

# The Church of St. Mary, Reed, Hertfordshire.

The church at Reed is about 3 miles south of Royston and beside the Roman Ermine Street. The Anglo-Saxon aisleless nave has survived intact next to a fourteenth century chancel. Both the early work and the later additions are built of flints, with dressed stone facings. The character of the nave is clearly attested by long-and-short quoins at all four angles, and its lateness in the period is indicated by the fine blocked north doorway, which has advanced features similar to some in the late-Saxon church at Langford in Oxfordshire. The long-and-short quoins of the nave are unusually complete, and are carefully built of neatly dressed stone with closely fitted joints. An interesting feature is the rectangular rather than square plan of the upright stones, which are placed with their longer horizontal sides alternately along adjoining wall faces. All four quoins rise from projecting square bases, and a peculiarity of the west wall is that an offset runs across it about 2 ft above the ground, the quoining below the offset consisting of one 'long' stone supporting a short which is chamfered on its western face by the width of the offset. A similar offset continues round the tower. The eastern quoins of the nave show a similar, but not identical offset near their bases. In all four quoins the long stones are mostly about 2ft in height, but as few are as short as 1 ft 4 in, and several are as long as 3ft. The shorts are of a fairly uniform height of about 6inches. (H.M.Taylor).

The quoins of the nave, up to a little over half the height of the wall, find the 'long' stones of a generous height, above that level they quickly reduce in height, and the topmost 2 to 5 courses become side-alternate in form. The quoins of the tower are made up of stones finely dressed and are not only of an extremely similar character to those of the nave but appear to be of the same stone. They are however set side-alternate, as are those at the very top of the nave walling. The interesting offset is unusual. However, having said that, we have only a fraction of the churches surviving of pre-conquest date and so it may not have been an unusual feature at all in those far off times.

**I am very pleased to record my grateful thanks for the following photos which were kindly provided by Paul Harrison.**

Photos on these pages are described viewed clockwise from top left.

1. A general view of the church from the south.
2. The offset of the SW nave quoin with the tower running away to the left.
3. The church, showing the position of the doorway in the north wall of the nave.

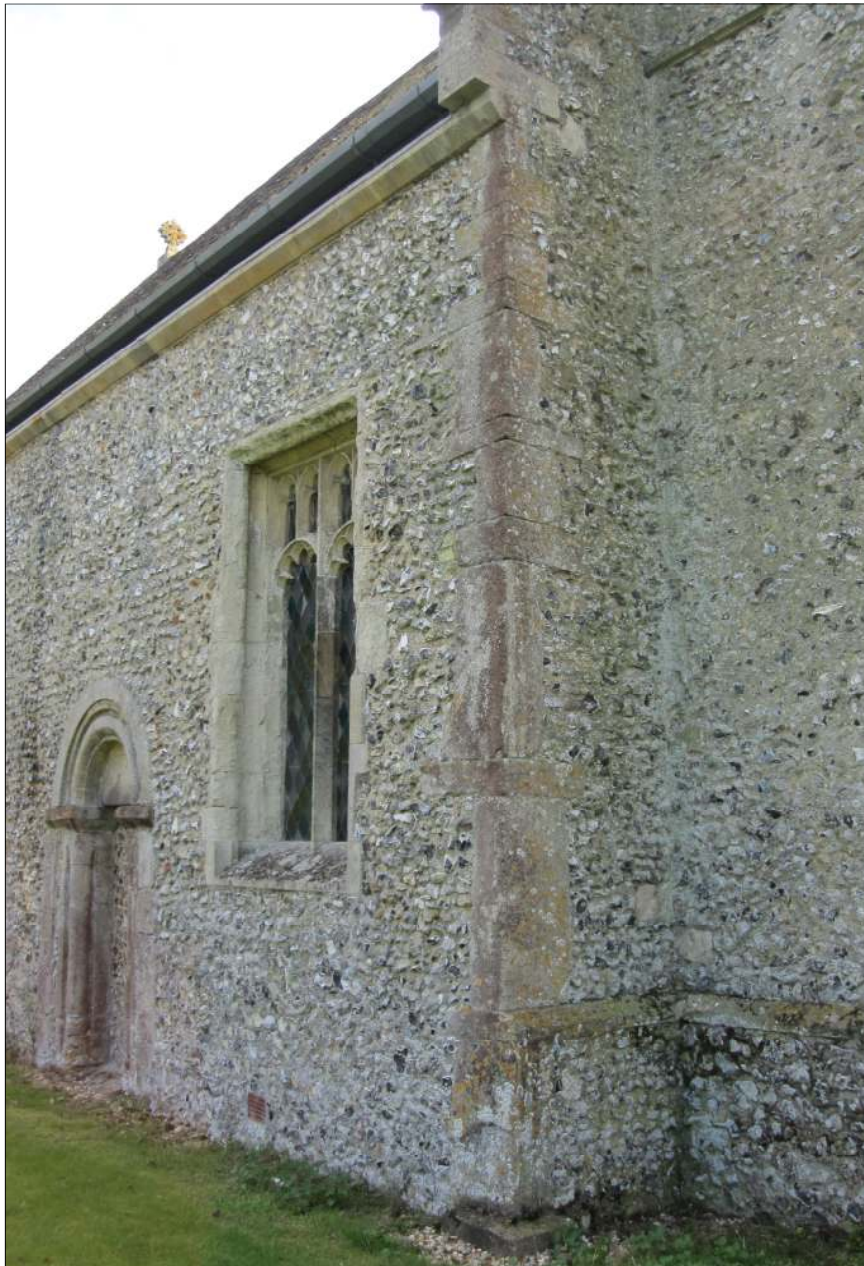




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4. SE quoin of nave; note the rapidly decreasing stature of the long-and-short work in the topmost quarter and which is finally capped with side-alternate character quoining. Note the offset at the base (partly masked by the inappropriately placed water butt).
5. The NW quoin of the nave, note the offset again, and square base stone, and the blocked north doorway.





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6. The NW quoin of the nave with the tower running away to the right. Shows the offset which is an integral part of the make-up of nave and tower walling. That both nave and tower walls are of one build seems further reinforced by (discontinuous) quoin re-entrants at the angles (this more evident in the SW quarter, see picture 7).

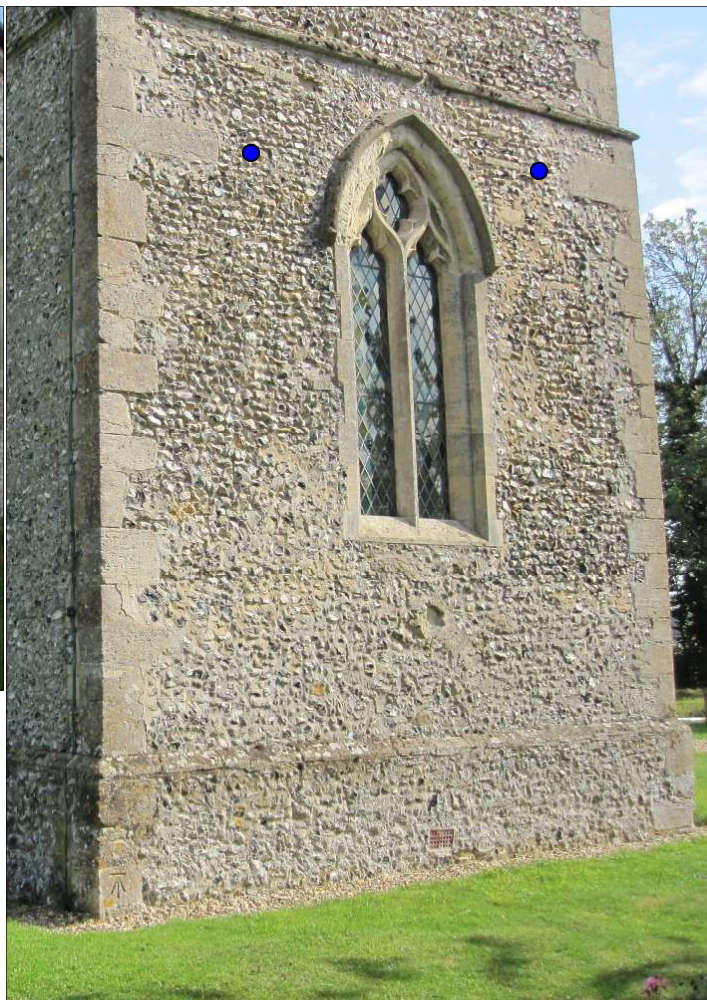




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7. The tower and nave seen from the SW, and showing the offset running around the tower. To the right is the SW quoin of the nave. Note the (broken) re-entrant quoining (blue arrow).
8. The western face of the tower; note the carefully dressed side-alternate quoining, and also the pair of massively long quoin stones (marked by the blue dots). This is not usual medieval practice and I wonder if the pre-conquest tower in fact reaches the height of the string-course.
9. The two upper stages of the tower, with medieval windows repaired with brick. The side-alternate character of the quoins repeats at this higher level. I note these stones, at every level, are not of standard shape and size, but with little in the way of features to aid dating it is difficult to know the extent of the height of remaining pre-conquest work in the tower. In view of the common practice after the conquest (and in medieval times) of building towers with buttresses, there is an immediate suspicion that this tower does not belong to Norman, or later, times.





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10. The north doorway to the nave, viewed directly from the north.

11. Oblique view, from the NW.

12. The foot of the west jamb, a typically pre-conquest conical base.

The tympanum is not a feature of work before the 11th century but starts to appear as continental Romanesque building practices permeate, and are assimilated by, Anglo-Saxon masons in those few decades before the conquest.





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13. The north doorway, detail of the west impost, and capital.



14. Closer detail of capital seen in 13.

For a detailed and concise description of doorway and the decorated capitals I can do no better than let H.M.Taylor take the field, thus:- Internally, the doorway appears simply as a round-headed recess cut straight into the wall. Externally however the original details are well preserved and none of them is hidden by the blocking wall. The original opening . . . rectangular, beneath a plain stone tympanum, which fills the whole of the round head. Although both the jambs and the round-arched head of the doorway are of two orders, the tentative Anglo-Saxon approach is well illustrated by the way in which the whole structure is almost flush with the main face of the wall, whereas in a Norman doorway the inner order would have normally been boldly recessed behind the outer. In both arch and jambs the outer order is of plain square section . . . The inner order of the arch is very slightly recessed behind the outer and is ornamented on its archivolt face with a roll-moulding . . . The inner order of each jamb is in the same plane as the outer, and is fundamentally square in section, but is enriched by the carving of its salient angle to represent an attached angle-shaft with a conical base and a rudimentary capital. These capitals are square above, with lightly incised volutes on the angles; they taper in somewhat bell-shaped form to meet the circular shafts; and the transition from square to circular section is helped by the provision of a simple upright leaf on each angle. The lowest section of each jamb is of the nature of a shallow plinth, rounded on the salient angle, and placed so as to support the conical base of the angle-shaft. Finally the doorway as a whole has a separate sill or plinth which projects a few inches from the wall-face.

Studying this doorway, we may glimpse the original form of the long vanished chancel arch of this church.

The treatment of the capitals is interesting since the (decorated) capital is not a distinct 'piece' as would be the case with Norman Romanesque. As Taylor observes, the salient angle is enriched by carving to represent an attached angle shaft with rudimentary capital. The decorated style of the capital is not unusual in late pre-conquest work but the outer spiral strays beyond the confines of the 'capital' onto the adjoining face of the outer order. Certainly the treatment of the capital and placed as they are importantly on an angle shaft is reminiscent of the late work on the chancel arch at Stoughton (Sussex).

We should understand that attached angle-shafts were unknown barely a few years before. Continental Romanesque practice was now being 'copied' albeit in the English manner. One can understand how they were feeling their way with the 'new' - the form here of the (generously) chamfered impost is the most intrusive and alien manifestation of the continental Romanesque designs appearing in the few decades before the Conquest.

