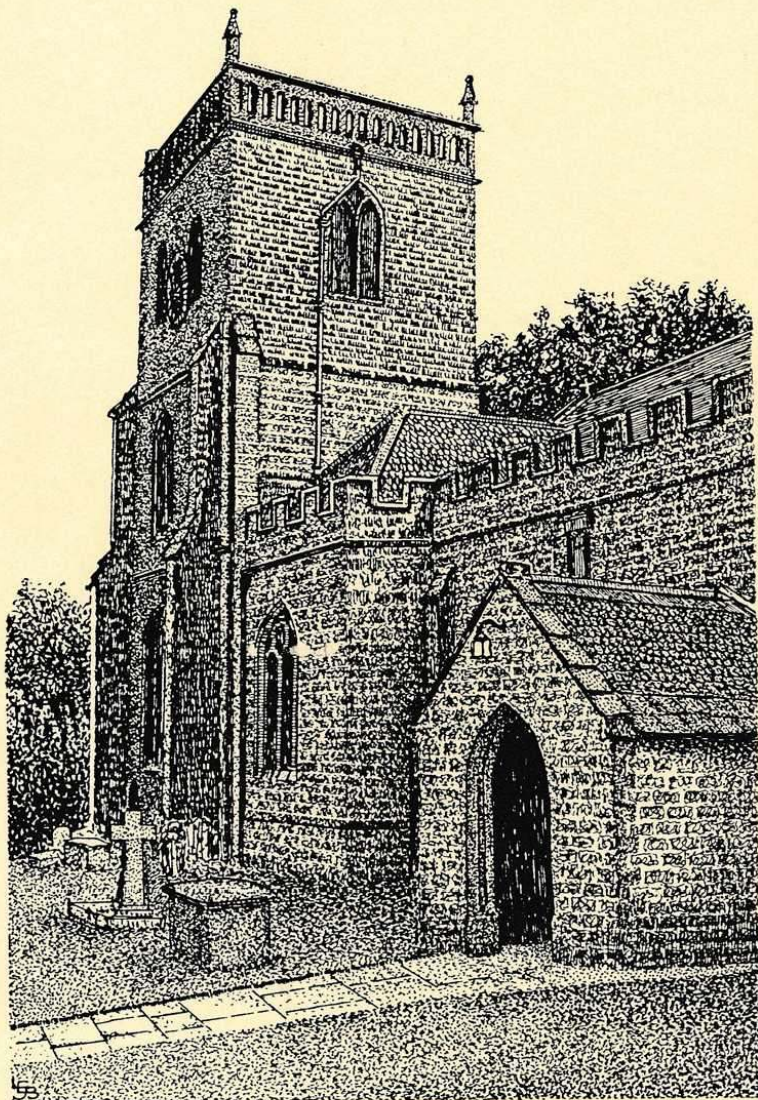


Chronicle

Volume 5 No. 2

April 1991



Journal of Yeovil Archaeological and Local History Society

THE SURVIVING ANGLO SAXON FABRIC OF EAST COKER CHURCH

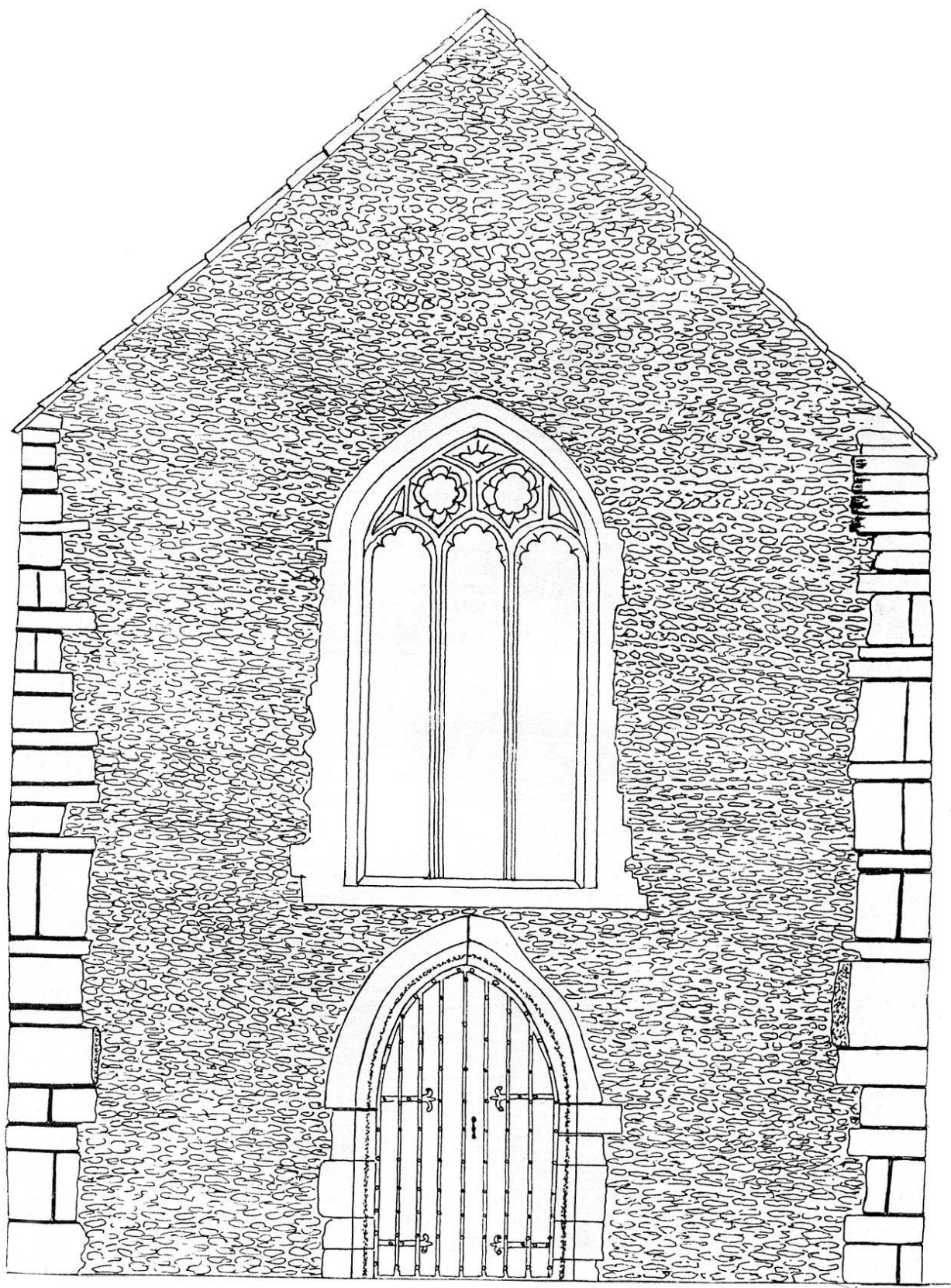
We are not aware that anything has been written to suggest that St. Michael's Church, East Coker includes fabric of pre-conquest origin. However, a re-appraisal of the west end of the nave indicates that hitherto unrecognised Anglo-Saxon material may well be present. The earliest acknowledged part of the structure is the north arcade, which is accepted as 13th-century work¹. At the west end of the arcade there is a short length of plain wall, linking the arcade to the west end wall. The arcade appears to have been built onto this wall, with the implication that the stub wall predates the arcade. If the stub wall is earlier than the arcade, then it might be expected to be a 12th century survival, but the wall is relatively thin (only 27 inches) and this would be untypical of Norman masonry. Anglo-Saxon churches with nave walls of the same thickness as East Coker include Sompting, Jarrow and Odda's Chapel at Deerhurst. Reculver and Escomb are one inch thicker, while Limpley Stoke and Shoreham are one inch thinner. Taylor² considered any walling less than 3 feet thick to be more likely to be pre-conquest than post-conquest. A second stub wall survives on the south side linking the 15th century south arcade to the west end of the nave and is similar in all respects to that on the north side. The resulting space between them (the width of the nave) is only 16', which is narrow in relation to its height. Again, these proportions would be typical of an Anglo-Saxon church. For comparison, the nave of Odda's Chapel and the eastern portion at Jarrow are both only 16 feet wide, while the naves at Bradford on Avon and Escomb are 14 and 15 feet wide respectively.

In examining the west front from the outside, it is necessary to disregard the added aisles and the 15th century doorway and west window. What remains is a tall, relatively narrow structure (see pl.11), which is completely unbuttressed. The absence of buttresses gives very strong support to the suggestion that this wall has a pre-conquest origin. A Norman or later structure of such height would almost certainly have been buttressed. The quoins of the west wall of the nave are built from relatively large blocks of stone set predominantly in a form of long and short work with side-alternate oblong pillar stones. This is a variation of two well recognised Anglo-Saxon building styles. Long and short quoins are typified by the late Anglo-Saxon tower at Earls Barton (Northants), whereas side alternate quoins occur more commonly in the earlier churches of the north-east of England. The unusual character of the quoins at East Coker are difficult to parallel exactly but similar features can be seen in the church of Rockland All Saints, Norfolk. Whilst the quoins are of well dressed ashlar, the walling between them is of local rubble stone and the great majority of Anglo-Saxon churches are built in this manner. It is common for Anglo-Saxon rubble walling to have been rendered such as the towers at Earls Barton and Barton on Humber, the whole church at Stoughton (Sussex) and the former nave of Milborne Port. This may also have been the case at East Coker, as some of the quoins show evidence of having been rebated for the purpose.

In conclusion, therefore, the design, proportions, thickness and method of construction of the west end of East Coker church are consistent with its being a surviving remnant of an Anglo-Saxon building. This hypothesis remains to be confirmed by expert opinion, but if it is shown to be so, it will be the only surviving example of an Anglo-Saxon west front in Somerset, following the demolition of the nave of Milborne Port in 1860's.

1 Pevsner N, 'Buildings of England: South and West Somerset'.

2 Taylor H, 'Anglo-Saxon Architecture Vol. 3'.



BCG-91
(NOT TO SCALE)

Plate 11. West End of the Nave of St. Michael's Church, East Coker