

Rockland St Peter by Stephen Hart



The church comprises a 22ft 6ins wide nave with shallow north and south transepts, a short chancel, north porch, south vestry and a three-stage round west tower with an integral stair turret and an octagonal belfry.

In contrast to the rubble flintwork of the church and tower, the walls of the north porch of 1624 are a colourful random mixture of knapped flints, bricks and pieces of limestone. The short chancel was rebuilt in 1909 and the south vestry of the same dates replaces a porch.

The church has no evidence to suggest that it might be earlier than the 14th century and the same can be said of the tower and belfry. There is convincing evidence described below, to show that the church, tower and octagonal belfry are all contemporary. And the two-light windows of the transept projections with so-called spherical triangles forming their apex tracery suggest the first half of the 14th century as their likely date. Rockland St Peter's round tower is therefore one of the later ones.

The tower's two circular stages are separated by a stone string course and another one forms the base of the octagonal belfry. The lower circular stage is about twice the height of the upper one and rises from a flint plinth weathered with dressed Barnack stone. The plinth and its stone weathering continue below the stair turret on the south-east and also below the flat fillet that forms the re-entrant angle between the tower and the nave west wall on the north side; with a girth of about 1ft 9ins, this fillet is rather wider than normal and is at right-angles to the nave wall. It shows that tower fillets were used on late towers as well as on the earlier ones.

The tower's three stages all have similar fabric comprising closely-packed rubble flint more noticeably coursed in some areas than others, with a few long stone ties in the south face of the upper circular stage. A difference in the fabric and the inclusion of stone blocks in part of the west wall suggests that a large area of it has undergone a major repair at some stage. Within the upper circular stage there are three rectangular stone windows at first floor level, and in the octagonal belfry stage two-light Decorated belfry openings in the cardinal faces alternating with stone blank window arches of similar proportions in the diagonals, support a 14th century date.

The integral stair turret on the south-east face of the tower rises through the two circular stages, with the tower's plinth and string course details continued in its structure. The turret flintwork is similar to that on the tower and, particularly on the east, merges and courses undeviatingly with the tower wall; the turret though,

contains many more stone ties, probably because its walls are thinner than the tower walls. The plinth weathering in particular provides confirmation of the unity of construction of tower and turret because not only are the weathering stones identical in both, but the angle between them where the turret meets the tower is formed by a single mitred stone; furthermore, the flintwork of tower and turret merges with no sign of a joint. In addition to two rectangular slits and two small trefoil windows in its external wall, the turret stair has one of each facing into the nave internally.

The tall pointed tower arch is about 8ft wide and has stone dressings both sides. In the tower, the arch dies into the plastered reveals at the springings. Above it, the tower wall is flat and its thickness at the arch apex is about 5ft – about twice the thickness of the nave walls. The entry into the turret stair is located in the south reveal of the tower arch. As at Shrimpling, the purpose of the excessive thickness at this position seems to have been to provide an adequate area within which a stair could be built, confirming the likelihood of unitary construction of tower and turret.

At first-floor level, the tower floor plan is fully circular with a diameter of 12ft 4ins – about seven inches more than on the ground floor. In the east wall, a recess of virtually the full thickness of the wall terminates at the nave face with a small trefoil window to the nave and, above that, a rectangular aperture to the nave roof space. Though the reveals of this recess are splayed at different angles in their lower and upper parts, there are no signs in them of vertical straight joints, showing that this wall is monolithic and thus establishing the nave and tower as contemporary. With no evidence of other alteration to the opening, it is likely that we see it today as it was built.

The first-floor chamber of the tower is quite well lit by its three rectangular windows and it appears that the odd-shaped recess in the east wall was provided to give some additional light to the nave and into the roof space. Since the tower was furnished with a stair from the outset, the recess would never have been for an upper door, and this is corroborated by the splayed reveals; upper doors have straight reveals. The facts that the wall thickness at the tower arch apex is greater than at the nave west wall outside the tower, and that the wall above the arch at first-floor level is curved, prove that the wall above the arch could not have been the west face of the gable of a formerly towerless church. This is a case where a flat east wall in a tower doesn't indicate an added tower.

There is little doubt that the octagonal belfry is contemporary with the circular stages, which, apart from the three rectangular windows at first-floor level, have no other windows, nor do their walls have any signs of former blocked openings inside or out. The stone-dressed entry to the tower stair at ground-floor level has a shouldered lintel, and repetition of this detail at the stair entries to the first floor and to the bellchamber implies a common date for the tower's three stages and the stair; this stonework shows no evidence of later insertion. But the most significant evidence is the fact that the octagonal belfry is circular internally with the same diameter as the externally-circular first floor below, and in the internal walls between the belfry openings there is no difference in the flintwork above and below the level of the external change of shape, which occurs at the base of the belfry openings, four or five feet above the belfry floor.

