

Syderstone, St Mary's by Stephen Hart.



North and south sides, impost and niche above door.

In its original form the church seems to have been a Norman cruciform building comprising nave and chancel, north and south transepts and a south aisle. Later, a round west tower with a west door and a north aisle were added but since then the transepts and both aisles have been demolished, and a Victorian vestry with brick quoins and a tiled roof built on the north side. The tower door is now the church entrance.

Former Transepts

Evidence for former South and North transepts is provided by blocked round arches with 7-inch chamfers springing from plain chamfered imposts, at the east ends of the north and south walls of the nave. The south arch, quite distinct from the south arcade arches, spans 11ft 3ins and its west reveal is 4ft 2ins from the east reveal of the eastern arch of the arcade. On the north side, the west reveal of the transept arch has been replaced by the eastern column of the now-blocked north arcade, thus removing any evidence of former structure corresponding with the south side. The east reveals of the transept arches are flush with the west face of the chancel arch wall.

Apparently, when drainage was recently put in on the south side of the church, no evidence of a west wall of the south transept was found, so aisle and transept may have been connected by an arch, implying that they were contemporary. Indications of the footings of the east walls of both transepts are visible externally.

Former South Aisle

A blocked south arcade in the church is the evidence for a south aisle that was later demolished – in 1785 according to the church guide. The circular arcade piers of about 1ft 9ins diameter have massive projecting square abaci with chamfered corners supporting round arches with a single 3-inch chamfer. These arches, and the wall they support are about 3ft 4ins thick. Where the aisle west wall was removed when the aisle was demolished, the present south-west corner of the nave was formed with ordinary walling flints lined up to make a vertical corner, and its south face is a patched-up cross-section of the aisle west wall still showing built-in faces of the stonework of the west arcade arch.

The arcade arches were blocked and four windows with Y-tracery were incorporated into the 1ft 8ins thick blocking walls. The condition of their stonework and the hollow-

chamfer section of their mouldings suggest that these windows are of 18th century date – not re-set medieval ones.

Tower

The round west tower has no Norman or earlier evidence. Its round-headed belfry openings with Y-tracery (like Rushmere), the east and west ones with shafts instead of mullions, suggest a 13th century date though this feature is difficult to date precisely because, while the round heads suggest early c.13, the Y-tracery pattern suggests late c.13.

The tower arch, 6ft 4ins wide and 9ft 6ins to the arch springing has plastered reveals and jambs and a pointed stone rib-arch rising from corbels and stone dressings facing the nave. In the tower, above the tower arch, the wall is flat and its thickness is about 3ft 4ins, the same as the nave west wall measured outside the tower, strongly indicating that the tower was an addition to the existing church.

The west door into the tower is of artless and confusing construction. Its pointed arch appears to be a different build from the jambs. The continuous stonework of the inner order of the opening has a hollow chamfer on the jambs which is not continued on the arch, and the chamfered impost – a Norman type though not uncommon also in early pointed doorways – seems to have been set upside down and support strange-looking springer blocks. The hoodmould, of a different stone, is oddly terminated. Colonnets of the outer order of the jambs have small stiff-leaf capitals, a definite Gothic feature seemingly later than the square capitals of the south arcade arches. The arch itself does not appear to be a reconstruction of (a) round one because the curvature radius of its voussoirs, if used in a semi-circular opening, would form a considerably wider doorway than is normal for an entrance door. Incisions in the stones that form the capitals of the shafts are unlikely to be scratch dials in such positions immediately below projecting impost and so do not prove that these stones were once on the south side. Has the O.S. benchmark been mistaken for a scratch dial?

The statue niche over the door is probably a later insertion and its canopy appears to be the head of a flushwork panel minus its flint infill. A notable feature of this tower is that it has no windows below the belfry.

Former North Aisle

The blocked north arcade, visible externally and internally, with double-chamfered pointed arches on octagonal piers with moulded capitals is evidence for the addition of a former north aisle, probably in the 14th century. The west wall of the north transept would have been demolished, since the aisle clearly incorporated the transept as is shown by the way that the west springing of the transept arch has been carried on the eastern pier of the arcade. Levelling of the aisle and transept floors would have eliminated any above-ground evidence of the transept west wall. Surprisingly, measurement derived from the mouldings below the abacus of the west respond visible externally as well as internally show that whereas the south and west nave walls are about 3ft 4ins thick, the north wall is only 2ft 3ins. This suggests that when the north aisle and arcade were built, instead of the arches being formed in the

then existing north wall, the wall was demolished and a new one built. Chamfered stone quoins of the north-west nave corner are probably a part of this c.14 work and the east quoins, though not chamfered, probably of the same date. One of the east quoin stones appears to be a piece of flushwork panel reused upside down still with one flint in place. It is uncertain when the north aisle was demolished and the arcade blocked.

Chancel

The east wall of the nave containing the chancel arch is only 2ft 6ins thick and the chancel side walls below a string course at window-cill level are about the same. The south wall contains two Perpendicular windows and a priest's door with a pointed arch consisting of two worked stones propped against each other in the manner of those in the tower doorway at Aylmerton. The north wall has a Perpendicular window similar to those in the south wall, but the east wall which is about 2ft 11ins thick is faced with knapped flint and contains a beautiful four-light Decorated window with curvilinear tracery.

The thinner nave gable and chancel walls with a string course, as well as the post-Norman windows, strongly suggests that this chancel replaces the original Norman one, but its constructional sequence is baffling because the east wall details appear to be earlier than the side walls. In addition to its great window, the east wall has elaborate stone plinth mouldings and diagonal corner buttresses, and just west of these, 3ins vertical set-backs in the side walls suggest constructional discontinuities. By contrast with the knapped flints of the east wall, the side walls are rubble flint and the Perpendicular windows look original rather than inserted. It is as if the side walls of an original Decorated chancel that replaced a Norman one have been rebuilt with Perpendicular windows.

Discussion

It is necessary to examine the evidence of the structure in the light of unsubstantiated statements in the church guide – firstly, that the church originally had a crossing tower that collapsed circa 1200 AD, secondly that the now-demolished south aisle was an addition to the Norman church after about 80 years, and thirdly that the tower door was reset from the demolished south aisle.

Grounds for the postulation that there was a crossing tower seems to be the two blocked round-headed arches to the former transepts. These imply an original cruciform plan, which could suggest a crossing tower as for example, at Castle Rising. But there is no direct evidence of such a tower and considerable evidence against it: Firstly, the distance between the west reveal of the south transept arch and the east arch of the south arcade is about 4ft 2ins, but there is no clear evidence internally of a tower west wall at that position. On the north side, at the west reveal of the transept arch, any original structure is now lost since the springing of its arch is now supported on the capital of a later north arcade pier. Secondly, the east reveals of both transept arches are flush with the west face of the chancel arch wall which, only 2ft 6ins thick, is unlikely to have been the east wall of a tower. If there had been a tower, its east wall must apparently have been entirely demolished. (3).

The span of the transept arches relative to the nave width suggests that if there had been a central tower, it would have been oblong rather than square.

Regarding the proposition that the former south aisle was a later addition to an earlier nave, the evidence of the south-west nave corner belies this. If the nave had originally been without an aisle, the south face of the south-west corner would have been the external wall face; as it is, it is a patched-up cross-section of the aisle west wall still showing the built-in faces of the stonework of the west arcade arch, with ordinary walling flints lined up to make a vertical corner where the aisle wall was removed.

The west door into the tower is said to have been moved from the south aisle and reconstructed “which accounts for its Norman features,” but it has no characteristic Norman features except perhaps the chamfered impost – a type not uncommon though also in early pointed doorways. The stiff-leaf type capitals of the colonnettes seem at odds with the robust Norman arcade but compatible with the shafted belfry openings, so the doorway may therefore be contemporary with the tower and probably dates from the 13th century. Conjectured re-setting of an arch from a south aisle entrance would imply its removal when the tower was built, which seems unlikely because the tower may originally have been built without a tower arch. The absence of windows in the tower, other than the belfry openings, could imply that it was built simply as a bell tower with external access only, like Sustead for example. If no access between tower and nave had been formed when the tower was built, a south entry to the church would have been retained. The double hollow-chamfered tower arch and the small quatrefoil opening above it are probably later than the west doorway and may be contemporary with the north aisle.

Despite the church guide’s statements therefore, the church’s evidence seems to suggest that there may not have been a crossing tower, that the former south aisle was an integral element of the original church and that the tower west door is not a reset doorway from the demolished south aisle.