

THE PARISH CHURCH OF
St. MARY MAGDALENE
WITHERSDALE



A Short History & Guide

SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

WITHERSDALE

The tiny village of Withersdale is situated near the road linking Harleston and Halesworth, in the picturesque countryside of the north of Suffolk, not far from the River Waveney, which divides the county from Norfolk. The Parish Church of SAINT MARY MAGDALENE stands to the south of the road, almost a mile towards Metfield from Withersdale Street.

Few visitors could fail to be charmed by the attractive and picturesque situation of this tiny church. It is one of the smallest in the county, and stands overlooking the road, but keeping a dignified distance from it, in company with a fine mediaeval farmhouse, itself of great age and once moated.

Both outside and inside this quaint and humble church is full of beauty and antiquity. The building is rustic, simple and quite unspoilt by restorers - a mixture of mellow colours and simple craftsmanship, with the beauty and homeliness which befits the Father's House.

The building consists of nave, chancel and south porch. There is a simple weather-boarded belfry over the western gable, with a tiled pyramid cap and a vane.

The NAVE dates from the time of the Normans (late eleventh or early twelfth century), although several windows were added later to give more light. The core of the CHANCEL, which internally is wider than the nave, dates from the Early Decorated period - circe 1300. The east wall was renewed with brick during Georgian times.

The approximate internal dimensions of the church are:

Total Length - 51' 3".

Width of Nave - 14' 10"

Width of Chancel - 16' 6".

The South Porch measures 6' 10" X 6' 3"

EXTERIOR

The Church looks picturesque when viewed from any direction, and a closer examination of its exterior reveals much of antiquity and beauty.

The CHURCHYARD, on the south side near the church, has a remarkable number of eighteenth century headstones in extremely well-preserved condition. This is probably due to the fact that they have been sheltered from the weather by the church building itself.

The wooden BELFRY, over the western gable of the nave, is a feature of many Essex churches, but it occurs seldom in Suffolk. It did possess a small wooden spire, but this was removed and the belfry restored during this century. The western corners of the nave have no buttresses to support them, nor stone quoins to strengthen them. This is very unusual. In the west wall can be seen a few hewn stones worked into the masonry, and some tiles near the top. This wall is pierced by a small square aperture, of post-mediaeval date.

The NORTH WALL of the nave has a blocked early Norman doorway, which has lost its jambs at the sides but still retains its simple round-headed arch. Beneath this arch is a window containing what looks to be Georgian glazing. To the east of this is a small lancet window, of 12th century origin, which has been carefully renewed during comparatively recent times.

Further east is a square-headed, two-light perpendicular window, dating from the fifteenth century, which has also been restored carefully.

The CHANCEL, on this side, has a broad single window and a two-light window with "Y" tracery. Both windows are Early Decorated and date from about 1300.

The EAST WALL has been renewed with Georgian brick, and it is plastered above the east window, which has three lights, with simple wooden mullions and arches.

The SOUTH WALL of the chancel has, like the north wall, a single window and two-light "Y" traceried window, both of about 1300. Between them is a simple PRIEST'S DOORWAY, of similar date.

The nave windows on this side are similar to those on the north side - a small twelfth century lancet and a square-headed, two-light perpendicular window, which has escaped restoration.

Also on this side is the SOUTH PORCH. The inside is timber-framed and the roof is supported by large beams. The inner entrance area is plain and sharply pointed, dating from the early thirteenth century.

INTERIOR

We enter the church by means of an ancient sixteenth century DOOR, with contemporary iron hinges. Inside, the church is bright, unspoilt and full of interest. The wonder of this small and isolated building is that its ancient furnishings were not replaced during Victorian times, and have remained largely intact to this day.

The simple plastered ROOF has fine old beams and timbers and at the west end are the strong timbers which support the belfry above. Beneath them is the seventeenth century western GALLERY which may at one time have been

used by the village musicians before the days when organs were used in village churches.

The FONT has a brick base, but its square bowl is Norman and extremely interesting. It dates from about 1180, and has carvings on all four sides. The west face has six interlaced Norman arches, rising from three carefully carved pillars. The north face has two rounded arches with a central pillar. In the south face is a six-pointed estoil, or rozette, above a human face and between two pillars, to the left of which is a foliated design (probably representing the Tree of Life), and to the right is a chevron design. The south face has two trefoil-headed arches on pillars. These are certainly not Norman and were probably re-cut in the fourteenth century.

Near the south door is a simple Elizabethan CHEST, and on the north wall opposite hang the ROYAL ARMS of King George III.

Many of the furnishings of the nave are Jacobean and date from the early seventeenth century. One bench near the font, however, is much older and now looks a little worse for wear. In the nave are eight Jacobean BENCHES (some authorities believe that they may be Elizabethan). These have attractively carved ends, each with three round knobs at the top.

On the north side is the simple Jacobean two-decker PULPIT. This is a humble but pleasing example of its type and is complete with its original back board and square canopy, or sounding board, which is nicely carved. The door to the pulpit still retains its original hinges.

Opposite the pulpit are two square BOX PEWS.

Behind the pulpit and beginning in the window sill are the mediaeval ROOD LOFT STAIRS. These led to the top of the carved Rood Screen which separated the chancel from the nave in mediaeval times. The

division today is made by a beam with plaster walling above it. There is no chancel arch.

The chancel roof is simpler than that of the nave, and the upper part is ceiled with plaster. Stretching across the east end of the chancel is a mediaeval BEAM, passing right through the walls, so that its ends can be seen from the outside. This beam may have been used at one time for the Lenten Veil, or it may have hung a sacring bell.

On the south side of the chancel is a MEDIAEVAL BENCH with poppy heads and (later) linenfold panelling. West of the Priest's Door is another similar poppy head bench end. The stalls, on the north side near the organ, are the only modern benches in the church.

Near the top of the south single window are fragments of mediaeval STAINED GLASS. Another fragment can be seen in the top light of the "Y" traceried window on this side. This is part of the Ufford Coat of Arms (Ufford Hall at Fressingfield was the home of Archbishop William Sancroft).

The COMMUNION RAILS are Jacobean, and the Altar is a Jacobean HOLY TABLE. On the east wall, either side of the window, are the Lord's Prayer, Creed and Ten Commandments painted on wooden panels rather than the more common, mass-produced canvas panels. The panelling below them appears to be a later addition, but it is in the style of the seventeenth century.

In the south wall of the sanctuary is a cinquefoil-headed PISCINA which still retains its sexfoil drain. The piscina was rediscovered in 1909.

The ORGAN is a single manual "American" reed instrument.

In the belfry are two BELLS. One, which has no inscription, may be mediaeval. The other was probably cast by Brend, the Norwich bell-founder, in the early seventeenth century.

The CHURCH PLATE dates from 1690 and was probably the gift of Archbishop William Sancroft who, when deposed of his Archbishopric in the reign of William and Mary, retired to his family home in Fressingfield, and possibly had much to do with the restoration of this little church of Saint Mary Magdalene.

POSTSCRIPT

This ancient church has stood for nine hundred years as the Father's House in this tiny community. Its walls are saturated with the prayers of countless generations who have loved and used it. No visitor can fail to see the pride and care taken of it by its present-day custodians. Its maintenance depends entirely upon what people are prepared to give towards its upkeep. Those who love and use this church would be grateful for your prayers for this sacred place and its continuing witness to the worship and glory of Almighty God.

We invite you to keep this Guide as a memento of your visit, and to leave a contribution to the upkeep of the church as a thank-offering.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE AREA make sure that you have visited Fressingfield Church with its beautifully-carved pews; Mendham Church with its wide wooden chancel arch; Metfield Church with its ancient working clock; and Weybread Church, with its round flint tower.