# The Priory Church of St Mary Letheringham

At this priory founded by a Norman knight, black-habited Augustinian canons worked and worshipped for some 350 years. Then came the Wingfield and Naunton families, and the Priory church has now served the community for over 800 years.

Monument to William Naunton d. 1635 and his wife. He constructed a mansion to the south of the church. The figures in niches at the west end of the church came from this monument.

Tower corner pinnacle of seated animal.

Tracery of the tower west window. (14th century).

Part of the north doorway from the church nave into the Priory (c 1196).

## HISTORY

The parish worship of God has certainly gone on in Letheringham since the second half of the 11th century, for a church is mentioned in the Domesday book in 1086. How long the present church has been in parochial use is not certain for it is thought that it was preceded by one about a mile away which served the parish until its demolition sometime in the 17th. century. No trace of this building has been found, but numerous skeletons were unearthed near Letheringham Mill and Letheringham Old Hall.

The present church is the nave of the Church of a Priory founded about 1194 by William de Bovile. It was dedicated to the honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary and was a cell of Augustinian Canons of the larger Priory of St. Peter and St. Paul in Ipswich. The Canons' Chancel extended 56 feet to the east, on the level platform which is still apparent.

Those who doubt the existence of the earlier church believe that when the Priory was founded, the monastery buildings were grafted on to what had already been the existing parish church and that the present nave has, ever since its origin, been the place of parish congregational worship, the monastic part being the choir.

The Priory lasted some 350 years before being dissolved in 1537. Its parent Priory in Ipswich was dissolved by Cardinal Wolsey nine years earlier, to found his College but the Letheringham Priory was perhaps of such small value that it was allowed to continue. On its dissolution, the Priory's lane was granted to Sir Anthony Wingfield, owner of a large surrounding estate who was Captain of the Guard to Henry V111. He gave it to his daughter Elizabeth who married William Naunton of Alderton. Later their grandson Sir Robert Naunton, who was Secretary of State under James 1, built a very grand mansion house 140 yards to the south of the church which he called Letheringham Abbey, although there has never been an Abbey or an Abbot at Letheringham and the house was not built on the Priory site. The size of the great house can be judged by the fact that, in 1674, it was shown on the Hearth Tax Return as having 37 fire places. Part of the house was demolished in 1770 and the remains of

this splendid building were pulled down in 1947.

The church as it is seen today is but a sadly mutilated fragment of the former priory church. At the dissolution of the Priory in 1537, the church consisted of the west tower, the nave (to where the present east wall stands) and beyond this the chancel which was wider and slightly longer than the nave. In its former glory, the church housed a fine series of monuments and brasses commemorating Sir William de Bovile (died 1320), patron of the Priory and grandson of the founder and each of the Wingfields holding the Lordship of the Manor of Letheringham, from Sir Thomas (died 1378) to Sir Anthony (died 1638).

Almost all the treasures of Letheringham church are lost, but thanks to twenty or more distinguished antiquaries, heralds and men of letters who wrote accounts of their visits covering the period 1561 to 1786, there remains a remarkably comprehensive record of the details and the glories of the old priory church and its wealth of monuments and brasses of outstanding craftsmanship.

The sufferings of the old church began soon after the suppression of the priory in 1536. By the end of the 16th. century, notes taken by a visitor to the church reveal that several of the memorials and brasses had been considerably damaged by the removal of marginal inscriptions and shields. The losses were considered to be the work of metal pilferers, who took just as much as they could easily prize up but how this was tolerated by the resident Wingfield lords of the Manor, themselves intending to be commemorated in the church, is difficult to comprehend.

In 1643 came the visit of William Dowsing's agent, when he removed small portions only of brass inscriptions declared as "popish" and broke down "ten superstitious pictures". The selective nature of his activity suggest that he was under severe constraint to do so little harm.

The church was spared much further destruction for the remainder of the 17th. century, yet at some time during this period the church fabric was sadly neglected. This was recorded by the well known Suffolk Historian Tom Martin of Palgrave ("Honest Tom" as he was affectionately known)

who visited the church first in 1723 to copy inscriptions and sketch some of the heraldry and brasses. He paid a second visit in 1744 and was appalled by the changes he saw. He found the old priory church was "in utmost decay ... shorn up and supported both inside and without in dayly Expectation of Falling". Yet at the same time there must have survived a considerable array of monuments which continued to be of great attraction to antiquaries who made drawings of the heraldry, brasses and painted tombs, for Tom Martin spoke of the "Tombs and Monuments contained in this Fabrick" saying that he had "neither seen nor read of any place (except Westminster Abbey) so fully adorned with such Noble Remains of Antiquity as are to be met with here". However he was dismayed at their increasing deterioration.

Decay of the church fabric continued, so that by 1750 the building was in a ruinous condition. It was soon afterwards that the last of the Nauntons died without issue and the Letheringham estates were inherited by a cousin, William Leman, who only succeeded in maintaining his claim on the estate because a contesting branch of the Naunton family made a serious legal slip in the management of their counter claim. It was during the period of this costly dispute that the further destruction of the treasures of the church took place. In 1768 the monuments were in good condition, though soiled by exposure to the elements, but in 1780 a visiting antiquary recorded the "Roof ... and much of the Walls entirely down. The Roof of the Chancel was standing, but all the monuments so broken and battered to pieces that the Havoc must have been purposely committed". Another visitor saw the ruinous condition of the "antient and curious monuments" and decided that "mere neglect and exposure to the weather for a few years by the fall of the roof, could not have reduced to the state of complete desolution .... Perhaps it was for the interest of some of the parties who lately disputed the estate, to destroy every record preserved in this place".

Little appears to have been done by the parishioners to protect the monuments or the fabric of the church up to this time, but in 1789 they were directed by the church authorities to put the building into decent order. Sadly, instead of repairing it, the churchwardens gave a contractor the entire fabric of the chancel and its contents to dispose of as he would, in return for which the nave was to be rebuilt and closed with a new, east

wall. What was left of the monuments was crushed for road making ballast and it is thought that the beautiful font suffered the same fate! The slabs, despoiled of their brasses, were used to pave the rebuilt nave.

## THE PRIORY

Little remains of the Priory of which the present church was part, for there is only the Gatehouse of early 16th. century brick construction which stands 40 yards south west of the church. It was originally of two storeys but the intervening floor has been destroyed. The upper storey is thought to have been used as a guest room. On its walls are painted vertical bands, pink in colour on a white background, the width of each band and the distance between them being approximately 18 inches. It is possible that the painting was a form of contemporary room decoration.

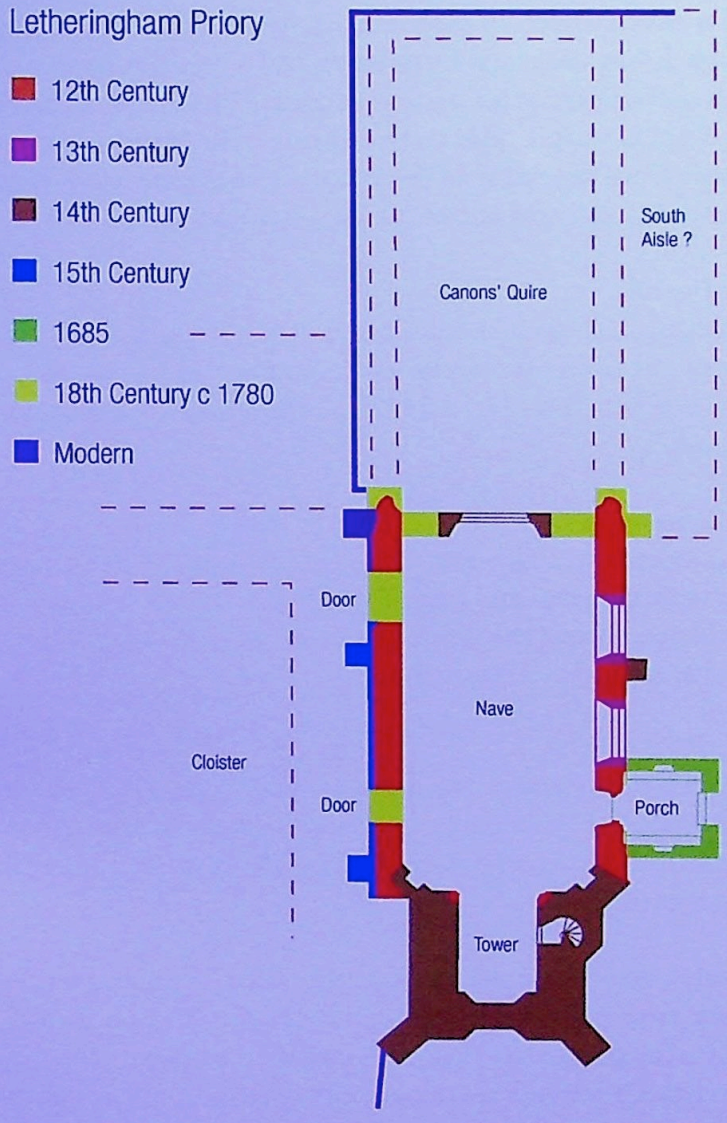
At the angles of the Gatehouse are semi-octagonal buttresses. Both entrances have been blocked up but a smaller entrance door has been inserted in the southern archway above which, in brick, is a three-light traceried window under a four-centred head. A modern shed has been built on the east side where the Porter's Lodge stood and the outline of the steeper roof of the original building can be seen on the Gatehouse wall.

Standing as it does at the north west corner of a walled enclosure, the Gatehouse appears to provide for entrance to the Priory from the north. However, with evidence of there being Priory buildings on the north side of the church, it is likely that the entrance through the Gatehouse was from the south, through the southern archway with its more decorative facia.

There are some remnants of the Priory walls adjoining the church on the eastern and western ends which provide some evidence of the Priory lay-out, but much more remains buried to the inspiration of continuing archaeological study.

As recently as 1976, there was found 13th.-14th. century pottery, when the foundations were dug of a dutch barn, 20 yards north east of the church.

Adjoining the church, on the north side, was believed to be the Cloister with a connecting door in the north wall of the nave near the pulpit. There are traces of this doorway on the outside wall, but nothing is visible from inside the church. The Archway for a second door, now visible immediately opposite the main entrance arch and of similar date, was discovered during restoration and alterations carried out in 1994.



## THE CHURCH

It is not easy for the visitors to find the approach to the church which is from a farm track close to the River Deben which passes through the yard of the adjacent farm to a small gateway leading to the churchyard and the south entrance of the church.

### *The Tower*

The find western tower, of three stages, was added to the church in the 14th. century. It has diagonal buttresses and a beautifully panelled flint parapet with corner pinnacles of dogs sedant. The large western doorway, now blocked up, is visible only to two thirds of its height, as it was silted up with rubble from the ruins of the Priory. The doorway has elegant and deeply cut mouldings, and above is a two-light window.

### *The South Porch*

The south porch is of brick and dated 1685. It has a curiously shaped gable with straight sides on convex lower shanks. On a buttress to the east of the porch is a sun-dial dated 1609, set obliquely to give an accurate southern aspect.

### *The South Doorway*

The south doorway, dating from the 12th. century, has a round arch ornamented with chevron and billet decoration. In the recessed jambs are typical colonettes. Above the south doorway on the inside of the church, the set of Royal Arms are Hanoverian.

### *The Nave*

The entrance to the tower from the nave is formed by a tall arch, the moulding of which has been made up from Norman chevron carved stone, and the jambs from Norman-roll-moulding, all probably re-used material taken from an earlier tower.

In the south wall of the nave are two large 13th. century windows, each of three lights, with plain intersecting bar tracery. The north wall has no windows as it is believed to have partitioned the church from the Cloisters. It appears to have been refaced externally when a Cloister doorway and

two western-most buttresses were built. The east wall is late 18th. century but its three-light window is 14th. century, which no doubt came from the destroyed Chancel.

During 1993 and 1994, the west end of the nave was remodelled to make room for the new organ and for more informal gatherings of the congregation after services.

Some redundant rear pews were removed. An undistinguished font, which had been installed to replace a beautiful 15th. century predecessor lost in 1789, was also take away. The Vestry Screen in limed oak and the bookcases in the same material were installed - the latter providing protection for valuable fragments of Wingfield memorials.

### *The Holy Table*

The Holy Table dates from the 17th. century. The Chalice is of fine silver and beautifully chased and, although it bears no date, it is believed to be Elizabethan. The Paten and Alms Dish are old pewter, as is the Flagon. The altar rail is three-sided and not of the prescribed post-Reformation pattern of a rail reaching from the north to the south wall of the church. It reflects the resistance of the extremist at the time to any form of restriction of access to the eastern end of churches after chancels were opened up to the laity.

### *The Pulpit and Pews*

The pulpit is of simple late Georgian design and the plain deal box pews date from the same period.

### *The Belfry*

There are signs of a Gallery in the Belfry, probably used by musicians and singers before the installation of an organ. In 1553 there were three bells, but only one of these remains. It is a treble bell of nice tone and good quality, cast in 1579 by Stephen Tonne and William Last.

### *Brasses*

Only two brasses survived the mid-eighteenth century devastation and are now mounted on the church walls. On the right of the east window is the brass of Sir John Wingfield who was Member of Parliament for Suffolk and Norfolk and was knighted in 1389. He died in that same year and is buried in this church. The armour is of the camail period and the jupon bears his arms. The indent for this brass is on the floor of the nave near the organ from which as late as 1813 the Revd. Richard Turner of Yarmouth took away this fine brass, finding it detached from its stone. This was restored to the church in 1842 by the Marquis of Northampton and Dawson Turner, nephew of the rescuer. In 1966, through the good offices of Major H F Owen-Evans, then Secretary of the Monumental Brass Society, it was mounted on wood for fixing to the wall. It depicts Sir John with a lion at his feet. The indent also carried four shields but only one has come back to the church and is mounted with the next figure by the altar.

The other brass - on the left of the east window - is of Sir Thomas Wingfield who died in 1471. This brass shows armour such as was worn

at the time of the Wars of the Roses. This brass too has had some travels before coming back home. The Revd. John Pridden of Heybridge in Essex visited the church in 1786 to make sketches of the monuments and brasses and on that occasion "collected" this brass for his father-in-law John Nichols, publisher of Richard Gough's Sepulchral Monuments of Great Britain (London 1786-96) in which an impression, taken from the brass, forms a full-size illustration. Eventually the brass found its way to Oxford and the Bodleian Library, but in 1966, thanks again to Major Owen-Evans, the brass was returned to the church on permanent loan. The indent for this brass is under the lectern and the first pew.

Much painstaking study of the remaining indents has been made to the gain of much valuable documentation, the identification and the present location in the church of each one, so that full information about the missing brasses is readily available. The indent of the greatest age is that which carried the brass of Sir William de Bovile who died in 1320. He was great grandson of the William who founded the Priory in 1194. This indent is partly visible on the north and south sides of the slate altar dais.

***Memorials***

From the mid-fifteenth century, the Wingfields rose temporarily above the provision of mere brass memorials and had instead magnificent stone monuments. Two of these were canopied tombs of outstanding craftsmanship. They were almost identical in their architectural detail and faced each other on the north and south Chancel walls. The south tomb was that of Sir Robert Wingfield who died in 1452 and Elizabeth Gowsell, his wife, and the north tomb of Sir John Wingfield who died in 1481 and Elizabeth Fitz-Lewis, his wife. Alas these and other beautiful monuments were lost when the Chancel was destroyed and remaining are but a few remnants of some monuments and some plain tablets to the later Wingfields and their successor patrons, the Nauntons, as now described under the heading of their location.

***Memorials near the Altar***

On the north wall is a memorial to Sir Anthony Wingfield (died 1605), grandson of the Sir Anthony who was Captain of the Guard to Henry V111 and Elizabeth his wife.

On the left of the east window, above the Wingfield brass is a memorial to Sir Robert Naunton (died 1635) who was Secretary of State to James 1. Sir Robert's grandmother was Elizabeth Wingfield to whom the Letheringham estates were given by her father, Sir Anthony Wingfield (died 1552). She married into the Naunton family in which name the Lordship of the Manor remained until 1758.

On the south wall, in the south-east corner, is a memorial tablet to Sir Robert's son James, who died at the age of two years and two months. This little boy must have been a remarkable child for the tablet records that his infancy frightened his parents "by promising too much for Earth to harbour". The reverence of the tribute on this memorial reflects the great sorrow of Sir Robert Naunton and his wife, in the tragic loss of their only son and heir and their hopes of a line which died with him.

***Memorial in the Centre Aisle***

On the floor of the centre aisle is a grand memorial stone to Henry North (died 1674) of Laxfield and Elizabeth (died 1706) his wife, who was daughter of Sir Anthony Wingfield (died 1638). The stone bears the coat-of-arms of North impaling Wingfield.

***Memorials at the West End of the Nave***

The remains of a wall monument from the destroyed Chancel to William Naunton (died 1635) who was brother and heir to Sir Robert (Secretary) Naunton and Anne (died 1628) his wife, are separately mounted on the walls at the west end of the nave. On either side of the tower arch are the kneeling figures of William Naunton and his wife and though damaged are of the quality craftsmanship of Nicholas Stone. These figures were rescued from the gardens of Letheringham Abbey House where they had been taken as ornaments. On the original monument there appeared below each figure, an identifying tablet and these are to be found on the North wall to the right of the Norman arch.

***Registers***

The first register bearing entries dated from 1588 to 1812, is in excellent condition and the writing on vellum is very clear for the most part. It is bound in leather with a title embossed on the cover with the name "Wm. Naunton Esq."

It is thought to have been started in 1598 but the entries back to 1588 have been transcribed, since all the earlier entries are very legibly written and by the same hand. At first, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials were all entered in the same register, which is confusing.

The Register contains Terriers, the earliest being dated 1820, and the other items of historical interest include press cuttings of functions held to raise funds for the cost of the restoration work.

*Written by W D Akester in 1979 with the help of earlier guides by the Revd. Harold Welch, the Revd. H N Duncan and the Revd. Leslie Wilks. Valuable explanatory and additional information has been obtained from an article by Doctor John Blatchly in the proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology 1974.*

***Note: It has been necessary to update this guide following the addition, relocation or removal of certain features in 1993 - 1994. The excellent original text has otherwise been left undisturbed.***

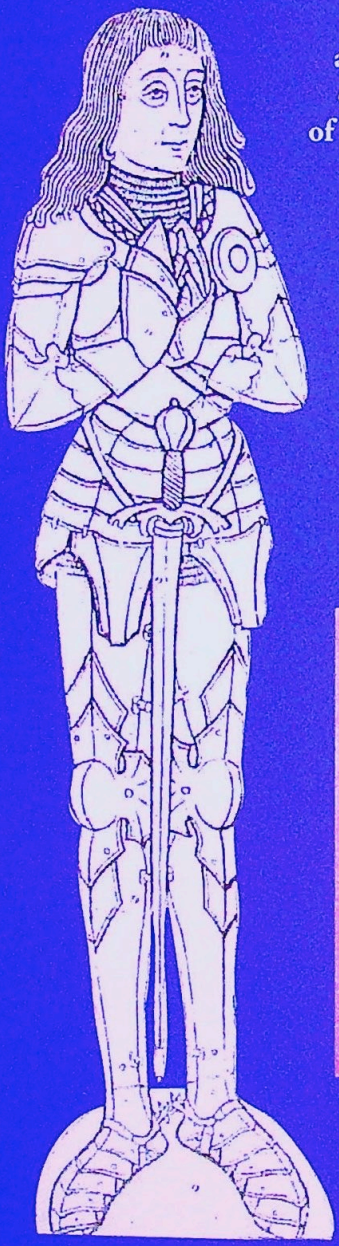
**1712, view from the south, before the church fell into decay. The chancel still existed.**

**c. 1765. Interior of the church looking west, The nave is roofless but the chancel still has a roof and its Wingfield and Naunton monuments.**

**1789, the church from the south, Both chancel and nave are in a ruinous state, only the nave being soon rebuilt.**

**In 1789 the churchwardens made the building safe and watertight, but the beautiful and historic monuments were stolen or smashed.**

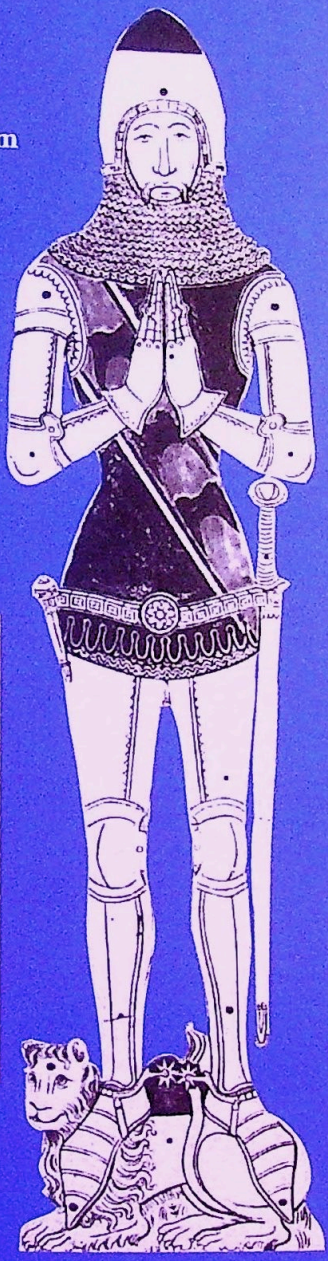
# The Wingfield and Naunton families of the Priory Church of St Mary Letheringham



Brass to
Sir Thomas Wingfield,
c. 1496
*(Left)*

Brass to
Sir John Wingfield,
c. 1389
*(Right)*

Portrait of
Sir Robert Naunton
(1563 – 1635)
*(Centre)*



The editor of this edition (2007) of the guide is most grateful to Dr. John Blatchly for his further assistance in making available illustrations from his collection of material concerning the church. Without these a further edition of the guide would not have been possible.

Design by Pinkhouse Design 01473 429410