

A SHORT GUIDE TO FLIXTON PARISH CHURCH

BENEFICE OF THE SAINTS



- 700 The church traces its origins back to the mission of St. Felix, Bishop of Burgundy who established Christianity in East Anglia in the 7th century. His figure is represented on the Flixton village sign. The first church building, of timber, wattle and thatch is thought to have been erected around 700 AD. In Saxon times a stone church and tower were built.
- 1258 In a time of religious revival when the Norman nave and short chancel were added, a priory for eighteen nuns of the Augustinian order was founded nearby by Lady Margery de Creke in 1258. The Prioress then appointed the vicars of Flixton as well as other churches in the region. A small section of the priory wall still stands near Abbey farmhouse, uphill from the church. It is not open to the public but may be viewed from the road.
- 1349 The Black Death of 1349, which decimated the villages and caused a shortage of agricultural labour, impoverished the priory whose income derived from land in Norfolk. As a result the chancel of the church, for which it was responsible, fell into ruins. In 1528 Flixton priory, along with all monastic foundations in England, was disendowed by Henry VIII's chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey and leased for £38 a year.
- 1528
- 1547 In 1547 ownership of the Priory was granted to the Tasburgh family who had lived at St. Peter's Hall in nearby St. Peter South Elmham since 1220. They robbed-out much of the architectural stone to enhance their own home, where it is still evident.
- 1600 The bitter religious spirit of the times was displayed at Flixton in the year 1600 when the congregation reacted against the Puritan practices of the vicar of the time, Thomas Daynes. Roy Strong in his book, "A Little History of the English Country Church" (Jonathan Cape 2007) records that, "*Literate members of his congregation took their Prayer Books to church and started to list all the things he omitted: Daynes refused to use the sign of the cross in baptism or allow any godparents; he wouldn't wear a surplice, allow the churching of women or even pray for Queen Elizabeth as Supreme Governor. His congregation took action and had him ejected from his living; he, in turn, denounced them as papists and atheists.*"
- 1615 John Tasburgh built Flixton Hall in the grounds of the old Priory in 1615 and the family remained adherents to the Roman Catholic faith. However, they enjoyed the toleration of Charles II who, during a royal tour of Suffolk admired Flixton Hall and on being told that it belonged to a "Popish dog" replied "*But the dog has a very beautiful kennel.*"

A memorial on the north wall of the church commemorates Margaret Tasburgh who died in 1705, having been *"a patient sufferer in prison with her husband during ye persecution called ye popish Plott, of which hee was accused and tried for his life, but a Jury of worthy Gentlemen of Suffolk had justice done to him."*

The Popish Plot was the imagination of Titus Oates who was born in Rutland in 1649. He had an interesting history of religious allegiances. His father was a Baptist preacher. Expelled from Merchant Taylors School in 1665, and leaving Cambridge without a degree he was ordained into the Church of England. In 1674, whilst serving as a curate in Hastings, he was imprisoned for perjury involving tales about a local schoolmaster. Despite this he became the chaplain to the Protestants in the household of the 6th Earl of Norfolk, who was a Roman Catholic. Titus Oates became friendly with Israel Tonge, who was a fanatical anti-Jesuit. Tonge persuaded Titus Oates to betray Catholics to the Government.

Oates embarked on finding out more about Catholics and their activities by joining the Catholic Church, which he did in 1677. His Roman Catholic religious education was not a success and he was thrown out of seminaries in Valladolid (in Spain) and Saint Omer (in France). He returned to England in 1678. Together with Tonge he manufactured what is now known as "the Popish Plot".

1678

Oates and Tonge claimed that an agreement had been made by Jesuits at the White Horse Tavern in Fleet Street to assassinate King Charles II. The intention was said to be to replace King Charles on the English throne with his brother, James Duke of York, who was a Roman Catholic and would be sympathetic to the Jesuits. As part of Oates' and Tonge's scheme Oates made a deposition setting out his allegations to Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey, who was well known as a Justice of the Peace, on 28th September 1678. A month later Godfrey was murdered, an act which appeared to add credibility to the Popish Plot and caused great alarm. It is now thought that Oates may himself have organised the killing of Sir Edmund. A wave of terror swept through London. Titus Oates was hailed as a hero for bringing the Plot to light. In the frenzy, which arose following Oates' allegations, 35 people were executed.

In due course inconsistencies in Oates' story came to light. Oates was called to the Privy Council and was questioned by King Charles about his story. The King was not convinced by Oates' claims and in due course the Duke of York persuaded a court to order Oates to pay him

£100,000 in damages for defamation. King Charles described the plot to his brother as "*better than a play*".

1685 After the Duke of York came to the throne as King James II in 1685, Titus Oates was tried for treason. Found guilty of perjury he was flogged, sentenced to be pilloried annually, and imprisoned for life.

King James was deposed in 1688. In 1689 Oates was pardoned and set free. He was granted an allowance of £500 to pay his debts and an annuity of £300. Later he married a rich widow, joined the Wapping Baptists in 1693 and was a frequent preacher. The Baptists expelled him in 1701 describing his as "*a disorderly person and a hypocrite*". He died in obscurity in July 1705.

In his "Guide to Suffolk Churches" (2009 reprint) Mortlock notes that "*accounts of the plot seldom mention the wives of the accused and I have never seen a reference to their imprisonment with their husbands.*" This would seem to make the church's memorial to Margaret Tasburgh fairly unique.

1753 In 1753, the male line of the Tasburghs died out, and the estate passed to the Wybarne family, the pair of tall tablets at the east end of the north wall of the church showing that Richard Tasburgh's daughter, Lettice, was a Wybarne by marriage. That family then sold the estate to the Adairs, a family of Scottish descent who later settled in Ireland. For a long while they were the Patrons of the living. William Adair who purchased the estate left a charity to provide red cloaks for the schoolgirls, blue jerseys for the boys and boots for both, so "Flixton children" were easily distinguished when visiting town. In the 19th century, when a village school was started, the charity paid for white aprons for new girl students.

1823 Until 1823, when it relocated to Bungay, a small Benedictine Community, retained by the Tasburghs, lived in the village in what is now known as "The Priest's House". The house then became the vicarage.

1830 In 1830 the church was part of the "Excursions through the County of Suffolk" made by David Elisha Davy whose journal was published by the Suffolk Records Society in 1982. On Tuesday 18th May he wrote, "*We went to Flixton. The church here stands on the edge of a hill, with a sharp declivity to the South. Here I found a great deal to do, and some hours were consumed before all was finished. The church is not in a proper state for the place of worship of a man of so large an income as Mr. Adair, and who has so little occasion for his money. The*

Chancel has long been dilapidated, but no large sum of money would be required to put the pews and seats in the church into a little better state than they at present appear in. But as he has only a life estate in the property, I suppose he thinks expence (sic) unnecessary."

The Adair referred to by Davy was Alexander Shafto Adair, Esq; an Army agent, who died just four years later at the age of 95.

The Census of Religious Worship of 1851 records the population of Flixton as 210. The church is described as having 80 free seats and 120 sittings that were privately rented. This "pew rent" formed part of the vicar's income. Holy Communion was held four times a year with an average of 18 communicants. An average of 60 persons attended morning worship with 90 at evening worship. There were 25 Sunday scholars and "*very few Dissenters*" in the village, "*all but one family*" occasionally attending church.

1851

In 1855, with the chancel still in ruins, the old Saxon tower finally collapsed, and Sir Robert Shafto Adair put the repairs into the capable hands of Anthony Salvin, who 20 years before had done major work on Norwich cathedral. The new tower was uniquely modelled as a "Rhenish helm", a design that echoed Anglo-Saxon censer covers. The only surviving Saxon example is that of the tower of the Saxon church at Sompting in Sussex. There remains debate as to whether Salvin was rebuilding Flixton's old tower or creating a completely new one. A sketch of the church made in 1818 shows the church to have a square tower topped by a gilded weather-cock, but even this evidence is open to interpretation. Marks on the tower stonework in this sketch could indicate the remains of an older Rhenish helm that had been re-built into a standard square form.

1855

In 1886, R H H. Bishop, M.A., vicar of St Andrew's, Sunderland, noted in his book "Architecture, especially in relation to our Parish Churches" (published by SPCK), "*The tower of Flixton Church, Suffolk, which was demolished in 1856, appears also to have had four gables. It was a tower of the same period (as Sompting), and was probably roofed in a similar manner.*" Arthur Mee disagrees, though in his King's England volume on Suffolk, admits that it is "*a rare copy of Saxon craftsmanship.*"

1856

In 1857 Thomas Willement was commissioned to design the east window glass, both for the lancets and the roundel above.

1857

In 1861 the nave and north aisle were rebuilt in Perpendicular style.

1861

- 1871 In 1871 "The Priest's House" was considered inadequate accommodation for the vicar, and a new vicarage was built adjacent to the church. The old house was then used by the Flixton Estate. That same year, Theodosia, Lady Waveney, the wife of the late Sir Robert Shafto Alexander Adair (d.1886), died.
- 1887 In 1887 "The Priest's House" was the residence of the estate agent of the Adairs - a certain Captain Charles Boycott. Boycott had been a land agent in Ireland where, because of his harsh treatment of tenants, he was ostracized by his neighbours, thus giving his name to the practice of "boycotting".
- 1893 In 1893 Sir Hugh Edward Adair commissioned the expansion and restoration of the chancel. This time the Norman style was chosen, perhaps in a conscious effort to preserve what had been there before. A floor of gleaming coloured Devonshire and Irish marble was laid, and elegant wooden choir stalls and a panelled reredos were carved. The existing glass by Willement was saved and re-used, whilst new glass by Burlison & Grylls in the north and south lancet windows depict Moses, Elijah, David, Peter and Paul. An Easter Sepulchre was also constructed in the north wall of the Sanctuary.
- Such was the extent of the restoration that little remains of the original mediaeval fabric. although the building was remodelled along the lines of the earlier one. The nave pillars are mainly 13th century, and some bench ends also appear to be medieval, whilst the Jacobean linen-fold pulpit bears the arms of the Duke family, partnered in one shield with the Parker family, and the other with the Barnard family. Mee considers the furnishings to be "*dignified and beautiful*", and points out the unusual model of a church on one of pew ends.
- 1902 The new century dawned with the Adair family concerned to build a suitable memorial for Theodosia, and in 1902 the imposing five-sided chapel was built at the north-western corner of the church to house the life-size marble figure of her sculpted by John Bell, whose "Babes in the Wood" group can be viewed in Norwich Castle Museum. Theodosia is shown with hands clasped, kneeling on an alabaster tasselled cushion decorated with her family arms and badges. With its fan-vaulted roof and clustered columns, Arthur Mee considers the chapel to be "*worthy of a cathedral*".
- 1920 That the north aisle had for a long time housed an altar is evidenced by the piscina on its south side, and in the 1920's this side chapel was dedicated to the Mothers Union. It has an altar of local oak, and on it there used to be a small bronze crucifix in memory of the eight local

men who did not come back from the Great War.

In the Second World War the nearby Flixton aerodrome became the base for the 446th Bomb Group USAF, and a memorial book records the names of those whose lives were lost on active service. On the east side of the organ casing are mounted two large aerial photographs showing the airfield layout "Then and Now". The connection with former members of the "Bungay Buckaroos" has continued, and as well as various photographic and other ephemera in the display case, the old comrades have donated the pair of memorial gates at the entrance to the churchyard. To the side of the entrance path, on the site of an old cottage, a Garden of Remembrance has been created.

1941

In 1948, the whole Flixton Estate of 2,970 acres - then under the management of Major-General Sir Allan Shafto Adair - was offered for sale: there were 21 farms, several small-holdings, two licensed public houses, two schools, three village post offices, various houses, numerous cottages, marshlands, woodlands, and grazing rights. The family retained ownership of Flixton Hall and Flixton Park, plus Home Farm and Home Woods. Everything was purchased by Metropolitan Railway Country Estates Limited, although many of the cottage dwellers were later able to buy their homes.

1948

Sir Robert died in 1949 and was succeeded by his only son, Major-General Sir Allan Adair, CB, DSO, MC, JP, DL, 6th Baronet who had been commissioned into the Grenadier Guards in 1916. He then resided at Amner Hall on Her Majesty the Queen's Sandringham Estate and served in the Queen's Bodyguard of the Yeoman of the Guard. He was a distinguished soldier of both World Wars and commanded the Guards Armoured Division in World War II. According to his 1986 memoirs, Sir Allan regarded Flixton Hall as "*a vast, uncomfortable mausoleum, still with no proper central heating. In winter the children had to wear their overcoats when moving from room to room*". The Estate was expensive to keep and maintain, and owing to heavy death duties levied on his father's Estate, General Adair was forced to sell. The decision was no doubt made easier by the fact that his only son and heir, Desmond Allan Shafto Adair, had been killed whilst serving with the Grenadier Guards in World War II, during the battle of Monte Camino in Italy.

1949

On retirement General Adair had set up residence in Raveningham and, in 1950, the massive library and all the fine contents of Flixton Hall were offered for sale. Despite efforts by both the East and West Suffolk County Councils to buy Flixton Hall and 250 acres of the land for use

1950

- 1952 as a joint farm institute, it was sold privately to a speculator. Two years after the purchaser had removed and sold all the protective lead from the roof, water was causing serious problems to the interior so he applied and gained permission to demolish the building in June 1952. As a result, one of the most magnificent buildings in East Anglia, and one which had once been considered by the Royal Family for their country home in East Anglia, but which lost out to Sandringham through the latter having better rail connections to London, was allowed to disappear forever. A large wooden door rescued from the demolition can still be seen on the "Samson & Hercules House", 15-16 Tombland, in Norwich.
- 2000 As with any church building, there is a continual round of maintenance. At the start of the new century a major roof beam at the south-west corner of the church was found to have rotted. This was due to water penetration at the join between nave roof and tower. In the course of this work, the bas-relief cherubs that form a double band around the top of the walls were discovered to be made of plaster and not wood as originally thought.
- 2007 In 2007 the church was the target for thieves who saw the lead roofing as a valuable source of income whilst the world trade price for metals soared. After several thefts an alarm system was installed.
- As it has done over the centuries, Flixton church continues to provide a spiritual heart for its community. With a regular pattern of services, in both traditional and modern language, it remains open for public worship, private prayer and quiet reflection throughout the changing seasons of the year.
- 2014 The centenary of the start of the First World War saw the church receive a folder listing the details of all those commemorated on the Great War memorial. This is available to view. The banner for the 1916 National Mission of Repentance and Hope was also re-displayed in the north aisle.
- 2016 For much of the year the nave roof underwent major restoration. Many new timbers were carved and inserted, and these have been left unstained. The exterior was re-leaded and the interior lighting improved. The plaster angel frieze was also restored. This was all financed by the Doreen Daphne Skinner Trust - a fund set up after the church received a generous bequest.