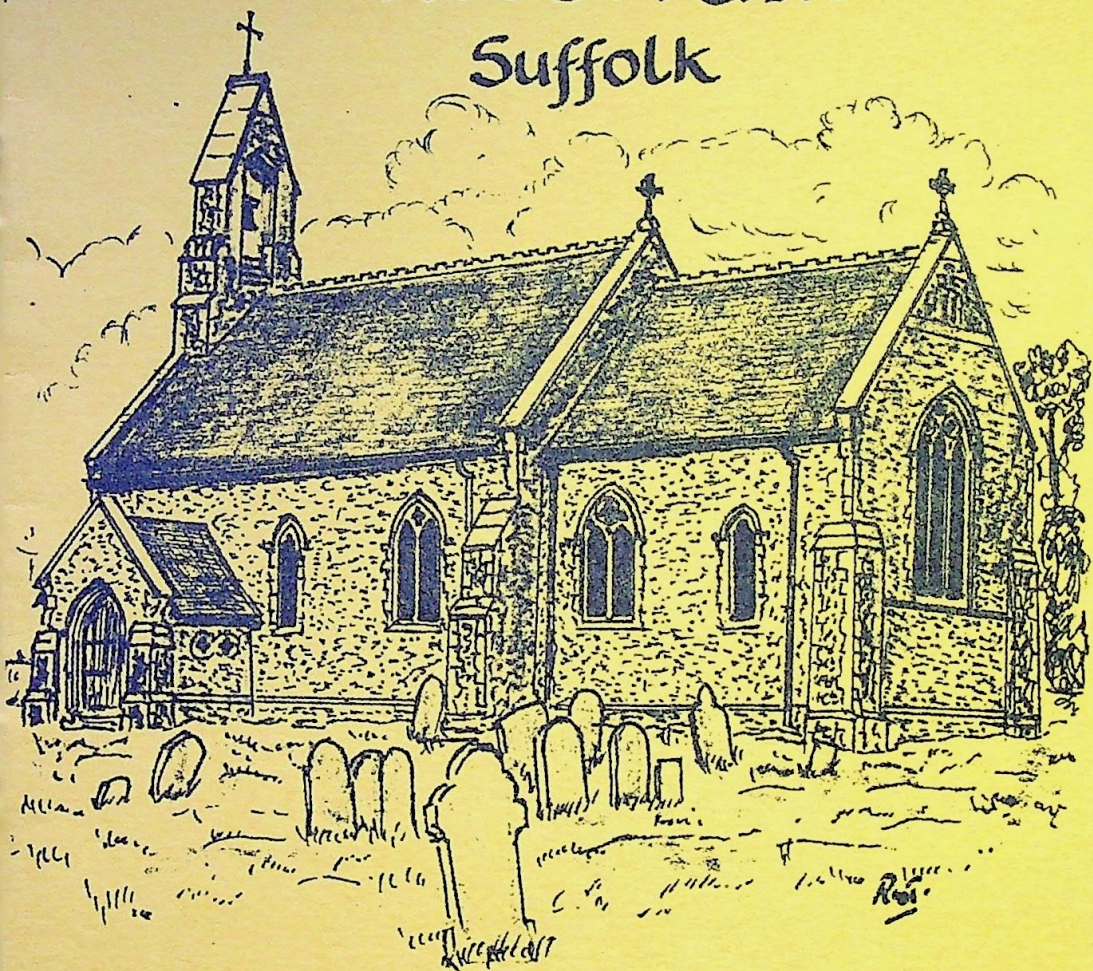


Saint Mary's Church Willisham Suffolk



Brief History
and Guide

WELCOME TO SAINT MARY'S CHURCH, WILLISHAM,
which stands at the heart of its small parish, not far from the site of Willisham Hall (a 17th century manor house which was destroyed by fire in 1934) and about half a mile south of the main centre of population at Willisham Tye, near the border with the parish of Barking.

Although the building that we see today was erected in 1877-8, it stands upon the foundations of an earlier church which probably dated from Norman times, and so Christian worship has taken place on this spot almost certainly for 900 years.

THE MEDIAEVAL CHURCH

The Domesday Book (1086) records a church at Willisham, with 32 acres of land. Some 19th century writers describe the pre 1877 church as Norman and so it is highly likely that the core of that building dated from the 11th century.

The old church was a small and rustic building, with few airs and graces, but clearly with a great deal of charm. It consisted of nave and chancel (with tiled roofs) and a pretty south porch of brick, added probably during the 1600s. The flint-rubble walls were covered with plaster rendering and were originally unbuttressed, although brick buttresses had been added to strengthen them in the 17th or 18th centuries. The windows on the south side had simple "Y" tracery of c. 1300 and the east window appears to have been 15th century. Perched on top of the western section of the nave was a very short and squat wooden belfry, crowned with a tiled pyramid roof and an attractive vane. Davy's etching of the exterior in 1844 shows this rather inviting little building in its churchyard, with a glimpse of the Hall in the background. He also illustrated the two coffin-lids which were lying loose in the churchyard to the north of the church. These dated from the 13th century and had beautiful decorative crosses in relief. They could still be seen in 1934, but since that time have either been removed or obscured from view.

William Dowsing, the Puritan inspector of churches .

The architect was Herbert J. Green, A.R.I.B.A., of Norwich, who restored several churches in Norfolk and Suffolk. He rebuilt the large Norfolk churches at Wells-next-the-Sea and Winterton and also the delightful little hill-top church at Darmsden, only two miles (as the crow flies) from Willisham. He trained in the office of Sir Arthur Blomfield, and his work shows remarkable dignity and sensitivity. The contractor was Mr. R. Tooley of Bury St. Edmunds, and the total cost of the new church was about £1,300.

Work was well under-way by September, 1877, when progress was described as "slow but sure". The new church was built upon the exact foundations of its mediaeval predecessor; its total length being 50 feet. The Nave is 21 feet wide and the Chancel $15\frac{1}{2}$ feet, whilst the Porch is $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet square.

Unfortunately several memorial slabs to members of the Leake and Brownrigg families (who owned the Manor during the 17th and 18th centuries) were done away with at the rebuilding.

Mr. Green chose the transition between the Early English and Decorated styles of architecture, which was fashionable between c. 1250-1300 for the windows and doorways, although he gave the east end of the church and the Porch clasping buttresses, which were a feature of churches at least a century earlier.

The completed church was re-opened on Friday, 31st May, 1878, when the Bishop of Norwich (in whose diocese most of Suffolk was then situated) preached. The service was described as being of "a plain Evangelical character". It is interesting that during the first few years of the church's life, entry was through the west doorway, whilst the Porch was used as a Vestry.

The church building has remained virtually unaltered since it was built, and today it remains a simple yet beautiful Victorian period-piece, which has been judiciously designed not to look at all out of place in the Suffolk countryside.

The fire which destroyed the Hall in 1934 also sadly destroyed the parish registers and church plate which had been stored there. So perished an Elizabethan chalice, a paten of 1647, a pewter almsdish, and registers recording Baptisms, Marriages and Burials at Willisham from 1558.

WHAT TO SEE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

An unforgettable feature of St. Mary's is its superb elevated SETTING, almost at the summit of a ridge. It is visible for some distance to the south and stands well when viewed from the road to Somersham and from the village of Offton. It is worth taking time to enjoy the splendid panoramic views southwards from the churchyard, over beautiful undulating countryside, with Offton church in the valley below to the south-west. This is an excellent spot to bring visitors who have been informed that Suffolk is "flat"!

The church itself is a small, neat and uncomplicated building, yet it does have character; and here Herbert Green has managed as well as any Victorian architect to re-create the 'feel' of a mediaeval country church. The walls are faced with flints and brown cobble-stones, and dressed stone is used in the windows, doorways, corners, gable-crosses, etc.

In the WINDOWS, we see the evolution from Early English (with single "lancet" windows) to Decorated architecture (with larger windows, divided into "lights" and enriched with tracery patterns at the top). Mr. Green also had the wisdom to include a variety of window design here.

The CHANCEL, which is strengthened by clasping buttresses at its eastern corners, has on the north and south sides a double window with simple "geometrical" tracery and a trefoil headed lancet window. The three-light east window has two small quatrefoils (four-lobed designs) in the tracery. In the NAVE we see two-light windows, with "Y" tracery enclosing quatrefoils and single trefoil-headed lancets.

At the WEST END is a doorway set beneath a gable, above which is a pair of trefoil-headed lancet windows. Rising from three small arches is the elegant gabled bell-cot, embellished with a pair of quatrefoils beneath the open arch containing the bell, which was made for the old church in 1777. The bell-cot is strengthened each side with small buttresses capped by double gables.

The south PORCH, which has clasping buttresses at the corners, and is lit by pairs of quatrefoil openings to the east and west, shelters the south doorway, by which we enter.

WHAT TO SEE INSIDE THE CHURCH

The interior is bright, homely and cared-for. Although a small church, it is well proportioned and appears quite lofty for its size. The eye is rightly drawn towards the east end where a pleasant dash of colour is provided by the altar-frontal, the curtain above, and the stained glass in the east window. The other windows are all filled with slightly tinted "Cathedral" glass, which was so popular with the Victorian restorers.

Most of the craftsmanship to be found here dates from 1877-8, but this is very worthy, as we would expect from Herbert Green's designs. This includes the arch-braced ROOFS to the nave and chancel, which rest upon moulded stone corbels; the CHANCEL ARCH, which has short, circular stone shafts, with moulded capitals and bases, terminating about half-way down the sides; also the EAST WINDOW, with its internal shafts, which is filled with STAINED GLASS by Heaton, Butler & Bayne, in memory of Charles, Maria and William Boby of Willisham Hall. The Window depicts the Crucifixion, flanked by two women (including the Blessed Virgin Mary holding a lily) and two apostles (including St. Peter with his keys); scenes of the Nativity, the woman anointing Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee, and the Resurrection, are shown beneath.

The Nave is equipped with BENCHES which have simple ends, but the CHOIR STALLS in the chancel, which are made of oak, have carved poppyhead ends, with leaf designs in the 15th century fashion. The fronts of these stalls are decorated with motifs of pairs of pierced openings,

with quatrefoils above, and these can also be seen in the PULPIT and READING DESK. The attractive LECTERN has wooden tracery in the style of the 15th century.

The sill of the south-east window in the Sanctuary is lowered to form a SEDILE (or seat) in mediaeval fashion. Note the richly-patterned TILES (probably by Minton) in the chancel and sanctuary floors. Flanking the east window are the LORD'S PRAYER, CREED AND COMMANDMENTS on brass plaques set in figured marble. In similar materials are the two MEMORIAL PLAQUES on the chancel walls, to Charles Boby (died 1842) and Maria his wife (died 1862) on the south, and to William Boby (died 1874) and Edward Boby (who died in New Zealand in 1868) on the north.

The only other memorial in the church is the WAR MEMORIAL on the north wall of the nave, commemorating six Willisham folk who gave their lives in World War I. Also on this wall may be seen a PAINTING of the exterior of the church in 1982 by R.S. Prentice, and HENRY DAVY'S ETCHING of the old church in 1844.

Perhaps the greatest treasure in the church is its beautiful 12th century OCTAGONAL FONT, which was preserved from the old church and carefully restored in 1877-8. There are many fonts of similar design to this in East Anglia. Around the stem are four handsome lions. At the top of the stem is a band of flowers and beneath the bowl are angels with outstretched wings. The eight panels of the bowl have borders studded with tiny flowers and contain four angels bearing shields, alternating with four larger hanging shields. At one time these shields would have been emblazoned with emblems and symbols.

The music has been provided by an American reed ORGAN, made by the Este Organ Company.

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TO OUR VISITORS . . .

We hope that you have enjoyed the peace and beauty of this little church and that you have felt "at home" here in our Father's House. Please pray for the priest and people whose Spiritual Home it is. The people of this small community would welcome with real gratitude any contributions that their visitors can spare to help them maintain this church, intact and beautiful, for future generations to use and enjoy.

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This brief History and Guide was written by Roy Tricker, to whom the present Rector and Churchpeople are most truly grateful.

Mr. Tricker expresses his personal gratitude to Cynthia Brown for advice, and to the Staff of the County Record Office for the use of their facilities.

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