An introduction to Church Architecture

**Saxon c.600–1066**

Early churches were wooden. Stone ones came later with **tall thin walls** and outside was often covered in **white plaster**. The Romans abandoned Britain abruptly in 400AD so skills and knowledge were lost but Saxons re-used parts they could not make from old Roman buildings (e.g. doorways/arches). Ornamental features were limited to geometric patterns.

**Norman c.1066–1150**

The Normans conquered England and changed building styles overnight. They usually built new in **stone** (destroying most Saxon churches). Their **round arches** pushed sideways so needed **thick walls** with only **small windows** (making it quite dark inside so were internally whitewashed). Finer tools and skills meant decorative feature developed, like floral patterns.
Unlike sudden change with the Normans, now came gradual change as masons moved across Europe, developing and sharing new skills. Styles mixed and many buildings were modified with the latest trends (not demolished) leaving the old beside the new. Change further north lagged behind, being further from Europe.

Gothic pointed arches ...
... on bulkier round Norman pillars.

Gothic pointed window ...
... cut into a thick Norman wall.

Gothic c.1180–1520
This was the era of the pointed arch. It is stronger as it causes less thrust sideways and more downward, making possible thinner walls with larger windows. Flying buttresses came taking more of the strain so walls could be taller with more windows inserted for even more light. Walls were sometimes heightened to add another high row of windows (a clerestory).

Simple tracery first appeared (decorative stonework between glass sections).

Pillars were slender and compound (e.g. side columns)

Pointed arches

Arcading

Tall, narrow lancet windows (often grouped)

Slender compound pillars

Old thick walls remained ...
... but additions had thinner walls

Grouped lancet windows

West towers more common

Floor Plan

Vestry for priest

Newly built squared chancels replaced Norman apses

Transepts were often added north and south making a cruciform (cross)
**Decorated Gothic** c.1250–1350

Tracery developed into more **elaborate patterns** within broader, pointed windows. Pillars became more elaborate with capitals and arches highly decorated.

- **Geometric shapes** (e.g. circles, trefoils and quatrefoils)
- **Repeating shapes** piercing the tracery
- **Curved lines** inspired by nature and flame
- The pointed _ogee_ shape became popular

**Early Window** *‘Geometrical’* c.1250-1300

**Mid Window** *‘Reticulated’* c.1280-1320

**Late Window and Door** *‘Curvilinear’ or ‘Flamboyant’* c.1300-1350

- Smaller pointed arches set within the lower sections
- Pillars became more elaborate
- Some of the old thicker walls and windows still remain
- Finer tracery inside broader arches replaced narrow lancets

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**Perpendicular Gothic** c.1350–1520

The 14th century Black Death killed 40–60% in England. With fewer masons a simpler style gained prominence dominated by **vertical lines** pulling your gaze upward. Other improvements (e.g. _flying buttresses_) increased window coverage and height further. More intricate patterns evolved later including fan vaults for ceilings of larger churches.

- **Compound pillar** with strong vertical lines
- **Clerestory** level raised above with windows
- **Flying buttress** (half arches) supporting higher walls
- **Buttress** supporting lower walls

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**Floor Plan**

**Arcading**
POST-GOTHIC c.1690–1820
Tudor England had sufficient churches then the Reformation and Cromwell’s puritan Commonwealth led to destroying or plastering over decorative interiors. After came a renewed interest in church architecture (especially in growing industrial towns). There were two main periods both using the columns, symmetry and other features of Ancient Greece and Rome. English Baroque (c.1690-1730) was less rigid and often very ornate (e.g. St. Paul’s Cathedral, London). Perhaps too extravagant for the English, it gave way to the longer-lived, elegant Neoclassical (c.1730-1820) focussing again strong vertical lines and proportion. Churches were mostly new (few were adapted). To bring everyone closer, most were a single room with no separate chancel and galleries were added (even in old churches).

GOTHIC REVIVAL c.1820–1890
After much austerity, interest in former catholic styles of worship grew and architects looked to styles associated with this earlier era. The growing population needed more churches which were built in a Gothic form (but styles were often a little muddled as the historic understanding was still developing). Existing ancient churches were re-ordered to restore traditional features (e.g. stained glass added but interior plaster/whitewash and galleries removed). More organs were installed for good hymn singing and enjoyment whilst new technologies were embraced including gas light and heating.