

## West Dereham, St Andrew's by Stephen Hart



The church comprises west tower, nave, chancel, south porch and north vestry. The nave is 23ft 3ins wide with an early pointed south door. The 2ft 6ins thick side walls are built of ferricrete and appear to have been raised in carstone in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Perpendicular supertransomed windows were inserted. The west quoins have been lost behind later buttresses.

Although built on Norfolk's west escarpment where the carstone outcrops, the fabric of the earlier parts of the church walls and the tower's circular stage is not carstone as is often said, but ferricrete, also known as conglomerate or colloquially as pudding stone. This is a coarse-textured dark brown stone, distinguishable from carstone by the inclusion of small gravelly pebbles, among them fragments of flint, the presence of which clearly establishes the material as geologically later than carstone since flint was formed in the chalk which was laid down above the carstone strata.

With an internal diameter of 17ft 4ins, the tower is one of the largest round towers in East Anglia, second only to the 20ft of Wortham in Suffolk. It is circular for about three-quarters of its height and has an octagonal belfry stage. The ferricrete used in its walls is in large blocks, roughly squared and coursed and the walls are about 4ft thick at ground-floor level, reducing at about two-fifths of the height of the circular stage at an external offset weathered with canted dressed ferricrete.

A large modern round-headed window faces west in the ground-floor stage, and at first-floor level, just above the off-set in the wall, there are two single-light round-headed openings facing west and north and evidence of a corresponding blocked one facing south; these two openings are wider than normal loops and framed with dressed limestone. The west one has probably been restored but the north one could be original; its semi-circular head is cut from a single stone and the window is of a similar pattern to those in round towers at Hengrave, Holton and Great Leighs, a type probably dateable as Transitional of the late 12<sup>th</sup> Century. There is no evidence of any other former openings in the circular stage.

Nearly a third of the East Anglian round towers have contemporary or added medieval octagonal belfry stages but the one at West Dereham is of unique design. Faced with brick, flint and ferricrete, each facet of the octagon is slightly recessed having five small round machicolation arches above and brick piers at the angles. Five of the eight faces contain two-light Tudor-arched belfry openings formed in brick; the other three, two facing east above the nave roof and one facing north-west, have blank walls.

The pointed tower arch with restored stone jambs is 10ft 9 ins wide and 7ft high to the top of its apparently original chamfered impost. It has presumably been altered from an original Norman one. Within the tower, the east wall is flat, 3ft 1 inch thick above the arch, and at first-floor level the inverted V-shape of a former nave roofline shows that the upper part of the tower's circular stage was built directly on the gable of an existing church. This gable is built of roughly squared ferricrete blocks of similar sizes to those in the tower's walls, and similarly roughly-coursed.

## Opinion

The flat east walls and the original gable line of the church's west wall within the tower establish that the tower was an addition to a formerly towerless church. The tower's north window is the most positively dateable feature of its circular stage and suggests a late 12<sup>th</sup> century date. The original church on to which it was built might therefore have been 11<sup>th</sup> century or early 12<sup>th</sup>. Its south door could have been inserted when the tower was added, implying perhaps that the altered tower arch may have been a former west entrance to the church.

The relatively low height of the tower's circular stage and the lack of any evidence of blocked openings in its upper part implies that the tower would probably originally have had a contemporary belfry that was subsequently replaced by the present octagonal one. The brick bell-openings suggest a 16<sup>th</sup> century date for the construction of the belfry but its machicolations and brick corners might imply a later date.