



Minster Church of St. Cuthburga, Wimborne Minster, Dorset.

A seemingly Norman edifice, the actual foundation dates to Cuthburga, sister of King Ine, who founded the nunnery circa 705.

Clockwise from top left -

1. Saxon stair turret, west wall of N transept.
2. A closer view of the turret and its stringcourses. Note the random coursed Saxon walling of the turret and transept which is quite different to the central tower (which rebuilt in Norman times above the eave level).
3. Note that the abutments are less than the width of the central tower, a Saxon trait (and not found in post-conquest fabric).

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Clockwise from top right -

4. South transept; W wall, Saxon stringcourse running from left and ending right of drainpipe at southernmost extent of original transept. There is a matching stringcourse on W wall of the north transept and which continues round the stair turret

5. The staircase in the north transept turret, looking up. A very similar construction to Hough-on-the-Hill, in that the rubble applied under the treads support these. Each tread is made up of some three stones, and not one piece as is usual in post-conquest work. A characteristic of pre-conquest circular staircases is that the newel is not integral with the tread, it is a column to which the treads abut, or are notched in.

6. Detail of Saxon treads in turret.



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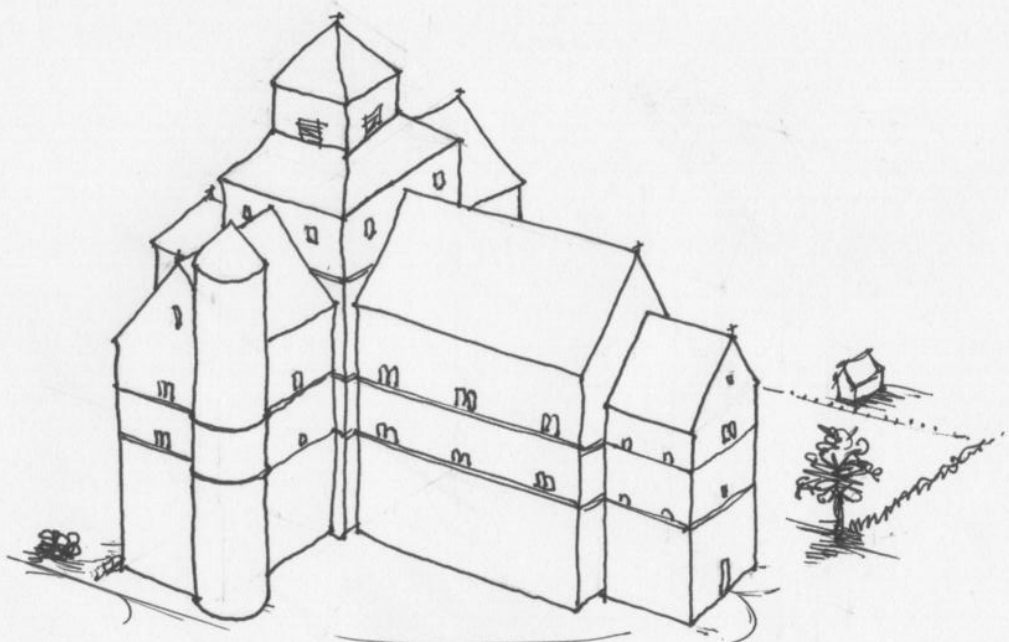
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Sketches of the Minster church.

Top. A recent sketch, a birds eye view of the Saxon church from the north-west, as it may have appeared in late Saxon days, the north transept with its (extant) stair turret, and the nave with a conjectural west porticus. The stringcourses which run round the turret when extended along the nave and transept walls clearly make more sense as being the springing for windows set in the walls at intervals. Naturally the capping of the tower is a feature that is now totally lost but I have given it a timber 'roof' of the type that Breamore still has to this day (and which houses bells).

Bottom. I have included this light pencil sketch, which I made in the late 1960's, it is a view of how the church may have appeared in Norman times, from the north-east. It shows the old north Saxon transept with its turret, and the tower as rebuilt by the Normans and in fact as it appears today (but without the fenestrations which were built after the fall of the spire in the 16th century). The drawing is unfinished and a low roof would doubtless have capped the Norman stages of the tower. The eastern apses are a possibility and remain to be proved (or disproved) by excavation. The Norman clerestory windows in the nave still exist today and can be seen 'hidden' under the aisle roofs and serve as a triforium on both south and north sides.

A note about the Saxon north turret: it is possible that the stairs led to a floor over the north transept, and which would have been used as a chapel with an altar and being quite normal in Saxon times. Monks (or in the case of Wimborne, nuns) would then have held services and prayers in small groups and the different levels and 'rooms' inside a church enabled separate devotions to be held independent of each other. Deerhurst is a case in point with its doorways and windows on higher levels allied to the west tower and to the nave and leading and giving access to 'rooms' within the church and above the main body of the church. Now that these higher floors have disappeared the 'mid air' doorways, which lead nowhere, tend to look puzzling. In the case of Wimborne the Saxon turret stairs are utilised to lead from the transept to the tower to give access to the Norman stairway in the higher stages of the tower walling.



Roman floor. Revealed just beneath the present nave floor on the south side is a part of a Roman mosaic floor made of small tesserae. It is viewable and is protected beneath glass. In quite a few instances Christian churches were sited in Roman villas, such as at Rivenhall, Essex. A Roman road passes Wimborne to the west, and to the south runs through a Legionary Fortress, and thence to the Roman port at Hamworthy near Poole.

