

## Ramsholt All Saints by Stephen Hart.



The church consists of a nave and chancel of the same width, 16ft 10 ins internally, and with 2ft 9ins thick side walls, a round west tower and a south porch. The tower arch in the nave west wall comprises two arch elements: a round-headed stone arch facing the nave and a pointed arch with a plaster finish in the tower behind. In the nave, pointed north and south doors have a simple chamfer on their outer stonework. The nave and chancel walls are rendered with windows of various dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries,

The circular tower is unique in having three external buttresses extending for its full height and located at N, S and W. Projecting more than 4ft at their bases and 2ft 9ins wide, they are of four stages and have dressed limestone quoins and weatherings at the steppings. They are clearly Gothic buttresses and seem to have been built with the tower. Their fabric, like the tower, consists mainly of septaria with some flint and a few bricks here and there. There is little doubt that the bricks are medieval because their colour and size is quite uncharacteristic of Roman bricks. They may be an early instance of the revival of brickmaking in East Anglia, believed to have occurred in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century.

Three single-light, pointed belfry openings at SW, NW and E are framed with stone externally and a ground floor window at SW is similar; internally, it has splayed reveals, stone dressings and a pointed head. These openings all have exterior arches of plum-coloured medieval brick above the stonework and the ground floor window has in addition a rough relieving arch in similar brick above. There is no evidence to suggest that the arches and stone dressings have been altered or are later insertions; in fact, the brick arches at their heads are pretty conclusive indications that they were built with the wall because later insertion, particularly of the relieving arch above the arch over the ground floor window, could not have been accomplished without considerable and unnecessary disturbance to an existing wall.

Bricks of the same kind are also used for the putlog holes whose spacing can be traced for the full height of the tower, being particularly striking on the east face. The tower's internal fabric contains a considerable amount of brick and has brick putlog holes.

A stone weathercourse in the tower's curved east face indicating an earlier nave roofline extends across the east faces of the north and south buttresses and there is a clear difference in the walling material above and below it on both tower and buttresses. These two buttresses are in effect part of the nave west wall, and

measurements taken inside and outside show the combined thickness of this wall and the buttresses to be about 7ft.

The tower wall is about 4ft thick and measures about 3ft 7ins at the apex of the tower arch. Internally above the tower arch, the east wall of the tower is curved. The two elements of the tower arch openings are clearly of different dates. The round-headed nave-side element is a plain Norman stone arch, 2ft 11ins wide and 6ft 9ins high to the crown and only 8ins thick; it has chamfered impostes with 11ins returns along the nave wall face. The tower-side element of the opening has a depressed pointed arch and is 3ft 4ins wide by 8ft 5ins high to the apex – just wide enough to provide two-and-a-half inch rebates behind the jamb stones of the nave-side element for a door, and just high enough to the springing (7ft) to allow the round-headed door-leaf within the opening to be fully opened to 90 degrees.

### Interpretation

The Norman tower arch implies that the church is no later than the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but as it is only 8ins thick, it appears to have been incorporated into an earlier opening; if so, the nave and chancel could be earlier. On those grounds, it has been argued that the present arch in the tower behind it was an opening into which the Norman arch was inserted and was therefore a Saxon tower arch, consequently “proving” that it and tower are pre-Conquest. However, since the opening in the tower is narrower than the Norman arch stonework and its arch shape so untypical of Saxon style, and since the tower’s post-Norman evidence is so overwhelming, there must be another explanation. The following interpretation is suggested as a plausible alternative.

It is suggested that the original church was Saxon, with a west entrance and no tower. After the Conquest, a Norman west tower was built and the present round-headed stone arch inserted at the nave face of the Saxon doorway opening to form the tower arch. Presumably a doorway or doorways in the side walls of the nave were formed at this time.

Later, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century perhaps, the Norman tower fell and was replaced by the present late 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> buttressed tower. The positioning of the N and S buttresses and the consequent massive nave west wall thickness is indicative of addition rather than of original work. The very existence of this buttressed tower design suggests the probability of an early calamity and subsequent constructional determination to ensure that it would not happen again. The Norman nave doorways would probably have been modified to pointed shape at this time.

The present tower-side element of the tower arch is unlikely to be the opening to which the round-headed arch was conjoined because if it had been, being earlier, its arch would be expected to be round – not the depressed pointed shape of the present one. The original opening appears therefore to have been modified in conjunction with the rebuilding of the tower and was made precisely the width and height to accommodate a door leaf fitted behind the Norman arch.

There can be no doubt that the buttresses are not earlier than the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The extent of their projection from the tower walls, their offsets and their stone dressings and weatherings clearly proclaim them as post-Norman. If therefore, they can be

shown beyond doubt to have been built with the tower, this would confirm the tower as post-Norman. The following indications suggest that the buttresses were built with the tower; individually they are convincing, collectively they are surely conclusive.

1 The walling material of the tower and buttresses appears to be the same. If these Gothic buttresses had been built on to an earlier tower, it is likely that a difference in the fabric of the tower and buttresses would be apparent.

2 The fabric of the buttresses contains dark plum-coloured medieval bricks of the same kind as appear in the tower putlog holes and window arches.

3 The stone weathercourse built into the tower's curved east wall and continuing across the east faces of the north and south buttresses and the different flintwork of both above and below the weathercourse is an indication that tower and buttresses had been built at the same time. Had the buttresses been later than the tower, it is unlikely that they would have these features.

4 The disposition of the ground floor window at SW and the belfry openings at SW, NW and E seems to have been determined by the locations of the buttresses. If these openings had pre-dated the buttresses it is likely that they would have been more conventionally located, particularly the ground floor window; thus their unusual placing suggests that the openings, walls and buttresses are all of the same build.

5 If the buttresses had been added to an existing tower, the north and south buttresses would more logically have been aligned on the north-to-south diameter (or even located at SW and NW as at Beyton).

6 The manner in which they have been integrated into the nave west wall tends to suggest that they were part of a major reconstruction at the nave/tower junction, rather than simple additions to an existing tower.

The church's constructional history could be summarised as follows:

C.11 Original single-cell towerless church with a west entrance.

C.12 West tower built and round-headed stone tower arch formed at nave face of west entrance. Nave doorways formed.

C.13 Collapse of Norman tower.

C.13 or early C.14 Buttressed tower built and tower arch modified. Nave side doorways modified to pointed arches. Chancel south and east windows.

C.15 Nave windows and chancel north window.

C.19 Porch built.