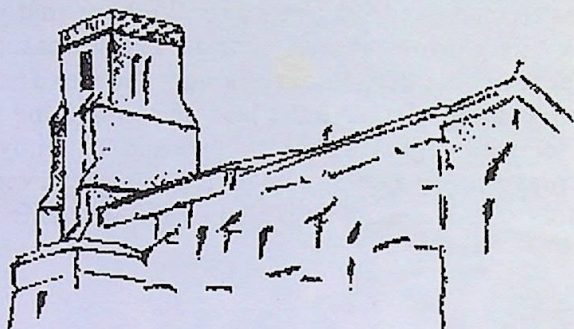


SAINT GEORGE' S
CHURCH



STOWLANGTOFT

Suffolk.

WELCOME TO STOWLANGTOFT -

a small and beautiful village with a delightful name. 'Stow' is Old English for a 'place' - an inhabited place, a meeting-place, or even a holy place. This was the stow of the de Langtot family and we know that Richard de Langtot was lord of the manor here in 1206. St George's is indeed a holy place - a grand and stately church in a fine setting, built to the glory of God and to inspire people, and still in regular use for Christian work and worship - the purpose for which it was erected over 600 years ago. We hope that you will enjoy exploring this glorious church, with its many treasures, and that you will feel at home here in our Father's House. The people of this small community who have the task of maintaining it intact and beautiful for future generations to use and to enjoy would welcome your prayers and also any contributions (however small) that their visitors can spare to help them care for their ancient church.

ST GEORGE'S -

A PLACE OF WORSHIP FOR 600 YEARS, AND MORE

The church stands upon a very early site which is an entrenchment dating from Roman times, and a pot of Roman coins was unearthed nearby in 1764. There was an earlier church here (and maybe the porch entrance and part of the piscina survive from it), but we know that the present building was erected between about 1370-1420. Its great benefactor appears to have been Robert de Ashfield, who was buried in the chancel in 1401. The rector, William Stanton, in his will dated 1392, left the residue of all his goods to Robert de Ashfield 'towards the chancel, being newly built'. John de Aysschefeld in his will of 1394 asked to be buried in the 'new church of Stowelangtoft'. Another rector in 1419 left money to the 'emendation of the windows of the chancel'. In 1520 Thomas Clement left 14 shillings to the painting of the arch near the rood-loft, so work was still being done at that time to make St George's beautiful.

It is fortunate that so much mediaeval work has survived here, and what splendid craftsmanship it is - all fashioned by hand with a great deal of love and care, because nothing but the best was fit for the House of God. Much colour and carving was however destroyed in the mid 16th century and by the Puritans in the 1640s. By the 1800s, St George's was badly in need of repair.

The church's 19th century restoration was initiated by the Revd Samuel Rickards, who was rector from 1832-64. He had been a Fellow of Oriel College Oxford in the early 1820s, during the build-up to the Oxford Movement which spearheaded the Catholic Revival in the Church of England and he knew the founders of the movement well, including John Keble and Edward Bouverie Pusey.

Another Fellow of Oriel, Thomas Mozley, the scholarly priest and writer, was a great friend and wrote about the Rickards family in his books of reminiscences. Rickards was a particularly close friend of John Henry Newman, with whom he was in regular correspondence and who often came to stay with him when he was vicar of Ulcombe in Kent and also here at Stowlangtoft. He wrote to Newman upon his arrival in Suffolk that the people were 'either of the lowest order of Dissenters or else they are churchmen without a jot of Christian knowledge'. His ministry must have been effective because by 1851, when the Religious Census was taken, the average morning congregation was 60, with 120 in the afternoon, plus 45 scholars at both services, out of a population of 186. The Holy Communion was then celebrated eight times per year.

Rickards was a keen supporter of the early principles of the Oxford Movement, but never became extreme in his churchmanship. He hated any idea of a movement towards Rome and when Newman became a Roman Catholic in 1845 all communication between the two friends ceased. One of the fruits of the Oxford Movement was the restoration of churches along pre Reformation lines, so it is not surprising that Rickards wanted his church to be correctly restored and beautified.

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When David Elisha Davy visited the church in 1832, it was under repair and the chancel roof was off; also a new rectory was being built. He paid another visit in 1843 and was 'met with great civility by the rector, Mr Rickards, who took our horse into his stable and gave us a lunch'. In 1855-56 a large restoration took place, which included repairs to the tower (which had developed a large crack), also the external and internal fabric of the church, including the stonework of the windows and doorways. A new pulpit and lectern were installed and one of the bells was recast. The architect for this work was William White, an architect of national importance, who designed several fine new churches, including St Saviour's Highbury and All Saints Notting Hill in London and Lyndhurst in the New Forest. In Suffolk he restored the chancel at Cavendish church.

Also during Samuel Rickards' time here the benches were skilfully restored, almost certainly by Henry Ringham, the talented Ipswich woodcarver and church restorer. Both Rickards and Ringham were instrumental in the erection of a mediaeval roof lying on Ipswich quay in the Revd Thomas Mozley's new church at Cholderton, Wilts.

Other 19th century improvements included the altar and reredos, also much of the stained glass, that in most of the nave windows being the work of Rickards' daughter Lucy. It seems that Rickards and his successors were fortunate in having the co-operation of the Wilson family, who became lords of the manor and patrons of the living in 1825.

Much has been done during the 20th century to maintain and beautify the church and the visitor soon becomes aware of the pride and care taken by those who tend and use it today.

Having briefly looked at its long history, we now examine the features and treasures of St George's in detail.

EXPLORING THE EXTERIOR.

It is worth standing back to enjoy the exterior as a whole and to view this stately church in its superb setting, especially from the east, where we see it elevated above the road on its ancient entrenchment. It is the design and proportions which make this church so grand, because its plan is very simple (tower, nave, chancel and porch) but its mediaeval architect ingeniously designed it to give the impression of great dignity, height and beauty.

The picturesque CHURCHYARD is surrounded by a flint wall of considerable age and incorporating ancient stonework which includes pieces of original window tracery, reused here when the windows were restored in the 1850s.

The churchyard contains some fine old trees, also a few well-preserved 18th century headstones with cherubs near the east wall of the chancel, and others on the south side. North-west of the tower is the vault of the Maitland-Wilson family of Stowlangtoft Hall, with the memorial to Fuller Maitland-Wilson (High Sheriff in 1873 and M.P.), who died in 1875. South-east of the chancel is a fine piece of modern sculpture by Glynn Williams of an opening horse chestnut bud, commemorating the art critic Peter Fuller who lived at Stowlangtoft. He and his unborn child were killed in a road accident on the M4 in 1990.

St George's is a rare example of a church which was built largely in one piece (c.1370-1420) and so most of the craftsmanship is of this date, although some is careful restoration of the original work. The keen eye will detect in the walls of the nave and tower several little blocked 'put-log' holes, where the mediaeval builders placed their wooden scaffold-poles.

The walls are of flint and one wonders how many thousands of flints were lovingly gathered from the fields to build it. The parapets, porch, buttresses and the base-courses at the foot of the walls are faced with simple flushwork patterns in flint and stone. Unlike the later and more elaborate flushwork seen in other churches in the area, the patterns are of simple chequerwork, with the stones positioned either in squares or lozenges, but the effect is very pleasing.

The lofty walls of the NAVE AND CHANCEL are strengthened and enhanced by elegant buttresses and are crowned by parapets, beneath which are superb gargoyles - an array of fascinating creatures which peer out and were made to serve the very effective purpose of throwing rainwater clear of the walls. Horizontal bands of stone, known as string-courses, punctuate the walls and are continued upwards to form hoodmoulds over the windows. It is perhaps the windows that really 'make' the exterior. These are unusually tall and stately, with fine tracery in the Perpendicular style of architecture, although of two lights, except for the magnificent five-light east window, above which is the base of the original eastern gable cross.

The nave has a blocked 14th century north doorway (with a 19th century corbel head) and there is a small priest's doorway on the south side of the chancel.

The western TOWER is tall and elegant and is lit by two-light windows, all of which (apart from the west window) are square-headed, although internally they are set beneath arched openings. Its western corners are strengthened by diagonal buttresses and at the east are angle buttresses north and south. Chequer flushwork adorns the base course and the flat-topped parapet (similar to nearby Westhorpe), beneath which are fine gargoyles on the north and south sides. The late 14th century west doorway is flanked by crowned and mitred corbel heads of 1855, but contains a mediaeval door. The staircase turret can be seen at the east end of the south side.

The south PORCH is a fine piece of craftsmanship, where we see Stowlangtoft's flushwork at its very best in the panelled parapet and chequered south face. The large entrance arch is of a style which suggests late 13th or early 14th century work and may have been re-used from the earlier church, unless the rebuilders simply copied an earlier style. Its hoodmould again rests upon corbel heads renewed in 1855. Above is a restored niche, now containing a statue of Jesus the Good Shepherd but originally no doubt containing the image of St George, the church's Patron Saint.

Inside the porch is lofty and its roof has original timbers. The arch in its north-east angle once sheltered a Holy Water stoup, where people dipped their fingers in Holy Water and made the Sign of the Cross as an act of symbolic cleansing and rededication before entering the sacred building.

Two beautifully carved benches whet the appetite for the feast of woodwork inside the church, which we enter by means of a mediaeval door, now very worn, but with its original ironwork, including the remains of the iron boss for its sanctuary ring. It is interesting to think that this door has been opening and closing to admit worshippers and visitors for maybe 600 years:

WHAT TO SEE INSIDE THE CHURCH

The interior of St George's gives a tremendous impression of height and space, with stately and beautiful proportions. It is bright, colourful and very handsomely furnished. Much of the mediaeval work dates from the 15th century. Again we are aware of the fine architecture in the WINDOWS and in the lofty TOWER AND CHANCEL ARCHES. Internal HOODMOULDS frame the arches of the windows and doorways. Those of the windows rests upon foliage corbels, whilst the doorways have corbel heads.

Some of the GRAFFITI on the tower arch is of considerable age, including the ancient writing on the northern respond, facing south-east. Further graffiti has been scratched into the stonework in the upper stages of the tower - mostly signatures from 1714 onwards, including 'G. Bullock, Millwright' who wished to immortalise himself in 1865.

The TOWER STAIRCASE DOOR is original (c.1400) and is totally covered with iron strapwork. A staircase of 71 steps gives access to the ringing chamber, intermediate chamber and bell chamber above.

The clock in the ringing chamber is of considerable age. It was repaired by J. Warren of Ixworth in 1835 (the cost being met by Mr Henry Wilson and the Revd S. Rickards) and in 1912 by J.B. Mortlock of Botesdale.

Stowlangtoft's four BELLS are hung for full-circle ringing, which is not always the case with small rings of bells. The treble was cast by John Draper of Thetford in 1631, the 2nd in 1614 by the itinerant John Driver of Bury St Edmunds (who cast two of Hunston's bells), the third is a pre Reformation bell by Brasyer of Norwich and the tenor bell (weighing 9 1/4 cwt) was recast, at the expense of Henry Wilson, by Taylor of Loughborough in 1865.

The west doorway shows the great thickness (about 4 feet) of the tower walls.

Beneath the south-west nave window are three embroidered PULPIT FALLS - the work of Mrs Ann Boyton. On the wall by the north doorway hangs a LIST OF RECTORS from the year 1314.

The arch of the north doorway frames Stowlangtoft's beautiful WAR MEMORIAL rood crucifix, with a wooden inscription in relief beneath and linenfold panelling. This was designed by the talented and little-known F.E. Howard of Oxford, whose skilled work in Suffolk includes the soaring font-cover and the bishop's throne in our cathedral at Bury St Edmunds, also the font-cover and reredos in Southwold church.

The octagonal FONT, although a little defaced and worn, is beautiful work of c.1400. The stem is embellished with a linenfold motif and in the panels of the bowl, beneath cinquefoil-headed arches, are worn figures whose faces may have been damaged by the Puritans. They are (we think) The Virgin and Child (east), St Margaret, with her spear through the dragon's mouth (north-east), a Bishop, with mitre and crozier (north), St Peter, with his keys (north-west), Our Lord, with his hand raised in blessing (west), St Paul, with raised sword (south-west), St George, with his cross emblem on his shield (south) and St Catherine, with her wheel (south-east).

Crowning the nave and chancel are grand arch-braced cambered - tiebeam ROOFS. The nave roof in particular incorporates much of its 15th century timber framework. The wall-posts rest upon a variety of mediaeval characters in the CORBEL FACES which peer out. The eastern bay has some of its original colouring and forms a CEILURE, or canopy of honour to the Rood. It is decorated with the IHC monogram of Our Lord's name.

The base of the ROOD SCREEN (separating the chancel from the nave) is still in place - and what a splendid piece of 15th century wood-carving it is. There are three double panels each side, divided by buttresses with crocketed canopies resting upon tiny heads

The painting on the panels is later, but that on the framework is original and can be seen at its best on the buttresses flanking the chancel entrance. Notice the tiny carvings in the spandrels each side of the arches in the screen panels. These include birds and an animal face with protruding tongue. Near the entrance is a small shield with the Ashfield arms (a fess engrailed, between three fleurs de lys), which appears to be a 19th century addition, although this family may well have given the screen.

The upper section has long gone, as has the rood-loft, which stretched across the church directly above it, but the STAIRCASE which gave access to the loft remains in the north wall of the nave nearby. Above the loft was the great Rood, showing Christ crucified, flanked by his mother and St John, which was the most important of the many visual-aids in the church, which acted as manuals of religious education for simple mediaeval folk who could not read and were not Latin scholars. Before the Reformation our churches were kaleidoscopes of teaching aids and were full of colour and carving.

The huge WALL PAINTING of St Christopher on the north wall of the nave must have been a superb piece of mediaeval art. He was usually placed somewhere opposite the main entrance, so that those seeking his prayers for their protection needed only to open the door to see him. The painting is now very faded but we can detect the saint carrying the Christ Child over the water, also on the left a hermit with a fishing rod and another little figure at his feet. Expert eyes have identified a lobster amongst the fish in the water, also a heron.

The nave is furnished with a magnificent set of exquisitely carved BENCHES - among the finest in Suffolk. These have beautifully-carved backs and over 60 traceried bench-ends, which are all different. They terminate in poppyheads and a rich variety of figures remain on the armrests, depicting birds, animals, people and mythological creatures. If time allows, it is worth looking at them all - particularly fascinating ones include a fox with a goose in its mouth, a boar with a harp, a cockerel, a man with pen and inkpot writing on a scroll (symbolising scandal) and a cockatrice (a bird's head with a serpent's body). Some of the ends and the figures have been very cleverly and carefully renewed or restored, but one really has to look hard to see what is old and what is new. Several of the front benches are entirely 19th century work and the present condition of the benches is a tribute to the skill of Henry Ringham of Ipswich.

The WAINSCOTTING surrounding the nave walls is of considerable age, and is unusual

The stone PULPIT, showing the four Evangelists, with their emblems beneath them, was designed by William White in 1855. The LECTERN was given in memory of Lt Col Fitzroy Wilson, who died in 1887.

In the south nave wall, towards the east end, is a large cinquefoil-headed PISCINA, showing that there was a side altar here. Into its shallow drain was poured the water from the washing of the priest's hands at the Eucharist.

A wonderful feature of the chancel is its beautiful 15th century STALLS. These form a complete set and are among the finest of the few sets which survive in East Anglia. Some experts believe that they may have been brought here from Ixworth Priory after it was dissolved in 1538. They are what is known as return stalls (set in an L shaped plan each side, with the clergy stalls facing east) and their exquisite woodcarving is worth examining in detail. The fronts have traceried panels, small narrow seats for singing-boys below and quatrefoil openings to help project the sound of their voices.

There are eight stall ends, all bordered with tiny flowers and those of the clergy stalls have rich tracery. These ends terminate not in the usual poppyheads, but in people, including a priest in a pulpit and another at a prayer-desk, servers with acolytes' candles, Gospel Book and incense-boat, also shields with the Ashfield arms and those of the Tendring family. It may well be that Robert Ashfield and Sissily (nee Tendring of Brockdish), who married in 1459, gave these beautiful stalls. The narrow fronts of the ends have little feathered angels.

The western stalls (facing east) are furnished with three misericord seats each side. Their armrests are a fascinating array of human faces with interesting head-gear, also one (headless) bird. The hinged tip-up seats were indeed 'mercy-seats' which could be rested upon during long sung services, but if drowsiness caused the occupant to put too much weight upon the ledge, the results would soon wake him up! On the undersides of the seats are carved the following (working from north to south) -

1. A dragon with a long tongue, and two flowers,
2. The Angel of St Matthew, with two faces in rays,
3. The Eagle of St John, with two half-figures of angels,
4. The Lion of St Mark, and two birds,
5. The Ox of St Luke, and two animal heads,
6. A hawk pouncing upon a hare, and two crowned or mitred heads.

The ORGAN, although only a small instrument (with four speaking stops) is a remarkable and unusual period-piece. It was built by Gray & Davison for the Great Exhibition in 1851 and has a fine marquetry case, with richly decorated front pipes.

(Please do not try to enter the Sanctuary because it is alarmed to protect the treasures that it contains)

In the south wall of the sanctuary are the SEDILIA, where the Celebrant, Deacon and Subdeacon sat during parts of the mediaeval High Mass. The lowered windowsill provided two seats and the third is beneath the cinquefoil-headed arch to the west. Further east is the PISCINA recess, with a quatrefoil drain. Its eastern circular shaft may be 13th century work re-used from the earlier church. Nearby is a long carved 17th CENTURY SEAT.

Opposite is Stowlangtoft's splendid mediaeval PARISH CHEST, bound with iron strapwork, where parish records and valuables were stored. These chests basically needed three working locks - the rector and two churchwardens each had a key, so that all three needed to be present for the chest to be opened.

A worthy piece of modern woodcarving in the sanctuary is the PROCESSIONAL CROSS, made of local oak in 2005 by Alaric Hey of Walsham le Willows in memory of the Revd Stanley Montgomery, whose ministry in retirement was much appreciated here.

The ALTAR AND REREDOS show tasteful 19th century craftsmanship. The reredos is an attractive representation of the Last Supper in marble, beneath a rich canopy. Flanking it is 19th century wooden PANELLING, with recesses containing eight rare and beautiful FLEMISH CARVINGS (the ninth carving is fixed to the south wall nearby), which were given to the church by Henry Maitland Wilson in 1887. These treasures were stolen on a January night in 1977 and were discovered near Amsterdam five years later. After a long and expensive legal battle they returned to their rightful home in St George's in 1990, thanks to the generosity of a Dutch friend, Mr Ran Eykelenboom as an act of gratitude to the British people for the part they played in liberating his country in World War II.

The carvings have been dated to around 1500 and maybe as early as 1480. They show scenes from Our Lord's Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension, carved in relief and with exquisite detail. They are as follows:

1. Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, with three sleeping disciples.
2. Jesus, tied to a pillar, being scourged (parts of the scourges are missing). One man is pulling at his hair.
3. Jesus carrying his cross to crucifixion, with a rather evil-looking soldier pulling a rope.

4. Taking down the body of Jesus from the cross. The detail of this difficult task is so realistic. The three Marys are present and Mary Magdalene (with lovely hair) receives the body.

5. The body of Jesus in the arms of his Mother, with St John placing a comforting hand on Mary's shoulder.

6. The body of Jesus is placed in the tomb by Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus.

7. The Resurrection, with Mary Magdalene at the top bringing her jar of spices to anoint the body. On the soldier's shield is the head of the Roman god Mithras.

8. The Ascension, with Our Lord's footprints at the summit of the hill and his Mother and disciples looking on.

9. The Harrowing of Hell (in the south-east window-splay, but in the sequence this scene should be between 6 and 7). Jesus 'descends into Hell' to rescue those imprisoned there by Satan. The entrance to Hell is a pair of great gaping jaws!

(A detailed booklet by the Revd Dr George Pattison about these carvings is on sale in the church).

The windows contain colourful STAINED GLASS of various vintages and dates. There is original c.1400 glass in the tracery at the top of the north-west and south-west nave windows. The main lights of the nave windows (except the south-east) are filled with c.1850s glass by the Revd Samuel Rickards' daughter, Lucy. Thomas Mozley wrote that she gradually filled her father's church with stained glass, describing how she made the designs, cut the glass, painted it, burned in the colours, put the glass together, soldering it herself and finally fixed it in place in the window. These windows have patterned designs and picture medallions. The glass in the tracery of the central windows and the north-east window, showing Old Testament characters, is later and possibly by A.L. Moore & Son who made three of the chancel windows.

The north-west and south-west chancel windows were given in memory of *MAUDE, wife of Arthur MAITLAND WILSON*, who died in 1906. Designed and made by A.L. Moore, the former shows personifications of Courage and Humility and the latter of Loyalty and Love. The south-east chancel window, also by A.L. Moore, shows the Annunciation and is in memory of *AGNES CAROLINE (1913), wife of Fuller MAITLAND WILSON* (High Sheriff and Member of Parliament). He died in 1875 and his memorial is above the family vault in the churchyard. The north-east window has grisaille patterns and in the tracery of all four windows are figures of apostles and saints.

The great east window was made in 1854-55 by M. and A. O'Connor at a cost of £320 in memory of *JOSEPH WILSON*, the first of his family to own the manor. It contains 15 panels showing scenes from Our Lord's life, with the Crucifixion and Ascension central.

The south-east nave window, which dramatically shows the church's Patron Saint, St George, slaying the dragon, is the work of Hugh Easton and is in memory of *ARTHUR MAITLAND WILSON (1934)*, husband of Maude, who has two chancel windows in her memory.

On the walls and floors of the church are several MEMORIALS to people of the past who have been part of this community. Most of them commemorate the lords of the manor who lived at Stowlangtoft Hall, which stands in its park about 1 mile to the north-east of the church. The present Italianate mansion was built in 1859 to the designs of John Henry Hakewill, who was also responsible for restoring the nearby churches at Thurston, Ixworth, Elmswell and Langham.

Several LEDGER SLABS in the floors commemorate members of the D'Ewes family who bought the manor from the de Ashfields in the early 1600s. *PAUL D'EWES* has an inscription in brass and there are several older burial-slabs which once had brass figures, shields and inscriptions fixed to them. One in the chancel floor has parts of two shields remaining. Other *D'EWES LEDGER SLABS* commemorate *ELIZABETH (1664)*, *PRISCILLA (1703)*, *THOMAS (?)*, *SIMON and SUSANNA (1692 and 1696)*, *DELARIVERA (1708)*, *WILLOUGHBY (1698)* and *WILLOUGHBY (1710)*.

On the south side of the chancel is a large WALL MONUMENT commemorating *PAUL D'EWES* and his two wives, which was sculpted by John Johnson of St Martin in the Fields, London, in 1624. Paul kneels, holding a book, with his wives each side. Below are their son and their seven daughters, two of whom carry skulls, showing that they died before the monument was erected.

Another wall monument, once on the north side of the chancel, now stands beneath the tower. It commemorates *SIR WILLOUGHBY D'EWES (1685)* and has two 'barley-sugar' pillars supporting an open pediment.

From 1760-1805 the manor was owned by the Rawlinson family and *SIR WALTER AND LADY MARY RAWLINSON (1805 and 1816)* are commemorated on the WALL PLAQUE to the south of the tower arch.

The manor then passed to Sir Thomas Wombwell, who held it until 1825. *LADY ANNE WOMBWELL (1808)* has a marble wall plaque on the north side of the sanctuary, which has a flattering inscription to her. Hers is also one of the three lozenge-shaped HATCHMENTS which may be seen beneath the tower. These were hung outside the deceased person's house for a period of time before being brought for permanent display in the parish church. The other hatchments commemorate *MARY (nee Fuller Maitland) the first wife of Henry Wilson* (she died before 1839), and *JOSEPH WILSON (1851)*, who bought the manor of Stowlangtoft from Sir George Wombwell in 1825.

The Wilson family were very generous to the church and village. The east window was erected in memory of Joseph Wilson and his son *HENRY MAITLAND WILSON* presented the Flemish woodcarvings to adorn the sanctuary. Henry (died 1888) is commemorated on one of the BRASS PLAQUES near the south-east corner of the nave, together with *MARY ELIZABETH DIGBY (1857)* and *ADELA MAITLAND WILSON (1910)*. The nearby brass plaques commemorate Capt. *ARTHUR HENRY MAITLAND WILSON* (killed in 1918) and *BARONESS AMHURST OF HACKNEY* wife of Lord William Cecil (1919) whose family lived in the hall after the Wilsons.

The delightful task of researching and compiling this brief Guide to Stowlangtoft's amazing church has been made all the more enjoyable by the advice and help that I have received from Peter Northeast, Cynthia Brown, George Pipe, Freddie Montgomery, Richard Brown, the Staff of the County Record Office at Bury St Edmunds and of Brian Turner, whose excellent 'A Tour of Eight Churches' in the Badwell and Walsham Benefice is on sale at the church and is highly recommended.

Roy Tricker

Revised Edition 2007.

front cover picture by Brian Turner Walsham le Willows

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WELCOME TO ST, GEORGE'S CHURCH STOWLANGTOFT

THE CARVINGS STORY

THE CARVINGS WERE GIVEN ORIGINALLY BY HENRY MAITLAND WILSON IN 1887 WHO WAS LORD OF THE MANOR. THEY THEN STOOD IN THE NICHEs EITHER SIDE OF THE REREDOS WITH THE HARROWING OF HELL ON A LEDGE, UNTIL ONE NIGHT IN JANUARY 1977 THEY WERE STOLEN FROM THE LOCKED CHURCH BY WHAT WAS THOUGHT TO BE AN IRISH GANG. THEY ARE BEAUTIFUL MEDIEVIL CARVED WOOD (CIRCA 1480s) SHOWING THE PASSION AND ASCENSION. THE FIRST TIME THEY SHOWED UP AGAIN WAS FOUR YEARS LATER, AN IRISH MAN ASKED FOR A LOAN IN HOLLAND AND USED THEM FOR SECURITY, HE NEVER REPAID THE LOAN AND THEY WERE KEPT BELIEVING THEM TO HAVE BEEN LEGALLY OBTAINED, IN 1981 THE OWNERS FLAT WAS BURGLED AND THEY WERE TAKEN. THE BUTLER DID IT TO GET MONEY FOR A FRIENDS DRUGS. IT WAS FOUND THAT AN AMSTERDAM JUNK DEALER HAD BOUGHT THE CARVINGS AND SOLD THEM TO A TELEVISION PRODUCER, HE TOOK THEM TO A MUSEUM WHERE THE CURATOR IDENTIFIED THEM AS 15TH CENTURY SO THEY STAYED IN THE MUSEUM. THERE THEY WERE SEEN BY A MRS. HALSEN-KUBES WHO HAD SEEN PHOTOGRAFTS OF THE STOWLANGTOFT CARVINGS, AND A COURT ORDER WAS ISSUED TO FORBID THE REMOVAL FROM THE MUSEUM. THE OWNER FOUGHT A COURT CASE AND WAS AWARDED THEM BACK, AND ST, GEORGES CHURCH HAD TO PAY A SUBSTANTANTIAL LEGAL BILL. IT WAS THEN THAT MR. EIKELENBOOM HEARD ABOUT OUR PLIGHT AND TRIED TO NEGOTIATE THEIR RETURN, EVENTUALLY IN 1990 HE WAS SUCCESSFUL, BUT THE COST IS STILL A CLOSELY GUARDED SECRET. MR. EIKELENBOOM'S MOTIVE WAS TO THANK THE BRITISH PEOPLE FOR THE HELP THEY GAVE THE DUTCH DURING WORLD WAR II. NOW NOT ONLY IS EVERYTHING KEPT UNDER LOCK AND KEY, THE CHURCH IS ALSO HEAVILY ALARMED.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO GIVE A DONATION TO HELP KEEP THE CHURCH SAFE AND BEAUTIFUL THERE IS A COLLECTING RECEPTACLE IN THE KNAVE.

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK EVERYONE WHO'S HELP AND SUPPORT MADE THIS WEEKEND POSSIBLE.



THE STOWLANGTOFT CARVINGS
by
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set or whether they combine carvings from different sets—for a careful viewing shows that they are certainly not all by the same artist though they may nonetheless all be from the same studio or workshop. Carvings of this type were often grouped together in the context of an altarpiece, as in the well known Brougham Altar now in Carlisle Cathedral. Similar carvings are also displayed in Lincoln Cathedral. They would almost certainly have been painted at one time, though no visible traces of paint remain on the Stowlangtoft Carvings. In style they are influenced by the spirit of the 'Devotio Moderna' which played a great role in late mediaeval religious life, emphasizing the humanity and the suffering of Christ and calling for intense devotion and discipleship on the part of the believer.

1. GETHSEMANE

The series opens with Christ praying in Gethsemane, immediately after the Last Supper and before his arrest. On the right of the Carvings, on top of a small hillock, stands the base of a chalice (the rest having been broken off) reminding us of the words of his prayer: 'O my Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will but as thou wilt.' (Mt. 26.39) The image, then, is of the cup of suffering which Christ must drain by consenting to be tortured and put to death – and his very desire to find an easier way, though not at the cost of disobedience to God. Look carefully and you will see that his eyes are open – he is fully aware of the destiny which lies ahead of him – in contrast to the three sleeping disciples. Peter, James and John, who are carved here with great naturalism; all of them, plainly, quite out of it, quite unaware of the spiritual trial of their master and equally unaware of the physical terror about to burst in on them in the shape of Judas (holding the money bag with the thirty pieces of silver) and the Chief Priest's soldiers who are already clambering over the wickerwork fence to

get into the garden and arrest Jesus.

2. THE SCOURGING

Jesus has been before the High Priest, the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate and in this violent and dramatic scene we see him being scourged by Pilate's soldiers, before being dressed up with the crown of thorns and purple robe. It is a picture of almost frightening cruelty. In the background the representatives of the High Priest (perhaps the left-hand figure is the High Priest himself) look on indifferently as the soldiers, ugly and brutalized men, aggressively and exaggeratedly masculine, beat their helpless, passive victim, whose almost feminine gentleness and vulnerability is the sole clue to the divine redemption being worked out in this act of human violence.

3. THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Jesus, now wearing the crown of thorns (intended to mock his claim to be Messiah but seen by Christians as a sign of the true kingship which reigns from the cross) carries his cross towards Golgotha, continuing to receive blows and taunts. We do not see him fall beneath the weight of the cross (as in the 'Stations of the Cross') but in his bent figure we can see all the pain and strain of what he is enduring: humanly speaking he has very little strength left, the cup of suffering is almost drained. Only Simon of Cyrene, to the left, helps him to bear the heavy cross. The gospels suggest that Simon was forced into doing this, but Christians have nonetheless seen in what he did an image of what we too must do: help Christ to carry his cross in a world still full of violence, cruelty and undeserved suffering.

4. THE DEPOSITION

There is no representation of the crucifixion itself among the Stowlangtoft Carvings. We do not know the

reason for this, but now, instead, we move straight to the deposition, the dead Christ being lowered from the cross. The cruel, mocking faces have gone, their grisly work finished; now it is his family and friends who surround him, lowering his body reverently and lovingly from the cross. Artistically, this carving is most forcefully conceived and executed: notice the diagonal line running down from the top right hand corner along the left arm of the figure holding the body, along Jesus's left arm, lifeless and limp, to the arms of the woman receiving him, and notice too the parallel line of their faces, united in sorrow, love and suffering. At the same time we can almost feel the dead weight of the body, suggested by the way in which the man who is taking this weight braces his back in order to support it. Who are these friends? The three women are, traditionally, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' (Mt 28.16), perhaps 'the mother of James and Joseph' (Mk 15.409 or 'the wife of Cleophas' (Jn 19.25). Mary Magdalene is often shown with loose hair, a reference to her legendary past as a somewhat immoral woman, and it is she who, here, receives the body, while the third woman carries a jar of embalming ointment. The men include John (the beardless figure on the left turning away in sorrow) and Joseph of Arimathea, the wealthy merchant who provided a grave for Jesus. The third man is possibly Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin (the ruling council which had condemned Jesus), who was nonetheless sympathetic towards the Galilean prophet.

5. PIETA

The carving immediately to the right of the alabaster reredos is, essentially, a pieta, a depiction of the dead Christ in his mother's arms. The same figures appear here as in the previous group apart from the man tentatively identified as Nicodemus. John is in almost exactly the same pose of inconsolable sorrow, turning away yet with one hand tenderly and comfortingly placed

on Mary's shoulder as she bends over her dead son, looking long and deeply into his upturned face, while Joseph of Arimathea supports his head. Of the two other female figures it is hard to tell which one is here intended to be Mary Magdalene. If we follow the clue of the loose hair then she is the figure on the right, striking a dramatic pose of tragic grief - but the other woman, standing on the left and now opening her jar of ointment has a glamorous quality which would fit well with the stories of Mary Magdalene's past. But whoever they are united in tender, shared act of mourning bonded by mutual care and support.

6. THE ENTOMBMENT

The body of Jesus is now ready to be laid in the grave, 'a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid' (Jn 19.41), which like the crucifixion, was situated outside the city walls, now to be seen in the background. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are placing the body in position; Mary Magdalene (bottom left) and the woman at the top right hand corner have made good use of their fragrant spices, while Mary the mother of the Lord is left to look on in undisturbed maternal grief. This carving is in considerably worse condition than any of the others, having suffered extensive vertical cracking - and yet this seems curiously appropriate for a scene of such unrelieved sadness, the wood breaking as human hearts must break at such a scene. Only the radiant calm of Christ's face suggests that this is on tragedy but that even this depth of sorrow remains within the loving purposes of God.

7. THE HARROWING OF HELL

This carving, set in the window bay on the south side of the sanctuary, shows what was a popular scene in late mediaeval piety: the harrowing of hell, an event alluded to in 1 Peter 3.18-19 'For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he

might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit; by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison' [(ie Hell or Hades); note also the clause in the Apostle's Creed - 'He descended into Hell']. This reference was developed into the doctrine that, after his death, Christ descended into Hell and rescued all those notable Old Testament heroes and heroines (and, sometimes, it was said, the virtuous pagans) who had been held captive by Satan until that time. Here we see him leading, in the first place, Adam and Eve out of the Jaws of Hell (shown literally as the jaws of a great serpent or dragon-like monster). This doctrine, highly mythological as it is, is not well-known today, yet it has a powerful meaning, holding out as it does the hope that God's redemptive work in Christ reaches throughout history and is not limited to those who know (or know of) the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth. Not even hell can hide us from the love of God. Amusingly, the artist has mixed his metaphors by showing the devil on the right with a key slung over his shoulder, since the 'entrance' to Hell is sometimes (as in the main image here) spoken of as 'Jaws' and sometimes as 'Gates'.

8. RESURRECTION

We now return to the main series of carvings and, indeed, to that event which is the chief focus of the whole drama of redemption: the resurrection. Christ is no longer a naked cadaver, as in the scene of the entombment, but is clad in a royal robe though physically and humanly the same person who had been the victim of violence and cruel humiliation. The scene as shown here is closest to the account in St Matthew's gospel: in the background we can see Mary Magdalene hurrying from the city with a jar of spices for a further anointing of the body, and, even as she comes 'behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door 'while' the keepers' (the armed guard sent by Pontius

Pilate) 'did shake and become as dead men'. A striking detail is the face on the shield slung over the back of the soldier on the right, which may, possibly, show the artist's conception of Mithras, a popular god among Roman soldiers, identified as a sun-god and a bull-slayer (note the ring in the mouth). At a profound Symbolic level, then, the whole scene could be interpreted as the triumph of the true 'sun of righteousness' over the material sun of earthly light and power, the victory of the vulnerable, crucified Son of Man over the violence and might of the Roman imperium. At the same time there is an almost sombre seriousness about the expression on the face of the risen Lord: his is no triumph to be celebrated with fanfares and self-glorification, for he remembers not only the cost, the suffering which he endured in his own body, but he remains bound by pity for those still entangled in the 'infernal machine' of human violence and cruelty.

9. ASCENSION

Four days have passed and now Christ leaves his disciples once and for all. He has led them (together with Mary, his mother) out to Bethany, has blessed them and is now taken up into heaven. We see them here looking up in astonishment, before they have even heard the angel's rebuke, 'Men of Galilee, why stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall come in the same manner as you have seen him go into heaven.' We might be tempted to think that this must have been yet another painful moment, a moment of loss and separation, but there is a lightness and vivacity about the carving which rules out any such feeling - Luke, after all, tells us that they returned to Jerusalem 'with great joy'. Paradoxically the absence of Christ is the condition, the 'flip side' as it were, of the sending of the Holy Spirit and the possibility of his universal presence in the world and among human beings of every race and

tribe and tongue. To put it another way: look at the summit of the mountain from which Jesus has just ascended. What do you see? You see the footprints where he had, even now, been standing, the last vestige of his presence on earth. Perhaps the artist is suggesting that those footprints are still there for us to seek and find - for the Spirit of Christ still walks among us in many ways and in many guises: in the beauty of creation, as in the need of the poor, the hungry, the insulted and injured. Perhaps the last word of the Stowlangtoft carvings, then, is that we must search out Christ's footprints 'and in them plant our own', being with him and helping him still carry his cross in a world so full of crosses: for that is the only royal road of resurrection, the road of glory.