

Cathedral church at North Elmham, Norfolk. Dedication unknown.

Ruins of a complete church, consisting of a west axial tower with south turret-stair; a nave flanked by two small towers; transepts; and a small apsidal chancel; period 1000 to 1050, possibly rebuilt on ruins dating from 650 to 700. For full description see H.Taylor, Anglo-Saxon Architecture, Vol. I, pp228-231; vol III pg 983. The site is somewhat complicated since it stands within a fortified earthwork of rectangular ditches and banks which may have been raised by the Danes. Bishop Henry Despenser obtained a licence in 1387 to fortify his manor at Elmham and the demolition of the apse and the addition of a 'matching' turret in the south nave wall are all of this date. The internal divisions in the nave are Despenser's work.

Pictures on all pages viewed clockwise from top left.

1. Looking north, left is the Saxon stair turret in the south wall of the tower, and to the right Despenser's 'copy' turret.
2. Base of easternmost column from the south nave doorway, now half hidden by Despenser's turret.
3. Remains of Saxon stairway in tower turret (the separate newel has been robbed); a typical pre-conquest construction where the treads (often made up of two or more stones) are constructed separately to the newel and notched into its curved surface. The newel is a thick cylinder (sometimes of stones 3 feet in height); this method of construction is NOT found in post-conquest work (and see similar stairways at Wimborne Minster, Broughton, Hough-on-the-Hill).



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4. Explanatory text on site relating to Despenser's adaptation of the church to a fortified house, showing the 'extra' turret to the right. The actual text sadly does not reflect the antiquity of the Saxon stone church. However the plan showing the layout is useful and it shows the two towers laying immediately to the west of the transepts, and the western tower abutting the nave.
5. The foundations of the apse and attendant cross work viewed from the south. The masonry belonging to the north tower stands to a height of about 18 feet.


North Elmham Chapel

The earliest building on this site served as the first cathedral of East Anglia until 1071. The diocesan headquarters then moved to Thetford (moving again later to Norwich).

This building, of timber, remained in use as a parish church until around the year 1100.

Bishop Herbert de Losinga of Norwich then started to build a replacement parish church nearby. The former wooden cathedral was then pulled down and a stone chapel was built for Bishop Herbert's private use - he had a palace located nearby. It is the remains of this stone chapel which you see here today.

In the late 14th century the chapel was converted into a castle for another Bishop of Norwich, Henry le Despenser. The castle was in use until the 16th century after which it fell into ruins.



The positions of five display panels around the site are marked on this plan. To reach the second panel, walk towards the chapel, turn right along the path and it will be found on a grassy bank ahead.

Far left
Bishop de Losinga's chapel
This is how the chapel may have looked from this position in about 1115. The south, and probably, main entrance was straight ahead. To the left is a stair turret attached to the west tower.

Left
Bishop le Despenser's castle
Around the year 1388, Bishop Henry le Despenser of Norwich turned the chapel into a small castle. The entrance was then moved up to the first floor level, and he cleverly copied the tower stair turret on the other side of the doorway to create an impressive approach. The difference in the stone work can still be seen.

In front of the castle was a drawbridge across a dry ditch. Despenser also surrounded the chapel with earthworks to make it defensible.



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6. Blocked doorway in north wall of nave, note bases of both columns, and associated stonework.

7 & 8. Close-up of these two bases. Compare with matching base [partly obscured by Bishop Despenser's 14th century work] in pic. 2 on page 1. These base mouldings can be closely compared with the "concertina" type mouldings to be found at Stopham (Sussex) in the late Saxon capitals of the south doorway to the nave. Here we have 2 'concertinas' above the concave lower moulding (which sits upon the convex base); the top concertina is partly broken away, more so in the east base. At Stopham there are three concertinas.



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9. Run of the north wall of the nave looking east.

10. Run of south wall of nave down to the S tower (against the transept).

The walling of the church is of coursed roughly squared pieces of brown aggregate known as carstone, which stand on a well formed plinth of flint rubble (H.Taylor).



Nikon



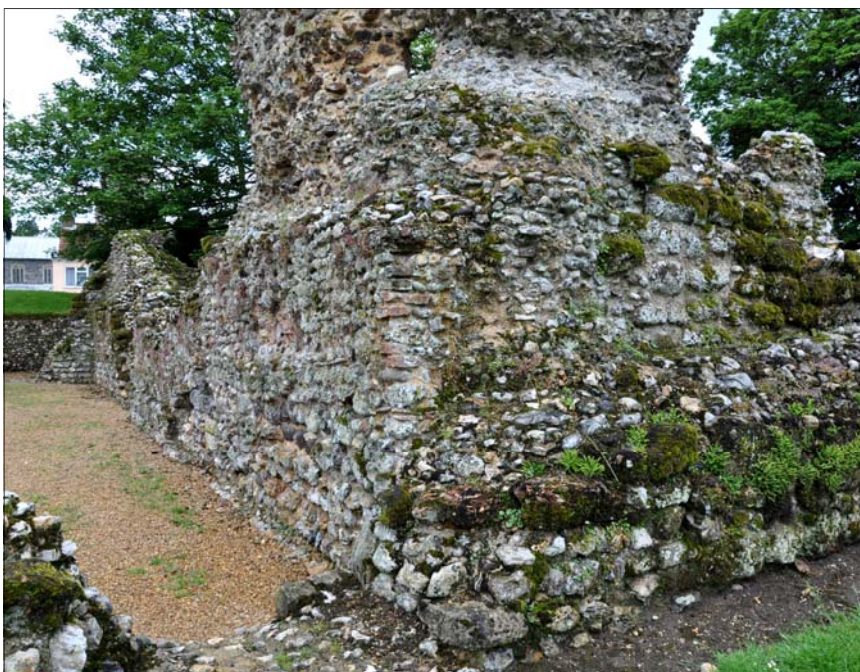
Some observations on the present fabric.

Enough remains of the Saxon Minster to gain a very good idea, at least, of the floor plan, and also of the addition at the east end which appears to belong to a build at a later date. I would anticipate the date of that addition being in pre-conquest times because of the attendant north/south block, or cross work, which sitting immediately to the west of the apse and laying against the east end of the nave with its two towers. I say this apsidal east end configuration is an addition because it is not keyed in to the 'older' work to the west of it, but abuts it (see note 1 below). It also extends slightly proud of the work sitting to its west, i.e. it is a greater width north/south. Dr.H.Taylor noted how there were (substantial) quarter-round (masonry) shafts at the re-entrant angles at the west of the transepts and the two eastern towers. If my deduction is correct about the east end being an addition then the 'easternmost' shafts were added at the date of the extension and match those to their west. The SW shaft may be seen in the lower picture on page 4, and the south-eastern shaft right picture this page.

It seems perfectly feasible that the original east end at Elmham would have been very similar to the 7th century east end at Hexham Abbey, and at St. Augustines church at Canterbury, both ending without an apse, simply a long straight cross wall running north/south bounded by its pair of towers, a basilica type building without any 'projection' at the east end. I see no reason why it should not put the date of the older 'western' building (with its eastern towers) in the 7th or early 8th century, based on the same distinctive eastern termination as Hexham and Canterbury (a treatment not found in later work in the medieval period).

I noted particularly one of the bases of the south doorway partially hidden under Despenser's medieval south turret. The base matches the pair belonging to the north nave doorway. It struck me how delicate, how petit are those mouldings, for a doorway (pictures see page 3). They agree with, and compare to, other Saxon mouldings, notably at Stopham in Sussex.

Dr.H.Taylor mentions, in his later volume III (of Anglo-Saxon Architecture), of Rigold's evidence (1962-3) of a first wooden church on an alignment to the north of the later axis, and is a cellular linear plan (Taylor). A subsequent phase corresponds to a second wooden church and with lateral porticus; while (Rigold's) phase B corresponds to the stone Anglo-Saxon church.



Note 1. In the picture above which is of north tower and its NE corner, you will observe the foundations of the cross work running out of the picture to the left. It will be seen how the north wall of the cross-work appears not to be keyed in to the walling running out to the west, and which belongs to the tower at that point. Dr.H.Taylor says, “. . . and a date about the middle of the 10th century for the enlargement of the church by the addition of the transepts and apsidal east end.” It should also be observed that the lower part of the (north) tower wall appears to be a widening of that wall, and ashlar facing can be seen higher up and set back from that (lower) widening. Care must be taken not to confuse later medieval work which belongs to Bishop Despenser's time (after 1387) when he fortified the building and it is thought demolished the apse and cross work, cutting a defensive ditch across the easternmost part of the site of the apse.

