

Comparison of limestone fallen from Waytemore Castle mound and in St Michael's Church.

Rationale: The present St Michael's dates, on stylistic grounds, from some time (probably less than a century) prior to 1431 when the Churchwardens' Accounts begin. For Waytemore, an important date is 1346 when a licence to crenelate was granted to the bishop of London (a very brief document available from a link on the Gatehouse website). Both buildings are flint-built because that is the available local stone; the limestone to strengthen the doorways, window embrasures, steps and buttresses of both buildings had to be imported. Waytemore, however, was robbed of almost all its limestone when the castle fell into disrepair (a couple of pieces may remain in the keep's north wall). Thus the limestone found when the hedge was removed from around the mound this year could be the last remnants of that structural material fallen from the top.

The castle was the bishop of London's administrative centre here and his gaol; St Michael's was also in the bishop's diocese, so it seems a reasonable bet that the construction of St Michaels and the improvement (crenelation) of Waytemore might have coincided, given that the limestone had to be imported for both – quite an expensive operation no doubt given the quantities involved. Probably the limestone came from quarries in Totternhoe, Bedfordshire, once owned by St Albans Abbey.

The church: St Michaels was extensively rebuilt in the 19th century, so any comparison of the materials has to proceed with care. The Rev W McCarthy¹ provided much historical detail about the church building and its various stages. We can summarise him by saying that only the external walls are likely to date to its construction sometime in the late 14th to early 15th centuries. However, if a possible Norman predecessor was also stone-built, its components may have been reused in part. Thus McCarthy recalls the burial of Mrs Roberts in 1850 in a vault at the west central end of the nave, when the workmen broke into 'an ancient Early Norman Vault'; he notes also that the present font, dated to 1150, was discovered during protective underpinning in the 1868-9 restoration – suggesting a smaller Norman church had existed on the site prior to the present building.

The present church exterior, for many years covered in plaster (removed in 1863), was repaired with flint and mortar in the major renovation of 1868-69, so its overall appearance is now quite uniform. The windows were all replaced using the originals as templates, and the present buttresses may reflect that renovation too. Nevertheless, examining carefully the exterior, some limestone blocks are visible, especially at the building's internal angles (see photos – the limestones are arrowed). The stones therein are mostly grey, not buff like the newer masonry.

The mound: I've seen only three fallen stones around the mound (see photos). Perhaps Museum of London Archaeology has rescued others. There are also a couple built into the keep's northern wall which may be original. There was also a shaped grey limestone block, apparently a segment of a window embrasure, uncovered in the pit excavated to the southwest of the mound in September 2022. The paucity of castle limestone is to be expected since it was valuable, and was likely scavenged when the castle fell into disrepair and the gaol was sold for its materials in 1649. The fallen mound stones have been shaped (one only roughly) and have chisel marks and traces of mortar. They appear to match the church stones in colour and size quite well, so the hypothesis that the church and mound stones have the same source is not, at least, outlandish. But some of the church stones are weathered in a way that does not match the mound stones, although this could reflect long exposure to the elements.

Caveats: This is a photographic comparison. A close comparison of the stones side-by-side would allow a better examination, especially of their fine structure, although even then it would not prove that the materials came from the same source. But hopefully the idea – that the limestone used in the church and the castle keep, which all had to be imported, could have come from the same source (possibly the quarry at Totternhoe) – will stimulate discussion and further investigation, not least to more accurately date St Michael's church itself. The input of experts with much greater insight would be warmly welcome.

Mike James, 12 April 2023.

¹ McCarthy W (1945) *St Michael's Church: Historical and Descriptive Notes on the Ancient Parish Church of Bishop's Stortford*. Herts & Essex Observer, Bishop's Stortford.



For scale the book is 23.5 x 16.0 x 2.0 cm

