

St Mary, Beachamwell. By Stephen Hart



Photograph from 1970s by Bill Goode. Detail of the tower.

The church has a nave and chancel of the same width with thatched roofs, a south aisle, north porch and round west tower. The nave's north-west quoin of Barnack stone, not erratics as stated elsewhere, is in long-and-short work and though the chancel may have been extended, its east wall rebuilt on a stone-capped plinth, has one upright stone and two or three flat ones in the SE quoin which suggest that they might be reset stones that were originally components of long-and-short work.

The two west bays of the south arcade and south aisle are early Perpendicular and the two east bays Victorian. The walls of both parts of the aisle are faced with knapped flints. The north door in the nave and a south door in the aisle both have pointed arches, and the north porch has a stepped gable. The nave north wall is 2ft 9ins thick and its west wall measured outside the tower 3ft 2 ins thick. Internally in the west wall, an upper door is situated above the tower arch but off-centre relative to it.

The tower is circular for about three-quarters of its height; near the top of the circular part there are four early two-light belfry openings; two have round heads arched in flattish flints (S & E) and two (N & W) have triangular heads formed with paired sloping stones. The circular part has two slit windows, one in the form of a vertical slot cut through a single stone and the other without stonework; there is also a Perpendicular west window in the ground stage. The Perpendicular top stage is octagonal with two-light belfry openings in the cardinal faces and flushwork replicas in the diagonals.

Internally, the tower east wall, unplastered above the tower arch, is flat in the ground stage but curved in the upper stories. The tower arch is 6ft wide by 10ft 6ins to the crown, with a plain semi-circular arch not set back on the jambs and without impost; the reveals of the archway and the nave walls are plastered but the plaster has been stripped from the arch itself facing the nave and from the arch soffit, exposing radially-laid limestone voussoirs at both nave and tower faces, with rubble flint and some stone to the soffit between. The voussoir stones, though suitably shaped for

their purpose, are not “dressed” and were clearly not intended to be exposed because they are scored on face and soffit to form a key for plaster. Above the tower arch and off-centre to the north is the upper doorway, partly obscured by the nave roof timbers.

The tower walls are 3ft 2ins thick measured at the west window and at the apex of the tower arch; they are thinned by shallow offsets externally and internally about halfway up.

Chiefly on the evidence of the early belfry openings near the top of the circular part, all writers call the tower Anglo-Saxon, but despite the formidable weight of this virtually unanimous opinion, there are convincing grounds for dating the church and tower as post-Conquest, of the same period as the round Saxo-Norman church towers at Herringfleet and Haddiscoe. The term “Saxo-Norman” is here used as meaning architecture of Anglo-Saxon workmanship or style executed after the Conquest.

The basis for this attribution is simply that, if it is accepted (as current opinion seems to profess) that limestone was unavailable in the area before Norman times, its use in the tower and nave at Beachamwell rules out a pre-Conquest date. Here, it was used for the triangular heads, imposts and through-stones of the early belfry openings, the tower arch voussoirs, the long-and-short NW quoin and the east quoins. Although recognised as a feature of Anglo-Saxon workmanship, long-and-short quoins persisted beyond the Conquest and were used, for example, at St John's, Timberhill, Norwich, founded between the Conquest and Domesday.

The six-foot width of the tower arch suggests that it was too wide to have been the west entrance of a formerly towerless church; the scoring of its stones as a key for plaster and the absence of mouldings or imposts suggests that the use of stone in the arch was not a later embellishment of an earlier rubble arch. As the tower arch and tower are obviously unlikely to be earlier than the nave and if the nave is dated by the NW quoin as Saxo-Norman, it follows that the tower and tower arch must either be the same date, or later if the tower was added. It is unlikely though, that the tower is a later addition because the style of the original belfry openings, constructed in flints with stone, seems to place it certainly no later than the long-and-short nave quoins; in any event, the stonework of the tower arch tends to support a post-Conquest date for the construction of arch and tower.

Despite a flat east wall within the tower in its ground stage, often regarded as proof that a tower has been added to an earlier nave, the curved profile of this wall in the stories above show that it would not have been the gable of a towerless nave, and provides corroboration that the tower and nave are probably contemporary. Further evidence for this is the thickness of the nave west wall measured outside the tower, which at 3ft 2ins is the same as the tower wall and thicker than the nave side wall. If the nave had originally been towerless, it is to be expected that its west and side walls would have been about the same thickness.

If tower and nave were built together, why, it might be asked, was the ground stage of the tower inside not made circular like the upper stages? The answer is probably that the east wall of the ground stage was made flat for the sake of simplicity of

construction of the tower arch: the crown of an arch built in a curved wall will necessarily lie in a different plane from the jambs, resulting in a distorted arch shape, awkward to construct, and so in order to form an archway with a vertical face for its full height, the section of wall in which it is built must be flat. There are, nevertheless, many instances of tower arches in curved walls with the inevitable distorted arch, some formed with dressed stone and some without.

There are convincing grounds for attribution of the same date to the "Saxon" features of the Beachamwell tower as to Great Dunham church barely 10 miles away which, because of its considerable use of dressed limestone for features of Saxon style is now usually regarded as of post-Conquest date. There, in the square tower is long-and-short quoining in Barnack stone and two-light belfry openings in which round heads arched in flint with some Roman brick are supported on through-stones set on mid-wall shafts. These features make striking parallels with the NW nave quoin and the belfry openings at Beachamwell.

The tower at Beachamwell highlights two wider issues; firstly, it demonstrates that it cannot safely be assumed that plastered tower arches, because they are plastered, are built with flints rather than with stone, and secondly, like Great Dunham, it shows that flint-formed features of Saxon style are to be found in company with contemporary features of Barnack freestone.

The dating suggested above relies heavily on the assumption that limestone was not available in the area before the Conquest. While it can be convincingly shown that Caen stone was not imported into East Anglia until the late 11th century, the earliest use of Barnack is less certain; it is said* to have travelled in pre-Conquest times as far from the quarries near Stamford as Ramsey and Bury St Edmunds, and so it is not impossible that it could also have reached places in West Norfolk accessible via the western waterways. Some early East Anglian churches with Saxon features of Barnack stone might therefore be pre-Conquest, but that seems to be dependent on when Barnack stone was first used in the area for minor churches.

* Donovan Purcell, *Cambridge Stone*, Faber & Faber, 1967.