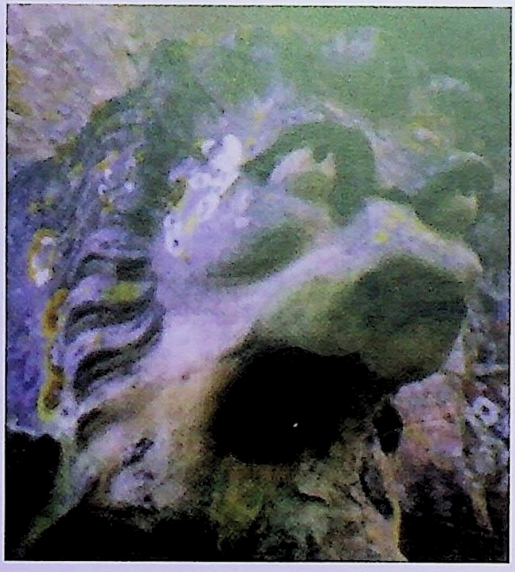
The Parish Church of St. Peter Sibton

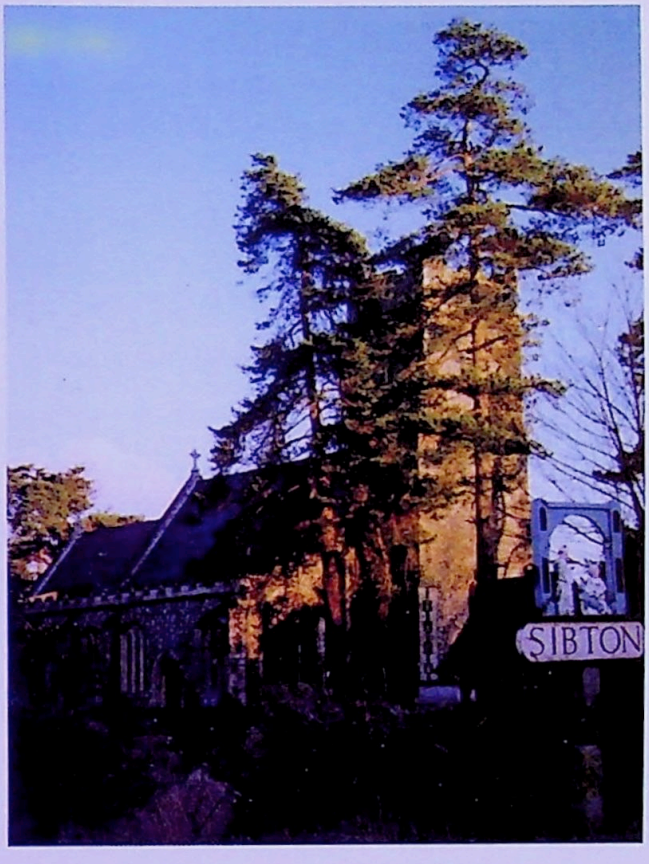


CHURCH GUIDE

AN ODE TO ST. PETER'S

I stand upon a hill
And watch the seasons pass.
There have been many that have ravished my façade,
I marvel at the craftsmen who embellished me with pride
And have left us with this lovely house of God.
But now I have become old and need repair
Expensive his will be
So I look to one and all of you
To take good care of me.
A short while ago my future was grim
But now I have so many friends
With festivals of music and of verse,
And flowers that God sends.
So it's looking to the future now
with a very happy end.

David Banthorpe
April 5, 1998



St Peter's Church stands in its churchyard that, in the spring, is filled with wild daffodils. Here too wildflowers bloom in profusion in the early summer, and in this rural setting a church has stood since the twelfth century.

Today it continues as a sacred place serving the spiritual needs of the community. In recent times the nave, with its crowning glory, the fifteenth century roof, has become familiar to visitors from far and near as a special gathering place where people of whatever belief or following can be sure of a welcome at a wide variety of events.

A vibrant future is promised for this much loved building. Like all ancient churches here is a place where people of all faiths and none may find inspiration, welcome, peace and beauty, and those of faith will sense an eternity in God's presence.

A History of the Church Building

Two ancient doorways

The doorway through the south porch has admitted people to the church for over eight hundred years. It has a semi-circular arch supported by double columns on each side with foliage capitals. This is a late Norman doorway dating from around 1180. Robert de Cadone began building a church in the reign of William Rufus more than eighty years earlier. The core of the wall through which the door gives access to the church probably dates from that period.

The church building has continued to develop and change over the centuries. On its north wall is a 12th century doorway. It is built into walls dating from the 16th century, so predating them by about four hundred years. When this part of the church was added to the earlier building, a lot of the building material including this doorway came from Sibton Abbey.

One of the fascinating aspects of the history of Sibton Church is that, like many of our mediaeval buildings, it has undergone a series of changes, partly owing to the efforts of benefactors, but also because of change and development in religious thought, which brought about changes in function and even orientation of various parts of the building as fashions and building styles changed.

Exploring the Outside of the Building

Changes to the church building become more obvious as you walk round the outside of the building. It is worth starting with a brief summary of what you will be able to see.

Standing outside the south porch you might almost think that this was a Victorian church, the stone facing of the walls doesn't look at all like work from the middle ages, and the style of the windows is distinctly Victorian. However the tower to the west is definitely 15th century work, and moving round to the north side, the building of the long north aisle appears to be in the late Perpendicular style of the 16th century with large three-light windows, buttresses and a parapet to the roof. At the east end of the building there is a chancel and vestry, and this is certainly the work of the Victorian Gothic Revival. It was built as part of a major restoration of the church building in the 19th century.

A Close Look at the Outside of the Church

The Tower

The church tower was built in the earlier part of the 15th century. Like most churches in East Anglia, St. Peter's is built mainly of flint rubble gathered from the fields. Because the stonework is quite loosely packed between the facing material of the walls, the tower needs to be supported by those diagonal buttresses at its western corners. They enhance its beauty, and carry the eye upwards to the embattled parapet adorned with lozenges and two-light panels in flint and stone flushwork. At its four corners are stone gargoyles.

They are large and splendid creatures throwing rainwater from the tower roof well clear of the walls. At the corners of the tower parapet are also the bases of four 18thcentury obelisk pinnacles, currently awaiting re-erection. These are replacements of the medieval originals. The two-light belfry windows and the west window are typical of the style of the 15th century. An original single window on the south side provides light for the ringing chamber, but the sundial was added in 1827.

A Ring of Five Bells

The tower contains a ring of five bells. The third and fourth bells are the oldest. The third bell was cast c. 1408 and so has rung out from this tower for over six centuries. Its inscription reads 'Eternis Annis Reconet Campana Iohannes' – May the bell called John sound for ever. The fourth bell was cast c 1530. It also has an inscription: 'Ptrus Ad Bterne Ducat Nos Paftua Nite' – a script that reads 'Petrus Ad Eterne Ducat Nos Pascua Vite': May Peter lead us to the Pastures of Eternal Life. There are shields and dedication crosses associated with each inscription, and a lion's head is engraved in the middle of the inscription of the fourth bell.

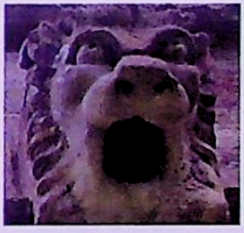
The North Side of the Church from Outside

You can see that the north side of the church is quite different to the rest of the building. Whilst the remainder of the building, apart from the tower is the result of nineteenth century restoration, this part of the building is a 16th century addition to the nave.

The church was enlarged during a restoration probably in the latter half of the 15th century, and this part of the church, a north aisle, was added about eighty years later, built in the late Perpendicular style.

The windows are large with broad shallow arches, and in this late perpendicular style two mullions separate them into three lights. There are elegant narrow buttresses, which are needed to support thinner walls pierced by large windows. The roof parapet is embattled. Every feature serves to emphasise strong vertical lines. It was the generosity of Robert Duckett that provided for this addition to the building. Much of the stonework was re-cycled from the recently dissolved Sibton Abbey.

There is a large amount of re-used dressed stone in the flintwork. It forms the plinth at the base of the walls, and the dressing stone of the crenellated parapet. The doorway probably came from the abbey as well.

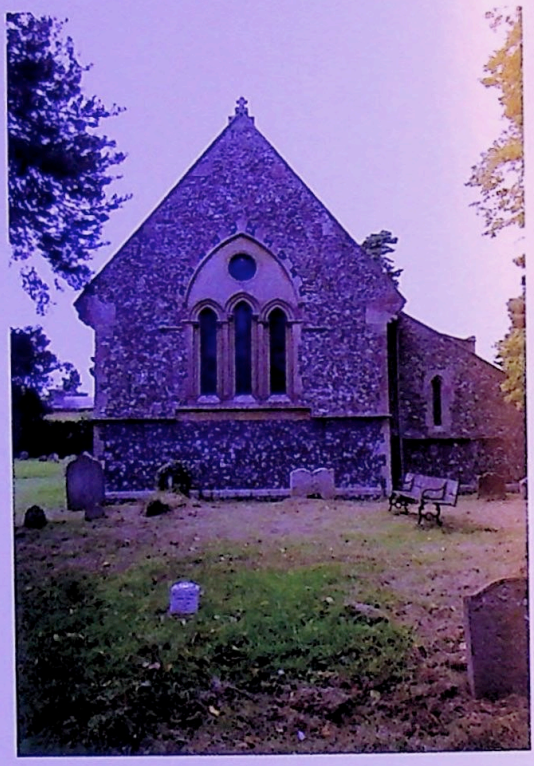


The architect E. C. Hakewill, who was responsible for the major Victorian restoration of the church remarked that this doorway plainly told him that it was made for a thicker wall in the time of Edward II and brought to this church in the time of Henry VIII.

The East End of the Church from Outside

Like several of Suffolk's churches, the original mediaeval chancel at the east end of Sibton Church had fallen into disrepair by the 17th century. Records show that it was replaced by a chancel of brick with timber windows, so the present chancel is the third one to be built here.

The chancel and vestry were rebuilt in 1872 to the designs of Edward Charles Hakewill. He used an adaptation of the architectural style of the mid 13th century. Running along the walls, surfaced in knapped flint, is a horizontal stone string-course. The windows are lancet styled with circular shafts and carved foliage in their capitals and corbels. The east window is a triple lancet window, with a central circular opening at its apex. To complete a spectacular picture of Victorian Gothic the highly eccentric priest's doorway has detached shafts, foliage capitals and a trefoil arch.



The South Porch and the Roof of the Nave

In keeping with the ideas of the Victorian Gothic Revival, at the restoration of 1872 the pitch of the nave roof was altered and the ridge raised to bring it to just below the level of the belfry window in the tower. The final stage of this restoration was the addition of the south porch. Built in the style of the 1400s, it has a niche over the entrance and small two-light side windows. A plaque on the west wall records that it was given by Ellen Anne Green in memory of her sister and her parents.

Inside the Building

The unique quality of this church is visible immediately. The clear vault of the nave is bathed with cool north light from the graceful windows of the aisle beyond. Between the two spaces rises a majestic arcade with circular piers, through which can be seen the font still on its original three steps. Further eastwards is the chancel with rich 19th century stained glass in its east window and there, peeping from underneath the arcade, is the organ with an elegantly elongated central façade of pipes. Against the east wall, the reredos above the altar glitters when candles are lit, reflecting shafts of golden light. The crowning glory of the building is the splendid hammerbeam roof. The whole effect is due to an astonishing blend of craftsmanship from several architectural periods spanning eight centuries.

The Nave

The original Norman nave was enlarged to the west in the 14th century. Today the late mediaeval core of the nave is possibly defined by the south and east walls and the south doorway. The windows are part of the much later Victorian restoration. By the time the nave was enlarged side altars would have been needed on either side of the chancel arch. The niches that would have contained statues of saints remain. There is delicate tracery in their canopies, and the colouring including diapered patterning as a background gives a hint of their former glory.

The four bay arcade between the nave and the north aisle probably marks the line of the 12th century north wall. It was almost certainly brought from Sibton Abbey when the north aisle was added to the church.

Examples of former pews line the walls of the nave. The fixed pews have been made moveable to create open space. The pews were part of the Hakewill restoration, the carved pew ends being created individually to designs by him.

An interesting contract between the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and the Friends of St. Peter's means that the nave is now leased to the Friends, who thereby become responsible for fundraising for the upkeep of the fabric of the building. Money is raised through exhibitions, sales, and concerts, and by application to charitable organisations. By this means the church has literally been saved from ruin, and a continuing programme of restoration and refurbishment ensures a lively future for the building at the centre of the local community.

Sibton Abbey

William de Chesney founded Sibton Abbey in 1150AD, endowing it with the manor of Sibton. This was fifty years after his father Robert de Cadone had built a church at Sibton. The abbey was colonised with twelve monks and an abbot from Warden in Essex. It was to be the only Cistercian house in Suffolk.

At Sibton Abbey, the life the monks centred around daily worship within the abbey church: the eight principal offices. These regulated other functions of daily life, working, eating and sleeping. Cistercians originated as a reforming order of Benedictines, aiming to follow more closely the Rule of St. Benedict. They were renowned for the simplicity of their worship, architecture, diet and clothing. Known as White Monks, they wore habits of undyed wool that were grey or white. Manual work was important. They created Granges, which they worked directly. Food and clothing were distributed to the poor at the abbey gate by the porter, and from the first half of the thirteenth century a hospital was established at the precinct gate which cared for the poor and the sick,

Later the granges were managed by lay brothers, who traded beyond the monastery walls at local markets, carrying out business transactions on behalf of the monks. Land was accumulated throughout East Suffolk, Norfolk and even the borders of Cambridgeshire. Cistercian houses were intended to be self-sufficient units rejecting income from churches, tithes and manorial rents. However by 1291 Sibton Abbey is recorded as deriving income from Sibton rectory and the chapel at Peasenhall together with income from four other churches in Suffolk.

North Grange and South Grange farms mark land formerly belonging to Sibton Abbey. Here 2000 sheep were farmed, and North Grange remained the home farm of the abbey. A dairy was established here, originally being sited at the abbey gate, managed by the Cellarer.

A lasting legacy for Sibton Church came about following the dissolution of the abbey in 1536. By the Will of Robert Duckett the north aisle of Sibton Church was built. A good deal of twelfth century fabric was collected from the abbey and re-cycled in the current Perpendicular style of the sixteenth century.

DAILY TIMETABLE

2.00 am	Vigils or Night Office
6.00 am	Matins followed by Lauds
7.00 am	Prime
9.00 am	Terce followed by Mass
Chapter Meeting followed by work	
12 noon	High Mass followed by Sext
1.00 pm	dinner
2.00 pm	Nones
Work	
5.00 pm	Vespers
5.30 pm	light supper
6.00 pm	Compline
6.30 pm	bed in dorter

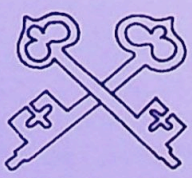
Remains of Sibton Abbey: An etching by H. E. Davy

The Nave Roof

Here is a wonderful example of the Tudor craftsman's art: a single hammer-beam and arch-braced roof. It was constructed and carved by hand in the late 15th century. A ship is one of the emblems of the living Church – the people of God. Looking up into this roof is like looking into the hull of a great mediaeval ship. The word 'nave' comes from the Latin word 'navis' meaning a ship.

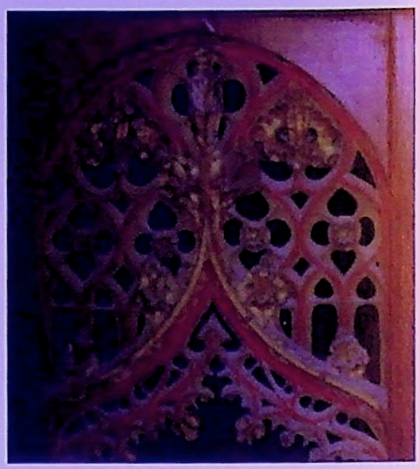
Originally, carved angels hovered at the ends of the hammer-beams. Angels may be seen high up, facing east and west, on the moulded collar-beams.

The wall-posts rest upon angels with shields, and between them the arch-braces are carved with leaves, above which are thick and richly carved cornices. The roof needed restoration in the 19th century, when maybe some of the figures were removed. It was in 1814 that shields, painted with arms of families connected with Sibton were placed on the ends of the hammer-beams to replace missing angels.



The decoration of the eastern bay of the roof is different. Here are carved bosses. One is a rebus, a cryptic word made up of letters and figures: 'S' and a barrel (or tun) for Sibton. Another carved boss has 'P' for St. Peter, and his crossed keys. The eastern bay of the roof formed a canopy of honour over the great Rood; a carving of the scene of the Crucifixion, which would have stood on a carved wooden Rood Screen that separated the chancel from the nave.

The Chancel Screen



The low screen that now divides the chancel from the nave preserves all that remains of the Rood Screen that was constructed and carved in the same period as the roof as part of the fifteenth century restoration. It once spanned the eastern wall of the nave and the chancel arch. The four sections of this screen are made up from eight of the tops of the openwork arches placed back to back. They formed the upper part of the original screen below a walkway that traversed the top of the screen. The blocked up entrance to its stairway can still be seen beside the pulpit.

Here are more examples of fine craftsmanship – exquisite carving that can be viewed at close quarters. Crockets curl into the central space of the arch, and flowers in the tracery grow from the cusping. Some of the original colouring is preserved, and the backs of the panels (facing inwards) reveal more coloured work.

The Pulpit

The pulpit dates from the 16th century. It has compartmented panels, and is ornamented at the angles and under the rim. In its present position it stands on a base constructed for it at the 19th century restoration of the church. When first built it would have been an impressive three-decker arrangement placed further along the south wall nearer the middle of the nave.

The North Aisle

The north aisle is divided from the nave by a four-bay arcade, which was brought from the ruins of the abbey to replace the north wall of the nave when the aisle was added in the middle of the 16th century. This 13th century arcade has circular pillars with octagonal bases, and double chamfered arches. There are two seats lining the northwest corner of the aisle that have 17th century panelling beneath them. Their panelled backs were made in the nineteenth century.

The 15th Century Font

The design of the font is one commonly seen in East Anglian churches. Though it didn't originally stand in this part of the church it still retains its original steps. The font has been carefully restored and re-cut in places, but this gives clean lines to the figures. The eight panels surrounding the bowl of the font have panels of Christian symbols borne on shields. These alternate with panels showing the emblems associated with the four evangelists. The shaft has tall lions and woodwoses. Where lions and woodwoses are found together it is thought that the woodwose symbolises good triumphing over evil, but in other contexts lions by themselves symbolise resurrection. The wooden cover of the font was made for it maybe in the 18th or early 19th century.

Facing south towards the south entrance door is the Cross of St. George; facing east are instruments of Christ's passion – the scourge, staves, cross and crown of thorns. This panel was recorded as being blank in 1820, and so must have been re-cut. Facing north there is a panel with the three crowns of St. Edmund, the martyred King of East Anglia, and facing west the emblem of the Holy Trinity. The emblems of the four evangelists are represented as follows. There is an Ox for St. Luke on the southeast panel, and what should be an angel for St. Matthew on the southwest panel. Again re-cutting has transformed this into an animal tethered to a post. On the northwest panel is the Eagle of St. John, and on the northeast panel the Lion of St. Mark.

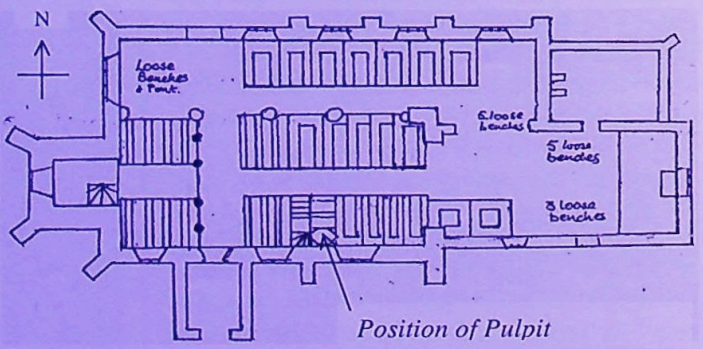
Renovations, Re-orderings and the Reformation

Changes in the style of church building are occasionally due to the whims of a local benefactor, but mostly they represent developments in religious thinking resulting in the necessary re-ordering of the building.

The nave of the early parish church was used for a wide range of secular purposes. From the beginning of the 13th century clergy were required to protect the bread and wine consecrated at Mass from irreverence, as it was believed to be the Real Presence of God. Screens were built to separate the chancel from the nave. By the 15th century, possibly in answer to secular needs, the nave at Sibton was enlarged. An elaborate and beautifully carved Rood Screen, complete with a carved representation of the Crucifixion, now stretched across the chancel arch, now widened so that the whole congregation attending Mass could see the Consecration.

However the period of religious reform, known as the Reformation was beginning. It eventually led to Henry VIII's break with Rome and the separate identity of the English Church. Sibton Abbey was reduced to a ruin. The focus of worship in the parish church changed from barely understood sacramental mystery and superstitious adoration to proclamation of the gospel in the English language that people could understand. Here were the beginnings of a universal education system that would change the whole ordering of society.

At Sibton in a 17th century re-ordering of the church, a triple-decker pulpit was constructed on the south side of the recently enlarged nave of the church, about a third of the way along the south wall from the chancel arch. From here the important Sunday sermons were preached. A Sibton book of Elizabethan sermons often preaches against the great sins of rebellion and the sacred duty of obedience to the authorities. The Rood was taken down from the screen, though the screen remained to separate communicants from the rest of the congregation. However the chancel fell into serious disrepair. The Puritans defaced carvings on the font, took down angels from the roof and destroyed stained glass. Eventually a Royal Coat of Arms was placed on the chancel screen, but not before the perpetual curate of Walpole and Cookley John Manning, turned local free-church preacher, had become vicar in 1654 preaching Puritan doctrine in the strongest of terms. In 1662 he was ejected. The Book of Common Prayer came into general use, and possibly not a great deal was to change in the worship at Sibton Church for the next two hundred years.



Arrangement of 17th century box pews showing positions current in 1870:
Note that though the altar is at the east end of the chancel, the seating is arranged facing the pulpit, which is on the south side of the nave.

Memorials

Memorial Brasses are normally an indication of accumulating wealth and status of the families commemorated. An early brass commemorates John Chapman quondam Barker (here quondam Barker means 'formerly Barker'). Dated 1475 it must have been moved from its original position to the north aisle after that part of the church was built. Other brasses of the Chapman Barker family are in the nave. They eventually succeeded to Peasenhall Manor. One intriguing feature is the changing name, sometimes Chapman, sometimes Chapman alias Barker.

Palimpsest Brass to Edmund Chapman

The brass to Edmund Chapman (1574) shows an effigy of him with eight sons, and Margaret, his wife and five daughters. There is a long verse beneath this image of the family. It is an example of a palimpsest brass, re-used brass using pieces of earlier brasses with the original inscriptions still present on the reverse side.

In the chancel are the brasses associated with still later generations of the family. One of these is a rectangular brass, which is partly obscured by the platform of the north choirstalls. It was this Edmund Chapman alias Barker to whom Peasenhall Manor was passed from Philip, Earl of Arundel c 1611.

The Edmond Barker Memorial

On the north wall of the sanctuary is a fine monument to Sir Edmond Barker, Lord of the Manor of Peasenhall and 'Petitioner in Ordinary' to Charles II.

In oval recesses, their borders cleverly interlocked, are two frontal busts. One is of Edmond with his long hair tied in bunches and lace cravat.

The other is of Mary his wife, who caused the monument to be erected. She is depicted with covered head, possibly in mourning for her husband. On the ledge beneath are a sleeping baby and a little girl with a skull, telling us that these two children predeceased their parents.

There are many ledger slabs in simple black marble, often with interesting inscriptions in attractive lettering of the period. Some have fine incised coats of arms.

John Bedingfield in the chancel floor has an angel with a crown accompanied by a skeleton with an arrow and an hourglass.

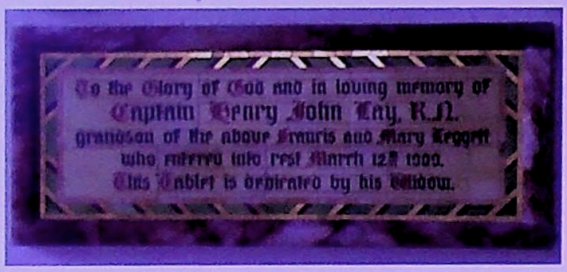
The Scrivener family

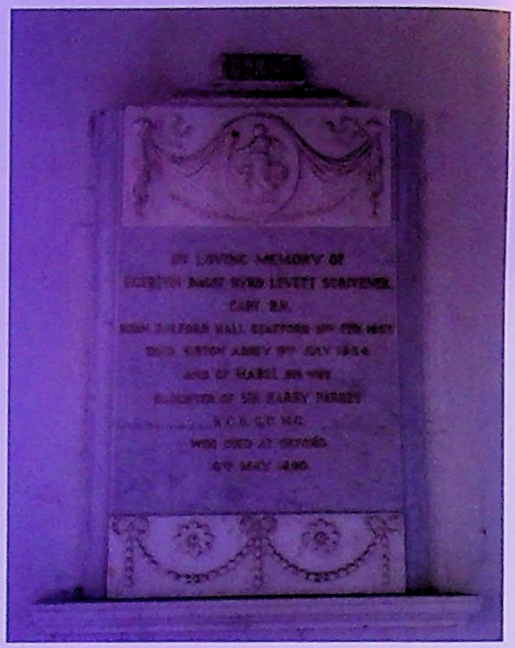
On the walls and in the floors of the church are a remarkable host of memorials to the Scrivener family who have been part of this community and its church since the 17th century. They became Lords of the Manor of Sibton in 1610. Four painted coats of arms can be seen on a fine alabaster wall plaque that commemorates the first John Scrivener who died in 1662. The Arms were granted to Ralph, his father, in 1576. The memorial plaque is on the south wall of the nave.

The Scrivener family have been great benefactors towards Sibton Church and to the village. In 1719 the grandchildren of John Scrivener, Dorothea and her brother John Scrivener, settled an estate so that one half of the rents would pay the vicar to read morning service in the church every Wednesday and Friday, as well as every holy day in the year. The other half paid for 'erecting a schoolroom in the parish of Sibton for teaching poor children, whose parents dwelt within the same, and were not able to bear the charge thereof, in the English tongue, writing and arithmetic, and in the principles of the Church of England, and for putting out apprentices.' Their father, Thomas had been a great sufferer in the royal cause, his estate having been sequestered and he himself confined in various prisons in Suffolk. He died in 1667 and was buried at Sibton.

Most monuments to members of the family are in the north aisle of the church. The Reverend Charles Scrivener, who died in 1737 was a brother of the second John Scrivener, the manor passing to him and then to his son Charles who died in 1751 and is commemorated together with Margaret his wife. John Freston then inherited from his uncle. He took the name of Freston Scrivener. The memorial to his wife Dorothea Scrivener who died in 1794 describes her as being "as near perfection as human nature could be". There is also a touching memorial to their daughter Marianne who died at the age of twenty-three. Her sister Dorothea is commemorated as the wife of a Bishop of Salisbury, Dr. John Fisher. Their daughter Dorothea married John Pike who took the name Scrivener. In 1840 the Pike-Scriveners built the Elementary School in Sibton for 120 children. Dorothea Pike-Scrivener together with John Kendall Brooke Esq., defrayed the expense of the 1872 restoration, and also presented the organ.

Two later memorial tablets have interesting twentieth century designs. A memorial to Captain Henry John Lay R.N. shows the transition from the art nouveau style to that of art deco. The memorial to Captain Egerton Bagot Byrd Levett Scrivener R.N. is in excellent mid-twentieth century style with art deco influence.





A History of the Organ

Records of the Earlier Organs

The church terriers show that the church first had an organ in c.1794. In 1817 and 1818 Joseph Hart of Redgrave was paid to build a new organ in the old case. This organ had five stops and a pull down pedal board, which was added later. A payment made for unspecified work to the organ might suggest that the pedal board was added in 1843. It is now in the parish church of St. Mary, Warren, Dyfed. While at Sibton, we know that it stood on a gallery at the west end of the church beneath which was the remains of the chancel screen.

Sibton was one of very few churches in the area to possess an organ. It could be that while the Joseph Hart organ was still at Sibton, the church was visited by Mendelssohn and that he played it. Mendelssohn was a close friend of Thomas Attwood, the organist at St. Paul's Cathedral, London. Thomas Attwood's son George was rector of Framlingham, and circumstantial evidence suggests that his sister, Caroline had organ lessons there from Mendelssohn. Did Mendelssohn suggest the addition of the pedal board?

The Organ by Bishop & Starr 1872

When the chancel at Sibton was rebuilt a new organ was presented by Dorothea Pyke-Scrivener. It stands in the chancel beneath the arcading to the north aisle. Built by Bishop & Starr, of Marylebone Road, London, it was erected in the church in 1872. It is a single manual and pedal instrument with nine speaking stops including a full principal chorus with Mixture and a 4'Flute.

The Chancel and the Victorian Restoration of 1872

The present chancel is the third to have been built for the church. The original chancel fell into such a dilapidated state that it was replaced by a brick structure with wooden windows, probably at some time during the eighteenth century. The windows of that chancel were renovated and repainted early in the 19th century. Although its Crucifixion scene had been replaced by the Royal Coat of Arms, the chancel screen had remained through all this period. However it was removed to the west end by authorisation of a faculty granted in 1813, because it was blocking light from the east window. All this was altered by the 1872 restoration.

The architect E. C. Hakewill was responsible for the designs for the Victorian Gothic structure that was to emerge. The church was closed while the alterations were made, and services were held in the school. Building work began in October 1871 and continued until July 1872. The external roof of the nave was raised, and new windows were placed in the south wall of the nave. Its box pews were removed, and the west gallery taken down. The remains of the former Rood Screen were re-worked as the current low chancel screen with its panels facing east and west. The panels were formed of the tracery conserved from the spandrels of the original screen arches. Restoration of the north aisle was funded by the Scrivener family. The Brooke family funded the remainder of the work, including the rebuilding of the chancel.

Hakewill's *tour de force* at Sibton was the chancel. A completely new chancel and vestry were built beyond the chancel arch. For the east window he conceived a triple lancet with a circular opening above set in solid stone.

Beneath the window is the reredos embellished with coloured mosaic work. At its centre there is a white marble cross in relief, flanked by two emblems of Christ, the Lamb of God and the Pelican in her Piety. The Stuart altar rails are not original to the church, since in 1813 the sanctuary was given iron rails. The carved poppyheads and angels of the choirstalls are Hakewill's designs, and the roof above is a barrel-vaulted roof studded with bosses, which include the IHS monogram of the Greek name for Jesus. There are also the crossed keys of St. Peter, stars and flowers can also be seen.

E. C. Hakewill

Edward Charles Hakewill was born in 1812, the younger of two brothers. The brothers came from an artistic family. Both the Hakewill brothers followed their father and became architects. E. C. Hakewill practised in London. In 1867 his home was required for the construction of the new Metropolitan Railway. He moved to Suffolk and built Playford Mount in the Gothic style near Ipswich. In spite of the fact that he wished to retire, he began work on the restoration of a series of Suffolk churches, some fifteen in all. Restoration was to be not only the repair of the fabric, but in many cases it also included 're-ordering', where internal furnishings and fittings were moved to the places in the church where they might have stood in the early 17th century. At the same time the architecture of the buildings was changed to a perceived style of the 12th and 13th centuries now sometimes derisively termed 'Victoriana' or 'Victorian Gothic.'

Stained Glass

The stained glass is Victorian, and of good quality. The glass of the east window, depicting wedding stories from the Bible was installed in 1873 to commemorate the silver wedding of J. W. Brooke of Sibton Park. Though there is no signature, the glass is by H. Hughes. There are six picture panels with compact figured compositions, and good colouration in the patterned surrounds. In the round opening above the three lancets is a small rose window.

The windows of the nave were installed during the same period and are by Lavers, Barraud and Westlake, again unsigned. Each lancet has two picture panels, in the style of mosaics. The glass in the west tower window is signed and is by Ward & Hughes, London 1885. There is colourful glass in the northwest aisle window.

The subjects of the two panels in the window next to the south door depict Biblical stories relating to missionary work. The window is in memory of Reverend Westhorp. He was secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

Wedding festivities

On Wednesday 4th November 1874, two years after the completion of Sibton Church's restoration (wedding themes dramatically depicted in the east window), the sun shone upon the wedding day of the eldest daughter of J. W. Brooke, Esq., with all the warmth and brilliancy of a day in early September. The interior of the church, recently restored, would require little decoration, though the floral arrangements around the east window were magnificent. Outside the church a triumphal arch had been constructed over the road, and the pathway to the south door had been covered by an arcade of twenty arches covered in evergreen and decorated with dahlias and ornamental grasses. The whole village turned out for the ceremony, and many people had to remain outside. Much loved by the villagers for her work with children and among the poor, The bride was Frances Jane Brooke, eldest daughter of J.W. Brooke Esq., who was marrying William Henry Rawson, the son of W. H. Rawson, a mill owner of Halifax.

The Oxford Movement

The effect of the1872 restoration at Sibton was to move emphasis from the pulpit in the nave to the altar at the east end of the church. The style of worship was changing. The ideas of clergy at that time were much influenced by the ideas of the Oxford Movement. The Reverend S. M. Westhorp was vicar from 1823 until 1871 when the work on the church was instigated, and the Reverend W. Bromley arrived in October 1872 as the work was beginning. He remained as vicar until 1891. He would have introduced the new style of worship during his ministry. Undoubtedly these men were supported by the Scrivener family and the Brooke family, who funded the cost of the restoration. The Brooke family were for many years the church's patrons, and have given silverware to the church, and a fine brass lectern, though this is now in Peasenhall Church.

The influence of the Oxford Movement changed the emphasis on preaching the Word of God from the pulpit, to sacramental worship at the altar – the celebration of the Eucharist. In some parishes these changes reached such extremes that the clergy were accused of popish practices, but not at Sibton. And so a robed choir was undoubtedly seated in the choirstalls, singing to the accompaniment of the new organ, and the vicar celebrated Holy Communion at the altar in front of the new white marble reredos with its symbols of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and even the presence of an altar cross in the style of a Crucifix.

The Parish of Sibton from the Records

By the time of the foundation of Sibton Abbey there were six manors in Sibton. The size of the two largest was roughly 120 acres. There was tillable land plus meadowland, as well as woodland (supporting pigs). Each would support a freeman, 4 villeins, between 10 and 16 bordars or cottagers, and 2 serfs. Their livestock consisted of two ploughing teams, 1 or 2 horses for riding, 8 beasts, beehives, 30 hogs and 30 sheep or goats. The other four manors were half this size or less. There were also two tenancies one about the size of one of the smaller manors and the other of just 16 acres. The abbey institution held lands. These increased when John, son of Nicholas, stabbed Robert de Redisham, the king's collector of tithes, with the result that his lands were escheated to the abbey.

From 1639 provision was made for the poor through the Town Estate, a bequest by Edmund Cutting. The Town House was let in four tenements, and there were other small acreages of land, some in Sibton and the remainder in the nearby parishes of Badingham and Huntingfield. Rents yielded an income for the poor, the school, and the church. In 1719, John and Dorothea Scrivener settled an estate for the education of 'ten or more' poor children. In 1840 the Scrivener family erected a school, and in 1866 an orphanage was established in what was probably one of the Town Cottages by Miss M. Green. It survived for more than twenty years growing in size, to be able to accept children from across the country.

In 1851 Rev. Westhorp recorded attendance at church. The average for Sunday mornings was 120 adults plus 100 scholars, and 200 adults with 120 scholars on Sunday afternoons; figures for scholars included school children from Peasenhall. The number of inhabitants recorded in the 1881 census was 484. The school at that time had sufficient room for an intake of 120 pupils.

Farming was the main business. There were thirteen farmers, one collecting taxes; another was also a dealer. Associated trades included a farm steward, two gamekeepers, a head gardener, two wheelwrights, one being a blacksmith and agricultural implement maker. There was a grocer and coachbuilder, two boot makers, a schoolmaster who lived in Peasenhall, and two parish clerks. Abbey House and Sibton Park were the principal houses, the Scrivener family and the Brookes being the principal landowners.

Agricultural mechanisation caused a decline in rural populations in the late 19th century, which has continued to the present day. At Sibton the number of inhabitants had fallen by more than a quarter by 1901. A dwindling congregation would cause Sibton church to become increasingly linked with Peasenhall. It was perhaps only the continuing use of the burial ground that was in part the reason for the continuing use of the church as a separate place of worship.

The Churchyard

The churchyard is entered through an arched gateway. First unveiled in 1920, and recently renovated by Gus Kitson and his team of craftsmen, it commemorates the tragedy of both world wars.

Many graves remind us that tragedy strikes at village life equally in peacetime. Bartholomew Balls died in 1838. He worked for the Spink family of brewers. Falling into a vat of boiling wort, he was able to get himself out, but badly scalded, he walked alone to his home across the fields, and died there from his burns a few hours later.

Perhaps no epitaph is more poignant than that of the nurse who died from typhoid contracted from a patient, or the record of the only daughter who died aged just seven months, to be followed ten weeks later by her mother at the age of 25. While the randomness of the age of death is nowhere presented more clearly than on the tomb of the Spink family just south of the porch, the verses on many grave stones record hope as well as loss in equal part. The journey through life and beyond death of the people buried there is recorded in the epitaphs of many of the headstones, and though traffic now moves fast beyond the hedge along the road through Sibton, the churchyard itself retains all the qualities and the atmosphere of Gray's famous elegy.

The ancient churchyard is above all a quiet place where the wild daffodils bloom each spring, where warmth seems reflected from the nave roof on a summer's day, and where the autumn sunset turns the bark of the pines and cedars a gentle rose pink. Beneath their boughs, the path to the glebe disappears into deep shade, and as the light fades the rooks fly noisily overhead to roost in sudden silence in the abbey wood on the opposite hill.

A Church Building Re-vitalised

At various periods in time thc churches of Sibton and Peasenhall have been run jointly: Sibton with the chapel of Peasenhall, and more recently Peasenhall with the chapel-of-ease of Sibton. A small notice below the east window of the porch states: 'marriages may be solemnised in this chapel'. It dates from 1885 when the parishes of Peasenhall and Sibton were amalgamated, and the church became a chapel of ease to Peasenhall meaning that the legal responsibility for the upkeep of the church fell on a single church council for both parishes. The parishioners of Sibton could no longer organise the affairs of their own church. As the result of long-term neglect, the church was almost closed in 1996. It was the formation of the Friends of St. Peter's Sibton that altered all this.

The Friends of St. Peter's Sibton, a registered charity (Charity No. 1063822), was formed in 1996 under the chairmanship of Alfred Wolton. This followed a harrowing meeting between parishioners determined to save the church building and representatives of the diocese who were threatening its closure. In just under a year the Friends proved their ability. They raised sufficient funds to begin work on a major restoration of the fabric. They have continued their efforts and have become a lifeline for this ancient and much loved building. The aims of the charity are to preserve the church as a place of worship in the parish and additionally, in order to meet needs in the wider community, to install a range of facilities so that the nave can be more widely used.

Since that time urgent work on the fabric has been carried out, including repairs to the tower and parts of the roof, and repairs to, as well re-glazing of the windows. Internally the flooring of the nave has been made safe, new heating and electrical services have been installed together with a kitchen servery that extends from a simple cabinet at the west end of the nave. Toilets have been built in the churchyard. The work of the Friends has revitalised the church building. In 2005 Sibton Church was once again returned to the full status of the parish church of Sibton. The work of maintaining the fabric falls jointly to the Parochial Church Council and the Friends of St Peter's Sibton.

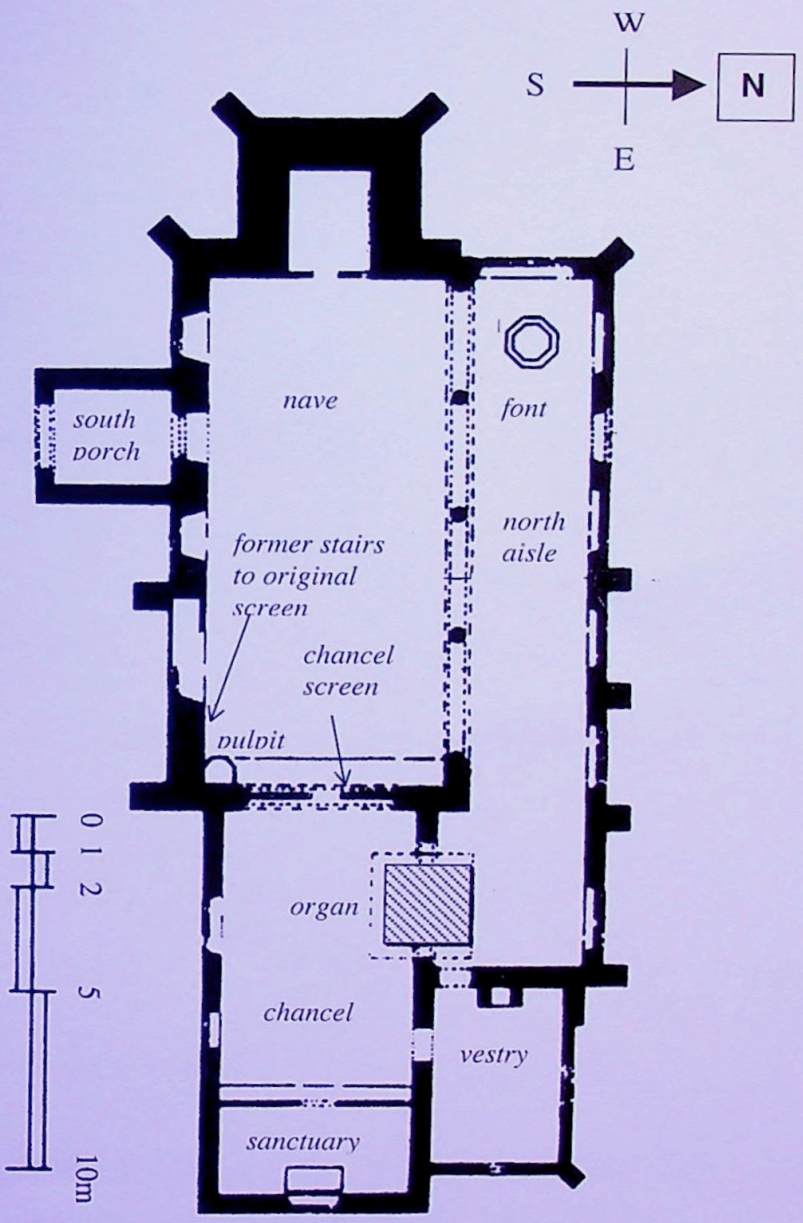
"We must look again at its past with appreciation and revert to its mediaeval pattern of use, combining the religious focus of the chancel with the nave's use as a village meeting place and indoor activity centre".

Thanks and Acknowledgements

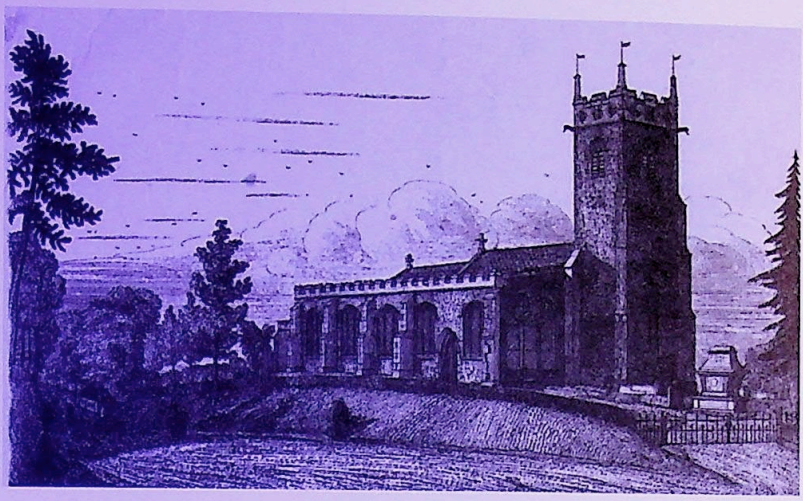
Special thanks are owed to Roy Tricker whose research and observations on the church building and its history have been an invaluable source of information during the preparation of this guide.
I am indebted to the late Fred Pearson, whose notes on the parish and church of Sibton were particularly useful as a resource concerning the history of the parish, and also to the Reverend Canon Richard Ginn whose research has provided valuable additional material.
I owe many thanks to Jan Belton for the use of her research into the stained glass in the parish church, and her notes on the manors of Sibton and Peasenhall, and to Diana Allen for providing notes, as well as earlier copies of church guides, and articles concerning the activities of the Friends of St. Peter's Sibton whose fund raising has ensured the survival of the church building into the 21st century.
I have used the record of the monumental inscriptions of Sibton Church produced by the Suffolk Family History Society in 1996, and the notes on the church bells written up by R.W.M.Clouston in 1980. Peter Bumstead kindly provided notes on the history of the organs.
The photographs on the front cover and on the first page of this guide are taken from the brochure produced by the Friends of St Peter's Sibton for their fund raising appeal. Other photographs are from my own collection.
I am very grateful to Ruth and David Whittaker for proofreading and giving valuable advice in preparing the text of this guide.
Lastly, I am very grateful for being given the opportunity to write this church guide. The work has given great pleasure, and I have been informed immensely, both from the point of view of features so far unnoticed around the building and its churchyard, and also I have been given a perspective on the history of this beautiful church building, added to and adorned during centuries of loving care.

Andrew Campbell. 2015

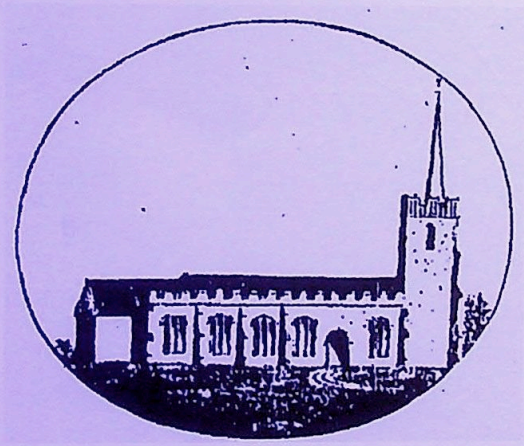
St. Peter's Church, Sibton
is one of a group of eight churches in the Yoxmere Benefice.
You are welcome to visit the other churches in our benefice, all of which are open during daylight hours. These are the churches of Dunwich, Darsham, Middleton, Peasenhall, Theberton, Westleton, and Yoxford.



Plan of St. Peter's Church
SIBTON



Sibton Church c 1844



Sibton Church: the spire
was removed in 1813

Price £2.50