Sedgeford St Mary's by Stephen Hart



Sedgeford church is one of the largest of the round-towered churches and is probably the only one that was built from the outset with an aisled nave. The present aisles, though, are wider than the original ones, embracing the tower. Analysis of its successive layers of chronological evidence reveals eight major separate phases of building.

Phase I Late 13th century: original church built, comprising Chancel, Nave, Arcades and Aisles, and Round Tower with contemporary octagonal belfry.

Except for a single octagonal column in the north arcade, north and south arcades are identical and provide strong grounds for the deduction that from the outset Sedgeford church was built with aisled nave.

Firstly, they occupy the full length of the nave between chancel and original west wall, with no residual lengths of former side walls each end, such as are usually seen where an arcade has been cut through a former outside wall later, and the depth to which the capitals of the west responds can be seen to have extended into the west wall is an indication that responds and west wall were built together.

Secondly, had the nave originally been without aisles, some evidence of its west corners would be expected to have survived beyond the arcade responds, as there would have been no reason to remove them, but there is no such evidence.

Thirdly, since the size of the arcade column bases averages about 3ft 7ins square, the implication is that they were built as individual footings for the columns rather than being residual sections of former side walls of that excessive thickness. Where an arcade has been formed by cutting arches through an existing wall, the columns usually stand directly on retained sections of that wall.

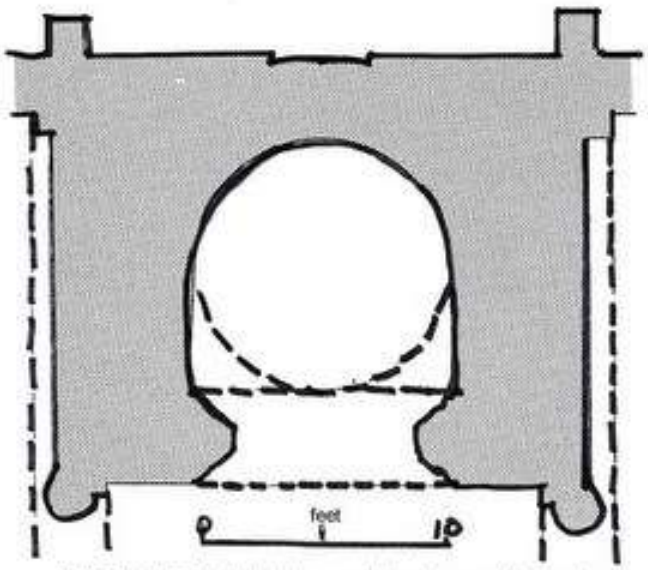
Fourthly, as both arcades are identical (except for the single octagonal column) and therefore almost certainly contemporary, this implies that they were more likely to have been part of the nave's original construction because arcades that have been inserted later usually show differences reflecting different insertion dates. The circular columns and moulded capitals suggest a 13th century date.

Lastly, there is no evidence elsewhere in the church or tower of any work that can be authenticated as earlier than the arcades (Indications of the blocked upper door, said by Pevsner to be c12, are so indistinct as to be unreliable for dating and it is questionable where there is in fact a blocked opening).

In the chancel, the lancet window in the north wall and internal traces of another in the south wall internally give a probable 13th century date. If the restored Geometric tracery within the original Barnack stone frame and arch of the south window is a faithful copy of what it replaced, it would corroborate the date. In any event, the window's original stonework is clearly earlier than the 14th century south transept whose east wall partially cloaks the stonework of its west jamb. (See Phase II below).

The original aisles of which there is now no trace, were almost certainly narrower than the present ones (See Phase III below), with the slopes of the original nave roof (before the clerestory was added) continued down over the aisles at the same pitch. This was a normal arrangement in early aisled plans.

The tower's circular stage has been called Saxon, Saxo-Norman and Norman, but contrary to those attributions, there is considerable evidence to show that the whole tower is the same date as the nave, i.e. 13th century. The main evidence for this is the ground-floor plan shape within the tower. Its north-south diameter is about 10ft 3ins, but where its side walls meet the back of the stonework jams of the pointed tower arch, its width is almost a foot more, giving the floor plan a hairpin shape; looking upwards though, the plan shape of the tower is completely circular at first-floor level which is also the apex level of the outer chamfers of the tower arch.



Tower plan showing the hairpin ground-floor shape and the circular shape above at the tower arch apex level.

Tower plan showing the hairpin ground-floor shape and the circular shape above at the tower arch apex level.

The transition of the tower's internal ground-floor shape to circular at first-floor level has been achieved by oversailing the walling in the spandrel areas of the tower arch and it MUST have been built like that from the outset because alteration of a supposedly circular tower plan of a conjectured earlier tower had there been one, to its present shape and widening of a conjectured originally narrower tower arch to the present size would have required so much cutting away of existing walling as to render such an undertaking impracticable, if not impossible. Realistically, the relationship of the tower's plan shape to the tower arch could only have resulted from preconceived design and construction of tower and tower arch together. Likewise the height, width and thickness of this tower arch, and the incorporation of a hoodmould in the wall above it facing the nave are collectively more indicative of the arch having been built with the nave west wall having been cut through it later. Hence, the obviously post-Norman pointed tower arch places the tower's circular stage also as post-Norman.

Objection to dating the tower arch as contemporary with the nave arcades may be made on the grounds that the tower arch impost mouldings are a later style than the moulded capitals of the arcade columns. But this can be explained by the fact that the inner order of the tower arch is a later insertion into an originally-wider, double-chamfered arch without imposts. Proof of this is shown by the awkward and unconnected manner in which the back faces of the imposts of the inner order meet the inner chamfers of the arch, the fact that the jamb stonework of the inner order does not course with the double-chamfered stonework behind it in accordance with traditional masonry practice and the fact that the radius of the inner arch has not been struck from the same centre as the outer chamfers and so can be seen to follow a different curve from the outer arch.

Built from the outset with aisles, this was apparently an important church and since it seems improbable that such a church of the 13th century would have been built without a tower, that supposition supports the evidence for the tower being contemporary with the nave.

The tower has no Norman evidence to show, but a Saxon attribution for it has been claimed based on a triangular-headed window in its west wall and a smaller aperture facing south which is visible only at first-floor level within the tower. Of these two, the west window is faced with dressed stone externally and is round-headed internally, though its brick arch at the inner wall face probably replaces an original hardwood lintel of the same kind as the one still in place at the quatrefoil window above it. The other, the south aperture, is very narrow and seems to have a horizontal head through the wall, only taking a triangular shape at the inner wall face. Although recognised as a feature characteristic of Saxon style, triangular-shaped window-heads are not exclusive to pre-Conquest times; they are also found over small windows in later towers. These two openings, one with stone dressings externally and the other with a virtually flat head are therefore dubious grounds for a Saxon attribution for the tower, particularly in view of all the evidence for a later date.

The main evidence that the octagonal belfry is contemporary with the circular stage is that the flintwork is similar in both stages and that since the circular stage has no evidence inside or outside of any earlier belfry openings, it was never intended to be a finished tower; the present belfry, with shafted Y-tracery openings, is unlikely to be

later than the tower arch, which, as shown, must have been built with the circular stage, and so the circular stage and the octagonal belfry must be contemporary. The shafted mullions of the belfry openings can be understood as coeval with the circular arcade columns.

Ladbrooke's drawings of the 1820s show the belfry openings as having trefoiled, mullioned lights with hoodmoulds, but the present shafted openings do not look like Victorian replacements and so Ladbrooke's detail is probably wrong. In any event, it would not significantly affect the chronology.

Phase II First half of the 14th century: South transept built, and probably also a Norman transept.

The south transept, with decorated window tracery and ogee window profiles, is clearly a later addition to the Early English church; this is proved by the fact that that at the junction of its east wall to the chancel, it cloaks the Barnack stonework of the chancel south window. Two sloping stones built into the transept east wall, whose purpose would presumably have been to weather the junction of the original chancel roof to this wall, indicate that when the transept was built, the chancel was lower than now.

Pevsner says that a north transept was projected but not carried out, but the evidence suggests that it was built, and then demolished later. If it had not existed, there would have been no reason for the arch across the aisle which not formed until later when the aisles were widened. (See Phases III and IV).

Recent archaeological investigation has shown that the original east wall of the north transept was further to the east than the present east wall of the north aisle, and a remnant is still visible outside on an alignment that would meet the chancel north wall between the lancet window and the curious low two-light window. The central circular stone shaft of this window with its elaborately carved capital shows that it was never intended to receive glazing and confirms that it would originally have been an internal opening between transept and chancel. Its style is consistent with the probable date of the transept. This transept was wider than the south one.

Phase III: Second half of the 14th century.

Aisles rebuilt to their present width, extending westwards to embrace tower. New larger arches to transepts formed in aisles. North and South porches built.

The original aisles and their west walls would have been demolished; wider aisles were built, extending westwards both sides, embracing the tower.

The cramped positions of the west window of the south transept, tight up against the present aisle wall, and the fact the aisle wall cloaks some of the jamb stones of that window is proof that this aisle wall is later than the transept.. It also proves that this aisle wall replaces the wall of a narrower aisle because if the arcades are 13th century, then original aisle walls would have been the same date: but, as just shown, the present aisle walls are later than the transept which itself is later than the arcades.

The arches that cross the aisles on the alignment of the west walls of the transepts were probably built as part of the aisle reconstruction – their responds in the north and south aisle walls appear to be integrally built with those walls. Because of the greater width of the new aisles compared with the original ones, their roofs would have had a lower pitch than previously, though steeper than now in order to clear the apexes of the new aisle-to-transept arches. A lower initial height for the new north and south aisle walls, barely above the window-heads, is indicated by a noticeable change in the flintwork above the aisle windows and that would have allowed a steeper aisle roof pitch than now.

The aisle windows of are of late Decorated/ early Perpendicular style with straight heads. This is a later pattern than the transept windows, and the aisles' west windows are of the same pattern as the side windows. They are of Barnack stone, which establishes that the westwards extensions of the aisles embracing the tower were contemporary with the new side walls, and this is confirmed by the similar walling, and later raising, of both. As Barnack stone was unobtainable after the quarries had been worked out in the late 15th century, the aisle extensions cannot be Victorian as has been suggested

The walls of the longer aisles return inwards at the west end to meet the tower's curved wall slightly in advance of its curvature to produce the present almost flat west façade, with its two contemporary buttresses. The tower's ground-floor west window is flush in this flat wall and so it was probably inserted when these aisle west walls were built to meet the tower; it is in the Decorated reticulated style, and though heavily restored, some original Barnack stonework confirms its provenance.

Internally, where the demolished west walls of the earlier aisles would have met the arcade responds, this now-exposed angle was rather crudely modified, and screen walls containing large blank arches echoing the size of the arcade arches were built between the backs of the modified arcade responds and the new west walls of the extended aisles. These screen walls conceal the lower parts of the tower's north and south circumference, creating odd-shaped inaccessible void spaces each side of the tower. The plane of these screen walls above the blank arches continues the alignment of the outer faces of the arcade walls.

The north and south porches were probably built shortly after the aisles, but the south door, without wave-moulded chamfers like the north door and the porches, might be an original one from the earlier aisle, reset in the aisle wall.

Phase IV say, mid 15th century: North Transept demolished and East end of North Aisle rebuilt.

At some stage after the aisles had been widened, the North Transept was demolished. Across where it had stood, a new section of north wall was built in a fabric noticeably different from the aisle wall, extending the line of the of aisle north wall. Into this new section, an ogee-headed two-light window similar to the one in the west wall of the south transept and no doubt from the demolished north transept, was reset. Evidence of later raising of this section shows that it was built before all the aisle walls were similarly raised when the clerestory was built (See Phase V below). The present east wall of the aisle contains a Perpendicular window and, with

the aisle's north-east quoins, would have been part of the reconstruction of the east end of the aisle following demolition of the transept. The former opening between transept and chancel, now exposed, was adapted to receive glazing.

Phase V 2nd half of the 15th century: Clerestory built, taller Chancel Arch formed, Chancel Walls heightened, Aisle walls raised.

The original nave roof was removed and the walls above the arcades were increased in height to form the clerestory, faced with knapped flints, and having six Perpendicular windows each side. The additional nave height meant that the ridge of the new roof cut across the east belfry opening of the tower.

A taller chancel arch was formed, probably in conjunction with the heightening of the nave east gable for the clerestory. The heightened chancel arch necessitated raising of the chancel to accommodate it, and this shows externally by a change of material in the upper part of the north and south chancel walls. It is interesting to compare the cheap chalk walls of the raised chancel with the fine knapped flint of the clerestory.

Knapped flintwork, different from the main walling, above a window-head level in the walls of both aisles including the western extensions shows that these walls were raised to allow the pitch of the aisle roofs to be decreased (their height in the centre of the aisles being governed by the apex of the aisle-to-transept arches). This would have been done in order to lower the level at which the aisle roofs met the nave walls so as to provide adequate height for the clerestory windows.

Phase VI Later 15th century: South Transept heightened and Rood-Stair Turret built.

Different flintwork, which includes some medieval bricks, in the top two feet or so of the east and west walls of the south transept shows that they have been heightened, and the way that the present transept roof cuts across the blocked east clerestory window shows that this alteration was done after the clerestory had been built. Before the transept was raised, it would apparently have had a lower-pitched roof with a ridge level clear of the clerestory windows.

An internal rood-stair turret was built in the north-east corner of the south transept, the top of which reaches right up to the eaves level of the transept, and this seems to have been the reason for the heightening of the transept walls and roof. As a result of the taller chancel arch, the rood loft would now have been considerably higher than before, if indeed there had been one previously.

Phase VII 1780: Chancel shortened.

The position of the priest's door near the east end is an indication that the chancel has been shortened, and the galleted knapped flintwork of the east wall and stonework at the eastern corners returned on the side walls confirm that this wall is a later build than the rest of the chancel.

Phase VIII Late 19th century: Alterations to the West End

On the west elevation, above the parts of the Phase III walls that conceal the lower part of the inaccessible voids each side of the tower window, flush horizontal bands of concrete or rendered masonry form bases for half-gables which close off the upper parts of the voids; the half-gable walls are faced with carstone and flint in an informal check pattern, and where they meet the tower's curvature, salient angles on their vertical edges form shallow returns of a few inches to the tower face, leaving exposed in the centre, a 4ft 2ins wide section of the tower's circumference, upwards from the level of the concrete strips. These half-gables and the steeply pitched tiling over the voids are probably contemporary 19th-century work. Ladbrooke's drawing shows a completely flat west wall.