



ST. MARY'S, KERSEY

## *Introduction*

Kersey has very few records of the days of its prosperity as a weaving village. Of one thing, however, we can be certain; it was for a very much larger community than the present that the church was enlarged in the 14th century. Even though the work was left unfinished, what has been handed down to us is still a large church for the size of the village which it serves—not only large, but expensive to maintain, because of its exposed position. Successive generations did their best with the money and skills available to them, but as the village declined in size and wealth, so it became more and more difficult to keep the church in a good state of repair. Cracks appeared in the tower, and the bells, after ringing for Queen Victoria's Jubilee, were restricted to chiming for fear that their shaking would bring down the whole structure. The minutes of the Vestry meeting on the 8th August, 1907, record the decision to put out collecting boxes for the restoration of the tower and bells. . . .

After two world wars and many social and economic changes, it has fallen to this generation to carry out this work and, with it, the restoration of the main fabric of the church. The bells in their new frame were rehung and dedicated in 1970. Work on the outside of the church—apart from the South porch—was completed a year later. A new floor was installed in 1976. That the large sum of money needed to complete the work so far has been raised within the last twelve years is due in the first place to the hard work of the people of Kersey, determined that their church should continue to stand guard over the village, as it has done for centuries past. But they would not have succeeded without the generosity of thousands of friends and visitors from all over the world, who responded to the public Appeal.

It remains now to see that funds are built up to ensure that the work which has been done will not be undone through neglect.

“WHAT are we to look for?” you ask.

“The Medieval Screen in the north aisle, the south porch roof, and the lectern with its beautifully carved eagle, all of these are 500 years old.”

“Our visit must be brief,” you may say, “what other things of interest would you point out?”

Look out for the squints in the north aisle sanctuary, with a view of the altar through the chancel wall, and notice how the tower is not in line with the nave, but two or three feet to one side. There is also a staircase in the south wall which once led up to the medieval rood loft (above the chancel step). High above you will see traces of the carved beams in the roof which formed a canopy over the rood in medieval days.

In the village itself, don't miss the weavers' cottages and the “horse doctor's home” with the tail on the gable end.

At the end of this Guide are a few notes on the Priory, the Village, and its people of long ago.

## Kersey Church

*The Original Church* is mentioned in Doomsday Book. In its early days it was probably a small rectangular building, plain and unpretentious, with a thatched roof.

*The Present Church* is full of medieval charm, although it suffered terrible mutilation after Reformation and in the 19th century was drastically restored. Sufficient remains, however, to reveal the beauty which it once possessed when it contained its original treasures—treasures, alas, beyond replacing, but living in some subtle way among the wreckage which remains.

In the early part of the 14th century (about 1335) elaborate plans to enlarge and beautify the church were being carried out, the north aisle was built and the foundations of the tower were laid. The tower is out of centre with the nave, indicating the intention of building a south aisle also and to make a wide lofty nave symmetrical with the tower. This work was never carried out, but later the walls of the nave were heightened and the present roof erected.

*The Tower.* The massive and imposing west tower was completed in 1481 and is built entirely of flint. It is of four stages, the walls at the base being no less than five feet thick and diminishing gradually to about three feet at the belfry stage, while the unusually high parapet is only about fourteen inches in thickness.

The west doorway is unusually wide, the doors are traceried and have a good carved trail surrounding them.

*The South Porch* is a magnificent example of 15th century craftsmanship. Its delicately carved panelled roof which is only 13ft. by 11ft. is divided into sixteen panels, each panel being two feet square, and filled with diverse and elaborate tracery. Mr. Munro Cautley in his book on Suffolk Churches says, "Of its size there is probably nothing to equal it." This beautiful piece of work was formerly covered with a lath and plaster ceiling—possibly to save it from destruction—and was only discovered in 1927. Some damage to the woodwork has been caused by leaking gutters, but it was carefully restored in every detail. The exterior of the south porch is a fine example of stone and flint panelling with excellent buttresses terminating in crocketed pinnacles.

*The Font* in present use dates from the early 15th century and its panels are enriched with unusually charming and simple designs, some of which unfortunately have been mutilated. The modern oak font cover was presented in 1976. An earlier font, dating probably from the end of the 11th century or the beginning of the 12th, may be seen in the north aisle. It was for many years used turned upside down as a cottage doorstep, but was restored to the church in 1927.

*South Wall.* Note the faint traces of a wall-painting of St. George and in the middle a large hook which supported the canopy of a three-decker pulpit. Beneath, a very early and crude niche which probably held the hour glass.

*The Nave Roof* must have been very beautiful in its original form with arch braced principals alternating with hammer beams in the form of recumbent figures, the heads of which have been completely destroyed. The eastern bay was treated as a canopy of honour to the rood, the angels forming hammer beams, hold shields with emblems of Christ's crucifixion. The whole bay was painted, several rafters retaining intact their original colour decoration, which is a most unusual form of trail with white predominating.

*Lectern.* The base of the lectern is another example of 15th century craftsmanship, but unfortunately at some time has been exposed to the weather. It has delicately pierced buttresses to its hexagonal shaft with little image stools between them and a well moulded base. The carved eagle—if that is what it is meant to be—is probably of different origin, but is also very ancient. The feet are unusual with long toes closely grasping the orb.

*The Chancel* was rebuilt in 1862 by King's College, Cambridge, who were then patrons of the benefice and extensive landowners in Kersey. The East window and reredos are both about a hundred years old.

*The Sanctuary* was enlarged in 1958, the rail and step being moved further to the west. The small altar was moved to the north aisle, and a new altar designed to be in proportion to both Sanctuary and East window, was put in its place. The Victorian reredos was painted by Jack Penton of Thorpe Morieux. At the same time the choir stalls were re-arranged to make a more spacious chancel.

*The Arcade* of seven arches was erected when the north aisle was built in the early 14th century and has a carved label mould and a deep and richly carved stone cornice just below the roof. Unfortunately the latter has been so badly mutilated that it is impossible to say what the subjects were, the only distinguishable portion left being immediately opposite the north door which shows a corpse in its coffin and two angels bearing away the soul.

It is interesting to notice that the decoration of this arcade was never finished, and the design on the extreme west arch overlooking the font is only roughly chiselled out. The reason very probably lies in the fact that this work was being done just before the Black Death in 1348, which carried off so many of the population including the workmen.

*The North Aisle* was completed in 1335 and was a self-contained church with a fine piscina and three stall sedilia in the sanctuary, all with richly embellished arches and canopy work. Once beautiful niches flanked the east window, and one still contains the headless figure of St. Anne holding an inscribed book. The other contains what is probably a section of the shaft of the old market cross.

*The Stone Sedilia.* On the south side of the sanctuary are three stone seats originally placed for the three clergy taking part in the Communion Service. Running at an angle across the wall between north aisle and sanctuary (just behind the sedilia) are a series of squints commanding a view of the high altar. These were presumably cut for the benefit of those who remained outside the church during the Communion Service. Looking through the squints they could watch, although kept outside, perhaps as lepers.

The sanctuary ceiling is decorated with the Arms of the Sampson family. Beneath the floor are two vaults containing the coffins of members of the Sampson and Thorrowgood families whose monuments adorn the walls.

*The Medieval Chancel Screen* dates back to the 15th century. The original colouring is quite untouched. The first, fourth and fifth figures (carrying scrolls) are prophets, while the second, third and sixth are kings. The second panel undoubtedly represents St. Edmund the martyr king (notice the arrow).

*North Wall.* The large recess in the wall of the north aisle contains an alabaster "Trinity". God the Father is represented as a seated figure, God the Son, by the crucifix, and God the Holy Spirit as a dove on the arm of the Cross. A similar "Trinity" can be found in the church at Kettlebaston.

*The Bells* form a ring of six and are of various dates and founders:

	Founder	Date
Treble	Thomas Gardiner, Sudbury	1716
2nd	Thomas Gardiner, Sudbury	1716
3rd	Stephen Tonne II, Bury St. Edmunds	1576
4th	Christopher Hudson, London	1689
5th	John Hudson, London	1662
Tenor	Miles Graye, Colchester	1638

The tenor was recast in 1969 by John Taylor & Company of Loughborough. The other bells were retuned at the same time and all six were re-hung in a new cast-iron frame in 1970, with money raised by the people of the village and grants from the Barron Bell Trust and the Leche Trust.

*The Churchyard.* Just outside the south porch, on the east side, you will find a memorial stone with the following four lines at the foot:—

Reader pass on nor waste thy time  
 On bad biography or bitter rhyme  
 For what I am this humble dust enclose,  
 And what I was is no affair of yours.

*This Beautiful* and ancient church has suffered to an extreme degree at the hands of the misguided iconoclast who has smashed and mutilated with an insane fury all that the world deemed beautiful. Everywhere one sees broken fragments which were once objects of magnificence and the result of long and patient craftsmanship.

In spite of all this wanton destruction and sacrilege the church still retains in a unique way the atmosphere of peace, as if the fury which has been hurled upon it and spent itself could not destroy its ancient calm or rob it of the love and devotion which have been built into its very walls by patient souls long since dead.

The Priory was originally a hospital or *Prebend* chapel, but about the end of the twelfth century it became the home of some of the Augustinian canons, and was dedicated to St. Mary and St. Anthony. A certain lady, Nesta de Cokefield, endowed it, amongst other things, with the advowsons of Lindsey and Kersey, and it also possessed other means of income. In fact, it appears to have been an edifice of some magnificence, and although all that remains today is a portion of its chancel—forming part of the farm buildings which are privately owned—enough can be seen to appreciate the glory of its past.

The Priory stood on a hill at the north end of the village, and with the church similarly placed on the southern slope they must have appeared like two massive sentinels guarding the village which lay spread out between them. The Priory has been dissolved these many years, and in the reign of Henry the Sixth it was presented with all its revenues to King's College, Cambridge.

### PRIORS OF KERSEY

Henry	circa 1219-1235
William	circa 1247
Reginald	circa 1258
Richard Waleys	Died 1331
Robert de Akenham	Elected 1331
John Calle	Resigned 1387
John de Polstede	Elected 1387
John Buche	Elected 1394
John Dewche	Elected 1411
Nicholas Bungaye	Resigned 1422
Richard Fyn	Elected 1422
John Duch	Elected 1431
William Woodbridge	Elected 1432

The 12th Century Seal is a painted oval, having a bust of the Blessed Virgin crowned in clouds, below is the head of St. Anthony, between them is a sun and crescent moon.

### Kersey Village

THE VILLAGE OF KERSEY is considered one of the most picturesque in Suffolk, and it has certainly retained much of its mediæval charm and feeling. The village street which runs up opposing slopes of a valley and crosses a tributary of the river Brett at the bottom is crowned on the south slope by its imposing and beautiful church, and on the north by the picturesque ruins of Kersey Priory. The stream which crosses the main street undoubtedly gave Kersey its name, for it was formerly known as Carseye, "Car" being the old name for a stream, and "Seye" denoting a ditch.

The village which is still rich in its old timbered houses once had twice its present population, and at the height of the weaving industry was undoubtedly prosperous.

Many of the old cottages still stand which once contained the looms on which was woven Kersey cloth, a strong and durable fabric for men's clothing. The neighbouring village of Lindsey wove a similar but lighter material for women which was known as Lindsey Woolsey.

The Sampson family was here as far back as the 12th century and gave their name to a hall in the village which is now a farmhouse, and there are several monuments to their memory in the church. It is worthy of notice that this ancient line is believed by some to have been connected with the famous Abbot Sampson of Bury St. Edmunds. We do know that the Abbot was the guardian of Nesta de Cokefield—the same who founded the Priory—and this seems to lend some degree of probability to the idea. Another famous line which lived here was that of the Thorrowgoods, Sir Thomas Thorrowgood was High Sheriff for the county in 1760, and his monument can be seen on the north wall of the church. Another monument is to John Thorrowgood who died in 1734, and whose wife was Bridget, the only surviving issue of the Sampsons of Sampson's Hall. In this connection another memorial is of great interest. This records the death in 1802 of Katherine Thorrowgood, the only child of Sir Thomas mentioned above, and through her decease the lineal descendants of the Sampsons and the Thorrowgoods became extinct, and it is stated that from Sampson's Hall a considerable inheritance in this parish has been transmitted without interruption through more than six centuries.

- There are in the village three commemorative oak trees.
1. In the Churchyard in memory of Winston Churchill.
  2. On the green at the entrance to Vale Lane in commemoration of the Coronation of King Edward VII.
  3. At Williams Green.

*Vicars and Priests-in-Charge  
of Kersey*

Thomas Clarke	1583
Robert Gumyill	1607—13
Thomas Miller	1635
John Sloper	1638—44
John Burgess	1644—46
William Alcocke	1647—53
Nathaniel Snow	1654—66
Thomas Horne	1670—83
George Wroth	1683—86
George Williams	1686—89
Gregory Doughty	1723—24
Charles Thackham	1724—25
Everard Stugis	1725—30
John Lane	1730—38
Nathaniel Kent	1738—66
John Howes	1766—73
Henry Inges	1773—74
Alexander Akehurst	1775—77
James Chartres	1777—78
John Gee Smith	1782—85
William Cole	1785—87
William Moore	1787—89
Thomas Barrow	1789—1801
Thomas Hart	during 1797
Joshua Hird	1891—03
Joah Furey	1803—07
Stering Kelty	1807—10
Stephen Hurnard-Hawtrey	1810—12
Sterling Kelty	1812—17
Alfred James Trash	1817—23
Charles Hatch	1823—36
Charles Chapman	1836—49
Abraham Hume	1849—78
Cecil Gordon Moore	1878
Alford Dean Mozeley	1878
William Brice Gray	1879—1907
Frank Benet Phillips	1907—15
Thomas Harding Soulby	1915—22
Daniel Kent Ambrose	1922—36
Roger Ernest Tempest	1936—42
William Walter Lillie	1942—47
William Hugh Nottage Mumford	1947—55
Sydney Edward Caller	1955—61
H. Donald L. Thomas	1961—67
Christopher R. W. Goddard	1968—73
Harry Tait	1974—75
Albert Richard Johnston	1975