

The Medieval Church Fabric – A Tour

(Margaret Andrews March 2020)

St Andrew's Church Shrivenham is widely regarded as a fine example of a seventeenth century church. However some of the medieval fabric remains visible if you look closely.



Starting outside, approaching the church we see the tower.



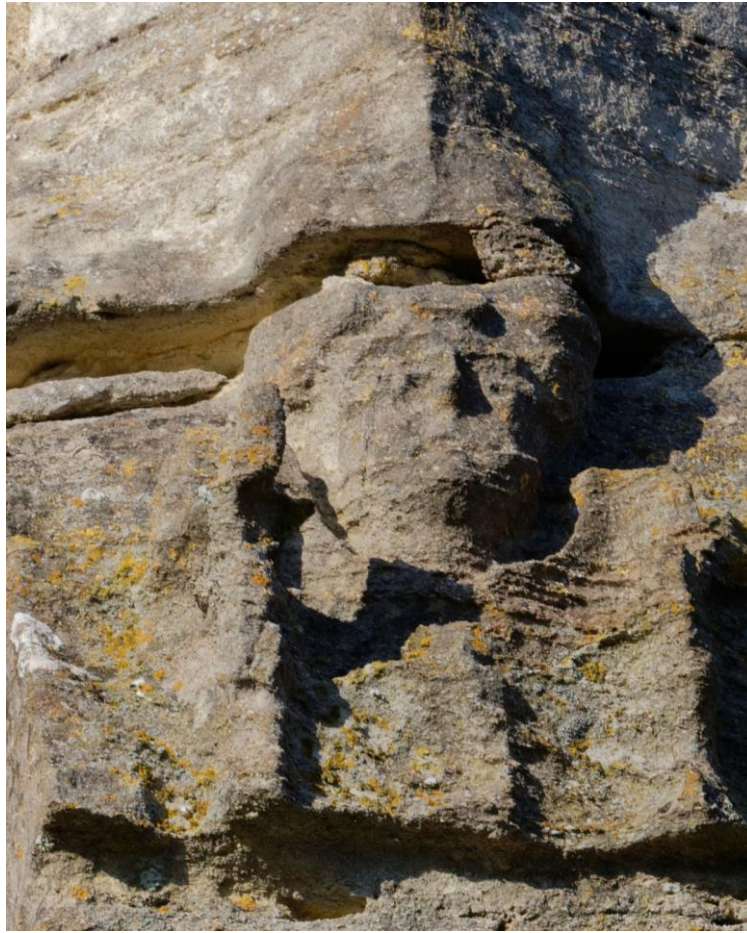
This is thought to date to the 15th century. Interestingly interior aspects (see below) suggest that this may be early rather than late 15th C as is sometimes suggested.



If you look at the West/North and South faces of the tower you can see the lines of the old roof showing that the pitch was much greater than it is now, and also suggesting that there were North and South transepts, making this a cruciform shaped church during the medieval period rather than the rectangular structure that we see today.

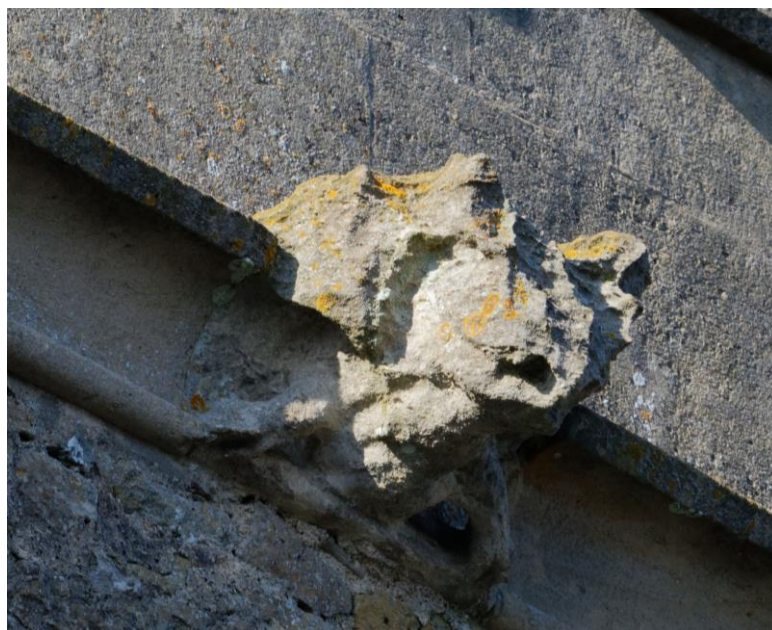


Looking further up the tower we see windows with typical gothic pointed arches.



And finally both at the top and on the buttresses are several gargoyles and grotesques. Sadly these are in poor condition.

The gargoyles have the water spout for drainage, while the grotesques are the other carvings





Next we approach the West end of the Church. The large seventeenth century porch dominates this view but if you look at the West end wall you will see two external buttresses.



These features although they were used in many periods tend to be characteristic of the later Norman or early gothic periods (later 12th to 13th Centuries). Their function was to help take the load of the internal arcade of arches. Interestingly the ones here are on the same line as the existing pillars suggesting that the pillars are likely to be in the same alignment as these of the medieval church

Next look up at the West window. You will probably have to step away a little for a good view so be careful of the gravestones.



Look at the relieving (or discharging) arch above this window. Again this could appear at any date but was particularly characteristic of medieval windows and doors. Its function was to do exactly as described, to spread the load of an opening. Interestingly despite the superficial similarity of all the church windows this is the only one with a relieving arch.

Next step through the porch and into the church.



Immediately inside the door on your right is the font. This is of Purbeck Marble and is considered to date to either the late twelfth or the thirteenth century. The font is octagonal and has blind arcading around the outside. The blind arcading is consistent with this dating.

Purbeck Marble is not in fact a marble but a polished limestone originating in the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset, near to Swanage and Corfe Castle.

During the medieval period the Purbeck Marble industry was sophisticated. The stone was extracted in Dorset and either worked there or shipped by sea to London where there was a workshop. Prefabricated items were then shipped all over the country. Sometimes the fitting was not perfect. If you have a chance have a look at the decorative Purbeck columns in Salisbury Cathedral and you will see this.

Next look straight ahead at the nice pointed arch of the tower, a classic later medieval gothic arch, and to in the tower is the opening that would have given access to the rood screen.

Sadly there is no photo of this at present as the church is closed because of the coronavirus.

Head up the nave but before you reach the base of the tower turn around and look back at the West window from the inside.



If you look it is apparent that this window is different from the other windows in the church.

The beam of the roof comes lower than the window arch suggesting that the roof is of later date than the arch. We have already seen that the earlier roof had a much higher pitch, so this window opening is likely to predate the lowering of the roof whenever that occurred.

Next if you look at the arch itself it does not look quite right. The arch is slightly distorted and the way that it springs off the corbels provided by the two small columns looks at best uncomfortable. It may be that there has been some adaptation here.



The small pillars of the window frame are themselves of interest.

Again no other window of the church has them.

Look particularly at the top and bottom and the decoration there.

This early gothic dogtooth decoration probably dates to the 12th or early 13th century.



Head up the Nave and stand under the central tower. If you look up you will see stone vaulting together with a large central trap door, suggesting a fourteenth to fifteenth century date.

Sadly no image as yet – blame the virus again

It may be that we can pin this down a little closer. Were you to go to Cirencester Church (which originated as the medieval Abbey of Cirencester) and look up at the tower there you would see very similar vaulting, even including the central trap door.

This is of note as during the medieval period Shrivenham Church belonged to Cirencester Abbey. In 1400, a year after the usurpation of the crown by Henry IV, the “Earls’ Rebellion” was brought to an end by the townspeople of Cirencester arresting and executing said Earls. In gratitude Henry gave the town a sum of money which they used to build a fine new tower for the Abbey. One wonders if while working on the Abbey the stonemasons were employed to work on another Abbey property?

Next head into the South Aisle and take a look at the only medieval monument to remain in the church. An effigy. Sadly this was in the churchyard until the early 20th century and so is very eroded. Indeed it is impossible to tell if it is even a man or woman. However someone was wealthy enough and important enough to warrant an effigy for their tomb.

Finally take the winding stairs up the tower, first to the “ringing chamber” where the bell ringers practice their mysterious art (but are always very welcoming to new recruits who want to learn). Head up to the next level to what is now the “clock room” holding the clock mechanism (the clock is a 19th century addition).



Here a deep groove is worn in the sill of the East of the window. The sanctus bell once stood in this window and its rope pulled over the sill.



This bell is now higher in the tower lodging with the big bells that are rung for services. The sanctus bell still performs its old task of calling the faithful to worship just before the service starts.

Thank you. I hope that you enjoyed the tour and will soon be able to see these things properly again.