

Brampton, St Peter's by Stephen Hart.



This church has a complicated constructional history and now consists of a wide nave with a longer chancel offset from the nave axis, a round west tower with octagonal belfry, a south porch and south vestry.

The octagonal belfry at Brampton is unique in two respects. Firstly, whereas several octagonal belfries have brick window dressings or quoins, this is the only one in which the belfry walls themselves are built of brick; and secondly, the dressed stone quoins at the angles, unlike those of all other medieval octagonal belfries on round towers, are of equal height and regular size. The rhythmic alternation of these uniform quoins and the arresting visual contrast they make with the red brick walls demonstrate an almost classical architectural effect of a kind not seen in any round tower octagons of the 14th and 15th centuries. This suggests that the belfry is unlikely to be earlier than the 16th century, and it could be as late as the early 17th century. Parallels in Norfolk for quoining of this kind are found at Blickling and Felbrigg Halls but these are both of circa 1620. Earlier precedents can be seen further afield: in Cambridge, the early 16th century Gatehouse of Jesus College must be one of the earliest examples, and from a little later the gatehouse turrets of St John's and Trinity Colleges bear a striking resemblance to the Brampton belfry although their ashlar quoins are not precisely equal. The two-light belfry window pattern at Brampton – simple, uncusped Y-form under a four-centred arch – is typical of 16th century late Gothic.

The brick construction and style of the belfry clearly differentiates it as a later addition to the flint circular stage. Below the belfry, three lancet windows at first-floor level are too low and too small to have been former belfry openings, and as there is no evidence of others, the present octagonal belfry is probably a replacement of an earlier one because the circular stage as now seen is unlikely to have stood without a belfry.

Medieval bricks below the cills and brickwork in the internal jambs of the three stone lancet tower windows suggest that they may have been inserted into earlier openings. A stone weathercourse in the tower east wall is an indication that the

circular stage is likely to be of post-Conquest date and, if the lancets were later insertions, probably Norman.

This is one of those round towers that poses the question as to why the tower arch is not central within the tower. The pointed arch, 5ft 8ins wide, is offset to the south to the extent that its south reveal is virtually tangential to the inner circumference of the tower. Looking upwards in the tower, the horseshoe plan shape seen beneath the first floor and the flat east wall at that level show that the tower was probably added to a towerless nave. The flat part of the east wall at that level is central relative to the tower and about four foot wide, its northern extremity roughly aligning with the north reveal of the tower arch opening below. It seems that an original central tower arch, four feet wide, was widened southwards by about 1ft 8ins, the north jamb remaining in its original position. To understand why this was done, it is necessary to try to elucidate the history of the church's considerable alterations.

Reused Roman materials in the quoins at its north-west corner suggest an 11th century date for the nave, but despite the common alignment of the outer faces of the north walls of the nave and chancel, they are probably not contemporary because there is a marked difference in their exterior flintwork and the chancel wall is about six inches thinner than the nave wall. A buttress now conceals the constructional detail where they join.

The east-west axis of the tower lies about 6ft 9ins from the inner face of the nave north wall, and assuming that the tower was built centrally to the nave, the original nave would have been about 13ft 6ins. The chancel, though, measured at the chancel arch is nearly two feet wider than that, and so not in line with the tower. This, its different fabric and its thinner walls seems to show that the present chancel is not the original one; it must have been completely rebuilt, and its windows suggest that would have been in the 14th century.

It appears that the rebuilding of the chancel was part of a major reconstruction scheme in which three new contemporary interdependent elements were built – the wider chancel, a southward widening of the nave, and a south-east chapel, now demolished, in the re-entrant angle between the enlarged nave and the wider chancel. Arches in the chancel south wall and in the nave east wall, both now blocked, that linked these three spaces are evidence that they were likely to have been built at the same time. Judging from the built-in stone weathercourse in the nave east gable, the south-east chapel was in effect an eastward continuation of the nave extension – not a transept. It is probable that it was also at this stage that the tower arch was widened southwards in order to bring it into better alignment with the wide chancel.

Prior to this reconstruction, there had probably been no chancel arch in the original narrow church, and so a major part of the reconstruction was the building of a nave east wall containing the chancel arch and the arch to the south-east chapel. The chancel arch was positioned appreciably off-centre southwards in the chancel, no doubt to relate better to the widened nave. This wall was carried up as the east gable of a new roof spanning the full width of the wider nave, with a corresponding half-gable wall south of the tower at the west end.

The new, wider chancel and the south-east chapel would have had separate gable roofs; the outer slopes of these roofs would probably have been continuous with the slopes of the new nave roof, with the inner slopes abutting the new nave east gable. Dressed stone weathercourses for the inner slopes, still visible, were incorporated in the gable, proving that it must have been contemporary with the widened chancel and the chapel

The positions of the weathercourses in the nave east gable show that there must have been a valley gutter between the chancel and chapel roofs on the line of the new chancel's south wall. The weathercourse defining the chapel roofline has since been chopped back flush with the wall flintwork, presumably when the chapel was demolished.

As the southward enlargement of the nave and the building of the chapel necessitated contemporary construction of the larger roof, an arcade would not have been formed in the original south wall, which would have been demolished when the nave was widened.

The width of the widened nave is such that its centre-line, and consequently the roof apex falls about two feet to the south of the tower, allowing sufficient clear space of the tower wall to form a thatch ridge. If it had been less, that could not have been achieved satisfactorily.

When the original nave roof was replaced by the higher one spanning the full width of the widened church, it appears that the north limb of the weathercourse that had been incorporated in the tower's east wall during its construction was extended upwards in the tower wall. Compared with the evenness of the original lower length, the poorer standard of setting and alignment of this later upper length reflects the difficulties of inserting sloping stonework into an existing curved rubble flint wall. It is possible that under the rendering on the tower east wall below the weathercourse, stone remnants of the original south limb within the tower flintwork may still be in place.

Parapet walls of church nave gables are usually coped with stone copings or sometimes where they have been repaired, with brick-on-edge, but here, doubtless altered in conjunction with the slating of the roof, the copings are 19th century rebated tiles. This is a detail from Norfolk's domestic vernacular and it is unusual to find it transposed into ecclesiastical architecture.

On the evidence described, a dating for the church might be:

11th century: Original towerless church built, with nave and chancel of the same width.

12th century: Round tower added with a central, narrower tower arch, axial to the tower and to the church. (If the tower lancets are original, the tower would be C13th.)

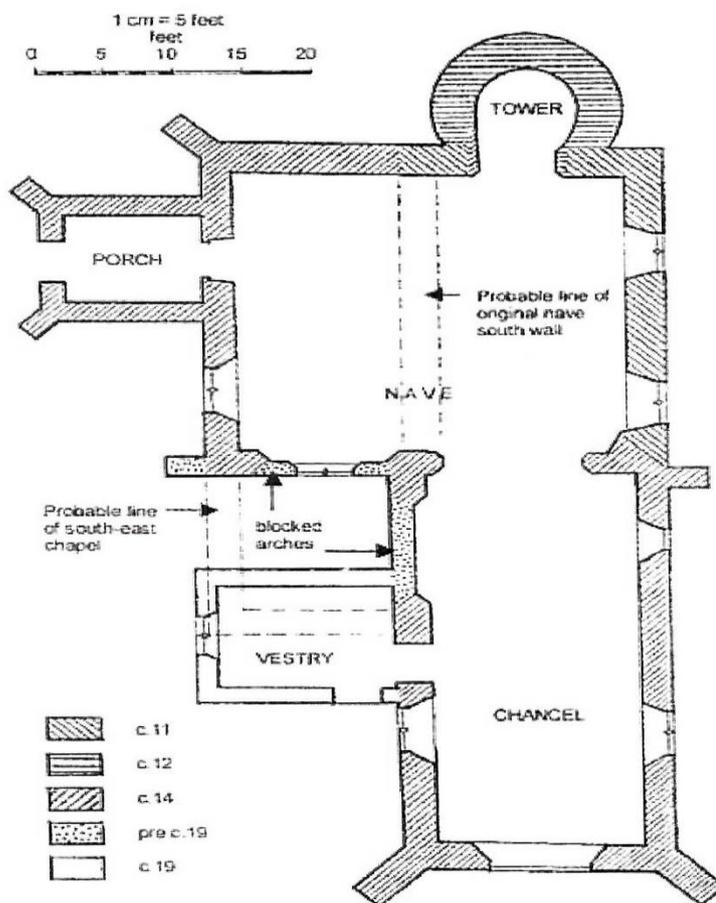
13th century: First-floor stone lancet windows inserted into existing openings in tower.

14th century: Chancel rebuilt wider, with arch to south-east chapel; Nave south wall demolished; New south wall and extended west wall for widened nave; Nave east gable wall built with chancel arch and arch to south-east chapel; South-east chapel built; Larger nave roof constructed and separate roofs to new chancel and chapel; Nave north windows inserted; Existing stone weathercourse in tower east wall extended upwards to suit taller nave roof; Tower arch widened; Porch built.

16th century: Original belfry replaced by octagonal brick belfry.

Probably pre-19th century: Chapel demolished and arches to nave and chancel blocked.

19th century: South vestry built. Nave SE buttress rebuilt (Ladbroke shows a sloping one that may have been built or altered when the chapel was demolished).



BRAMPTON CHURCH PLAN

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