

St James Pockthorpe

The western tower block

The present west end of St James's is its most remarkable, elaborate and striking feature. The same width as the original nave, it extended the building some 3.5m to the west so that it stood hard up against the street. Perhaps as a consequence, the north-west corner of the church was chamfered off to facilitate vehicles turning the corner; presumably for reasons of symmetry the south-west corner was given the same treatment. At a higher level on both corners a corbel supported right-angled quoins. Though its details are now very worn, the northern corbel is quite possibly the original stone in situ, with a carved half-length atlas figure with 'demonic' bat-ears.



St James Pockthorpe, John Kirkpatrick, c.1724
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(NWHCM 1894.76.1724)

This western extension is divided internally into three compartments, the central one - roughly square - rising up to a tower supporting an octagonal belfry. The *Buildings of England* entry could be taken to imply that the octagonal top is no earlier than 1743 (Pevsner and Wilson 1997, 238). However a drawing at Norwich Castle Museum (left) by John Kirkpatrick, who died in 1728, shows that the medieval original had much the same form. The drawing also suggests four pinnacles, each surmounted by possibly figural sculptures. To north and south of the central square bay are flanking compartments, probably envisaged as buttressing the tower. Each has an arched

opening into the ground level of the tower itself as well as into the nave to the east. What is thus created is like a small western transept, or narthex; it is hard to characterise given some uncertainties about the exact form of the original openings to the east, which were widened in a later building campaign.

Regardless of those details, the general source of the design is clear enough: the central and axial octagonal belfries of mendicant churches such as the Blackfriars in Norwich (Sutermeister 1977) or the Greyfriars in King's Lynn (Martin 1966). Given that St James's is less than 100m north of the site of the Carmelite friary, it is quite likely to be an echo of the central tower there. The mouldings of the north and south doorways into this western block and of the transverse arches under the tower itself suggest a date around the middle of the 14th century, the period when the friary churches in Norwich were themselves well advanced. It was a clever idea to transpose this design to the west end of the church. The solution was arrived at no doubt because of the very limited space available between the old west wall of the nave and the line of the road, which meant that a self-standing square-plan tower would either have had to be very narrow or would have bitten into the nave space. The huge advantage of the arrangement adopted was that it both supported a tower and extended the nave space under the supporting arches to the west.

Bibliography

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