

The Parish Church of St. Gregory and St George, Pentlow

A Short History by Andrew Clarke



Introduction:

Pentlow Church is a very old Saxon church, probably over a thousand years old, and possibly even dating from the early years of the 7th century during the revival of Christianity in East Anglia. The Church of St. Gregory and St. George (previously St. George but its original dedication is unknown), is one of only six ancient round towered churches in Essex and is its most northerly church. Experts in Anglo-Saxon churches date it back in the middle Saxon period (c. AD 650-850). It has kept almost all its original two-cell layout, with a long narrow rectangular nave, and a narrower stilted apsidal chancel: The only other examples of eastern apses in Essex include those at Great and Little Maplestead, some eight miles to the south.

The church, originally just nave and apsidal chancel, was built to straddle a circular tumulus, or mound, in the valley floor of the Stour, in a landscape crisscrossed with prehistoric crop-marks. The walls were built in 10 inch bands of whole flint, stones and erratics, and are around two and a half foot thick. The walls are of uncoursed construction with large mortar gaps. The internal width of the nave is twenty foot, the maximum possible for an oak roof span with the technology available at the time.

The distinctive round tower is much later in date, possibly as late as 1320. It owes its design to a much earlier tradition. The main entrance to the church was originally through the west door, in the Byzantine fashion, but this grand doorway is now merely the entrance to the ground floor of the tower, which was built in front of it. The base of the tower now serves as the vestry, and its grand doorway was the original entrance to the church. The doorway is tall and narrow, with a later outer face applied to the west of it.

The apse and the west main-entrance seem to be a byzantine influence, based originally on roman secular public buildings, and very rare in East Anglian churches. Pentlow Church is one of only six round-towered churches with an apse. It is more usual to see a south door and a square east-end to the chancel with a large west window above the altar, a layout that owes more to the Celtic church. There has been a suggestion that the chancel was originally smaller and rectangular, based on the fact that the foundation plinth of the apse is incomplete.