

## Old Catton, St Margaret's by Stephen Hart



*Tower and west wall. Tower arch by Simon Knott*

The church comprises a nave and chancel of about the same width, a round west tower with an octagonal belfry stage, two nave transepts and a chancel chapel on the north side, a south porch and a south aisle.

Very little remains of the original fabric of the church, the earliest recognisable part being the lower part of the south-west corner of the nave and short adjacent lengths of the nave west and south walls. Flint quoins and rough uncoursed rubble flintwork suggests a possible 11th century date for these early remnants. In his *History of Catton Church*, the former Vicar, the Rev Noel Boston dates the chancel as Norman on the evidence of a round-headed priest's door in the chancel "though the decoration is imitation Norman." He also dates the arch in the north of the chancel, and hence the Lady Chapel to which it connected, as about 1350. He regarded the octagonal belfry of the tower as having been added in the 15<sup>th</sup> century but found it difficult to date the circular stage, suggesting that "its massiveness placed it not later than the Norman period."

The early nave was probably first heightened without a clerestory during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, presumably to the level defined by a former roofline that sprang from the level of the bottom of the clerestory windows referred to in Boston's *History* but not now visible, and may have been occasioned by the addition of the Lady Chapel on the north side of the chancel.

The three-times chamfered western arch between the chancel and the Lady Chapel is consistent with the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century date for the chapel suggested by Boston but the chapel was apparently smaller than now, with a likely width proportional to the arch and gabled like a transept. Its eastwards extension was probably part of the alterations of 1867 when the asymmetrical north wall was built, the buttressed gable of its western half perhaps expressing the original size and form of the chapel. The second arch between the chapel extension and the chancel was formed in 1880. A 14<sup>th</sup> century date for the Lady Chapel accords well with the considerable evidence, described below, for the tower having been built at the same time.

The clerestory, the north arcade and a north aisle were additions of the 15th century, presumably with the present four-centred arch from the aisle to the Lady Chapel whose low profile was no doubt adopted to fit below the aisle roof, the height of which would have been governed by the clerestory windows.

The south aisle with windows of Perpendicular style was added in 1850, and in 1881, the two north transepts replaced the north aisle.

The tower is circular for roughly two-thirds of its height and has an internal diameter of 10ft 9ins, its wall is 3ft 11ins thick measured at the ground-floor west window, and its east wall is curved internally. There are no fillets in the re-entrant angles between the tower and the nave west wall, nor is there any continuity of the flintwork where they join.

A little below halfway up the circular stage, there is a distinct change in its facing flintwork. The lower section, on a splayed knapped flint base, is faced with roughly-coursed knapped flints and medieval brick headers arranged in a loose but regular open chequer pattern; this style of decorative walling can be shown to be a 14<sup>th</sup> practice by comparison with the positively datable 14<sup>th</sup> century unbuttressed square tower of Mattishall Burgh church, whose lower stage has similar, though not identical, patterning. The facing of the upper section is uncoursed flintwork without bricks comprising knapped and rubble flints in roughly equal proportions. Knapped flints, i.e. those split to give a flat face and trimmed to fairly regular sizes like those in this wall did not come into use until the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and this style of flintwork is typical of the 14<sup>th</sup>. Within this fabric on the north side there are remnants of an unidentified brick feature that could possibly have been a slit window.

Two west-facing windows, one in each section of the circular stage are framed externally with medieval cant bricks. The lower window is a trefoiled lancet with brick cusping and a brick hoodmould, and the upper one a smaller simple pointed lancet of the same pattern as the one in the porch side wall. They both seem to be contemporary with the tower; the cant bricks in the jambs of the lower one course well with the flintwork in which they are set but modern pointing around the upper window makes it difficult to assess how its jambs meet their surrounding flintwork. The bricks of both match those used in the open chequer patterning. Internally, the ground-floor walls are plastered and so the form of the construction of the lower window embrasures cannot be seen, but above first-floor level the walls are unplastered and are mostly knapped flint. The upper window has splayed flint reveals and a depressed double-ring arch of medieval brick. Opposite, in the east wall just below the top of the circular stage, is the upper door; it has flint jambs and a depressed brick arch and is blocked on the nave side.

About a foot or so from the top of the circular stage both outside and in, the flintwork changes to a predominantly cobble type, as if the top courses of its wall had been rebuilt in preparation for a renewed belfry, and within this band, there are putlog holes lined with medieval bricks.

The octagonal belfry stage with medieval brick angles rising from a course of cant bricks has two-light Perpendicular belfry openings in the cardinal faces with straight heads and simple panel tracery formed with moulded brick, with simplified brick flushwork replicas in the diagonals.

Measured at the apex of the tower arch, with overall thickness of the wall between nave and tower is 3ft 4ins but this thickness consists of a double arch comprising a 2ft 6ins thick one through the nave west wall and behind it, a taller one 10ins thick

formed in the curvature of the tower's east wall. The nave-side arch is pointed with a moulded profile, the moulding dying into plain splayed jambs without impost; it is 3ft 10ins wide and 7ft 11ins high to the apex. The rere-arch on the tower side is the same width but 9ft 4ins high with a plain depressed pointed head. The pointed shapes of both arches show that they are post-Norman despite a suggestion that they may have been altered from round-headed ones for aesthetic reasons; there is, though, no evidence of this, and even if the nave-side arch had been altered (possibly having originally been a west entrance), there seems no reason why the rere-arch in the tower would have been. With a post-Norman tower arch, the tower is unlikely to be earlier.

As a first step towards deducing the age of the tower's circular stage, it has to be established whether it was part of the original church or added later to an originally towerless church. Here, with separate arches through the nave west wall and in the curved tower wall, the configuration of the tower arch is a strong indication of the tower having been added to an existing nave, and the obvious difference between the flintwork of the original nave remnant at the south-west corner and that of the tower confirms that for the original nave and tower were of different builds. It has been suggested though that the flintwork difference is due to a 15<sup>th</sup>-century refacing of the lower part of an earlier tower, but it has no Norman or earlier evidence and its post-Norman features show no evidence to suggest that they are not integral parts of the original structure.

In establishing the date of the tower, the high position of the upper door has to be given due consideration. As mentioned above, it is near the top of the circular stage, considerably higher than the usual level for upper doors in round towers, and although there is no means of knowing the ridge height of the original nave, the norm for an 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century nave of this width (about 17ft) without a clerestory was rarely more than about 30ft – too low to accommodate an upper door at the height of this one. Unless, therefore, the original nave was exceptionally high, the upper door could not have been formed (and the tower built) before the first heightening of the nave which seems likely to have been in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a date no earlier than that being confirmed by the amount of knapped flint in the tower's internal walls irrespective of whether or not its outside walls were refaced. Rather than a refacing of the lower part, its flintwork difference from the upper part of the circular stage could be as a result of an interruption of construction due to the Black Death and later resumption under different conditions.

It is unlikely that the present height of the circular stage was ever the tower's full original height because its upper compartment does not appear to have been a belfry: there is no evidence inside or out of any blocked former belfry openings and in any case it is improbable that the upper door, whose head is only two or three feet below the top of the circular stage, would have given access directly into a bellchamber. The change to cobbly flintwork with medieval brick putlog holes in the top few courses of the circular stage seems to imply that the octagonal belfry above is a later build than the work below, suggesting that it replaces an earlier original one. There is also reason to believe that it may not only be later than the circular stage, but possibly also post-dates the 15<sup>th</sup>-century clerestory because the bricks in the quoins and dressings of the belfry openings are formed in yellow bricks, whereas

red bricks are used in the clerestory quoins and window arches. The brick details of the belfry openings suggest that it could be 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Though usually just described as a two-storey 15<sup>th</sup> century or a Perpendicular porch, there is evidence to show that the history of the South Porch is rather more complicated. It could well be 14<sup>th</sup> century and may originally have been single-storey.

Looking first at the small area of its west wall to the left of the window, it can be seen that the fabric is uncoursed rubble flint comparable to that on the upper part of the tower's circular stage and quite different from the knapped flintwork of the upper part of this wall and the front gable or the immaculate 15<sup>th</sup> century knapped flint of the clerestory. No other porch flintwork at ground-floor level is visible because to the right of the window, the wall has been repaired entirely in modern brick and the lower part of the porch front is rendered. Corroborative evidence from an original 14<sup>th</sup> century date suggested by the flintwork to the left of the window is provided by the window itself which has medieval brick jambs and arch similar to the tower windows, and by the twice-chamfered entrance arch – a typical 14<sup>th</sup> profile.

There can be little doubt that the west wall of the porch above the window, and the front wall above the arch are of a different built from the lower walling to the left of the window because, as well as their flintwork difference, the SW has brick quoins which although mostly renewed with modern bricks, have a few courses of original post-Reformation brick lower down. Most of the bricks in the stepped gable are similar, and this and the stepped gable itself imply a post-medieval date for the upper part of the porch – probably 17<sup>th</sup> century – and the difference in style of the stone windows in the gable from the brick side window support a later date for the upper storey. It seems plausible that the purpose of this later building phase was to provide an upper room over a formerly single-storey porch rather than the restoration of an existing two-storey one.

The present height of the porch's front gable is such that the ridge of a pitched roof behind it would have met the nave south wall (before the clerestory was built) appreciably above the then nave eaves level, which tends to suggest that the 14<sup>th</sup> century porch would probably have been of single-storey height and could indicate that the porch did not attain its two-storey height until after the clerestory had been built.

The squinch wall between porch and nave, built to accommodate the stair to the upper room, is difficult to date with certainty, but its form suggests it was conceived as an afterthought rather than as an original feature, and its much-repaired and repointed flintwork seems more akin to the upper walls of the porch than to the older work in the lower part to the left of the side window. The bricks in the squinch arch do not match those on the front gable; apparently medieval, they could be 15<sup>th</sup> century bricks reclaimed from the three courses of red bricks at the base of the clerestory where disturbed by the squinch wall and the porch upper wall junction. These observations tend to suggest that the squinch wall is later than the lower wall of the porch and more likely to be contemporary with its upper part. If so, that would imply that the original porch had no stair and was therefore single-storey. On the other hand, if the squinch wall were to be established as the same date as the lower part of the porch wall, then clearly there was originally an upper room, and the upper

part of the porch was a rebuilding rather than an addition, and if the stone windows in the front gable are older features reset, that could imply that there had been an upper room before the rebuilding. On balance, though, the front wall with stepped gable, the knapped flint of the upper part of the west wall and the squinch wall material tend to favour the concept of addition of the first-floor storey rather than the rebuilding of an earlier one.

The church histories tell us that the west gallery on the nave was installed in 1773, and it was apparently at that time that the curious flat-roofed rectangular projection from the clerestory that sits on the rear porch of the porch was built. Ladbrooke's drawing of the church in the 1820s shows it. Formerly, the stair would have given access just to the upper room at its north-west corner, but to provide satisfactory access to the gallery from the stair a new landing was created by using the north end of the upper room. To provide a window to light the new landing and to give increased headroom, the space acquired from the upper room was enclosed in the knapped flint structure with gault brick quoins that we now see. Its side walls are built on the porch walls and its south wall is apparently carried upon a sturdy iron I-beam, the end of which is visible in the porch west wall. Accommodation of the landing window necessitated the lowering of the porch's pitched roof to a virtually flat one with the result that the front gable is now simply a freestanding wall stabilised by iron ties!

The evidence seen and deductions suggest the following constructional chronology:

11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century: Original towerless church built.

14<sup>th</sup> century: Nave heightened. North chapel built. Round tower built, perhaps in two phases separated by the Black Death. Single-storey south porch built\*

15<sup>th</sup> century: North arcade and north aisle built with arch to north chapel. Clerestory added.

16<sup>th</sup> century: Original belfry replaced by present octagonal belfry.

17<sup>th</sup> century: Upper room formed over south porch, with stairway access formed in nave wall.

18<sup>th</sup> century: West gallery formed in nave with access landing built about south porch.

19<sup>th</sup> century: South arcade and south aisle built. North aisle replaced by two north transepts. North wall of north chapel rebuilt and north chapel extended eastwards. Second arch between chancel and north chapel formed.

\* Alternatively, a two-storey porch and stairway may have been built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century after the clerestory had been added, with its upper part rebuilt in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.