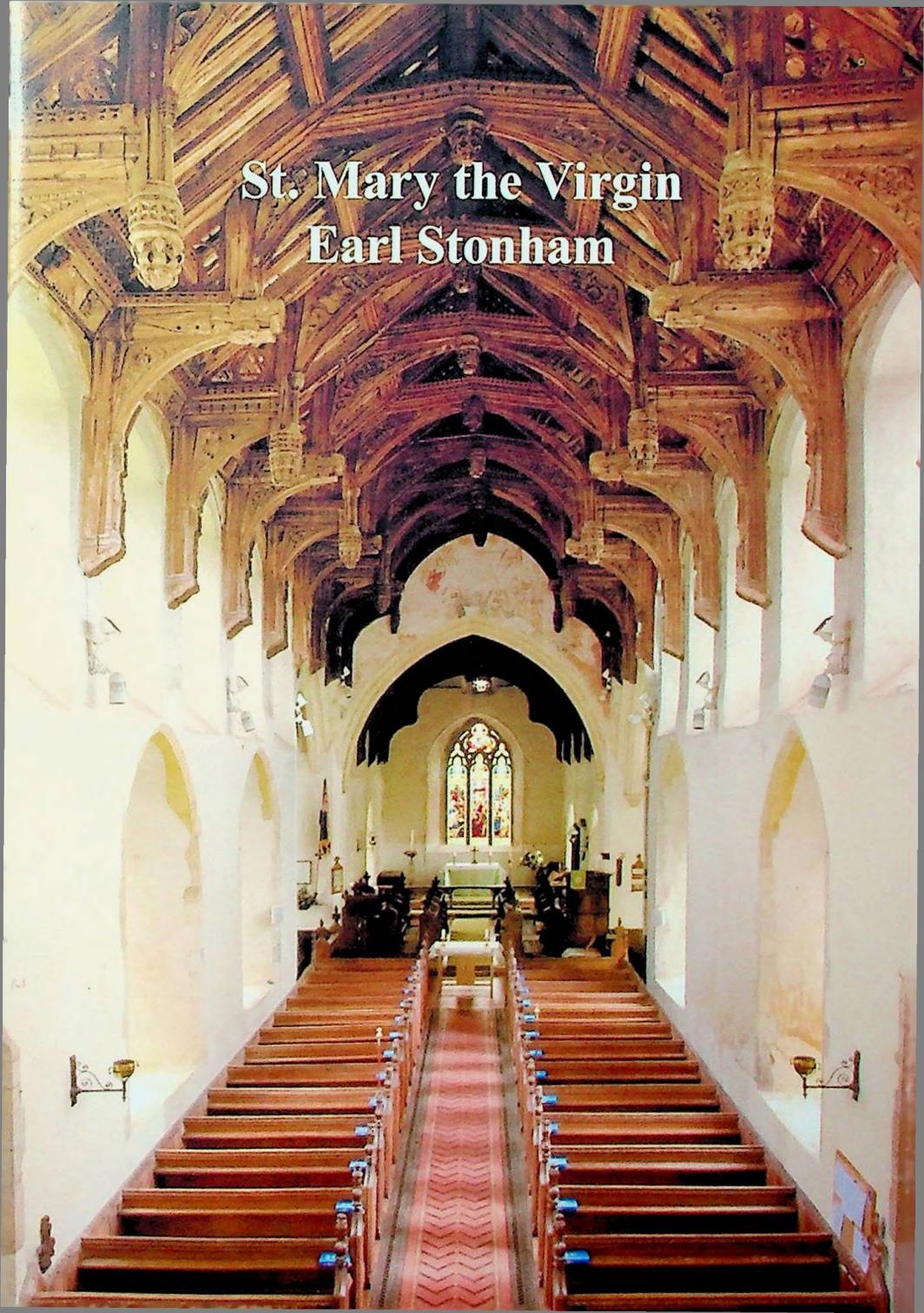


**St. Mary the Virgin  
Earl Stonham**



A Guide to the  
Church of St. Mary the Virgin  
in the Parish of  
Earl Stonham with Stonham Parva  
in the County of Suffolk

Photographs by Alan Sarsby

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## St Mary the Virgin, Earl Stonham

“The place where you stand is holy ground,” and it has been so since before the Christian era. The path on the east side of the church goes over what is reputed to be a Roman Tumulus. This claim to be a site of an ancient a burial ground is substantiated by a number of cinerary urns discovered about a hundred years ago. What was once a sacred spot tended to remain so in the minds of succeeding generations. But the size, structure and fate of any buildings which may have served as places of worship during a thousand years may never be known. The first sure reference to a church here is contained in the Domesday Survey of Suffolk. “At Stonham, Ulric the thane held ..... the third part of a church with five acres.” Similar entries record that Ulmar the thane and Alflet also held a “third part of the church” at the time of the Norman conquest. Of the thirteenth century all that remains obvious is a small lancet window in the chancel. Extensive rebuilding of this cruciform church took place in the fourteenth century, when the porch was built. Most of what you see is the work of those who lived here a hundred years later. Through the generosity of many benefactors and by the co-operation of the whole parish a major restoration of this work, costing £2,000, was undertaken in 1874.

The tower windows were renovated in 1926. Five years later a further £1,000 had to be raised to preserve the roof. In 1961 all the roof timbers were again treated against deathwatch beetle. Again in 1966 the tower was found to require re-pointing along with other repairs.

### The Nave

On entering the church one has an immediate impression of spaciousness, light and well being. Then one is struck by the beauty of the roof. It is a magnificent ‘single hammerbeam’

roof dating from about 1460 and is made of oak. The span is seventeen feet six inches, and the length is divided into ten bays. Prone angels alternate with heavily carved pendant bosses, the latter being 'false' hammer beams. All the principals have a wall post, each richly carved, with canopied niches containing figures of apostles and saints. These all suffered mutilation on the orders of Thomas Dowsing in the 1640's. The angels hold shields on which are displayed symbols of the church and Christ's Passion. One still holds a mitre, another a chalice and host and a third a hammer and a pair of pincers. Note also the double row of cherubim. Anyone who has time to study the roof carefully can see an albatross, a court fool, a sturdy farmyard duck, a fox with a goose in its mouth, an owl and a terrier. These with crowns and crosses in many forms were a source of endless meditation for the worshipper of medieval times. The intention of such a roof with its representation of so many angels, apostles and saints was to act as a forceful reminder of the praise that is ceaselessly offered by the whole host of heaven, joined for a moment by mortals in their offering of Te Deum and Sanctus.

### The Windows

The windows on either side of the nave were inserted during the 'Decorated' and 'Perpendicular' periods. Their original stained glass was destroyed, the Churchwarden's accounts recording re-placement by clear glass in 1643. 'Then layde out to the glazier for mending of the Church windows £2 10s. 6p', and 'Layed out for mortar for all the windows 1/2d'.

### The Pews

The pews were installed in 1874, all the carpentry being the work of one local man, James Gibbons, and the carving by Mr. Godbold, of Harleston. Their design was based on one or two old pews that have survived. The present seating replaced

box pews which were the fashion in so many churches until the second half of the last century.

### The Wall Paintings

All the walls of the church were covered with paintings of the saints or biblical scenes. The 'Doom' over the chancel arch is the best of what remains, unwittingly preserved by the lime wash of the Puritan times. There is in Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich a 'Watling' room. Hamlet Watling was the schoolmaster of this village, and it was he who brought this painting to the light of day once more. The subject is an impression of the Last Judgement, with Christ enthroned on a rainbow. Above are the sun and moon, with archangels holding Passion emblems. Below Him angelic trumpeters call us from the grave to give an account of ourselves and to receive our reward. On the left of the figure of Christ stands His mother, in whose honour this church is dedicated. On the same side the righteous stand in front of a sacred structure. Opposite, the wide jaws of hell gape to receive those who are the followers of the Devil. A pleasant thought to contemplate! Beneath the arch stood the screen which also extended across the arches of the two transepts, enclosing them as chapels. A 'tiny window' high up and to the right of the chancel arch is thought to have illuminated the Rood screen at certain times of the day. The glass in it can be seen only from the north transept. It shows an eagle displayed with a palm wreath - part of the arms of the Goodall family, patrons of this living at the time of the Restoration of Charles II.

### The North Transept

This was re-built from the level of the windowsills in the last century. A step for an altar was found, but the dedication has not been traced. On the walls are framed replicas of some of the *Frecoes*. Above the window in the east wall was discovered

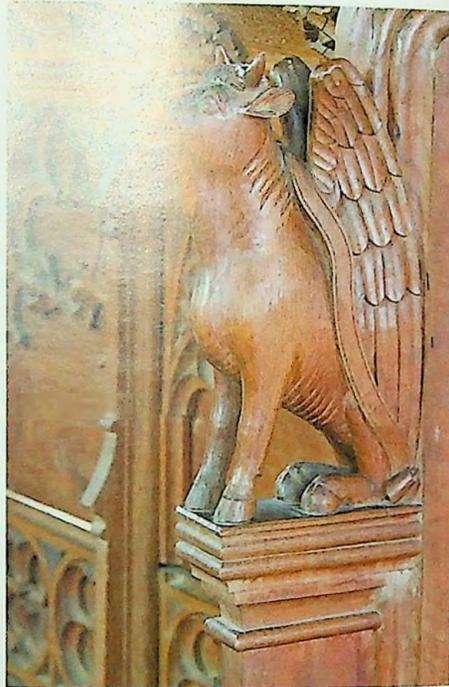
the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Three Kings; but with rebuilding this unique painting has been lost to us. Here also are the names of those who, in the two world wars, gave their lives for their country, names proudly repeated on the memorial in the churchyard. Where this list now hangs was once the stairway to the Roodloft. One of the paintings on the west wall gives a clearer impression of the 'Doom'; another of St. George slaying the Dragon; and the third represents the Martyrdom of St. Thomas a' Becket, the face having been repainted when the popular saint of Canterbury fell into disfavour with Henry II. This north transept is now used for quiet meditation and prayer. The medieval pews removed from the west end of the nave during renovation in 2004 have been retained and now line the North Transept. One old pew contains the inscription: 'Orate pro (aia) Necolai Houk' - 'Pray for the soul of Necolai Houk'.

The new roof timbers of both transepts have the traditional symbols of the Trinity, the Arms of Pembroke Hall and emblems of the Passion on the arched bracing.

### The South Transept

Both *Lectern* and *Pulpit* are passed on the way to the south transept. The former was a gift made by Miss Sunderland of Bedford in 1874. The Jacobean Pulpit is a well preserved example of the woodcarver's art from the reign of James II. At the time it was erected, with back panel and ornate sounding board, it cost £10.00. Above the pulpit were triple hourglasses (*now removed for safety*). These are thought to be unique, the glasses are the same size, but with differing amounts of sand in each, they record the passing of a quarter, half and three-quarters of an hour. Large hourglasses were once a common feature in our churches. On the west wall is the painting of St. George slaying the Dragon. Gildersleeve of Bury St. Edmunds







built the organ in 1899 at a cost of £330.00. Included are stops from an older manual organ, made by Walker, this was formerly mounted on a gallery at the west end. Modern improvements include the installation of an electric blower in 1948, new pedal board and pneumatic action in 1955. In 1973 through the Memorial Fund to Mr. R. Runeckles, organist from 1963 to 1972, new pipes, the re-voicing of others and re-arranging of the swell, greatly improved the instrument. The organ has the unique feature of having a piece of a World War 2 V2 rocket incorporated into its mechanism. The item was recovered by Mr. Runeckles and used to make repairs. Beneath the organ is a vault of the Driver family, formally of Deerbolt Hall in the parish. In the south wall is a simple *Piscina*, or waste-away for the ablutions after the Mass of Medieval times. The altar that stood near the window in the east wall was dedicated to St. Anne. It was on this wall that the Martyrdom of St. Thomas a Becket was once painted.

#### The Chancel

To the left of the chancel is a *Lancet window*, all that remains of the obvious thirteenth century Church. The *Chandelier* (now removed for security reasons) is a particularly graceful one, and may have been introduced here in 1704. The accounts for that year include an item 'for setting up the candlesticks . . . 6d'. The *Choirstalls* were made at the same time as the nave seating. The first set of carved figures symbolise the four evangelists; but the next are of more antiquarian interest. In the fifteenth century these two pew fronts were probably rests for books or manuscripts for the clergy, who sat in 'Return Stalls' under the Screen. They have been partly re-made at some unknown time and may have had portions of the Roodscreen incorporated in them. Note particularly the man with the bagpipes which were

widely used in England at the time. The grotesque poppy heads at the east end on either side must have been thought sufficiently amusing to have been spared. Watling states that 'no examples are known to exist of earlier date than the Decorated style'.

The *Chancel Roof* was of the same style as that in the nave. Generally it was not as rich, but it did have finer tracery above the hammer beams and collar. This was nearly all lost during numerous repairs, understandable when the upkeep of the chancel was the sole responsibility of the Rector. Only the structural timbers remained in the twentieth century, with a false ceiling and lime wash plaster. Happily, its former enrichments have been restored.

On the left of the sanctuary is possibly an *Easter Sepulchre*. The 'cross flory' at the back of it was found in the floor of the south transept and moved to this place. Against the north wall stands a *Chest* (originally domestic), which is seven hundred years old and has some interesting chip carving within its sunken roundels. No doubt it was used for storing the Communion plate, vestments, surplice and other clerical items. A second chest of more rustic origin has an intricate and curious lock.

On the south side is a *Sedilia* (*decorated stone seat*) for two persons, separated by a crouching hound. East of this is a fourteenth century *Fenestella* (*or stone tracery*) above a thirteenth century *Double Piscina* which is peculiar to that age. The *Altar Table* is probably the same age as the pulpit, and has richly carved legs.

Public subscriptions made possible the commissioning of the pleasant east window in 1874. It is by Ward and Hughes and depicts the adoration of the Shepherds, an incident from the Resurrection story and in the centre light, the Ascension of Christ. The small window above, showing the Spirit as a Dove, was a personal gift of Mrs. Watling.

### Returning Westwards

You can now enjoy another good view of the nave roof. The shading above the tower arch indicates the earlier roof line. The *Font* dates from about 1460 and though sadly mutilated it still displays some interesting and unusual emblems of the Virgin Mary. The list of known rectors dates from 1288. Patronage has included the Crown, Earl Marshall of England, local gentry and the Master and Fellows of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. Their purpose in acquiring the patronage was to induct anyone who forfeited his Fellowship by getting married! From 1990 the Diocesan Board has held the Patronage.

### The Tower

It is thought by some that the Church had a tower at the crossing in earlier days. A later one stood at the south-west corner of the Church. The foundations of this tower were uncovered in 2004 during building work and were recorded before being covered over again. In the fifteenth century the present tower was built with the former west window incorporated in the new tower.

The door to the bell turret has a very old and curious lock. In the floor of the tower is a large porphyry slab. The brasses have been removed, but even so the inscription in Norman-French is still legible: 'Ici gist lone Qefvst femme Robert Asscheborne. Priet pvr l'alme Qadevs ces peches Li pardone'- 'Here lies Joan who was the wife of Robert Asscheborne. Pray for her soul that God may pardon the sins of her body'.

The original *West Doors* are still intact, though their tracery is now very worn, so is the archway above, by generations of watchful sextons. On the north wall is an interesting *Memorial Tablet* to Thomas Goodall, protesting his allegiance to the Established Church. The south wall of the ringing chamber has a list of *Ancient Charities*, now reorganised but still administered by the Trustees of this 'Towne' of Earl Stonham.

Tribute must be paid to the benefactors of these charities. Their forethought has enabled the Trustees to make available for more than three centuries considerable sums of money for the maintenance of the fabric and furnishing of this Church. Many of the items listed are given in detail in the *Churchwardens Accounts*, which date from 1622. These and the *Registers*, which date from 1654, were kept until recently in the ironbound *Parish Chest*.

The ground floor of the tower was extensively refurbished during 2004 when the old Victorian screen was replaced with a fine oak one, and kitchen and service facilities were installed.

#### **The Church Plate**

There is a much misshapen and perished pewter bowl of uncertain date and use. In fair condition are two plates or patens of pewter. The earlier dates from about 1655 and the second was made by Elizabeth Roydon in the 1720's. A knife used for cutting the bread in those times was found at the east end of the church in 1874 but this has subsequently been lost. A typical entry for the accounts (1715) gives 'paid to Stephen Martin for scouring the tankard and plate 6p', but again the tankard has disappeared.

In silver there is a very pleasant little plate with pie-crust edge on three feet and bears the inscription 'Earl Stonham Parish in Suffolk 1735'. It is by John Twite and made in 1732. A cup of secular appearance, but used as a chalice, was introduced in 1813 by Thomas Halford. It has a fluted base to the bowl with a band round the top. Two years later a cover was made for it by Thomas Dexter at a cost of £1 16s. 0d. In current use is a set consisting of chalice and paten, with a flagon inscribed 'The Gift of Mary A. Sunderland, for the Service of God in St. Mary's Church, Earl Stonham, 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1877'.

#### **Earl Stonham Bells**

The Bell Chamber and the Ringing Chamber were extensively renovated in 2004. The old wooden bell frame installed in 1879 has been retained for architectural and historical interest. A new bell chamber was created lower in the tower and a new steel frame for eight bells has been installed. Two of the old bells have been recast and a new sixth bell added. The new no. 4 bell is dedicated to the Fowler Family and the re-cast no. 3 bell is dedicated to the Budworth Family of Deerbolt Hall. The work has been carried out by Taylor's of Loughborough. Provision now exists for an additional two bells to be added to the ring in the future.

**Historical Note.** The census of 1553 gave four bells for Earl Stonham. Before restoration there were five bells. Inscriptions read (1) 'Henry Pleasant made me 1706; (2) 'Thomas Gardiner, Sudbury, fecit 1727'; (3) 'Famulorum Suscipe Vota Quesumus Andrea' 'We pray thee Andrew receive the vows of thy servants'; (4) 'Vocor Campa Maria Virginis Egregie' 'I'm called the bell of the famous Virgin Mary'; (5) 'Downham facit 1781. Percute Dulce Cano. Candler Bird Ch.Warden T. Osborn'; Nos. 3 and 4 were cast at the Brasyer's foundry at Norwich in the reign of Edward IV. Their inscriptions are not peculiar to this place, that on No. 3 bell appearing elsewhere in Suffolk on eleven bells and that on No. 4 bell is seen in five other towers. The Tenor bell was recast by Taylors of Loughborough 1949, and is tuned to G sharp.

**As you leave this Church may the peace of God go with you**



THE LADY BENEVOLENT

Obituary notice for Michael John Selman, dated 19th June 1988, with a floral arrangement.

Gravestone for Michael John Selman, dated 19th June 1988.

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