



ST. MARY'S  
EARL  
SOHAM

## St. Mary's Church, Earl Soham

"From the village, travelling north, the road begins again gently to climb and wind back to the uplands, and here, to the east, against a background of darkly massed trees, riding forward on the shoulder of the hill stands superb St. Mary's Church."

The church which has its origins in the Thirteenth Century was originally dedicated to St. Andrew. When and why it was re-dedicated to St. Mary is not known, but one source puts the date of this as 1855.

Between 1699 and 1888 no substantial repair work was done to the building. Throughout the 1880s the church had been seen to be in urgent need of repair, but the work was delayed for nearly a decade because of the severe continuing agricultural depression. Work finally started in 1890, and became extended through into the 1900s as additional serious problems became apparent. Much of this restoration work was carried out under the direction of (Sir) Thos. G. Jackson of, later, Winchester Cathedral fame, whose original hand written report dated 2nd October 1888 is lodged in the Suffolk County Records Office.

Entry to the church is through the low Fifteenth Century south porch. Atop its gable is a tall medieval figure holding a staff with below it a worn rampant lion, and a modern inscription: "Christ who died upon the rood, grant us grace, our end be good." The figure may represent St. Andrew and have come from the now empty niche high above the great west doors. An alternative suggestion is that it is the remaining one of the figures who originally stood on the tower's four pinnacles.

The oak double doors, installed in 1991 in memory of three long serving parishioners have yet to weather to their lasting natural colour. Within, in the near left corner, lies a Stoup, a 'vessel for Holy Water'. This was originally set in the wall to the right of the inner door, and was probably removed during the commonwealth.

Opening the ancient heavy oak single door (itself worth time to study) one gains entry to the church at the west end and close by the Fifteenth Century font. This is of a familiar local design, the gift of Robert Kinge, but the panels are all defaced and the inscription round the base is no longer legible. T.G. Jackson's report identified the font as a very fine Fifteenth Century work which required to be cleaned from paint, as well as did its Jacobean cover. Restoration of the cover seems in the end to have been virtual replacement as although the base from its underneath can be seen to be much older, the remainder is a clear example of T.G. Jackson's work.

The nave was rebuilt in the Fifteenth Century and given a superb double hammerbeam roof. Looking up one can see carved figures, all of which, except the two, either side, at the west end have been much defaced. This is a very visible part of the damage done by William Dowsing and his men who during the Commonwealth worked through many of Suffolk's churches removing anything that smacked of 'Popery'.

This church suffered particularly severely at their hands as at the time a noted Royalist and Malignant, Sir John Cotton, son of the Lord Mayor of London was Lord of the Manor and resident in the Parish. Sir John had given large sums towards the clothing of the King's troops, and in 1643 a Commission was sent down by Parliament which compelled him and 79 others in the Parish or neighbourhood to sign, or to make their mark to a 'Solemn League and Covenant' written in the church register (now in the County Archives at Ipswich). All the figures in stone and wood were mutilated and there is nothing left of the original windows which would have been full of beautiful painted glass.

Dominant to the south side of the Chancel arch is a striking Jacobean pulpit with blind arched panels and strapwork under the canted book ledge. Above the backboard is a hexagonal tester. Until ~~about~~ hundred years ago this pulpit was situate half way down the south side, where there now hangs, since 1949, a fine set of Charles II Royal Arms, on canvas (recently restored), previously displayed above the Chancel arch. Until 1890 the congregation were seated in Jacobean box pews which occupied the whole Nave around the pulpit either side of the aisle and through into the Chancel - there being no organ there, nor a raised floor as now.

There was then also a gallery in which an organ had been installed in 1825, situate at the west end of the Nave and reached by the staircase where the War Memorial Plaques are now displayed. T.G. Jackson describes the gallery as handsome and interesting of its kind and having some claims to be preserved on its own account. He added 'on the other hand it would of course add a great deal to the dignity of the church to throw open the tower arch to the nave once more'.

As the Thirteenth Century Chancel was rebuilt, an older east window (a water colour of which hangs in the Vestry) was replaced and the present glass installed in 1899, the gift of Sir Auckland Colvin.

Standing with one's back to it and looking the length of the church there is a good, and almost the only, view of the much better west window (by Burlison and Grylls?) installed in 1906 - which looks its best when seen with the evening sun of high summer shining behind and through it.

Under the direction of T.G. Jackson, the Chancel floor was raised; and in 1901 a new organ, by Norman and Beard of Norwich, the gift of Sir Auckland Colvin installed together with the present choir stalls. Some part of the 1825 organ was used in the new one, to which also additional pipes have been added in the last twenty years. The Altar was further elevated as it is today. It appears that the great arch between the nave and chancel was rebuilt with new foundations, having been widened in the past.

To either side of the original (narrower) arch there were undoubtedly side chapels, but of each of these all that now remains is the piscina, albeit apparent now only as a niche in the facing walls. However, on the south wall of the Chancel, close by the present Altar, the fifteenth Century piscina to be seen still in good condition with its

drain still in place, was uncovered during the restoration work. During that work also foundations were found showing that at one time the Chancel had been eight feet longer; and, at the other end, that the west wall had, before the tower was built, run across the church under where the font now is. At that earlier time also there was at the west end a door in the north wall - but this is long since sealed off.

In the Nave the old pews were demolished; the pulpit was repaired and removed to its present site, its height being maintained by setting it on pillars akin to those in the "modern" screen with its massive turned uprights erected in the tower arch by T.G. Jackson, using timber salvaged from the gallery.

Having been closed for fifty one weeks, the church was re-opened on 22nd April 1891. During that time, and spread over no less than fourteen contracts, work carried out had eventually included: the Nave roof - recasting lead, oak boards between rafters, deal cladding and felt; repairing Nave and Chancel walls and gables; re-building Chancel arch with foundations (wrought stone from Clipsham Quarries, Rutland); building buttress chimney with stove pits and flues; drainage, dry areas and troughing complete; repairing of porch; new roof to Chancel; concrete and wood block floor; concrete and stone floor for Nave and Chancel, (the stone an extremely hard bituminous limestone from near John O'Groats House); restoration of Jacobean pulpit; stoves and chairs for temporary use. In the course of this work, the exterior was made weather-proof and the interior convenient for services. It was specially noted that nothing was spent on decorative work: The expenditure on "actual work" and material was about £695 in total!

From that time the seating in the church, previously in the Jacobean box pews, was on chairs. The box pews had retained the ruins of seventeen of the Fifteenth Century pews which "even in their mutilated state" were seen by T.G. Jackson as "extremely interesting". He proposed the future restoration of as many of them as were not too far gone to be made serviceable. At the time some at least of the pew ends were stored in the loft of one of the Rectory barns where they remained until re-discovered in 1928 by the newly arrived Rector, Rev. (later Archdeacon) Thos. Brown as he was being shown around his new home by the churchwarden, George Whymark. Their enthusiasm for their find was such that, working from those originals, additional pew ends were created by Archdeacon Darling's group of woodcarvers based at Eyke. The seats and backs of the benches were for the most part made in this village in the workshops of Wm. Baldry, adjoining the Falcon, one of his workers being Swin Rogers. The salvaged medieval ends can be found in the first five rows, and include e.g., a man with a log on his shoulder, a woman setting up a sheaf of corn, and a good standing figure with a basket. The spirit of these originals was so well caught that in some cases it is difficult to tell old from new. The ends are three inches thick and have window tracery carved deeply in the solid.

In 1888, T.G. Jackson identified the Communion Table and rails as "of oak and very good of their kind, and the rails seem to be the original ones of Archbishop Laud's

time". He advised they should all be cleaned from paint. Sadly it is clear they did not survive this, because the present rails are a patent fine example of T.G. Jackson's own work. The Altar Table now in use appears to be part of the memorial to Canon Abbay. The Reredos (by Mowbrays of London) and panels fixed on the east wall were added in 1929 as a memorial to the late Canon Abbay (see the inscription carved in the top left hand corner of the panels).

To the north of the Chancel arch, tucked in to the left of the organ is a modern window in glowing colours showing St. Edmund and St. Felix - a further memorial to Canon Abbay and other members of his family. The beautiful glass was one of the last commissions of Margaret E. Aldrich Rope of Leiston.

On the south side of the Chancel, the "Y" tracery windows with their worn headstops point to a date around 1300. In much more recent times, but offering their own interest, a number of (young?) people have scratched their names and other detail on some of the glass in the two windows. The most recent is dated 1952, but one at least is dated 1857; who, one may pause to wonder, were Henry Stone, 1888; William Wright of Dennington; Walter Buck, Earl Soham, 1857; and others?

There is a priest's doorway in this south wall. The stone of the arch was repaired in April 1748 by "R Pa...ant"; the oak door dates back only to 1929.

In the north east corner of the Chancel there is, on the wall, a memorial to Rev. John Hindes Groom and his "faithful and beloved" wife Mary. He was Rector here and at Monk Soham from 1818 to 1845, being followed by his son of the same name who was incumbent for the next thirty five years. It is said that John Groom the elder lived a very full and physical life around his two parishes, extending and indulging his pastoral activities greatly beyond the ordinary and proper call of his duties as cleric.

Below the memorial there is a large store chest, Jacobean in origin but much restored by the Eyke wood carvers. This chest and the door of the pulpit were found with the pew ends in the barn loft.

Returning to the Chancel steps one sees the fine but cumbersome oak lectern, another of Sir Auckland Colvin's gifts. The more practical, lighter lectern standing, usually, below the pulpit is a recent gift in memory of Rev. C.G.St.C. Tisdall, lately Rector here. The old White Ensign hanging over the Colvin lectern was flown by Canon Abbay's naval officer son when with a British force in Russia at the time of the Bolshevik revolution. Elsewhere in the Chancel are the banner of the Mothers' Union and the laid up Colour of the former British Legion Branch, which continues very actively in being with a wider membership and a new title and Colour.

Walking back down the Nave it may be seen that a number of the pews bear memorial inscriptions, donated by families as the pews were made and installed during the early 1930s. In all they offer seating for some 120 people. The gallery until its removal in the early 1900s seated another 50 folk.



The restored and new pews were dedicated in October 1940 by the Bishop of Dunwich.

The kneelers throughout including those at the Communion rails were worked by parishioners during the last ten years.

Electricity was first installed in the church in 1927. The candelabra now hanging throughout the church are the work of Hector Moore. Blacksmith of Brandeston, and internationally renowned.

The tower is entered by passing through T.G. Jackson's Screen with its false gallery front over. It is possible that a gallery was planned within the confines of the tower (as a home for an organ?) but there is no information about this. The great west doors to the church were sealed off in recent years only, and are now lost behind a plywood panel and a (wheel mounted) store cupboard; this area is used as a Vestry and a place to which mothers with young children can, if need arise, withdraw during a service - the new heavy curtains providing a "sound barrier", and privacy. In the Vestry now converted to use as a desk is T.G. Jackson's Altar table.

The tower has a peal of six bells, the oldest of which, like the tower itself, date from about 1470. The bells were rehung in 1898 and again in 1976 (at a cost then of £4000), and are still rung frequently. Entrance to the bell chamber is through the medieval door and up a steep spiral stone stairway. For reasons of safety this door is generally kept locked. The tower is one of the very few to be found with inscriptions identifying both the donor (Ranulph Colnett) and the builder and his "best helper" (Thomas Edward and Christopher). They are to be found twelve feet up on the external west buttresses, are in latin, and much worn.

A Cromwellian Altar table stood in the bell chamber for many years during which time it acquired numerous inscriptions. Albeit much defaced, it now stands immediately to the left of the south door where one entered. Above it hangs the list of Rectors, starting with Richard de Overton in 1294. On the table is the much used book recording visitors from the world over, which we hope you, too, will sign before you leave.

The Rectors' Roll is worthy of study. For length of service two names in particular catch the eye. Canon Richard Abbay who was Rector from 1880 to 1927 (47 years) was also a scientist and an authority on apple trees, laying out orchards and experimenting with many varieties. Before him Francis Capper was here for 59 years until 1816. In 1898 (in his Register of Burials of all places) Canon Abbay records visiting a 102 year old lady parishioner who well remembered Rev. Capper!

In the mid seventeenth Century strong efforts were frequently made to remove clergy whose churchmanship did not please parliamentary supporters during the Commonwealth. A book published in 1642 lists many cases though what substance there was in the allegations is not known. One of those accused was Thomas Folkes, listed as coming here in 1624 - "This Mr Folkes (or Fowkes) was tried for murder at

Bury before Judge Croke and was found guilty of manslaughter, which might only mean that he accidentally killed a man. The verdict however caused the Living to be vacated, but the Archbishop of Canterbury giving him a dispensation he still retained it. The Archbishop's reply to the Attorney for the Petitioners was "would you have me undoe a man for one unlucky blow?" Soon afterwards the Archbishop was himself thrown into prison and the Attorney hoping that he might have been humbled by confinement, waited on him again, but was told by the Prelate that he had no power now to put anyone, however bad, out of the Ministry.

It was also said of Rev. Folkes that "his religion is either more or less as the wind blows, and that if the ceremonies being tending to Popery, none so forward as he who has attended the company of known Popish Recusants; and even goes to Lambeth Fair and bought a lot of special Papist ware of which he made good use".

The present Incumbent, Canon D.A.S. Boyes is Rector also of Cretingham and of Ashfield-cum-Thorpe, and Rural Dean of the Loes Deanery. He "inherited" Canon Abbay's Register of Burials which reflecting well over 100 years of use was finally filled and replaced only in 1994.

The Parish Registers for Marriages, Baptisms and Burials dating from 1558 are now held in the County Archives at Ipswich, as is the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643.

The church is not overburdened with memorial plaques or stones. A characteristic early nineteenth Century tablet by Gaffin, for members of the Hinde family is on the north wall ("deep sarcophagus with urn and drooping willow branches on top"). It overlooks the simple family stone in the aisle floor. Facing it, on the south wall, is the plain brass plate commemorating Sir Auckland Colvin.

A plan and detail of all plaques, memorials and inscriptions is kept in the Vestry.

Leaving the church as one entered, one's eye may well turn to the huge untrimmed yew tree which comprehensively excludes sunlight from within the church throughout much of the day. Beyond it there is a Wellingtonia pine grown from a seed brought from California in 1875. The churchyard has been closed for burials since 1878, but there is a small memorial garden reserved for the interment of ashes on the far eastern edge in which modest commemorative stones are added from time to time.

From outside the tower is to be seen as one whose proportions seem instinctively good. Its great west doors, as old probably as the tower itself have on either side of and above them empty niches - more reminders of Dowsing's visit. Further up, under the higher niche is a flushwork shield carrying a St. Andrew's cross. The flag-pole atop the tower is a recent memorial replacement; the weather vane is older. Originally there would have been figures on each of the tower pinnacles but they were removed in the past (more of Dowsing?) and the pinnacles have since been rebuilt.

On the south west buttress of the Chancel one complete and two incomplete scratch

dials are to be seen; their origin is not known.

On either side of the east window one can see good corbel heads of Canon Abbay - on the right with the beard - and Sir Auckland Colvin on the left.

Understandably the church is a Grade One Listed building.

As one walks around this superb church it is, as one visitor has said, "quite a thought, that the Chancel was here when the Black Prince was conquering at Crecy; and the Nave was built before the first Tudors came to the Throne....."

"Truly this is one of Suffolk's oldest and loveliest Corners".

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