

Aylmerton, St John the Baptist



View from south, porch and door in tower, and view from north with ruined chapel

The church comprises an aisleless nave, chancel, round west tower, a two-storey porch and the ruins of a north chapel. Of an apparently smaller earlier nave nothing remains except possibly short lengths of its west wall next to the tower. It was replaced by the present wider and higher one which has Decorated west windows, Perpendicular side windows and a south door with castellated capitals. The combination of these features of different styles in the new nave walls and recorded bequests suggest a late 14th century date. It seems that the chancel had been rebuilt a little earlier, its narrow width compared to the nave and its steeper roof pitch implying that it had been built on the former narrower nave. Its east window with petal tracery is the same pattern as at Gresham and one at Acle that can be dated 1362.

The nave east gable appears to have rebuilt from the level of the chancel eaves and this may have been done in association with enlargement of the chancel arch when the rood stair, entered from the north chapel, and rood screen were installed, perhaps circa 1445, the date of a bequest to the church fabric. Both blocked doorways to the rood stair are still visible, one in the ruined north chapel and the other in the nave east wall internally above the pulpit. The in-built stone weathercourse in the nave east gable is an indication that the gable is not earlier than the chancel.

A large arch in the nave north wall, now blocked, gave access to the north chapel whose ruined walls are visible outside. The two-light Y-traceried window in this blocked arch and a similar one inserted in the chancel south wall may be from the north chapel, which would date it as early 14th century. The date of its demolition is not known but it must have been after the formation of the rood stair.

The tower is circular for its full height and was probably a late 13th century addition to the narrower earlier church of which little except perhaps part of its west wall now survives. It has an internal diameter of 8ft and walls 3ft 6ins thick though its curved east wall at the tower arch apex is an inch or two less and about 1ft thicker than the nave west wall measured outside the tower.

The tower is faced with largish cobbly flint rubble including some cleft flints, but from about the level of the belfry opening cills or a little higher, a difference in the flintwork is noticeable – it has a larger-scale texture with a greater proportion of cobbly

boulders. This may be a consequence of the considerable reconstruction carried out to the upper part of the tower in 1912. The belfry has four two-light openings with Y-tracery, the east facing opening being shorter with a higher cill level than the others to allow clearance of the nave ridge. Much of the external stone dressings and tracery of the belfry openings has been renewed but enough of the old stonework remains to establish that Y-tracery was the original pattern and the church guide states that the reconstruction followed the old design, re-using the old stone and flints. Ladbrooke's drawing of the 1820s seems to confirm this though not showing the east opening as shorter. Internally, further evidence of the belfry reconstruction is seen in renewed flintwork, and all the four openings have modern brick internal arches of depressed pointed shape.

There is no evidence in the tower, outside or inside, of any former belfry openings below the present ones and so we may conclude that the Y-tracery indicates not only the date of the belfry but probably of the whole tower. Y-tracery was one of the patterns of the Late Geometric, a phase covering the Early English period, and the beginning of the Decorated and was used from the end of the 13th century well into the 14th.

One other window opening in the tower, a lancet of Barnack stone in the ground-floor stage facing west appears to be contemporary with the tower, and its style is not inconsistent with the late 13th century date suggested by the belfry openings.

An external door in the tower's south wall with flint jambs and a head comprising two long stones curved on their undersides, springing from stone impostes and propped against each to form a pointed arch has been the cause for a belief that the opening, and thus the tower, is Saxon. There are however reasons for regarding these as dubious grounds for that belief and there is also convincing evidence for a later date. The Saxon attribution rests principally on two pretexts: firstly, that the stone head is constructed, not with voussoirs, but "in the Saxon fashion" with two long stones claimed to be a large erratic split in two, and secondly, that flint jambs would never have been built if dressed stone was available. On the first of these points, the two long stones are, in fact, not erratics but Barnack stone, the same stone as was used for the tower's ground-floor lancet window. The curved under-edges of the two stones follow the curved arch soffit behind them, showing that the opening was not formed with a triangular head in the Saxon fashion with the stones being shaped later in situ as has been proposed, but was built as a curved pointed arch. Forming small arches with two propped stones, though rare, is not alien to post-Saxon practice and several other examples have been noticed, for example the tower south door at Stiffkey, the priest's door at Syderstone and the belfry windows at Hardley. On the second point, the dressed Barnack stone used for this arch and its impostes show that flint jambs were indeed built when dressed stone was available.

In addition to the arch shape and the use of Barnack stone in its construction, further evidence which corroborates a post-Norman attribution for this doorway is the design of the internal rere-arch. Its reveals splay into the tower and it has a depressed pointed head about 18ins or so above the apex of the external arch – a form of construction typical of doorways from Early English times onwards, but not of Norman or pre-Conquest ones which usually had round-headed rere-arches and parallel reveals. Since there is no reason to suppose that the exterior pointed arch or

the internal rere-arch have been altered, the evidence for a post-Norman attribution for this doorway seems to outweigh the grounds for calling it Saxon, having in mind also that external angles formed with flints have been shown not to be exclusive to pre-Conquest work.

It is difficult to envisage why an external door into a tower would have been required if an opening between nave and tower were to be made when the tower was added, and so the probability is that no tower arch was formed when the tower was built, as at Sustead two or three miles away where even now there is no access between nave and tower. Built with stone jambs, positioned off-centre in the tower south wall and tucked in close to the nave west wall, this doorway was apparently of minor importance and would surely never have been an entrance to the church. It was probably provided as the simplest means of access to a tower added to the church, avoiding the disturbance that creation of a tower arch would have necessitated.

The opening that now exists between tower and nave is a plain pointed arch, 4ft 7ins wide by 10ft 5ins high to the apex, with a plaster finish and without impostes or mouldings. Plaster stripped from the nave wall face round the opening (to alleviate salt problems) revealed that it was formed without dressings and the absence of any kind of arch voussoirs in the head or quoins at the jambs, whether flint, brick or stone, indicates that the opening was broken out through an existing nave west wall, but as the tower had external access, that may not have been done until later, perhaps when the nave was widened. If so it would confirm that the tower was an addition to an earlier nave because, had they been contemporary, a tower arch would be likely to have been formed during their construction. The church guide records that the tower door was re-opened in 1912 after having been blocked for centuries, presumably since becoming redundant when access to the tower was provided by formation of the tower arch.

The High-level Recess in the Nave West Wall

High up in the west gable of the nave internally, a shallow recess having the appearance of the upper part of a blocked former opening has been the object of speculation as to its purpose. It is about 3ft wide and its head is the shape of a somewhat distorted pointed arch*; the whole feature is plastered in with the wall and has rounded edges. Under the arch apex, the wall is recessed about 5ins or so, but downwards from there, because the enclosed recess slopes slightly out of the vertical, the its depth (sic) gradually diminishes until its outline disappears about 3ft lower, fading flush into the wall plaster at the bottom.

This feature seems too high in the wall to have been an upper door to a tower chamber and there is no evidence of it inside the tower. Arguably it might have been a high-level window in the nave of an originally towerless church, the west face of which would have been covered by the east wall of the later tower. If so, and if its distorted pointed arch were to be relied on as the original shape of the window head, that would indicate a post-Norman date for the supposed window and would therefore date the tower as later in conformation of the tower's own evidence. As such a window would obviously have been below the roof, it would also establish that the original nave roof must have been no lower than its present level, though presumably it would have had a steeper pitch.

An alternative suggestion in the church guide (by A. B. Whittingham, F.S.A) that the feature might have been an earlier belfry window above a lower nave roof is unconvincing for several reasons. Firstly, there is no sign of a blocked east window within the tower at this level or of any evidence of corresponding blocked openings at south, west or north, and notwithstanding the church guide's assertion that the 1912 reconstruction of the upper part of the tower "obliterated all traces of other windows," the tower's internal flintwork at that level does not have the same "new" appearance as the obviously rebuilt walls of the belfry stage above. Careful internal and external examination of the tower's flintwork suggests that the 1912 reconstruction of the upper part of the tower was only upwards from about the present belfry cill level, and so the tower walls below this level would not have been affected and if the tower had contained any earlier belfry windows below the present belfry level, it is to be expected that there would still be some evidence of them in what appears to be unaffected fabric, but there is none. Secondly, the deduced height of a tower suggested by belfry openings at this level would have been barely higher than the present nave roof – very low for a tower of the 13th century date implied by the apparent lancet form of this conjectured belfry opening. Thirdly, since the apex of the feature is at about the same level as the ridge of the chancel roof, the nave ridge would have had to be lower than that by at least the height of the conjectured belfry window; that seems unlikely because an original nave roof of the same pitch as the chancel roof but appreciably lower would have resulted in improbably low nave walls.

If the feature had originally been a high-level window of a towerless church or a former belfry opening of a lower tower, it would no doubt have been blocked when no longer needed, and it is to be expected that the filling of such an opening would have been built flush with the surrounding walls. But within this feature, the enclosed surface is out of plumb, forming a recess flush at the bottom and progressively deepening above. Why should this be so?

The answer could be that the feature in the nave west wall may never have been a blocked opening. Assuming that the tower stood at its present height or thereabouts when the nave was widened in the late 14th century which the evidence described below suggests it did (see next paragraph), if the widened sections of the west wall each side of the tower had been built plumb and the upper part of the tower walls had a slight batter, it would mean that at the positions where the new plumb gable walls on each side internally met the curve of the tapering tower east wall, shallow vertical "jambs" starting flush and gradually increasing in depth, would develop as the new walls' height was built upwards. At the level at which these "jambs" attained the depth of a layer of flints, depending on the degree of batter of the tower wall, the plumb nave-face flintwork of the walls from each side could be arched over to meet in the same plane completely covering the tower wall from there upwards. When plastered, this would show in the nave as a gradually deepening recess starting from nothing at the bottom, with a simple arch at the level where the recess attained a depth equivalent to a layer of flints – just as now seen in the church. In the absence of any evidence of a blocked opening in the tower behind this feature, or of indications that the 1912 reconstruction extended down to its level, this could be the most probable explanation of the recess.

Presumably in the belief that feature described had been a former belfry opening, the author of the church guide states that "the belfry had to be raised to clear the new

nave roof" when the nave was rebuilt wider and higher in circa 1400. However, at the time the tower was probably already standing at its present height or thereabouts, because if the belfry had been built then, it would be expected to have been given Perpendicular belfry openings as in the nave, not Y-tracery, a style datable to about a century earlier. This suggests that when the nave was enlarged, its additional height may therefore have been accomplished simply by means of taller side walls, made possible by a lower pitch for its new roof, with a ridge level not significantly different from its original (present) level.

* Since this feature was observed, replastering has tidied its outline to a symmetrical shape, thus perpetuating the doubtful interpretation that it is a belfry window of a previously lower tower.