

## St Benedicts Church Norwich by Richard Harbord.

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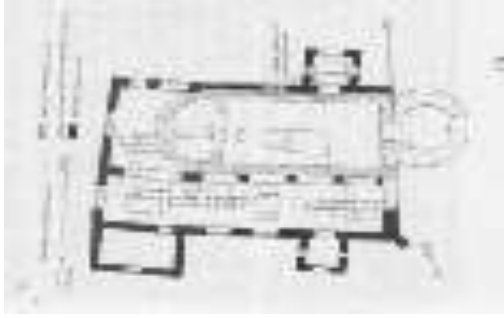
*St Benedict in 1930s and 1940s by Plunkett and 2015*

The 1086 Domesday Survey of Norwich lists 31 churches (including six by name) and 43 chapels. By the middle ages there were 60 churches and 15 others in religious foundations. Most of those had Saxon or Norman origins. Today 35 medieval churches survive in Norwich. This is the largest number in any city north of the Alps. Only about a dozen churches and/or their burial yards have been comprehensively studied by archaeologists. This limited number is partly due to the intensity of development on urban sites and their heritage value. Also churches are only part of the bigger picture of the historical evolution of the city and they are not the prime focus of attention of archaeologists.

Before World War Two five of Norwich's churches had round towers. They were all located outside the core of the Norman city. They were built in what were then outlying suburbs to be included in the city walls of the expanded medieval urban area. In 1942 attacks by enemy bombing meant that one has completely disappeared (St Pauls) and three others were badly damaged. Only the Round Tower Church of St Mary Coslany survives intact in the city.

St Benedicts lies on the western edge of the medieval city where only the tower survives in the middle of modern housing. Neither Nicholas Pevsner nor Bill Goode describes the former church except to give a short account of its tower. A proposal to develop land on the eastern side of the burial yard for housing led to archaeological investigations of the site between 1971 and 1978. This article is based largely on East Anglian Archaeology Report no 15 published in 1982 by J P Roberts and Michael Atkin. It describes the archaeological sites 157N (church) and 147N (adjacent medieval houses and tenements).

The site is a gravel terrace above the River Wensum so the ground slopes down from the south side of St Benedict's Street to Westwick Street on the north side. The historical evolution of the site was as follows:



**Phase 1:** in the pre-Conquest period Norwich expanded westwards from Pottergate when a few scattered cottages were built on Benedicts Street. They used shallow foundations and ground beams to support timber-framed, thatched domestic structures. Soon afterwards in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century the two-cell chapel of St Benedicts was built. The nave internally measured 11 by 6 metres. A kink in the side walls inside the nave suggests that there was a chancel screen. The north wall extended westwards beyond the gable. The only explanation of this feature is that it was an over-sight during construction. A narrow chancel arch and an eastern apse added a further 3 metres to the length of the chapel. No stones were found above any of the wall foundations but the banded infill of the trenches is consistent with flint wall construction. Stray 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century potsherds were found in the soil but these were not enough for secure dating purposes. The foundations of the chancel arch are similar to those found in Bishop Herbert de Losinga's Norman chapel in Magdalen Street and dated c1100. The early St Benedict's Church probably had long and short quoins as in the walls of St Lawrence Church in Norwich and which was dated archaeologically as 1038-1066.

**Phase II:** ribbon development along the streets intensified and more substantial houses were built. In the church, a Norman doorway seems to have been inserted in the north-west corner of the nave. A cushion capital from the door-frames was later reused in the side of a put-hole in the tower (now lost). The door arch had at least three orders. About 1200 a narrow north aisle was added but it stopped a bay short of the west end of the nave to avoid a clash with the Norman doorway. A square ended chancel was abutted against the apse. When completed the curved end wall of the apse was demolished.

It was at the end of this period that the round west tower was added. A big hole was dug and filled with flints and mortar. This was compacted to form the foundation for the tower. Whole flints were used with a few large ones, in courses that have a tendency in a few paces to form a herringbone pattern. There is no change in the pattern of flints rising up the external side of the round part of the tower so it was probably all built at the same time. Each section was built about 0.45 high and then levelled off ready to receive the next layer. There are no fillets between the tower and the west wall of the nave. This is consistent with a dating of about 1200. The tower has an unusual western door pointed with unchamfered stone reveals.

Immediately above the western door is a window where red bricks form the reveals and voussoirs to the pointed arch. There is a small tower arch into the nave which has been blocked with modern bricks. High above, near the apex of the former roof, there was another and similar door opening. The long and short quoins in the west gable wall, were replaced with free stone quoins. The north part of the gable still survives for its full length but it has been rendered. On the south side of the tower the gable wall only survives with a height of 1.5 metres but part of a stone quoin can be seen

behind the render. All this can only be dated on historical evidence. It is close to a date of 1200 and not 13th century work.

**Phase III:** the nave was widened on the north side by demolishing the old wall and replacing it with an arcade of three bays. The south and east walls of the nave were rebuilt in flints at the same time. The tower and its arch remained on the central axis of the old narrower church. The north wall of the north nave was probably completed in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. The Black Death then hit Norwich and many of the tenements adjacent to St Benedicts Church were abandoned for a long period. In the recovery period the adjacent tenements were intensively redeveloped with backland development along the alleys.

**Phase IV:** about 1400 a north porch was added to the western end of the aisle. The archaeological report does not mention the polygonal belfry added about this time to the tower. This has eight sides but they are not exactly aligned to the cardinal points. The south opening faces a more south-south-east direction. The blind sides have tracery framed panels. The four openings are plain with no tracery and the parapet is also plain. The inside of the tower was not seen but it is unlikely that an inspection would reveal blocked openings.

Later in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the east end of the north aisle was extended and a vestry added next to the chancel. The 3.65 high side walls of the nave were raised and provided with three clerestory windows. The Norman north doorway and its porch were probably demolished at this time. The north aisle was extended westwards with an additional bay. Its arch was smaller than the earlier arches to the east. A new Perpendicular style east window with three main lights was inserted. The church remained largely unchanged from that date until it was destroyed by bombing. It is shown in Sillet's drawing of the north side of the church dated 1828. By then the roofs of the nave, aisle and vestry were leaded. Only the chancel had a clay pantiled roof.

**Phase V:** in the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a rapid population growth in Norwich and the street frontage along St Benedicts Street was upgraded with more substantial houses with rear wings and yards. There were three bells in the tower of which the earliest was cast by John Brand senior of Norwich in 1573. The others were made by his relatives- Elias Brand in 1636 and John Brand junior in 1659. As the internal diameter of the tower is so small the bell-frames may have been stacked above each other. In the nave there was a finely carved (but mutilated) stone font of the Perpendicular period.

There were two sepulchre brasses in the north aisle. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries there were five bequests. A Will dated 1520 bequeathed a donation to build a south porch. This was two storeys high with a stepped gable. Another bequest was for a stained glass window in the east window of the aisle.

**Later phases:** the church was repaired and reroofed in 1896.

**Conclusion.** Archaeology can give a far closer estimate of the dating of a Round Tower than if only an architectural assessment is relied on. This depends on adequate archaeological material being available. In the case of St Benedict's the indication is that the round tower was built much later than the original Saxon chapel to which it was attached and it may date from around 1200. This points to the late date of most church round towers and throws doubt on any but a few dating from before 1100. For example a pre-Conquest, timber built, two-cell chapel was found on the site of the

proposed Anglia TV Centre in 1978. It was a Scandinavian 'stave' type church with no tower and perhaps used a bell-cote instead. The Saxon church on the site of St Martin-at-Palace in Norwich appears to have been a similar type of building. If these suggest the usual form of Saxon churches in the city then it also throws doubt on the idea of a widespread building programme throughout East Anglian of Church Round Towers at any one time in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. As so little is yet known about the early churches in cities like Norwich, this is an open question.

St Benedicts font made in about 1320 and later recut. It was moved to Erpingham where it can be seen.



*Plunkett's photographs of St Benedicts before the bombing with font. Detail of belfry*

See also:

Norfolk Heritage Explorer NHER 157

Simon Knott's excellent piece about St Benedicts

<http://www.norfolkchurches.co.uk/norwichbenedict>

Sillett made a fine drawing in 1828.