

## Topcroft, St Margaret's by Stephen Hart.



### Architectural description

The church comprises a nave 18ft 8ins wide, south aisle, a chancel rebuilt in 2.75 inch bricks in Flemish bond in 1712, a south porch and a four-stage west tower with a battlemented parapet.

The tower's ground stage, approx 19ft high, is circular and faced with regular uncoursed rubble flint; the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> stages are octagonal with angles of medieval brick and are faced with material similar to the ground stage. The present belfry occupies the octagonal 4<sup>th</sup> stage, which is faced with knapped flint and has stone quoins at the angles, and the parapet is similar. The circular stage contains a large two-light Perpendicular window facing west and in the west face of the lower of the three octagonal stages a stone-faced lancet has a medieval brick relieving arch above; in all eight faces of the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage there are single lancets framed with medieval brick. Feigned two-light windows with panel tracery in flushwork with four-centred arch heads in the diagonal faces of the belfry suggest that the present belfry openings of similar proportions in the cardinal faces have lost their mullions and tracery. Each of the octagonal stages is separated by stone string courses but the junction between the circular and octagonal stages appears to be a modern restoration in brick and tile.

The walls of the circular stage are over 5ft thick; the internal diameter is 9ft 9ins and the fully circular internal shape of the ground stage continues into the two lower octagonal stages. The pointed tower arch is 6ft wide and about 14ft to the apex; it is plastered and about 5ft 10ins thick at the apex whereas the nave west wall is about 2ft 6ins thick measured outside the tower.

Internally, the walls of the lower octagonal stage contain quite a lot of medieval brick – headers and stretchers, which are clearly part of the original fabric and not repair insertions. The west window in this stage had an arch of medieval brick through the full thickness of the wall and medieval brick jambs except for a few flints at the bottom and there is no evidence to suggest that it is a later insertion. There is no upper door. In the next octagonal stage, the sections of the wall between the eight lancet windows also contain medieval bricks and the eight lancets have medieval

brick jambs and arches of similar construction to the single window below; there is no evidence to indicate that they might have been altered from an earlier pattern.

### Interpretation

The tower's circular stage has been attributed to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century; if that were so, a tower of that date would have been circular for its full height and its position relative to the nave west wall is such that, had its east face been a flattened curve like many others, it would have been clear of the nave west wall. That would imply that the tower had been built up against an existing nave wall, implying an earlier church but as the nave has no evidence to suggest that it might be earlier than the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the tower's circular stage is likely therefore to be post-Norman.

Whereas at virtually all other round towers, whether built with the church or added later, the upper part of the tower above the nave can be seen to be built on the nave west wall, at Topcroft the first octagonal stage of the tower at nave roof level is clearly separate from the nave west wall and is not built on it, but up against its west face. This, and the considerable wall thickness at the tower arch seem to confirm that the tower was independently built against an existing church.

Attainment of this unusual and considered relationship between the octagon and the nave west wall obviously implies that the circular ground stage must have been positioned accordingly and is therefore likely to be the same build as the octagon, and the octagon's lancets and the pointed tower arch indicate a post-Norman date – perhaps the late 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century, though the extent of the medieval brick in the octagon suggests the later date. Being of a plain plastered finish unembellished with dressed stone, the pointed tower arch is more likely to be original than an updating of an earlier arch and so would predicate the same post-Norman date for the circular stage of the tower to which it gives access. This conclusion is corroborated by the similar external flintwork of the circular stage and the octagon.

It has been suggested that the two lower octagonal stages were built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to replace a collapsed earlier upper round section, but in view of the above, it seems more likely that they were a contemporary continuation in octagonal form of the lower circular shape and the eight lancet windows in the upper of these two stages were the original belfry openings. The panel tracery of the flushwork in the belfry suggests that it and the parapet were added in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The arrangement of an octagonal upper stage on a circular ground stage appears to have been a deliberate and innovative architectural concept that came into favour in the 13<sup>th</sup> century concurrently with wholly octagonal towers such as Buckenham and Toft Monks. Topcroft was one of the earliest of the type, another example of similar date being Ashby in Suffolk.

The tower arch is off-centre to the north within the tower with the result that the south jamb of the opening covers a larger area than the north. This, and the greater than normal wall thickness at the tower/nave junction arising from the tower's thick walls and its placing vis-à-vis the nave might seem to have been to provide enough room for a stair within the walling south of the opening similar to the arrangement at Shimpling. But there is no stair; there is though, a deep cupboard in the south-east

quadrant of the tower wall internally but this is thought unlikely to have been the entry to a now-blocked spiral stair because it does not appear to have been built – just apparently scooped out of the wall. So the reason for the off-centre tower arch remains obscure.

As an argument to support a Saxon attribution for the tower, it has been suggested that because two lower octagonal stages are circular internally, they have been cut back externally from an original circular shape to the present octagonal form, and that the eight lancet windows were originally round-headed Saxon belfry windows altered in the Early English period. This fanciful idea can be dismissed, firstly, because of the constructional impracticability of altering the external shape of an existing flint tower in this way, secondly because the lancet windows show no evidence inside or out of having been altered and thirdly because the internal walls contain medieval bricks which were not made until after the Norman period.