

Herringfleet, St Margaret by Stephen Hart



Standing in open country, a little distant from neighbouring buildings, St Margaret's church consists of a nave, chancel, round west tower and south porch. The nave and chancel are rendered but fortunately the tower has been spared this treatment except that the flintwork of the belfry stage has been so heavily pointed as to give the impression of rendering but a few flints show through.

With an internal nave width of about 17ft 3ins and a chancel about 3ft narrower, there are set-backs of about 17ins outside at the north-east and south-east corners of the nave where the chancel joins it. The four corners of the nave and the east corners of the chancel have dressed stone quoins; they are, or were, Caen stone but many have been replaced with a colder, grey stone, particularly the lower ones that would have more vulnerable to deterioration.

The north and south walls of the nave are about 2ft 9ins thick, but the west wall measured outside the tower is about 3ft 7ins and the same internally at the flat wall at the tower arch. Externally above the nave roof level, the tower's east wall follows a flattened curve rather than the true arc of a circle.

On the north and east walls of the chancel, the wall rendering finishes about 9ins above the ground, revealing that the footings of the east wall and the north wall for a distance of about 13ft 6ins from the east end are of brick, whereas those of the western part of the chancel are of flint. The western part of the chancel north wall contains a high-level round-headed Norman window with Caen stone dressings externally; it is single-splayed and plastered internally. The other windows of nave and chancel are later patterns. The Norman round-headed nave south door has two orders, the arch of the outer with chevron decoration and the inner with a roll moulding; both orders have chamfered imposts with star decoration. The blocked north door has a pointed arch with simply-chamfered stone dressings.

There are quadrant fillets between the tower and nave west wall and a chamfered string course separates the tower's lower stage from the belfry. Up to this level, the tower walls are well-coursed flintwork with two courses of larger flints encircling the tower at levels about halfway up the nave roof and at its ridge. The discovery that at the corresponding levels internally there are similar courses of larger flints poses the question as to whether the external bands were intended purely as decoration or whether they might have been thought to contribute some structural advantage. The lower internal band coincides with the level at which square patches of modern brick suggest that the beams of a former intermediate floor may have been removed.

Between ground level and the belfry string course there are small windows at three levels. An inappropriate modern window faces west on the ground floor behind which the internal recess suggests that there may have been a door at this position; the first-floor stage has two slit windows facing north and south, and above these facing north, west and south, three more that may originally have lit a removed second floor. All have stone dressings externally with arch-lintel heads cut from single stones with a semi-circular outer profile in the lower windows and straight-headed in the upper. Internally, all these windows have splayed embrasures with small set-backs on the reveals at the springings; the two lower ones have flint jams and stone voussir arches but the upper three have jambs of stone as well as the arches.

An upper door in the east wall at first-floor level has dressed stone jambs and arch; the jambstones are shaped to an angle slightly greater than 90 degrees to conform to the internal curvature of the wall, and the voussoirs of the arch are set back slightly on the top jambstones.

Within the ground stage of the tower, the east wall in which the tower arch is formed is flat, though at first-floor level and above, the inside of the tower is fully circular with unbroken continuity of its flint coursing on the east side. Since the internal north-south diameter is 10ft 10ins on the ground floor and about 1ft more at first-floor level; the tower's upper walls are about 6ins thinner than the 3ft 7ins thick ground-stage walls. The tower arch is small – 3ft 7ins wide by 7ft 6ins high to the crown of its arch. It is plastered and so details of its construction cannot be seen, but there is no sign of the billet mould reported by Cautley; its simple chamfered impostes are not returned on the nave or tower faces.

The belfry is similar to the one at Haddiscoe in that the belfry openings at the cardinal points are the double, through-stone type with triangular heads to the lights. They are formed in dressed stone, and except for the one facing east, they lie beneath semi-circular stripwork arches that spring from jamb shafts with cushion capitals. The face of these arches and vertical bands of stripwork outside the jamb shafts are decorated with Norman billet moulding.

Two intermediate round-headed openings in the belfry stage facing south-west and north-west are framed and arched externally with post-medieval bricks and are probably later insertions. The flintwork and the late brick in their internal construction are compatible with them having been broken out through the existing wall.

Interpretation

Characteristic perhaps of the romantic approach to the history of ancient buildings, the Rev Dr Edward Brooks' village chronicle of Herringfleet provides an imaginative, if fanciful, chronology of the church. The tower, he says, dates from 980 AD, and was built on foundations 20ft deep, the belfry followed circa.1180 with, at the same time, the chancel – a Norman chapel with a west door, probably replacing an old Saxon-Viking wooden building. Then, in the 13th century, the nave was built to connect the Norman chapel to the tower, the chapel's west door being reset as the nave south door. There is though, no evidence to substantiate Dr Brooks' theory, and a pragmatic reading of the church's constructional evidence described reveals a rather different picture.

The first point that the evidence establishes is that the church and tower were built at the same time. Although a flat east wall within a round tower has been claimed as proof that the tower has been added to an earlier church on the premise that the flat wall is the west face of a former towerless church's nave, Herringfleet is one of a few cases where this formula does not hold good. Since the internal diameter at first-floor level is greater than at ground-floor level, the tower east wall at the upper level is thinner than the flat wall below and the nave west wall measured outside the tower, and because from first-floor level upwards, it is curved, it could not have been the gable wall of a towerless nave. It would only have been built like this if the nave and tower had been built together. Also, if the nave had originally been towerless, it is unlikely that its west wall would have been nearly 1ft thicker than the side walls. The tower east wall in the ground stage maintained the same thickness as the nave west wall outside the tower, probably being kept flat in order to simplify the arch construction and to avoid the distorted shape that results from building an arch in a curved wall.

On the assumption that Caen stone was unlikely to have been available for minor churches in East Anglia before its importation for Norwich Cathedral which was not begun until 1096, the use of this material in the nave and chancel quoins and in the tower windows clearly places a post-Conquest date on the church and tower, of probably not before the end of the 11th century, provided that the stonework can be shown to be part of the original construction and not inserted later.

Because of the rendered finish on the nave and chancel walls, it is not possible to judge whether the quoins were original or inserted, but within the tower it is possible to see that the stone dressings of the five windows at first-floor level and above were part of the original construction. Two facts establish this. First, the soffit-mortar and the board-marks of the shuttering on which the splayed window arches were built can be seen to be contiguous with the back edges of the stones that form the internal and external dressings to the openings, showing that arch and stonework must have been built on the same shuttering; if the stonework had been added later, there would be discontinuity between the original board-marks and the stones. Secondly, there is no disturbance to the flintwork around and above the stonework of the arches; later insertion of the stonework would inevitably have left evidence of derangement to the flintwork surrounding the openings.

Although the through-stone design of the belfry opening is typical of Saxon technology and style, the use of Caen stone in their execution dates them as post-Conquest and the inclusion of billet moulding and cushion capitals clearly shows Norman influence.

A possibility that the belfry might be a later addition to a Saxon tower can be dismissed - firstly, because the stonework of the tower's later stages confirms it as post-Conquest, and secondly, there is no evidence of former belfry openings in the upper part of the lower stage that might suggest that it once stood without its present belfry. Nor is it likely that the stone string course and the belfry stonework are added Norman enhancements of an earlier belfry.

On the evidence of the Caen stone, the Norman chancel window and nave south door and the tower's Norman features, the whole church has to be considered as

post-Conquest but the Saxon style of the belfry defines it as a product of the Saxo-Norman Overlap, and probably datable to the 11th century.

The brick footings at the chancel east end suggest that at some stage the chancel has been lengthened, the original east quoins apparently being reused. Was this perhaps part of the alternation made in the 1820s when the east window glass was installed?