

OAU Watching Briefs

Ducklington, St Bartholomew's SP 398076

The church was visited on 9 and 13 May 1994 to see excavation by Messrs Shayler for drainage. The trenching was to extend around the entire church except for the tower (W end); it was completed around the chancel by the second visit, and a start had been made on one soakaway.

The sequence of building concluded by Sherwood and Pevsner was taken as the basis of the investigation, ie a 'Transitional Period' nave and chancel to which aisles were added, first S then N, then a tower. All exposed masonry joints were investigated.

The angle buttresses at SW and SE corners of the S aisle proved to be of integral build at footing level. Single ashlar formed the base of each buttress, sloped (as with the tops of the buttresses); they showed diagonal tooling on the sides, the sloping face and the 5 cm-high vertical face below it.

The S porch had been added later, confirming Sherwood and Pevsner.

On the second visit the angles between the aisles and the chancel were exposed. At the S, the chancel footing seemed to be butted against the continuation of the aisle. This seemed odd, as if the chancel had been secondary, and this view was in a way supported by the survival of mortar render and pointing on the face of the aisle only. However the main bonding of both footings was similar (yellow gravelly mortar), and the appearance of a straight joint was based on only three visible courses, so it would be unsafe to conclude that the chancel was later on this evidence alone. The area seen is where one would expect to find a buttress if (at some stage) the aisle had been freestanding or the aisle/nave had been without a chancel.

The priest's door on the S side of the chancel showed a chamfer-stop on the right jamb (the left stop was damaged). There was no evidence of buttressing to the chancel angles.

At the junction of the N aisle with the chancel there was a greatly expanded footing to the aisle gable, and here a more positive indication of a straight joint in the footing above this offset, this time suggesting the aisle had been butted onto the chancel/nave. This again seemed somewhat illogical if we accept Sherwood's thesis that the 1340s work was remodelling an older building. There may however be some reason to question her view. The N aisle footing was apparently of integral build, including its porch (with crypt) and all buttresses. Sherwood's 'remodelling' argument was implicitly based on the survival of early splays which had been cut back for the 1340's windows, and on E English work in the porch; the footings however suggest that the building in its present form is no older than its diagonal buttresses, and the hence is dated by its 14th century arcade.

The new evidence of a straight joint where aisle meets chancel might suggest this aisle was built (from footings up) c 1340. It should however be noted that in the E gable of the N aisle the footing was irregular. It looked like two builds, but there was no straight joint, all stones being fully bonded, and the coursing suggested the footing was built from N to S. Shaylers suggested that it was the work of 'the apprentice', who got out of line

and then over-compensated. If however there were two builds, then possibly the 1340s footing had been elaborately bonded into the footing of an older but narrower N annexe to the church which extended 3.25 m from the chancel.

Continuing ante-clockwise, there are buttresses flanking the tower, taking the thrust of the arcades. The trenches showed them to have chamfers different to those on the S aisle angles: that on the N buttress is chamfered on its outer (N-S) face; that on the S buttress is very damaged but on the side face only (ie E-W), as if turning the wall line out for the stair turret of the tower. The impression was that they reflected a ground level rather higher than that reflected by the S aisle angle buttresses.

Perhaps the strangest feature was on the W gable of the S aisle, a narrow offset which is topped by a squared block. Cleaning of the joints showed that it was bonded better to the footing to the N, not at all to that to the S. Was the S aisle intended to be narrower, and this the base for a would-be corner buttress, much smaller than those which were in fact built? Or was it just a break in the build? It was rubble faced all round, and had not been cut back.

Conclusions

The most significant contribution is the discovery that the N aisle is of integral build at footing level, including diagonal buttresses.

It is also interesting that the masonry suggests a ground level which has risen only comparatively little since the 12th century, which could mean that much of the rise of the churchyard above the surrounding roads had happened before that time. If this is so, the likely explanation is that St Bartholomews was already a busy burial ground, and there should therefore be a Saxon church. Nothing was seen of it, so it should be underneath the present church. Until something is known about it we should beware of trying to draw firm conclusions about the place of the S aisle and chancel in an early plan.

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