



ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
ELMSWELL

Welcome to the church of St. John the Divine, Elmswell!

Standing on its gentle hill it provides a tranquil area between a restless trunk road and a busy village.

We trust this guide will assist your enjoyment of our ancient building.

The manor of Elmswell was given to the Abbot of the Abbey at Bedericsworth (Bury St. Edmunds), and remained in the hands of his successors until the Dissolution in 1539. It passed by sale or inheritance to various individuals. Now the patronage to the benefice in Elmswell is entrusted to the Martyrs Memorial and Church of England Trust.

The Domesday Book says of Elmswell: "A church with 20 acres of free land in alms."

It is reasonable to assume that the first stone and flint building on the site was built by the Benedictine monks from the Abbey. The route between the Abbey and Elmswell was called the Lord's Chariot Way.

In 1433 the then Abbot entertained Henry VI at the manor in Elmswell. If you ascend the spiral staircase and look over the gallery rails you can see an oblique view of the layout of the church.

May 1996
Douglas Lewis

Within this guide the numbers in the text refer to items on the enclosed plan.

How old? - This is often the first question asked by visitors to a church.

The chancel, which is the oldest part of the building, was built during the decorated period (1300-1350) and was restored in 1864. At the same time a vestry was added to the north side from the designs of Mr R J Withers.

The rest of the interior of the church belongs to the Perpendicular style (1350-1500).

In 1862 the South aisle was rebuilt and had an extra window added - see the drawing by the North door. The architect for this work was Mr E C Hakewell.

Our fine tower was added during the latter half of the 15th century.

About 1870 a North aisle was added to correspond with the South side.

Mr J Drayton Wyatt was the architect for this work and Mr W Woods of Elmswell was the builder.

In 1993 the West end was re-ordered. This provides a gallery, a kitchen, a meeting room and other facilities. The Whitworth Co-Partnership designed and supervised this addition and F A Valiant and Son Ltd were the contractors.

Chancel

When the chancel was restored in 1864 part of the work consisted of re-glazing the East window with painted glass. The four lights in the window depict - The Baptism of Christ, the Agony in the Garden, the Crucifixion and the Entombment. The other windows on the South side have glass dating from 1865 and 1868.

The communion table is unusual as it has a heavy stone top supported by a carved oak base. The stone top has five crosses cut into its surface (one at each corner and one in the middle), signifying the five wounds of Christ. (1)

On the South side of the Sanctuary there is a Piscina, which was used for cleansing the sacred vessels and a sedilia which provided a resting place for clergy helping with long services. (2 & 3) The recessed shelf on the north wall would have been used for items concerned with the communion services. (4)

The list of rectors by the vestry door begins in 1250 when the parish was in the Diocese of Norwich. In 1349, the year of the Black Death, there were three rectors. It has been estimated that at least half of the population died during this plague. (5)

The organ was built by Henry Jones and Sons of South Kensington in 1903. It was restored in 1972.

Tablets on the western end of the chancel record the passing of Revd. J T Lawton and members of his family. He was rector here for 54 years.

Redecoration of the chancel was carried out in 1969.

When the chancel arch was repaired in 1910 a stone head was found embedded in the masonry. It is now fixed over the South

door. One report states that it is a relic of a church older than our present building, but on the same site. (6)

Nave

The wrought iron screen which separates the nave from the chancel was given in 1894 by the Revd. W A C Macfarlane who was rector of this parish and Lord of the Manor. It was restored in 1969 by Mr Malcolm Macfarlane-Grieve, son of the former rector. A tablet, close to the screen, records these facts. The eagle which tops the screen symbolizes St. John. (7)

If you stand back and look at the chancel arch from the nave you will see that the walls supporting the arch are wider on one side. Another point, the pillars in the nave which support the upper walls and the roof are some 45cms. closer together at the chancel steps than they are at the West end by the tower. This is measured across the church from aisle to aisle.

These pillars are octagonal in section and the faces are slightly concave, by which means interesting shadow is cast.

The nave roof, executed in stained pine, was an important part of the Victorian restoration. It replaces a ceiling and a roof of lower pitch.

This earlier roof may have been supported on the stone shafts between the clerestory windows.

Above the arches on both sides of the nave there is an elaborate stone string-course.

Two tie-irons are fixed to the roof to prevent an outward thrust on the walls.

The shields on the ends of the beams in the nave roof were painted by the Revd. W F Francis of Great Saxham. He also painted the reredos behind the communion table.

The pulpit, lectern and litany desk date from the Victorian period. (8)

There are five text on arches in various parts of the church. Some are painted on sheet metal and some are painted directly onto the walls.

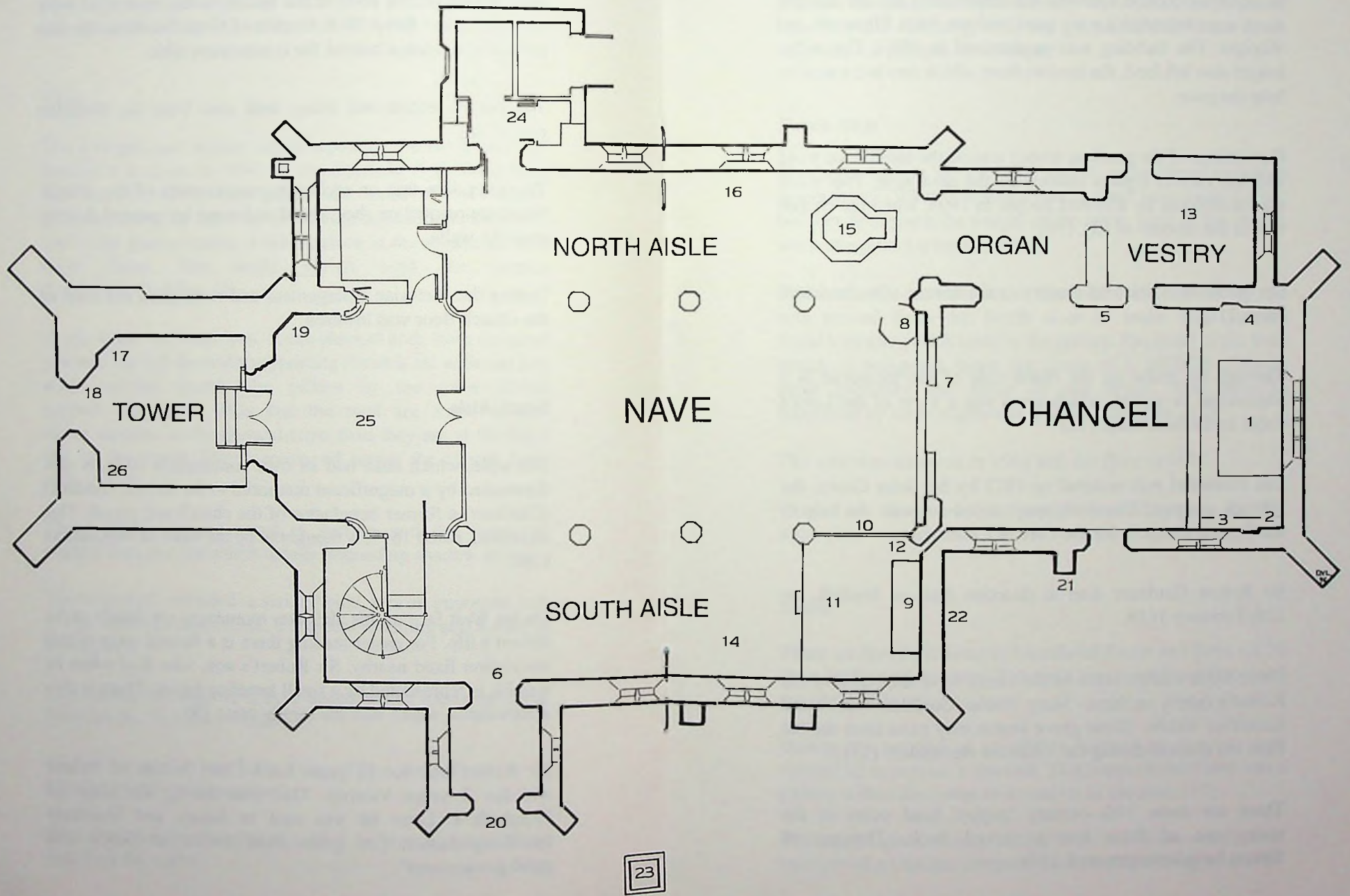
During the Victorian enlargement and restoration the level of the church floor was lowered.

South Aisle

The aisle, which once had its own communion table, is now dominated by a magnificent memorial to Sir Robert Gardener (Gardiner) a former benefactor of the church and parish. This memorial, dated 1619, is thought to be the work of Maximilian Colt.

On the West face of this alabaster monument are details of Sir Robert's life. For easier reading there is a framed copy of this inscription fixed nearby. Sir Robert's son, who died when he was 24, is represented by a small kneeling figure. There is also a rhinoceros, which was the family crest. (9)

Sir Robert was for 18 years Lord Chief Justice of Ireland and for 2 years Viceroy. This was during the reign of Elizabeth I. Later he was sent to Jersey and Guernsey by King James, "to settle their estate in peace and good government".



In 1614 Sir Robert founded the almshouses by the church, these were intended for six poor widows from Elmswell and Woolpit. The building was modernized in 1967. The noble knight also left land, the income from which was to be used to help the poor.

One section of the parclose screen around the tomb is very old and has various figures painted on the nave side. This work was undertaken by different people in 1904, when the church was in the diocese of Ely. (10)

On the floor of this old chantry is the matrix of a decorated cross. (11)

Through the pillar on the North side of the memorial is a hagioscope or squint, which gives you a view of the Lord's Table in the Sanctuary. (12)

The memorial was restored in 1972 by Mr John Green, the Ipswich sculptor. This work was carried out with the help of the Central Council for the Care of Churches.

Sir Robert Gardener died at Breccles Hall in Norfolk, on 12th February 1619.

Three black marble slabs in the vestry have the name of Sir Robert's family on them:- Mary Webbe, Gardener Webbe and Katherine Webbe. These grave stones may have been moved from the chancel during the Victorian restoration. (13)

There are some 14th century 'poppy' head pews in the aisle; one of them has a carved back. The carved figures have been removed. (14)

William Dowsing, the Parliamentary Visitor, came to Elmswell church on 5th February, 1643 and gave orders to "brake down superstitious pictures and images".

North Aisle

This aisle, built in the Victorian period, makes the church plan symmetrical. What a difficult task it must have been for the builders to support the weight of the upper parts of the church while the pillars were inserted.

The font is the main feature of this area. It is 14th century and was moved from the South door to make way for the spiral stairway which leads to the gallery. The bowl of the font, which is octagonal, bears the name of I. HEDGE. This is most probably the name of the donor. The base is supported by three eagles and a horned creature. (15)

The roof was renewed in 1969 and the floor in 1970.

There are some more 'poppy' headed pews in this aisle. (16)

Tower

There are five bells hung in a medieval frame and there are 70 steps leading up to them. The bells are in poor condition and are not safe to ring.

During the re-ordering of 1993 a bricked up doorway was opened up to provide a fire exit. This suggests that there was a gallery within the tower at sometime in the past. (17)

The stained glass window at the West end of the church is in memory of a Captain Tonge of the 14th Light Dragoons. (18)

THE EXTERIOR

Tower

H Munro Cautley in his book, "Suffolk Churches and their Treasures", says of our tower: "The Magnificent 15th century tower has probably the finest flint and stone devices in the county".

High up on the SE buttress, just above the device of two chalices with the arms of St. Edmund between, is carved the name, Syr Wyllm Maundevyl. There was a rector of this name in 1488.

The tower was reroofed in 1980 and part of the parapets were rebuilt. Repointing was carried out on the upper stage at the same time.

A section of the old lead roof bears the name of churchwardens, Isaac Bugg and Daniel Pattle and is dated 1805. This piece of lead has been framed and placed in the meeting room. (19)

South Porch

This is decorated in keeping with the tower. Over the entrance we see the words from Psalm 100, "enter into his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise; be thankful unto him and bless his name". (20)

High up by the chancel door is a scratch dial, this is a form of sundial used to mark the times of the church services before mechanical clocks began to be more commonly used in the 15th century. The remains of the shadow casting metal rod, called a gnomon, is still visible. (21)

The outside of the South aisle at its East end has a pattern of flintwork different from the rest of the church. (22) There was at some time a window in this place which was filled in to make a solid wall behind the Gardener memorial.

By the South wall is a Churchyard Cross. It has a 14th century base and was restored in 1904. (23)

At the time of the re-ordering a porch was built on the North side of the church to provide a toilet and a boiler room. (24)

The churchyard was closed for burials in 1900.

Re-ordering of West end

This area provides a meeting place for various church activities. (25)

The main wood used in the construction is maple which has been treated with a polish based on beeswax and turpentine.

The pews lost in the West end have been compensated by the space for chairs in the gallery.

A noticeboard in the tower room states: "The Incorporated Society for Building and Churches granted £50, AD. 1872 towards enlarging and restoring this church upon the condition that all the seats be for the free use of the parishioners according to law, suitable provision being made for the use of poorer inhabitants". (26)

Fortunately this condition would not be necessary today.

Amplification System

In 1989 this was donated in memory of a former resident.

Floodlights

These were provided by a private effort within the village in 1994. They give a warm welcome to the village when approaching from the South West. These lights may be sponsored for anniversaries and, by so doing help with the maintenance of the church.

Our forefathers built this church and then maintained it with care and devotion. It is now our heritage and responsibility. Nevertheless, we remember that the church is not only flint and stone but, as the Bible says: - "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house -".