

Bylaugh, St Mary's.



Tower, pulpit and box pews in interior: photos by Simon Knott

The nave and chancel of this small church were all but rebuilt in 1809-10 by Sir John Lombe of Bylaugh Hall when transepts were added. The church now comprises a nave and chancel with short north and south transepts and a round west tower with an octagonal belfry stage. The only original part of the church is probably the tower and part of the nave west wall, though the north and south doors and the nave's two-light Perpendicular windows may have been reset in rebuilt nave walls. A change in the flintwork quality of the nave west wall south of the tower is noticeable where the newer meets the old.

A plaque in the church states rather ambiguously: "the tower buttress, windows, roof and battlements substantially rebuilt and repaired." The 1960 Listing describes Tower and Nave as 14th century, Chancel and Transepts 1809-10, nave with two Perpendicular windows and C.14 north and south doorways. The 1997 Pevsner refers to the round tower as having an octagonal C.14 top and WJ Goode called the tower Saxon.

The tower is circular for three-quarters of its height and has an internal diameter of 8ft 10ins. Its walls have no significant taper except for the top few feet beneath the belfry stage on the east side which has a pronounced batter; seen from the north or south, the circular string course on which the octagonal belfry is built appears to have a smaller diameter than the circular stage below the batter. The battered part appears to have been rebuilt and suggests that the octagonal belfry stage was a later addition and that the east section of the upper wall of the circular stage was modified when the belfry was built.

There is no evidence of Norman or earlier features or of blocked former belfry openings in the circular stage. The circular stage has three windows: a lancet at ground floor level with a relieving arch of medieval brick above it and two small slit windows at an upper level with medieval brick jambs and triangular stone heads. The octagonal belfry stage has in the cardinal faces two-light belfry openings with cusped Y-tracery and proudwork replicas in the diagonals.

The tower arch is pointed and though formed in a flat nave west wall, above the arch the wall becomes circular; the method by which the flat wall and the tower's circularity are unified suggests that arch and tower would have been built together.

The medieval brick in the tower's small windows and in the relieving arch above the west lancet show no evidence of later insertion; indeed, the structural contribution of an inserted relieving arch or the decorative effect of its bricks would hardly justify the work involved. As it is widely accepted that medieval bricks were not made in East Anglia before the late 13th century, those in the original tower fabric could indicate a 14th century date for the circular stage, contemporary with the nave doorways.

The lancet window type may have been adopted as being better suited to a curved wall of small diameter. The absence of blocked belfry openings in the circular stage implies that it was never intended as a completed tower, and a circular belfry may have originally been envisaged and possibly even started; but construction was apparently halted, perhaps due to the Black Death, and not continued until some years later when the upper part of the circular stage's east wall was modified and the octagonal form for the belfry stage was adopted. The cusped Y-tracery of the belfry openings suggests the octagon was of the later 14th century.