

Thorpe next Haddiscoe, St Mathias



The church comprises a nave with brick chancel, a round west tower and a south porch.

The nave has dressed stone quoins at the SW and NW corners and Norman north and south doorways, the former blocked. The south door had plain stone jambs with only a small chamfer but the arch has concentric mouldings including a large soffit roll which springs uncomformably from the chamfered jamb, there being no imposts. The north door externally has plain stone jambs and undecorated radial voussoirs in the arch, with imposts of a pattern comparable to those in the belfry openings. All this stone is probably Caen. A double-splayed circular window high up in the gable of the west wall now faces into the tower and part of the flat western face of this wall about 3ft 6ins wide shows within the tower above the tower arch. On the nave side the tower doorway is round-headed, 2ft 10.5ins wide by 6ft 5ins high with dressed stone jambs and imposts of similar pattern to those of the north doorway, but this is not early work. Behind this, the opening through the nave walls splays into the tower and has a flat depressed arch of medieval brick, clearly later than the tower. In the re-entrant angles between nave and tower, quarter-round fillets capped with a conical stone finial surmounted by a carved head, extend above the original nave west wall roofline.

The brick chancel is said to have been rebuilt in 1838.

Beneath its crenellated 15th century parapet chequered with alternating squares of knapped and rubble flints, the tower has two stages, both of coursed flint rubble. The lower stage about twice the height of the belfry stage and has a slightly larger diameter, the offset at the base of the belfry being weathered by a chamfered course of dressed stone.

At first-floor level three narrow windows framed with dressed stone have semi-circular heads cut from single stones with a simple concentric double-groove decoration; over two of these, small carved stone corbels project. A little above these windows, the tower wall surface is recessed about three inches between vertical flint lesenes about eight inches wide on the original wall plane that divide the circumference into nine segments about 3ft 5ins wide; the lesenes extend nearly to the stone weathering at the base of the belfry stage, and where they terminate at the top, their width tapers off and they gradually die back into the wall face. Four of the recesses contain blocked slit windows framed in dressed stone with undecorated stone arched lintels. In the belfry stage, at each cardinal point a double belfry

openings at the wall face have shafted jambs and a central knopped baluster with cushion capitals and chamfered and quirked impostes supporting semicircular arches bearing simple concentric roll mouldings.

The stonework in the tower windows and belfry openings is probably Caen. Internally, the first-floor windows have radial flint arches above which the walling shows no disturbance such as would be expected had they been later insertions, and the flintwork of the splayed reveals, which courses with the internal walling, appears to be in undisturbed contact with the backs of the external stone dressings: this effectively establishes that the windows were built with the wall and that the stonework is part of the original construction and not a later insertion. Within the belfry, the inner arches of the openings, set back an inch or two on straight flint reveals, are formed in flint and span the full width of the twin lights.

Based just on conjecture that the flint lesenes and recessed panels on the tower are the lower parts of blank arcading like that at Tasburgh and Thorington, from which the arches were removed for a later upper stage, it has become widely believed that the belfry stage is a Norman addition to a Saxon lower stage, supplanting the blind arches and a former Saxon belfry; but there is no actual evidence to substantiate that. On the contrary, with no sign of the springing of any arching, the diminishing profile of the tops of the lesenes suggests that this could be their original configuration. If arches of supposed blind arcading had been removed for the construction of a later belfry stage, the tops of the lesenes would have been rebuilt to their present tapered profile; that would have caused disturbance to the topmost 3ft or so of the lower stage, but there is no significant variation in the flintwork at that level to suggest that such conjectured modifications were done.

As there is no positive evidence to establish that the lesenes have been altered from how they were originally built, it raises the possibility that, rather than forming a blank arcade like those at Tasburgh and Thorington, the tower's builders sought to achieve an effect similar to that created by the pilaster-strips (lesenes) around the base of Kirby Cane tower, about five miles away.

The recesses on the Thorpe tower are appreciably wider than the blank arch recesses at Tasburgh and Thorington and the average width of the lesenes is considerably less than the pilasters at both; wider arches on narrower pilasters would have produced ill-proportioned arcading. Comparative approximate measurements taken of the blank arcading at Tasburgh and Thorington and of the lesenes and recesses at Kirby Cane and Thorpe are as follows:

Tasburgh: Pilasters and recesses of approximate equal widths, average 2ft 8ins.

Thorington: Pilasters average 12.5ins. Recesses average 2ft 5ins.

Thorpe: Lesenes average 8ins. Recesses average 3ft 5ins.

Kirby Cane: Lesenes average 7ins. Recesses (excl. those affected by wider brick pilasters) average 2ft 8ins.

These measurements highlight the facts that the lesenes at Thorpe which differ little in width from those at Kirby Cane are only a quarter of the width of the pilasters at Tasburgh and two-thirds of those at Thorington, and that the recesses at Thorpe are on average respectively 9ins and 12ins wider than at Tasburgh and Thorington. It is also architecturally significant that the wall face of the tower at Tasburgh and Thorington is that of the pilasters whereas at Kirby Cane and Thorpe the plane of the recesses becomes the tower wall face.

Considered individually these facts may not seem important, but collectively they tend to suggest that the lesenes and recesses at Thorpe are more analogous to the Kirby Cane theme than to blank arcading and thus to support the likelihood that the present configuration represents the original constructional form and that consequently there never was any blind arcading at the top of Thorpe tower's lower stage.

If that were so, there would be no reason for thinking that the tower was built into two phases. It is therefore very much more likely that the whole tower was built in one operation and on the evidence of the double-splayed window in the nave west wall and the wall's flat west face visible within the tower, it was apparently added to an earlier towerless church. The idea that the tower is a single build is supported by the uniformity of the flintwork on its two stages (this is better seen in photographs taken before the present pointing was done, in for example, Cautley's and the Taylors' books) and by the similarity of the concentric ornament on the arches of the first-floor windows and the belfry openings.

Caen stone was probably not available in East Anglia before the Conquest and was unlikely to have been used on minor churches before its use at Norwich cathedral in the last decade of the 11th century. The tower, therefore, could not be Saxon unless the stone features in its lower stage and in the quarter-round re-entrant fillets were to be established as having been inserted later, as mentioned above though, the indications are that the stone windows were built within the wall, and it seems certain that the stone finials that cap the fillets must have been built with them and bonded into the tower wall; it is improbable that they and the curious stone embellishments above the windows would have been later additions.

The blocked double-splayed window high in the gable of the nave west wall establishes that the tower was a later addition to an earlier church. The nave's ashlar quoins and the stone doorway dressings appear to be Caen stone and, except for parts of the south door which may have been altered, do not show any obvious evidence of having been later insertions. Recognising that double-splayed windows were necessarily earlier than dressed stone features, the double-splayed gable window could be contemporary with the nave's ashlar stonework, which unless established as inserted later, could confirm a post-Saxon attribution not only for the tower but also for the nave. On the other hand, were the dressed stone in the western quoins of the nave and in the north and south doorways to be established as later insertions, it could imply a Saxon nave considerably earlier than the tower, but would not alter the tower's attribution.

If, as has been widely proposed, construction of the present belfry had displaced arches of blank arcading in the upper part of the tower's lower stage, that would

imply that there had been three distinct building campaigns: firstly, a towerless church; secondly, a tower with Caen stone windows, re-entrant fillets, conjectured blind arcading and presumably an earlier belfry, and thirdly demolition of the assumed former belfry and the arches of blind arcading, alteration of the tops of the lesenes and the building of a Norman belfry. However, the apparently short period implied by the similarity of the detail between the implied second and third phases seems unlikely and the absence of any actual evidence of alteration to the upper part of the tower's lower stage suggests therefore that the tower was of a single build.

If the whole tower (except its later parapet) is of a single build, and assuming that the Caen stone features of the lower stage and its re-entrant fillets are original work and not later insertions, then they and the belfry date the tower as no earlier than the last decade of the 11th century. The flint lesenes, nevertheless, suggest a Saxon tradition and so the tower could be regarded as a later expression of the Saxo-Norman Overlap and be attributed to the 12th century, a date consistent with the belfry details.

The blind arcading theory and subsequent assumption that the Norman belfry is later and therefore the lower stage must be Saxon is an interesting conjecture with no actual evidence to support it. It has been repeated so often without scrupulous examination that it seems to have passed into the domain of accepted fact.

