

Church of St. James, Avebury, Wiltshire.

The photos this page are described from left to right.

The church of St. James in the small village of Avebury is situated just outside one of the greatest stone circles in England. Avebury is about 6 miles west of Marlborough and a mile north of the Great West Road, itself formerly a Roman road. So wrote H.Taylor in volume one of his book "Anglo-Saxon Architecture".

At first sight the church is a typical medieval structure with a 15th century west tower. Heavily restored in the 19th century, the Norman arcades to the nave were replaced in 1828, and the chancel replaced in 1878 and clerestory windows inserted in the nave walling. The nave however is Anglo-Saxon and has 5 windows of that period remaining, also the north-west quoin is extant, and is of side-alternate build. Internally the Anglo-Saxon construction of the nave is indicated by the tall thin walls, by three circular windows high up in the north wall, by the two round-headed single-splayed windows lower in the side walls to the west of the later arcades and by the square string-course, chamfered below, which runs along the whole of the north wall and may be seen within the north aisle, close to the later roof. Taylor mentions how the pre-Norman character of these (lower) windows is indicated not only by their construction in large stones but also from the way in which they have been partly cut away by the Norman arcade (and those cut away by the 1828 arcade). He observes how the line of the internal splay goes right through the wall save for a small square rebate cut at the outer face of the wall, doubtless for the housing of a wooden shutter. In complete contrast the inner splays of the upper circular windows (in the north wall) were of plaster and the outer faces were cut in a single square stone about a foot in thickness through which the circular apertures were cut with a splay both inward and outward. Three of these stones are still in their original places, although all but one had been removed during the addition of the clerestory in 1878. They would have been lost but for the intervention of Mr. Ponting who first interpreted their significance in 1880 and subsequently directed the restoration of the north wall to its present state. The place of the missing circular window had already been occupied by one of the new clerestory windows and the wall now contains only three of the original windows. Around the inner splay of the stone outer faces of these upper windows may still be seen the series of holes drilled in the stones to accept sticks which formed a framework for a conical structure of wattle (basketwork) round which the rubble masonry of the wall was built and within which the plaster inner face of the window was formed.

During the rebuilding of the chancel in 1878 the foundations of a square-ended Anglo-Saxon chancel were found, and the original floor level was also discovered, about 2 ft below the present floor.

Dimensions taken by H.Taylor. Nave 36 ft long internally and 24 ft 6 in. high to the top of the original work as measured from the present floor (originally 2 ft higher). My measurements taken using laser device - L 10.777 metres/35.384 ft; H to underside tie beam 8.215M/26.972 ft; W 5.22M/17.13 ft.

The apertures of the upper circular windows are about 7 inches in diameter. They have their centre line about 23ft (i) above the present floor. The two lower round-headed windows have apertures about 4 ft tall externally, tapering from 1ft 4in at the sill to 1ft 3in at the springing of the heads. Their sills are about 9ft above the present floor, and internally their apertures are splayed to be about 2ft 6in wide and 6ft tall.

Note (i). I would estimate that Taylors dimension here is too high.

1. External face of north round-headed window .
2. The internal face of the same window.



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3. The westernmost circular window in the nave north wall.
4. The other remaining two circular windows.
5. A part of the bold string-course, at its western end, on the external face of the north wall (viewed from the north aisle). Note: this is virtually identical in size and section to that on the north wall of the tower at Wimborne Minster and which can be seen from inside the north transept, and also on both transepts at a lower level - see the relevant file on that particular church.
6. The NW quoin, which apart from one tall stone some 30 inches high, is of side-alternate construction. This photograph has been enhanced (sharpened) to distinguish the different stones.



We might expect the two round-headed windows to originally have had sisters running along both walls of the nave, to the order of perhaps three or four each side and with the usual north and south doorways, now vanished. It may be that the lower windows were somewhat later additions to the original nave, to which the higher circular windows (originally on each side of the nave) belonged.



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7. This picture is to show the progression of building of the three successive north aisles and how they sat against the NW quoin of the Anglo-Saxon nave. The red vertical line picks out the probable corner of the relatively narrow Norman aisle and also its roof line. The "red window" shows the probable site of the Norman window. The blue lines show the extent of its Early English successor. The EE window has survived in the west wall. In all medieval builds the Anglo-Saxon circular clerestory windows were allowed to remain and until the 19th century restoration when new windows were inserted but not without respecting the antiquity of the pre-conquest windows in the north wall of the nave.

