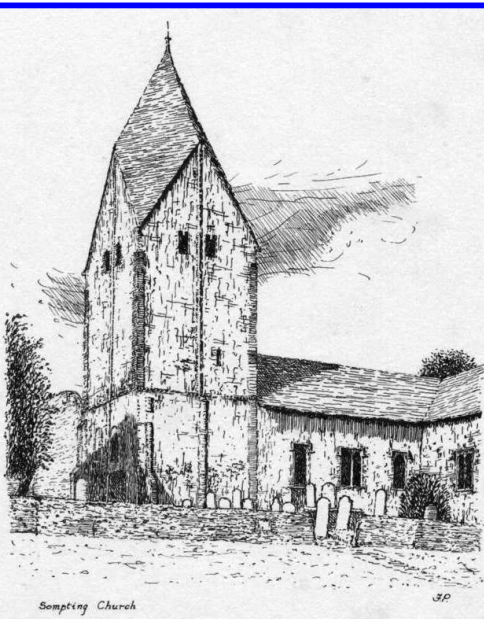


Church of St. Mary, Sompting, W.Sussex.

All pictures viewed clockwise from top left (blue border).

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1. Ink sketch of the church from the south, by F.Parsons, 1966.
2. South face of tower.
3. West face of tower.
4. Stringcourse, west face tower.
5. SW corner of tower with stringcourse above.



Sompting Church

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Sompting Church.

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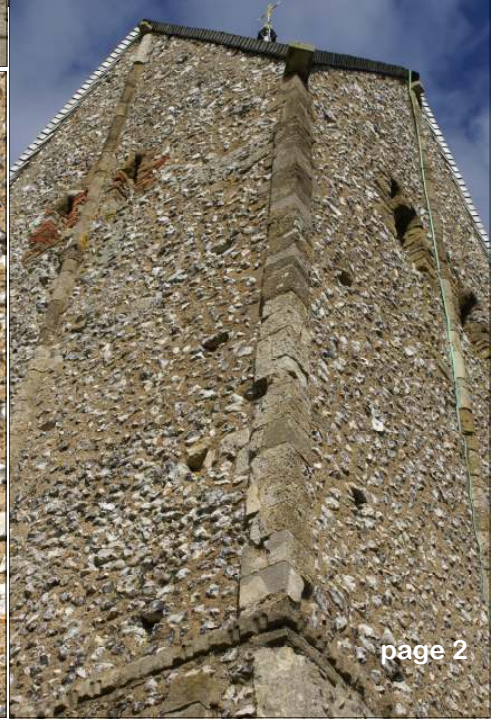
6. Detail (at stringcourse level) of junction of stages at centre of south face of tower. Note the base of the central pilaster which springs from a foot with fluted, or leaf decoration. A triangular headed window is seen above right.

7. Tower from the NE.

8. SW corner above stringcourse.

9. Two arched openings upper stage, S face tower. Note the mid-wall shafts supporting through-stones.

10. The distinctive stringcourse (and see photos 3 & 6).



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11. Tower archway from nave.

12. Archway, S capital.

13. Archway, N capital.

14. Saxon window N wall tower (viewed internally).

15. Blocked Saxon window S wall nave (cut by insertion of later window).

16. Detail of picture 13, showing contrasting stone, possible use of Roman worked stone (right).

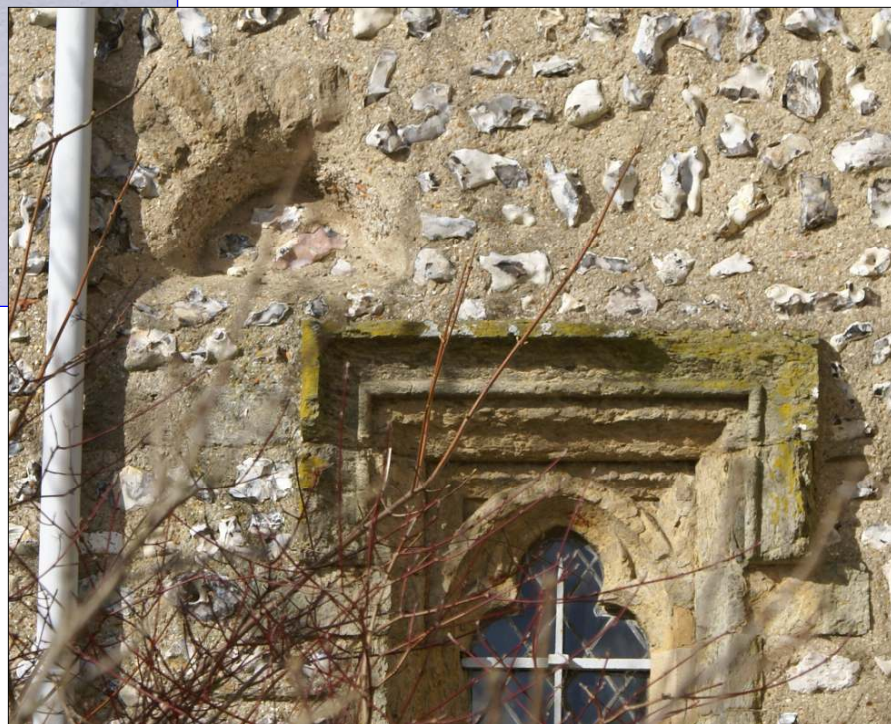
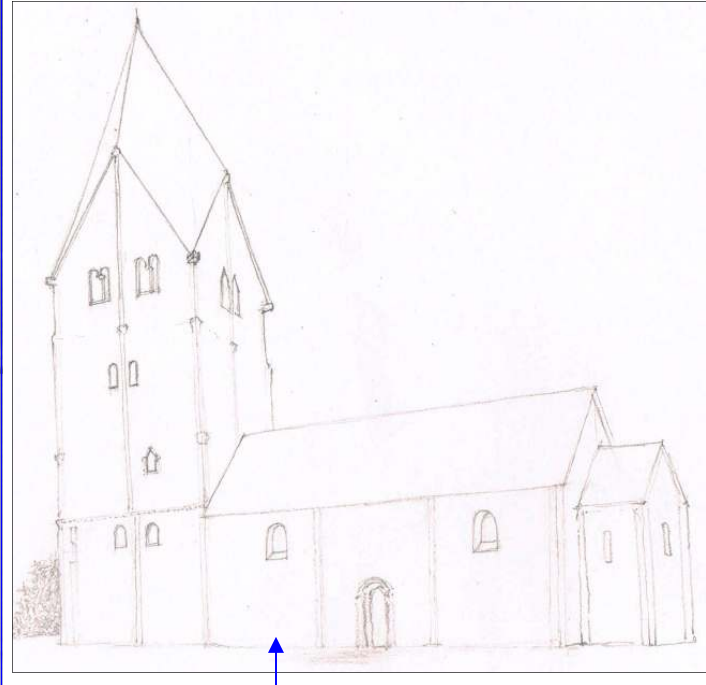


Sompting Church.

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17. Remains of arch of blocked pre-conquest window in south wall of nave and no more than a few yards from where the tower abuts the nave. This would seem to have come to light within the last decade.
18. Pencil sketch (made by F.Parsons in 1970), an impression of how the church may have looked in the first quarter of the eleventh century. The blocked nave window may be seen, it is the left hand of the two in the south nave wall and is above the blue arrow.
19. The head of this blocked window seen from outside (adjoining the inglorious drain pipe). This window was not noted by H.Taylor since in his time it was not visible. I would say that, due to the rough presentation of the stonework of the head, especially when compared to the blocked window in the north wall of the ground floor of the tower, that the tower is logically the later addition to the church, and was probably built over the west wall of the nave, as was usual practice. See H.Taylor's Anglo-Saxon Architecture, Vol II

pages 558 to 562 for an in depth description of the tower.



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Sompting Church.

Further notes on the fabric of the church.

There is evidence on the long-and-short pilasters of the south wall of the tower being 'cut-back' to receive plaster, definitely a pre-conquest technique. There are also partial remains of at least three pilaster strips on the lower stage of the north side of the tower which have been destroyed by the later medieval chapel. Taylor mentions that a post-conquest date had been assigned to the tower, hinging on the Norman "billet" decoration to be found on its string-course separating the two stages. He describes it in detail and explains how it differs from billet and is actually pairs of vertical half-round channels gouged out of the square string-course, and those above the lower pairs are one-half of an increment offset so as to be above the gap between them. Thus upon careful examination not billet by any stretch of the imagination.

There is some debate upon the original form of the roof. Although the four faces differ in their detail of openings, the common feature is the vertical half-round pilaster running up the centre of each face to finish at a square corbel (Taylor terms it a prokrossos) at the gable. Taylor refers to a paper by Mr.C.A.Hewitt upon the tower roof timbers, dated during 1978. Warwick Rodwell comments upon the recent (dendro-chronological) dating of the spire timbers when seventeen cores were taken from the roof timbers, and a date of 1300 to 1330 was arrived at. Rodwell was of the opinion that the internal horizontal voids in all four walls of the upper part of the tower were indicative of substantial timbers predating the present timber roof structure. He was of the opinion that it is likely that the early 14th century roofing of the tower was simply a reroofing of an original helm of similar form. So it seems that at that 14th century date the timbers had to be replaced, doubtless for structural reasons, and that the form as we see it now is basically unaltered.

Referring to my photos of the tower and at the top stage in particular there are, high up in that stage, two pairs of double belfry windows in both north and south faces. These openings all have a central shaft which is a "mid-wall" type supporting a through-stone. This very nicely fixes them in the pre-conquest era (no self-respecting Norman mason could possibly conceive of using such a technique which would be foreign to his schooling); it is a matter of debate exactly where it places them, but one might reasonably indicate a date of no earlier than (i)950 and 1050 at the very latest bearing in mind the decoration to be found and the general makeup of the openings. I think it is rather a red herring to be trying to date the structure using the quoins, that is often the last resort if no openings such as windows or doorways remain, but here we have perfectly good, un-restored, belfry openings that fix that part of the tower at a pre-conquest date.

It is possible that the first stage of the tower started life, as a west vestibule/porch, in a similar way to Deerhurst, but there is little at Sompting to date it by apart from quoins and stringcourses and that one ground floor window in the north tower wall. So we can examine both that window and the head of the blocked window in the westerly part of the south nave wall and compare them. The techniques of each are widely different, the tower window is of nicely dressed stone with something approaching long-and-short construction and non-radial stonework to the head, whereas the nave stonework is of roughly set rubble and designed to be covered very conveniently with plaster. We could reasonably expect that this "rougner" work in the nave is earlier than the more exact work in the ground stage of the tower, and the stonework of the tower window could easily belong in the first or second quarter of the 11th century. This window could be later than the belfry windows, in which case it is an insertion. Or it may be of the same date, in which case the tower is one build, but in view of the odd matching, or mismatch, of pilasters above and below the stringcourse separating the stages I would favour two building sequences and this north window being a later insertion, maybe 50 years later. In the great scheme of things the logical sequence of build would be at the outset a two cell church (and lets say the window in the south wall of the nave does belong to the original date of the build). Secondly a western porch, or porticus, was added, and the 'tower' archway was inserted into the west nave wall to give access to this building. I suspect there may be reused Roman carved stone in the capitals, unfortunately this doesn't actually date the archway, it only gives us the clue that it is pre-conquest, but then that is patently obvious from the style of the voussoirs, the soffit-roll and the style of the imposts "clasping" the Roman stones. At some point afterwards this first stage was raised to a full height of a tower. It is really interesting; Taylor gives the thickness of the tower walls as a meagre 2ft 3in. That is what we might expect of pre-conquest walls of a nave, but for a tower one might expect 2ft 7in at the very least. The tower at Netheravon (Wilts) has walls a generous 3ft 6in; at Barton upon Humber the tower walls are 2ft 6in thick. In any case the narrow walls are typical Anglo-Saxon practice, which was of a type of walling very different in structure to the Norman technique.

Notes.

i. See the page on Jumieges Abbey.

