

## Beeston St Lawrence Church by Stephen Hart.



*Dot Shreeve's drawing and RTCS at Beeston St Lawrence in 2010.*

The church comprises a round west tower, nave and chancel of the same width though the chancel is a little lower, and a south porch. As the nave has been widened by the rebuilding of its south wall on an alignment south of the original wall, the tower is off-centre to the north and so the ridge of the nave roof meets the tower's curved east wall off-centre to the south. The roofs are tiled with blue glazed pantiles.

The tower is circular to the top: it has walls about 3ft thick and an internal diameter at ground-floor level of 9ft. The fabric is mainly rough-coursed irregular flint rubble and contains quite a lot of ferricrete in the lower part, particularly in a band about 6ft high at about 6ft above ground level. A stone west window with Y-tracery and a medieval brick hoodmould has been inserted in the ground-floor stage within the ferricrete band, and immediately below it are the ferricrete jambs and head stones of a small blocked window. About half-way up, facing west of north, west, and east of south there are three blocked triangular-headed openings with jambs and heads of ferricrete, and above them the walls have a noticeable taper and there seems to be a change in the fabric – above this level there is virtually no ferricrete. The present belfry has pointed openings at the cardinal positions. The west one has stone dressings but the others have been reconstructed in post-medieval brick; some have a brick hoodmould like the inserted ground-floor window but their stone mullions and tracery have now been replaced with wood. A shallow parapet of knapped flint replaces the one reportedly blown off by a V2 rocket in 1945.

Internally, a tall pointed tower arch, 4ft 10ins wide with plastered jambs has 9-inch wide chamfers towards the nave and a chamfered stone inner arch at the head fading into the reveals. The opening is off-centre to the south relative to the tower axis but to the north relative to the widened nave. Looking upwards in the tower, the internal shape is circular and the thickness of the tower's curved east wall above the arch is about three inches less than the nave west wall measured outside the tower.

Original areas of the nave west wall are of similar materials to the tower and on the north side original ferricrete NW quoin stones are visible about 3.5ft wide from the tower behind a later buttress. South of the tower, though no quoins are discernible,

much of this wall having been rebuilt in association with the southwards widening of the nave and a large buttress at the SW corner.

The nave north wall appears to show several building phases. At 30ft from the NW corner a line of ferricrete quoins extending to about 12ft above the ground defines its original east end, and above them rough flints extend that quoin line upwards. The lower part is composed of flint and ferricrete but above about 12ft the flintwork is different and contains less ferricrete, implying perhaps a later build.

Beyond the vertical straight joint formed by the ferricrete and rough flint quoins, the nave wall continues a further 23.5ft eastwards terminating with a buttress (similar to the one added at the NW corner) at the junction with the chancel, where a shallow projection in flint and medieval brick, now mostly rendered, indicates the position of a blocked former rood stair of which there is no sign internally. The eastern section of the nave wall contains virtually no ferricrete and also suggests the possibility of two building phases: at about the same level as the fabric change in the western section, a tenuous difference in the flintwork is discernible within which putlog holes can be identified, and occasional medieval bricks not present in the lower part, are seen. This upper flintwork could be recognised as comparable with that in the buttresses at each end of this wall and the south wall flintwork. A later, further heightening of both sections of the nave north wall is shown by a band of knapped flint about 3 or 4ft high at the top, which runs for its full length.

The western section of this wall contains a tall blocked round-headed opening 3ft 4ins wide with post-medieval brick jambs and arch but there is no trace of it internally. A round-headed internal recess 3ft 5ins wide indicates the position of a former north door in the normal position; it is blocked externally with knapped flint. The eastern section contains one two-light Decorated window with mouchette tracery, but subsequent patching and pointing make it difficult to judge whether the window was built with the wall or inserted later.

The nave south wall is of rubble flint of a type not dissimilar to that in the upper eastern part of the nave north wall and has two-stage buttresses at each end and one intermediate one; their flintwork matches the wall, they have stone dressings, and their two-stage design is identical to the two on the north side of the nave. In this wall there are two three-light windows with cusped stepped lancet lights under a two-centred arch. The wall has been heightened in knapped flint by 3ft or 4ft as on the north side.

The north and south walls of the chancel are generally similar – three bays between buttresses and divided horizontally at about a third of their height by a stone string course (most of which is missing in the east bay on the south side which has been extensively restored). In the centre bay of the south wall is a priest's door and the string course in that bay is a little higher to accommodate it. The fabric below the string course is rubble flintwork not unlike the nave south wall whereas the upper flintwork is knapped. This knapped flintwork and the lavish workmanship of the chancel buttresses suggest a different building phase from the lower work. These buttresses, on both walls, are of unusually elaborate design and quite different from the nave buttresses – their lower stages have squared knapped flint flanks and stone fronts terminating with gablets, with stone mouldings sloping up to an upper stage

entirely of ashlar stone which in the east end ones extends above the eaves with a castellated terminal. Another rare detail is the use of “internal” stone quoins at the re-entrant angles between the squared flintwork of the buttresses and the walling flintwork. Similar “internal” stone quoins can be seen in the west wall of the Cloister at Norwich Cathedral near the north end, and in the angle between the north aisle and the chancel at Threxton.

On both sides of the chancel the upper stage of the central bay contains a large three-light window with a two-centred pointed arch and hexagon motifs in the tracery; the sub-tracery in the hexagons on the south side comprises four foliations and on the north side, subsidiary supermullions. The contemporary pairing of windows with two hexagon variations, typical of early Perpendicular tracery in East Anglia, is not uncommon and the same combination can be seen, for instance, in the nave windows at Tuttington.

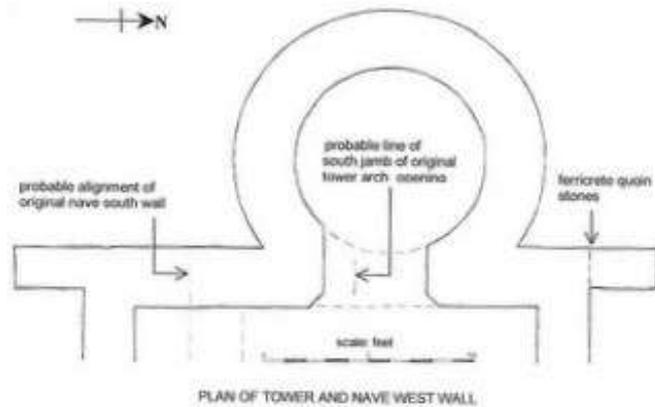
The chancel east wall is also divided by a horizontal stone string course at the same level as those in the side walls below which there is a fine dado frieze of flushwork panelling above a moulded stone plinth – a continuation of the plinth profile used on the chancel buttresses. Above the string course, the wall is mainly squared knapped flint containing a three-light Perpendicular window whose mullions and tracery are restored but its stone arch and jambs seem to be contemporary with the wall.

The knapped flint south porch has a crow-stepped gable, diagonal buttresses and flushwork panels in the plinth on the front and buttresses. Its entrance arch is almost round-headed, in fact a three-centred arch whose double hollow-chamfer mouldings continue uninterrupted in the jambs. The arch has a hoodmould with head stops.

## **Interpretation**

The earliest parts of the church, accepted as Saxon by most commentators, appear to be the lower tower up to just below the blocked openings, the nave west wall north of the tower and the western section of the nave north wall from the NW corner to and including the line of ferricrete quoins about halfway along the wall. These quoins probably represent the NE corner of the original nave which would imply an original two-cell plan of nave and narrower chancel or possibly a short single-cell church.

There are no indications of quoin stones in the nave west wall on the south side of the tower similar to those at the NW corner, but if it is assumed that the north jamb of the present non-axial tower arch is in its original position and that the arch was originally central to the tower and axial to the nave, that would imply an opening 3ft 6ins wide and a nave width of about 14ft 3ins.



It seems therefore that when the nave was widened, a smaller original tower arch opening, approximately 3ft 4ins wide and central to the tower, may have been widened southwards to better relate to the wider nave. This was achieved by rebuilding the south jamb and leaving the north in situ; at the same time, the opening was heightened and given a pointed arch, and had there originally been an upper door to the nave, it would have disappeared within the taller arch.

The small blocked tower window with ferricrete dressings, very low in the west wall of the tower, suggests that the ground floor compartment of the tower may originally have had a low ceiling which would have allowed only a low door between nave and tower. The Y-traceried west window was probably inserted to light a higher ground-floor chamber when the tower arch was heightened,

The fact that the internally curved tower east wall at the tower arch apex is a little thinner than the nave west wall measured outside the tower establishes that the nave and tower were built together. If as is likely, the three blocked openings framed with ferricrete were the belfry openings, the tower would have been lower, no higher probably than the present nave roof ridge, and the eaves level with a commensurately lower nave may well have been at the level of the top of the ferricrete quoins in the north wall.

A heightened nave as evidenced by the different fabric of the upper part of the western section of the north wall and its rough flint east quoins (the west ones at that level are concealed behind the later NW buttress) would of course also imply the contemporary raising of the nave's original south wall and perhaps at the same time, insertion into it of lancet-style three-light windows. With the tower now disproportionately short relative to the higher nave, the original belfry openings were blocked and a conjectured belfry comprising the stage between those blocked openings and the cills of the present belfry openings\*, was probably added. Concurrently, the original narrower chancel, if there had been one, would have been demolished and apparently one of the same width as the nave was built, its north wall between the ferricrete quoins and the present chancel being the only surviving part of it. Its eaves level was probably at about the same level as the original nave wall before it was heightened.

Evidence for a later widening of the nave by rebuilding its south wall on a new alignment south of the original line is provided primarily by the asymmetrical relationship of the nave to the tower. The present nave south wall is about 5ft further south than the alignment of the original wall, assuming that the north and south walls had formerly been equidistant from the tower axis. The contrast between the fabric of the lower western part of the north wall and the south wall flintwork in which there is no ferricrete confirms that the two walls were built at different times.

The rubble flintwork of the rebuilt nave south wall and its three buttresses indicates that they were of one building operation, and that the internal area encompassed by the length of this wall implies demolition of the south and east walls of the then chancel as well as the original nave south wall. Clearly this enlarged nave could not have been roofed before the north wall of the then chancel had been raised to the same height as the west half of the nave north wall, and the similarity of that added walling to the flintwork of the south wall, with identical buttresses on both walls, suggest that the two operations were contemporary. However, since the Decorated window with mouchette tracery in the north wall is of a later pattern than the lancet style of the nave south windows, it seems likely that the latter were reclaimed from the demolished nave south wall and re-set in the rebuilt one.

As the former chancel would have disappeared when the enlarged nave incorporated the area it had occupied, it is to be expected that a new chancel would have been built at the same time. However, the earlier Perpendicular tracery of the present chancel's north and south windows indicates a later date than the nave's Decorated mouchette north window. It therefore seems a possibility that the present chancel's rubble flint walls below the string courses on the side walls and the priest's door may be all that got built of a new chancel at the same time as the nave enlargement, and that its knapped flint upper walls, the elaborate buttresses (different from the nave ones), the early Perpendicular windows and the whole of the east wall represent a later completion of an unfinished one, perhaps delayed by the Black Death. The eaves level of the chancel is higher than the heightened north and the rebuilt south walls of the nave and the subsequent additional 3ft or 4ft in knapped flint that was added to the top of both to accommodate this proves that the upper parts at least of the present chancel were later than the enlarged nave (before its knapped flint heightening). If, as seems likely, a prolonged delay in construction occurred in C.14th at the Black Death, the taller chancel with its rich decoration may represent a grander concept than had previously been intended, necessitating the further heightening of the nave and presumably the reconstruction of its roof if it had been roofed before the delay.

When the knapped flint upper walls of the nave increased its height, the ridge of the resulting higher nave roof would have encroached into the tower's previous belfry stage. This may have been when the tower received the present belfry, built directly on the previous belfry stage with the existing Y-traceried belfry openings reset. Faint indications of what could be the blocked former belfry openings are detectable on the exterior of the stage below the present belfry, but only an internal inspection can confirm or negate whether there were openings in that stage\*.

On the evidence described and the reasoning deduced from it, the constructional history might be:

Late C11th or Early c.12: Original two-cell church with narrower chancel (or a short single-cell church) with low nave eaves level (up to top of ferricrete quoins in north wall), and a low round tower (to just above the blocked openings).

Late c.13: Original nave heightened and two three-light cusped lancet windows inserted into nave south wall. Original chancel, if one had existed, demolished. Chancel of same width as nave added but with eaves height only as original nave eaves.

Original belfry openings blocked and a conjectured belfry stage added to the tower, probably no higher than the cill level of the present belfry openings – but see below\*

C14: Nave south wall and the south and east walls of the c.13 chancel demolished. South wall of nave rebuilt further south and lengthened eastwards, incorporating the original C13 windows reset, with three buttresses.

Retained north wall of the C.13 chancel raised to same level as the heightened nave north wall, embracing an eastwards extension of the nave and containing a mouchette window and rood stair.

Buttresses of the same design as in new south wall built at each end of extended nave north wall.

Presumably the enlarged nave was roofed.

Tower arch widened and heightened.

Small tower west window blocked and present window inserted.

Present chancel commenced (then delayed – Black Death?)

C15: Chancel completed.

Nave walls raised again (in knapped flint) to suit the new higher chancel. This second heightening of the nave would have necessitated a new higher roof which, if thatched, would no doubt have been at a steeper pitch than the present tiled roof with its ridge probably encroaching into the c.13 belfry stage.

Conjectured c.13 belfry openings blocked\*

Present belfry added to tower, its openings reusing the stone dressings from the C.13 belfry.

Porch built.

C.16: Rood stair eliminated.

C.18: Tall rounded-headed brick window inserted in nave north wall, later blocked in brick.

Early 19.C: Lower-pitched tiled roof replaced the 15<sup>th</sup> nave and chancel roofs?

Porch gable re-built.

Gothick panelled ceiling formed in nave.

The validity of this chronology depends on recognition of a distinction between the fabric of the lower and middle lift of the nave north wall east of the line of the ferricrete quoins. However, it is possible that these two stages were a single build; if so, it must have been part of the C.14 nave enlargement and could not have been later than the rebuilt and lengthened south wall. But, on the evidence of inclusion of medieval bricks in the middle lift only, it seems more likely that that part was contemporary with the south wall.

\* If internal inspection of the tower walls in the stage below the belfry were to reveal no evidence of former blocked openings, the implication would be that that stage and the present belfry with Y-traceried openings were of one build, probably part of the late C13 phase above. That would suggest that the tower west window and the tower arch alterations were also part of that phase rather than C.14.