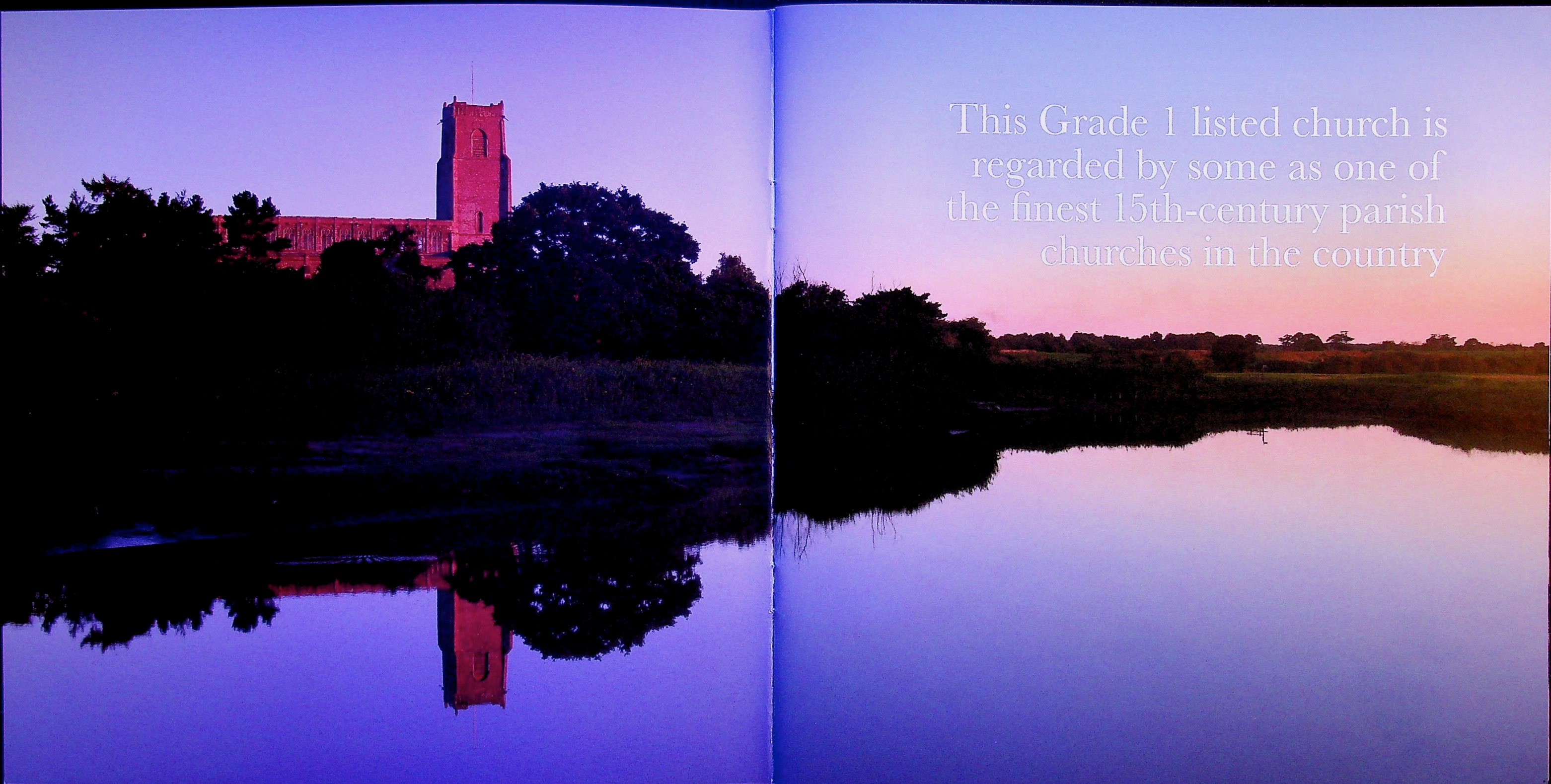


# Holy Trinity Blythburgh

‘the Cathedral of the Marshes’



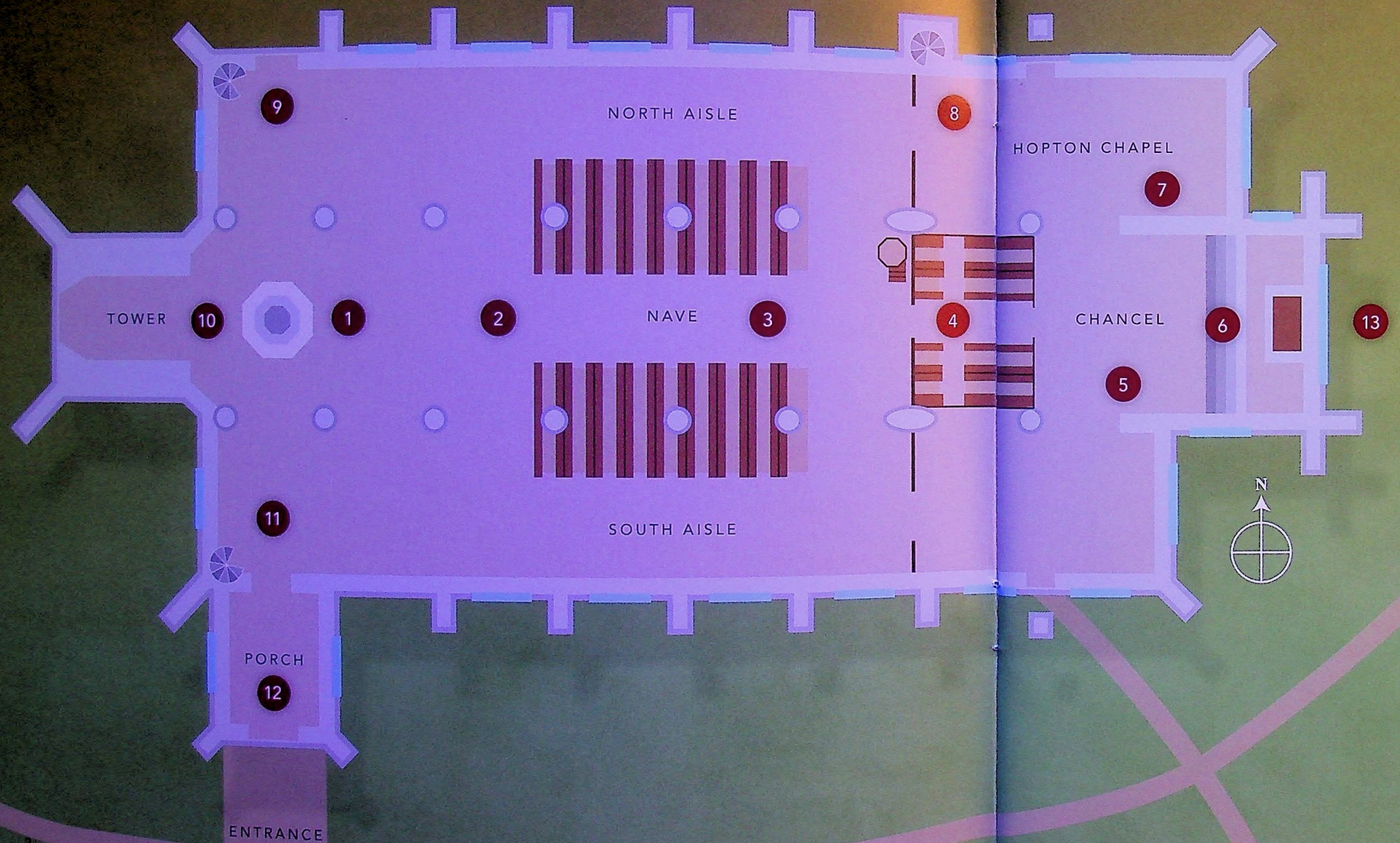




This Grade 1 listed church is  
regarded by some as one of  
the finest 15th-century parish  
churches in the country



# Plan of the Church



## 1. The Font

The octagonal 'seven sacrament' font, dating from the 15th century. p17

## 2. The Nave

The main body of the church with the angel roof above. p14

## 3. Poppyheads

The carved figures on the pew ends. p16

## 4. Choir Stalls

The small figures on the front of the choir stalls are believed to be saints and apostles. On the bookrests are the inkwells and graffiti from the 17th-century schoolroom once in the Hopton Chapel. p29

## 5. Jack o' the Clock

The 17th-century Jack o' the Clock figure. p28

## 6. High Altar

The high altar, with a sculpture by Laurence Edwards. To the right of the altar is the piscina, where the priest could wash his hands and the stone seats, known as sedilia. p24 & p28

## 7. Hopton Chantry Chapel

Connected to the chancel by the tomb of John Hopton, Lord of Blythburgh Manor, who died in 1478. p30

## 8. Alms Box

The wooden alms box is known as 'Peter's Pence'. To the left is a small doorway and stairs which originally led to the loft on top of the rood screen. p30

## 9. North Door

The great north door with its scorch marks, and the old weathercock above. p19

## 10. The Bell Tower

The tower contains six bells which are still regularly rung. Against the west wall is the medieval headstock and wheel from one of the earlier bells. p17

## 11. Priest's Room Door

The corner door leads up to this small chapel, available for quiet and prayer. Over the south door hovers a reproduction angel. p18

## 12. The Porch

The porch and large water stoup. Above the porch is the 20th-century sculpture of the Holy Trinity by Nicholas Mynheer. p27

## 13. East facade

On the east end external wall, 12 flint letters in Lombardic script and above, on the gable end, a medieval sculpture depicting the Holy Trinity. p40







# Welcome to Holy Trinity Blythburgh 'the Cathedral of the Marshes'

This Grade 1 listed church is regarded by some as one of the finest 15th-century parish churches in the country.

It has been featured in guidebooks such as *England's Thousand Best Churches*, and TV programmes, such as Channel 4's *Time Team* and BBC 4's *Reading a Church* series. It was Benjamin Britten's favourite acoustic venue, and continues to host special events and services, including Aldeburgh Festival concerts. Around 12,000 – 15,000 people visit the church each year, and the Friends of Holy Trinity draws around 80 members from all over the country.

There is much detail to be admired too. As you walk down the nave, notice the intriguing bench ends; go through the rood screen and pause at the carved choir stalls; stand at the altar and look at the bronze sculpture; look right, to the Jack, and left to Hopton Chapel. Look up to the carved faces on the corbels supporting the roof beams. Make your way down the north aisle and notice the scorch marks on the north door, the masons' marks on the pillars and the remnants of coloured glass in the windows. Pause at the seven-sacrament font and peer at the underside to appreciate the quality of the original carving. And then look up once more at those watching angels and find your own place in this ancient space.

## We hope you enjoy the many beauties of this place

As you stand at the west end and look down the nave to the altar, look upwards to the church's crowning glory – its medieval angels.

The sheer size of the building as it soars up to the tie beam roof and stretches away to the plain east window above the altar and sculpture.

The openness of the space, and the absence of clutter from pews, memorials and over decoration.

The light streaming from the high clerestory windows, bouncing off the lime-washed walls, intensifying that unparalleled quality of light peculiar to East Anglia and its wide-open skies.

The faded beauty of its ancient floor, many panements cracked by the passage of time.

The quietness and solitude in this cathedral-like church, which has experienced over 600 years of Christian worship.

The quality of sound in the sought-after acoustics of the building.



# The History of Blythburgh

Blythburgh is an Anglo-Saxon settlement, although there is evidence of Neolithic and Roman activity here too. Christianity came to Suffolk in the seventh century, and Blythburgh was one of its important centres. At this time East Anglia had its own Christian king, Anna, who ruled from 640 until his death some 13 years later.

In 654 King Anna fought the battle of Bulcamp (on the other side of the river Blyth from the church) against the pagan Mercian king Penda. Anna's army was defeated and both Anna and his son, Jurmin, were killed.

There was a church at Blythburgh as early as 654, and tradition has it that both Anna and Jurmin were buried there. The church may well have been one of the monastery (minster) churches of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia. The discovery of an eighth-century writing tablet in Blythburgh suggests that there was a literate Christian presence at the time.

Blythburgh was for centuries the local centre of authority. Major criminals were punished here, and for all the commercial importance of Dunwich, on the coast just five miles away, its merchants had to come to Blythburgh to change money.

At the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, Blythburgh was part of the royal estate. It was one of Suffolk's twelve market towns. The church was especially rich, worth ten times the average for Suffolk,

which was itself one of the wealthiest counties in England. Around 1120, Henry I granted the church in Blythburgh to the Augustinian canons of St Osyth Priory in Essex. This first church had two daughter churches, probably the parish churches of Walberswick and Blythburgh. So, Holy Trinity is not on the site of the earliest church, which is to the north-east at the ruined priory, in a private garden.

The Augustinians founded a priory dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, centred around the original church. The priory was never large, although by the end of the 13th century, its' income came from property in some 40 Suffolk parishes. The number of brothers living in the priory may have reached double figures, but by 1407 the institution was in decline, and there were only seven, including the prior.

The priory was dissolved in 1537 under King Henry VIII. Its buildings were raided for their materials, but substantial ruins survived into the 18th century until stone was taken to repair Blythburgh bridge, and to provide a foundation for a new 1780s turnpike.



In 2008, Channel 4's *Time Team* came to excavate the priory ruins.

Blythburgh, located as it was within a rich agricultural area and on an important highway at the lowest road crossing of the river Blyth, continued to prosper through the 12th and 13th centuries, and into the beginning of the 14th. But the Black Death, which reached East Anglia in 1349, was a turning point, resulting in a loss of population, and widespread social and economic disruption. After the loss of the priory in the 1500s, a fire in 1676 wiped out the centre of the village.

Blythburgh's population rose rapidly from the end of the 18th century, peaking in 1851 at 1,118. But most people were very poor. Across the Blyth, the forbidding Bulcamp House of Industry was opened in 1766 for destitute people. This became an even more feared workhouse in the 19th century, with over 550 inmates. In the 20th century it became a hospital and, after closure, was converted into 'Blyth View' private residences.

Blythburgh today is very different from the place of even 50 years ago. Redundant cottages were demolished until a demand for second homes halted their destruction. The mill was pulled down in the 1930s. The dairy, grocer and off-licence have gone. So have the reading room and the school. The Primitive Methodist chapel is empty. Blythburgh is now a destination for holidaymakers, especially nature lovers,

as the once drained marshes have become a nature reserve. The White Hart pub, which has been serving customers for more than 500 years, the village hall, the rejuvenated village store and the church are still focal points for lively community activities.



© The Trustees of the British Museum.

An exciting find from the site of the priory is this leaf from an Anglo-Saxon writing tablet of the eighth century. Made from bone, it has a recess at the back that originally contained wax, into which letters could be incised with a stylus. There are traces of runes scratched into the surface, which do not make sense, but suggest that a scribbler was trying out some Latin verbs. One possibility is that the Blythburgh leaf is a fragment of a diptych, used during the Mass in the early medieval church. The names of those deserving special commemoration would have been written into the wax and read out during the service. The leaf is now in the British Museum.



# The Story of the Church

While there has probably been a church in Blythburgh village since the seventh century as we have seen, the parish church is a descendant of a daughter of the first church. There are now only a few fragments of the 11th-century church embedded in the present walls.

The tower dates from the early 1300s and the bulk of the church from the 15th century. There was at the time a great surge in church building in Suffolk. There is no simple connection with population or wealth. It reflects a shift from patronage of religious institutions to local parishes, and, above all, deliberately conspicuous expenditure, with some local rivalry linked to religious beliefs. It appears that rebuilding started with the bays of the nave adjacent to the tower. The chancel followed in the 1440s and 1450s. The work was probably completed by the 1470s.

One local benefactor was John Hopton, Lord of Blythburgh Manor, of Yorkshire descent, who succeeded to the Suffolk estate in 1430. He founded a chantry in a chapel in the north aisle for his first wife in 1451. We do not know how much Hopton contributed to the cost of the new church, although in his will he referred to the building as "by him lately edified and built".

This chimes with an obsession in the Middle Ages with death. The church historian Eamon Duffy says: "The extensive and often sumptuous rebuilding of so many

of the churches of East Anglia in the 15th century was an expression not simply of ... bourgeois prosperity ... but the concern of the rich to use their wealth as post-mortem fire insurance."

The building was supported by large and small donations. Some gifts were deliberately conspicuous: the names of John Masin and his wife Katherine, for example, were inscribed on the font and the now lost central boss of the vaulted roof of the south porch. Heraldic shields in windows and along the length of the roof celebrated the Hoptons and others. The Anglo-Saxon past was kept alive with the depiction of kings and bishops of Dunwich in the windows.

Included in the long list of people who left money to the church is Alice, who helped pay for a canopy over the high altar. Having been arraigned for keeping a brothel, perhaps she was aware that she needed some defence against final judgement.

Unfortunately, as the fortunes of Blythburgh declined over the years, so did the fabric of the church. Despite its prominence and its beauty, it began a slow decline





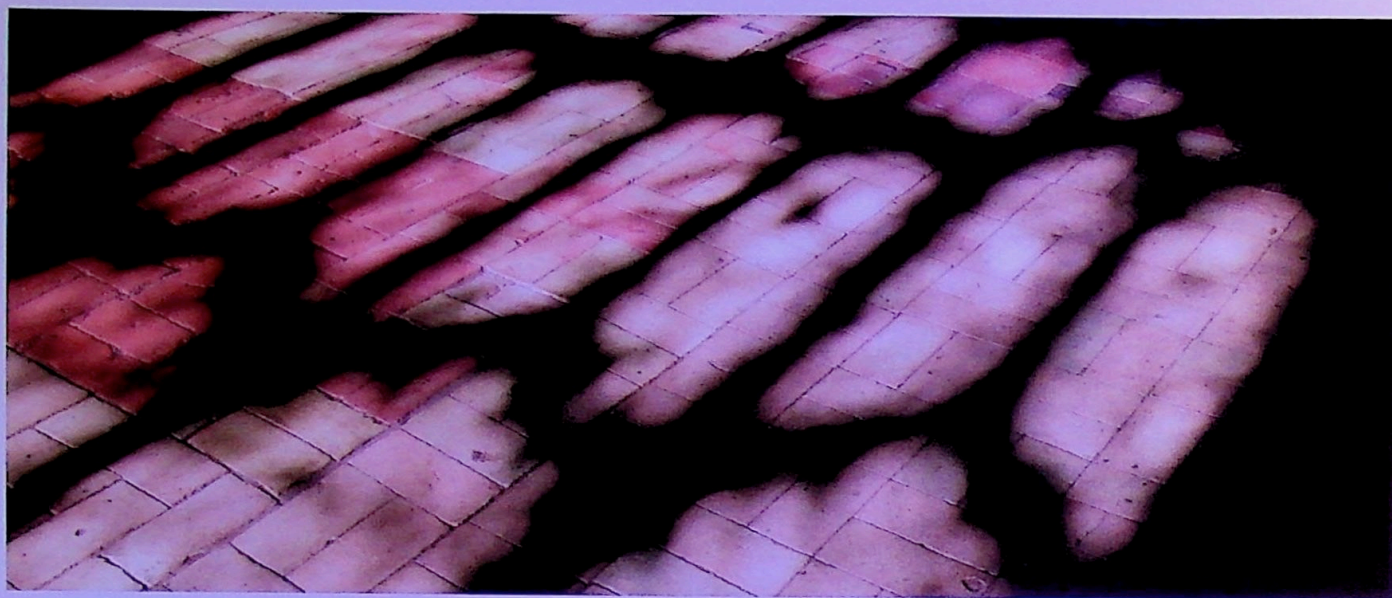
from as early as 1537, the date of the suppression by Thomas Cromwell of the nearby priory.

There are records of a dramatic storm in August 1577. During morning service, lightning struck the building, and "cleft the door, and returning to the steeple rent the timbers, brake the chimes, and fled towards Bongay, six miles off". The steeple collapsed, damaging the font – and a 40-year-old man and a boy of 15 were found "starke dead" in the wreckage.

The Reformation and founding of the Church of England in the 16th century involved doctrinal changes that led to destructive assaults on the fabric of the church. During the mid-17th century, Parliament demanded that churches should be stripped of what were considered superstitious ornaments. A Suffolk Puritan and enthusiastic iconoclast, William Dowsing, was commissioned to do his worst. On 8 April 1644 he came to Blythburgh and ordered the removal of "twenty superstitious pictures, one on the outside of the church; two crosses, one on the porch and another on the steeple; and 20 cherubim to be taken down in the church and chancel ... and gave order to take down above 200 more within eight days".

The appearance of the church was changed forever. Before Dowsing's destructive visit, the church would have been lit by the stained glass in the vast windows, and the vivid colours of the wooden angels in the roof would have been matched by brightly painted pillars. There is, however, no record of any local protest at this





doctrinally driven destruction. In East Anglia, opinion was largely with the Puritans.

The church subsequently suffered several centuries of decay. The roof, damaged in the 1577 storm, does not seem to have been effectively repaired until 1782, and the 19th century witnessed more decline. In 1808, the *Gentleman's Magazine* recorded that "the church is kept in a very bad state ... the angels in the roof are continually falling. An altar tomb in the chancel now serves as a base for two or three clumsy columns of bricks, so that the deceased [Sir John Hopton], whatever he might have been in his lifetime, is now unquestionably a firm supporter of the church!"

A Suffolk schoolmaster and antiquarian, Hamlet Watling, who visited the church between the years of

1840 and 1890, was shocked by how quickly the church was "mouldering into ruin". A newspaper reported the congregation sheltering under umbrellas from the rain pouring through holes in the roof.

On Thursday 8 December 1881 the London newspaper *The Morning Post* reported: "The parish church of Blythburgh ... has been closed by order of the Bishop of Norwich on account of the dangerous condition of its fine hammer-beam roof".

The area suffered from grinding rural poverty, and many villagers preferred to worship at the Primitive Methodist chapel, which had been opened on the Dunwich Road in the 1830s. The patron did not live in the parish and was accused of neglecting the church.



The closure of Blythburgh church precipitated a bitter 25-year long dispute between, on the one hand, a succession of incumbents and restoration committees, and on the other the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Strong voices in the community, including Royal Academicians Seymour Lucas and Ernest Crofts, called for a secure, restored structure with the sweeping away of accumulated unsightly repairs. The SPAB, regarding Blythburgh as a fine example of an un-restored church, was implacably opposed to the loss of any historic fabric, including post-medieval repairs, and viewed its replacement by modern copies as anathema. The restorers' ambitions were constrained by lack of money, and the result was that the church, relatively clear of Victorian embellishments, remained largely as it is seen today.

The church reopened in 1884. It had been closed for nearly two and a half years, and was now partially restored. The contract with the Southwold builder, R J Allen, had cost £1,064 10s 0d. The south aisle had a new roof of English oak and the lead had been recast. The parapet on the south aisle had been secured, and nearly all the windows restored. Internally, old deal box pews had been removed and the oak benches returned to their original position. The stalls in the chancel had been moved further apart and the floor, where absolutely necessary, levelled and paved with light-coloured bricks. The lead on the roofs of the nave and north aisle was repaired, ancient coloured glass in the windows cleaned and replaced and fitted with new

lead. Six new coloured emblems had been placed in the south windows.

On 12 August 1944, during World War II, a US Navy Liberator bomber, packed with explosives, and piloted by Joe Kennedy, brother of President John F Kennedy, exploded in the air over New Delight Covert, Blythburgh Fen. This explosion caused considerable local damage – possibly including some to the south side of the church.

The Priest's Room over the porch was rebuilt in the 1960s, and opened as a place of prayer and meditation. In the 1970s, the roof above the nave and chancel was repaired and raised. The light which pours into the church through these clerestory windows provides a distinctive aesthetic to an already striking building. More recently, in 2008, a nationwide appeal raised over £200,000 to repair the south aisle roof and secure it against the raw weather of its exposed site.









## The Nave

The nave is the name given to the main body of the church. It comes from medieval Latin for a ship – an early Christian symbol that may have been suggested by the keel shape of the roof.

During the 15th century, part of the great space of the nave would have been used for small altars. The crowned 'M' on the front pillar to the south west of the rood screen suggests that there was an altar of salutation to Mary here.

There are some tomb slabs let into the floor, with inscriptions that can still be read. Sadly, their memorial brasses were taken out and sold during the 17th century, to meet the demands of Dowsing's commission. However, the church might hold a different record of local faces. It may well be that the distinctive, and often comic, features of the heads on the corbel stones supporting the roof beams, belonged to real people. Some of them may have been the craftsmen who cut the stones and carved the wood, or possibly local characters to be seen in the market place, courthouse or priory of 15th-century Blythburgh.

Above the nave is the clerestory, a gallery of 36 windows, whose clear glazing enables them to flood the church with light.





### 1. The Rood Screen

In late medieval churches, a carved crucifixion scene, or 'rood' meaning 'cross', was mounted on the top of the screen between the chancel and the nave. Across the top of the screen would have run a loft, which in this church could be reached by the small doorway and stairs near the north door in the Hopton Chapel. Now this leads nowhere, but originally it would have been possible to walk across the screen.

### 2. The Pulpit

The oak pulpit, with its carved panels and flower motifs, dates from the Stuart period, in the region of 1670–75.

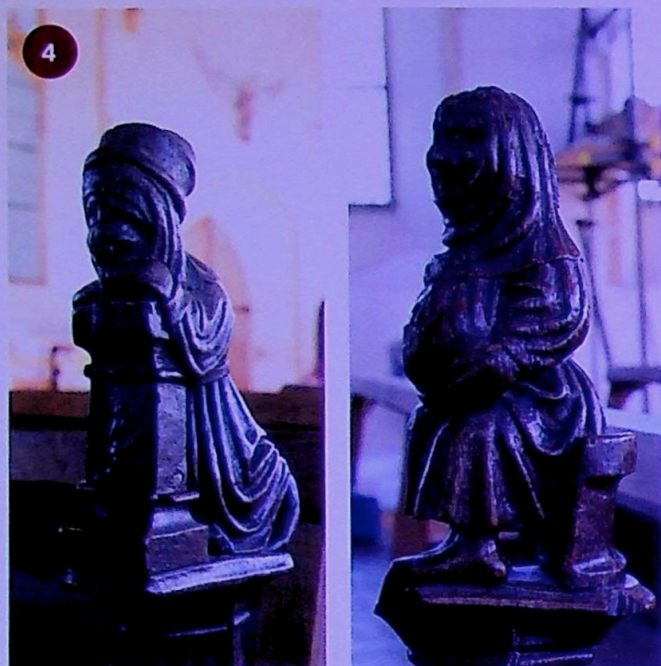


### 3. Robins in the Lectern

The revolving, or 'pigeon coop', lectern – with sides for Old and New Testament readings – has a story attached. Back in the 1880s, a robin flew into the church and made a nest in the shelter of the lectern. She stayed there until her eggs hatched and the fledglings flew away. Then, around 50 years later, apparently, the same thing happened again. The story has been incorporated into the life of the church. The Wardens' staffs in the pews have brass robins at the top, to commemorate our avian visitor.

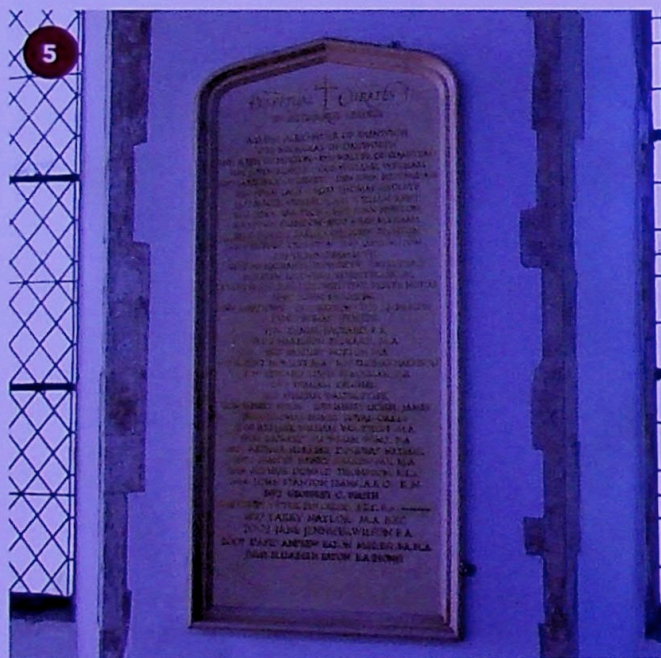






#### 4. Poppyheads

The great airy space of the nave finds its contrast in scale in the carvings of small figures on the pew ends. These characterful figures from the 15th century are known as poppyheads, from the word *puppis*, which means the figurehead of a ship. They aim to teach the congregation some lessons. Some represent the seven deadly sins. For instance there is avarice sitting on a moneybox, hypocrisy praying with open eyes, and gluttony with distended belly. Slander shows a split tongue – a reminder of the punishment for slander in the ancient rhyme, “tell tale tit, your tongue shall be slit”. At least two figures, with upturned palms, urge those sitting beside them to seek salvation through the seven corporal acts of mercy. The man in bed is a reminder to visit the sick, and another, in the stocks, to help prisoners. A third theme is the seasons. The sower in spring, the gleaning of grain or flowers for summer, the killing of a pig in autumn, and gathering wood for winter.



#### 5. Perpetual Curates' Board

On the north wall is a board listing curates – the name given to priests – dating back to 1310. Notice the entry for Mr Nathaniel Flowerdew, 1654, described as ‘an intruder’. This probably means that he was a non-ordained minister, appointed by order of Oliver Cromwell at the time of the English civil war. His predecessor, with the splendid name of Itchingham Lofte, was the inspiration for a trio of novels for children by writer and broadcaster Simon Mayo.





## 6. The Font

The octagonal font, c 1450, is one of the rare, 'seven sacrament' fonts, sadly now shorn of these scenes by the Puritans. The seven would have been baptism, confirmation, confession, marriage, ordination, the last rites, and the Mass, with another design on the eighth panel. The quality of the carving can be seen on the underside, virtually untouched by the iconoclasts' hammers.



## 7. The Bell Wheel

At the west end of the church is the medieval headstock and wheel from one of the bells that fell three centuries ago. The bell tower contains six bells which are still regularly rung.



## 8. The Bible Box and 'Judas' Bible

Displayed in the Bible box is a second folio edition of the Authorized Version of the Bible, printed by Robert Barker in 1613. It is known as the Judas Bible because the name of Judas is mistakenly used in place of Jesus in Matthew 26. 36: "Then commeth Judus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, 'Sit yee here while I goe and pray yonder'". Sadly the page has been stolen from this bible.





## The Priest's Room

The room above the church porch can be reached via a door in the angle of the west and south walls.

In medieval churches this space was often set aside to enable priests to fulfil their duty of saying regular masses for the souls of the benefactors of the church. The squint window in the wall, half way up the circular stairway, enabled priests to face the Chantry chapel altar when they said their prayers for the souls of John Hopton and his family, during the night. The room may

also have been the cell of a hermit, Robert Leake, who died in 1517.

In 1966 the room was refurbished as a chapel by the then priest, the Revd Stanton Jeans, who also made the altar table. An icon of St John the Baptist hangs on the wall, and the chapel now provides a unique setting for prayer and meditation.



## LOOK OUT FOR...

### The Devil's Dog

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There is a persistent legend which, while it has no basis in fact, is nonetheless firmly attached to Blythburgh Church. In 1577, so the story goes, the congregation had just settled down for the sermon when Black Shuck – a huge, ghostly hound which roamed the coastline and countryside of Suffolk – burst through the heavy oak doors and ran down the nave aisle, pausing only to snap the necks of an old man and a young boy, before bounding towards the terrified clergyman, its red eyes fixed and flaming.

A few feet short of the altar table the infernal creature seemed to disappear into thin air. The congregation had hardly regained their wits when a great rumble sounded from the foundation of the church. Cracks splintered

along the walls and the steeple gave way, crashing through the nave.

If you examine the north door, you will see scorch marks in the woodwork which imaginative folk (much later) attributed to Black Shuck's claw marks, scorched into the woodwork, as he made his desperate exit.

This, and other shaggy dog stories, is believed by some to have inspired the 19th-century author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to transport the spectre from the Blythburgh marshes to the Devonshire moors, to star in his celebrated Sherlock Holmes story *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.









# The Angel Roof

The arch-braced, fired, tie beam roof is unbroken by arches from nave to chancel. The medieval carpenters used few nails and no iron bolts. Instead they relied on framing, and they mortised and tenoned the great beams and fixed them with wooden pins. It is a testament to their craftsmanship that the great span has endured for 500 years and more.

The roof once carried 18 or 20 angels in pairs, painted red and green and embellished with gold leaf. Each has a distinct character, with individual facial features. Each body ends at the hips in a large painted boss. The great extended wings are carved, and were originally coloured, although several replacements, made in 1954, are plain. The original style of decoration can be seen in the replica above the south door. This gives a good idea of the colours that once adorned the church. Between the angels, the rafters too were highly decorated, and the floral motif in green and red on a white background, though faded, can still be seen. The shields held by the angels bear the arms of Swillington, Ufford and Hopton – names rooted in the history of Blythburgh.

The angels have had to face many trials through the ages. When the church was struck by lightning during the great storm of 1577 and the spire collapsed, the angels in the west end bays were destroyed.

For many years the story went round that, in 1644, the angels were peppered with lead shot by soldiers under arch-Puritan William Dowsing, frustrated that they couldn't tear these 'superstitious' figures from their lofty vantage point. However, analysis of the shot supplies a more prosaic reason for the gunshot damage. It appears that it may have been made by local marksmen who had been contracted by the church to rid the building of jackdaws – a common 18th century problem, and one for which churchwardens were willing to issue (in 1761–62) half-a-crown's worth of powder and shot.

In 1974, desperate measures were needed to save the roof from collapse, and over the next 20 years the techniques and materials of 20th-century engineering were used to raise it by 23cm and to sustain it for another 500 years.





## LOOK OUT FOR...

### Masons' Marks

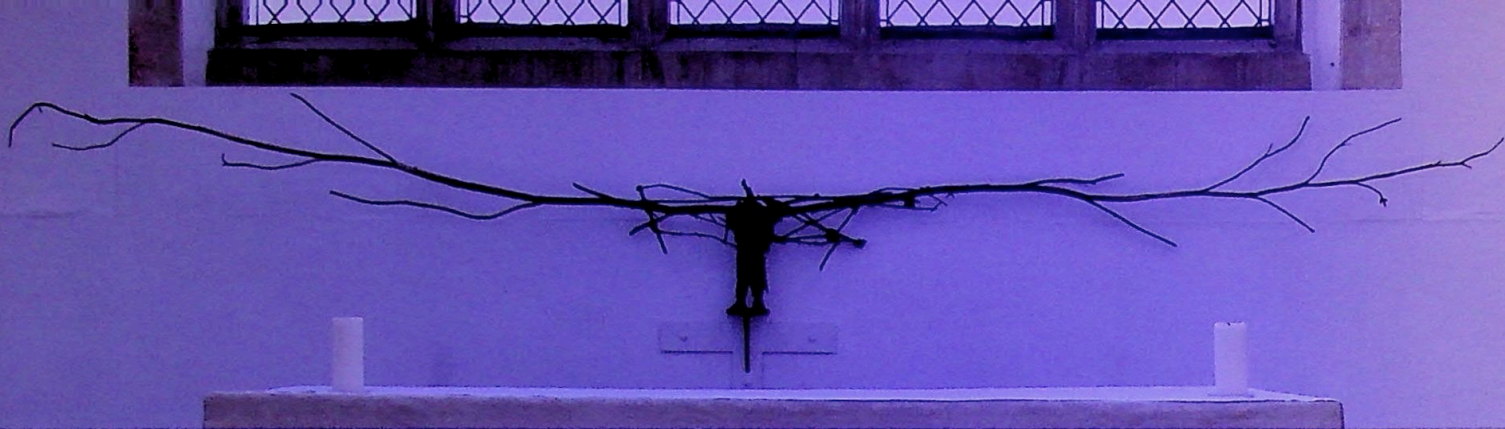
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Marks made by the original builders of the church can be found on every nave pillar but one. Families or fellowships of masons used these marks as signatures or trademarks, adopting one basic mark and adding pieces to represent individual members. They are most clearly

seen on the lower parts of the pillars, but there are more on the arches above. There are also more on the exterior of the South Door, together with the date 1629 on the lower left panel.







# The Arts in Holy Trinity

Through the ages the church has inspired and nurtured great achievements of the human spirit, and this church, being itself a place of beauty, is a natural home for works of music and art.

## Music in Blythburgh

The first Aldeburgh Festival performances took place in June 1948. At first they were housed in local halls and churches, but by 1967 it had found a permanent home in the Victorian maltings at Snape. Then in 1969, just as the festival was beginning, a fire swept through the buildings. With three days' notice, most of the 19 scheduled events were transferred to Blythburgh church, including the staging of Britten's *Idomeneo*, described at the time as "the most extraordinary performance".

Blythburgh was also home to pioneer British composer William Alwyn, and now hosts an annual festival dedicated to his music.

The Blythburgh Singers choir is a group of experienced singers from various parts of Suffolk and Norfolk who meet on the first Sunday of every month to lead choral evensong at Blythburgh church. Since its foundation the choir has also given concerts in other East Anglian churches, and sung services in English cathedrals. Concert tours abroad have included Holland, Alsace, Venice and Vienna. Although the personnel have changed over the years the primary purpose of the choir remains that of keeping alive the glorious repertoire of music composed for the service of Anglican choral evensong.





## Works of Art in the Church

### 1. Altar Sculpture

Chancel

Behind the altar table, beneath the window, is a powerful altarpiece by Laurence Edwards. Cast in bronze from the mud, wood and hogweed that can be found all around this locality, it brings the precise beauty of the outside marsh into the church in a way that combines imagination, emotion and spirit. The figure is bent under the burden of life's troubles, but its open arms describe a 14ft span in a gesture of welcome and inclusion, echoing the wingspans of the celebrated Blythburgh angels in the roof above. Laurence Edwards was born in Suffolk, where he continues to live and work. The *Altar Sculpture* was gifted on permanent loan to Holy Trinity Blythburgh in 2013.

### 2. Altar Rail Kneelers

Chancel

Designed by Laurence Clarke and worked in 2011 by a team of stitchers led by John Veitch, these take as their theme the 19th century hanging on the north side of the choir stalls.

### 3. Pulpit Crucifix

Nave

Suspended above the pulpit is a poignantly plain crucifix made in bog-wood by a local schoolmaster, Eric Paisley, in 1965.





#### 4. The Four Gospels

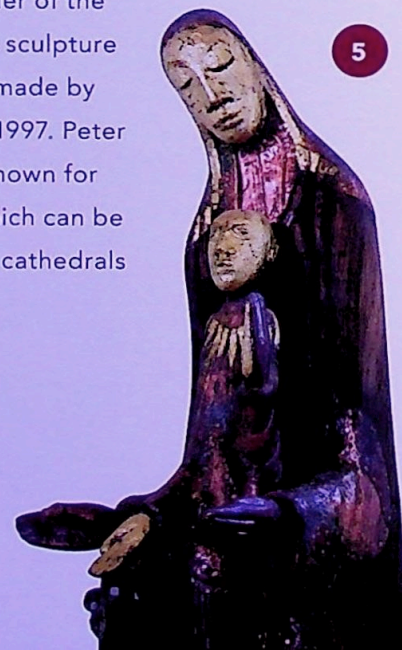
Hopton Chapel

The panels behind the altar table are *The Four Gospels* by Mara Amats. They were made specially for Holy Trinity at the millennium, from hand-made paper using reeds (*Phragmites Australis*) gathered from Walberswick marshes by Natural England. They depict, from left to right, the symbols of the four evangelists: a man for St Matthew; a lion for St Mark; an ox for St Luke; and an eagle for St John. These are drawn from the Book of Revelation. The scrolls below each creature contain the gospels of each evangelist. Mara Amats (1941 – 2007) was a painter and craftswoman who was instrumental in developing the fair trade movement.

#### 5. Madonna and Child

Hopton Chapel

In the north east corner of the Hopton Chapel is the sculpture *Madonna and Child*, made by Peter Eugene Ball in 1997. Peter Eugene Ball is best known for his religious work, which can be seen in churches and cathedrals throughout Britain.







## 6. Icon of John the Baptist

Priest's Room

In the Priest's Room is an icon of John the Baptist, possibly based on a Byzantine original dating from 1300 and now in the British Museum. He has the familiar wild hair of the Baptist, but around his neck is draped a goatskin instead of the traditional camel hair cloak. The origin of this work is unknown.

## 7. The Benedicite Banner

Nave

In the south aisle, is a banner based on the opening words of the canticle, the Benedicite: "O all ye works of the Lord..." At the base are two doves of peace on an olive branch. On either side trumpets praise the Lord. The elements of earth, fire and water surround the sun, which gives life to the world. Made by Heather Cooper, the banner was dedicated in June 1989.



## 8. Holy Trinity

Porch

On the outside of the porch, in a niche that has been empty since Dowsing's men arrived in 1644, is *Holy Trinity* by Nicholas Mynheer. God the Father is seen above, his large, comforting hands cradling his son Jesus. The dove, representing the Holy Spirit, nestles between them. This was installed for the Millennium in 2000. Nicholas Mynheer's painting and sculpture has been widely commissioned for cathedrals and churches.



# The Chancel & Choir Stalls

The chancel is the area to the east of the church, which houses the altar, organ and choir stalls.

Behind the altar table, beneath the window is a powerful sculptural figure by Laurence Edwards.

To the right of the altar is the small, arched recess, called the piscina, where the priest could wash his hands. The stone seats, known as sedilia, were where officiants could sit during the service.



## Jack o' the Clock

The 17th-century Jack o' the Clock figure stands above the screen to the right of the chancel. In 1840 he was recorded as standing on a ladder in the tower arch and chimed the hours. An inscription beneath him used to read: "As the hours pass away So doth the life of man decay." The bell is now rung at the beginning of services.





## The Choir Stalls

The small figures on the front of the choir stalls, seven on either side, are believed to be saints and apostles, beautifully carved, and each one carrying a sign to help identification.

The priests' stalls also have figures. On the north side is the martyr St Stephen, with the stones that slew him, and St John the Evangelist bearing a chalice with serpent emerging – a reference to a traditional story that he drank from a poisoned chalice to prove his faith. On the south side, delicate carvings of a man and a woman are thought to be Christ holding the earth in his hand, and Mary his mother wearing a tiara. Alternatively, it might be Anna, King of the East Angles and his daughter St Etheldreda.

The number of figures is interesting. Fourteen does not fit any heavenly order, and it has been suggested

that some figures have been cut down to make the set fit into its present position. They may originally have formed the front parapet of the rood screen loft – moved to the choir in the 1870s. During the 17th century they were used in front of benches in the Hopton Chapel when village children attended school there; they were therefore missed by the iconoclasts.

The book rests in the choir stalls were used as desks in this school and still have the holes that held the inkwells. On one of them can be seen the name Dirck Lowersen von Stockolm, deeply cut, schoolboy fashion, into the wood with the date 1665. Dirck was possibly the son of one of the workmen brought over to help with drainage of the marshes. Perhaps bored at school – a long tradition in itself – he made his mark.







# The Medieval Glass

When the church was first built, a number of the windows would have contained brightly coloured images from Biblical stories and the life of the church in stained glass.

By as late as the 19th century, writings and illustrations show that many in the windows of the north side of the church retained their saints and East Anglian figures, including St Fursey who established a monastery at Burgh Castle, and Offa, King of East Anglia, the legendary patron of King Edmund, killed by the Danes in 869. But the decline and neglect of the church in those years destroyed most of the remaining 15th-century glass.

In 1840, the Hopton Chapel contained figures of 11 bishops of Dunwich, of which fragments of four remain. Only St Felix, who brought Christianity to East Anglia around 634, survives intact. There are, however, two very beautiful fragments of angels in the lower lights.

In one of the windows on the south side of the church a few remaining pieces of medieval stained glass had been retained. In 2016, these were removed by Holy Well, the stained glass conservation studio in Wells, and combined with other fragments from the church that they already held in safekeeping. The tracery was restored and the glass returned. As part of a long-term conservancy programme – as funds become available from donors – all the windows are gradually being glazed with clear glass.







# Memorials in the Church

The tomb outside the entrance to the Hopton Chapel is that of Sir Roger Swillington and his family, Lords of the Manor in the reign of King Henry IV.

Legend has it that the church plate and movable treasures were hidden in it in 1644, to save them from Dowsing, but when the tomb was opened and searched in the 19th century, no trace of any treasure or body was found.

One of the windows in the Hopton Chapel contains a 20th-century memorial to W E G (Bill) Muttitt, churchwarden and carpenter foreman at Reades of Aldeburgh, which portrays building materials and a representation of one of the roof angels. The panel was designed by Andrew Anderson, then architect at Blythburgh – a tiny 'A A' can be seen in the bottom part of the panel.

There are several other notable memorials in the north aisle, including Royal Academicians John Seymour-Lucas (d 1923) and Ernest Crofts (d 1911), who was also Keeper of the Royal Academy. Crofts' memorial is by a member of the Wyon family, known for their image of Queen Victoria on the penny black stamp. Margaret Becker, daughter of the renowned Suffolk artist Henry (Harry) Becker, is also memorialised,



## The Blois Family

The Blois family, descended from Robert Blois (d 1559), an Ipswich mercer and chandler, established their gentry status through the purchase of a farmhouse in Grundisburgh, later renamed Grundisburgh Hall. King James II created the baronetcy in 1686. The Revd Ralph Blois was curate of Blythburgh from 1735 – 1759, and the family's connection with Blythburgh church as patrons derives from their acquisition of the Blythburgh estate by marriage in the 17th century. There are several memorials to the family in the church and churchyard.



## The Priest's Tomb

There are a number of memorials set into the floor of the church, sadly now without their memorial brasses. One intriguing tomb at the front of the nave, is set in the shape of a cross, and bears traces of a chalice. It is thought to be the tomb of John Ovy, Prior of Blythburgh from 1500 – 1506.



## The War Memorial

The memorial, containing the roll of honour of 17 local men who gave their lives in two world wars, was presented to the church by Georgiana Blois, wife of Dudley George Blois DSO, who died in the battle of the Somme in 1916.



## Joe Kennedy Jr

Blythburgh also remembers Lt Joseph (Joe) Patrick Kennedy Jr. In one of the many tragedies of World War II, Joe Kennedy, the eldest son of Joseph Patrick Kennedy Sr, US Ambassador to Britain, and his co-pilot Lt Wilford Willy were killed when, due to an electrical fault, their plane, loaded with over 21,000lbs of Torpex, exploded in mid-air over New Delight Covert, Blythburgh Fen. It was the largest explosion ever recorded over Britain. The damage on the ground was widespread – 147 houses were affected and there may have been some damage to the south side of this church – but there were no civilian casualties.



# Outside the Church

## The North Side

Contrasting sharply with the ornateness of the south porch, through which important local figures would have entered, the north doorway is plain and austere. This is possibly because the canons from the priory, who were expected to be more visibly humble, would have entered the church from the north.

This side of the church commands the marshes, river and road, and is a testament to the inspiration of medieval builders who chose a site of such grandeur for this church that it has cheered the heart of travellers through the ages and earned the title, 'Cathedral of the Marshes'.

## The South Side

The south door of the porch is still fastened at night by a great oak beam that fits into grooves cut in the thickness of the walls. The porch is large, as befits a 15th-century church. It was often used for weddings, christenings or civil business for local people. This could explain the large water stoup, to the side of the entrance, which may have doubled as a font.

This porch is a plain and much-repaired version of a more elaborate original. It features cinquefoils, grotesques, roses, angels and lions' heads in stone. Above the porch is a striking 20th-century limestone sculpture of the Holy Trinity by Nicholas Mynheer.

Cut into the stonework beside the smaller south door, the marks of a Mass clock can still be seen. Some 3,000 Mass, tide or scratch dials exist in the UK. This form of sundial was used to mark the 'variable' time of liturgical services in the medieval world.







## Some Churchyard Characters

### George Whincop (1767 – 1847)

George Whincop was “upwards of 50 years Blacksmith of this Parish”. George was a church fixture – between 1795 and 1803 he was witness to 37 of the 47 marriages that took place here. Go back to 29 October 1789 and you find George, with Mr Bullock, the constable, and Robert Sherington, the landlord of the White Hart, witnessing the sale of Samuel Balls’s wife, for a shilling! A note of caution: The incomplete Blythburgh registers show that another George Whincop witnessed marriages in 1760, 65 and 66. This may have been his father, so we cannot be entirely sure who witnessed what.

### Sir Capel Charles Wolseley BT (1870 – 1923)

Capel Wolseley came from an Irish family. He spent the early years of the 20th century in Russia, and served as British Vice-Consul in Archangel from 1900 to 1909. Sir Capel ended up in Blythburgh in unfortunate circumstances. On 27 August 1923 he was cycling across Blythburgh common, intending to visit a relative who lived nearby. He failed to hear a car approaching from behind and turned into its path. He sustained head injuries and died soon after reaching Southwold hospital. His wife Beatrice, Lady Wolseley, died in 1947 and her ashes were scattered in Blythburgh.





## William Alwyn (1905 – 1985) and Doreen Carwithen (1922 – 2003)

William Alwyn was a pioneer British composer of film music, writing prolifically in the late 1930s to the 1950s. He scored the documentaries *Fires Were Started* and *Desert Victory*, and his features included *Odd Man Out*, *The Fallen Idol*, and Disney's *Swiss Family Robinson*. His last score was the Carol Reed thriller *The Running Man* in 1963. He was awarded the CBE in 1981.

His wife, Doreen Carwithen – known locally as Mary Alwyn – was also a composer. She met William Alwyn in 1941, at the Royal Academy of Music, where he taught her harmony. In 1947 she was the first RAM student to be accepted for training in film music composition, and went on to score over 30 films. From 1961 she devoted herself to her former professor as secretary and amanuensis. Together they built a house in Blythburgh, and were married in 1975.

## Harry Becker (1865 – 1928) and Margaret Jane Becker (1904 – 1953)

The renowned Suffolk artist Harry Becker – whose depictions of landscape and agricultural labourers at work make him a local treasure – was born in Germany and trained in Antwerp. His father, a doctor, moved to Colchester, and Becker, after spending time in London – where he is said to have met Vincent van Gogh – arrived in the parish in 1915, with his wife Georgina and daughter Janet. The Suffolk years were not easy. Money was always short, partly because he became increasingly reluctant to part with his work. Georgina (also an artist) supported the family with earnings from drawing classes at St Felix School. The family was kept afloat by a network of friends and patrons. His work survives in private and public collections, including Christchurch Museum, Ipswich.

Harry's daughter Janet became a respected Suffolk historian. One of her most enduring works is *Blythburgh, an Essay on the Village and its Church* published in 1935. She studied at London University and trained as a conservationist, developing a career as cleaner and renovator of church monuments. After her father's death, Janet lived with her widowed mother at The Old Vicarage, Wangford. As well as historical studies she published a volume of verse and two novels including *Ploughshare into Pylon*. There is a memorial to Janet Becker in the church.







## LOOK OUT FOR...

### The Blythburgh Puzzle

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On the east end external wall there are 12 flint letters in Lombardic script. They are probably the initial letters of a Latin dedication; Ad Honorem Jesu Beati Sanctae Trinitatis Mariae [et] Sanctae Annae Hic Kancellus Reconstructus [est]: 'To the honour of Blessed Jesus, the Holy Trinity, Mary and St Anne this chancel has been rebuilt'. However, some have also suggested that the letters can be tied to the names of the families who were patrons and benefactors of this church, and who

are commemorated within the chancel. Could MS be Mary Swillington, AH 'Ann Hopton', and KR Katherine Roos (Rous)? Perhaps the Latin conceals a subtle tribute to the wives of the great and the good of the neighbourhood.

Way above these carved initials, at the pinnacle of the roof, sits a medieval stone carving, believed to be of the Holy Trinity.







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