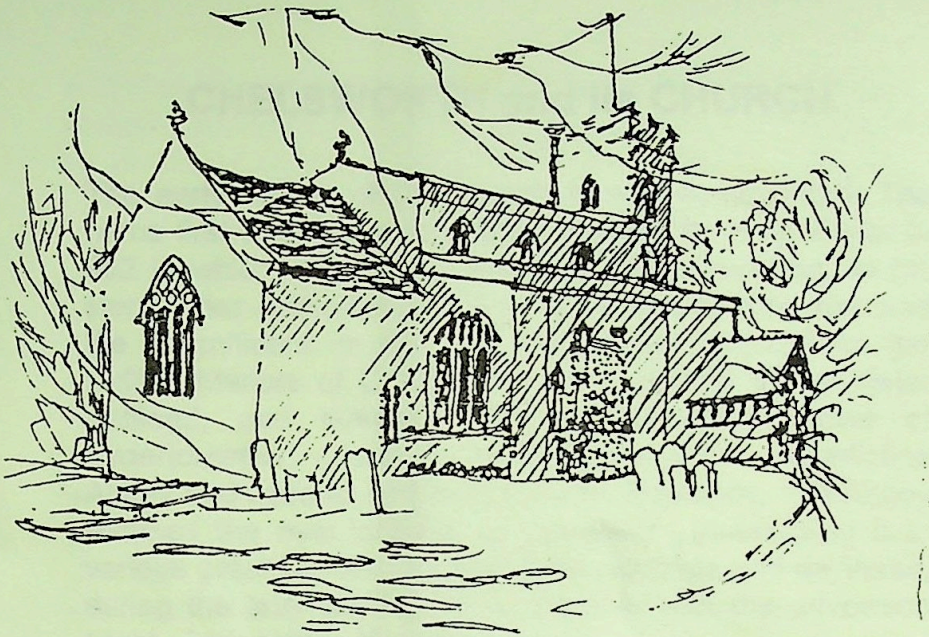


All Saints Church

Chelsworth

CHELSWORTH and its CHURCH

The early history of Chelsworth is well documented. The name first appears in a Charter granted by King Edgar in 962 in which he gave an estate in "Ceorleswyrthe" to his stepmother Aethelflaed, widow of his father King Edmund the Magnificent. In her will, Aethelflaed bequeathed her Suffolk Manors of Chelsworth and Cockfield to her sister Aelflaed, and thereafter to "St. Edmund's Stowe at Bydericwyrthe" - later to become the great Benedictine Abbey and national shrine of Bury St. Edmunds. The Abbey retained the over-lordship of the Manor (subleasing it to various great families, including the Howards and de Veres, during the later Middle Ages) together with the advowson (right of appointing the parish priest).

When Henry VIII dissolved the Monasteries (1539), the patronage passed to the Crown, which appointed all subsequent Rectors until the formation of the United Benefice. The earliest parish priest whose name is recorded is Geoffrey de Sai (1199), and the list of his successors is in the Church. The living was united with that of Monks Eleigh in 1932, and the United Benefice with that of Brent Eleigh and Milden in 1976. The parish of Kettlebaston was added to the Benefice in 1996.

The earliest Church in Chelsworth was doubtless built by the Abbey for its tenants here and it is this building which is mentioned in the Domesday Survey of the Manor in 1086 as "a church with 30 acres of ploughland and one meadow". The original manor house was on a site immediately west of the Church, by the river, as appears from early references in **The Chorography of Suffolk** (c. 1602) (Suffolk Records

Society Vol. 19. 1976. pp 36 & 105): "...the seate (site?) of a most ancient house environed with ditches or moates according to the forme of antiquity.... with some Ruines or visible foundations yet permanent".

The present Church of All Saints is evidently mostly of the 14th and 15th Centuries and incorporates no obvious traces of its predecessor, although it was possible that some of the older building materials were re-used. As it stands, it provides an interesting illustration of the ambitious enlargement (widening) in the perpendicular style characteristic of the 15th Century, of a basically early 14th or even late 13th Century (Early English and Decorated) fabric. It is of course possible that the Nave, subsequently rebuilt, incorporated features from the original Norman or even Saxon building.

Of the 14th Century building, the tower and chancel survive. The latter was much altered in a Victorian restoration of 1866, when the present East window, though not its slightly later glass, was inserted. Other features of this earlier building incorporated in the present one are:

- the **Font**, with identical cusped arches on the eight faces of the bowl:

- the elaborate **Tomb Recess** with its external projection with twin round turrets and cornice with ball flower ornament, built into the thickness of the North Aisle. This remarkable monument was evidently moved and rebuilt into its present position from the earlier church, or even from elsewhere when the church was greatly enlarged in the 15th Century. A close examination reveals

dislocation of some of the diaper design when rebuilt. It seems that, as originally built, it was free-standing. The medieval ledger stone was inserted into the floor circa 1900 and forms part of the original design. There is no inscription, effigy, heraldry or documentary evidence to enable identification of the person commemorated, but it is traditionally supposed to be the tomb of St. John de St. Philibert, Lord of the Manor, (subtenant of the Abbey) from 1334 to 1351. He died abroad in 1359. Stylistically it seems a little too early for that, and is more likely to be that of his father of the same name who died in 1334. its complex design is admirably described by Sir Nicholas Pevsner (**Buildings of England, Suffolk**, 1st edition 1961, p. 146) who says, with his great authority as an art historian, that "its style is that of the Royal Court." Note especially the delicate groining of the vault, and the carving of the central boss and the little capitals.

The major enlargement of the Church in the 15th Century drastically altered its proportions, dwarfing the little tower with a lofty and indeed sumptuous nave and aisles of three bays with clerestory, and adding a handsome South porch with crenellated parapet continued over the South aisle and with stone lion and gryphon (?) atop its East and West angles. The result was that the Church's ground plan gives an overall width, including both porches of 80ft, almost exactly equal to the overall length from the tower buttress to the East wall.

The characteristically perpendicular features in this splendid enlargement include the fine three-light East and West windows of the North and South aisles, but it is interesting to note that the much simpler two-light nave

- In 1500, John Sawnder left six Marks for making a bellframe in the tower. (We know that in 1552 Chelsworth had four bells (see page 9).

- In 1524, John Alden bequeathed £4 (a large sum in those days) towards "the leading of the church". This must refer to the nave and aisle roofs and could be taken as implying that the major extension referred to above, as of the 15th Century, actually took place in the first quarter of the 16th Century, shortly before the Reformation brought almost all church building to an abrupt halt.

Glass: Chelsworth Church is fortunate in possessing some excellent stained glass., dating from the 17th, 19th and 21st Centuries:

- a delightful jumble of Continental domestic glass of the 17th Century, Dutch or German, exists in the windows of the South Porch. Individual fragments deserve close study.

- a few similar pieces of Continental domestic glass appear in the East and West windows of the South aisle.

- of the 19th Century glass, especially notable is the East window of 1875 by Hardman of Birmingham, depicting Christ crucified, with Our Lady and St. John, characteristic High Victorian Gothic Revival, the stiff hieratic figures consciously modelled on the glass and illuminated manuscripts of the 14th Century.

- the East window of the North aisle depicts the Ascension in a more pictorial style and softer colouring (circa 1899).

- the western-most of the two South Chancel windows is by Lavers, Barraud and Westlake, typically self-confident Victorian.

- the two heraldic windows, East and West of the South aisle, illustrate the coats of arms of successive Lords of the Manor down the centuries.

- the small windows in the North and South aisles are rare, being examples of local work by the otherwise little known RB King of Ipswich, 1853.

- the small Millennium panel executed in AD 2000 by Paul Quail, was given by parishioners, and is positioned in the West window of the North aisle, above the font.

Other notable features include:-

(i) The **Royal Arms** of George IV (1820-1830) over the tower arch.

(ii) Three **funeral hatchments**, which were originally displayed after a death, over the front door of the deceased's residence. They are all of the Pocklington family. The earliest, over the South door, is that of Robert Pocklington, Serjeant-at-Law. who bought the Manor of Chelsworth in 1737, built the Old Hall, and died in 1767.

Near it is that of Sir Robert Pocklington, who, as an officer in the 15th Dragoons in 1794, rescued the last Holy Roman

Emperor, Francis II of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine, (brother of Marie Antoinette and later, father-in-law of Napoleon and Emperor of Austria) from capture by cavalry of the French Revolutionary Army near Cambrai, a gallant exploit rewarded by his Imperial Majesty with a Knighthood of the Military Order of Maria Theresa (the Emperor's mother). The cross of this Order appears at the base of the hatchment beneath Pocklington's escutcheon and also on his **marble mural tablet** in the South aisle, together with his Dragoon's helmet, guns and cannon balls. The supporters of his arms on the hatchment are an English and an Austrian hussar of the Napoleonic era. Sir Robert died in 1840.

(iii) A **monument in the Chancel** to Major General George Stracey Smyth who died in 1823, Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, Canada, and sometime ADC to Queen Victoria's father, Edward, Duke of Kent. The handsome bas relief profile of the General and the eloquent epitaph composed by his admiring brother, the Reverend John Gee Smyth, Rector of Chelsworth for 41 years to his death in 1831, are of considerable interest.

(iv) A **mural tablet** in the North Aisle, which is a 1914-18 War Memorial commemorating Charles Peck, the only native of this tiny village to be killed in action.

(v) **Two ledger stones** (flat floor slabs) formerly in the Chancel. The one by the vestry door commemorates Robert Andrews, Rector of Chelsworth 1646-1689; the other Ralph Hewitt and his sister Elizabeth, who married, first, the aforesaid Robert Andrews and, after his death, Nicholas Thurloe, Vicar of Brent Eleigh.

(vi) **The two-manual organ** by Auguste Gern, a French organ builder of Notting Hill. It replaced a barrel organ in 1877 and is a fine instrument for its size. You will notice that the console is placed in front of the organist, who faces the congregation. In 1992, the organ was restored by Boggis of Diss.

(vii) **The Pulpit and the Chancel Stalls**, dating from the 1866 restoration, represent good restrained work of their period.

(viii) **The Church Plate**, comprising a Cup and Cover (Paten) of 1663, a second Paten of 1724, and an alms bason and Flagon of 1735.

(IX) **The Parish Registers**, complete from 1559. The earlier volumes are held in the Suffolk Records Office, Bury St. Edmunds.

(x) Finally, **the Bell**. There is only one, cast in 1763. The sad story of its predecessors is neatly summarised in a limerick composed by the father of the late GR Pocklington, author of **Chelsworth: The Story of a Little Suffolk Village** (1956), an outstandingly well researched and beautifully written parish history.

> The Churchwardens and Parson of Chelsworth
> Said, "What is our fine peal of bells worth?"
> When the answer was told,
> They at once had them sold,
> And we now have but one bell at Chelsworth.

As recorded in an inventory of 1552, there were four bells at that time. The other three were sold for £84 in 1746 and part of the proceeds used for re-leading the church roof the following year.

A FINAL NOTE

The exceptionally picturesque, unspoilt Suffolk village served by this historic church has hardly grown at all in a thousand years and seems unlikely to do so in the future. Its total population at the time of the Domesday Survey (1086) was carefully estimated by Geoffrey Pocklington, in line with established historical analysis, at between 80 and 100.

There have been considerable fluctuations over the centuries, and the population has dwindled since the first National Census in 1801. Rising to a peak of 346 in 1831, with the subsequent decline in agriculture and, later, its mechanisation - its present resident population, including children, is about 125. The cost of repairs and upkeep is ever constant and the generous support of visitors is therefore much appreciated.

May 2003

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

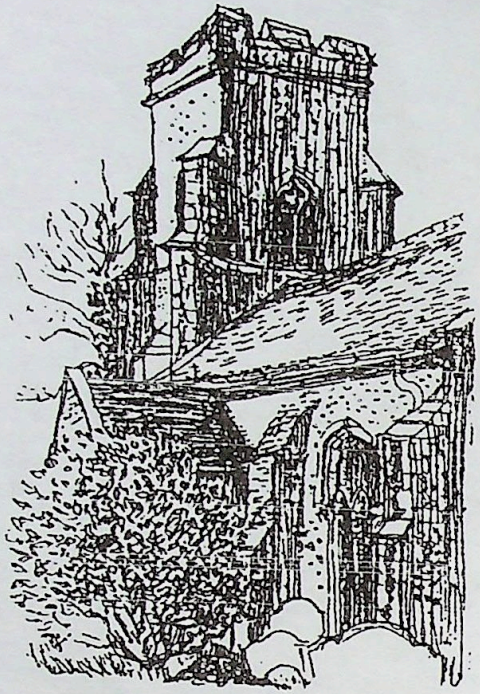
The PCC of All Saints, Chelsworth, wish to acknowledge the following in the production of this Guide:

Canon John Fitch M.A., Rector of All Saints Church from 1980 - 1987, for his original guide entitled **CHELSWORTH and its CHURCH.**

Chelsworth: The Story of a Little Suffolk Village (1956) by
GR Pocklington.

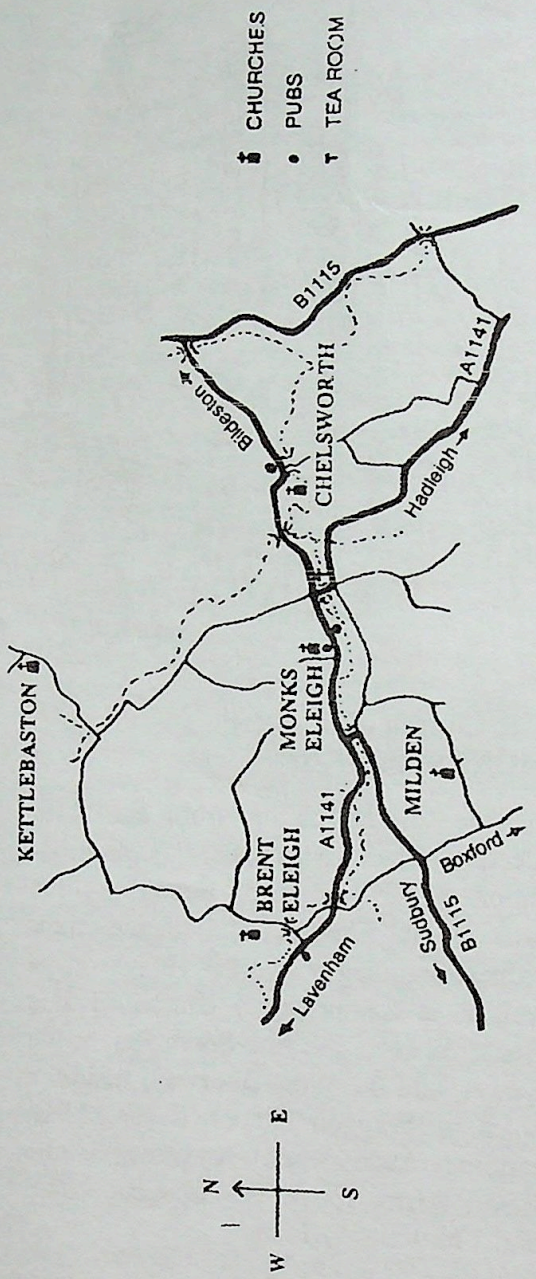
For full descriptive and historical details of the armorial windows of the South aisle (see page 7), and of the hatchments (see page 7), please refer to **the Heraldry of Suffolk Churches booklet No. 2** in the series published by the Suffolk Heraldry Society, 1979 onwards.

The Chorography of Suffolk by Dr. John Blatchley FSA, of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History.



The Church of St. Mary
KETTLEBASTON

Note the Church's patron saint in the buttress niche as you arrive. The Chancel is 14th Century and contains casts of 14th Century alabaster panels of the Annunciation, found in 1864. The originals being in the British Museum. The wrought iron grill to the Rood Stair was designed by Sir Ninian Comper. Note the Scratch dial on the south east buttress of the Nave.



FIVE BEAUTIFUL CHURCHES IN ONE BENEFICE

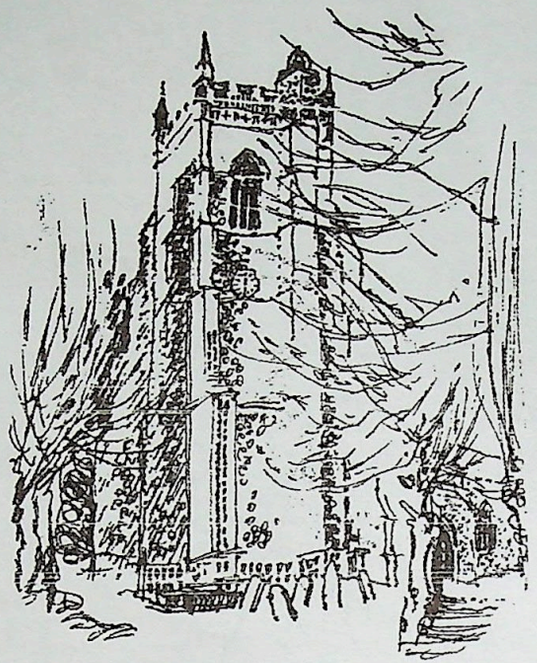
These five churches in our benefice may be of historic interest to travellers in the area, and all are welcome to visit them, remembering that they are also active centres of worship in each village. We would be very grateful if, therefore, visitors would spare a prayer and a thought for their continuing existence and repair.

The Church of St. Peter
MILDEN

Small Domesday Church on a hill dating from 1086, with views of Lavenham Church, Brent Eleigh, and Monks Eleigh. Fine Norman South Door in the Porch. Note the 17th Century Churchwardens Pews in the Chancel and James Alington Tomb, and recently discovered fragments of Wall Paintings on South Wall.

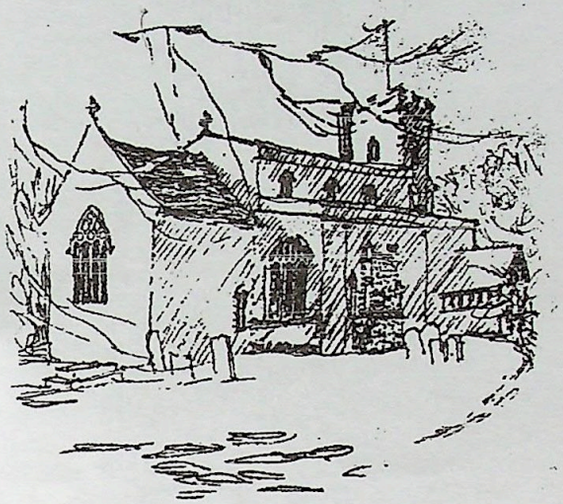
The Church of St. Mary
BRENT ELEIGH

Historic Church standing by the Hall, since 1280. Fine South Door, and three bar arcade in South Aisle with carved wood Chantry Chapel. Important Medieval Wall Paintings behind the altar in the Chancel, and Thomas Dunn's Monument here to Edward Colman. 17th Century Box Pews in the Nave.



The Church of St. Peter
MONKS ELEIGH

A fine Church dating from the 14th Century, when it was under the administration of the Monks of Canterbury (as was Brent Eleigh), and hence their names. Standing above the village on its hill, it is the principal church of this Benefice. Note the fine South Porch, the Tower, and the West Doorway. Inside, a splendid 'Waggon Tilt' or 'Seven Sided' raftered Aisle Roof. A Queen Anne Royal Arms above the Chancel Arch, and 13th Century Font.



The Church of All Saints
CHELSWORTH

A Charter granted in 926 to King Edgar mentions a church here. A Domesday Church first recorded here in 1086. The present building by the river Brett is 13th Century. See the Font, and Crusader Tomb of John de Saint Philibert. A surviving Rood Loft Stair and Doom Painting over the Chancel Arch. Fine South Porch with 16th Century Stained Glass Panels.