

THE SURVIVING ANGLO-SAXON FABRIC OF EAST COKER CHURCH

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Some three miles south-west of Yeovil, the church of St Michael, East Coker, stands in a prominent position to the south of the village. It is adjacent to the manor house, known as Coker Court, which possesses a 15th century hall. The church is cruciform but with very short transepts. The tower is unusually situated on the north side, in the angle between the north transept and the chancel. It was built towards the end of the 18th century, to replace a dilapidated central tower, and the chancel was extensively rebuilt earlier in the same century. The nave has north and south aisles and displays considerable evidence of 15th century work in its windows, doorways, parapet and north arcade. The south arcade is earlier, and the font dates from the 12th century. When, in 1991, the AGM of the Society was held at St Michael's Church, it was claimed by the authors that the fabric of the building included substantial Anglo-Saxon work which had not hitherto been recognised. The purpose of this article is to set out the arguments on which this claim was based.¹

The earliest previously-acknowledged part of the building is the south arcade, which is accepted as being 13th century work.² At the west end of the south arcade, however, the most westerly arch has clearly been built into an existing wall. The surfaces of this wall curve inward as they rise, so that the wall is narrower at its top than its base. The mouldings of the arch are vertical and of uniform width. This results in a mismatch between the arch and the wall, such that most of the dressed stones stand proud of the wall. If the wall is indeed earlier than the 13th century arcade, then it might be expected to be of the 12th century; but the wall is only 27 in. (686 mm) thick, and this would be untypical of Norman masonry. Taylor considered that any nave walling less than 3 ft (914 mm) thick should be examined more closely 'to see if there is confirmatory evidence for claiming it as Anglo-Saxon'.³ Anglo-Saxon churches with nave walls of the same thickness as East Coker include Sompting, Jarrow, and Odda's Chapel at Deerhurst. Reculver and Escomb are 1 in. (25.4 mm) thicker while Limply Stoke and Old Shoreham are 1 in. thinner.⁴

There is a matching plain section of wall at the west end of the 15th century north arcade. It is similar in all respects to that on the south side. The resulting space between (the width of the nave) is only 16 ft (4.88 m), while the nave in its present form rises to approximately 19 ft (5.8 m) at the top of the walls internally. Such proportions are typical of an Anglo-Saxon church. For comparison, the nave of Odda's Chapel and the eastern portion of Jarrow are the same width as East Coker, whilst the naves at Bradford on Avon and Escomb are 14 ft (4.27 m) and 15 ft (4.57 m) wide respectively.

It has already been noted that the mismatch between the south arcade and the nave wall appears to be caused by the fact that the wall curves inward towards its top. This curvature is also apparent in the walling above the other arches of the south arcade, the inference being that the whole of the arcade has been cut through an earlier, tapering wall, vestiges of which survive. The evidence is less certain on the north side and in this case the wall may well have been rebuilt above the arches. The tapering is, however, also apparent at the west end of the north wall of the nave. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that the early work extends almost as far as the crossing, a distance of some 48 ft (14.7 m).

Externally, the west end of the nave stands forward of the north and south aisles, and its tall narrow proportions are immediately apparent. It is built on a flat protruding plinth which at the present time is almost level with the ground. It should be noted that at the west end of the church there is a difference in level of some 27 in. (686 mm), the present ground level being that much higher than the floor of the nave. A 15th century doorway and window have been inserted in the earlier west wall. This can be seen clearly from the fact that the plinth has been cut to accept the doorway. The west wall of the nave is unbuttressed, a fact which adds weight to the hypothesis of a pre-Conquest origin, since a Norman or later structure of such height would almost certainly have been buttressed.

It is, however, the quoins of the west wall which provide the strongest evidence of a pre-Conquest date. They are built from relatively large blocks of stone set predominantly in the form of long and short work, with side alternate oblong pillar stones. The quoins are not regular and show some unusual features; most noticeably, they have some additional infilling stones which tone down the visual effect of those which are set in the side-alternate orientation. The resulting vertical joint lines are very narrow and give the superficial impression of being false joints, incised on more massive blocks. Close inspection, however, indicates that these joints are real. The general arrangement is a variation of two well-recognised Anglo-Saxon building styles. Long and short quoins are typified by the late Anglo-Saxon tower at Earls Barton (Northants), whereas side alternate quoins are widely distributed but occur more commonly in the north-east of England.⁵ The unusual character of the quoins at East Coker is difficult to parallel exactly, but some similar features can be seen in the church of Rockland All Saints (Norfolk). Another significant feature of the quoins is that over the majority of their height they exhibit a pronounced inward curvature towards one another, as do all three walls of which they form a part. The same feature has already been noted above in relation to the interior of the church. The upward curvature of the walls in this manner appears to have been used as a deliberate constructional device to help stabilize tall, thin, unbuttressed walls.

Establishing that the curvature of the walls was caused by deliberate tapering is significant because it eliminates the possibility of its being the result of other factors such as distortion by subsequent movement of the structure. This constructional device appears to be similar to the 'batter' described by Leask⁶ with reference to Irish churches and it is possible that the similar method of construction used at East Coker reflects its location on the fringes of Anglo-Saxon dominance, close to the persisting Celtic traditions on the south-western peninsula and in South Wales. Close scrutiny of Anglo-Saxon churches, however, suggests that wall curvature may be more common than has previously been acknowledged. It has, for instance, been recognised at Escomb by Fernie.⁷ Personal observation suggests that it is also present at, for example, Barnack and Wittering (both Cambridgeshire) and Kirk Hammerton (North Yorkshire).

The quoins at East Coker are very closely jointed and the curvature is smooth. It

is possible that this smooth profile was produced by allowing the upper edges of the stones to protrude during construction, and then cutting them back *in situ*. This rather peculiar type of masoncraft recalls some of the details at St. Laurence's, Bradford on Avon. It is also apparent that there has been some overall dressing of the quoins at East Coker and this needs further consideration. The uppermost stones of the quoins, especially on the northern side, do not conform to the overall profile, being vertical and constructed of smaller stones. Neither do they exhibit the constructional pattern of the lower stones of the quoins, the result, perhaps, of their having been repaired.

There is a marked difference in colour between the pale grey of the quoins and the yellowish brown Ham stone used for dressings elsewhere in the church. It is difficult to assess the true character of the stone owing to the presence of lichen and grime, but while some of the stones may be from the more durable light-coloured beds on Ham Hill, others appear to be markedly oolitic and would have had to be brought from further afield since there is a lack of such stone in the immediate vicinity. Surviving Anglo-Saxon work in the area shows a preference for the use of oolitic limestone for dressings and for sculptural purposes.⁸

While the quoins are of well-dressed ashlar, the walling between them is of local rubble stone which may even have been available within the parish. The great majority of Anglo-Saxon churches are constructed in a similar way. It was common for Anglo-Saxon rubble walling to be rendered, and surviving examples of the practice can be seen in the towers at Earls Barton and Barton on Humber (South Humberside), and in the complete churches at Stoughton (Sussex) and Alton Barnes (Wiltshire). The west front of the former nave at Milborne Port was also built of rendered rubble stone.⁹ Often there seems to have been a deliberate attempt to emphasise the quoins by making them prominent against the rendered surface and by partially trimming back individual stones to give the impression of long straight edges on stones which were, in reality, irregularly shaped. This technique may have been used at East Coker because some of the quoin stones have shallow rebates, appropriate for a rendered wall.

Each of the features which has been described, might, taken in isolation, provide insufficient foundation for claiming that the nave at East Coker is of Anglo-Saxon origin, but taken together, they represent a powerful argument. Standing Anglo-Saxon churches in the south west of England are rare. None were listed by Taylor and Taylor in Cornwall or Devon¹⁰ (although discoveries have recently been made of Anglo-Saxon work at Exeter, St. Martin's).¹¹ In Somerset the early work at Milborne Port has been assigned a post-Conquest date (towards the end of the 11th century) by Zarnecki and recent writers.¹² Claims have also been made for Anglo-Saxon survivals at Shepton Mallet¹³ and Wilton, near Taunton.¹⁴ Dorset is marginally better placed, with Anglo-Saxon work at Canford, Sherborne, Wareham, Wimborne and Winterborne Steepleton. Examples become more numerous, however, in Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and Hampshire. The addition of East Coker to the list for the most south-westerly English counties would, therefore, be very significant in terms of the known distribution of Anglo-Saxon churches.¹⁵ So far as is known, East Coker was not a minster church. The Anglo-Saxon cathedral was at Sherborne, with adjacent minsters at Yeovil¹⁶ and Yetminster,¹⁷ and no case has been made for a minster at Coker. It was, however, the name of a hundred,¹⁸ the meeting-place of which has not so far been determined.¹⁹ The identification of a substantial Anglo-Saxon church at East Coker may indicate that this settlement was the focus for the hundred. During the medieval period East Coker was a completely autonomous parish church having its own right of baptism, as evidenced by the early Romanesque font.

A useful model for the development of East Coker may be the sequence deduced for West Blatchington (Sussex).²⁰ It was founded as a Saxon estate church (on an estate seemingly descended from a late Roman precursor) and was later modified to serve as a Norman manorial and medieval parish church. The earliest structure, claimed to be a plain, single-cell, rectangular building, has been dated to the 10th century on the basis of its design and the liturgical requirements which would have dictated such a plan. A comparison of the proportions of the layout at West Blatchington with those at East Coker is thought-provoking. The former had internal dimensions 16 ft (4.9 m) wide and 53 ft (16 m) long. The walls were 30 in. (0.76 m) thick. There is nothing to indicate the form of the east end of the church at East Coker, but in the light of the arguments advanced by Holmes²¹ it would be crucial for its dating to establish whether or not the original church was of the single-cell type. It must also be considered whether the church at East Coker may be the first Anglo-Saxon estate church to be recognised in Somerset.²²

It is perhaps surprising that such positive evidence of the Anglo-Saxon origins of East Coker church should have gone unrecognised for so long. However, there are good reasons which can be advanced in explanation. The internal evidence is not immediately apparent and needs a careful study to appreciate. Until 1975 the external evidence would have been more difficult for the casual observer to see, owing to the fact that the west end of the church stood within the private grounds of Coker Court. The present public access to the west end was only created by alterations in that year. A further explanation is provided by a photograph published by Batten in 1894²³ which shows the west end of the church from the grounds of Coker Court. At that date it was densely shrouded in creeper. It is not known when the creeper was removed, but while it was present only the 15th century additions to the west end would have been clearly visible.

The lack of comparable buildings in the south west poses problems for dating the early work at East Coker. The unusually elaborate construction of the quoins could be interpreted as evidence for a late Saxon date, but the lack of surviving window or door openings means that dating evidence is very limited. Petrological studies and excavation might both contribute to establishing a more positive chronology for the structure.

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