

Fritton St Catherine



by Stephen Hart

The church has a nave and chancel of the same width, a round west tower, south porch and north vestry. Although the nave has been heightened and later windows inserted, the round-headed north door now leading into the vestry and the small, square-proportioned nave west quins of stone, probably Caen, are convincing grounds for attributing it as Norman.

The tower is circular for three-quarters of its height and has an octagonal belfry stage and parapet. There are flat fillets in the re-entrant angles between the tower and nave west wall. The walls of the circular stage measured at the west window are about 4ft 2ins thick and the internal diameter is 9ft 11ins. Careful examination of the walls externally reveals a change in the flintwork at about two-thirds of the way up the circular stage. The lower two thirds is reasonably-coursed flint rubble of average sizes, but above that up to the base of the octagon, the walling is uncoursed smaller, more closely packed flint and contains occasional medieval bricks; also, it has a small but noticeable taper whereas the walls below are plumb.

This upper section of the circular stage contains a single-light west window framed with medieval brick, having a shallow triangular head comprising two bricks propped against other at a shallow angle. At corresponding levels facing south, north and east, blockings of similar-sized openings can be detected

Below the level at which the flintwork changes occur, can be seen traces of three small blocked openings at south, west and north, the latter very indistinct. These occur at the level of the upper door of which the altered and blocked head can be seen on the east of the tower below the weathercourse of a former nave roof gable peak. A two-light west window in the ground stage has ogee tracery and a transom.

The octagonal stage has fabric of smaller rubble flint with brick: it has medieval brick quins and two-light Perpendicular belfry openings in the cardinal faces and is surmounted by a battlemented parapet of knapped flint with dressed stone quins.

The round-headed tower arch, 5ft 9ins wide by about 15ft 6ins high has chamfered imposts and stone dressings to its jambs and arch facing the nave, and within the tower the east wall above it is curved and 3ft 6ins thick at the apex. The nave west wall measured outside the tower is about 8ins thicker which confirms that the tower

must have been built at the same time as the nave because otherwise quite unnecessary and improbable gouging out of the nave west wall would have been necessary to accommodate the tower's internal curvature. On this evidence and the contemporary nave's Norman features, the lower part of the circular stage of the tower is also datable as Norman up to the level where the change in the exterior flintwork occurs.

Upwards from that level to the base of the octagon, the slight taper of this section, its smaller fabric containing occasional medieval bricks and the brick west window suggests that it is a later build than the lower circular part, possibly of the late 13th or early 14th century. Its brick west window and the three other blocked openings at the cardinal points at the same level suggest that this stage would have been a new belfry replacing the original Norman one.

The present octagonal belfry was probably built in the 15th century and its parapet added later, perhaps in the 16th. When the octagon was added, three of the former lancet belfry windows in the upper circular stage would have been blocked, and perhaps also the smaller windows below if they had not already been blocked when the lancet belfry replaced its predecessor.