

Rushmere, St Michael's by Stephen Hart



Tower, coursed flintwork and Caen stone quoins

Architectural description

The church comprises the nave, a wider chancel, a red brick south porch and a round west tower circular to the top. There are flint fillets between the tower and church, and the coursing of the tower flints can be seen to be continuous across the fillets and in the nave west wall.

The nave is only 14ft 6ins wide internally, and as the overall width of the tower and fillets where they meet the nave externally is greater than that, the outside faces of the nave west walls are in fact just the ends of the 2ft 6ins thick side walls, but the measurement from them to the inner face of the nave west wall, ie its notional thickness, is 3ft 7 ins.

The quoins at the SW and NW corners of the nave are of squared Caen stone of typical Norman proportions and size, and many of their joints have been weathered back to such an extent that the visible mortar is likely to be the original bedding mortar in which the stones were set. This mortar can be seen to be uniform with that of the flintwork in the nave west wall, fillets and tower. The north wall for most of its height, the south wall west of the porch and the lower part of the south wall east of the porch are of coursed rubble flintwork similar to that of the tower's lower stage. The nave has two two-light windows each side of Y-traceried and Perpendicular types. In the top three feet or so of the south wall, some medieval bricks alternating with flints are set in an irregular voussoir manner to form two crude, wide arch-like patterns of roughly segmental form, but they seem to lack any apparent past or present architectural purpose.

The stone quoins of the wider chancel establish it as post-Conquest and its three-light east window with Intersecting tracery and the two-light Y-traceried side windows suggest that it replaced an earlier one in the early 14th century.

The tower is circular to the top and can be seen to be in three distinct stages, clearly defined by differences in the flintwork of the walls. The lower stage, from the base to about 9ft above the ground is of coursed rubble flintwork similar to the nave north wall; the middle stage which occupies more than half the tower's total height is of more closely-packed uncoursed flints and contains a few medieval bricks; the belfry stage, surmounted by a shallow brick parapet, has coursed flintwork containing

medieval bricks which course with the flints and in places are laid in short consecutive stretches.

The only window in the tower below the belfry is a tall narrow lancet facing west; it is located mainly in the lower part of the middle stage and has a renewed stone frame externally. A drawing of 1829 by J.C. Buckler (*Archaeologia* Volume XXIII. Society of Antiquaries, London, 1831) shows a shorter pointed window apparently inserted within the outline of a taller lancet shape, and so the present lancet may be a true representation of the original arrangement.

Higher up in the middle stage above the level of the nave roof ridge, there are traces of six blocked openings. Their external shape is indeterminate and further uncertainty may be caused by Goode's description of them in his *Round Tower Churches of South-east England* as built of flints internally with round heads. Buckler's drawing, however, shows them as lancets and this is confirmed internally where they can be clearly seen to be pointed shape, with the heads and internal jambs framed with medieval bricks, not flints. There are also internal putlog holes bridged with similar bricks in the walls below these blocked openings.

The four two-light belfry windows at the cardinal positions in the top stage are of dressed stone and have simple Y-tracery beneath semi-circular arches. Internally they have stone jambs and the west opening has its original medieval brick rear-arch, the others are repaired in modern brick.

The tower's internal diameter is 8ft and its wall thickness measured at the west window is 3ft 7ins. Internally, the tower east wall is curved and at the tower arch apex its thickness measures slightly less than the notional thickness of the nave west wall measured outside the tower, which is the same as the tower wall thickness. The pointed tower arch is plastered and about 6ft wide and 9ft 9 ins high to the arch springing level. It has no impost but, unusually for a pointed arch, its springing is set back an inch or two on the jambs.

Interpretation

The uniformity of the mortar setting of Caen stone nave quoins with that of the flintwork in the adjacent walling provides evidence that they are likely to have been original components of the nave walls and not later insertions. Their style and material and the style of the flintwork establish the nave walls as Norman, and if these walls and the lower stage of the tower can be shown to have been built together, then the tower's lower stage must also be Norman. There are several considerations that point to this probability.

Assuming that an original round-headed tower arch had been the same thickness as the present pointed one (and the jamb measurement of the opening suggests that it would have been), its thickness at the crown would, like the present pointed one, have been less than the notional thickness of the nave west wall measured outside the tower; the nave and tower must therefore have been built together, because if the tower had been added, the internal curvature of its east wall clearly could not have been intruded into an existing nave west wall without unnecessary and improbable disturbance to it. Contemporary construction of the nave and the lower

stage of the tower is confirmed by the continuity of the flintwork coursing and mortar in the nave west wall, fillets and tower walls, and further corroboration is provided by the notional thickness of the nave west wall having been made the same as the tower wall thickness. Also, if the church had originally been built without a tower, it is unlikely that it would have had a 3ft 7ins thick west wall. This evidence for contemporary construction of the nave and tower establishes the tower's lower stage as Norman.

The marked change in the character of the tower's flintwork at about 9ft above the ground suggests that the tower was rebuilt from that level, presumably following a partial collapse of the upper parts of the Norman tower. The different flintwork, the blocked former belfry openings with pointed arches, and the use of medieval bricks in those windows and in the fabric of the middle stage clearly denote a different building phase from the lower stage and suggest a late 13th or early 14th century date. It seems that the assumed collapse of the Norman tower probably also caused damage at the tower's junction with the nave west wall to the extent that the original tower arch had to be rebuilt, thus accounting for its present pointed shape. It is significant that the springing of the pointed tower arch is at approximately the same level as the external fabric change.

It is to be expected that there would have been a reasonable interval between completion of the tower's middle stage with its six belfry windows and the surmounting on it of the present later belfry. The Y-traceried belfry openings may therefore be rather later in the 14th century than their round-headed design might suggest. Alternatively, is this tower evidence that medieval bricks as found in the six blocked original lancet belfry openings came into use in East Anglia earlier in the 13th century than has generally been supposed?