

## Barsham, Holy Trinity by Stephen Hart



*Tower, quoins in nave west wall, north wall with Norman window, and east chancel wall.*

### Architectural description

The church consists of a thatched nave, chancel with a tiled roof, north aisle, south porch and a round west tower. The western nave quoins of flints and erratics show that the nave is probably the oldest part of the church dating perhaps from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It has a small Norman window in the north wall, and at high level in the nave west gable a double-splayed round-headed window exposed after a fire in 1979 indicates that the church was originally without a tower.

The chancel is notable for its extraordinary east end. The tracery of the east window is a diagonal lattice of mullions over the whole window and this pattern is extended as flushwork covering the rest of the wall. No certain date has been established for this but it has been interpreted as a rebus of the shield of Sir Edward Etchingam, the patron of the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The round tower has variously been attributed as Saxon or Norman but there are convincing arguments and evidence to show it is probably post-Norman. It is circular to the top and is in three stages: the lower stage occupies just over half the height and terminates at an offset ledge in the wall at approximately the level of the nave roof apex; the middle stage, about 9ft high rises from the offset to about 2ft below the cills of the belfry openings, and the top stage comprises the belfry and the parapet.

The lower stage fabric is roughly-coursed flint rubble but the flints in its top few feet are larger and more widely spaced than below. All has been recently repointed except the bottom 6ft 6ins or so, though the lower 4ft has earlier cement pointing; thus, about 2ft 6ins of 'original' surface remains. This stage contains a restored Decorated-style ground floor west window and at about halfway up, at first floor level, three stone-faced lancets facing south, west and north. The edges of the stonework of the two facing north and south have simple chamfers but the western one has a roll moulding. Internally, their embrasures have splayed reveals and splayed arches formed in flintwork; the arches are of roughly rounded shape though the one on the north side is slightly pointed. The soffit mortar of the heads shows the board-marks of the shuttering on which the arches were built and this mortar can be clearly seen to be actually in contact with the backs of the external facing stones thus providing conclusive evidence that they were built concurrently with the external stonework. At

the springing of these arches there is a set-back of an inch or two where the lowest of the shutter boards rested on the reveals, a practice which has been thought by some to be exclusively Saxon.

At the same level as these three windows, in the tower east wall, is the former upper door with dressed stone jambs and a flat plank head. It has had a pointed glazed timber light inserted at the nave wall face.

In the middle stage, i.e. from the offset ledge up to the belfry, the exterior flintwork is generally similar to the main fabric of the lower stage with similar recent repointing. In the cardinal faces areas of inconsistent flintwork, though not conspicuously obvious, signify blocked former openings. At the base of this stage within the blocked areas there are two small slit windows facing north and south. They have brick jamb linings and horizontal brick heads externally, and inside one has a head of two bricks propped against each other and the other an inverted V-shaped stone. They are the same width inside and out.

Clear evidence of the blocked openings in the middle stage is seen internally at second-floor level where splayed ashlar stones form the jambs of four former openings at the cardinal positions, though the east one is noticeably a little way off-centre to the north. Their cill level coincides with the external offset between the lower and middle stages, and they are blocked with flintwork leaving internal recesses about 8 ins deep and some 5ft wide across the stonework, while the lengths of curved wall between are about 3ft 8ins. The stone jambs are about 7ft high and the heads of the recesses are now renewed with low modern brick arches. Judged from the internal width of the recesses and taking account of the wall thickness, it would appear that the external openings could have been either 2-light or single lancets; the skilful marrying of the external flint blocking to the existing fabric has made it difficult to determine their original exterior width.

In an alternative interpretation, to support a Saxon attribution for the tower, these internal stone jambs have been claimed to show that an earlier low tower was raised in octagonal shape, later made circular, but it is difficult to see the logic of this fanciful idea.

The belfry stage flintwork is smaller; the fabric contains several bands of bricks in the lower half and much random brick in the upper part and the parapet is capped with moulded bricks. At the cardinal positions belfry openings of 2-light width have stone frames and arches of Tudor shape but mullions and tracery are gone, leaving just remnant cusps in the arch stonework.

The tower has an internal diameter of 10ft 6ins and its wall thickness measured at the west window is 3ft 11ins. The tower east wall is circular within the tower and 3ft 8ins thick at the apex of the tower arch whereas the nave west wall measured outside the tower is about 3ft thick. The tower arch opening is double splayed on plan and is about 4ft 6ins wide at the doorway. It has a very odd configuration and appears to have been rather haphazardly broken through the nave west wall, apparently being formed without stonework. On the nave side, the doorway opening, 9ft 9ins high to the apex has a pointed arch recessed within widely splayed jambs that continue upwards beyond the doorhead level, and on the tower side the reveals

of the opening splay to a width of 5ft 8ins but the apex of the arch is maintained at the same level as in the nave, resulting in a depressed Tudor-style arch in the tower.

### Interpretation

There is convincing evidence that the tower was added to an earlier towerless church. The church guide records that a thin probe can be inserted between the tower wall and the outside face of the nave west wall for a distance of at least a metre, and the small blocked window near the apex of the nave west wall confirms that the church once stood without a tower. This means, of course, that unless the original towerless church had a west doorway, the tower arch would have been formed when the tower was built and its style would give an indication of when. The double-splayed ground plan of the opening is probably as originally formed as there seems no reason why it would have been altered. This and its pointed arch can therefore probably be taken as an indication of a post-Norman date for the opening because tower doorways of this form are quite untypical of Norman or earlier work – tower arches of round towers in those times usually went straight through a wall with parallel reveals. The tower arch therefore, gives an initial suggestion of a post-Norman date for the tower, supported by the fact that it is an addition to an earlier, possibly Norman, church.

The three small stone-faced windows in the lower stage, being pointed lancets, provide a positive post-Norman date for their external stonework but were they contemporary with the tower or inserted later? A window with splayed jambs and a splayed arch head that has been built on shuttering, as these have been, could not have been formed in an existing thick flint wall without considerable disturbance to the existing wall outside and in. A breach through the wall wider than the finished width of the splay would have been required that would have had to be needled and propped to prevent collapse of the flintwork above; that aperture would have had to be high enough to allow the builder to lean over the finished arch level inside and out in order to actually build the arch flintwork on the shuttering and to “pin up” from it to support the wall above. However well the surrounding flintwork was made good externally, it is likely that some indication of insertion would remain internally, but here, there are no signs of disturbance to the internal flintwork or disruption of its coursing above and at the sides of the windows which might suggest that they were not built as part of the original wall and so they can therefore be regarded as the same date as the wall.

A further argument corroborating this likelihood is that if the windows had been later insertions, that would imply the unlikely situation that the tower had been built without any windows below the belfry (assuming that the later ground-floor west window was not an enlargement of an earlier opening). The pointed shape of their arches confirms a probable late 13<sup>th</sup> century or early 14<sup>th</sup> century date for the tower's lower stage.

No great significance need to be given to the rounded shape of the internal arches of these windows, since in many small windows of round towers their rear shape is often more fortuitous than premeditated and defers to the functional practicalities of construction rather than to the window's exterior style; many start as pointed behind the external facings and gradually change within the wall thickness to irregular

rounded shapes at the inside wall face. The perfunctory standard of internal finish in the upper parts of most round towers shows that their builders usually had little concern for aesthetic effect in these areas.

Clearly the three first-floor windows in the lower stage are too low and too small to have been belfry openings (as has been claimed!) and this is confirmed by the upper door being at the same level; it would be unlikely to have opened into a bellchamber.

As there is no evidence of former belfry windows in the lower stage, it seems likely that the middle stage, unless it replaces an earlier belfry (for which there is no evidence), was the original one and of the same date as the lower stage. The four blocked openings with splayed stone jambs in this stage must have been belfry openings, as windows of this size at this height for any other purpose would be unprecedented.

The amount of brick in the fabric of the top stage, the present belfry, clearly defines it as a later addition, confirmed by the contemporary blocking of the former belfry openings in the middle stage. It can probably be safely dated as late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century.