



St Margaret's Old Church, Hopton on Sea

An Historic Building Survey by Andy Phelps BA

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Location: Coast road, Hopton on Sea, South Norfolk, National Grid Reference: TM 5300 9996, Designation: Grade II listed LB No. 227769, Historic Environment Record No: 10760, Status: Disused and Ruined

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Introduction

St Margaret's old church presently stands as a ruin near the centre of the south Norfolk village of Hopton on Sea and appears to be a fine example of Christian architecture from the 14th century onwards albeit with an unusual double nave plan which makes no attempt to differentiate between nave and chancel. At the western end stands a well preserved square tower which has been built to sit almost entirely within the double nave plan while to the north a small porch covers the north western opening. The building is presently without a roof and this has been the case since a fire destroyed its thatched cover and the interior of the church in February 1865. Despite this absence of roofing most of the walls have survived remarkably well given the length of their exposure to the elements and many survive to nearly their original full height however there are areas that have collapsed or appear to be on the verge of doing so. The walls are composed of flint and lime mortar to their greater extent with the use of limestone ashlar at the quoins and in some of the window jambs. Brick has also been employed extensively in the jambs and heads of some windows and also within the fabric of the southern wall.

Methodology

The following report has been composed using primary evidence gathered during two days of survey work in the spring of 2011. It has also drawn upon the previous descriptive surveys produced by Neil Batcock and Edwin Rose and several other sources which have been referenced appropriately within the text. The survey was carried out using a 30m tape and a hand tape to produce a basic ground plan of the structure to accompany the photographic survey. Sketch drawings were made of all the elevations and these along with the ground plan were annotated during the survey.

Historical background

No mention is made of a church at Hopton in the Domesday survey of 1086 however previous research (Chapman, 1984) has indicated that from 1087 to 1100 a Monk served the

village in some capacity, a position essentially granted by King William Rufus himself and this may indicate the existence of a church. There is nothing to directly link the present church to this time however and the earliest datable features place its erection to around the late 13th or early 14th centuries. Early maps of the area from the latter half of the 16th and early 17th centuries depict a single celled building with a western tower however these are likely to be representative rather than faithful representations of the church. Perhaps the earliest detailed drawing of the church dates from 1818 (Isaac Johnson) and here the view from the south clearly indicates a double nave with western tower as with the modern ground plan. Additionally this sketch shows 7 windows along the southern wall, suggesting that two have been lost at the east end. Later 19th century depictions from the south and west confirm the presence of the porch to the north and the use of a thatched roof. In 1847 the Reverend Suckling produced an invaluable plan of St Margaret's in which the location of the pulpit and font are indicated as well as demonstrating the number and form of the arches within the central arcade. His accompanying description reveals the arcade piers to be octangular and that many of the piers were in a poor condition with a considerable lean to the north. The tithe map of 1844 shows St Margaret's within its present day boundary but at this time it lies within the north western corner of a large field, part of a sparsely populated village.

The events of the morning of Sunday the 8th of January 1865 signalled the end of St Margaret's long tenure as the parish church for Hopton on Sea. An eye witness account from Mrs James Orde a resident of Hopton Hall records that the churches stove became over heated, with the subsequent fire no doubt taking hold of the thatched roofs and that despite the alarm being raised there was no way to prevent the building being entirely gutted with the loss of all the churches contents (reproduced in Bleak and Lonely, 1984). For some reason, perhaps to bring the parish church closer to the 19th century hall a new church was erected the following year and St Margaret's was left as a ruin save for the erection of a small mortuary chapel in the south western corner of the building accessed from the southern doorway and abutting the tower to the west.

This small lean-to structure remained in use well into the 20th century presumably to facilitate the continued use of the grave yard before being abandoned with the rest of the church.

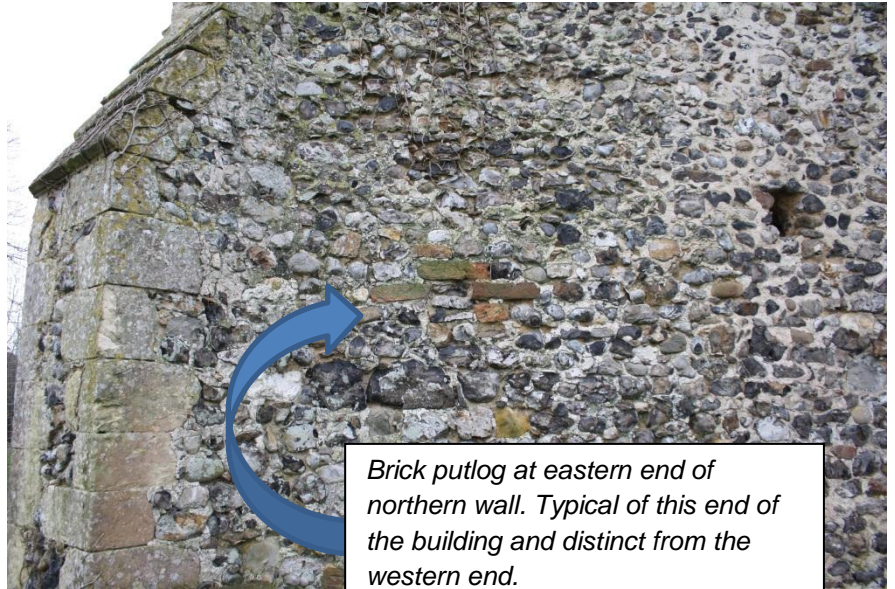
As ruination has begun to seriously take hold numerous schemes have been put forward at various times to find a way of preserving St Margaret's but as yet without success. In 1985 the diocese of Norwich wished to demolish the building (EDP, 1985) but its short term survival was ensured when the parish council agreed to purchase it for a nominal sum. Recent history has seen the building become increasingly fragile and overgrown with the continual threat of vandalism and theft of stone work in a now semi urban environment resulting in the church being fenced off from the public. Currently an application is being put together by the parish council and the church restoration committee for Heritage Lottery Funding. Hopefully they will be successful and will be able to secure the survival of St Margaret's for the next generation.

Description

North Wall

The north wall can be divided into two distinct phases with roughly faced coursed flints in a white lime mortar to the west distinct from those to the east which lack any coursing. Additionally the putlogs to the east are formed externally in brick at a height of approximately 1.5m above the ground while those to the west are constructed of elongated flints maybe

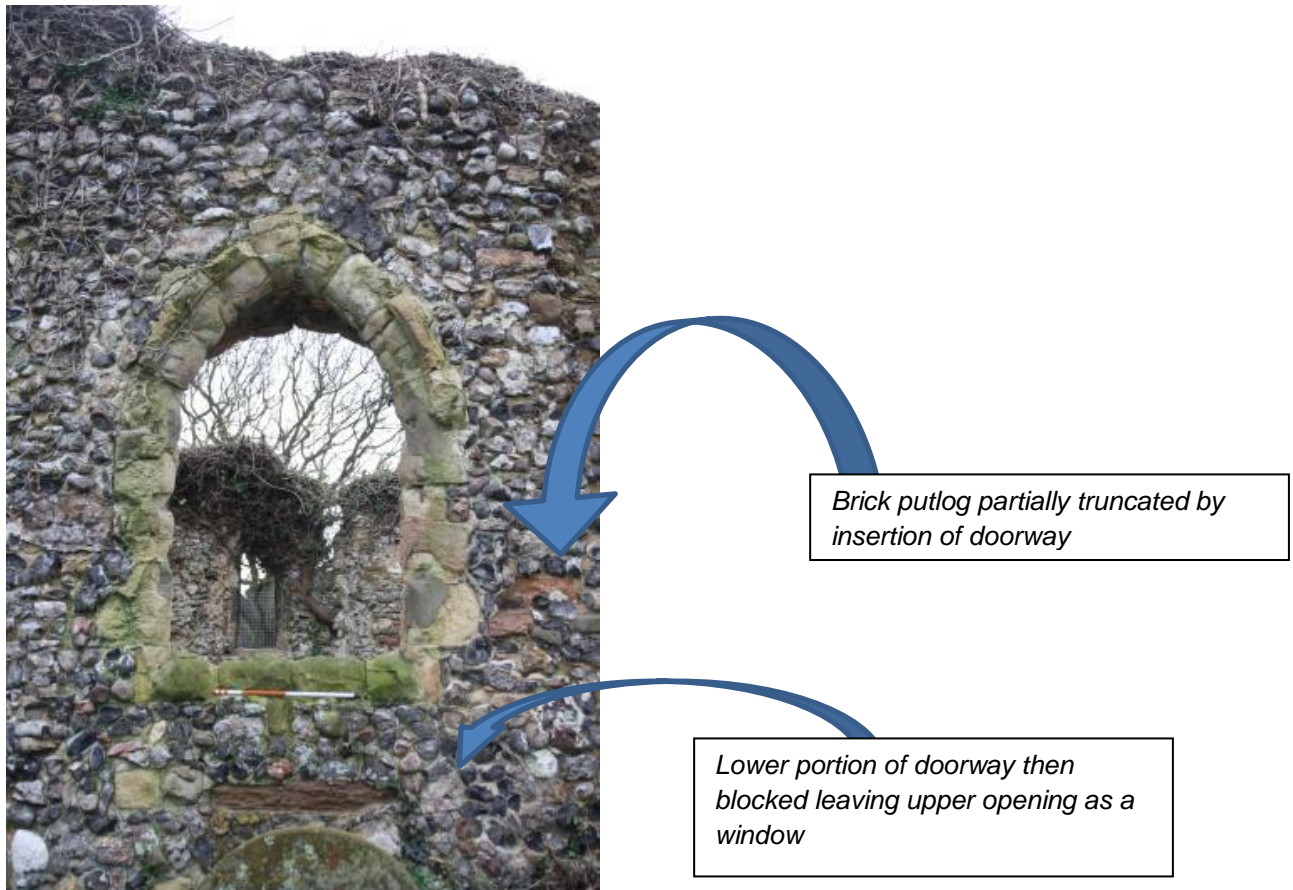
0.4m higher. A joint between windows A3 and A4 identifies the point at which construction changes and this is reflected in the appearance of the windows along this wall of which there are a total of four extant examples. Windows A4 and A5 lie to the west of the joint and are built of Caen stone externally with brick surrounds internally, they are of lancet design. To the east of the joint windows A2 and A3 are constructed both internally and externally of Caen stone with A2



Brick putlog at eastern end of northern wall. Typical of this end of the building and distinct from the western end.

of a similar lancet design to windows A4 and A5 mentioned above. Window A3 however is much wider and lower with a shallower pointed arch reminiscent of a doorway which a cursory inspection reveals it almost certainly was at one stage. Externally the blocking of this doorway has been carried out in flint but its line can still be traced, however internally 18th - 19th century red brick has been employed presumably hidden behind render prior to its ruination. This doorway had a relatively wide internal splay and this has been preserved to the ground level further highlighting it as the former location of a doorway. Interestingly it maybe that prior to its blocking this doorway itself was inserted into the existing wall perhaps replacing an earlier lancet window as close examination of the putlog immediately to the west of the opening suggests it has been partially cut away upon its east side. This truncation can best be explained by the cutting of a new opening or the widening of an existing one to create a doorway. Mid-way between windows A2 and A3 can be traced the outline of another window, in-filled with flint to make it almost invisible externally and indeed internally, however the loss of flint facing from the internal wall surface has revealed traces of the windows still plastered splayed jambs so we can be confident of its previous existence.

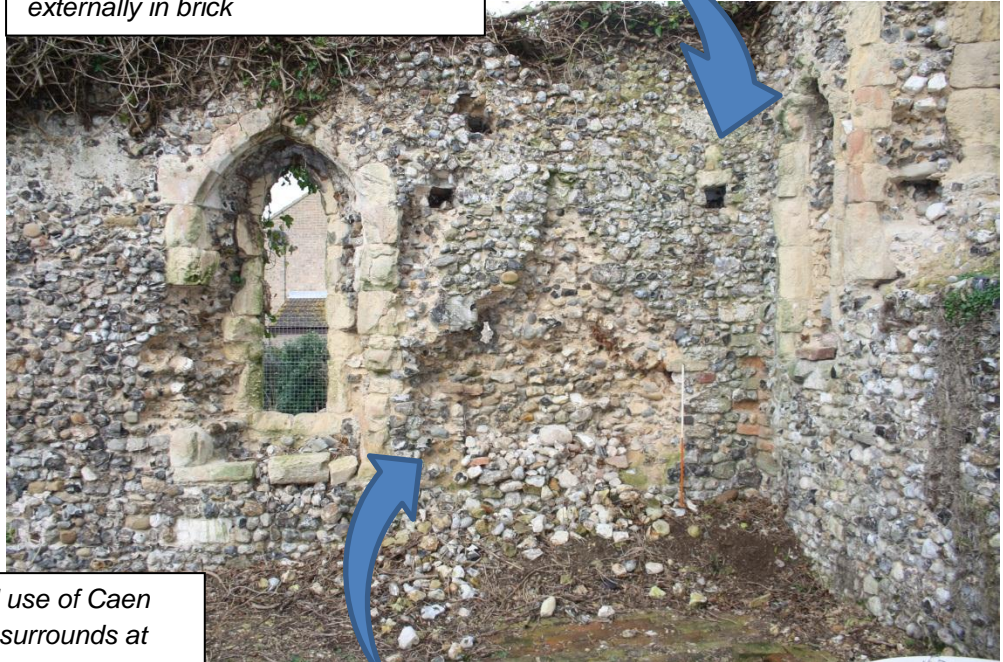
At the west end of this northern wall sits a low gabled porch with flint flushwork to the north flanked by two diagonal buttresses. There is some use of limestone over the arch where it forms a polychrome design with the squared flints and also at the buttresses where it has been used at the corners but the remainder of the structure to the east and west relies upon



roughly coursed and faced flints with repairs in brick. Sadly the western wall of the porch has all but collapsed with the eastern in a poor state of repair. A photo taken from the west around 1970 (Oldhoptononsea.co.uk) indicates that there may have been a small window in the southern wall of the porch prior to its collapse. The porch doorway formed in medieval brick and flint is broad with a four centred arch of chamfered brick reflecting the northern doorway into the church which the porch protects. This latter doorway has Caen stone surrounds and despite its advancing decay was of much finer quality than the porch entrance.

Internally there are two features of note. The first is the remnants of some kind of brick channel with Piscina below set into the wall to the east of the main doorway. The practical function of the channel feature is not altogether clear however Batcock suggests it maybe a draw-bar hole for the doorway to the west. The second feature located at the eastern end appears to have once been an aumbry with apparent ogee head recessed into the thickness of the wall just west of the corner. At first the assumption could only be that the surrounding masonry has been robbed since the churches ruination however the description given by the Reverend Suckling in 1847 and before the fire describes this aumbry as “remains unclosed with masonry” which must therefore lead us to believe the stones were removed before this date or that indeed it never had them.

*Putlogs internally framed in stone,
externally in brick*



*Note also the internal use of Caen
stone for the window surrounds at
this end of the wall*

*'Un-enclosed' aumbry at eastern end
of northern wall.*



*In-filled window at east end of north
wall. This external view has been
highlighted in outline but internally
the plastered splays can just be
seen where later flint work has been
lost*

East Wall

The east wall forms a double gable divided down the centre by a change of construction signifying the chancel to the south from the aisle to the north. Both chancel and aisle walls are constructed in flint with the aisle gable being roughly faced and un-coursed in the same manner as the north wall and using brick putlogs either side of a central window (A1). The flints of the chancel wall however are rough coursed and roughly faced more in common with the southern wall of the nave. Here the lower putlogs are of flint both internally and externally but the upper portions of the gable including the arch of the central window (N1) have been lost through collapse. Both the chancel and aisle windows are of Caen stone where it remains but only in the aisle window can the remnants of tracery be detected near the top of the arch. What fragments do remain are reticulated in design and probably of early 14th century in date (Rose, 1985). Fragments of fallen tracery can be seen in close proximity and others may be recovered with closer inspection. We know from a photograph taken of the ruins around 1900 (oldhoptononsea.com) that prior to the collapse of the upper gable the chancel window was of a simple three light Y tracery design dating to the early years of the 14th century. From this same photograph it appears that window A1 had what must have been three narrow lights and that the wall above it at this time stood a full metre or more higher than today. A low diagonal buttress at the north eastern corner between the aisles north and east walls is of flint with Caen dressings. There is no indication that this is not an original feature to the construction of these two walls but it is of note that internally portions of this angle have been constructed in a reddish orange brick with a coarse sandy texture somewhat different in appearance to much of the other medieval brick to be found in the church. A loose brick of identical character found in close proximity had straw impressions on one side and sunken margins.

Internally the remainder of this wall to the south displayed the remnants of two niches either side of window A1. The northernmost niche was formed in Caen stone although very much eroded while the southern has been robbed away or was never enclosed much like the aumbry on the northern wall discussed above. Immediately to the south of this second niche are the remnants of a dividing wall which must have formed the eastern portion of the arcade between nave and aisle. What remains is a crumbling stub perhaps 2m or more in height built of flint and faced at least partially



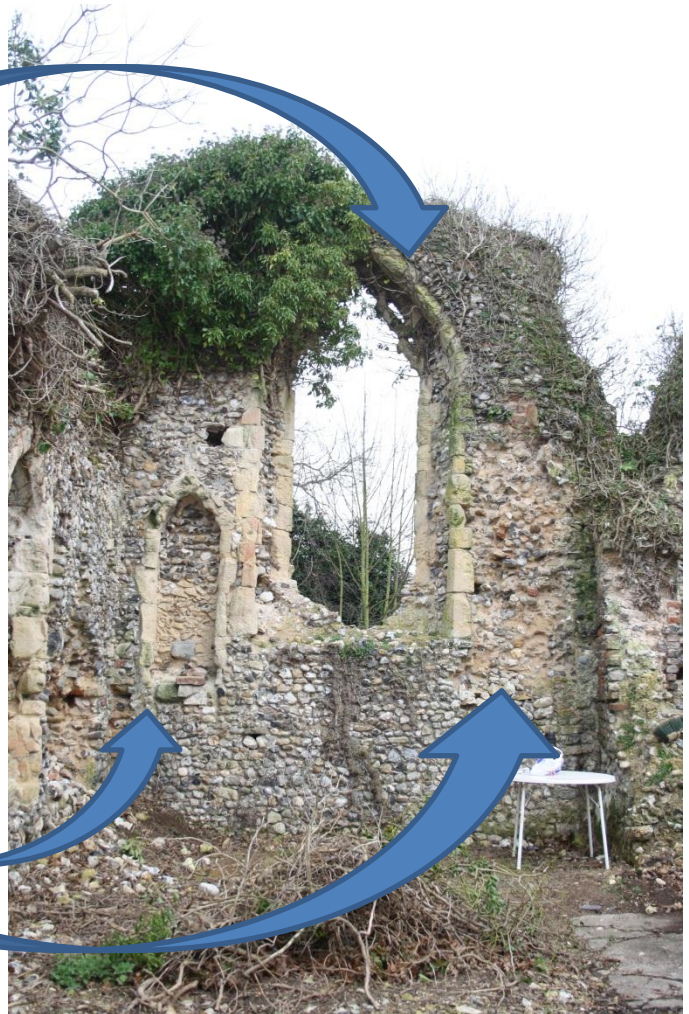
Bricks visible at internal angle of north eastern corner

with brick. From the reverend Sucklings sketch of the church dated 1847 this arcade continued west with a series of eight pointed arches resting upon seven octagonal piers. None of these piers remain with the possible exception of a portion of what might be a brick pier base at the western end just to the north of the tower.

The interior of the chancel east wall displays several more putlogs that are not visible externally and the remnants of a plank of wood set into the wall below and to the south of the central window. Batcock (1990) suggests this is the sill of another blocked aumbry and this is possible although it might benefit from closer inspection.

East wall of chancel with traces of reticulated tracery surviving at the head of the central window

Niches present to the left and right of the central window although that to the right lacks any enclosing stonework



South Wall

The south wall of St Margaret's as alluded to above is built of roughly faced flints lain with rough coursing and although the flints used to the east might be generally larger in size at least to the authors eye, no conclusive evidence exists to suggest that it is anything other than of a single build. A drawing of this elevation from the early 19th century does however indicate what might be a break in construction at this same point (Issac Johnson, 1818 from oldhoptononsea.co.uk). A total of five windows survive all with pointed arches but Johnsons drawing of St Margret's prior to the fire indicates that a sixth and seventh almost certainly

stood at the eastern end where the wall has now collapsed. Unlike the windows to the north almost all the remaining windows are formed with brick surrounds and although externally much of the brick has been lost enough remains to suggest they were lancets with wide internal splays. Window N7 immediately to the east of the southern doorway is a little odd in that its lower portions appear to have been blocked up with a mixture of flint externally and limestone internally however this probably represents alterations to a low window. Window N4 towards the centre of the wall is the only window with limestone surrounds and it is somewhat narrower than the others on this wall. From the exterior it maybe be possible to see infilling to the west and beneath the sill of the window, perhaps indicating some alterations to its size. Internally it coincides with a curved recess within the thickness of the wall detailed as the pulpit upon Reverend Suckling's plan (from oldhoptononsea.co.uk). A set of curving brick steps now much broken up by foliage and seemingly leading nowhere provided the access to the pulpit and from here close inspection of the jambs of window N4 reveals significant fire damage. Immediately to the west of this window is a large crack in the wall resulting at least in some part from well established ivy growth. The wall to the east of this crack has a considerable southerly lean and would certainly benefit from a detailed structural inspection. It is interesting to note that medieval brick has been used upon the internal face of this southern wall which would probably date this portion of the building to the 14th century, however as previously observed by Rose (1985) the brick has the appearance at least in places of a skin which may have been applied to an existing face. The southern entrance to the church is located at the western end of this wall through a pointed arch of limestone and brick doorway dating to the late 15th century. This doorway is in a poor condition and with the loss of its eastern jamb is now held up with wooden formers. Externally Caen stone has been employed for its surrounds but internally the arch is formed in brick with limestone at the jambs. At one time an internal stone Piscina sat immediately to its east but this is now in a fragmentary state.



The head of this brick lancet can be seen in this southern wall window although the jambs are much eroded

West Wall

The west wall consists of just the western gable wall of the aisle, the remainder being taken up by the western tower to the south. Its construction is consistent with the western portion of the northern wall with rough coursed and faced flints and evidence to suggest a flint putlog on its exterior but its upper portions are still obscured by ivy growth. The wall nevertheless remains in good condition with the upper gable surviving to close to its original height. At its centre window A6 once displayed two lights framed in Y tracery dating to the early 14th century but this has been lost in the last 100 years and now only the Caen stone jambs and pointed arch remain externally with medieval brick used upon the splayed internal jambs.

There is no suggestion in the surrounding fabric that this window is anything other than part of the original build of this wall.

The Tower

The square tower, located at the western end of the nave appears to be largely of a single build which Rose places around 1400. As with the rest of the church it is predominately constructed of flint with some use of limestone and brick. The flints are faced but there is little concession to coursing if any and unlike the rest of the structure it makes use of galleting at least in its lower joints where inspection was practical. There was also a great deal more use of limestone rubble including some fragments of the distinctive shelly Barnack stone from the Lincolnshire region. Diagonal buttresses project from both the north-west and south-west corners of the building continuing up in stages to within one quarter of the full height of the tower and a plinth runs across the base of the tower to the south, west and to the north where it lies outside the church. Rectangular ashlar blocks of varying size and lain on end have been used at the corners where there are no buttresses and continue up to a moulded limestone cornice beneath a parapet which looks to have been heavily repaired in red brick. The tower appears to have had two floors and a flat roof space, the lower floor being accessed by an external staircase rising from the south west corner of the aisle and the remaining floors presumably by internal ladders. The first floor doorway has been blocked up although it is not clear when this occurred and a second doorway directly below this one and just visible above the growing mound of guano has also been in-filled. There is no trace of the latter doorway on the northern face of this wall as later masonry has been built up against it. The upper floor has a two light perpendicular belfry window with square hood moulding on each of the four walls and there are further windows on the floor below to the south and west, although their actual form is obscured by the extensive covering of ivy. On the ground floor only the western face has a window and this is of two lights below a four centred arch. To the east the upper portions of the red brick tower arch have been partially in-filled with brick above a wooden lintel inserted at the springing of the broad pointed arch and above this the scar of the previous gable roof can be traced against the wall of the tower. Internally the base of the tower is filled with pigeon faeces up to almost the height of the ground floor window while the wooden floor joists above have either collapsed or are in an advanced state of decay.



Blocked ground floor doorway at base of tower. Note the build-up of guano from pigeons nesting in the tower

Comparable Local Churches

The use of a double nave is interesting and fairly unusual in this area, the closest comparable example is at Pakefield some 7 miles distant and to the south of Lowestoft.

Here the twin nave served two adjacent but quite separate parishes, effectively operating as two churches. Another example can be seen in Wisbech on the border with Cambridgeshire. It is possible that the additional nave at Hopton might have performed a similar function, perhaps catering for the population of Newton as well, a village lost to the sea circa 1350 which approximates the date of construction for the north aisle.



The unusual twin nave at Pakefield. Author

Although several local churches make use of medieval brick to a limited extent you have to go as far as Tunstall near Acle to find one which makes use of it on a similar scale as here at Hopton on Sea.



Brick window surround at Tunstall. Author

Also ruined or partially so the windows at SS Peter and Pauls are formed in a similar manner to St Margaret's in a not dissimilar type of brick.

Of those churches visited in the local area it was clear that at the turn of the 14th century considerable money and effort was being spent on programmes of building and remodelling. The Y tracery style of window in



Y tracery at east end of St Micheals, Rushmere. Author

particular survives well at St Mary's in Ashby, St John the Baptist in Lound and St Michaels in Rushmere. The area contains several other ruined or part ruined churches such as at Corton the next village to the south, Flixton and Raynham.

Conclusion

It is clear from the results of this survey that St Margaret's is a fascinating multi period building with a rich history. It stands today as a physical record of the parish with its adaptations and alterations reflecting the societies changing beliefs, aspirations, wealth, resources, skills and population as well as innumerable other aspects of previous generations. Probably St Margaret's began as a simple single celled structure sometime before 1300. A chancel may have been added to the east shortly afterwards before the

addition of a large northern aisle at the beginning of the 14th century. This aisle was extended to the east around the mid-14th century to produce the distinctive double nave plan while the present tower was constructed about 1400. The porch was appended later that century to complete the major construction works but smaller alterations followed including the cutting of a new doorway at the east end of the north wall followed by its conversion to a window and the blocking of another window immediately to the east of this. After the fire a small mortuary chapel was erected within and to the north of the tower which survived up until the mid-20th century. The use of the churchyard beyond the fire and the gentle development of Hopton since ensured it remained as a distinct area which now serves as an important village space and compliments the ruined St Margaret's.

As St Margaret's moves onwards towards a new phase in its long history opportunities for further insights in to its past maybe present themselves. Repairs to the existing structure and any renovation work may allow us to examine the southern wall for instance in greater detail and perhaps refine its date and phasing. Additionally a detailed inspection of the brickwork used within the building would allow its comparison to existing chronologies for the area and refine the dating of the churches development.

Any reuse of the building would almost certainly require some below ground interventions as well and the potential gains to our understanding of St Margaret's through proper monitoring of these interventions should not be under estimated. Internally this may reveal earlier floor levels for example or the original line of the nave's north wall while externally other long demolished additions might come to light or even evidence for an earlier church.

It seems then that Hopton on Sea still has a great deal to learn about its past from the original St Margaret's, let us hope that this fine church is still standing for future generations to ponder over.

Acknowledgements

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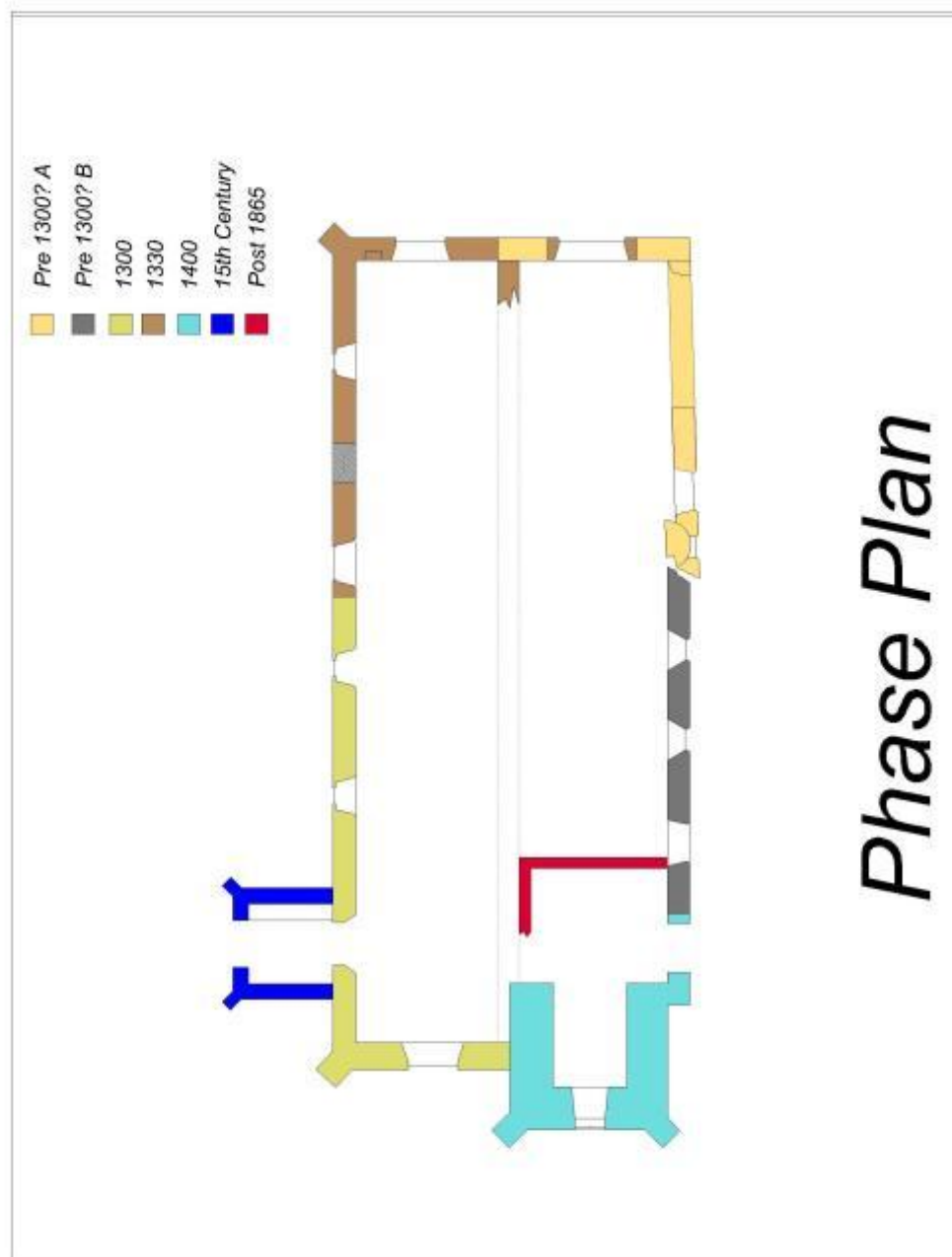
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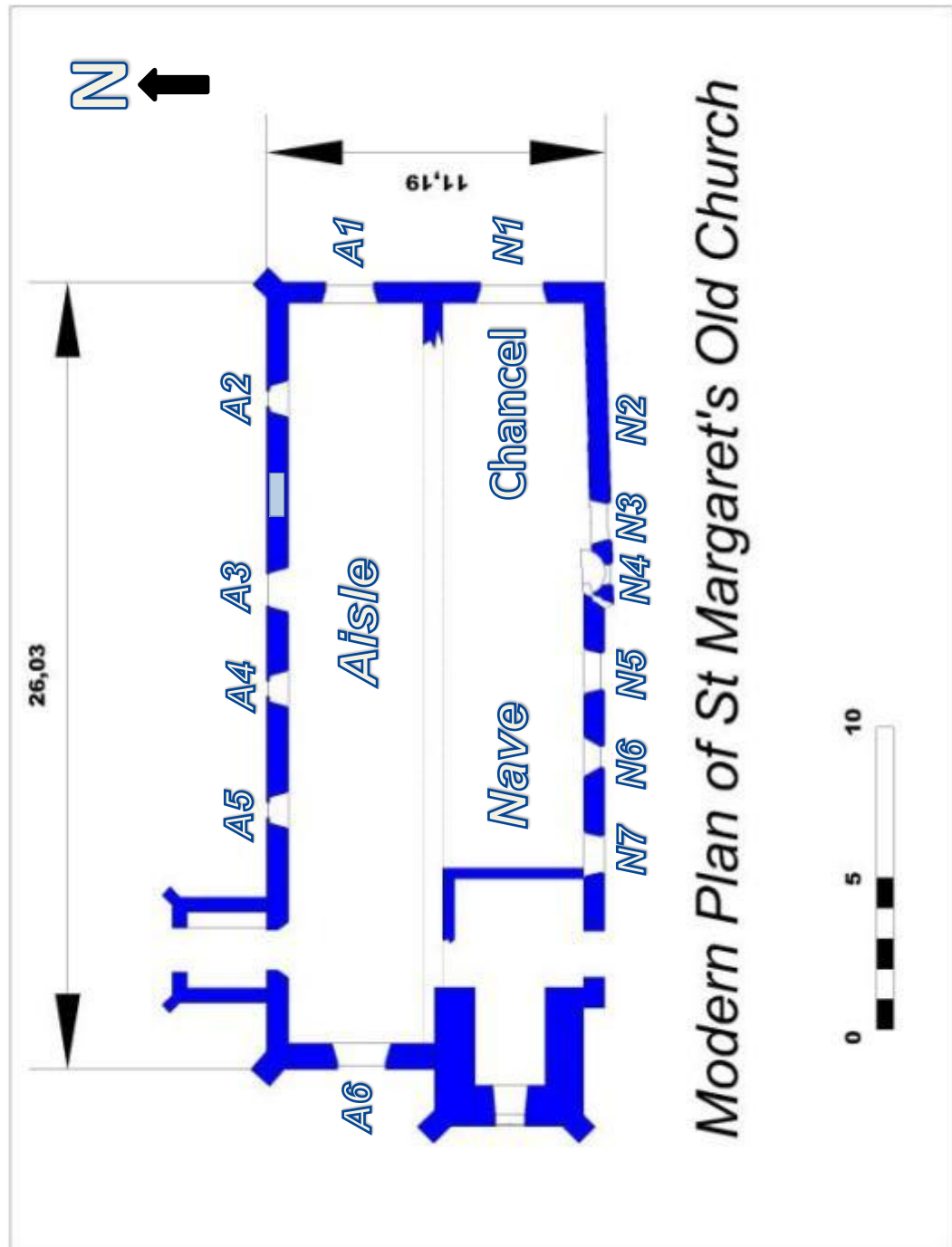
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www.oldhoptononsea.co.uk





Terminology

Aumbry: Recess in a church wall in which sacred vessels are kept, usually near an altar

Caen Stone: A light creamy-yellow Jurassic limestone quarried in northwestern France near the city of Caen

Flushwork: The decorative combination on the same flat plane of flint and ashlar stone

Galleting: Chips or spalls of flint pressed into mortar joint as a decorative scheme or to protect joints from the weather.

Piscina: A stone basin with a drain for carrying away the water used in ceremonial ablutions

Putlog: Small holes that were intended to receive the ends of logs or squared wooden beams in the walls of buildings such as scaffolding during a buildings erection