

HAVE YOU NOTICED HOW THE CHANCEL DOES NOT QUITE FIT THE NAVE?

Remember that there was a little church on this site before the present church was built. Establishing the exact course of construction of first the new nave, and then the new chancel, is a matter that continues to intrigue me and, although I cannot claim to have come up with the definitive answer, I do think that I have probably got it broadly right. If anyone can remember as far back as the second article in this series then you will know that the master mason, Robert Wodehirst probably completely demolished the old nave in 1360, and started work on a new one, leaving the old chancel still standing. However, in 1362 the spire of Norwich Cathedral collapsed and Wodehirst won the contract to rebuild the presbytery. It was not long before every available mason was at work on the east end of the cathedral. Work even stopped on the cathedral cloisters.

At Swanton Morley, a lot of materials were on site but the aisle walls had only been built up to the sills of the windows. And there work stopped for about twenty years. Work did not restart on the cloisters until 1381, so it is likely that it did not restart at Swanton Morley until, say, 1383. My best guess is that the nave was essentially complete, apart from the upper part of the tower, as the 14th century drew to a close. Let us try to imagine what it looked like at this time.

Standing in the centre aisle of the new nave you would have looked in wonder at the magnificent tracery in the aisle windows and seen in front of you the huge chancel arch which was much too big for the old chancel. There would probably have been some wood and canvas structure filling the gap to make it weathertight. High above this arch was a large east window bringing in even more light. This window would have been high above the roof of the old chancel. Externally, the east end of the nave would have been supported by the four buttresses that still exist. Fig.1 shows the end of the south aisle. The outer pair of buttresses are, of course, designed to support the aisle walls, while the inner two buttresses are aligned with the piers of the arcades.

We cannot be sure, but it is probable that the new chancel was not built for some time after this; some time around 1440 currently seems most likely, but this is also around the time at which the nave may have gained a new roof. For his will, dated 1441, John Foxe left a bequest to provide a lead roof for the nave. The presumption is that there was a thatched roof, which would have required a steep pitch and that it was replaced by a lead roof with a much lower pitch. If this correct, then it is possible that it was necessary to lower the high east window.

The master mason would have been asked to devise a way of replacing the little chancel by a much larger one, and this building would of course need to have its walls buttressed. At its east end were the diagonally aligned buttresses that we see today, and at the west end he slotted the building in between the pre-existing inner pair of buttresses that supported the east wall of the nave. However, this meant that the first of the chancel windows was partially obscured by the buttress and he had to cut these buttresses back. If you look at Fig.1 you can see that the plinth of the base has been lowered and cut back. You can even see where the horizontal 'stringcourse' beneath the aisle window has been cut off where it meets the buttress, and rebuilt at a lower level. You can also see that, higher up, the depth of the buttress (i.e. the E-W dimension) has been markedly reduced.

In Fig.2, which shows the south wall of the chancel, you can see how the windows are crowded towards the west (left hand) end of the wall. So why did the mason not introduce a short length of wall before the first window? This would have given a more balanced external appearance and avoided cutting back the buttress. The answer lies, I think, in the way in which the land falls away to the east. The small square window shows the location of the rib-vaulted crypt, which had to be built to raise-up the east end. Inserting a length of wall would have moved the whole chancel further east and this would have required an even more expensive crypt.

You can also see how the ridge of the chancel roof appears to touch the high east window. In fact it intrudes into it and the bottom part of the window tracery has been cut off and filled in. Whether this was a result of the large new chancel or the new lead roof of the nave is another story!

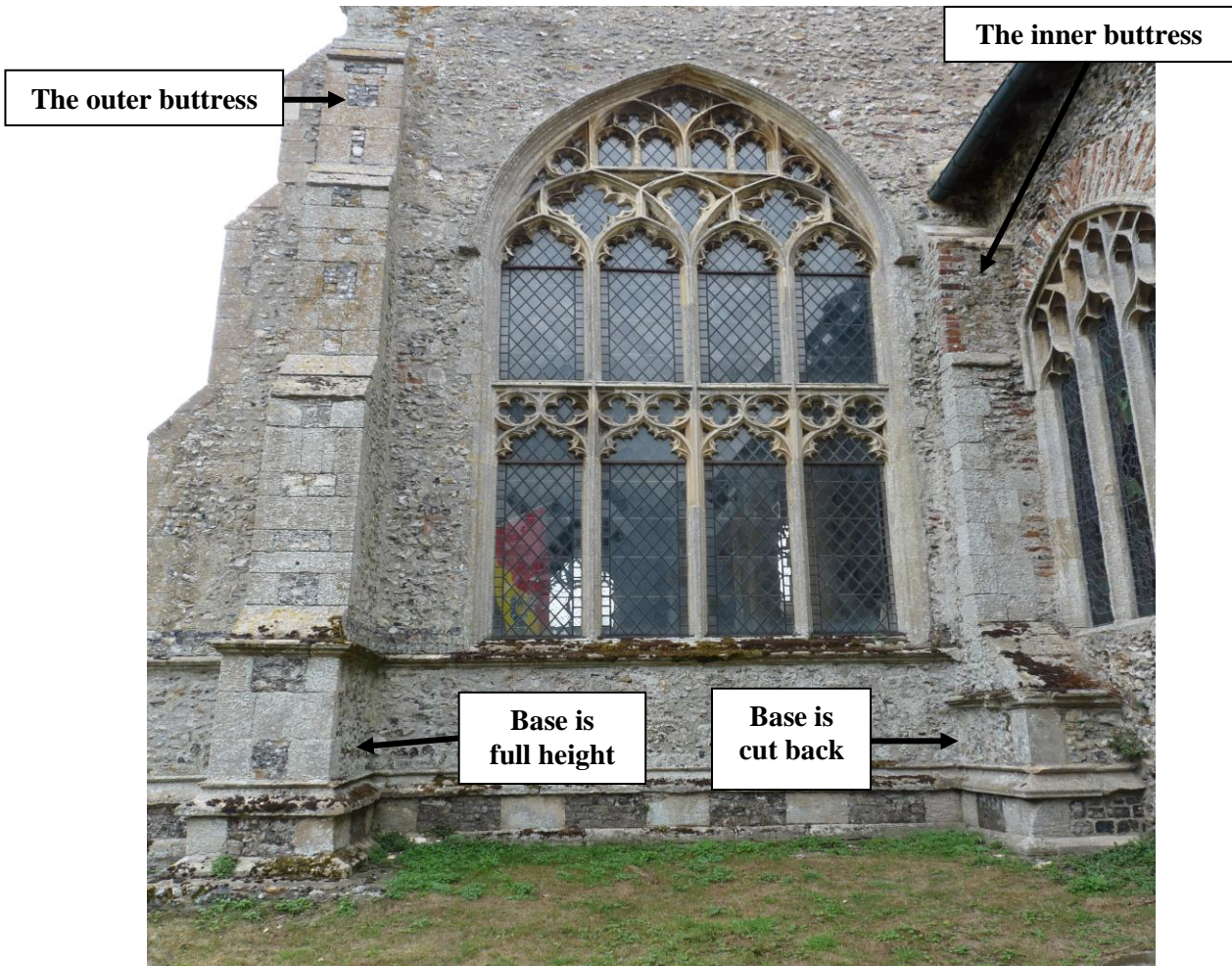


Fig.1 General view of the east end of the south aisle, showing the inner and outer buttresses



Fig.2 Note how the chancel windows are crowded towards the west (left hand) end