

Fritton, St Edmund's, Suffolk by Stephen Hart.



First sight of this church comprising a round west tower, an aisleless nave 21ft wide, a chancel with an apsidal east end, south porch and north vestry poses an immediate conundrum: why is the tower not central to the nave, and how is it that the tower has apparently genuine 14th belfry openings above later first-floor brick windows that seem to be contemporary with the wall in which they are set? Answers to these questions can only be found by considering the tower's enigmatic features in conjunction with alterations made to the rest of the church.

Since there is no evidence for a pre-Conquest or Norman tower, the church was probably originally towerless. Pevsner's suggestion that a tower was intended above the chancel is considered unlikely because the Norman arch between chancel and apse that would have supported its east wall is only 15 inches thick.

The present tower is wholly circular, though the upper stages show a marked flattening of the curvature on the east and west faces. It has an internal diameter of 9ft 4ins and walls 3ft 6ins thick. The facing of the lower two-thirds consists of blacked knapped flints with some medieval bricks and several roughly-squared blocks of stone including stone "ties" spaced one above the other in the west face. It has a stone lancet west window on the ground floor, with stone jambs and an arch of medieval brick internally. The upper third of the tower, from just above the first-floor window cills is faced with light knapped flints rather larger than the black ones below, and first-floor windows at south, west and north, shown by their internal construction to be contemporary with this stage, are formed with post-medieval bricks and have pointed arches. Above, two-light belfry openings facing east and west have Decorated stone tracery, and single, pointed belfry lights facing north and south have stone dressings.

Measured at the tower arch apex, the nave west wall is about 2ft 9ins thick and about 6ins less outside the tower. In the tower the east wall is curved, and in the nave, at the level of the top of the side walls, the east face of its west wall is set back about 9ins, above which a segment of the tower's outer curvature projects into the nave. The pointed tower arch is formed in medieval brick; it is 9ft 8ins high to the apex and 4ft 2ins wide, splaying to 5ft in the tower, but an inner modern brick sub-arch, 9ins thick, has been inserted at the nave face.

The chancel with an apsidal east end is about 12ft 4ins wide internally, and the 8ins inset of the chancel wall from the nave north wall at the chancel arch implies an original nave width of about 13ft 8ins. Chancel apse buttresses and original nave

quoins are of Caen stone which indicates post-Conquest dates for chancel and nave. The nave walls were formerly lower than now, as is shown by the height of the original north-west quoin stones and a change in the flintwork of the north wall above the level at which the original north-west quoins terminate.

An enlargement of the church seems to have been carried out in the mid 14th century: the nave north wall was heightened and Decorated windows inserted in it, the then nave south wall would have been correspondingly raised and a new roof constructed over the higher nave. Arches would have been formed in the nave south wall to create a south arcade and the south aisle would have been built, having Decorated windows in its south wall and a low-pitched lean-to roof and end walls. Convincing evidence of the original level of the aisle roof and its low pitch is given by the flintwork change in the extended west wall south of the tower, and rather less clearly in the corresponding east wall south of the chancel.

The possibility that it was at this time that the original nave south wall was totally demolished and a larger roof then built to span the increased width of the church can be excluded because, had this been so, the nave east gable could not have been of the type of brick used and would have been built homogeneously with the extended east wall of the nave south of the chancel, and the flintwork of the extended west wall south of the tower would have been of uniform style for its full height.

At about the same as the south aisle was formed, the tower was built on the original nave/chancel axis, and the way that a segment of its outer curvature above the tower arch projects into the nave suggests that it probably breached the nave west wall. This also implies that the tower was added to a towerless nave as it is unlikely that this unusual configuration would have been used for one built with the church. This tower would have been rather than lower than now, with the cill level of its belfry openings just above the ridge of the new nave roof; the belfry was, no doubt, faced with flintwork similar to that in the lower stage and the Decorated tracery and stone dressings of the belfry openings were probably those now in the present belfry.

The evidence for a post-Norman date for this original tower is overwhelming. The likelihood that it was added; knapped flints of the quality of those in the external facing of the lower stage were not used until the early 14th century; the internal construction of the stone lancet west window incorporating medieval bricks shows it to have been built with the wall and not inserted later; the styles of its belfry windows (now reset) are 14th century; the medieval brick construction of the tower arch, and most conclusive of all, the extent of medieval brick in the tower's ground-stage internal fabric puts a post-Norman date beyond doubt.

The chancel arch was presumably originally Norman and seems to have been altered to its depressed pointed shape in the 14th century. During the 15th century, Perpendicular windows were inserted into the chancel, two each side.

The east gable of the nave, embracing the full width of the church and built entirely in post-medieval brick laid in Flemish bond with tumbled-in gable parapets, shows that the next major alteration was probably not until the 18th or 19th century, when the 14th century nave roof and the lean-to aisle roof were replaced by the present larger roof spanning the full width of nave and aisle. The arcade wall would have been

demolished, the aisle south wall was slightly raised and the west end wall of the former aisle was built up to the gable profile of the new larger roof with closely-packed small flints. A small brick window that seem subsequently to have been altered to a stone trefoil in Victorian times was incorporated in the flintwork of this raised wall.

As a result of the wider roof, the nave ridge line became offset southwards from the chancel/ nave/ tower axis, and since the wider roof would now have been higher than the then existing belfry openings, that belfry was taken down as far as its cill level (i.e. to the level where the flintwork changes from dark to light). The tower was then raised from that level, faced with light knapped flint. First-floor windows framed with bricks were incorporated at about the starting level of the raising, above which, in the taller tower new east and west belfry openings, which have brick jambs, re-used the stone tracery of the original belfry windows. The single-light ones facing north and south have stone dressings, probably also the original material reset.

The post-medieval bricks in the first-floor tower windows and in the jambs of the belfry openings can easily be understood to be contemporary with the large brick gable on the east end of the nave.

There are three windows on each side of the nave, all of similar 14th century patterns but the eastern pairs on both sides are smaller than the single western ones. On the north side, the jambs and cills of the taller windows look original but with most of their tracery restored; on the south, the stonework of all three looks too crisp and unweathered to be of medieval age and they were probably renewed when this wall was raised for the larger roof, the two eastern ones probably having been the same height as the western one. The north vestry of 1855 contains a reset, very weather window of the same pattern, of the smaller size – perhaps an original one from the south wall.