

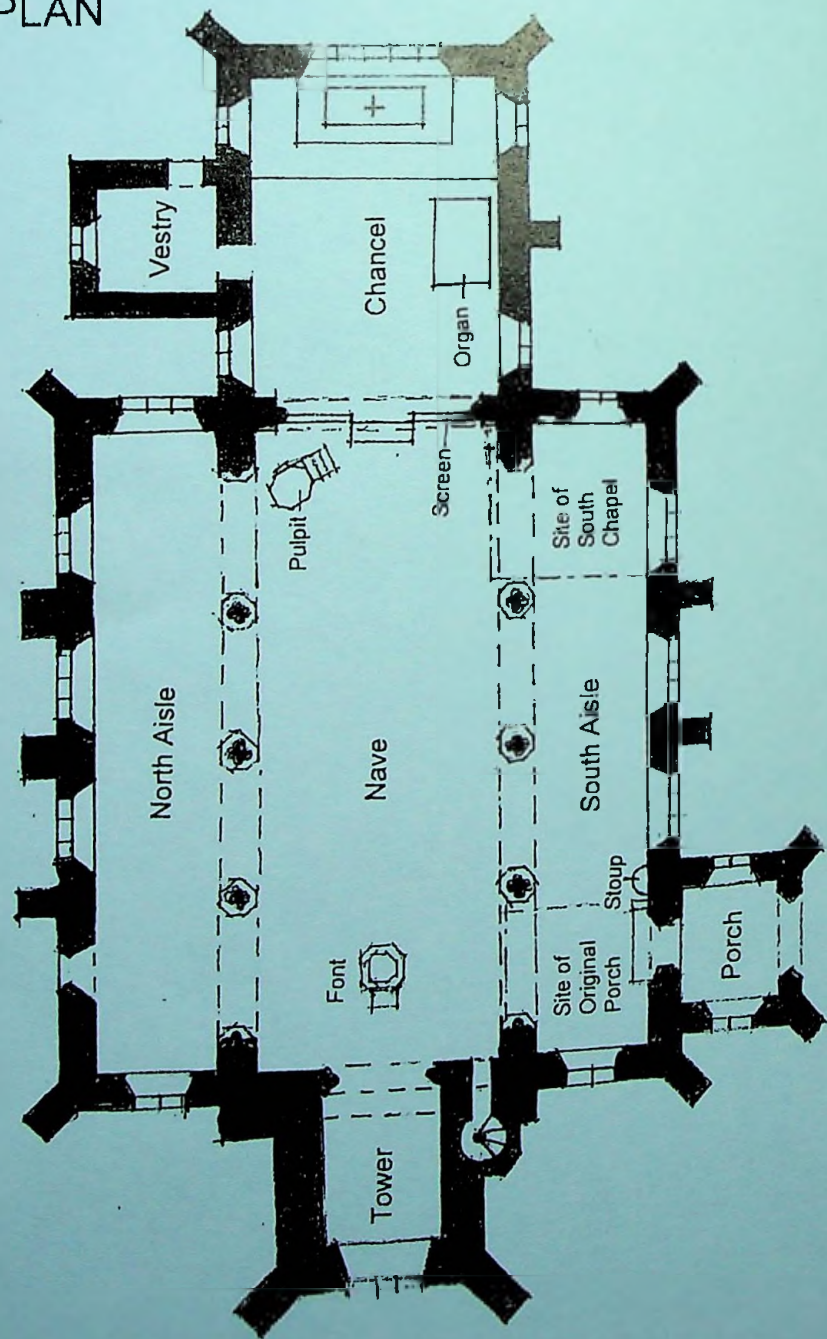
29/5/18

ST MARY THE VIRGIN, WITHERSFIELD



CHURCH GUIDE

PLAN



WELCOME



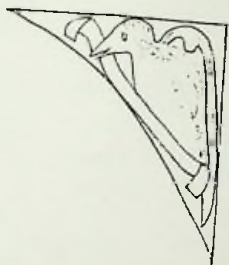
Our parish church is open to all: we like to welcome visitors whether they come to explore our church building and its contents for themselves, or say a prayer, for this is still a working parish church which has been in existence for over 700 years.

Like all ancient churches, this has its own unique and special treasures. We hope this guide, which is not intended as a parish history, will help you locate and appreciate the meaning of our church and its artefacts, made by medieval and later craftsmen to adorn the House of God, and which are now looked after by our present congregation.

Please look round.



ST MARY'S CHURCH WITHERSFIELD: OUR HISTORY



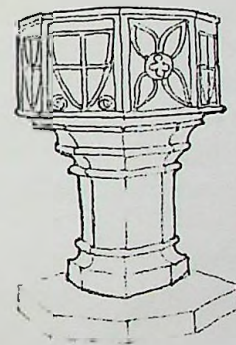
We do not know when a permanent building for Christian worship was first erected in Withersfield. But it is likely there was already a stone church here by the thirteenth century, as a rectory is documented in 1254. Moreover, the iron ring handle on the south door has been dated to that time. Over the years the original building of chancel and nave, to which a side chapel on the south was added, has been altered and extended to suit the religious needs of the parishioners. The building we see now is largely of the late fifteenth century, consisting of nave and tower, constructed when East Anglia was a prosperous centre of the wool trade. The north aisle was added at the end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century.

Later in the sixteenth century the building underwent changes when the church had to conform from Catholic to Protestant practice. The walls were white-washed, and the screen lost its loft. The remaining stained glass, paintings and statues were destroyed when William Dowsing, a commissioner during the Commonwealth, ordered their destruction. He reported in his diary that on a visit to Withersfield on January 6th 1643, "we brake down a crucifix and sixty superstitious pictures and gave orders for the levelling the steps in the chancel".

This was followed by a period of partial neglect, perhaps because in the following centuries there was no squire living in the village. But by the nineteenth century this was changing. In 1867, when there was a squire (a parson who was also the squire), the church was extensively remodelled, and a more regular plan was created by constructing the south aisle and porch, and rebuilding the chancel appropriate for the Church of England liturgy. Essentially this is how it remains today.

THE FONT

The first item you will notice as you enter the church is the octagonal **font**. Here the children of the parish have been baptised into the Christian community since Tudor times. It is probably late sixteenth century, with its eight panels carved with pointed quatrefoils or imitation shields-of-arms (though one possibly Alington). It is large enough to immerse a baby, and you can just detect where a locking bar was once fixed to secure a cover.



THE NAVE

Standing in the centre gangway facing the chancel, you see on your left the **north arcade** with its quatrefoil piers (columns) and double hollow-chamfered pointed arches: the stone is the white clunch from Cambridgeshire. Behind you, at the west end, are an extremely high arch into the tower, and beyond, a tall Perpendicular window, which with the clerestorey windows of the upper nave, creates this light interior.



There is just one window, high up in the clerestory at the east end of the north side, which still has its pre-Reformation **stained glass**, the only glass 'picture' left by Dowsing. This depicts the sign of the Trinity, and perhaps it was endowed by the Gild of the Holy Trinity, the medieval gild of this village.

High above is the dark roughly-hewn oak **roof** of alternating tiebeams with pierced braces, and false hammerbeams. These must once have held carved wooden angels, as there are still fragments of two remaining. One stone corbel has a carved head, but the details do not indicate who he was. Were there others which have been destroyed?

CARVED BENCH ENDS

Withersfield church is known for its lively carved bench ends or **poppyheads**, on the south side of the nave. Comparison with those in St Andrew's Isleham, which are similar in style and are dated 1452, may indicate these were made in the late 1450s. Several have holes in the top to take rush lights or candles, made when the benches themselves were altered later to make them more comfortable and draught-proof when sermons were habitually long. Starting from the west end, they show:

St Michael weighing a soul (a tiny naked figure). He wears a feathered garment, which is exactly the costume 'St Michael' would wear in the Mystery plays of the time. On one side of his scale is a 'soul', kneeling and praying with a rosary, the attribute (emblem) of St Dominic. We understand that it is his help that weighs down the scale to her advantage in spite of the devilish figures who try to upset the balance.



Following this, **two animals**, possibly puppies, or even dragons (see the easternmost poppyhead), apparently fighting among vines. This might be taken as a warning against the consequences of drunkenness.



Next but one, a **youth holding the shield of St George**. The red cross on a white ground is the Banner of the Resurrection, the Christian symbol of Victory over Death.



Next but one, a '**Pelican in its Piety**' with four chicks in a nest. It was believed that the pelican pecked at its own breast to feed its young with its blood. It symbolised Christ shedding his own blood for mankind. The leaves and fruits of the plants on which the nest rests are particularly finely carved.



Then, a **collared and chained Swan**. This is the badge of Henry V, subsequently used by his successor. This poppyhead must have been carved when there was a Lancastrian king on the throne, probably Henry VI, and signify loyalty to him.



Next, a **Mermaid**. She would originally have held a mirror. These creatures symbolised the lusts of the flesh, and the Church used them to turn people away from temptation and consequent disaster.



At the easternmost end, **St. George and the Dragon**. This saint represents the fight and subsequent victory of good over evil. Here he is attired as for a joust, with a lance and jousting shield. Perhaps the sculptor had not seen a soldier armed for war, but only a participant in this sport. The horse's harness and the saint's armour are shown in careful detail. The dragon is particularly large and repulsive.

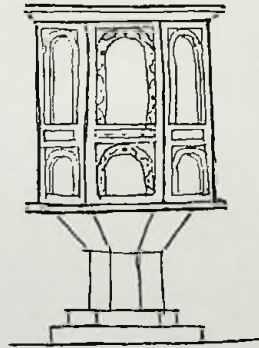


BENCHES ON THE NORTH SIDE

These square-ended benches with shallow wooden buttresses, a standard sixteenth century type, were certainly made after the north aisle was built about 1500.

THE PULPIT

Here is a typical late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century **pulpit**, with carved late Renaissance decoration of semi-circular headed arches in two levels, and acanthus leaf decoration on the cornice. The preaching of The Word was central to post-Reformation worship, so a pulpit was an obligatory item.



On the floor in front of the chancel step, is a small **memorial brass** to Joanna Argell, née Bury, with her heraldic device. She died in 1579. It reads:

Joannae quondam Bury claris parenti' orate nupt
Uxori Palu: Argall cmi Lond ar quivu 18 annos
Et amplius feliciter vixerat aetat suae an' dm 1579 placide in xpo
Dormien: pientiss marit' ppetui amoris sui pign.

(To Joanna formerly Bury descended from famous parents lately wife of Paul Argall of the county of London esquire with whom she had lived happily for 18 years and more, falling peacefully asleep in Christ on the 6th day of the month of January in the year of our Lord 1579. Her most devoted husband set up this pledge of his undying love.)

THE SOUTH CHAPEL

To your right is the site of a fourteenth century chantry chapel, with its space marked out on the floor by paving bricks. The east

window, smaller and lower than the others in the church, has Decorated tracery. On the east wall is a blocked doorway which would have given access to a demolished stairway to the rood loft.

On the floor is the black marble **memorial slab** for Sir John Jacob who died in 1740. Sir John, the colonel of a regiment in the Duke of Marlborough's army, was executor to his cousin, the last Lord Alington, Lord of the Manor of Withersfield, whose seat was in Horseheath. He built West Wratting Hall with a legacy from Lord Alington. After the abolition of chantries by Edward VI, the local Lords of the Manor came to regard these chapels as their personal spaces. Probably Lord Alington himself is buried in the same vault.

On the south wall is a **brass plaque** recording that the chancel was rebuilt and the south aisle erected in 1867, giving the name of the rector, William Mayd, and churchwardens of the time. It balances the fifteenth century brass tablet in the north aisle that you will see.

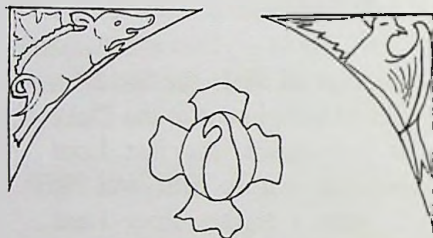
THE CHANCEL ARCH

The arch with its castellated capitals and carved fleurons is fourteenth century, deriving from the earlier church building. Above is part of the stone jamb of a demolished doorway to a rood loft. Below is a small niche which once would have held the statue of a saint and probably indicates that there was once a small altar below.

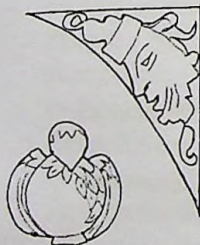
THE CHANCEL

In 1867 the **chancel** was completely rebuilt. The architects were Clark and Holland of Newmarket. Nothing is left to tell us what the medieval chancel contained. The present chancel is typical of its time, with a large Perpendicular-style east window, choir-stalls and organ, and decorative floor tiles. On the side walls are memorials to former rectors.

THE CHANCEL SCREEN



This must once have been one of the finest fifteenth or early sixteenth century screens, for it is very delicately carved and has a wealth of detail, some minute. Prominent on the tracery of the lower panels are Tudor roses. Unfortunately it has suffered badly over the years. What is unusual is that the gates with the screen, have survived.



Screens were taken down in Edward VI's reign, brought back under Mary, and had their roods, the cross with the crucified Christ, and lofts removed under Elizabeth I. Further, the floor level of the chancel was raised in the nineteenth century. This may account for the way the screen seems to fit so badly into the arch.

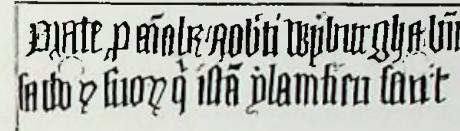


At some time statues were removed. In the late seventeenth century, since it now looked denuded, baroque carvings of cherubs and classical corn husk drops were affixed. Finally it was painted in the 1867 restoration in what were believed to be medieval colours and patterns, though these may not be correct.

If you look very closely at the panels on the west (nave) side of the screen, you will see in the spandrels, heads in hats, birds and animals, wild boars for example. On the cusps of tracery are even tinier creatures, owls and lions' heads among them. On the east (chancel) side which is not damaged, are pairs of creatures in the upper spandrels, fishes, birds and animals among them.



THE NORTH AISLE



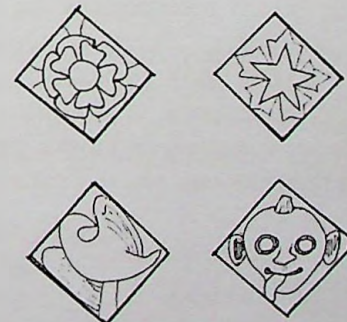
On the north wall near the altar is a small **brass plaque**. Written in an abbreviated form of Latin, (rather like a text message), it reads:

Orate pro animabus Roberti Wyburgh et bene factorum suorum qui istam ylam fieri fecerunt

(Pray for the souls of Robert Wyburgh and his benefactors who had this aisle made).

Robert Wyburgh's will of 1497 left £40, a very large sum then, for the fabric of the church, and requests a chantry be made for him, so the aisle is likely to have been built as his chantry chapel. This would date it to about 1500. Possibly some of his legacy was also used for building the south doorway, and the rood screen. He also left money to many other local churches. He may have been a maltster, as he leaves bequests of malt to the poor and others. He also leaves his rights to farm 'strips' in various fields in Withersfield.

The aisle's roof has pale oak woodwork which is carved and moulded, and there are carved bosses, which include a Tudor rose, dating the roof to post 1485, the heraldic mullet of the de Vere family, a phoenix and a grotesque face of a man with his tongue out.



Several of the piers have **graffiti** scratched on them: they include initials, and two dates, 1654 and 1702 and possibly markers for games, and are of various dates.

Also in the aisle and matching the **memorial slab** of Sir John Jacob is one for his son-in-law, the Reverend Abraham Oakes rector of

the parish from 1723 till 1756. He built a new rectory with a gift of £500, from Sir John Jacob. His son was also a parson and there is a further slab with the name of his infant son. The church possesses Abraham Oakes' small funeral **hatchment**, but it is now too delicate to be on view.

In the east window is modern **stained glass** by Pippa Heskett showing St Cecilia, a memorial to a rector, John Keen and an organist. At the west end, above the original fifteenth century north door, is an early nineteenth century **benefaction** (charity) **board**. Parishes were obliged to keep a visible record of bequests for the benefit of the poor. Below is a board recording the restoration of the roofs. The initials of the churchwardens of the time and builder are carved on the nave cornice.

THE SOUTH AISLE

The entire south aisle was an 1867 addition, as the brass tablet near the east end records, with the **arcade** of Bath stone, a close copy of the north one. It incorporates the area of the earlier chapel. At the west end the position of an earlier porch is marked by paving bricks. Just by the door is the 1867 re-creation of a **stoup**, possibly made out of the capital of the respond to the entrance of the demolished chapel: the slot might have accommodated the beam of a parclose screen. Next to it stands a massive **oak chest**, probably Elizabethan.

PLATE

The church possesses a communion cup and paten dated 1701 but these are not kept in the church.

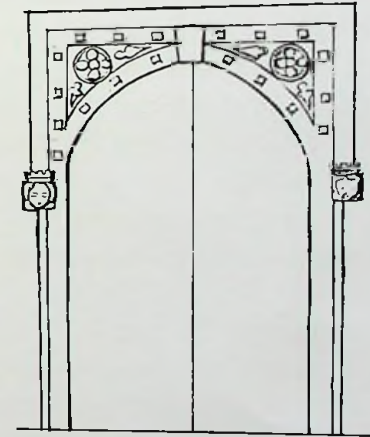
BELLS

There are five bells, cast between 1603 and 1804, but are no longer rung.

THE PORCH

The present porch was also built with the south aisle in 1867, to replace the earlier one

The **south doorway** to the church is the original late fifteenth century doorway, moved and re-erected. It has fine carved details, which include small shields and fleurons, and tracery in the spandrels. Its style suggests it could have been made by John Wastell or his workshop. Wastell was an eminent master mason who worked on churches in Bury St Edmunds and the surrounding area.



Above is a medieval niche made to hold a **statue** of the saint to whom the church is dedicated, **St Mary**. The original, lost at the time of the Reformation, has now been replaced by one made in 2007 by Alexander Wenham from stone from the medieval building which had been discarded when the south aisle was built in 1867.

On the Victorian south door is the oldest artefact belonging to the church. It is the iron **ring handle** with a circular pierced backplate, and is thirteenth century. Two salamanders, which were believed to survive fire and so would protect a building, are riveted to the oval handle, while on the ring at the end of the shank is a tiny bird. This could be a dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit.

