

Gissing, St Mary RT by Stephen Hart



The church comprises a round west tower, an aisleless nave, a chancel with north and south chapels and a two-story porch with fine flushwork.

The tower, which has an internal diameter of 10ft 10ins, is built of well-coursed flints and has in the ground stage a Norman west window comprising two round-headed lights in a stone frame with incised chevron face decoration externally and a splayed arch with stone dressings inside; it shows no evidence of later insertion, the adjacent flint coursing running uninterrupted right up to the jamb stones of the opening. About halfway up the tower, above the level of the Norman west window and therefore built after it, three double-splayed circular flint windows facing north, west and south light the first floor. Their plastered inner splays (the plastering possibly original) show no indication no impressions of basketwork shuttering as at Hales, but the flints round the upper half of the circle at the wall face are laid radially in the manner of arch voussoirs, as are those of the external splays also.

Dressed stone belfry openings have twin round-headed lights centrally supported at the wall face on a circular column with a cushion capital; chamfered imposts on the jambs extend through the full thickness of the wall and act as the springings for a single arch spanning the full width of the opening behind the twin stonework arches at the face of the wall. This is a Norman structural technique in contrast to the Saxon method of forming double belfry openings in which the arches of the two lights go right through the full thickness of the wall taking a central bearing on a through-stone supported on a column in the middle of the wall. There are no signs of blocked former belfry openings that could imply that the present belfry is a later addition, nor is there any variation in the flintwork below it that might suggest that it is a replacement of an earlier one.

Between nave and tower a tall tower arch has stone dressings both sides; Norman-style mouldings face the arch on the nave side but most of these are renewals although one or two of the original Norman voussoirs remain to indicate the original pattern. Estimated with reference to the jamb measurements, the wall above the tower arch apex may be a little over 4ft thick and within the tower it is a flattened curve.

Round-headed north and south doorways and west quoins of Barnack stone provide the chief Norman evidence of the nave. The jambs of the inner order of the north door have on their reveals a comparatively rare Norman decoration comprising two parallel vertical grooves, similar to a smaller version of this pattern on the tower arch

imposts at Morningthorpe, about seven miles away, although there the grooves and the feature on which they appear are horizontal.

The Norman stone of the south door shows no evidence of later insertion, the flintwork coursing running up the upper jamb stonework without apparent disturbance. At certain points, particularly at the right-hand jamb, weathering has eroded the jointing of the stonework to the extent that the original mortar in which the stones are bedded can be identified – it is quite distinct from later re-pointing – and continuity of mortar of the same composition and colour can be traced in the adjacent wall flintwork for some way beyond the door stonework. Later pointing is easily distinguished from the original mortar in which the flints were set, and much of it has fallen out through ineffective adhesion to the original mortar and flints. This uniformity of the mortar of the doorway and the nave wall is a strong indication that the south door is an original feature of the nave, and consequently dates the nave as Norman. The same can be shown for south-west nave quoins which are of typical Norman size and proportions, and the adjacent flint walling shows no evidence of the stones having been inserted after the walls had been built.

The similarity of the flintwork of the west wall and the tower and the continuity of coursing where the tower meets the nave establish that the nave and tower were almost certainly built together. This is corroborated by the 4ft thickness of the nave west wall measured outside the tower; if the church had originally been towerless, a west wall of such thickness would have been unlikely. Also, had the tower been added later, any difference in thickness that there may be between the curved wall above the tower arch and the nave west wall would seem insufficient for the superimposition of a curved layer of flintwork over the latter without breaking into its face.

The flintwork of the upper part of the nave south wall has different fabric containing stone, and was presumably rebuilt in c.19, or perhaps only refaced since at this level internally, the wall posts of the fine medieval double hammerbeam roof do not appear to have been affected. Ladbrooke's drawing of the 1820s shows four small windows high up on this wall that are no longer there. One of them is circular and drawn with voussoirs around it. This prompted a belief that the nave could be Saxon, but the visible evidence described above for a Norman attribution is more convincing. With side walls 3ft 2ins thick and a width of about 21ft, a Norman diagnosis for the nave would also have to be favoured by the school of thought that equates specific measurements with architectural periods.

A semi-circular arch formed in the north wall of the chancel spans a 15ft 3ins opening to the north chapel; it has no respond wall at its west springing and a 9ft 3ins respond wall at the east. The north and east windows of this chapel are two-light with Y-tracery but as its walls are rendered externally it is not possible to judge whether they are original or later insertions.

Making a curiously asymmetrical contrast with the round arch opposite, two pointed arches with an octagonal column between give access through the chancel south wall to the south chapel. The spans of the two arches differ slightly – 6ft 6ins the west and 6ft 10ins the east, with respond walls respectively 1ft 10ins and 6ft 10ins long. The outside walls of this chapel have been entirely re-built incorporating

windows of Decorated style; Ladbroke's drawing shows a Y-traceried window in the middle of the south wall with a pointed south door to the west of it. He also drew what appears to be coursed walling on the south face of this wall. Was that perhaps 18th restoration work in brick, later replaced by the Victorian flint walls?

Pevsner's suggestion, repeated in the church guide and elsewhere, that the round arch to the north chapel, may have been altered from two former pointed ones is without visible evidence to support it, nor is there an obvious motive for it. Had it been so, two pointed arches would not have matched the south ones – the position in the wall does not correspond, and the span of the opening is a little less than the overall width of the two south arches. Pevsner's early 13th date for the south chapel suggested by the once-chamfered profile of the pointed arches is equally applicable to the round arch of the north chapel which has the same profile; round arches of the Transitional period continued into the early-13th century. It seems possible that the round-arched north chapel which has a once-chamfered pointed west door came first, followed shortly by the pointed-arch south chapel. The Y-traceried windows of the north chapel and the similar one in Ladbroke's drawing in the south chapel suggest a date of about a century later, and so could in both cases be replacements of original lancets.

The three double-splayed circular flint windows in the tower and the tall tower arch are features that have caused this tower and church to be attributed as Saxon even though they have distinct Norman features that appear to be original parts of the structure. The case for its Saxon attribution depends on an unproved preconception that double-splayed circular flint windows were never used after the Conquest and a consequent assumption that all the Norman features of the tower and nave must therefore be later insertions or alterations. However, since there is no evidence that those features are not contemporary with the walls in which they appear, but, on the contrary, convincing evidence suggests they are original features, and as the tower and nave, both containing Norman features were apparently contemporary, it seems more likely that the tower's double-splayed windows represent an instance of the use of a characteristic Saxon feature in a Norman building rather than that all the Norman features of the tower and nave had been inserted later into a Saxon building.