

St John the Baptist, Morningthorpe by Stephen Hart.



Morningthorpe church comprises round west tower, nave, chancel and south porch.

There seems little doubt that the tower and church were built together, the main evidence for this being the excessive thickness of the nave west wall. It is 4ft 6ins thick measured outside the tower and 5ft thick above the tower arch, and viewed from the north or south, the east wall of the tower above the nave roof can be seen to overlap the nave west wall by about 4ft. It is unlikely that a church built without a tower would have had such a thick west wall. The side walls of the nave, by comparison, are about 3ft thick.

Two features of the church indicate an early date for original tower and nave. The first, a blocked round-headed opening in the nave south wall now partly covered by the south porch, is arched with voussoirs of flint laid non-radially (called Tredington fashion by Baldwin Brown). It may have been a double-splayed window or possibly a tall doorway, but without removal of the plaster to examine the wall internally, it is not possible definitely to establish its purpose.

The other early indication is the style of the impost mouldings of the tower arch; the imposts are stone, square in section with slightly rounded upper and lower edges, about 6ins thick and have two horizontal V-shaped grooves along their faces. This decoration is described by Taylor & Taylor as “strongly suggestive of pre-Conquest workmanship” and the same could be said of the detail of the blocked nave opening. However, decoration almost identical to that on the tower-arch imposts appears on the jambs of the Norman north door at Gissing, about seven miles away. Although the two grooves there are vertical and a little larger than those at Morningthorpe, this is essentially the same decorative motif. Norman-style small dressed stone quoins at the corners of the west wall also imply a post-Conquest date, and so a late 11th or early 12th century attribution for the original church and tower before alterations might be appropriate.

The tower is circular to the top. Its ground-floor west window is a Perpendicular insertion; about halfway up, in the first-floor stage, there are three flint-framed slit windows facing south, west and north, the west one with a dressed stone arch-lintel – a single rectangular stone with semi-circular cut-out in its bottom edge. Internally, these three loops are entirely of flint but their pointed arch heads are of such rough construction that it is difficult to be certain whether they were later insertions or built with the wall, though the flintwork of the splayed reveals, seemingly coursing with the wall flintwork, suggests the latter.

The tower's ground-floor walls are about 4ft 2ins thick and the internal plan shape at first-floor level is roughly circular up to the level of the apexes of the slit window arches, above which it transmutes to a rather irregular septagon – a flat east wall (more or less) then six faces with alternate angles approximately over the windows. At the belfry floor level, about 4ft 6ins below the belfry openings, the shape reverts to a circle and the wall thickness reduces to about 2ft 6ins.

In the late 1980s repairs became necessary when exterior flintwork between first-floor level and the belfry was seen to be bulging badly and apparently in imminent danger of collapse. Investigation showed that the bulging flintwork was an outer casing to a structurally-separate internal core – and that the internal core seems to be octagonal. Estimated from photographs, the outer casing seems to have been about 8ins thick. This form of construction was found to extend from first-floor level up to the belfry floor, thus encompassing the section of wall containing the flint slit windows.

The repair scheme that was undertaken involved uniting the flint outer casing with the core wall. This was achieved by taking down the bulging areas, drilling and setting twisted stainless steel ties into the core wall in epoxy resin and rebuilding the outer casing around their hooked ends. At certain stages, wire straps encircling the tower were fixed at intervals, anchored to the nave west wall and these were eventually removed about a year after completion. The cavity between the flint case and main wall was grouted up with a crushed light-weight expanded clay aggregate. On completion, the whole tower except the ground-floor stage was repointed.

Since the rebuilding was limited to the bulging areas only, not all the facets of an octagon or its angles were seen. A photograph, taken in February 1988, shows the south-west angle of the core and it appears to be formed of flint rubble with a rendered finish. (The author is uncertain whether other angles were exposed. Photographs of one instance only have been seen by him). Judged from photographs taken later during the course of the work, the core wall seems to have a rough, irregular face and to be curved, following the profile of the outer casing; indeed some photographs shows flints projecting from the clearly curved inner core wall, implying that the outer skin has broken away from it. The facet of an octagon would be expected to be flat, with a fair face.

This seems to provoke uncertainty as to whether the whole core was, in fact, formerly octagonal, but it is difficult otherwise to account for the obtuse angle seen on the core.

The depth of the external reveals of the slit windows is about equivalent to the apparent thickness of the outer flint casing, but the splayed inner embrasure shows no obvious making-good across a cavity between the core wall and the outer skin. The jambs and heads of these windows were not rebuilt as part of the renewal of the bulging casing.

On the unusual evidence revealed arising from these repairs, it seems that the constructional history of the tower as now standing could be open to alternative interpretations.

If it is accepted that the tower's inner core was in fact an octagonal tower stage that had later been recased to achieve a fully-circular shape, the tower was probably of three stages that must have been built at different times, as follows:

The ground stage, up to first-floor level, inclusive of the tower arch, appears to be all that remains of the original tower, dateable as described above as probably from the Saxo-Norman period.

The internal flintwork of the three first-floor loops with seemingly, albeit rough, pointed heads suggests that a middle octagonal stage, from first-floor level up to the level of the belfry floor might be 13th century; the outer dressings of its three slit windows must have been behind their present position by about the thickness of the present casing, and presumably there would have been a contemporary octagonal belfry, not the present one. The implication is that this octagonal stage must have replaced an early Saxo-Norman superstructure, unless there had been a long delay in building the tower's upper part which is unlikely since tower and nave were almost certainly built together.

The flint casing to the octagonal stage was probably built in the late 14th or the 15th century, and the stone arch-lintel of the west loop could be an earlier reclaimed feature reset. The present belfry, having the same external diameter as the octagon casing, would have replaced the conjectured octagonal one at this time.

If, on balance, it is considered that the core wall of the tower's middle stage was not octagonal, but just the inner core of a circular wall from which the outer flint facing had parted, the constructional chronology might be as follows, though the angle(s) in the core wall exposed by the repair work remained unexplained.

A Saxo-Norman ground stage, as in the previous scenario, would be likely to have been surmounted by a contemporary superstructure.

In the second phase, that original superstructure would have been replaced by the present, probably 13th century middle stage of a circular form built to the same diameter as the ground stage; no doubt, it had a contemporary belfry.

In a third phase, the present 14th or 15th century belfry replaced the earlier one. The present belfry wall is thinner than the middle stage wall and the exposed top of the thicker wall below is neatly levelled off at belfry floor level with brick. No brick has been noticed in the two lower stages.

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