

Edingthorpe, All Saints by Stephen Hart



Edingthorpe, tower and south side; font and north door by Simon Knott

Architectural description

The church has a tall round tower with an octagonal belfry stage, a nave with a thatched roof and a tiled chancel and south porch.

The nave is 23ft 6ins wide which is appreciably more than the average width for early minor churches. Its north wall is built with crudely coursed large boulder flints and shows three courses of ferricrete spaced apart by flint courses at low level externally. The north door has once-chamfered dressed stone jambs and arch and simple stone impost; the arch is oddly asymmetrical. Internally, the reveals of the opening are slightly splayed and the rere-arch is a depressed pointed shape. This doorway, which Pevsner calls Transitional of circa 1190, seemed to be the earliest datable feature of the church. The north windows are 14th century early Perpendicular types and so, being later than the north door, are clearly insertions.

Stripping of internal plaster to about 5ft high on the nave north wall and more extensively on the west wall north of the tower doorway (now replastered) revealed two similar courses of ferricrete at about 1ft and 2ft 3 ins above floor level. Those on the north wall were interrupted by what seemed to be two blocked openings, possibly doorways, in the eastern half of this wall, whose purpose seems obscure. The section of wall between them was undisturbed.

The external flintwork of the south wall is entirely different from the north – it is more regularly laid and uses much smaller flints with a high percentage of knapped ones, and is clearly a different build from the north wall. Its three windows, two two-light and one three-light, show no evidence of later insertion and though all have different tracery, the tracery patterns of all three were used in the Decorated period in the 14th century. The western one has Y-tracery of unusually refined type in that its members are hollow-chamfered by contrast with the plain chamfers of normal Y-tracery; the middle one, also two-light, has trefoiled ogee lights with a reticulation unit in the apex, and in the three-light eastern one, under a depressed pointed arch, has cinquefoiled ogee lights with a pair of soufflets above the centre light. Further evidence that they are of the same date is provided by small details in Roman brick above their arch hoodmoulds. Like, for example, at Norton Subcourse, this seems to be a case of the contemporary use of multiple window designs in the same elevation.

The chancel appears to have been rebuilt, probably in the 19th century. Its walls are faced with roughly-squared knapped flints and it has dentilled brick eaves courses, a brick gable on the east wall and a plain-tiled roof. The three-light east window with reticulated tracery seems to be an original 14th one reset.

The tower

The tower is circular for about three-thirds of its height, above which the belfry is octagonal. Starting from a flared base of about 16ins high, the circular stage walls are plumb to about half their height and then taper slightly. At the transition from circular to octagonal, simple cambers in the flintwork merge the two shapes without any form of stringcourse at the junction.

The fabric of the circular stage is a mixture of coursed cobbles and knapped flints. Some of the knapped flints appear as rough bands approximately 18ins high; these occur at 12ft and 20ft above the ground on the south side and there are suggestions of two more lower down on the north side. There are some medieval brick putlog holes in the lower half and occasional bricks in the fabric at low level on the west side and high up on the east. The upper half of the circular stage contains more knapped flint – about 75pc of the facing material – by comparison with about 20 to 25pc in the lower half.

A small west-facing Perpendicular window to the ground floor with a square head and a hoodmould can be seen internally to be a later insertion into a larger embrasure framed and arched in medieval brick.

At about 8ft below the base of the octagon, a pointed south-facing slit window framed with medieval bricks lights the first floor: internally, it has splayed reveals, medieval bricks in the jambs and the brick arch at its head goes through the full thickness of the wall. There is no evidence in the surrounding flintwork inside or outside of the window having been inserted, or having been reduced from a larger opening like the ground-floor window. Externally, in the west wall at the same level, irregularity in the external flintwork indicates the position of a former opening and this is confirmed internally by a recess of similar size and construction to the south window. There are no other window openings in the circular stage of the tower, or any evidence inside and out of the blocking of former ones.

At first floor level in the tower east wall, an upper door opening has been blocked, leaving a recess about 2ft 4ins deep. The recess is about 7ft high by 1ft 10ins wide and has straight reveals with jambs of medieval brick and flint, and, although the head has been repaired at the face, the original arch can still be seen behind the repair: it is a shallow pointed arch formed in medieval brick and built to the same pattern as the brick arches in the south and west window embrasures. At the back of the recess, a separate pointed inner arch of medieval brick, a few inches narrower and lower than the recess, can be seen, and it is within that arch that the former opening has been blocked. This inner arch is of different construction from the other, its apex being formed with two bricks propped against each other.

Externally, in the east face of the circular stage above the north slope of the nave roof, a sloping curving weathercourse of medieval brick is built into the tower wall.

The octagon is faced with knapped flints with a few cobbles amongst them and has medieval brick quoins. It has two-light belfry windows in the cardinal faces, all of which have suffered drastic repairs involving unsympathetic use of incompatible brick. The two facing north and east have pointed arches: a few jamb stones and the stone hoodmould are all that remain of the eastern one, the rest having been replaced with crude brickwork copying Y-tracery; the north one still has its outer stonework and hoodmould and remnants of stone tracery, with brick repairs below. The two facing south and west have square-headed Perpendicular stone windows with panel tracery but their mullions have been replaced with thick supports of brick. Internally, the octagonal belfry walls are mostly rebuilt modern work.

As can be seen on the outside, the change of shape from circular to octagonal starts about 5ft below the cill level of the belfry openings, but inside, the tower is circular up to 15ins below the belfry cill level and there is no variation in the internal flintwork at the level where the change of shape occurs externally.

The tower has an internal diameter of 10ft 11ins and a wall thickness of 4ft 6ins measured at the west window. A pointed doorway, about 8ft high to its apex and 3ft 8ins wide, provides access between nave and tower. It is 1ft 4ins thick and built with medieval bricks plastered on the nave side to produce a moulded profile with a hoodmould around the arch. It seems to be a sub-arch within a larger brick-framed opening which has a depressed pointed arch of medieval brick: this opening is about 3ft higher and 7ins wider and splays to a width of 4ft 11ins in the tower. The overall wall thickness at the apex is a little under 4ft.

Interpretation

It has been suggested that the pointed north door of the nave is an early Norman door altered in the Transitional period, but, whatever the reason may be for its lack of symmetry, that cannot be so. This is because the arch voussoirs are jointed and curved to a radius, which, if set as a semi-circular arch, would give an opening about 2ft wider than the doorway (it would be about 5ft 3ins wide). Also, the length of the soffit curve of the voussoirs measures considerably more than the equivalent length for a semi-circular Norman arch spanning an opening of this size. The arch therefore must have been built as a pointed arch, even if possibly altered later. Confirmation of the pointed shape being original comes from the splayed reveals and depressed pointed head of the rere-arch internally: a Norman doorway would have had parallel reveals and a semi-circular rere-arch. In the absence of any evidence by which the church can be dated earlier than the north door, the tower must therefore be post-Norman whether it was built with the nave or added later.

Evidence that the tower is later than the north door is provided by the tower's materials – its medieval brick and knapped flints. The revival since Roman times of brick-making in East Anglia did not occur until the late 13th century nor were knapped flints of the quality of those in the tower's circular stage used before the early 14th century. The amount and quality of knapped flint in the fabric of the tower's circular stage and the extent to which medieval brick has been used in the formation of the tower arch, in the windows of the circular stage, in the upper door and in the weathercourse in the east wall are proof that its date is unlikely to be earlier than the 14th century, and consequently it is likely to be an addition to an originally towerless

church. None of these brick features show any evidence of earlier construction which has subsequently been modified with inserted bricks, nor could brick arches of the kind used over the windows have been inserted into an existing 4ft 6ins thick wall without access from above and there is no evidence externally or internally of reinstatements of holes of such size as would have been necessary to enable a man to reach the centre of the wall to build such arches and to “pin up” from them to support the walling above. Thus, being part of the original construction of the circular stage, the brick features establish the earliest date that it could have been built.

The upper door recess, which was arched in the same manner as the tower windows, is clearly part of the tower build, whereas the brickwork of the narrower inner arch seen at the back of the recess is, no doubt, the dressing to the corresponding opening cut through the nave gable when the tower was built.

It has been widely supposed that all octagonal belfries of round tower are additions to Saxon or Norman structures, but there is convincing evidence to show that several, including the one at Edingthorpe, are contemporary with the circular stages.

The evidence at Edingthorpe is, firstly the fact that the circular stage shape continues internally well above the level at which the octagon starts externally with no variation of the internal flintwork at that level which might suggest a different building phase, is surely proof that the octagon was commenced as part of part of the same build as the circular stage, and the merged external junction of octagon to circular stage without a string course tends to support this. Secondly, there is no evidence inside or out of former belfry openings in the circular stage; this implies that the circular stage had never been intended to stand on its own as a finished church tower and that the octagon had been envisaged as a feature of the tower design from the outset. A suggestion that the south window is an original belfry window made smaller can be dismissed for four reasons: there is no evidence of its reduction; there were only two such windows; they were too low, and they were at the same level as the upper door and it is most unlikely that an upper door would have opened directly into a bell-chamber. All these considerations point decisively to a circular tower with a contemporary octagonal belfry.

On the premise that the circular and octagonal stages are of one build, dating of the octagon can provide a date for the whole tower. The remnant of stone tracery in the apex of the pointed north belfry opening is probably original: it can be identified as a straight-sided reticulation unit, attributable as Late Decorated or Early Perpendicular, and possibly of the same date as the windows inserted into the earlier north wall of the nave which have a comparable, but not identical, motif. Being one of the first manifestations of the development of Late Decorated tracery into the Perpendicular style, the straight-sided reticulation motif suggests a date in the second half of the 14th century, making this tower one of the later medieval round towers. The Y-tracery form of the brickwork in the east belfry opening is unreliable as an indication of what it may replace since it was probably just the simplest and cheapest method of repair. The square-headed openings facing south and west seemed to have been altered in the 15th and 16th century. The style of the small ground-floor west window suggests it may have been inserted at the same time, and judging from the size of the original embrasure internally, it would probably have replaced a stone lancet of similar size to those at Rushall and Thorpe Abbots.

On the evidence of its flintwork and windows, the south wall seems to have been built in the 14th century. It may, of course, have been rebuilt on its original alignment, but alternatively, since at 23ft 8ins the nave is wider than is usual for early minor churches, the rebuilt wall might represent a widening of an originally narrower church. If that were so, it would establish that the tower, being approximately central to the wider nave, was built after or at the same time as the nave was widened because otherwise its position would have been appreciably off-centre to a narrower nave. The tower's evidence is consistent with it being about the same age as the nave south wall.

Postscript

During renovations to the church being undertaken during October 1999, plaster was stripped from the nave west wall and disclosed a blocked opening. The opening was blocked with flintwork at the face of the wall and was defined by straight joints at its sides and an arched head, though the roughness of the flintwork made it difficult to determine whether the head shape was pointed or round. The size of the opening was 2ft 9ins wide by about 4ft 6ins high to the top of the arch; the right-hand edge of the opening was 4ft 11ins from the nave north wall and its cill level was 9ft 9ins above the floor. At about the level of the springing of the arch, a decayed timber plank spanned the opening, which appeared to serve no purpose other than supporting the flint filling within the arch. Removal of a few flints from the filling showed no definite reveals to the opening and seemed to indicate only a shallow depth.

The most likely possibility is that this opening was a niche. It is too low to have been an upper door into a conjectured earlier tower of a narrower nave and there is no evidence in the exposed flintwork of this wall of any former tower arch. It also seems unlikely that it was a window because of the lack of clean reveals and its position: if it had been a window, perhaps central to an earlier nave, that nave would have only been about 12ft 7ins wide which seems improbably small. Nevertheless, as been shown, the 14th century south wall could indicate the widening of a former narrower nave.