

Pentlow, St George and St Gregory by Stephen Hart.



The church comprises a round west tower, an aisleless nave, an apsidal chancel, a north chapel and a south porch. The walls of nave, chancel and tower are a typical mix of uncoursed as-found rubble flint and erratics and the nave west corners are formed with rubble flint quoins; the north-east is concealed by the chapel wall and there is a buttress at the south-east corner. At the point on the chancel south wall where the curve of the apse starts, there is a small set-back of a few inches forming a mini-quin of flints that fades out at the top of the wall.

The nave and chancel are the oldest parts of the church and are probably 11th century. Pevsner (Essex, 1965 edition) calls them Norman. All the windows, though, are later. Those in the nave north wall are two two-light with Y-tracery and one three-light Perpendicular, and similarly in the south wall but a two-light Perpendicular one. The chancel windows are also two-light with Y-tracery. The nave has simple once-chamfered pointed north and south doors.

The tower is circular to the top. At ground and first-floor stages it has three single-light slit windows with stone dressings and straight heads which are probably original and a later inserted two-light Perpendicular one in the west wall. Unusually, but not uniquely in round towers (e.g. East Lexham and Threxton), there are only three belfry openings; the two facing west and north-east have Y-tracery but the south-facing one is Perpendicular with panel tracery, apparently a later enhancement to the approach aspect. This window and an area of the wall immediately above it has recently been repaired following a lightning strike. Several putlog holes can be identified in the tower fabric – some are flint, some stone and one or two are short thin planks of wood. There are no fillets in the re-entrant angle between the tower and the nave west wall.

The battlemented parapet is medieval and may well be the same age as the tower: if so, it would probably be one of the earliest battlemented parapets on round towers as many others are later additions. Above a stone string course there are a few courses of flint above which a continuous encircling band of Roman bricks below the crenellations introduces an element of colour and the merlons are almost entirely of this material. The Roman bricks are distinguishable from medieval ones by their thinness.

The tower has an internal diameter of about 13ft and its walls are 4ft 3ins thick. Ample internal evidence shows that it was built on to a formerly towerless church:

firstly the flat face of the nave west wall can be seen above the tower arch, and secondly where the curved tower walls meet the nave west wall they partly cover the mouldings of the doorway arch. This doorway reveals much about the early history of the church.

Two separate arches are formed within the thickness of the nave west wall. A plain round-headed Norman arch of dressed stone with radial voussoirs is formed within an opening that is a few inches wider on the nave side and then a later arch with engaged shafts, cushion capitals, diaper-ornamented chamfered impostes supporting a moulded arch has been superimposed on the west face of the earlier one; these are clearly separate builds because there is a straight vertical joint at their interface, and their springing levels, architectural details and stone coursing do not coincide.

Since the tower has been shown to have been an addition to a formerly towerless church, the low height of this “tower arch” and its elaborate west-facing embellishment clearly indicate that it was the church entrance. The next point of interest is that whereas the external quoins of the nave are of flints, the earlier, inner arch element is of stone. As such, its stonework and style date the church as Norman unless one believes that the stonework is a Norman enhancement of a Saxon flint opening. Although it has been shown that flint quoins were used by the Normans (e.g. on the middle stage of Guestwick tower) and by later builders, there is still controversy on this point. The question then arises as to why, if the Normans used stone for the door, why not also for the church’s quoins? The answer may be for reasons of economy; much more stone would be required for the four corners of the nave than for one small arch.

Another minor point that could tend to suggest Norman or Saxo-Norman workmanship for the walls is evidence of stratification, small areas of which can be seen in the chancel south wall each side of the small set-back where the apse curvature starts. This practice, in which uncoursed rubble flint is brought to level beds at intervals of about a foot or less, has been seen in Norman and early c.13 walls but no examples have been noticed in walls that can be authenticated as Saxon.

The superimposed west element of the double tower arch is odd in that the moulded arch does not rise from its impostes in the normal way; instead, its springing point from the impostes is recessed several inches back from their face. The reason for this seems obscure, and it would be interesting if the tower plaster that covers the lower parts of the arch and its capital were to be removed to investigate the actual junction of the arch to the impost.

The tower has no Norman features but, based on its wall thickness, it has been called Norman by W.J. Goode, and although the 1965 Pevsner dates it as “probably c.12, though with c.14 windows,” the 2007 edition says “probably c.14, the date of the windows.” H.M Taylor & J. Taylor (*Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, Vol II) attribute the nave and apsidal chancel as Saxo-Norman, and without giving reasons suggest that the tower “seems to be of Norman date with later work in its upper stages.” However, whether or not the stonework of the early inner order of the tower arch is contemporary with the flint-quoined church or an enhancement by the Normans of a Saxon flint opening, it and the later outer element clearly represent two separate

phases of Norman work. The tower walls partly cover the Norman west arch, and as it is improbable that there would have been a third Norman building phase, the tower is more likely to be post-Norman. Its rectangular stone windows, apparently contemporary, and the style of its Y-traceried belfry openings even if later restored, are compatible with a late Early English or early Decorated date.

When the tower was built, it would of course have closed off the church's entrance, necessitating new entry to the nave. It is therefore likely to have been then that the north and south nave doors would have been formed in the nave walls. Their once-chamfered profile could indicate a date of perhaps c.13 or early c.14 and so it would be logical to attribute the tower as contemporary with them.

The north chantry chapel was probably built during the first half of c.16, not long before the Reformation. Its walls are now rendered and its three-light north window and north doorway are blocked. The head of the doorway is a Tudor arch and the wide archway between the chancel and the chapel is of a similar shape. The east and west walls have stepped gables and the large Perpendicular east window has panel tracery.

Walls of knapped flint with light brick dressings on the Victorian south porch make a pleasing contrast to the church walls.