

**A SHORT GUIDE TO THE CHURCH  
OF ST. ANDREW, WESTHALL,  
SUFFOLK**

*by*  
RICHARD FREEMAN

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Some of the remains of the original Norman church. *Above:* The site of the old apsidal chancel at the east end of the south aisle. Note remnants of the Norman chancel arch to the left of the Perpendicular window. *Below:* The south wall of the nave showing the Norman doorway and stratified Norman walling. (Photos: H. D. Tyson.)



## A SHORT GUIDE TO THE CHURCH OF ST ANDREW, WESTHALL, SUFFOLK

The parish of Westhall is situated in and around a long, shallow valley through which flows a tributary stream of the River Blyth. It is probable that Westhall takes its name from its position in that valley. Hall is derived from the Old English word "halh" meaning a nook or a narrow, sheltered valley. Hence "the western nook".

Other spellings of Westhall have in the past included Westhala, Westhale, Westall, Weshall, Vestale and Woestall.

Ever since the Bronze Age, and probably even earlier, man has inhabited this area. Evidence to this effect is given by the archaeological discoveries made in 1854 at Millpost Field in the south-west corner of the parish. These finds consisted of, among other things, Bronze Age bridle ornaments and fragments of bowls. On the same site Roman coinage of the second century A.D. was also found.

At this point it is worth noting the close proximity of the Roman road of Stone Street which skirts the parish on its western side.

For well over 800 years there has been a church on the site where the present church stands. The *Domesday Book* of 1086 makes no mention of a church, nor in fact, any recognisable mention of a village at Westhall. But from visible evidence in the walls of the church, it is certain that its building took place not long afterwards; probably around 1150.

### THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CHURCH

The Church of St Andrew, as it stands today, is a wonderful admixture of all the main English styles of architecture from Norman to Perpendicular. And with some careful observation the visitor will be able to trace its development.

The church as we see it consists of a small south-western tower, thatched nave with a south aisle and north porch, and a large, well-lit chancel with a tiled roof. But when the church was first built in the twelfth century, all that it consisted of was a nave and a small apsidal (rounded) chancel. The original Norman nave is now the south aisle.

Evidence of this Norman building is still visible and can be clearly seen on the south and west sides outside the building, and particularly inside the small tower arch. Here the inside of the west wall was the

original Norman west front of the nave. As one will discover by standing inside the tower, the wall contains one of the finest and best preserved **Norman doorways** to be seen in North Suffolk. It consists of four orders of colonnettes with much ornamentation in the arches that spring from them—billets, flowers and grotesque beasts' heads which touch the roll mouldings with their chins.

It is interesting to note that the jambs (sides) of the doorway have been cut away at the base. This happened when the large tenor bell was taken down from the tower for rehangng. It was discovered that the bell was too wide at the lip to pass through the doorway. The obvious solution, destructive as it was, was to cut away the bottom of the jambs.

Above the doorway can be seen a small Norman window set in a blank arch, which is flanked on each side by blank arches.

Another Norman doorway, this time not quite so magnificent, can be seen on the outside of the south wall of the aisle at the west end. This is another typical example of the fine craftsmanship that existed in this country during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It consists of one order of colonnettes with a scalloped arch springing from cushioned capitals.

If one looks closely at the base of the walls surrounding this doorway, it will be noticed that the stones used in the building are laid neatly in rows of roughly equal size. This is called stratification and is typical of the Norman way of building walls. Above, the stratification gives way to uneven rubble walling and a definite straight joint can be seen where the two styles meet. This is a sure sign of a later rebuilding of the upper part of the wall.

Slightly to the east of the doorway can be seen the remnants of an original Norman window which was replaced by a much later—fifteenth century—Perpendicular window. Incidentally, if one looks up towards the roof more straight-jointing can be seen where the walls were raised to accommodate the much taller Perpendicular windows.

More Norman work can be seen in the vicinity of the east end of the south aisle, near to where a Perpendicular window has been blocked up. Here Norman roofing corbels, probably from the old chancel, have been re-used in the rebuilding of the south walls.

Nearby, in the eastern wall of the aisle, the outlines of the old Norman chancel arch can be traced, although much of it has been mutilated by the insertion of a five-light castellated window during the fifteenth century. The original chancel was apsidal in shape, probably like those still to be seen at Fritton in Suffolk and Hales and Heckingham in Norfolk. It was demolished when the new chancel was erected around 1370. H. Munro Cautley, the late Diocesan Surveyor, recalls in his book, *Suffolk Churches and their Treasures*, having seen the foundations of the old chancel many years ago.

Other Norman remains can be seen, in the form of slit window heads, worked upside-down into the lower half of the tower's west wall.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century the lower stages of the tower were built at the west end of the old nave, so covering up the magnificent Norman west doorway and window. At roughly the same time, the north wall of the nave was pierced with crude arcading and a new north aisle added. This immediately altered the position of the tower from the west to its present position in the south-west corner of the church.

Traces of the early fourteenth-century work can still be seen in the outside of the north wall of the present nave, just east of the porch. This consists of a blocked-up Early English lancet window. Nearby, two buttresses which flank a later Perpendicular window, are almost certainly of the same date as the blocked window.

During the late fourteenth century, circa 1370, the old Norman chancel was considered to be inadequate and a new, more sumptuous building was added onto the east end of the north aisle. This was built in the Decorated style of architecture, admirably reflected by the large reticulated, five-light east window and its matching windows on each side of the chancel. The priest's door on the south side is also of the same style. Near this door, on the centre buttress of the chancel, are two **Mass dials**, once used by the priest for telling the time for the commencement of the Mass.

Also during the fourteenth century the arcading between the old nave and north aisle, which must have been a crude affair, was completely rebuilt with five octagonal piers and double-hollow-chamfered arches. The old apsidal chancel was then demolished to allow the sunlight to enter the new building from the south. The north aisle then became the nave and the Norman nave was relegated to the status of a south aisle, very much as we see it today.

During the first half of the fifteenth century, further modifications took place when the walls of the nave and south aisle were raised to take the new-style Perpendicular windows which remain to this day. The earlier Norman and Early English structures had been considered inadequate for lighting the inside of the nave.

The final stages of building took place during the sixteenth century when the Perpendicular north porch and the upper stage of the tower were added.

The **porch** is built of flint and stone and has crude flint flushwork at the base. In the spandrels each side of the archway are two shields, one bearing the sign of the Trinity and the other the Instruments of the Passion. The Early English doorway into the church has hoodmoulding that terminates in carved heads of a man and a woman.

The tower, as previously mentioned, was built in two stages and has

flushwork buttresses and battlements. The lower windows are Early English and those at the bell stage are Perpendicular. It was restored in 1971 at a cost of around £500.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century there have been several restorations to the church, the most notable of these being in 1881 when the easternmost window in the south aisle was blocked up. In an engraving of the church in 1845 by Henry Davy, this window can still be seen and in the south wall, outside where this window once stood, there is a crudely-cut stone inscribed E.S. 1881 commemorating the restoration.

The chancel was restored shortly afterwards in 1882.

## THE INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH

### *The Nave*

Judging by the wealth of fine medieval furnishings that can still be seen inside the church, the pre-Reformation interior must surely have been a glorious sight.

Upon entering the nave through the north porch, and after taking in the immense size of the interior as a whole (the church is 111ft long, the nave measuring 61ft by 40ft and the chancel 50ft by 22ft), the first thing to be looked at is the archbraced **roof** of the nave. Although, sadly, it has been subjected to the ravages of iconoclasm and time, what remains gives us a fair indication of its former beauty. It was erected at the same time as the walls were heightened to take the large Perpendicular windows. At either side, the wallposts terminate in carved angels, still showing some of their original colouring. They were made headless by the zealous iconoclasts.

Some of the angels support shields bearing floral emblems, but on the north side one can be seen holding a set of pipes while two others hold crowns.

The roof of the south aisle is similar in style to the nave, but has carved wall plates.

The beautiful fifteenth-century **font** stands proudly upon its pedestal at the west end of the nave. It is one of the main features of the church. Octagonal in shape, it bears the mutilated carvings of the Seven Sacraments around its bowl, borne by angels with outstretched wings. But what is so remarkable about the font is that it still has much of its original colouring and gilding and that it has delicate gesso (plaster) ornamentations in the form of rosettes and canopied figures on the buttresses of the panels.

If one starts at the east side of the font, facing due west, and proceeds round in a clockwise direction, the panels illustrate the following:

1. Mass,
2. The Baptism of Christ,
3. Holy Orders (notice the inscribed book and Chrismatory),
4. Baptism,
5. Confirmation,
6. Matrimony,
7. Penance, with the devil making his exit to the right with his tail between his legs,
8. Extreme Unction.

The defacing of the panels probably took place during the time of Oliver Cromwell, although the Journals of the iconoclast William Dowsing contain no mention of his having ever paid Westhall a visit. It is possible that the order for the defacing was given by Francis Jessope, Dowsing's assistant in this area.

The benches in the nave are all modern rebuilds using the timbers and panelling of the old box pews, which had been installed in 1812 at a cost of £112. Many of these old pews were also used to construct the vestry partition in the north-western corner of the nave.

The light-coloured oak benches in the south aisle are probably the oldest in the church. They have poppyhead ends and date from around 1450. Note the holes in the top of each poppyhead. These were used for holding taper candles.

In recent years a number of the old poppyheads have been tastefully restored to their former glory using glass fibre materials and it is extremely difficult to distinguish between the restored and unrestored.

The **pulpit**, situated at the left-hand side of the chancel arch, was constructed during the early part of the seventeenth century. Made of oak, it exhibits some fine examples of Stuart woodcarving. The front panel has a large blank Ionic arch and the Bible rests above are supported by six ornamental brackets carved to depict elephants and birds.

The oak eagle **lectern** was made in 1919 by Hart of Birmingham and placed in the church as a memorial to the men of the parish who died during World War I.

Another of the glories of the church, which sadly did not escape the mutilations of the iconoclasts, is the **screen**. It stands at the foot of the chancel arch. Originally it would have been a lofty structure, probably having slender vaulting which supported a loft with the Holy Rood (cross) and statues of St Mary the Virgin and St John the Evangelist either side of the crucified Christ.

The door which can be seen in the north wall of the nave, alongside the screen, was the entrance to the stairs that led to the rood loft, from where parts of the Mass were said and where candles were placed before the cross.

All that now remains of this once beautiful screen are the dados

(lower portions) containing sixteen colourfully-painted panels, eight on each side, depicting saints and their symbols and the Transfiguration. Depicted, from north to south, are:

*St James the Great*, with a staff and book and wearing a hat with a shell upon it.

*St Leonard*, in chains and carrying a crozier.

*St George*, with lance and shield.

*St Clement*, wearing a mitre and carrying a triple cross and an anchor.

*Moses*, with tablets

*Salvator Mundi*

*Elias*

} The Transfiguration.

*St Anthony*, with staff, accompanied by a pig with a bell about its neck.

*St Etheldreda*, partly obliterated, wearing a crown and carrying a book.

*St Sitha*, with a rosary and a book.

*St Agnes*, with a sword at her throat and a lamb leaping up to her.

*St Bridget* (inscribed Breda), with a crown on her head and carrying a crozier, book and chain.

*St Catherine*, with wheel and sword.

*St Dorothy*, with a basket of flowers and a bunch in her hand.

*St Margaret of Antioch*, piercing a dragon with a cross.

*St Apollonia*, holding a tooth.

Running across the top of the panels at the northern side is a fading blackletter inscription in Latin. From this it appears that the screen's donors were Thomas Felton, Richard Love, Margaret Allen and others whose names have been obliterated. The inscription has been transcribed as

. . . Margarete uxoris eius Orate p aia Tome feltonie/Orate p aia ric lore ac p bono statu Margarete alen vidue qui istud (followed by two illegible words).

An extended translation, kindly supplied by Mr Peter Northeast, would possibly read: "[Pray for the soul of . . . and] Margaret his wife. Pray for the soul of Thomas Felton. Pray for the soul of Richard Lore and for the good estate of Margaret Alen, widow, who [made this]." From the names that this inscription contains, it is fairly certain that the date of erection was around 1500.

After examining the screen, glance up at the chancel arch and see how the pressure of the roof has buckled the arch on the north side.

The framed canvas painting of the **Royal coat-of-arms** are those of King George III, who reigned from 1760 to 1820. According to the

churchwardens' accounts they were placed in the church in 1816 and were originally displayed high above the arcades at the east end of the nave.

After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 all churches were ordered to display Royal Arms in a prominent place as a token of loyalty to the king, although they first appeared in churches during the reign of King Henry VIII.

In the south-east corner of the south aisle, near the side altar, is a plain, much damaged Renaissance **tomb chest**. This marks the tomb of Nicholas Bohun, who died in 1602. It was erected by his father Francis Bohun, who outlived his son by several years.

The Bohuns were lords of all the Westhall manors from the end of the sixteenth century until early in the nineteenth century and played a large part in the affairs of the church during that time. It would appear that the Bohuns appropriated the south aisle of the church for their own use not long after they became lords of the manors, for included in a parish rates list for 1683 is a note stating: "Note yt Edmund Bohun Esqr is not chargeable to the repayer of the church because he maintains The Isle in which he setts".

This same Edmund Bohun (1644-98) was a profuse writer and a lawyer. In 1690 he was appointed Licensor of the Press. Unfortunately, five months later, he fell foul of the authorities when he permitted publication of a pamphlet questioning the right of King William III to the throne. In 1698 he was appointed Chief Justice of South Carolina, where he died of a "pestilent Fever" shortly afterwards. He was buried at Charleston.

For nearly three centuries the Bohuns owned Westhall Hall, a half-mile away to the east of the church. Their estate was finally sold in 1829.

Above the tomb chest is an interesting **brass plate** with a long inscription tracing the history of the Bohun family from the time of Humphrey Bohun, Earl of Hereford and a Marcher Lord, up to the death of Nicholas. In the floor of the aisle nearby the tomb is a black marble ledger slab to the memory of another Edmund, a son of Chief Justice Edmund, who died in 1734, and of his wife Hannah, who died in 1731. Nearby is a small rounded slab bearing the inscription G.E.B. 1800. This is the gravestone of George Edward Bohun, infant son of John Francis Brown Bohun.

The **Holy Table** at the east end of the aisle is Stuart.

Westhall Church has a varied and interesting selection of **wall paintings** dotted around the walls of the nave and south aisle. They mostly date from the fifteenth century. It is quite possible that in the future more will be discovered beneath the many layers of whitewash that has covered the walls since the Reformation, as it was quite usual for churches to have many paintings all over the interior walls.

Wall paintings were a kind of *Biblical picture book* and a sure way of teaching the illiterate worshippers of medieval times about the Bible and its teachings.

On the north wall of the nave, alongside the western door, is a large, faded painting of St Christopher, the patron saint of travellers, ferrying the infant Christ with the aid of a staff. In pre-Reformation times it was thought that anyone entering a church by the south door, thus immediately sighting St Christopher, would be free from sudden death for the remainder of the day. Also depicted in this painting are devils and what appears to be Christ and the Hand of God.

On the wall of the south aisle, nearby the south door and again towards the east, are two painted crosses enclosed by floriated circles. These are **consecration crosses**.

At the consecration of a church (or in this case probably a reconsecration) the bishop would anoint twelve places within the church and twelve places outside. The places inside were marked by painted crosses and the exterior usually by incised crosses, although to date none have been found outside at Westhall.

In the jamb of the easternmost window of the south aisle there is a painted canopy. This probably surrounded the image of a saint to whom the nearby side altar would have been dedicated.

Half way along the south wall is another faded wall painting. This apparently was a large vine which entwined around what were probably scenes from the life of Christ, or of an important saint. For half way up the left-hand side of the vine can be seen a portrait of a man with a halo. Another wall painting can be seen high up at the west end of the same wall. This small, rectangular painting is much too faded to be identified.

### *The Chancel*

The chancel was heavily restored in 1882, but as with the nave, it still displays many of its interesting, earlier furnishings.

The **roof** is of the single-framed rafter type with collars that have carved rosettes on them. In the centre is a carved representation of the Holy Trinity which depicts God in human form holding the crucified Christ in front of Him. This is something of a rarity in churches in this part of the country. Before the Reformation, Westhall village had its own Guild of the Holy Trinity and from 1280 until the Dissolution of the monasteries, the advowson of the church belonged to the Priory of the Holy Trinity, Norwich (now Norwich Cathedral).

Above the rafters of the roof is a large, concealed space which, so tradition has it, was used by local smugglers to hide casks of brandy en route from Dunwich to Beccles. Reference to these early nineteenth-

century smugglers' activities at Westhall can be found in Leonard Thompson's excellent book *Smugglers of the Suffolk Coast*.

The carved poppyheads on the **choir benches** are well worth close examination, for they were obviously executed with Nature in mind. Delicately carved into the fleur-de-lys shapes of the poppyheads are acorns, berries, haws, wheat, roses, thistles and ivy and on the sides are delightful carvings of animals and birds, including a dog, cow, lamb and a swan.

The age of these berchends is uncertain—their style is typically pre-Reformation, but what is so puzzling is their remarkably good state of repair. Judging from the blank poppyheads that accompany them, they were probably installed as late as 1882, the time of the chancel's restoration.

To the left of the high altar is a crudely-carved **Jacobean chair** which is beginning to show signs of its age. On the right front leg are cut the initials I.D.

The fine five-light Geometrical east window has the fragmented remains of some of its original mid-fourteenth-century **stained glass** in its reticulated tracery heads. Other fragments can also be seen in the heads of the windows each side of the chancel.

In the south-east corner of the chancel, next to the modern high altar, is the ogee-headed ashlar stone **piscina** (washing bowl). When it was first installed, at the same time as the chancel was built, around 1370, it was quite a splendid affair. It had delicately-carved side shafts and pinnacles which were later completely defaced, probably during the time of Edward VI or Elizabeth I, although the faint outline of these decorations can still be made out.

Next to the piscina are **sedilia** (seats) built into the base of the window. These were occupied during part of the Mass by the celebrant and his assistants, the deacon and sub-deacon. Alongside this, in the western jamb of the window is a small **towel locker** which was added at a later date.

### *The Bells*

One feature of the church that the casual visitor rarely sees is the **ring** of five bells hanging in the tower.

The three oldest bells (nos. 1, 4 and 5) were all cast during the early seventeenth century by William Brend, the Norwich bellfounder, while No. 2 is probably an 1875 recast of one which in 1681, was found to be cracked and had to be repaired at a cost of £7 12s. No. 3 bell bears no inscription, but according to the churchwardens' accounts, was recast and rehung along with the other four in 1846 by a Mr Fulcher of Southwold "as per contract", at a cost of £32 10s.

Details of the bells and their inscriptions are set out below:

1. (treble) Anno Domini 1616 AWB
2. C. & G. Mears, founders, London, 1875
3. no inscription
4. Anno Domini 1616 AWB
5. (tenor, key F) Omnis Sonus Laudet Dominum Anno Domini 1626 AWB (Weight 13½ cwt).

A translation of the Latin inscription on bell No. 5 reads "All sounds praise the Lord" and the initials AWB are those of William Brend.

In 1913 the bells were again rehung, and to commemorate this a peal of 5040 changes was rung. A tablet recording the event and the names of the ringers can be seen on the west wall inside the tower.

#### *The Plate*

Among its plate, the church possesses two pieces of silver of great interest. The first is the Elizabethan communion cup which was made in London in 1567. This is of a plain design and is somewhat typical of its time. It stands seven inches high and is marked with a leopard's head, a fleur-de-lys, a small blackletter "k" signifying the year 1567, and a lion passant for quality.

The other piece is an alms dish of 1811 which bears the initials PB/WB, the mark of the Bateman brothers, sons of Hester Bateman, the famous London gold and silversmith. It is designed to look like a salver, standing upon three legs.

In addition, there is also a simple paten with a diameter of 4½ inches, which has no marks of identification.

## THE REGISTERS

The church registers date from 1559, the first year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and are of great interest, particularly to the genealogist and the local historian. Unfortunately, for safety reasons, they are now kept in the county archives at Ipswich.

The earliest register, covering the years 1559 to 1780, contains many entries of baptism, marriage and burial as well as several references indicating political and economic events that not only affected Westhall but the country as a whole. For example, there is an entry for 1653 stating that James Hubbard had been "chosen and sworne Regester of the towne of Westhall" according to Act of Parliament. This refers to the time when the solemnising and registering of marriages was taken out of the hands of the Church and all marriages had to be performed by a duly elected parish register.

In 1670, Edmund Bohun, acting as parish clerk, entered in the register that there were 148 communicants, three recusants (people who refused to attend the church) and no papists in the parish at that time. This is an indication of the anti-Catholic feelings in the country and shows how the Church kept its watchful eye on possible enemies.

Another entry, this time recording the burial of Elizabeth Mills in 1678, ends with the following note, here translated from the Latin to read: "an oath was made in accordance with the Statute of Parliament". This statute refers to the Burial in Woollen Act of 1678, which ordered that no one should be buried in anything but sheep's wool. The Act, repealed in 1814, reflects the dire state of the once prosperous wool industry in England during the late seventeenth century.

The first entries in the register are in Latin and record only names and dates for baptisms, marriages and burials, but as time goes on the entries become more descriptive. In 1659, for instance, the register records the following burials:

Alice Smith an antient maide, March 27  
Elay Watlin an aged man April 29  
John Goldsmith sometime vicar of this Towne June 8  
Rosa Marshland a maid who was drowned October 25

and under marriages:

James Spatchet widdower & Margaret Allen widow of this towne  
November 24.

Among the many entries of note is a whole page used exclusively to enter the baptisms, marriages and burials of the Bohun family, who as previously mentioned, were lords of the manors for many generations. At the top of the page is the reason why the family had a page to itself:

This book was first bound in Covers and all the issuing bans added at the sole cost and charge of Edmund Bohun Esqr 1672. Therefore hee desireth this whole leafe may be preserved for and used by none but his posterity.

This instruction was carried out and the page is now completely filled with Bohun entries, including a record of Edmund's death in South Carolina in 1698.

Some notable entries in the later registers include the following:

1765 William Havers, mole-catcher, aged 73 years, March 16  
1788 Richard Chaston, married man (a stranger) aged 75 yrs

and for the year 1752 there is a brief note which informs us that:

The year 1752 commences by Act o' parliamt on the 1st January.

Up to that year the British new year had officially commenced on March 25 (Lady Day).

On October 1, 1783, a Stamp Act granted a duty of 3d. on every new birth, baptism, marriage or burial entry in the registers. This is duly recorded.

In 1813 Parliament ordered that entries should be made in three separate registers, specially printed by the King's Printer. These new registers took the form of printed pages to be filled in in detail by the officiating minister. Consequently, from them we are able to glean a lot more information about village life than was previously possible. From the Westhall Register of Baptism 1813-67 it has been possible to discover what sort of trades and occupations were carried out in the village over that period of time. This is because the occupation of the baptised child's father had to be entered in the register.

For interest, a list of some of the trades and occupations included is given below:

Farmer	Linen weaver	Thatcher	Schoolmaster
Husbandman	Carpenter	Cooper	Publican
Labourer	Blacksmith	Gardener	Shopkeeper
Servant	Miller	Tailor	Yeoman
Cordwainer	Bricklayer	Artist	Bailiff
Coachpainter	Groom	Clerk	Mason

The artist included in this list is Henry Davy, the Westhall-born painter and engraver whose own birth is recorded in 1793. His daughter was baptised here in 1846, aged 17 years 10 months.

Among the many engravings that Davy produced in his lifetime there is one of Westhall Church in 1845. A copy of this can be seen hanging on the west wall of the nave.



The interior. *Above:* The Jacobean pulpit and the northern half of the painted rood screen (c. 1500). *Below:* The nave and south aisle seen from the north-east. Notice the magnificent, but simple fourteenth-century arcading. (Photos: H. D. Tyson.)

