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## ARCHITECTURAL NOTES ON ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH, OFFHAM

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The village of Offham is famous for its quintain standing on the green around which the older buildings of the settlement are grouped. Half a mile to the north, in comparative isolation, stands the parish church (N.G.R.TQ 660581) – a building of considerable architectural interest, but hitherto treated with only passing reference in the volumes of *Archaeologia Cantiana*.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence of Early Norman construction is evident in the nave, the north and west walls being of roughly-coursed Lower Greensand rubble with some stones set aslant, very similar to what occurs in St. Leonard's Tower, just over a mile to the south-east – generally regarded as having been built under the direction of Bishop Gundulf in the closing part of the eleventh century. At Offham, the nave walls are only 2 ft. 8 in. thick, a surviving characteristic of Anglo-Saxon construction, whereas typical Norman walls are usually not less than 2 ft. 10 in. or, more generally, 3 ft. At the north-west corner, the quoin is constructed of neatly squared blocks of tufa and this is also used for the external jambs and voussoirs of two internally-splayed Norman windows occurring high up in the north wall. This material was in common use in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, but was seldom employed beyond that period unless re-used from an older construction. In the south wall, the semicircular rere-arches of two other similar windows can be observed from the inside, proving that the upper part of the wall is of Norman age and survived alterations in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

There can be little doubt that the Norman chancel was of the usual short square-ended plan, narrower than the nave by a distance equal to double the thickness of the lateral walls – like Dode and

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Cant.*, xxi (1895), 263.

# OFFHAM CHURCH · KENT

- 11th CENTURY
- 13th "
- 14th "
- 15th "
- UNCERTAIN

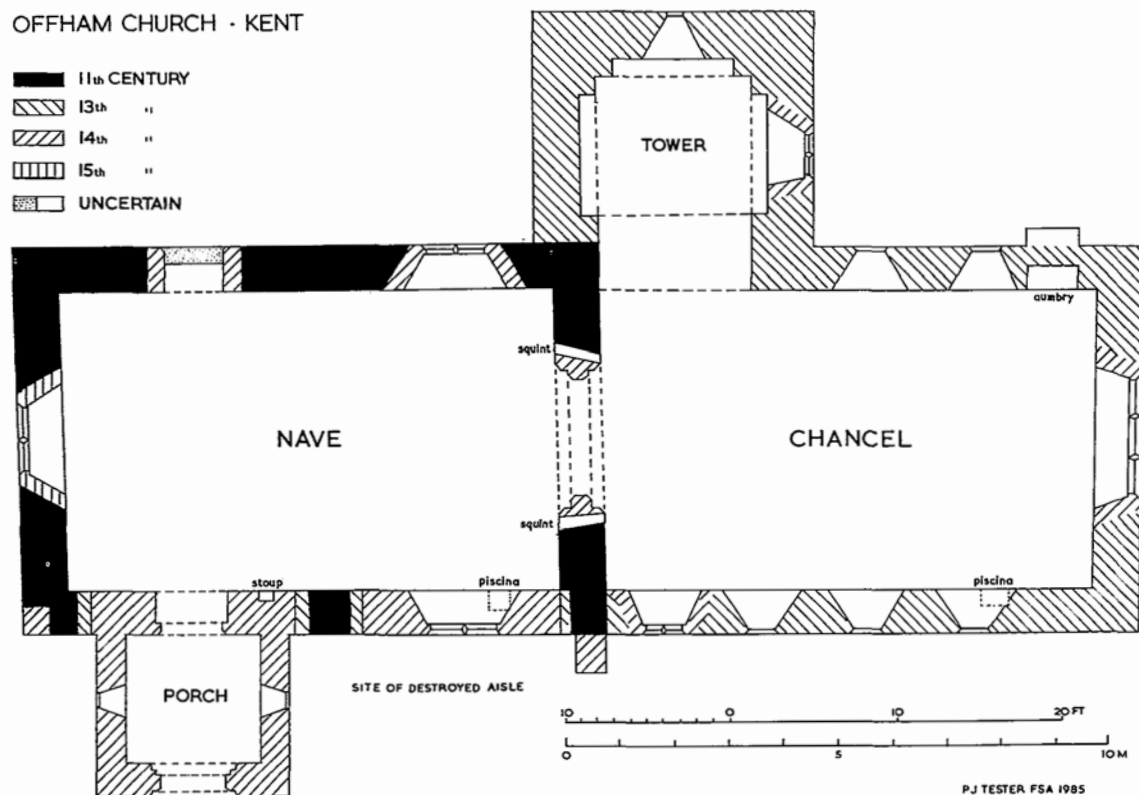


Fig. 1 Plan of St. Michael's Church, Offham.



Offham Church. Tower viewed from the North-west.

Paddlesworth described by Canon Livett in *Arch. Cant.*, xxi (1895). Over the head of the later chancel arch can be clearly discerned the semicircular head of its Norman predecessor, which appears to have been approximately 10 ft. 8 in. wide.

There are no traces of the original eleventh-century entrance, but it may well have occupied the same position in the nave as the existing south doorway. In the west wall, the unbroken courses of rubble

walling preclude the possibility of a doorway ever having been in that position.

In the thirteenth century considerable enlargement of the church took place. A longer and wider chancel was provided, approximately the same size as the nave. Canon Livett suggested that the existing chancel was built round the older one which was then demolished.<sup>2</sup> There are four lancet windows in the south wall, one altered later, and two on the north side. In the east end there was probably a triplet of lancets, replaced by the existing window in the fourteenth century.

Attached to the north side of the chancel, overlapping the north-east corner of the nave, is a plain unbuttressed tower, its ground storey opening into the chancel by a wide pointed arch. The tower is contemporary with the chancel and has pointed-arched internal recesses in its north, east and west walls. Single lancet windows occur on the north side at both ground and upper levels, while the uppermost storey is a late-medieval addition. A fourteenth-century window in the east side of the ground storey is probably an enlargement of an original lancet.

Comparison of the external face of the rubble walls of the thirteenth-century chancel and tower with the Norman nave shows a contrast in construction indicating plainly that they are of different ages.

At about the same time that the chancel was rebuilt, a south aisle was added to the nave. This was effected by piercing the Norman south wall with two wide pointed arches, now blocked, the outlines of which can be discerned both inside and outside the building. A substantial pier was left between the two arches and the upper part of the wall was undisturbed, as witnessed by remains of the Norman windows previously mentioned.

Several other features of the thirteenth-century reconstruction remain to be described. Towards the east end of the south wall of the chancel is a piscina with a trefoil-arched head,<sup>3</sup> and opposite in the north wall is a pointed-arched recess most probably once fitted as an aumbry. On the exterior at this point there is a shallow pilaster buttress, presumably added to counteract a weakness in the wall caused by a reduction of its thickness in forming the aumbry. When the buttress was constructed is uncertain, but its mortar joints are galleted in a manner characteristic of sixteenth-century work.

A remarkably consistent feature of the thirteenth-century construction is the manner in which the arches of the tower, the aisle, the

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> An illustration of this and some other details occurs in an article on the church by J.R. Larkby in *The Reliquary* for October 1901.



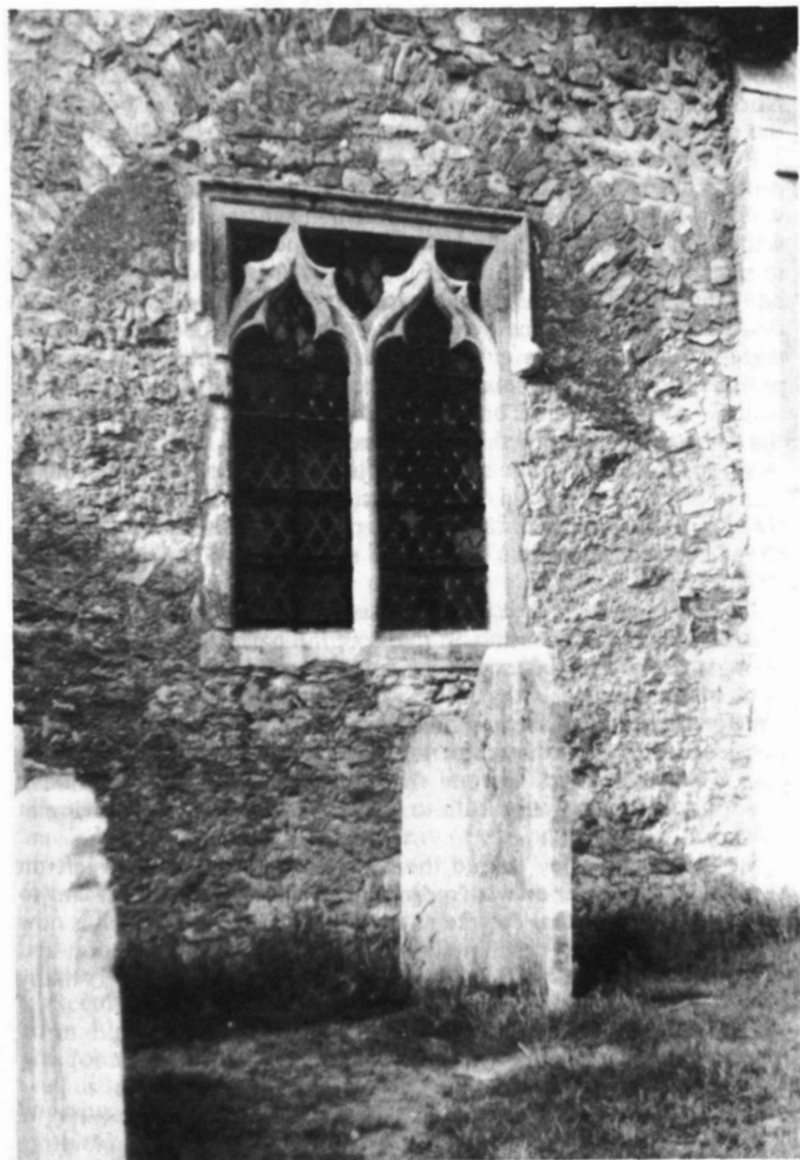
Interior looking East.



Norman Window in the north Wall of the Nave. A typical area of roughly coursed rubble wall is shown adjoining.



South Side of the Chancel with thirteenth-century Lancet Windows and Walls of uncoursed Rubble.



Fourteenth-century Window set in the Blocking of a thirteenth-century Arch to the former south Aisle.



rere-arches of the lancets and the head of the aumbry are all turned in rough slabs of local stone without properly formed voussoirs. In a less definite context this could almost be mistaken for crude pre-Conquest work. A few tufa blocks salvaged from demolished parts of the Norman church were used in the north-east and south-east quoins of the chancel and in several other parts of the later reconstruction.

Further alterations took place in the first half of the fourteenth century when the south aisle was demolished, the arches blocked and windows with ogee heads to the double lights introduced into the side walls of the nave. In the chancel, the lower part of the western lancet in the south wall was converted into a low-side window. The porch and south doorway are of this period and probably also the north door, now blocked. A new chancel arch with a two-centred head was created to underset its slightly wider round-headed Norman predecessor.<sup>4</sup> Nearby there remain corbels once supporting the rood beam or loft and squints occur on both sides of the arch, a piscina on the south side indicating the former presence of an altar at this point. A stoup is situated in the south wall just east of the doorway and is said to have been inserted during a restoration, having been found on the site of the south aisle.<sup>5</sup> The existing window in the west wall of the nave is of Perpendicular character and probably belongs to the fifteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Demolition of the west end of the south aisle apparently involved the remaking of the south-west quoin of the nave, using large blocks giving a deceptive appearance of Anglo-Saxon work. Close inspection, however, reveals that at several points pieces of thin roof-tile were incorporated in the horizontal joints – presumably at the time of construction – and these are most unlikely to be pre-Conquest. Moreover, it is almost certain that the original quoin would have been rendered in squared tufa to match its counterpart surviving at the north-west angle.

Sir Stephen Glynne visited the church prior to 1840 and left on record that the interior was 'mean and neglected'.<sup>7</sup> It is pleasant to observe, however, that despite its remote situation the church is now well maintained and has happily escaped the drastic restoration and renewal that has destroyed the archaeological interest of so many ecclesiastical buildings.

<sup>4</sup> Livett noted that the pointed arch was inserted 'no doubt for the purpose of support'. *Arch. Cant.*, xxvi (1904), 299.

<sup>5</sup> J.R. Larkby, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> It may be noted that the upper part of the west wall was rebuilt in 1984.

<sup>7</sup> *The Churches of Kent* (1877).