

ST MARTIN'S CHURCH



NACTON, SUFFOLK

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## NACTON

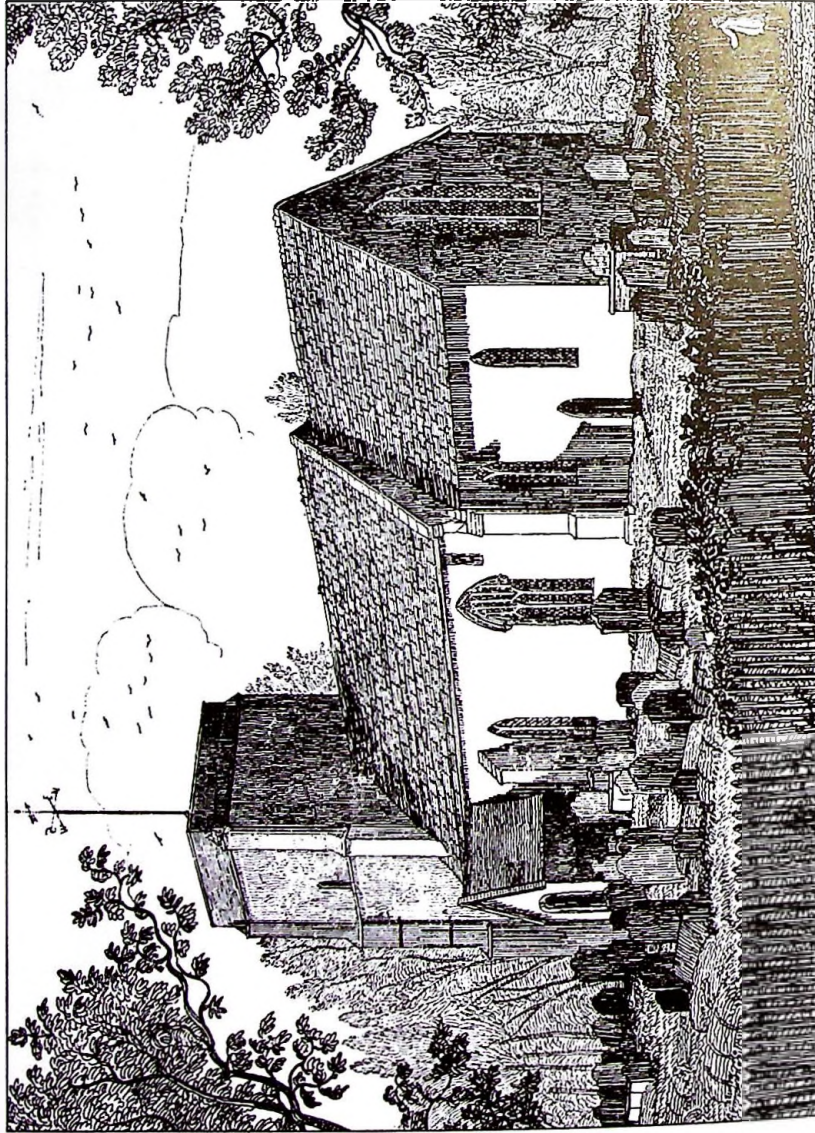
In preparing this booklet I acknowledge the work done by Roy Tricker for his History and Guide of 1983, the drawing of the font by Angela Pratt, the WI Churchyard Survey, 1981, assistance from the County Record Office and from several local residents in helping to get the record as accurate as possible and lastly to Jacqueline March of Serendipity Business Services and Bob Paine of Portman Press for the final presentation.

*Michael Thuell*  
*Nacton 1997*

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*Cover picture*  
*The 15th century font*  
*(restored and re-cut 19th century)*



Nacton Church (Drawn and etched by Henry Davy, 1839)

## Nacton and St Martin's Church

Although isolated from the main body of the village St Martin's is at the heart of a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Set in a well-wooded landscape the church provides an oasis of tranquillity. From the churchyard there are attractive views towards the village where homes old and new nestle amid the peaceful surroundings of the trees. This is not a picture-postcard village of tourist coaches and clicking cameras but it is a warm, lived-in village of kind and friendly people. Beyond the church are the schools, the shop, the village hall, the sports field, the farm and other smaller businesses, all making for a lively community, but oldest by far is St Martin's church where people of Nacton have met in Christian worship for 800 years. Architecturally St Martin's cannot in any way compare with the great wool churches of Suffolk but, as Roy Tricker so admirably put it in his earlier guide to St Martin's, 'The cream-coloured rendering, together with the tiled roofs and the good timberwork in the porch and dormer window, present a homely and welcoming appearance.'

Today St Martin's continues perhaps more vigorous than ever. Although a parish of only 560 people Nacton benefits from its proximity to some of east Suffolk's major centres of employment, in Ipswich, Martlesham and Felixstowe. A number of marriages take place in the church each year and over the past ten years there have been 60 baptisms. The average weekly attendance is close to 50 but on the occasions which attract our largest congregations, on Easter Sunday, Harvest Festival, Remembrance Sunday, Christmas Day and at the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, it is sometimes difficult to accommodate everyone in the 240 available seats. Attendance at St Martin's is further increased as the church is regularly used by Orwell Park School, both for its own services and in joining the local congregation. This flourishing situation is maintained by the willing contribution of a large number of people - the organist and members of the choir, those who assist at services by reading and leading the prayers, the cleaners, flower arrangers and coffee makers, the Sunday School teachers, the churchyard workers, the members of the Parochial Church Council, the clergy and lay readers.

## The Mediaeval Building

It is difficult to date the origins of St Martin's precisely. The earliest visible feature is the single lancet window in the north wall of the chancel, now enclosed to the north by the vestry. This window dates from the late 12th or early 13th century, indicating that the chancel has stood on this site for about 800 years. The original nave and the tower may be of similar date, although it is possible that they were rebuilt in the late 14th or early 15th century. Whilst the south wall of the chancel has a single early 14th century window and a double Y traceried window of the same date, the tower and the nave have windows in the perpendicular style of the late 14th to 15th century. However, most of what can be seen today in chancel and nave is the result of later reconstruction and development.

The tower, as a whole, is one of the oldest surviving parts of the church. Its perpendicular window is the largest in the building. At one time the tower was probably higher than its present 45 feet and may have been used in the mediaeval period for purposes of defence. The facts that it is buttressed and that the only access is by way of a small doorway several feet above ground level, requiring a ladder to reach it, support this theory. The small single windows in the present top stage once gave light to the ringing chamber, above which was the belfry stage and possibly an embattled parapet. A stone in the west face bears the date 1788, which may have been the year in which the upper stage was removed and the present parapet of white Suffolk brick erected. Above the west window is a blocked niche, for a statue, with the remains of its pinnacled canopy. The tiny window in the south side of the west face gives light to the spiral stairway, which is in this corner of the tower. The tower is built largely of local septaria, which is not a hard-wearing building material. A major modern problem with the tower has been the break-up of parts of the septaria behind the cracked external rendering. Possibly, weathering of the upper sections of septaria in the 18th century was a reason for removing the upper mediaeval stage.

For several centuries, from about 1400 to 1800, there seem to have been few changes to the simple structure of St Martin's, a church of

chancel, nave and tower, little more than half its present size, providing seating for about 100 people. To the people of the time the most obvious changes would have been to the internal appearance of the church as it passed through the stages from being part of the international Catholic Church to becoming part of the national Church of England, involving the various upheavals in style and ceremony of the Henrician and Edwardian Reformations of the mid-16th century, the subsequent Marian Reaction, and the iconoclastic puritanism of the mid-17th century. Although a small parish like Nacton may have been less affected than some areas, much of Suffolk was, nevertheless, subject to considerable puritanical, protestant influences through its comparative proximity to London and its trading links with northern Europe.

By the 1800s more information is available about the appearance and condition of St Martin's, from the fascinatingly brief entry in the diary of Sir Philip Broke, of Broke Hall, for the 2nd July, 1820, 'No church - untiled', to the 1839 drawing of the exterior of the church by Henry Davy, shown on page 4. One of the fuller surviving written records comes from David Elisha Davy who visited the church in 1828. He noted that the nave and chancel had plaster ceilings. On the east wall, above the communion table, were framed tables of the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Commandments. Towards the west end of the chancel, on the south side, stood the manorial pew, enclosed on three sides and having its own low roof. It was made of deal and painted to resemble wainscot. The nave was filled with neat and uniform box pews, painted white, as was also the hexagonal pulpit which stood on the north side. Finally, he noted that the Royal Arms hung on the south wall and above the chancel arch were three hatchments of the Vernon family.

In 1859 the plaster ceilings were removed and the church was given new roofs. The box pews were taken out and the present seating replaced them. In 1870 the Broke Chapel was built, on the south side of the nave, and at the same time two dormer windows were placed in the nave roof to give more light.



*The Chancel*

## The Work of 1906-08

In 1906 St Martin's was closed while major restoration and new building work took place. A temporary church was established for Nacton in the granary at Home Farm and dedicated to St Barnabas. Between 1906 and 1908 St Martin's was virtually rebuilt, so that today more early 20th century Edwardian work can be seen than mediaeval. However, this work was done to such a high standard that it is among the best Edwardian church architecture in Suffolk.

The family mausoleum of the Vernons, to the north of the nave, which stood over their vault, had first to be taken down and the north aisle was then constructed. The new work was continued eastwards to include the organ chamber and the vestry. The entire church was re-roofed. A new south porch was built and the Broke chapel was restored. The western dormer window of 1870 was removed and its eastern counterpart was refashioned. The chancel was given a new east window. The church was completely re-floored and the chancel refurnished. The architect was Charles Hodgson Fowler, well-known for his restoration work at Durham and Rochester cathedrals. The clerk of works was William Ash and much of the building work was done by staff of the Orwell Park Estate.

The total cost of the project was £2,657. When the final accounts had been presented Fowler wrote, 'I am surprised at the small cost of the work - you certainly have got a great deal for the money - it would have been nearer £3,000, if you had had a builder'. Half of the entire cost was met by Ernest George Pretymann, MP, of Orwell Park. Apart from making personal donations he paid all the wages, totalling £850. Lord de Saumarez and members of his family, descendants of Admiral Sir Philip Broke, and then still in ownership of Broke Hall, were also substantial donors. The remainder of the money came from donations and local fund-raising. Apart from wages the largest items of expenditure were £474 for bath stone, £265 for the choir stalls and porch, £161 for timber and £134 for lead. - Ninety years later, in 1997, the cost of restoring the mediaeval tower is put at £120,000!

## Fixtures and Furnishings

Entry to the church is through the late 14th century SOUTH DOORWAY, carved into the sides of which are some graffiti of considerable age, including a mediaeval pilgrim's cross. The DOOR itself is at least 400 years old. Inside the doorway, to the right, is a HOLY WATER STOUP, in the wall, which people used as an act of symbolic purification upon entering the sacred building, by dipping their fingers into the water and making the sign of the cross. To the left, the table is in memory of George Herbert Smith, vergier and sexton for 24 years.

The immediate impression which one gets on entering the church may depend upon various factors, not least the light factor. Perhaps ideally the interior should be viewed on a bright afternoon in summer when south-westerly light floods in through the windows. On a dull day in winter, without the lights on, first impressions may be less favourable. However, in whatever circumstances, it takes only a moment to notice that this is a well-furnished and cared for church. Modern features such as the nave CARPET, the colourful, hand-worked HASSOCKS and the FLOWERS are the most obvious indications of this.

The main features of the nave are the roof, stonework and pews. The most interesting feature of R M Phipson's PEWS of 1859 are their poppy-head ends. The tapestry HASSOCKS were worked by ladies of the village in the 1970s. Above, C H Fowler's ROOF is of memel and redwood with carved bosses, all from the early 20th century re-building, but preserved from the 15th century is the oak CORNICE at the top of the wall on the south side. The new north aisle is divided from the nave by a noble four-bay ARCADE of Bath stone, its arches resting upon quatrefoil piers. Of a uniform style is the CHANCEL ARCH, also of 1906-08, which replaced a mediaeval arch between nave and chancel which was only seven feet in width. The little birds on the shields which flank the chancel arch are probably martins, referring to the church's patron saint. They were copied from the remains of a fresco discovered on one of the walls during the restoration. At the same time some rosary beads and a coin from the reign of Edward III, 1327-77, were found. Other mediaeval reminders in the nave are the two plain NICHES, for statues, in the eastern splay of the south-east nave window and the trefoil headed PISCINA, in the wall

nearby, indicating that there was a side altar here.

Looking from nave to chancel it is immediately apparent that the CHANCEL 'WEEPS', or inclines, a few degrees to the north. Some authorities maintain that this symbolises the head of Jesus inclining on the Cross, while others argue that it is merely caused by the nature of the site or because chancel and nave are of different periods. The CHANCEL is furnished mostly by Bowman of Stamford to designs of C H Fowler. The PANELLING around the sanctuary walls incorporates 18th century woodwork from the former Broke family pew. In the north wall of the sanctuary can be seen the deep splay of the Early English LANCET WINDOW. On the south side are a PISCINA and a WINDOWSILL SEDILIA, which have been lined with wood. Into the piscina drain was poured the water from the washing of the priest's hands at Mass and the sedilia provided seats for the clergy during certain parts of the service. In the top of the double window in the south wall is a small fragment of MEDIAEVAL GLASS, consisting of a shield bearing the instruments of the Passion.

To the west of the nave can be seen the TOWER ARCH. High above it is a SANCTUS BELL WINDOW through which the ringer of a bell at the Sanctus and the Consecration during Mass could see what was taking place at the altar. The DOORWAY TO THE BELFRY STAIRWAY, previously mentioned, can be seen in the south-west corner. Until 1906 there was a wooden gallery within the ground floor section of the tower. The tower has five BELLS. They are situated on the roof of the tower, under a cover inside the parapet, in a fixed position so that they can be struck but not pealed. The oldest bell, a tenor, was cast by Miles Graye in 1685 but the others were recast by Gillett & Johnson in 1898, although one preserves an inscription that Darbie of Ipswich originally made it in 1662.

The FONT was restored and re-cut in the 19th century, but it is of 15th century origin and a fine example of its type. Around its octagonal bowl are the emblems of the four Evangelists alternating with angels bearing shields. These shields display the instruments of the Passion, the emblem of the Trinity, the cross of St George and the IHC monogram of Christ's name. Beneath the bowl are angels with wings outstretched and a band of fleurons with foliage. Round the stem are lions and wodewoses, or wild men, some with clubs lowered, perhaps representing regenerate man, others with clubs raised representing unregenerate man.

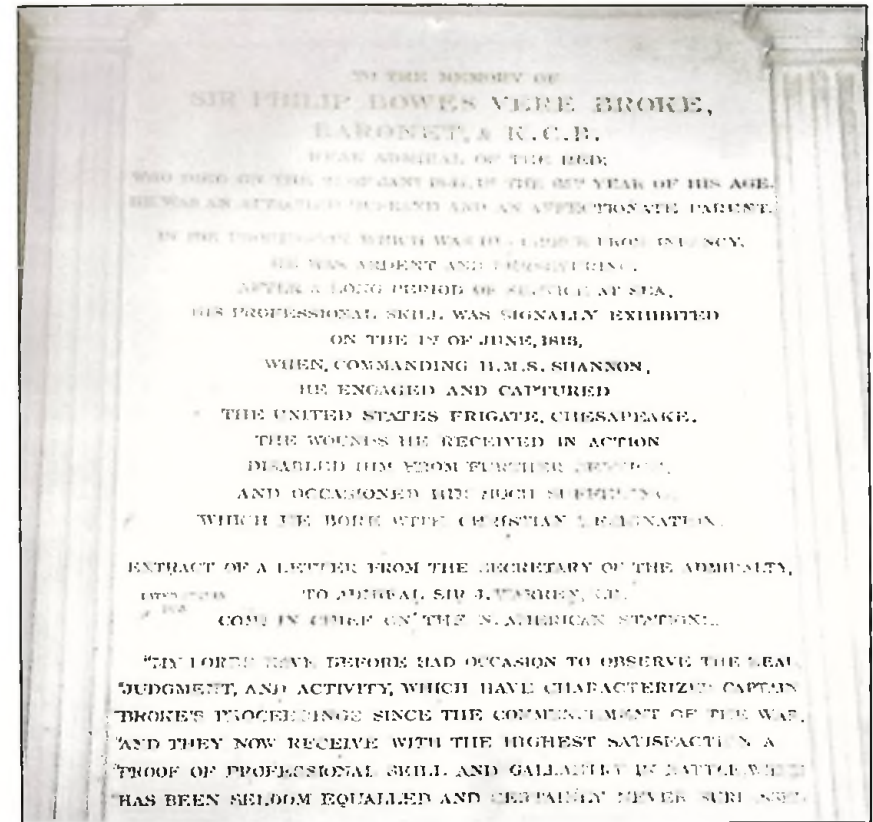
In the Broke Chapel can be seen the Stuart COMMUNION TABLE, which formerly stood, as the church's communion table, in the chancel. The BENCH ENDS in the Chapel are worthy of notice. One shows the pelican, feeding her young with blood from her own breast, a Christian theme symbolic of Christ's sacrifice. On the west wall are the BROKE ARMS, dated 1642, together with the various BROKE MEMORIALS, which are described elsewhere, the Chapel itself being built over the vault containing the remains of members of the Broke family. Also of interest, in the Broke Chapel, can be seen the 1965 Women's Institute Our Village book and the 1977 Jubilee books in the cabinet made by Samuel Thomas of Slip Cottage, Nacton.

## Memorials

St Martin's is notable for its memorials to two famous Admirals and members of their families. The Vernon memorials are in the north aisle, beneath which is the Vernon vault. These memorials are to Admiral Edward Vernon, of Orwell Park, famous for his seizure of Porto Bello in 1739, during the Anglo-Spanish War, popularly known as the War of Jenkins' Ear, and to his wife Sarah, together with Admiral Vernon's heir, his nephew Francis Vernon, Viscount Orwell and Earl of Shipbrook, and his widow Alice.

In the Broke Chapel and on the south wall of the nave are the Broke memorials. The leading member of this family was Admiral Sir Philip Broke, of Broke Hall, who is most famous for his victory in the engagement between the Shannon and the Chesapeake in the Anglo-American War, 1812-14. The memorial to Admiral Broke and his wife, Sarah, shown on page 13, recounts his exploits. Other memorials include those to Admiral Broke's parents, to his brother, Major-General Sir Charles Broke Vere, who was with the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsular War and at Waterloo, and to his nephew, Admiral Sir George Broke-Middleton, who had the Broke memorial window installed.

In the chancel there are two memorials, one to the Reverend Harry Edgell, Nacton's longest serving rector, from 1835-94, and another to his son, Captain Henry Edgell. Nearby another long-serving rector is



*Memorial to Sir Philip Broke*

remembered, the Reverend J D Hepple, who was at Nacton between 1923-49. By the south door a tablet honours the eight men of Nacton who died in the Second World War. The First World War Memorial, listing the names of 18 local men, can be seen in the village. In the chancel floor is a black ledger slab, with a fine coat of arms, to Horace Pine, who died in 1770, and in the nave floor is a brass shield and inscription to Richard Fastolf, who died in 1479 and was a member of the family of mediaeval lords of the manor of Nacton, but this brass is now covered by carpet. A final memorial, at the east end of the north aisle, is to Thomas Hewett, MD, and his son the Reverend Thomas Hewett, rector of Bucklesham in the mid 18th century. The inscription is worthy of notice.

## Memorial Windows

Of the twelve principal windows in the church nine were either commissioned or restored in memory of local people.

In the chancel the east window is by Kempe and was made in 1907. It is in memory of the Reverend Harry Edgell and his wife Jane. It shows the Crucifixion, with on one side the Virgin Mary and on the other St John. Below is the pelican in her piety and the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. The single window in the south wall shows two post-Resurrection scenes and is dated 1863, in memory of F L Cocksedge, DD. The double window of clear glass was restored in memory of Emily and John Gull, two well-loved participants in church and village life over many years.

The only memorial window in the nave is to the Broke family. Made by Clayton and Bell in 1863 it shows the coats of arms and marriage alliances of the family. On the brass sill below is a list of members of the family from the 16th century. It concludes with the inscription that it was given by Sir George Broke-Middleton in thanksgiving for the peaceful enjoyment of Broke Hall by his family for 340 years. The west window in the tower was restored in 1991 as a gift from Gillian Bence-Jones, and her son Nicholas Bence-Jones, in memory of her father, George Pretyman, the owner of the Orwell Park Estate for nearly 50 years. A further part of this memorial is the painting by Hamish Moyle.

The four windows in the north aisle all have particular dedications. The west window shows the Holy Family, the Wise Men and the Shepherds. It was placed by her children in memory of Inez Pringle, who lived at Broke Hall from 1899-1911. The window to the left, in the north wall, is in memory of the Rt Hon E G Pretyman PC, of Orwell Park, and given by his wife and children. Its three sections show the Sower, the Good Shepherd and St Martin. In many ways it is the most striking window in the church for the clarity of the figures and their colour against a plain glass background. The centre window is in memory of Herbert Pretyman, 1861-91, Lieutenant, Grenadier Guards. Also by Clayton and Bell, it depicts St George, together with the Archangels St Michael and St Raphael, with an additional thanksgiving for the safe return from the War, in 1918, of George and Herbert Pretyman. Finally, the window to the right is in memory of Miriam Edith Watson, the wife of the rector at that time, 1905, dedicated by the parishioners.

## The Churchyard

The main way into the churchyard is through the gate from the road in the east boundary wall. The gate was made by Stephen Cook, a local resident and carpenter, in loving memory of his son Roy, 1946-76. The step up to this gate is a slab of Purbeck marble which came from the floor of the church. A careful inspection of the slab reveals some brass studs which formerly attached a monumental brass to it.

On entering into the churchyard the Wildlife Sanctuary notice is immediately apparent. This states that many of the plants that flourish here are now rare in Suffolk. For insects, birds and small mammals this is a haven. Because of changes in our countryside areas like this are valuable and should be cherished. For this reason the churchyard is managed in a way that benefits wildlife. You will find areas left unmown until the plants have seeded and provided food and shelter for the insects and birds that depend on them. The grass is cut and raked off into piles which in themselves form important sheltering-places for many creatures. Management advice has been given by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

On the right as you approach the south door are the railings marking the entrance to the Broke vault. On the north side of the church was the Vernon mausoleum. This stood over the Vernon vault and was described as 'in the modern Italian style, open on the west side, having palisades, with an entrance at the centre.' It was demolished when the north aisle was built and the entrance to the vault is now marked by a ledger-stone bearing the names of those interred in the vault.

Of the memorials within the churchyard the most outstanding is the tall cross of Portland stone on the northern section of the western perimeter close to Orwell Park. This marks the graves of members of the Pretyman family, of Orwell Park.

Alongside the resting places of these famous members of the Vernon, Broke and Pretyman families lie, in vastly greater numbers, the less well-known, but thanks to the work of a dedicated group of members of the Nacton Women's Institute, in 1981, the inscription on every gravestone has been recorded. From the time of the earliest surviving stone in 1700 there is a record of many of the people who lived and worked in Nacton

over nearly 300 years. Details of their names, ages, occupations, together with personal inscriptions, give us a wealth of information. This record is available for inspection on request and contains full details of 310 gravestones.

Over the last ten years there have only been fourteen burials in Nacton churchyard but the new north section contains an area for the burial of cremation ashes. In this connection an interesting footnote is of one notable absentee from the churchyard. The famous Colonel Tomline, of Orwell Park, was one of the first to be cremated at the new Woking Crematorium, in 1889.

## The 1803 Steeplechase

An unusual claim to fame for a church is that St Martin's tower, or steeple, was the objective in what is believed to have been the first steeplechase in England, the term originating from the idea of a chase to a steeple.

The story is that in 1803, during the emergency of the threatened Napoleonic invasion, the 7th Hussars were stationed at the Ipswich Horse Barracks, which covered a large area, still marked today by Barrack Lane, between St Matthew Street and Anglesea Road. One officer was boasting of his new horse's qualities and challenged others to test their horses against each other. It was a moonlit night, the officers were ready for any lively diversion, and before long seven or eight had committed themselves to a ½ mile gallop from Ipswich to Nacton. To make themselves more visible to each other they agreed to wear white night caps and night shirts over their uniform.

In the period since 1803 these events have continued to be remembered, perhaps most popularly through the plates drawn by H Alken, which were published in the *Sporting Review* of January 1839 and subsequently became widely available as a set of four colour prints. They show in Plate I, Ipswich, the Watering-place behind the barracks, in Plate II, The large field near Biless Corner, in Plate III, The last field near Nacton Heath, and in Plate IV, Nacton Church and Village. A text accompanies the plates. Most of the riders and their horses are named. The challenger



*St Martin's - a general view*

appears to have been named Hansum and rode a grey called Champion. However, at the finish he was narrowly beaten into fourth place. 'Screaming and whooping like devil-rid maniacs they clattered through the quiet village. Cannon-ball first, Lounger next, on one side of him Simpson, on the other Hansum and the grey ....which brought the villagers affrighted from their beds.'

The event was again recalled, as part of the history of the 7th Hussars, when a re-enactment of the Midnight Steeplechase was staged at the celebrated Tidworth Southern Command Torchlight Tattoo of 1926. Eight officers of the 7th Queen's Own Hussars took part and in a Foreword to the programme details it is stated that the original challenge had been to 'ride to Nacton Church - 4½ miles away.' It goes on to say that the race is believed to be the first steeplechase on record.

## Rectors of Nacton

Nacton has been well served by its rectors over the years. A record exists of most of their names since 1321 but the most recent names are:

Harry Edgell, 1835-94

Arthur Hawtrey Watson, 1894-1906

Henry Luke Paget, 1906-09

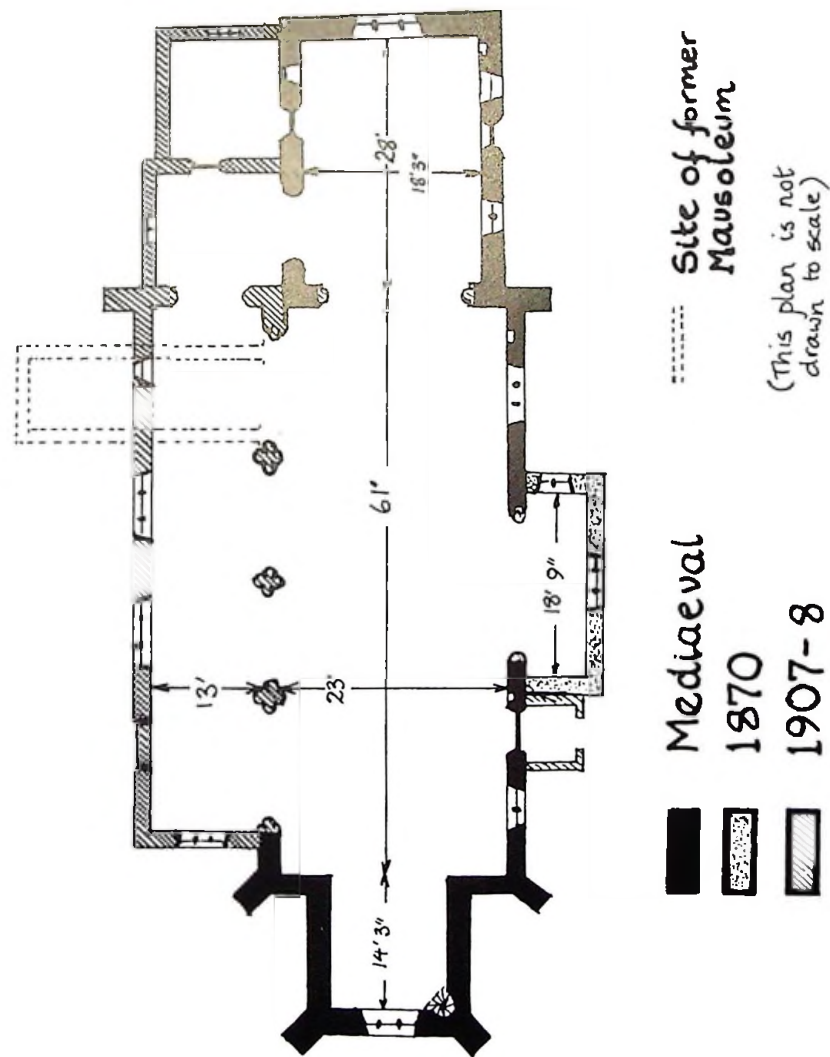
Ernest John Sandford, 1909-23

John Dixon Hepple, 1923-49

James Patrick Seth Mathers, 1949-57

John Bobby Macgowan, 1957-64

Geoffrey Leslie Grant, since 1964



Plan of St Martin's