



HOLY TRINITY
BLYTHBURGH
Cathedral of the Marshes



This magnificent church has stood as a witness to the Christian faith for hundreds of years in its stunning East Anglian setting, rising above the marshes. Many generations of people - local residents and visitors from far and wide - have been inspired by its beauty, its majesty and that peace and stillness which emanate from its very stones.

This building speaks to us of the Divine; it is truly a house of prayer. It was built to give glory and honour to God and today we seek to ensure that this is still its prime purpose. The Holy Eucharist is celebrated regularly and people gather to worship God around the altar, the font and the pulpit, as they have done

for centuries. Today Holy Trinity Blythburgh is one of twelve churches in the Sole Bay Team Ministry, covering parishes from Walberswick in the south to Covehithe and Benacre in the north and from Southwold in the east to Sotherton in the west. Our Mission Statement summarises our view of the mission of the Church in this rural and coastal area, as we enter a new millennium of Christian belief: 'Rejoicing in diversity, we seek to grow in faith and enable others to grow into faith, by worshipping God and by serving Him in our neighbours.'

As you admire the beauty of this church and experience its tranquillity, spend some time in

silence with the One to whom it is dedicated - the Most Holy Trinity. Bring before the God of whom this place speaks the needs of the world and your own needs and remember to offer thanks for those many blessings we receive each day.

As Jacob said of Bethel, so we can say of Holy Trinity Blythburgh: 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God: it is the very gate of heaven.' (Genesis 28:17)

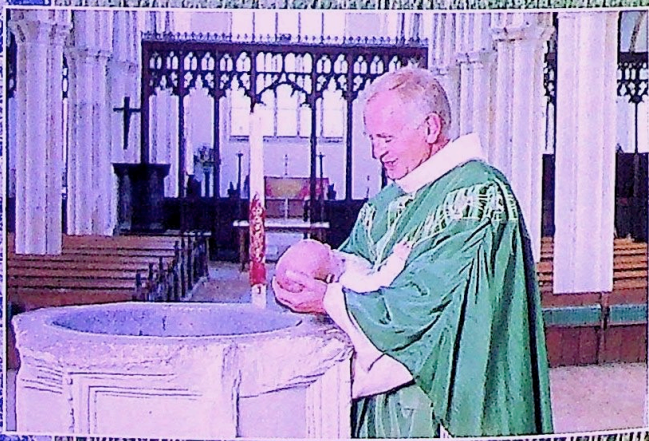
God bless you and your loved ones.

Barry Naylor

Barry Naylor
Team Rector

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Left *The modern sculpture representing the Holy Trinity*
Below *The Rector at the font*



THE GLORY OF BLYTHBURGH

As you stand at the west end of the church by the font and look down the nave to the altar, what strikes you most?

- The size of this magnificent building as it soars up to its wonderful tie beam roof and stretches away to the plain east window above the cross and candles?
- The openness of the space, with wide reaches of pavement floor and the pleasing absence of memorials or decorations?
- The light streaming in from the clerestory windows, intensifying that special quality of light peculiar to East Anglia and its wide open skies, only the lovely flowers in the church bringing a touch of colour?
- Perhaps, if you are lucky, the brightness brought by shafts of sunlight touching the stones and intensifying the white limewashed walls?
- Or is it the quietness and solitude you feel as you stand small and human in this great cathedral-like church and sense years of Christian worship and love?
- Or, perhaps, the wonderful quality of sound you can experience in the perfect acoustics of the building and the hope that rushes upwards with 'angel voices ever singing'?

Perhaps there is no simple answer – how do we respond to sheer beauty? But the response is worth savouring and enjoying.

There is much detail to be admired too. As you walk down the nave, notice the playful bench ends; go through the screen and pause at the choir stalls; stand at the altar and look right to the Jack and left to the Hopton Chantry. Look up to the angels in the roof and the carved faces on the corbels. Notice the scorch marks on the north door, the tethering rings on the pillars, the remnants of coloured glass in the windows. Pause at the seven-sacrament font. And then look up once more from the detail to the great openness and work out what is for you the Glory of Blythburgh.



THIS CHURCH AND THE ARTS

Through the ages the church has inspired and guarded great achievements of the human spirit, and this church, being itself a place of beauty and holiness, is a natural home for works of music and art. Musicians, singers and orchestras are welcomed here, and since 1962, when Benjamin Britten noted the excellent acoustics of the building, some of the Aldeburgh Festival concerts have been performed here. Likewise, it houses works of art, not only in its own fabric, but by addition. Above the seventeenth-century pulpit is a poignantly plain crucifix made by a local schoolmaster in 1965. Near the main altar is a figure of the Virgin and Child carved in oak by Peter Eugene Ball and in a niche on the outside of the porch, which has been empty ever since 1644, there is now a representation in stone of the Holy Trinity by Nicholas Mynheer.

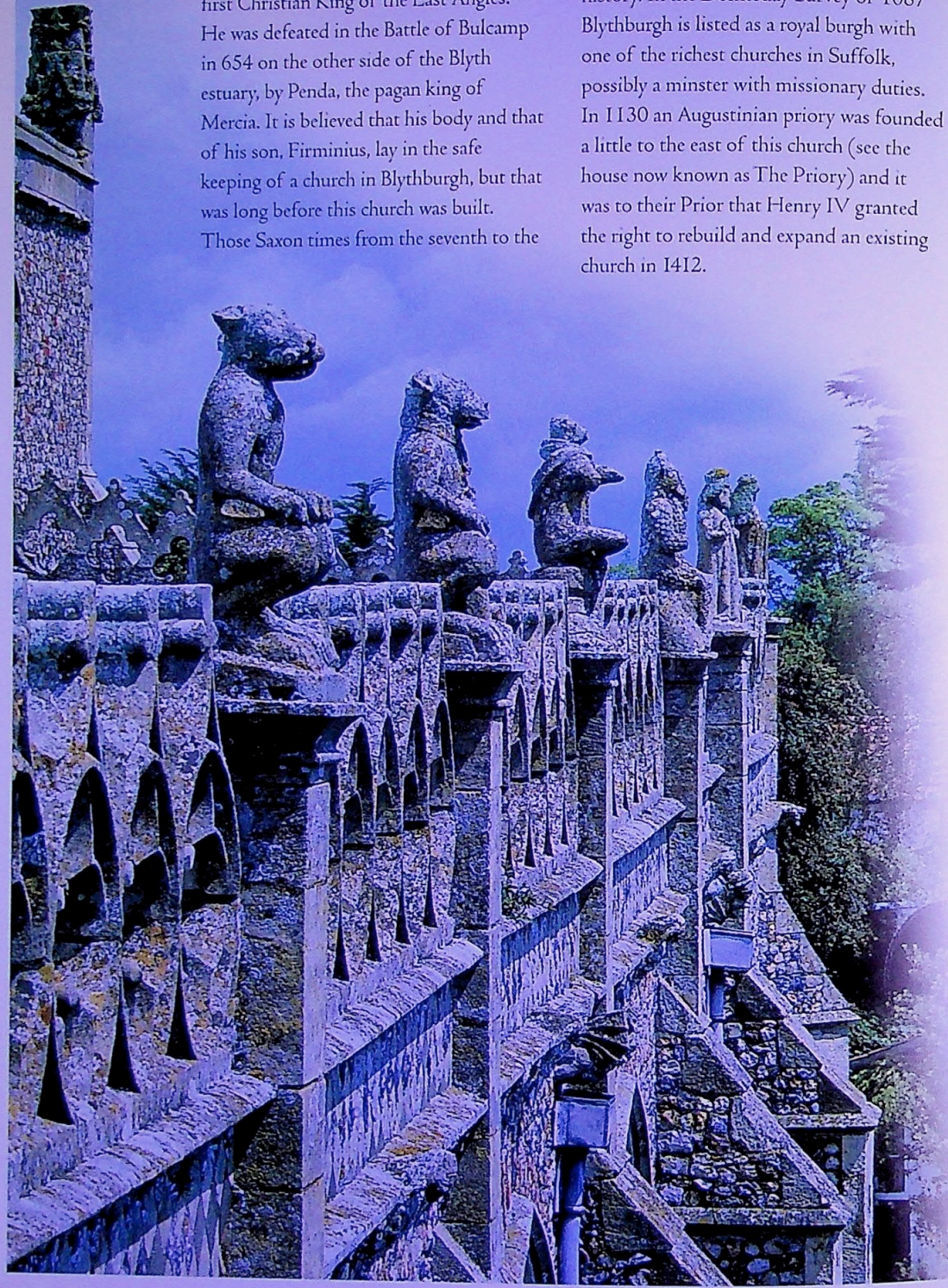
Below The Virgin and Child by Peter Eugene Ball



HISTORY

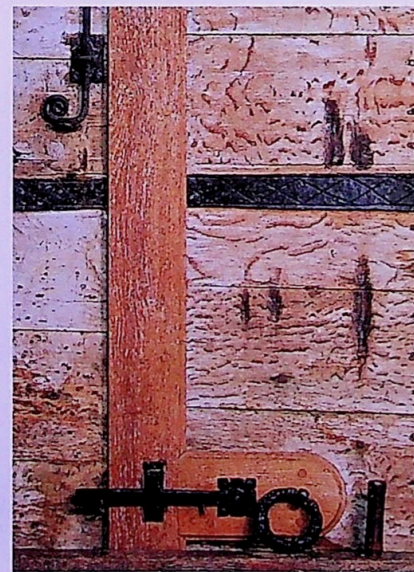
Christianity came to Blythburgh in the seventh century, when Anna was the first Christian King of the East Angles. He was defeated in the Battle of Bulcamp in 654 on the other side of the Blyth estuary, by Penda, the pagan king of Mercia. It is believed that his body and that of his son, Firminius, lay in the safe keeping of a church in Blythburgh, but that was long before this church was built. Those Saxon times from the seventh to the

eleventh century may have been the most important period of Blythburgh's Christian history. In the Domesday Survey of 1087 Blythburgh is listed as a royal burgh with one of the richest churches in Suffolk, possibly a minster with missionary duties. In 1130 an Augustinian priory was founded a little to the east of this church (see the house now known as The Priory) and it was to their Prior that Henry IV granted the right to rebuild and expand an existing church in 1412.



There was a great surge in church building in Suffolk in the fifteenth century, based more on local rivalry than on increased population or wealth from trade. Blythburgh is one of a group of churches near the sea competing in beauty and wealth. It should be compared with Southwold, Covehithe and its own daughter church of Walberswick.

The church began its long period of decline quite early in its history. Its problems started in 1538 when the nearby priory was closed by Thomas Cromwell during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, leaving the Parish Church to face alone the forces of reform, reaction and secularisation. There are a number of stories associated with this church and one that seems to be true is that there was a great storm in August 1577. During morning service, lightning (or was it the Devil?) 'cleft the door, and returning to the steeple rent the timber, brake the chimes, and fled towards Bongay, six miles off. Afterwards a man of forty and a boy of fifteen were found 'starke dead', and on



the great north door were the fingerprints of the Devil in scorch marks; they can still be seen. The font was damaged by the falling of the spire and the roof was not repaired until 1782.

The mid-seventeenth century was a time of sad destruction for many glorious East Anglian churches. Parliament demanded they be rid of superstitious ornaments, and a local Puritan, William Dowsing, was commissioned to do this. 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 twenty cherubim to be taken down in the church and chancel... and gave order to take down above 200 more within eight days'. Although this dismantling, as described in Dowsing's diary, must have caused a sad loss to the church, especially if it involved the removal of medieval stained glass from the windows, it does not sound like ruthless destruction. There is no contemporary record of soldiers shooting into the faces and wings of angels in the ceiling, nor of them tethering their horses in the nave, although this is a plausible story which is given colour by the broken floor tiles and the tethering rings in the nave pillars. The old church lacked champions, and in the eastern counties opinion was largely with the Puritans.

In fact, the church seems to have suffered less from the zeal of the Puritans than from the neglect of the following two centuries. If we could see the fifteenth century church before it was robbed and suffered long years of decay, we would be amazed by its brilliant colours. When the

Left, below Two of the distinctive faces carved on to the corbel stones



Left The 'Devil's fingerprints' - scorch marks on the north door which are a lasting reminder of the great storm of 1577



sun shone through these vast windows full of stained glass, and lighted up the bright paintwork of the nave ceiling and even the stones of the pillars and walls, painted in numerous patterns and colours, it must have seemed like a kaleidoscope or the folk art of a gypsy caravan rather than the simplicity of holiness which surrounds us today.

There are several eyewitness accounts of the gathering pace of decay in the nineteenth century. In 1819, the *Gentleman's Magazine* recorded that 'the church is kept in a very bad state... and that 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, was shocked by how rapidly the church was 'mouldring into ruin' between visits he made in 1840 and 1890. In the 1880s a newspaper reported the congregation sheltering under umbrellas from the rain pouring through holes in the roof. Indeed, the church became so unsafe that it had to be closed for a number of years. Ironically, the population was rising and reached a peak of about 600 in the 1850s, with another 500 or so in Bulcamp workhouse. This tragic neglect was the result of grinding rural poverty, the founding of a Primitive Methodist chapel in the village during the 1830s and the absence of any rich resident patron.

By the late nineteenth century the church had become little more than a ruin, albeit one of considerable sentiment and romance. By good fortune, and possibly helped by William Morris, who had become Secretary to the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, it escaped any programme of Victorian



Left The unusual Blythburgh Jack-o'-the-Clock once struck his bell on the hour; nowadays he announces the entry of the clergy. He dates from around 1682 and is one of only a few remaining in England

restoration and remains a plain and whitened version of a great fifteenth-century church. In 1881 a Restoration Fund was set up and the unending work of repair and maintenance was begun. The church was reopened in 1884. Windows were unbricked, releaded and reglazed. Worm-eaten wood in the pew backs was replaced by oak from the old mill post of Westleton Mill. The Priest's Room over the porch has been rebuilt and opened as a place of prayer and meditation; and one of the most remarkable works of repair has been the raising of the roof above the nave and chancel, accomplished during the 1970s. Maintaining this church is a task of constant vigilance, but also one of inspiration; we who worship here are proud to be the guardians of the building, its history and its Christian message.

THE ANGEL ROOF

The great span of the roof, unbroken from nave to chancel by any arch, once carried eighteen pairs of angels, coloured in gold leaf and red and green paint. It must have been a truly uplifting sight, letting the spirit soar upwards.

This is an arch-braced, firred, tie beam roof. The medieval carpenter used few nails and no iron bolts. Instead he relied on framing, and he mortised and tenoned the roof and fixed it with wooden pins. So thorough was his construction that the great span rode without repair for 500 years.

What strikes one most after the open splendour of the architecture is the spell cast by the angels. These angels are back to back in pairs, facing east and west.

The shields held by the angels bear the arms of Swillington, Ufford and Hopton - names rooted deep in the history of Blythburgh at the time of the building of the church.

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

years, we trust, so that all who come may continue to see these gracious figures floating in endless flight and bathed in the white light from the clerestory windows. They are indeed 'holy angels bright'.



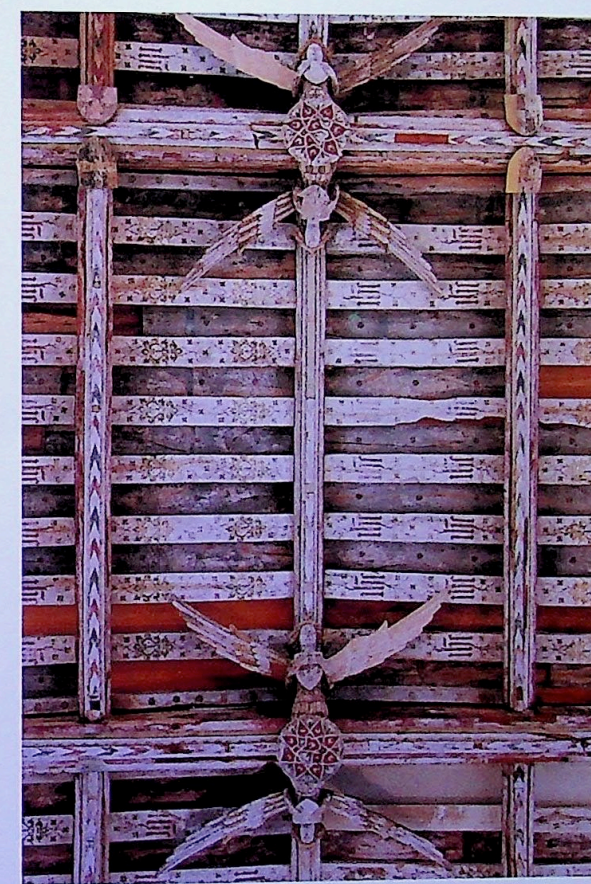
Below *A wounded angel*



Each face is different, although alike in beauty; each body ends at the hips in a large painted boss. The great extended wings are carved and were originally coloured, although several replacements given in 1954 are plain. The original style of decoration can be seen in the replica above the great south door. This may seem rather brash to our eyes, but it gives a good idea of the strong decoration 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 can still be seen. Look for the detailed work in a frame by the vestry to study this more closely.

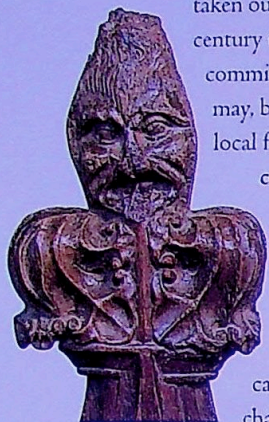
Legend has it that, in 1644, the angels were damaged by lead shot from Puritan soldiers under Dowsing, firing rounds of bullets high into the roof above them in a bout of desecration. Less romantically, these grapeshot holes may have come from attempts to get rid of jackdaws in the roof - a common eighteenth-century problem and one for which churchwardens were willing to issue 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 twenty years the techniques and materials of twentieth-century engineering were used to raise it by nine inches (23cm) and to sustain it for another five hundred



During the fifteenth century part of the great space of the nave would have been used for small altars, and the crowned 'M' on the first 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, but these are now impossible to identify, as their memorial brasses were taken out and sold during the seventeenth century to meet the demands of Dowsing's commission. Nevertheless, the church may, by chance, hold a different record of local faces. Look at the heads on the corbel stones supporting the arches of the side aisles. Surely those interesting and distinctive features must have 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



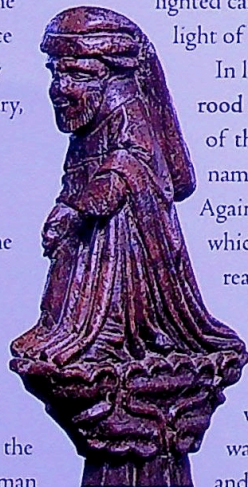
Slander

place, courthouse or priory of fifteenth-century Blythburgh.

The great nave seems to reflect the vastness of Heaven and the smallness of man, a contrast emphasised by the characterful poppyheads – carvings of little figures on the bench ends. These fifteenth-century figures represent the seven deadly sins: for instance Avarice sitting on a money box, Hypocrisy praying with open eyes and rosary, Gluttony with distended belly. Slander shows a split tongue, reminding us of the old punishment for slander in the doggerel 'Tell tale tit/ Your tongue shall be slit'. At least two figures, with upturned palms, are there to urge those sitting beside them to seek salvation through the seven corporal acts of mercy: the man



Summer



Pride



in bed is a reminder of the need to visit the sick, and another, in the stocks, to help prisoners. A third theme is the seasons: the sower in spring, the gleaner of grain or flowers for summer, the killing of a pig in autumn and the gathering of wood for winter.

All the poppyheads must have been potent symbols for the frail folk praying beside them, especially when they held lighted candles flickering in the cold light of a winter's evening.

In late medieval churches, the rood screen supported the figures of the crucifixion, hence the name rood, meaning 'cross'. Against it would have rested a loft, which in this church could be reached by the little doorway and stairs near the small north door. Now this leads nowhere, but originally it would have been possible to walk across the screen and loft and down by the south side.



THE CHOIR STALLS AND THE HOPTON CHAPEL

Right These two figures are thought to be Christ and the Virgin Mary



The small figures on the frontals of the choir stalls, seven on either side, are, we think, all saints and apostles, beautifully carved, and each one carrying a sign to help identification. The text under the pictures gives our key to them, but there may be others and you should seek your own. 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 – the poisoned chalice that proved his faith. On the south side, delicate carvings of a man and a woman are probably Christ holding the earth in his hand and Mary his mother wearing a tiara, or possibly Anna, King of the East Angles and his saintly daughter Etheldreda, but these are suggestions and open to question.

Right The carved figures on the choir stalls are probably representations of saints and apostles



St John the Baptist (book with lamb) St Matthias (axe and book) St Philip (loaves) St Luke (doctor's cap and book)
 St Matthew (T-square) St Bartholomew (flaying knife) St Andrew (cross)



St Thomas (staff/spear) St James the Less (fuller's club) St Simon (oar) St Peter (key)
 St James the Great (pilgrim's staff and wallet) St Jude (boat) St Paul (sword)

The number of figures is also interesting. Fourteen does not fit any Heavenly Order, and very probably some figures have been cut down to make the set fit in its present position. The figures may have formed the front parapet of the rood loft, and we know that during the seventeenth century they were used in the Hopton Chapel in front of benches when village children attended school there. The book rests in the choir stalls were used as desks and still have the holes that held the inkwells, and on one of them can be seen the name Dirck Lowersen, deeply cut schoolboy fashion into the wood. Dirck was probably the son of one of the workmen from the Low Countries, brought over to help with drainage of the fens. Perhaps he had little English and his name bears witness to his boredom.

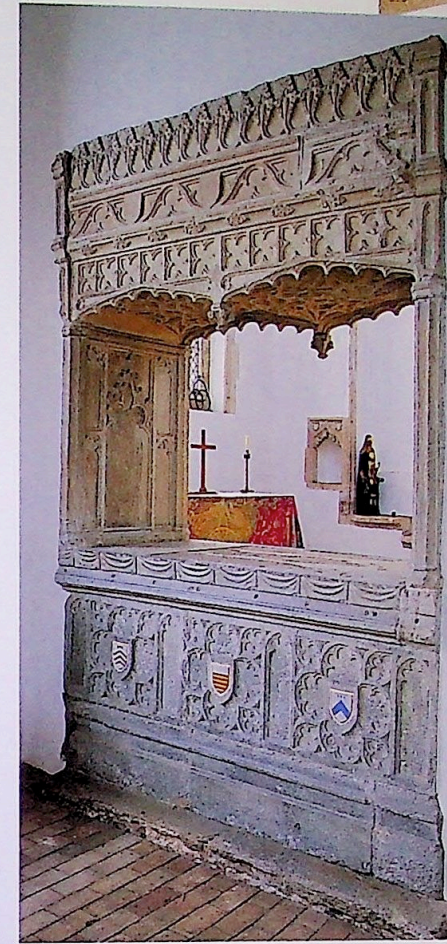
To the north of the chancel, just below the sanctuary, is the tomb of John Hopton, Lord of Blythburgh Manor, who died in 1478. He wished to be interred under a tomb of marble 'on the north side by him lately edified and built'. The tomb occupies a paramount position and, before the Reformation, would have served as the

Easter sepulchre where the consecrated Host and the cross were kept from Good Friday until Easter Morning. It is decorated on either side with shields. There are six on the chest itself, set in quatrefoils, and six more decorate the canopy which has intricate detail on the underside and rich cresting above. There were originally three memorial brasses inlaid on the top of the tomb, commemorating Hopton and his two wives, Margaret (d. 1452) and Thomasine (d. 1497).

In 1452 Hopton founded a chantry for a chaplain to pray for the soul of Margaret, his late wife. The chantry (from the Latin *cantare*,

to sing) was dedicated to St Margaret, and the chaplain celebrated mass daily in the Chapel of St Anne (the Hopton Chantry Chapel), immediately behind the tomb. After Hopton's death, a second chaplain was employed to sing for the souls of Margaret, Hopton and Hopton's benefactor, Sir Roger Swillington. The chantry appears to have been discontinued before 1535.

The stalls from the chapel are now in the choir. They bear the arms of the Swillington and de Roos families, former holders of the manors of Blythburgh and Wissett. Rents from these manors provided a stipend of six pounds per annum for each chantry chaplain.



Above The Hopton Tomb

Left The Hopton Chapel Altar

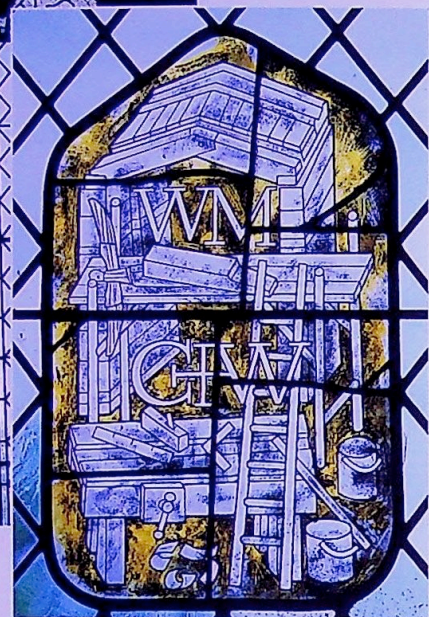


Right and below
Remnants of medieval
glass in the Muttitt
memorial window



Nineteenth-century writings and paintings show many saints and East Anglian figures in the windows of the north side of the church, before storms and man's negligence destroyed the remaining fifteenth-century glass. The chantry chapel in 1840 contained demi-figures of eleven bishops of Dunwich, starting with St Felix, who brought Christianity to East Anglia c. 634. Now only Bishop Alsin remains, in the north-east window. Above him to the right is St Anthony, an abbot in blue habit and holding a T-cross.

Little else remains of the original glass in the north aisle, which once included St Fursey (d. 648), who established a monastery at Burgh Castle, and Offa, King of East Anglia, legendary patron of King Edmund, killed by the Danes in 869.

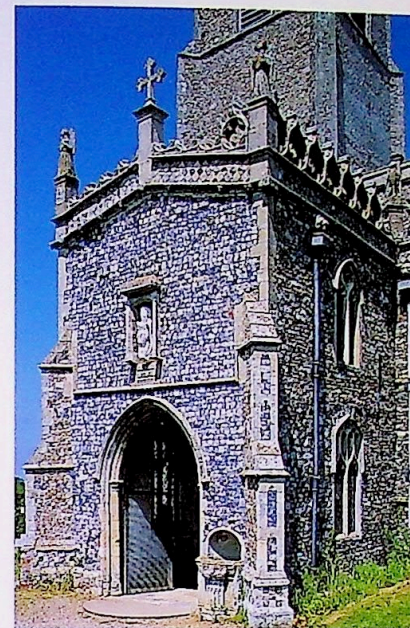


As very little remains of the medieval glass and the church gains so much from light through plain windows, it is hoped that one day clear glass may gradually be put in more of them. This has been done in the east end of the Hopton Chapel, in a window given in memory of Richard Collett, a churchwarden. There is also a nice contrast of styles in the window by the small north door; here the Muttitt memorial sits well beneath the medieval tracery and glass. William Muttitt, also a churchwarden, has been commemorated by the tools of his trade and his initials. Both these men were good twentieth-century servants of this church.



To enable priests to fulfil their duty of saying regular masses for the souls of the benefactors of the church, the space above a church porch was often set aside for this use; it is believed that this was the case at Blythburgh. In the angle of the west and south walls is a circular staircase leading to this room. The squint window in the stairway wall enabled priests to face the chantry chapel altar, without going into the church, when they said their prayers during the night for the souls of John Hopton and his family. The room may also have been the cell of a hermit, Robert Leake, who died in 1517.

Today this chapel provides a unique setting for prayer and meditation. The Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist is reserved here, to take Communion to the housebound and dying and as a focal point for adoration and praise, in this particularly still and tranquil corner of God's house.

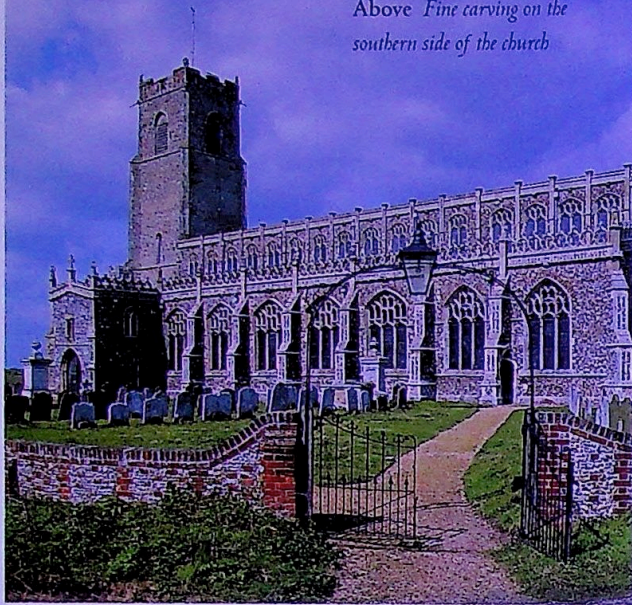


Above The porch from
outside, with the
Priest's Room above
Below The tranquil
interior of the Priest's
Room





Above Fine carving on the southern side of the church



Above The southern side of Blythburgh greets arriving worshippers with resplendent medieval stonework



Below The plainer north side of the church, seen here on a winter's morning

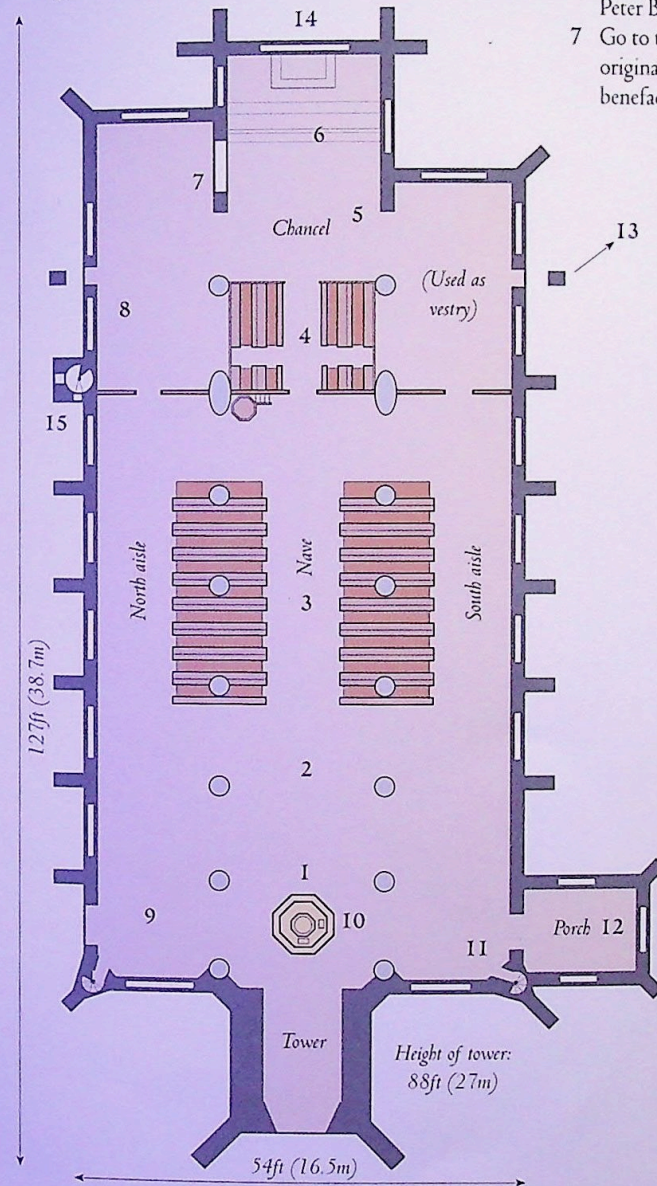
The south door of the porch is still fastened by a great oak beam that fits across it into grooves cut in the thickness of the walls. The porch is large, as befits a fifteenth-century church, and often housed weddings, christenings or civil business for ordinary folk; this could explain the large stoup, which may have served as a font. This porch is a plain and much repaired version of a more glorious original. This southern side features cinquefoils, grotesques, roses, angels and lions' heads in stone, the display contrasting sharply with the plainness of the north aspect, possibly as men of import would have entered from this side, whereas the men of God, the canons from the priory, would have come by the northern wall.

On the east end wall is one of the riddles of Blythburgh: twelve letters in Lombardic script skilfully cut into the flint. 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'. On the other hand, it is intriguing that so many of these letters can be tied to the names of the families who were patrons and benefactors of this church and who are commemorated within this very chancel. Instead of *Mariae Sanctae* we could have 'Mary Swillington', not *Annae Hic* but 'Anne Hopton', and for *Kancellus Reconstructus* 'Katherine Roos' (Rous). Our medieval ancestors loved a pun and perhaps the Latin was specially devised to hide a subtle tribute to the wives of the great men of the neighbourhood.

The northern 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 their church so that it has cheered the hearts of travellers through the ages, and earned the title 'Cathedral of the Marshes'.

- 1 By the octagonal font, which dates from the fifteenth century, you can gaze down the great length of the church and reflect on its magnificent openness.
- 2 Look up to the Angel Roof (with the remains of eighteen pairs of painted angels); notice the bright light through the plain glass of the clerestory windows. The clerestory – literally a 'clear storey', and pronounced so – was a common fifteenth-century church feature. A second tier of windows would be put in high above the nave and chancel, containing clear rather than stained glass as elsewhere in the church, to illuminate the figures on the rood screen and let in more light.

- 3 In the nave and aisles, study the bench ends – of the seven deadly sins, acts of mercy and the seasons.
- 4 Passing the pulpit (1670–5) on your left, go through the screen and into the choir stalls; note the Apostles and saints on the bench ends, and inkwells and schoolboy carvings on the top.
- 5 Pause at the Jack-o'-the-Clock, struck three times before service.
- 6 At the altar, the cloth reflects the Church year; to the right are the sedilia (recessed stone seats for the priest and his assistants) and piscina; placed here is the magnificent statue of the Virgin and Child by Peter Ball.
- 7 Go to the Hopton Tomb and Chantry Chapel (1451), originally used for masses for the souls of the departed benefactors, later the village school, now a chapel.



- 8 By the small north door, see the alms box (1473, known as 'Peter's Pence') and the stairs which once led to the rood loft with a view across the choir screen; notice the traces of medieval glass and the new, modern window designs.
- 9 On the great north door, see the scorch marks; above is the old weathercock, and on the pillars close by, supposed tethering rings.
- 10 Return to the font, with the bell tower on your right (six bells are regularly rung). Notice the restored angel over the south porch door, which is pitted with shot holes and still secured today by a great baulk of timber.
- 11 Climb up the narrow stairs to the Priest's Room, look through the squint window towards the Chantry Chapel and through the outer windows across the East Anglian landscape.
- 12 Out to the porch, notice the stoup and the recent Trinity statue in the niche. Medieval ceremonies of baptism and marriage were performed here.
- 13 By the gateway at the south corner of the churchyard, look back at one of the favourite views of the church, notice the angels holding shields in the clerestory and the grotesques at the head of the buttresses.
- 14 By the east window, look up to the sculptured block, representing the Holy Trinity, and down to the Lombardic letters.
- 15 On the north side of the church, enjoy the view over the River Blyth and the marshes.

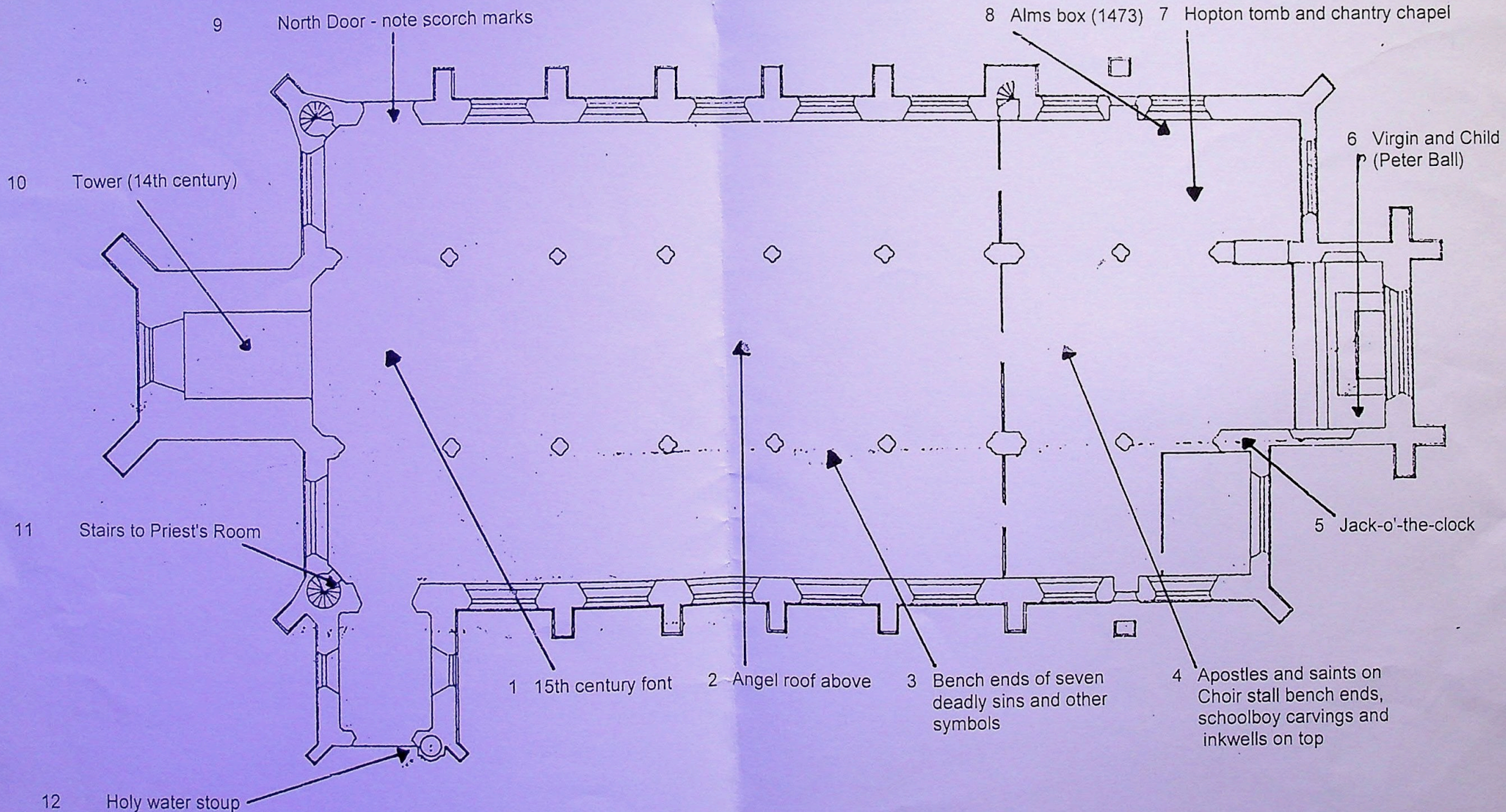


Closer links with Blythburgh

If you would like to play an active part in the work of supporting Holy Trinity Blythburgh, you may like to become a 'Friend of Blythburgh'.

For further information about the Friends or the life of the church, contact the Team Rector on 01502 722192.

PLAN OF HOLY TRINITY CHURCH BLYTHBURGH (mainly 15th century)



For more information see the *Church Guide Book* on sale on the bookstall