

## Heckingham, St Gregory by Stephen Hart.



The church consists of a nave and apsidal chancel with thatched roofs, a north aisle, south porch and a west tower with a circular base stage surmounted by an octagon nearly twice the height of the base.

Flat stone buttresses on the chancel and a superb nave south door provide strong evidence for dating the church as Norman, but the windows are of later dates. The nave is about 15ft 3ins wide; its south wall and the arcade wall are about 2ft 10ins thick and the west wall which contains a few random pieces of limestone among its rubble flints is 3ft 1ins thick measured outside the tower.

The arcade was formed by cutting pointed arches through the nave north wall; the openings have no stone dressings or imposts, just small chamfered edges. Two-light Y-traceried windows in the north aisle and one of three lights with Intersecting tracery in its east wall suggest an early 14<sup>th</sup> century date for the formation of the arcade and aisle. The aisle north door, now blocked, seems to be a re-setting of parts of the stonework of the former Norman north door.

The simple Norman tower arch, 3ft 10ins wide, and 9ft 6ins higher to the springing of its round arch, has chamfered stone imposts and stone dressings to jambs and arch. Within the tower, the wall above the tower arch is curved with a thickness of three feet thick at the crown, slightly less than the nave west wall measured outside the tower.

The circular stage of the tower, just over a third of its total height, has 4ft 2ins thick walls and an internal diameter of 8ft 8ins. There are quadrant fillets of flints and pieces of limestone in the re-entrant angle between it and the nave west wall. The walling is mainly small uncoursed and closely-packed rubble flints although the lower parts show some indications of coursing and larger flints, and at about four or five feet above the ground level pieces of dressed stone are incorporated in the flintwork including a few short pieces of billet moulding. The circular stage also contains some medieval brick putlog holes near the top externally and internally. The west window with dressings and a square hoodmould of medieval brick is probably a later insertion, perhaps of the same date as the south porch.

The octagonal stage, two stories high, is faced with smooth-pointed mixed flints including some knapped, and has brick angles. The bricks in the belfry stage appear to be medieval but in the first-floor stage below, the angles appear to have been renewed with later bricks of the same kind as are used for the dressings of a

restored lancet in this stage; these may date from the 18<sup>th</sup> century or as late as the 19<sup>th</sup>. The belfry openings at the cardinal faces in the top stage are pointed lancets with stone dressings. The Perpendicular brick and flint south porch has a four-centred brick arch below a square brick hoodmould.

## **Interpretation**

Since the nave west wall outside the tower is thicker than the curved wall in which the tower arch is formed, they must have been built as one; otherwise, a pre-existing flat wall would have had to be unnecessarily gouged out to accommodate the curvature and as that is most unlikely, the tower's origins can safely be established as contemporary with the Norman nave. Confirmation of this comes from the Norman tower arch since the tower to which it gave access would have been of the same date. However, evidence in the external fabric of the present tower's circular stage suggests that it is unlikely to be Norman, implying therefore that an original Norman tower probably collapsed and much of the external walls must have been rebuilt, almost from ground level.

The date of the tower's deduced rebuilding appears to have coincided with the construction of the north aisle; the principal evidence for this is that the short pieces of Norman billet moulding in the circular stage wall have been used for putlog holes formed in the wall when it was built. Three can be positively identified, all at about the same level at about four or five feet above the ground; their sides are pieces of limestone and they are bridged with the billet moulds. Also at this level, or thereabouts, other pieces of stone with dressed faces appear to be reused reclaimed material. The mortar in which these stones are set is identical to that of the surrounding flintwork, showing them to have been built with the wall rather than inserted as repairs; by contrast, the mortar used in the fillings of the putlog holes is lighter.

These Norman stones are most probably remnants reclaimed from the outer order of the north doorway when it was removed from the original 2ft 10ins thick north wall of the church and reset in the thinner, 2ft 4ins thick, aisle wall. If this is so, it is pretty conclusive evidence that the circular stage of the tower, at least from the level at which the billet mould putlog holes occur, is contemporary with the formation of the north aisle. As suggested above, the aisle was probably built in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, a date not inconsistent with the style of the lancet belfry openings in the upper half of the tower octagon and its medieval brick angles; the logical conclusion therefore is that the octagon is contemporary with the rebuilt circular stage.

A proposal that the "Norman" putlog holes were formed later in the flintwork of an earlier tower to accommodate scaffolding for a rebuilding of just the octagonal upper stage can be refuted on the grounds that they are too low relative to the octagonal stage to have been relevant to its construction. In any event, if putlog holes had been required in the retained wall of an earlier tower, they would not have needed stone sides and bridgings; a hole would simply have been cut in the flintwork. Furthermore, the way that the putlog holes marry with the surrounding flints strongly indicates that they were built with the wall and not inserted into it; if they had been later insertions into an existing wall, their setting and mortar would probably show some variation from the surrounding flintwork, but it is homogeneous.

