



St Margaret's Church, Syleham

Location

Situated on the bank of the River Waveney, the church was strategically placed at the end of the causeway which once continued over the river and provided the only crossing between Suffolk and Norfolk. The area was at one time an island in the marshes and in the Spring is bright with snowdrops and daffodils.

Dedication

Although originally dedicated to St Margaret of Scotland, a deeply religious woman and great-grandmother of Henry II who briefly visited Syleham in 1174, the church was at some point re-dedicated to St Mary and was officially St Mary's for many years. However, local people continued to call it St Margaret's and the Diocesan Bishop confirmed this dedication in 2008.

The Church and its priests

Until the Reformation, Syleham's priests were appointed from Wingfield College and then by the Bishops of East Anglia. During the Commonwealth, Congregationalist Samuel Habergham was an influential Minister here and is buried in the chancel.

Syleham, now in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich, is one of seven parishes in the care of Revd Canon Eleanor Goodison. We at St Margaret's try to be a living presence in the village and hope that you will absorb a sense of the 'beauty of holiness' during your visit - and that you will perhaps join us in our worship one day; the notice board gives details of services.

Exterior

The church is thought to date from 11th century Saxon times: it has fragments of Saxon limestone work at the NW angle of the nave whilst the lower courses of the tower, of local flint, are also Saxon. The use of flint would have dictated the tower's shape. Opinions vary as to whether the main part of the tower is Norman or 14th century, with a later top. Putlog holes, for scaffolding, are visible.

The tower contains three bells, which are rung with aid of a recently installed chiming apparatus. There is a 15th century tenor bell by Braziers of Norwich with an inscription to Thomas à Becket, a bell by John Darbie dated 1676 and a 1708 bell by John Goldsmith of Redgrave and inscribed 'Margaret'. There is a ground floor lancet window in its west wall and four small slit windows at belfry level, all thought to be 14th century.

The tower and chancel (early 13th century) are both older than the late 14th century nave; marks on the tower indicate that the nave was once thatched. Could a fire have led to a re-build producing the external appearance we see today? The chancel roof was last repaired in 2006.

The south porch was built in 1450, funded by Alice de la Pole, granddaughter of Geoffrey Chaucer and wife of the Duke of Suffolk, of nearby Wingfield Castle. The arch bears the arms (west) of the de la Poles and (east) Chaucer and de Burghersh. There is a holy water stoup to the east of the ancient door, which retains its 13th century furniture. As a reminder that the interior of the church was once rich in colour, tiny remnants of paint can be seen in the crevices of some of the carvings around the door.

The churchyard, which includes devils-bit scabious and meadow saxifrage, is a designated County Wildlife Site.

The church is a member of the Round Tower Churches Society and of Suffolk Historic Churches Trust

Interior

Immediately in view, as one enters the church through the 13th century nave door, is the font, thought to be 14th century on an earlier base – suggested to be a very old font turned upside down. The wooden cover is dated 1667.

Standing against the north wall is a 13th century chest, banded with iron and with five locks. The oil lamps in nave and chancel are sadly not functioning.

The windows in the nave are Perpendicular (1350-1550), whilst the two lancet windows in the north wall of the chancel are 13th century. The east window is Victorian, with Decorated tracery. If you look carefully at the window to the south of the sanctuary, you will notice scratched signatures .. an evocative reminder of the everyday.

The lower steps of the turret staircase which once gave access to a rood screen can be seen beside the pulpit, which, like the attractive communion rail and the former altar table, is 17th century. There is a simple piscina in the south wall of the sanctuary.

There are several memorials in the chancel, including six slabs and two wall tablets (dating from 1638 to 1825) in memory of members of the Barry family, of Syleham Hall; brass inscriptions to William Fuller (died 1634) and his wife; an 18th century inscription to the Lambe sisters; and a 19th century memorial to Augustus Cooper, curate for 44 years.

Memorials in the nave include an 18th century slab to the memory of three brothers who all died in their late teens; a wall tablet in memory of Alfred Read of Monks Hall; and further, more recent, tablets in memory of Col and Mrs Leader of Monks Hall, of their son John, and of Anne Napier of Syleham Manor.

There is a framed list of incumbents from 1315, a facsimile copy of Syleham's Domesday Book entry, and a handsome stone War Memorial tablet.