ST MARY THE VIRGIN
CRATFIELD
SUFFOLK

CHURCH GUIDE

St Mary's in the 1950s The cupola on the tower (lost in the 1960s) contained the clock bell.

Photograph by Edwin Smith.

ST MARY THE VIRGIN CRATFIELD SUFFOLK

An account of Cratfield church written in 1895 warns readers that '*Cratfield is about as unknown a place as one could well find*' and first-time visitors today must gain much the same impression; the lanes are single track, a main road is five miles away and the nearest motorway is in the next county.

However, it would not have seemed such a backwater to its medieval population. At the time of the Domesday survey East Anglia was the most densely populated area in the country and Suffolk was home to more freemen and individual freeholdings than all the other English counties together. Cratfield was particularly favoured; in the whole of Suffolk there were 29 'franklins' (a rank between yeoman and gentleman) and Cratfield boasted 5 of them. Based on population size alone it would not have justified a single one.

The land was fertile and produce was not only traded locally but sent through the network of rivers to the busy East Coast ports with their trade links to London and the continent. The region was prosperous and 16th century taxation records tell us this was still the case four hundred years later.

That level of medieval prosperity is what we have to thank for the extraordinary number of superb village churches in Suffolk today, four out of five of which are pre-Domesday foundations. St Mary's, Cratfield is one such.

The **earliest written record** we have is the Domesday Survey which tells us that in 1086 there was already a church here standing in 6 acres. A safe guess would be that it was a simple, single-cell building, perhaps of flint rubble, perhaps of timber, and almost certainly thatched. All of this early building, however, has either been replaced or incorporated into later work.

A WALK ROUND THE OUTSIDE STARTING AT THE PORCH

The earliest features we can safely date are the first two **windows in the south aisle**, one on either side of the porch, and the **priest's door** into the chancel. They are Decorated style of the 1300s, as are the **south aisle** itself, the **vestry** and the superb **clerestory** with its twenty windows that flood the nave with light.

One of the charming carved headstops on the aisle windows where the masons have indulged their whim with caricatures, perhaps of local worthies, the vicar or the church wardens?

One of the Mass dials

Walking east from the porch, you can just make out the **mass dials** on the upper stages of the next two buttresses. They are at a most unusual height and would have been quite inaccessible to anyone wanting to use them which suggests they may have been moved at a later date.

Most of the rest of what we see took shape between the later 1300s, when the Decorated style was evolving into the essentially English Perpendicular style, and the Reformation of the mid 1500s.

During that time a great deal of effort and money went into enlarging and beautifying parish churches generally and Cratfield was no exception: the **porch**, most of the aisle and chancel **windows**, the **tower** and the **north aisle** all belong to this period.

As you reach the chancel you will see around the priest's door some patches of **rendering** that have survived. They give an idea of how the building would have looked before the weather and the Victorians set about removing it. Originally flint rubble walls would have been rendered or limewashed or both, the flints would rarely have been exposed. As late as 1912 Kelly's Directory described Cratfield church as being of 'plastered flint'.

The exception would have been when, for decorative effect, flints were knapped (split) to show the sparkling black inner faces, as in the case of our clerestory with its alternating brick and knapped flint around the window heads.

You will notice that the self-colour of the fragments of rendering around the priest's door is a subtle, warm buff that comes from the use of lime and sand only, without cement. Around the corner on the east wall of the chancel you see, by contrast, the drab grey effect of modern cement rendering which was so often applied in the mistaken belief that it would cure dampness in the wall.

One benefit of a wall that has lost its plaster is that it allows us to read much of the history of its construction. We see, for example, the crude, early masonry of the **chancel south wall** where the builders used whatever stones were to hand and bedded them in large quantities of lime mortar. In contrast are the east and north **vestry walls**, of a later date, where the flints are carefully graded and coursed. We can also see in the vestry walls the filled **putlog holes** of the medieval builder's scaffolding and the line from which the wall was later raised to match the height of the north aisle. The small east **window** in the vestry is in the Decorated style.

Tucked in between the vestry and the north aisle is the little **Victorian outbuilding** that began life around 1879 as the vault for a patent coal-fired, warm air heating system. It later became the coke store for the big Tortoise stove that stood in the nave until the 1990s. Warming the church for a Sunday service meant whoever was on the 'firing squad' rota had to light and load the stove on Saturday night and then encourage it again on Sunday morning – it worked very well apparently. The outbuilding was converted into a disabled toilet and store in 2012.

We complete our walk around the outside of the church at the **tower**. It is a beautifully proportioned example and if you look carefully you will see a slight curved taper from the top of the buttresses to the underside of the battlements. This is a subtle aesthetic device, understood by builders in classical antiquity, and clearly also by medieval masons; it counteracts the tendency for long parallel verticals to appear disconcertingly top heavy.

The handsome dressed stone **battlements** with their blind panel and shield decoration and corner pinnacles were added in 1547, many years after the tower itself was completed. They were paid for with the proceeds from the sale of two censers, two chalices and a cross; a prudent move by the churchwardens to pre-empt their confiscation by the Crown during the reforming purges and ensure that their value remained to benefit the church.

The focus of the main approach from the road to the church is the splendid set piece around the west door. This was the ceremonial entrance for the many processions, led by the priest, which were an important part of the liturgy before the Reformation. They preceded the main Sunday Mass and took place on special feasts and saints' days.

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The West door.

May when blessings were sought for the harvest. At that time the tower floor was level through to the nave so the processions had no steps to negotiate.

In the mouldings around this great door are crowns and the emblems of the Virgin Mary, an M surmounted with a crown. The door itself is a Victorian replacement.
In the spandrels are unusually well-preserved carvings of a **woodwose**, a wild or green man, and the **dragon** he is fighting with his club and shield. There was a belief that this represented the struggle between mankind in a state of innocence battling with the temptations of the devil. There is an angel at the apex of the door arch to offer help from above and guardian lion stops to the hood mould. Above the door is the **west window** which has at the top of the arch a beautifully preserved, bearded figure of a man at prayer, perhaps a benefactor, and lions' head stops to the bottom of the hood mould. Less well preserved are the **niches** on either side of the doorway which would have contained statues of saints, possibly St Edmund, the 9th century king of East Anglia, and St Thomas of Canterbury, the two saints to whom the chantry altars were dedicated. There are none of the frivolities in this ensemble which the masons permitted themselves around the south aisle windows.

The woodwose battling with the dragon.

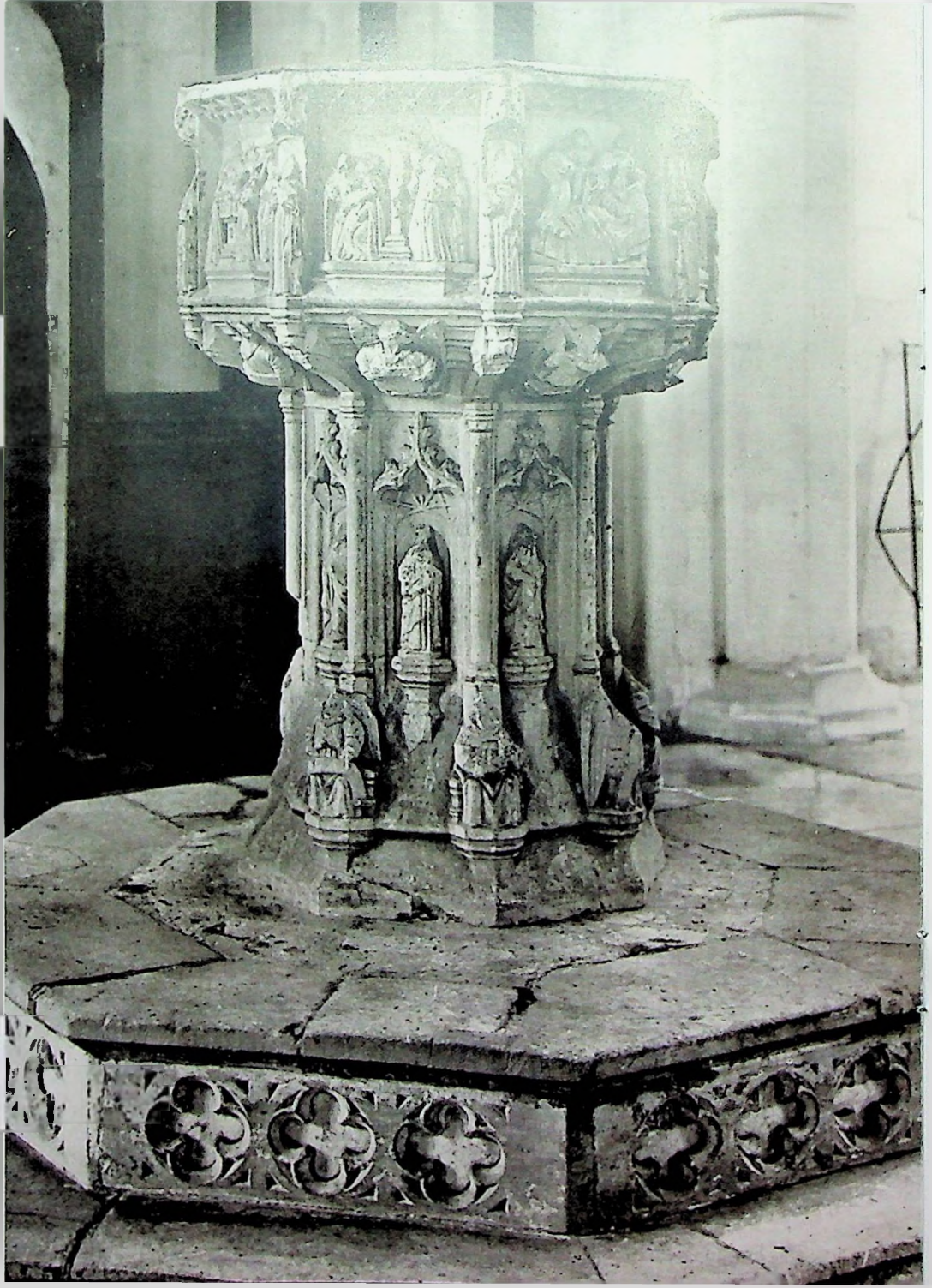
CHURCH INTERIOR

Entering the church through the **south porch** it is worth reflecting that medieval porches were much more than just protection from the weather; the preliminary parts of the baptism and marriage ceremonies were conducted there. Both Edward I and Charles I are reported to have been married in a church porch. The churching of women after childbirth took place in the porch and legal agreements were concluded there. It was, and still is, an official site for the display of certain public notices.

Once inside the church the first and most striking feature is our famous **seven-sacrament font**. It is estimated that there are around forty fonts of this magnificent design, only two of which are outside Norfolk and Suffolk. Munro Cautley's view is that the Cratfield font is the most beautiful of them all.

Its date is late 1400s and the carving of the figures, although sadly mutilated, can still be seen to be of extraordinary quality. Around the base are seated figures at the feet of the supporting columns between which are saints in canopied niches surmounted by angels. On the panels of the bowl are scenes of the seven sacraments. Starting from the east panel and going clockwise these are; extreme unction, Crucifixion, baptism, confirmation, then two blank panels which would have been penance and Mass, the most offensive sacraments to zealous reformers, and finally ordination and marriage. Originally the whole font would have been brightly coloured and traces of the original paint can still just be seen.

The disfigurement of the font raises some interesting questions. Most of the destruction of **'superstitious' images,** paintings, carvings, statuary, painted glass etc., is laid at the door of Cromwell's Parliamentary Visitor, William Dowsing, a Laxfield man, who with his deputies was responsible for a very great deal of it. However, the picture would seem to have been rather more complicated than at first appears. In many parishes his efforts were profoundly unwelcome, to the extent that some church wardens faced fines rather than assist him in his work, but in other instances images were happily destroyed by the villagers themselves. According to his records it appears



The Seven-Sacrament Font '... the most beautiful in the kingdom'.

that Dowsing only managed to visit about one third of the churches in the county whereas few churches escaped damage in some degree.

When he visited Cratfield in 1643 his diary records that *'my deputy broke down divers pictures and I have done the rest'* and the accounts for that year show that the crosses were taken down from the gables and the stained glass removed from the windows. It would seem reasonable, therefore, to assume that Dowsing was also responsible for the damage to the font. However, at that time the font was no longer in the church; it had been removed in 1569 by the previous vicar, Francis Eland, in direct defiance of Queen Elizabeth's edict, and was not returned until after the death of his son Gabriel in 1652. Between them the Elands, father and son, were vicars of Cratfield for 86 years and both were enthusiastic reformers. It seems, therefore, that the mutilation of the font occurred whilst it was out of the church and in their care.

The nature of the damage raises a further question; the penance and the Mass panels have been carefully and quite skilfully removed, perhaps by someone who cared for the font but who found those two sacraments particularly offensive, whereas the rest of the carvings have suffered the clumsy violence of hastier vandals. Did the font then suffer more than once at the hands of different iconoclasts?

Such a beautiful object would clearly have been very expensive and it was acquired at a time when the church was being embellished in so many other ways. During the 1400s and early 1500s ten large new windows were installed, the organ was bought and built into a new gallery, the north aisle, the tower, the porch and the vestry were all built or enlarged, and much else besides. It was a remarkable achievement for a village as small as Cratfield with no resident rich grandee to help.

Apart from legacies and donations a popular method of fund raising was through **'church ales'**, festivities arranged by the churchwardens at which they sold their home-brewed ale to pay for work on the church or relief for the poor. In 1490 alone St Mary's threw five such parties, apparently to good effect.

Behind the font is the entrance to the tower, through the splendid **tower arch**. For the first several centuries of its life it would have been completely open to provide a clear processional route into the church from the west door and allow the light from the west window into the nave. However, at some stage, perhaps in the eighteenth century, when processions were no longer part of the liturgy but music in churches was enjoying a revival, the arch was filled in and a musicians gallery built onto it. It was gratifying, therefore, in 2011, to be able to remove that infilling – the gallery had already been removed in 1879 - and for the first time in several hundred years enjoy the view of the great west window from the nave, as was originally intended.

In the bottom of the tower is a rare treasure, always known as the **clock case,** but which has recently been identified as of much greater significance. It is built out of oak and consists of a raised platform with a panelled balustrade surround and two large, curved, supporting wall brackets. A later, rather crude cupboard has been built below it which was not part of the original structure.

Until the 1960s the platform contained the mechanism of the church clock (now on display at the back of the church) which struck the hours on a bell on the tower roof. However, there were some puzzling anomalies which suggested that the structure was not in its original position and that it was not originally designed for a clock.

The medieval organ gallery with the roof and cupboard that were added later when it became a clock case.

After examining all the evidence the archaeologists concluded that our 'clock case', the construction of which pre-dates the first mention of a clock by fifty years, was the **medieval organ gallery,** or organ perke, built to house the organ that was acquired in 1497. Medieval organs were much smaller than modern instruments and would have fitted happily within this gallery.

Its original location would have been in the chancel, probably on the wall over the vestry door, where it would have accompanied the clergy in singing their daily offices. Although any evidence of fixings is now hidden behind the plaster there are two churches in the diocese, Covehithe and Walberswick, which have bare, ruinous, chancel walls in which sockets can be seen for brackets in similar positions.

When the liturgy was changed at the Reformation organs no longer had a role and the records show that our organ was dismantled in 1576. It seems that by a stroke of good fortune the gallery was saved from destruction by then being moved into the tower and adapted to house the clock. The fact that it partially blocked the west door was not an issue as processions had been banned since 1547.

The person who really benefited from this move, and who probably initiated it, was whoever was responsible for winding the clock. Priest or sexton, he would have been very happy that with the clock at the lower level he no longer had to climb a thirty-foot ladder several times a week to wind it. That happy piece of recycling means that we now believe we have the only surviving medieval organ gallery in the country.

A computer image by Tim Howson of how the chancel screen might have looked after the removal of the Rood and statues.

We have seen that the dedication of the church, and therefore of the **main altar**, was to St Mary the Virgin. However, we also know there were two other altars in the church and additional priests to serve them. These were guild or **chantry altars** dedicated to **St Thomas of Canterbury** and **St Edmund** respectively.

At the east end of the **north aisle** the position of one of those altars can clearly be seen. There is a recess in the north wall that was originally the **aumbry**, the cupboard for storing the sacred vessels, which has been rather charmingly adopted by two cherubs as part of Sarah Mynne's memorial of 1724, perhaps adding a little extra sanctity for Mrs Mynne in the process. Opposite this is the **piscina** where the chalice was rinsed after the Mass. Above that is the stone bracket on which would have stood the figure of the saint to whom the altar was dedicated.

The importance of this corner as a chapel is endorsed by there being two large, three-light, **Perpendicular windows** serving it while the adjacent windows are the older two-light form.

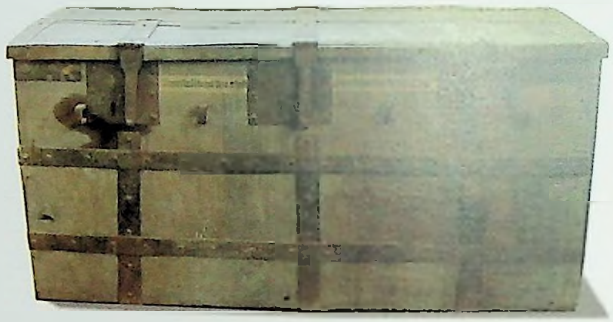
This grouping in the north aisle corner was almost certainly repeated in the south aisle to accommodate the other chantry altar. David Elisha Davy who visited the church in 1807 records that to have been the case and notes that the ceilings over the areas of both chapels were 'wainscotted' or panelled, further confirmation of their status. Any traces of an aumbry or a piscina in the south aisle are now hidden by plaster.

Also at this end of the south aisle is the doorway to the **rood stair** (now blocked)

Sarah Mynne's memorial over the chantry chapel aumbry.

and above it, by the chancel arch, the opening where the stair emerged onto the **rood loft** which was on top of the **chancel screen** (what remains of our chancel screen is now in the vestry).

The purpose of pre-Reformation chancel screens was to separate the nave of the church with its many secular activities from the sacred area of the chancel, exclusive to the clergy, where the holy rites of the Mass were performed. On the rood loft were brightly painted, life-size statues of the **Rood** or crucifixion, with Mary and John on either side. Lit by candles these would have dominated a dim, medieval interior.



The parish chest.

After the Reformation screens suffered varying degrees of destruction. Rood lofts were required to be taken down by an order of 1561 and the rood and the statues of Mary and John were always to be removed. Treatment of the rest of the screen, however, varied from parish to parish; in some cases more was removed while in others much was retained. When the lower panels were retained any painted images were invariably mutilated. However, the liturgical swings after the Reformation were such that damaged screens sometimes had parts restored; Cratfield screen, for instance, had new doors fitted in 1639 when Archbishop Laud was encouraging a return to some pre-Reformation rituals.

Cratfield screen is a rather battered relic, showing all the scars of just such a chequered history. In 1832, when David Elisha Davy visited Cratfield for the second time, it was still relatively complete and in position in the chancel arch, missing only its loft and statues. However, by 1875 only the bottom half remained while the upper part had been sawn off, shortened and placed in the musicians' gallery at the west end. During the Victorian restorations the separated fragments of the screen were roughly reassembled and it spent the next stage of its life standing against the wall at the west end of the nave. It was finally relocated into the vestry in 2011 when the tower arch was re-opened.

Standing in the north aisle is the massive oak **parish chest**. The inscription on it records the name of the donor, Roger Walsh, who died in 1475. The chest was the medieval archive; it was used to store all the vital parish and church records so security was important. On our chest there is provision for three padlocks, the keys to which would be held by different individuals, probably the vicar and two churchwardens, all of whom would have to be present for the chest to be opened. Cratfield is well known to have remarkably extensive records, going back to the late 1400s, now deposited in the Ipswich Records Office.

By the early **Victorian period** the church was in a poor state. In 1846 when Rev Suckling published his survey of Suffolk antiquities he described St Mary's as *'lofty and admirably proportioned'* but he regretted *'the dirt and neglect which so miserably contrast its present condition with its ancient splendour.'*

Repairs were badly needed and in 1875 the diocesan architect, Richard M Phipson, was appointed to put together a

Francis Eland's memorial tablet.

comprehensive programme of repair and restoration. The works would take five years to complete and for most of that time the church was closed. The nave and aisle roofs were removed altogether and internal work then progressed as funds became available. Overall the work was less heavy-handed than much Victorian 'restoration'.

The **nave roof** was replaced largely as the original, the architect requiring that nothing was renewed unless absolutely necessary. Its structural form is simple with heavy tie beams on alternate arch-braced principals with the soffite panelled in rectangles with foliate corner decorations. The roof was originally covered in lead which was removed and replaced with *'the best Ashton & Green's green slates'*.

The **south aisle roof** was obviously in a more derelict condition and was replaced entirely with pitch pine and re-leaded.

Probably the most characteristically Victorian work was the replacement of the old flooring pamments and ledger slabs with Mintons encaustic tiles. The memorial slabs were moved to the west end behind the font but for some reason an exception was made for Francis Eland's little tablet which was allowed to remain in the floor just below the chancel step. It is a simple, home-made affair appropriate perhaps for the austere reformer who removed the font, and with whom the vicar at the time, Alexander Griffiths, was probably in sympathy. Like Eland, Griffiths was a staunch Protestant who, for example, took issue with his architect over a reference to the 'altar table' rather than the 'communion table'.

The **musicians gallery** at the west end, which contained the organ and the upper part of the chancel screen, was removed and, with the assistance of the Church Buildings Society, the box pews in the nave were replaced with the present pitch pine benches.

The original **Pulpit** was constructed in 1617. It was combined with a reading desk in 1638 and, with the clerk's desk below it, comprised the substantial three-decker shown in Phipson's survey drawing of 1879 (displayed on the wall at the back of the church). It was dismantled as part of the alterations and fragments of it were incorporated in the construction of the present pulpit in 1889. Of the same date is the finely carved oak **lectern**.

The **pews** in the aisles are 17th century originals with delightfully varied, rustic

versions of poppy head finials. In the back of the north aisle four 15th century bench ends have been modified and re-used.

There was much recycling of other elements during this work; the back panel from the original pulpit, dated 1617, was built into a new **credence table** and **15th century pew ends** were incorporated into the new choir stalls and the priest's stall in the chancel.

The walls of the chancel date from the 1300s. The **chancel roof**, which is particularly handsome, is double-framed with arch braced principal rafters and collars and a triple-embattled cornice. It is probably 15th century. Three of the wall posts have been shortened to accommodate the later insertion of the large Perpendicular windows. The windows have fragments of medieval glass added during the Victorian restoration. The panel in the south window showing Christ carrying the cross is believed to be continental eighteenth century work.

The interior arrangement of the chancel as we now see it is the result of Phipson's re-ordering. Despite some peevish exchanges with Rev Griffiths, Phipson succeeded in having the chancel floor raised, fortunately by only one step rather than the two recommended by the Cambridge Camden Society which would have made access to the vestry even more difficult. The altar was raised by a further step and the memorial slabs which previously enjoyed a privileged position in the chancel were moved into the vestry.

17th century poppy-head finials.

View of the West end and 15th century century pew ends in the chancel.

Vestry door.

In the north wall of the chancel is the entrance to the **vestry** with its original oak door and stone surround decorated with fleurons, a crown and two heads, probably 1400s.

The **reredos**, a fine piece in stone and marble, dated 1889, was the gift of Rev Proby Cautley, a previous vicar, in memory of his mother.

The **altar table** is a replica of the Jacobean original which was stolen from the church in 1978.

Most of the **memorial slabs** moved from the chancel into the vestry commemorate the deaths of infants. They show, for example, that Anne Freston, wife of the vicar, lost six children between 1726 and 1736. Only two of her children survived. Such awful levels of infant mortality would not seem to have been unusual at the time; Queen Anne, who no doubt had the best medical attention available, lost eighteen children stillborn or in infancy.

A detail around the vestry door.

The floor of the vestry is raised to form a plinth at its east end and there is a small Decorated style window above it. There is also an early report of an aumbry in the north wall, although there is no evidence of it now. Nevertheless, the room has the air of a chapel about it and that may have been what led to the suggestion in Alfred Suckling's History and Antiquities of the County of Suffolk of 1846 that it was the guild chapel of St Thomas, an assumption perpetuated by several later commentators.

There can be no certainty either way but it seems unlikely that a chapel serving the lay membership of a guild should be sited where the only access to it is through the chancel. Furthermore, the records refer to only two chantry altars and they have already been accounted for in the north and south aisles. It seems likely, therefore, that our vestry was always a vestry.

In the vestry are two of the three lecterns bought in 1633 to display Foxe's Book of Martyrs. Foxe gives a vivid account of the martyrdom in 1557 of John Noyes, a shoemaker, who was burnt as a heretic in the neighbouring village of Laxfield during the Marian purges.

Also in the vestry is the **clock bell** which was originally hung in a **cupola** on the roof of the tower. The cupola was lost when the roof was reconstructed in the 1960s. The bell, donated by a churchwarden, William Alleys, in 1490, is inscribed "VIRGINIS EGREGIE VOCOR MARIE" (I am the bell of the Glorious Virgin Mary) PREY FOR THE SOLE OF WILLIAM ALEYS". It is thought to be the original sacring or **sanctus bell** which before the Reformation was rung during the celebration of the Mass.

In the tower is a ring of six **bells**. Records show that there were four in 1500, a fifth was added in 1593 and in 1640 the oak frame was substantially renewed and adapted to take the sixth bell that completes the ring we have today. The oldest of the present bells is from 1585 and was cast, or re-cast, on site by William Tapsel, an itinerant bell caster. From 1593 the Brend family of Norwich provided four bells the last of which was the tenor of 17.5 cwts cast in 1637. The youngest, and the lightest at 6.5cwts, is the treble cast by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 1781.

Sadly, by the 1960s, the condition of the bell frame and the stability of the tower had deteriorated to the point where regular full-circle ringing was no longer safe. However, in order that the bells might still be heard, albeit somewhat less effectively, a chiming frame was fitted which enables all six bells to be sounded by one ringer.

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Looking at a medieval church like Cratfield we can marvel at the generations of skill and passion which created it. Looking into its history, however, reveals an even more remarkable picture; for a thousand years this village church has suffered repeated cycles of damage and neglect. We know what happened to Christian meeting places at the hands of the Danes and the pagan Saxons but the following centuries were in their own way scarcely less turbulent; from the catastrophe of the Black Death and the social upheavals that followed it, through the plunder and reversals of the Reformation, the zealots and vandalism of the Civil War, the cynicism and neglect of the Enlightenment and the mixed blessings of the Victorian enthusiasts, it has not only survived them all but has emerged and flourished as the remarkable work of art and testament to the faith of a community that it is today.

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