

Notes on the foundation and architecture of St Gregory's, Norwich

The church of St Gregory is at once one of the most magnificent and most mysterious in Norwich. Although ostensibly an early foundation, preceding its neighbours to both east and west, it is not documented before the thirteenth century. Its dating has to be based on other evidence. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the parish boundary is that St Gregory's is the only one of the five parishes abutting the river between St John Maddermarket and St Swithin to extend south of St Giles/Broad Street. It could thus be thought to have pre-existed the parishes of St Peter Mancroft and St Giles as it intrudes onto territory they might otherwise have claimed when their churches were constructed c. 1070 and late 11th century respectively. The only architectural feature at St Gregory's of early date is the west tower, which has two 'porthole' openings high in the north and south walls suggesting a late 11th-century date. That may indicate the period when a stone building replaced a wooden one.

The bulk of the extant structure is datable to the late 14th century, with a nave design stylistically of the 1380s culminating in a new chancel for which a payment was made in 1394, and a dedication of the high altar in 1401. It is probably crucial to understanding the ambition and quality of this building to note its dependence on the cathedral priory, its substantial revenues being appropriated to the Infirmary. The attribution of the design of the St Gregory's to Robert Wodehirst (Wadherst), who was 'master' at the cathedral cloister in 1385-86, is especially suggestive. The tracery designs in the north walk of the cloister provide an excellent comparison with the aisle windows at St Gregory's. But it takes more than a great architect and an Infirmaryer to create a work of this distinctiveness, and short of evidence that there were leading members of the parish community making the aesthetic and funding decisions, it is worth postulating the involvement of the bishop, Henry Despenser.

Several characteristics of the design and layout make St Gregory's distinctive. It is the first church we know of in the city to be extended over a right of way – in this case the road runs underneath the high altar platform. This involved raising the east end on a flight of steps to provide adequate headroom for the passageway beneath. The effect is (or was) imposing, but badly compromised in its current usage which largely obscures the vista. The eastern bay of the sanctuary project beyond the side aisles sufficiently to allow a tall and wide window to be provided north and south of the altar, so as to maximise the lighting. The church has a 'through-built' or integrated interior, of uniform width and roof height and design from west to east and with no chancel arch. It is the earliest example of the phenomenon to survive in the city intact.



The clearstorey has two windows per bay, with alternating tracery patterns. Alternation also occurs in the large windows in the aisles, an idea as well as the style arguably deriving from the cathedral cloister. There are several other telling details: the aisle windows are set in wall-arches supported on slender ashlar wall shafts – the earliest example in the city; the roof has an alternating system of tie-beams and arch braces, the latter ascending from angel corbels (again precocious); and the capitals of the main arcade piers are strongly crenelated.



The overall impression created by the building is one of clarity of purpose mingled with particular detail. An example of the latter is the vault of the western tower, which has an octagonal central opening in it to facilitate hoisting bells up to the top stage. Its form is clearly based on the octagon at Ely. This can be used to bolster the suggestion that the mason Robert Wodehirst was involved in the design as he is recorded working at Ely between 1387 and 1393. Ely is also a potential source for the crenelated capitals, which appear on the 'throne' canopy in Prior Crauden's chapel, and so too is St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, where Wodehirst had worked in the 1350s. How much of the spatial articulation and massing of the

interior of St Gregory's would have been the mason's conception, is another matter (whether or not Wodehirst was in charge). So much was dependent on the site and the character of the earlier building there. For example, the stairs up to the sanctuary cut across the lower part of a door in the south wall which would originally have led down a barrel-vaulted undercroft, possibly originally used as a carny chapel. As the ground it occupies is falling away to the east another of its functions was certainly to act as a foundation for the east end of the church at main floor level. But when was it built? The blocking of the door by the late 14th-century steps suggests it was a leftover from an earlier building project. If that is the case then it follows that the church had already been lengthened at least once and, furthermore, that its chancel was already the same width as it is today. Potentially, therefore, it was already an integrated interior as also seems to have been the case at St Stephen's in Norwich by about 1320.