

## Rushall St Mary's Church by Stephen Hart



The church comprises a nave with 3ft 2ins thick walls, Perpendicular windows and a blocked arch to a former chapel in its north wall, a chancel with lancet windows, two in the east wall rather than the usual three, a south porch and a round tower with an octagonal belfry stage. The tower is an addition to an earlier church as can be clearly seen at the upper door at first-floor level in the tower, described below.

Cautley calls this tower probably Norman with a c. 15<sup>th</sup> century top, Pevsner wonders whether a circular feature on the west face of the tower indicates a Saxon date and calls the octagonal stage Perpendicular, and Goode calls the tower Saxon with an octagonal 13<sup>th</sup> octagonal stage. However, re-evaluation of all the evidence that the tower can show, inside and outside, much of which had previously been overlooked, suggests that the whole tower is 14<sup>th</sup> century though the octagon may have been built a little later than the circular stage.

### Architectural description

The tower is circular for about two-thirds of its height and has an octagonal belfry stage. The walls of the circular stage are faced with even-sized rubble flints and non-flint erratics laid uncoursed, and at roughly halfway up there is a set-back of a few inches in the external profile. Facing west in the lower part, there is a cinquefoiled lancet window and above the set-back, a circular feature formed with concentric rings of medieval and later bricks below the remnants of a ray-type arch of medieval brick. Directly behind this circular feature at first floor level within the tower, there is a blocked window embrasure with a pointed arch head; its reveals have only a slight splay and its jambs and arch are formed with medieval brick, the brick arch going through the full depth of the internal recess. The blocking at the outer face of this former opening reduces the depth of the recess to about 2ft 6ins and echoes the external brick ring pattern.

The fabric of the octagonal belfry contains random medieval bricks but is otherwise similar to the circular stages. At the base of the octagon the transition from circular to octagonal shape is made without a string course or other separating feature. Each of the octagon's angles starts with three dressed limestone quoins, but above them, the angles are formed with medieval bricks. Although externally the octagonal shape starts at the bottom of the dressed stone quoins, internally the circular shape is

maintained up to the level of the top of them, ie about 2ft 3ins higher, without any break or variation in the internal flintwork at the level of the external change of shape. Upwards from the level of the top of the stone quoins, the internal shape is octagonal.

Two-light belfry openings in the cardinal faces of the octagon, with four-centred arches, have a small oval quatrefoiled eyelet in the apex between the cinquefoiled heads of the lights; this is a tracery pattern that is not exclusively attributable as either Decorated or Perpendicular, but is typical of the transition between these two styles.

At first floor level in the tower east wall there is a blocked upper doorway, not now visible from the nave but seen in the tower. At this opening, it can be clearly seen that the tower is structurally separate from the nave west wall. There is a vertical straight joint between the nave wall and a 10in thickness of flintwork covering it which forms the tower's inner circumference. The opening through the original nave west wall, blocked at the nave face, has a pointed arch with plastered reveals splayed towards the nave; around the edges of this opening, at what would have been the outside face of the nave west wall, ragged flintwork suggests that stone dressings have been removed. The curved tower flintwork, 10ins thick at the opening can be seen to be independent of the nave wall opening; its flint jambs partially cloak those of the nave wall opening and a wooden lintel set lower than the apex of the arch in the nave wall behind it spans the opening. Some minor repairs in modern brick do not obscure the constructional method.

The tower's internal diameter at ground level is 7ft 5ins and its wall thickness measured at the west window is 4ft. The east wall internally is curved and is about 3ft 3ins thick at the apex of the tower arch. The tower arch is 4ft 4ins wide and about 12ft high and has a depressed pointed arch; this shape, though generally associated with Tudor building, is not uncommon from Early English times onwards.

In the nave wall, in the SW corner of the church, is the blocked doorway to a former tower stair, and at first floor level in the SE quadrant of the tower internally, the blocked opening at the top of the former stairway is visible; it is 2ft 1ins wide by 6ft high with a roughly semi-circular head and seems to have been just cut through the wall without a stone or brick arch and with no dressings to the jambs.

There is no evidence internally or externally of any other former openings in the tower below the octagonal belfry.

### **Interpretation**

The upper door configuration within the tower at first floor level provides irrefutable evidence that the tower has been added to a pre-existing church: behind the curved flintwork forming the inner circumference of the tower wall, the reveals of the pointed blocked opening in the nave west wall, being splayed toward the nave, witness that this opening was originally a window in the west wall of a formerly towerless church. The irregular flintwork around the edges of this opening at the original wall face, in contrast to the rendered splayed reveals, is convincing evidence that stone dressings from the outer face of this opening have been robbed. As there is no

evidence to suggest or reason to suppose that the opening through the nave wall has been altered since it was converted from a window and its dressings robbed (apart from later blocking at the nave face), it is primary evidence that the tower is later than the church, and as the church's west window was pointed, the tower must be post-Norman.

Whether the pointed window was contemporary with the nave or inserted later, it is probable that there would have been a reasonable lapse of time between its construction and subsequent obscuring of it by the building of the tower. Thus, if the window was 13th century, the tower is likely to be 14<sup>th</sup> century. The style of the tower's ground floor west window is not inconsistent with this date and it wouldn't be too fanciful to imagine that its jambstones could originally have come from the nave west window which was converted into the upper door.

The fact that the tower's internal circular shape is continued uninterrupted to about 2ft 3ins above the start of the octagon externally indicates that the base of the octagon formed with dressed stones at the angles was part of the circular stage build. This, and the absence of any evidence of former belfry openings below the octagon suggest that the circular stage on its own had never been intended to stand as a finished church tower, but that an octagonal belfry on a circular lower stage had been a predetermined design feature from the outset. Also, the external transition from circular to octagonal without a string course tends to confirm the base of the octagon and the circular stage as being part of one building operation.

Nevertheless, the amount of brick in the belfry walls and its brick quoins, in contrast to the virtually brick-free fabric of the circular stage and stone angles at the octagon base, suggest that the belfry may be a different build from the circular stage: if so, this would mean either that the present brick-quoined belfry replaces an earlier octagonal one with stone quoins built with the circular stage (the lower quoins of which remain), or that building ceased when the level of the top of the circular stage internally (the top of the external stone quoins) had been reached, to be continued under different circumstances after a gap of some years. The first alternative seems unlikely because of the apparent short time interval between a conjectured earlier stone-quoined belfry and the present one which that would imply, and so a temporary suspension of construction seems more probable. It is suggested that the tower was being built during the 14<sup>th</sup> century and work was abruptly halted by the Black Death in 1348 and not resumed until later in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. A break in construction would account for the change from stone quoins to brick and the different belfry fabric which start at the level where the internal shape changes from circular to octagonal. The style of the belfry openings is consistent with the late 14<sup>th</sup> century.

A 14<sup>th</sup>-century date for the circular stage is supported by the blocked first floor window in its west wall behind the external circular feature. Its pointed arch and jambs of medieval brick are consistent with this date and are almost certainly contemporary with the building of the wall in which they occur because, had the opening been inserted later, a brick arch of this kind could not have been formed through the full thickness of a 4ft thick wall without access from above, and there is no indication in the inner or outer flintwork above the arch of reinstatement of

a hole of such size as would have been necessary to enable a man to reach the centre of the wall to build the arch and to 'pin up' from it to support the walling above.

What then is the explanation of the circular feature in the external wall in front of the brick-arched tower window? It is noticeable that it contains two types of brick (and some tile) – an outer ring of medieval brick with remnants of a ray-type medieval brick arch above, and an inner ring of thicker bricks which could be 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is suggested that the internal pointed window opening originally had outer jambs of medieval bricks and a brick arch whose remnants are still visible, and that subsequently the bricks from the jambs of the opening were removed and re-set in the circular pattern we now see as the surround for a clock. The later bricks, tiles and the central flint filling may have been introduced as part of the modification of the window for the clock or used for reinstatement after its later removal.

The supposition that the circular feature was a Saxon circular window is questionable for the following reasons: firstly, the tower's likely 14<sup>th</sup> century age established by the evidence described; secondly, there is no evidence that the internal pointed brick-arched opening behind the circular feature has been altered from circular shape; thirdly, there seems no plausible constructional, functional or aesthetic reason why a (conjectured) circular window, if preserved as circular externally, should have been altered to pointed shape internally; fourthly, the external wall flints adjacent to the outer ring of bricks are not laid radially as a window surround as in other early circular windows like those at Gissing or Fornsett St Peter; and fifthly, there is no precedent for a round tower with a single west circular window. Externally, rough filling in the space between the top of the circle and the remnants of the original brick arch above, corresponds with internal blocking above the circle in the upper part of the pointed opening, confirming the overall impression, inside and out, that this feature is an alteration to a circular shape, not from one.

Finally, the tower stair. In the light of the tower's date established by the evidence described, it is tempting to think that the stair was built at the same time but this is improbable because if it had been, there would have been no need for an upper door and the old nave west window would have been totally lost, disappearing behind the tower wall's inner facing. Also, it is unlikely that the stair opening into the tower at first floor level would have been formed without a brick arch and jambs similar to those of the first-floor west window behind the circular feature. So, the stair came later, with the opening into the tower at first-floor level just broken out through the wall without brick dressings; was this when the building of the belfry was resumed or later still?? There seems no way of being certain.

The position of the former entry to the stair in the SW corner of the nave west wall, now blocked and used as a cupboard, is such that it cannot have given access directly into the tower wall, and so there must have been an external stair turret in the re-entrant angle between the tower and the nave west wall. The fabric of the walls of nave and tower in this area can be seen to be different, showing where they have been reinstated after removal of the stair turret.

The contrast between the brick-formed opening behind the circular feature and the rough flint jambs and head of the blocked tower stairway opening highlights the

difference in appearance between an opening clearly built with the wall and one cut through a wall later.

**The dating of the tower might be –**

Mid-14<sup>th</sup> century: The circular stage of the tower built against the existing church, up to and including the stone belfry quoins, with a stone-framed ground floor west window and a brick-framed first floor west window. Pointed west window in nave gable converted into upper door and its facing stones possibly reused in tower ground floor west window (though some now restored). Tower arch formed.

Late 14<sup>th</sup> century: Second phase of tower built, comprising octagonal belfry stage with medieval brick quoins.

15<sup>th</sup> century? External stair turret between the nave and tower built on south side, with a doorway in SW corner of nave and an opening cut through the tower wall at SE at first floor level.

17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century: The brick-framed first floor west window altered externally for installation of a clock, subsequently removed.

19<sup>th</sup> century? Tower stair turret removed and the affected nave and tower walls reinstated externally. Stairway entry into tower at first-floor level blocked.