, but in fact the window he shows is much nearer the level of the upper one; the top of the window in the drawing is just below the level at which the nave west gable joins the tower and this corresponds approximately with the top of the arch splay of the present upper window. The window drawn by Ladbrooke could be medieval or an 18 century Gothick insertion at the wall face into the original splayed recess of the present upper window; it is much narrower than the width of the present window's splay and was probably taken out when the tower's assumed rendering (as indicated on Ladbrooke's drawing) was removed and the double-splayed window behind, presumably discovered.

Although the Taylors considered the upper window as either having been heavily restored or a modern insertion, its evidence suggests that it is an original part of the structure; the radial shuttering board-marks in the splayed heads inside and outside and the undisturbed exposed flintwork of the reveals and around the opening strongly imply construction with the wall. By contrast, the inclusion of bricks in the external jambs of the lower window, the distorted profiles of its internal and external heads which obviously were not built on shuttering like the upper window, and the rough rendering covering the irregularity of its internal splays are indicative of the opening being later work and of having broken out through an existing wall. Also, whereas in early double-splayed windows the aperture is more or less at the centre of the wall giving roughly equal splays inside and out, the aperture of this window is only 1ft 3ins from the outer face of a 4ft thick wall.

The triangular-headed upper door (which, of course, would have been unnecessary before the tower was built) and the large double-splayed flint west windows tend to suggest earlier work than the stone-dressed tower arch and quoins, but on the evidence of the tower walls covering the tower arch stonework, the tower's lower stage is clearly later than the arch. So, contrary to a commonly held belief, features formed with flint without dressed stone have been constructed at the same time or at a later date than features using it, and if the arch is Norman and the tower later, the tower clearly isn't Saxon. Though triangular-headed flint opening have been widely considered to be Saxon features, examples are to be found in Norman buildings –

for instance, a blocked upper door with a triangular flint head can be clearly seen in the east face of the square Norman tower at Flitcham.

Theoretically, the Norman belfry could be a replacement of an earlier one, but in view of the its apparent closeness of date to the Norman tower arch, this seems improbable, and since there would presumably have been a reasonable lapse of time between the building of the nave with its Norman west doorway (now the tower arch) and the erection of the tower whose walls partially cover it, it seems more likely that the whole tower was of one build and thus the double-splayed flint windows and the stone belfry are contemporary. That being so, it confirms that double-splayed windows and triangular-headed openings, though recognised as features typical of Saxon workmanship, persisted well into the Norman era.

A striking feature of this tower is the distinct change of material and workmanship at the lower level where, at about 6ft or 7ft above ground, we see quite a sudden change from carstone and silver carr to flintwork. It is not inconceivable that the change of flintwork style at a similar distance below the belfry stringcourse could be an intentional aesthetic artifice to echo the change of material at the ground stage.

A dating based on this evidence and interpretation might be as follows:

Late 11th century: Towerless church built with 3ft 3ins thick nave walls, dressed and squared carstone quoins and a stone-framed west entrance.

12th century: Tower built; upper doorway formed, north and/or south nave doorway(s) formed if not already in existence.

Post-Norman: Nave widened by rebuilding north wall approx 3ft 6ins further north. South door formed if not already existing, if existing, altered to pointed.

Alternative scenario

If, for the sake of argument, the lower stage of the tower was assumed to be pre-Conquest on the grounds that an upper door with a triangular head and double-splayed windows are exclusively Saxon features, this would obviously mean that as the nave is earlier, the dressed stonework of the tower arch (limestone and carstone) and probably the dressed carstone NW quoins would be Saxon. While this may not be impossible, there are no precedents for the use of dressed stonework, carstone or limestone, on minor churches in the flint area of East Anglia which can be authenticated as pre-conquest.

Formed without rebates, the tower arch opening, as the former west door of the towerless church, could be said to be more indicative of Saxon than Norman technique.

If these Saxon indications are considered more convincing for a pre-Conquest date for the church and tower than the grounds for a Norman attribution, then the dating might be:

Early C.11 (say). Saxon nave with 3ft 3ins walls sand small squared dressed carstone quoins, and an unrebated west door opening with stone dressings and chamfered limestone imposts.

3rd quarter C.11 Saxon tower and upper door under construction. BY the Conquest, tower had reached the level of the change of flintwork. Work ceased.

C12 Upper part of the tower lower stage completed in different flintwork; belfry added.

Post-Norman: Nave enlargement and south doorway insertion or alteration to pointed.

Whatever the constructional history may have been, the tower, with its double-splayed flint windows, must be later than the dressed stone tower arch because the flints and mortar of the tower wall, by adhering to the tower arch stonework, show conclusively that the stonework could not have been inserted into the opening after the tower wall had been built. Nor would the imposts have been returned within the tower and not in the nave. This proves that, whichever of the two suggested dating sequences is preferred, traditional flint techniques persisted even though limestone and the skills to work it were available.