

ST PETER'S CHURCH

PALGRAVE

SUFFOLK

a short guide

Welcome to this fine parish church, a focal point for village life and Christian worship since the eleventh century.

Seeing the church today, it is easy to imagine that it has remained unchanged for centuries, but successive generations have left their mark.

Both outside and inside, our church shares a layout and form typical of such buildings. But take time on your visit to appreciate the details that make St Peter's different and special. Some of them are explained in this leaflet.



Palgrave Church as illustrated in 1842

The Victorian Improvements

The present appearance of the church interior owes much to the Rev'd Charles Martyn who raised funds for the building of the north aisle in 1861. A list of those who contributed to this venture, and of the cost, hangs at the west end. The builder of the north aisle was Henry Angold, of Diss.

Note that the external walls of the north aisle are not so thick as those of the earlier building. They are built of red brick with flint and stone facings.

The arcade is built in reconstituted stone, but its colonnade and arches are a convincing copy of the much earlier chancel arch. Note that the columns are not equally spaced; the arches at either end being narrower than the middle three.

The Victorian refurbishment of the church was not limited to the north aisle but included also all new furnishings: the vestry screen (depicted on plans as being at the east end of the aisle), the pulpit, and the pews. Martyn must have anticipated a large congregation, as the church would then have seated 230 comfortably — plus a choir.

Oil lamps of brass and glass were mounted at the ends of the pews.

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The Georgian Chancel ~ and some earlier clues

The chancel dates from the Georgian period. An old register of services records the first Holy Communion held in the new chancel in June 1729. The simple cornice is typical of the period as is the coved eaves externally. The semi-circular arched windows perhaps emulate a Norman style which stood before. Note what appears to be a blocked circular window in the east gable outside. The stained glass in these windows contains no figurative representation, and this is characteristic of early 19th century glass.

Footings of an earlier, slightly wider, chancel have been found. The style of the chancel arch dates it from the early 1300s. It is clear that there was once a Rood Screen in front of the chancel arch: the corbelled stone feature that projects from the outside wall at this point probably still contains the winding steps that gave access to it, and the side of a doorway was found behind the pulpit during plaster repairs. Roods (Anglo Saxon for Crucifixion) were common from the 1460s but banned from churches, along with all other imagery, from 1547.

In the medieval period there would typically be two altars, one of which stood in the position now occupied by the pulpit and was dedicated to Thomas-a-Becket. A small 'piscina' remains in the thickness of the wall. It was also required that

there be statues of Mary and of St Peter to either side of the altar. These had, likewise, to be destroyed at the Reformation. During repairs to the tower arch in 2000 fragments of a carving of Mary and the infant Christ were discovered.

The Nave Roof of 1460

Our nave roof is a true testament to the craftsmen of the fifteenth century, working for the glory of God. The structural design is single hammer beam; resisting the outward spread of the roof without the use of tie beams. The carved heads (note especially the grotesque beast at the north east post) are decorative rather than load-bearing. The wide arched braces form a continuous sweep up to the ridge. Along the ridge intersections were once carved roses, of which only fragments now remain; lost along with the angels which it is assumed finished the beam ends. Small square roses decorate the cornice.

The carpentry is the work of John Hore of Diss and dates from the 1460s. The painting of the ceiling followed a few years later, as is known from the will of one parishioner in 1471. The decorative scheme includes foliage designs on the braces, red roses—the symbol of Mary—and black flowers which have the look of tracery.

The South Porch ~ C15

The south porch dates from the late fifteenth century and is contemporary with the nave roof. It is the work of Master Mason Hawes of Oc-cold. The names of Hawes and Hore (carpenter of the roof) are often linked as collaborating on church buildings. Their signature square rose carving appears both in the porch stonework and in the roof.

The porch is of the Perpendicular period of ecclesiastical architecture, as exemplified by the window tracery design and the knapped flint flushwork panels in the parapet.

Various symbols adorn the shields around the doorway: two mitres and crozier for the pre-reformation Bishop of Norwich; the crossed swords of St Paul; and three crowns for the Abbey of St Edmund. In the spandrels above the door is depicted St Michael defeating a dragon.

There was once a ceiling at mid height of the porch, and an upper room known as a 'parvis chamber' (and for which uses varied) with steps that can still be seen in our cleaning cupboard.

On the wall is the most ostentatious memorial in the church: that to Thomas Martin, a collector of antiquarian books and documents, who lived at Barbauld House - which no longer exists.

The Norman Font

The font is perhaps the oldest feature in the church, having survived all the changes that have taken place ~ including the lengthening of the nave in around 1300. Its design and square plan is unusual for Suffolk, where the more common type is octagonal and of a later date. Although likened to a West Country type, there are several similar in Norfolk churches.

The lead bowl is large enough for full immersion of the child, as the early rite of baptism involved repeated cleansing with the north door opened to expel the devil.

The Early Church Building and lost structures

A church was recorded here in the Domesday survey of 1086, at which time there was a second church in Palgrave ~ half way between here and Diss and still evident in 1700, according to Thomas Martin. There was also a chapel at St John's. The Norman church building would have conformed to a standard plan and thus had a nave of only half the length of the fourteenth century plan seen today. St Peter's was remodelled between 1300-1380 and probably included a chapel on the north side, dedicated to 'Our Lady of the Churchyard'.