

Fishley, St Mary's. Stephen Hart.



Fishley set amongst trees. Detail of the tower and west nave, coursing of the flints and window blocked with bricks.

Off the beaten track, hiding amongst its pines, this little church comprises a nave and chancel of the same width under one steeply pitched slate roof, a narrow north aisle with a single iron prop instead of an arcade, a round west tower and a south porch.

In Vol II of their seminal work, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* HM & Joan Taylor devote a brief paragraph to Fishley Church under Appendix B titled (italics) "Churches with features which have been claimed as Anglo-Saxon but which we do not regard as sufficiently definite to justify their inclusion in the main text." They write: "an indication of pre-Norman date is given by the north-west quoin which is of plain flint construction, with the west wall of the narrow north aisle built straight against it."

However, this description is rather misleading because there is no clear-cut straight joint where the west wall of the aisle meets the nave west wall, nor are there any flints that can be unambiguously recognised as quoins; a difference of appearance though between the flintwork of the nave west wall and that of the added north aisle wall can be detected, defining an irregular periphery at their interface.

In churches where flints have been used as quoins, they are identifiable as such because they are mostly larger than the walling flints, and where later aisle walls have been built against flint nave quoins as for example at Bedingham or Burnham Norton, the abutment between the added wall and a former flint corner is well defined. But here at Fishley, there is no such clarity because of bonding between the aisle wall fabric and the similar flint-sized flintwork of the nave west wall.

Dressed stone quoins at the south-west corner of the nave are Caen stone of typically Norman size and proportions, and where they have weathered or deteriorated to the extent that their original bedding mortar can be distinguished with reasonable certainty from later pointing, continuity of that mortar can in places be traced into the adjacent flintwork of the west and south walls.

The tower is circular to the top. The lower three-quarters of its height is faced with quite well-coursed rubble flintwork, considerable areas of which are still partially rendered with patches of harling. The top quarter, the present belfry stage, is faced with bright red mediaeval bricks and makes a colourful contrast with the flint beneath; it has four single-light, stone trefoiled belfry openings at the cardinal

positions. Near the top of the flint-faced stage, former belfry openings facing south, west and north can be identified, now blocked in bricks similar to those of the belfry stage. These blocked areas are about 3ft 4ins wide by about 5ft 6ins high with straight flint jambs and roughly-shaped impost stones. Internally, also 3ft 4ins wide, including one facing east, they are blocked flush with the wall space and have flint jambs and semi-circular flint arches spanning the full widths of the openings. The only other window in the tower is a stone lancet in the west wall.

The tower walls are about 3ft 6ins thick and the internal diameter at ground floor level is 7ft 8ins, although an internal off-set in the walls of a few inches at 6ft above the floor reduces their thickness above that level. The round-headed, plastered tower arch is 3ft 9ins wide and about 11ft high to the crown and has a chamfered impost on one side only. Above, the former upper door opening in the tower has a round-headed flint arch and flint jambs but is now blocked, with a quatrefoil inserted into the opening facing the nave.

The south door into the nave is a round-headed Norman door but much restored. The wall in which it is situated is about 2ft 9ins thick, but at a short distance eastwards from it, a set-back of about 9ins internally reduces most of the nave and chancel south walls to about 2ft thick. Their flintwork is uncoursed rubble, noticeably different from that adjacent to the Norman south-west quoin, but much of it appears to be rebuilt Victorian work. The nave's two two-light south windows with cusped Y-tracery and the chancel's south lancet are probably also Victorian renewals. The eastern quoins are dressed stone, probably mostly medieval but perhaps reset; the chancel east and north walls are about 2ft 2ins thick and are probably also medieval but the gable of the east wall has been rebuilt. The three-light cusped lancet east window and the north lancet are also probably Victorian restorations.

The nave has been widened by about 6ft 7ins by the addition on the north side of a lean-to extension, but unlike a normal aisle it has no arcade separating it from the nave – only a single slender iron column. Its wall has similar flintwork to the chancel north wall, and its two north lancets, like the chancel one appear to be Victorian insertions. In its north wall though, there is a blocked pointed door of perhaps the late 13th century or early 14th century, and in the east wall a quatrefoil window of Barnack stone. The aisle's north-east quoins are relatively later than those at the north-west corner; some of the latter are Caen stone and are comparable to those at the south-west corner of the nave. The aisle wall thicknesses vary, and it is difficult to understand why: the west wall is 2ft 4.5ins, the north wall for about 12ft 3ins from the north-west corner is 2ft 2.5ins and 1ft 5.5ins for the remainder of its length, and the east wall 1ft 10ins.

Interpretation

The oldest parts of the church, as we so often find, are the nave west wall and the lower part of the tower and there is good evidence to show that they were contemporary: firstly, the coursing of the flintwork in the lower part of the west wall coincides with that in the tower walls, and secondly, the internally curved tower east wall obviously could not have been the west gable of a formerly towerless church, nor could it have been curved flintwork added to a nave gable because this wall's thickness at the tower arch apex is about six inches less than the external thickness

of the nave west wall. This proves that the tower and west wall must have been integrally built unless builders of a hypothetical added tower had, improbably, hollowed out the internal curvature out of an existing flat wall.

Indications of Norman date for the flint part of the tower are firstly, its integral construction with the original nave, datable as Norman by the south door and the south-west quoins of Caen stone, a variety probably not imported before the commencement of Norwich cathedral in 1096; there is no evidence to suggest that the door and quoins are not original features. Secondly, the irregular exterior brick blocking of the original belfry openings above impost level without an enclosing semi-circular flint arch above as on the inside, plus indications of small-radius flint arches suggest that the openings at the outer wall face may have been two-light in front of a larger semi-circular arch in the wall behind spanning the full width of the opening – a Norman technique, in contrast to the Saxon method in which twin arches at the wall face extend through the full wall thickness taking a central bearing on a through-stone supported on a small column. Although it has been thought that openings with flint jambs and arches (such as these blocked belfry openings) or arches set back on their jambs were evidence solely of Saxon workmanship, it can now be shown and is widely accepted that such features were not exclusive to pre-Conquest times.

Apart from the tower and nave west wall, the only surviving part of the original church is the short length of the 2ft 9ins thick south wall that contains the south door. Assuming that the tower was central to the nave and that the original nave north wall thickness had been the same as the remnant of the south wall, the nave would originally have been about 13ft wide. The presence of a blocked east original belfry opening (seen in the tower but hidden by the present roof externally) shows that the roof was lower than now, and so, no doubt, were the walls.

It appears that in the post-Norman period a major reconstruction occurred in which the nave and chancel were virtually rebuilt; the walls, some 9ins or so thinner than previously, replaced the Norman walls of nave and chancel, with a pointed north door in the nave's new north wall. If the new walls were higher than the original ones, a new roof, steep enough for thatch and perhaps encroaching on the east belfry opening, may have been the reason for heightening the tower. Medieval brick in the added belfry and the style of its belfry openings are compatible with an early 14th century date which could be the date of these major alterations. The small west lancet window in the tower, cut out of one stone (probably Caen), was probably inserted at this stage. Since the quoins at the south-west corner of the nave are of dressed stone, the implication is that before the building of the aisle there would have been similar ones at the north-west corner, but being no longer there, they must have been removed when the aisle wall was built. That this did occur can be shown by simple measurements: firstly, the measurement from the face of the aisle north wall to the interface between the aisle and nave flintwork on the west wall (i.e. the Taylors' assumed flint quoin line) is 6ft 7ins compared with 5ft 9ins from the aisle north wall face to the outside face of the former nave north wall seen internally where the aisle west wall meets it; secondly, in confirmation of the latter measurement, the distance from the aisle north wall face at its east end to the chancel wall (i.e. the original nave north wall line) is about the same (5ft 10ins); thirdly, on the west wall, the distance from the tower to the aisle/nave flintwork interface is only about 2ft 2ins

whereas on the other side of the church, the corresponding distance from the tower to the south-west corner is 3ft. The nine or 10-inch difference in these comparisons is the equivalent of the space previously occupied by dressed stone quoins and establishes therefore that the aisle/nave flintwork interface could not be flint quoins of the original nave north wall because it falls inside that wall's external face.

The quatrefoil window in the aisle east wall is the only piece of Barnack stone in the church. This suggests that the aisle might be a separate building phase from the earlier post-Norman reconstruction described above and could be as late as the late 15th century, after which Barnack stone was no longer available, the quarries having been worked out. When the aisle was added, the north-west nave quoin stones were removed and the aisle west wall bonded to the nave wall, some of the removed quoin stones being reused in the north-west corner of the aisle, with the "new" quoins at its north-east corner. The earlier north door was reset in the thicker part of the aisle north wall, and subsequently blocked at a later date. No evidence of it shows internally, and it remains a mystery as to why the aisle north wall is thicker at the west end.

In most medieval churches, when aisles were built, it was normal practice to form an arcade through the former nave wall, but at Fishley there is no evidence that this was done. If there had been a stone arcade, it is to be expected at least that evidence of responds at each end would remain, but here the whole nave north wall between the chancel and the inside face of the nave west wall appears to have been removed. The resulting gap, the whole length of the nave, some 27ft, would have been far too wide to be spanned by a single beam in medieval times, and since the present iron column at mid-span is clearly relatively recent, it is suggested that at the time that the aisle was built, a wooden arcade or a simple colonnade of wooden posts may have supported the roof structure, to be replaced by the present iron column during later Victorian restorations. Alternatively, a short section of the nave north wall may have been retained in the middle to give mid-span support.

As part of the restorations carried out in 1861, the nave south wall east of the porch and much of the chancel south wall seem to have been rebuilt with buttresses, and a buttress was added on the chancel north wall. The gable of the east wall was also rebuilt and it appears from the unweathered condition of their stonework that all the windows except the tower windows and the aisle quatrefoil were renewed. A new braced-collar roof was constructed, and apparently the iron column now supporting the aisle roof structure replaced its previous means of support. The south porch was probably also of this time.

Fishley coffin slab.

In 2013 Julian Litten reported on his examination of a C13 coffin slab at Fishley. Substantial renovations were undertaken at Fishley in 1861, funded by Miss Sophia Catherine Edwards. Amongst the items removed from the church were two lidden stone coffins which were placed in the churchyard. One was found in 2010 and has been repositioned in the church. It is of Barnack stone with a lid of Purbeck marble consistent with those known to have been produced in Purbeck between c1250 and 1350. Records of the manor of Fishley suggest that the coffin may be of de Veile

family. Further information can be seen in September 2013 edition of the Round Tower, available electronically.