

Guide Book to the Church of St. John The Baptist, Wantisden



Including history of the Parish

FOREWORD

It gives me great pleasure to write the Foreword to this new edition of the Guide Book to the Church of St. John the Baptist at Wantisden.

This Church has a charm shared by remote churches, especially if they are untouched by modern facilities — no electricity or water supply. Christian services of worship here have a very real sense of carrying an ancient baton for Jesus Christ throughout the centuries. This is not only the place where the Suffolk ancestors worshipped, but in similar circumstances, too. On hot summer days the church is refreshingly cool, and at Christmas and Easter everybody wraps up very warmly, and brings a torch to supplement the candlelight.

And yet the 20th and even the 21st centuries are very close, with the perimeter fence of the old airbase within yards of the church tower.

God's presence remains the same.

Thanks be to God.

The Revd. Janice Leaver, Team Vicar

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ST JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH WANTISDEN

This remote, ancient and beautiful church has stood high among its wind-swept fields and heaths for almost a thousand years. The population is few and scattered, but the witness to the Christian faith and a living relationship between God and man still endures.

History of the Parish of Wantisden

The first recorded history of Wantisdena, the wooded valley of its earliest settler, Want, is in the Domesday Survey but long before that, primitive man had settled on this breezy plateau, and Bronze and Iron Age artefacts have been found in this parish, while burial mounds of late Iron Age or Roman date are on the borders of Chillesford.

The first Anglian settlers farmed the land for some four centuries. Their farmsteads varied from 121 acres worked in unity by 22 freemen and one serf, to the 4 acre holding owned by Aluric and the 2 acre strip held by Morewin. Other men who walked these fields nine hundred years ago were Edwin, Oslac, Edilt, Alwin, Alflet, and Brictric.

The first rough crag church was already in use, and three groups of freemen farmed its glebe and contributed to its upkeep. Some 14 oxen ploughed the light soil and the men had pasturage and common forest rights in Staverton.

William the Conqueror's henchmen regularised this free life. The lands of Wantisden were given to Earl Alan of Brittany and Robert Malet, and subtenured to Hubert, Gilbert, Gilbert de Wiscant, and William de Malavilla, but no doubt Aluric and his brethren continued to plough and sow unhindered except for tiresome details of tax payment and tithes.

The Settlement

If the medieval settlement ever had a nucleus it was probably near the church and the Old Yards to the south as the heath tracks all join at this point but there is little evidence that there was ever a strongly nucleated village.

Up to the fifteenth century it was rich and flourishing, a hinterland to the Continental port of Orford Harbour, with Butley River and Stone-bridge Creek forming private outlets to the sea and overseas trade. Butley Priory, an Augustinian priory founded in 1171 by the wealthy de Glanvilles, owned the parish, and the farms prospered under these and later landlords.

However, changes were coming, geographically the coastline was being swept by erosive tides which carried sand and shingle, debris of ruined Dunwich, south to block the harbours with great banks, alter the course of the River Alde and destroy Orford's trade for ever. The climate also changed and increasing drought made marginal land, like these Sandling heaths, unattractive agriculturally. The Farming pattern changed too, and this was

accentuated by endemic bubonic plague after the Black Death of 1349. There is absolutely no evidence that Wantisden was afflicted by plague in 1349, or at any other date but the population became more mobile as the feudal system relaxed, and subsistence farmers withdrew to the more sheltered, fertile, newly drained land in the valley bottoms.

Wise landowners changed their policy from arable farming, heavy in its demands on manpower and wasteful on light land, to sheep farming, cashing in on the increasingly prosperous clothmaking industry. This caused discontent and unrest among the labourers who rose against tax collectors and Lords of the Manor in open revolt. In June 1381 the neighbouring manors of Melton, Staverton and Hollesley were attacked.

Norden's 1601 map shows a group of cottages near the Hall, and others around Drydale Bottom farmhouse, also at 'Gaytons' with its adjacent mill and along Fen Row where Mr. Southwell had his water mill, but the flourishing settlement which had supported all those freemen and their families 550 years earlier had already dwindled to some 32 adults in total, and this handful of cottages. The reason for the decline must be sought in the geography of the area. The natural Wantisden streams seem to have dried up by 1600, and only a few deep deserted wells mark the sites of old dwellings in the empty fields. By 1601, Wantisden parish was largely "heathye and barraine groundes", sheep walks and pasture, with only eight houses paying hearth tax in 1674.

Wantisden Hall and The Old Barn Yards

The **Old Barn Yards**, the site of the original Wantisden Hall, are 200 yards south of the church where there is now a deep reservoir. This uneven and much broken patch of clay was formerly two unequal rectangles divided by a series of deep moats and ditches. It was apparently still occupied by buildings in 1601 when John Norden surveyed the land and drew the first map of Wantisden for his patron, the estate owner Sir Michael Stanhope of Sudbourne Hall. In 1845, when the Tithe Map was made the buildings were probably barns.

In 1550 the present Wantisden Hall, a quarter of a mile south across the old "Church Feylde" was rebuilt, probably by Francis Sone, on the site of an earlier open hall house. It was a winged mansion of red brick with stepped gables and dark blue diaper patterned walls fronted by a formal garden and was the home of Richard Wingfield, guardian of Francis Sone's grandsons and one of the knightly Suffolk family which provided Queen Elizabeth I with a Reader in Greek, and Cambridge University with a Public Orator, and which sent soldiers to fight with Sir Philip Sidney in the Low Countries and to plan new colonies in America.

Wantisden Hall Farm, whose land surrounds the church consists of c.1150 acres arable, 100 acres wet marsh and lakes, 240 acres ancient park and 60 acres windbreak plantations. It is noted throughout the country for the efficiency of its irrigation and the

excellence of its crops- a great contrast to the 450 acres cultivated in 1946 when the Kembball family took over the farm. it was then overrun by the rabbit population. Nine thousand of these were subsequently eradicated in one year and brought in more income than that year's barley crop.

The farm is also famous for advanced conservation work in the river valleys and the Staverton Park area at the southern end of the parish, and in 1982 Wantisden was chosen for the annual Farm Tour of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (when the Duke of Gloucester became the first recorded royal visitor to the church). The large ponds excavated by Mr Jack Kembball in the river valleys are now maturing into attractive wildlife and water conservation areas, a fitting memorial to a farmer who transformed this arid farmland and continued to work until well into his nineties. He died in 2008 but his work is carried on by his son and grandson.

Staverton Park is an area of ancient woodland situated at the southern end of Wantisden Hall Farm land and famous for its collection of oaks and holly trees many of which have been here since medieval times. It was then a deer park where the last sighting of a wolf was recorded in 1150. Later it was owned by the Priors of Butley Abbey and their chronicles show that Henry VIII's sister Mary, former Queen of France and later married to Charles Brandon Duke of Suffolk, hunted here and picnicked under the oaks whilst a guest of the Prior.

In 1764 the then owner, the Marquis of Hertford, had

a large circular table made from Staverton oaks for a banquet held in Orford Castle. The table can still be seen there.

The quaint Shepherd's Cottage and Gamekeeper's Cottage built at the same time as "follies" also remain.

The oaks were pollarded for firewood until the nineteenth century since when they have grown their large spreading crowns.

During World War Two the park was used for tank exercises and a military camp. Two aircraft, one English and one German, crashed there burning a large clearing. A visit of inspection by George V1 was recorded.

The Deer Park was re-established in 1982 to help control the growing deer population.

Wantisden in the Twentieth Century

The population remained static at between 50-100 until this century, then dwindled even more rapidly as new main roads by-passed the settlement.

The Second World War saw the most dramatic change to the surroundings of the church. In 1942, After the U.S.A entered the war following the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Ministry of Defence built fifty air bases in England for the Americans. Bentwaters, as it was named, was one of the last of these and half of Wantisden's best land, the two Bent Waters cottages, with their great trees near Harrison's Belt, and Walnut Tree Farm, vanished under runways and Nissen huts.

However the airfield was not needed by the

Americans so it stood idle until 1944 when it was used by the R.A.F. Fighter Command for fighter plane escort of the daylight bombing raids on Germany.

The years between 1942 and 1944 saw considerable damage and vandalism to the church as the whole area was a battle school and tanks passed frequently from Rendlesham Hall to Orford and Iken carrying out military exercises. One benefit of the resultant cracks in the fabric was that it led to the rediscovery of the Rood stairway on the South side of the Nave.

After 1945 there was a hard fought battle to keep the church open. The Reverend Arthur Snell was the devoted pastor of Wantisden and Butley for twenty five years. He continued to hold summer services and raised money to keep the building weathertight.

Bentwaters was reoccupied by the American Airforce in 1951 and continued in use throughout the Cold War. The only access to the church was by military escort through the base until the new access road was constructed in 1958 by Suffolk County Council and Mr. Jack Kemball. The Americans took an interest in the church and for many years officers and men helped with its cleaning and maintenance along with pupils from Butley Middle School. For some years an Easter daybreak vigil was held in the church and when the Base closed in 1993 the Officer's Wives Club presented hymn books to the church.

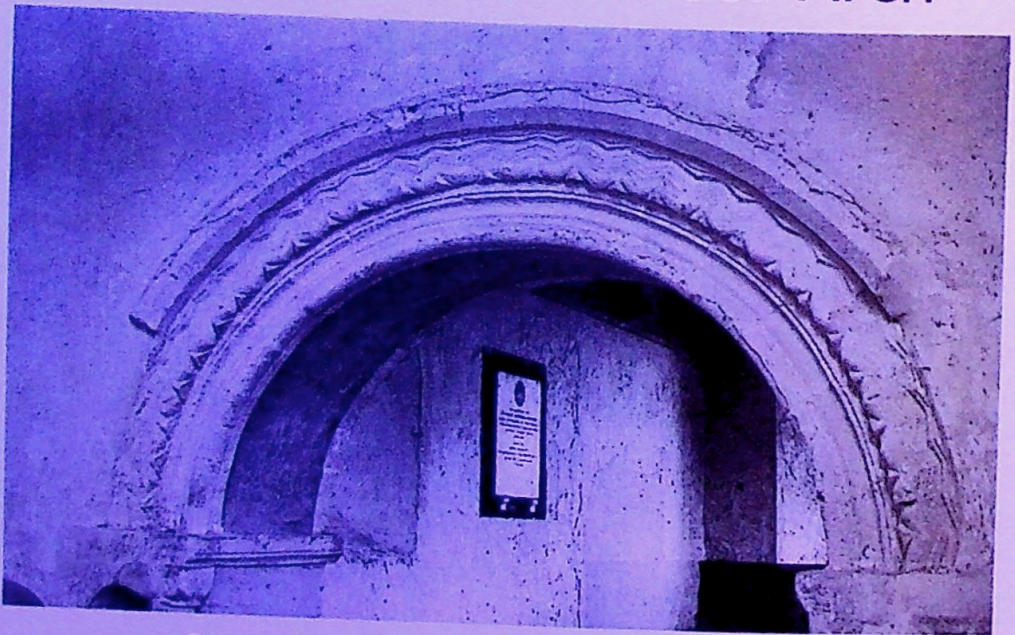
The former airfield is now a privately owned company, Bentwaters Parks Ltd.



Coralline Crag Tower



Norman South Door Arch



Norman Chancel Arch



Nave



George III Coat of Arms 1806



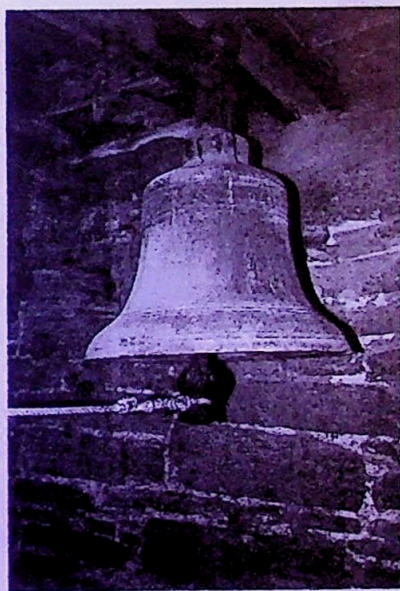
Norman Font

St. John the Baptist Church Wantisden

The Tower, one of only two in the country made of coralline crag limestone, is a Fifteenth century structure built, like that of neighbouring Chillesford, of the attractively textured stone full of fossilized shells which was dug from local pits. There are diagonal buttresses with Caen stone quoins to the West and a door between with a crowned headstop. Above the door is a Perpendicular window. There is a polygonal South bell stair and the small bell openings have Decorated tracery.

The construction of the tower can be dated from the will of Alexander Blok who, in 1445, left goods for the construction of the first two yards of the new tower and in 1449 John Thorn left "to the reparation of the tower to be newly made 17s at three separate work stages".

By 1960 the top was open to the sky but it was rebuilt without battlements in 1965 at a cost of £1262. The Crag stone needed was donated by Sir Peter Greenwell and his wife from a pit on their land at Sudbourne. At the same time the bell cast in London in 1776 was re-hung on a metal beam and in 1966 metal ladders were fixed to give access to the top two floors of the tower.



Exterior Walls and Windows

The walls of the nave are twelfth century and are of flint interspersed with fragments of tile and brick. The doorways and windows are of Caen stone. A North doorway of about 1300 was blocked in 1960. There is a Norman lancet in the north wall of the Chancel. Beyond it a change in the rubble pattern shows that the East end was extended around the beginning of the fourteenth century. The east window, the priest's door and the windows on the South side are also of that period.

Between 1972 and 1976 all the windows were repaired and rereaded at a total cost of £770.

South Door

The carved hood mould of the twelfth century south door, decorated with a triangular or flat nutmeg motif and supported by colonettes, is worth noting as are the three grotesque faces around the door arch. The east head has a mouth open at the ends and closed in the middle, the apex head appears to have a curly moustache and a cleft upper



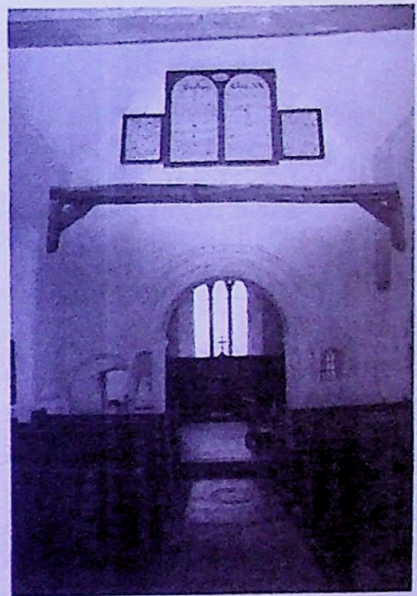
lip but could be a lion, an early representation of Christ. All have large oval eyes drilled for pupils. The heads have flat tops and do not fit well in their present location, they may be re-used corbels. Primitive scratch dials on the left of the arch marked

the canonical hours for the use of the Canons of Butley Priory who served the church. The remains of a holy water stoup may be seen on the right.

The Interior

The simple interior, devoid of modern facilities such as electric light or heating, has an atmosphere of timelessness in stark contrast to the military reminders outside but fitting for its location in such a deserted landscape.

In **the Nave**, the first item of interest is **The Font**. Eleventh century or possibly earlier, it is massive, entirely built of small blocks of stone, with added late twelfth century decorative work. Munro Cautley thought that it was one of the oldest in the county and knew of only two others in the country constructed in this way, both of which were of very early date. It is still used for occasional baptisms. (see photograph in centrefold).



A ledger stone nearby carries a brass inscription for Robert Harvie, a scion of the Ickworth family, and his wife Maria. He died in 1633; she had evidently moved before her own date of death could be added.

On the wall opposite the door is an indecipherable **Wall Painting** probably of St. Christopher. In Medieval times his image was venerated by the people and often placed opposite the main entrance to the church as viewing his image daily was thought to prevent weariness or an unprepared or accidental death.

Also visible are two of the former five roundels enclosing Consecration Crosses from the original dedication of the new building.

On either side at the back of the nave are the earliest very plain benches, the ends pierced for rush light tapers. The remains of the 15th century poppyhead bench-ends are further down the church, much mutilated and patched, reputedly with old panelling from Wantisden Hall. They have been painted and grained as was fashionable in the late 18th Century.

The growing prosperity during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is seen in the tracery of the added windows and in the remaining medieval bench ends, battered though they are.

The Royal Arms of George III hang on the North wall. Dated 1806 and painted on canvas they show the lion and unicorn springing from behind the shield in lively fashion. They were well restored in 1977 by Simon Carter when they were cleaned, re-varnished and the frame fitted with a back board. Note how the frame was shaped to fit the top of the Chancel arch when they were first installed.

The Elizabethan chest has also been well restored after being damaged by vandals in 1945, when the Parish Constable's Staff and handcuffs also disappeared.

A ledger stone at the east end of the nave aisle floor commemorates Annam Brioni Smith who died in 1655, its large shield of arms is set in a laurel wreath.

The Norman Chancel Arch and Screen are a major feature of the church interior, beautiful irregular Norman work, pierced by a massive arch 6'5" wide, decorated with chevrons and roll mouldings above single shafts. A niche for a statue was fitted on the left in the 14th or 15th Century. Small apertures were cut later in the flanking walls to improve the view into the Chancel.



Late 18th century or early 19th Century **Decalogue Boards** hang high above the arch.

The **Rood Loft Stairs** in the south wall are much broken away but should be noted. They had been bricked up but were revealed by bomb blast during tank exercises in the Second World War. The siting of the upper doorway shows that the rood screen would have masked most of the Norman arch.

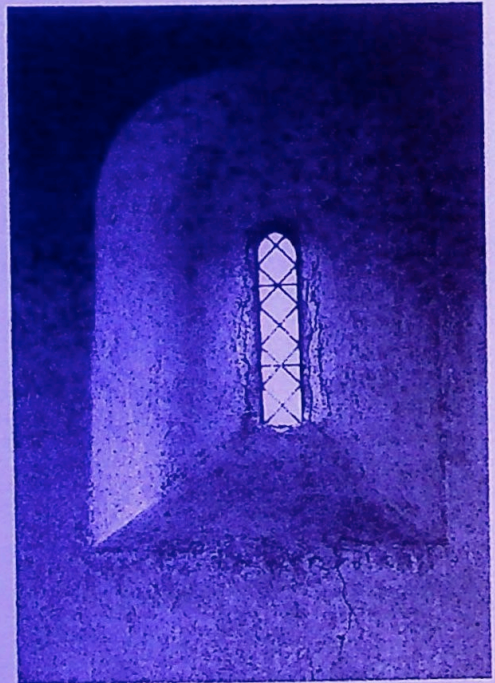
The **Chancel** was gently restored in the 1860s. The unusual oak altar rails, reredos and altar are the only notes of muted colour in a building otherwise a harmony of cream, grey and silver against the dark old benches. The encaustic tiles may be a disturbing addition to the interior but are appreciated when trying to clean a building with no water or power.

The **Brass** in front of the altar is a clear "black letter" inscription to Maria Wingfield, sister of the famous Bess of Hardwick, who died 28th November 1582 in "ye faith of Christ" as she had lived "in ye trewe feare of God" .

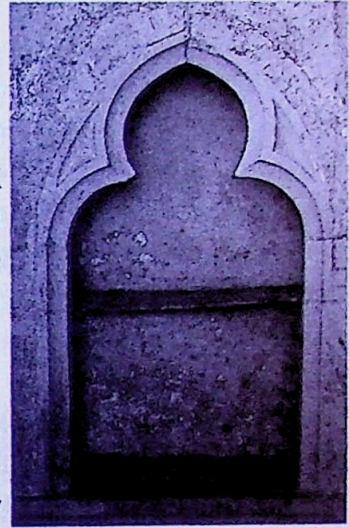
Her husband Richard Wingfield lived in Wantisden Hall

On the North side the **Norman lancet** has a typically deep splay.

Nearby, Smyth of Woodbridge supplied a tablet for the parson, Thomas Comyn, Clerk. His shield is in an oval at the top and the epitaph includes his wife Anne who "exchanged time for eternity" in 1838.



On the south side is the early **piscina** with its fluted stone basin for cleansing the Chalice and Paten and a rudimentary oak **credence shelf** above which could well be the original. The surrounding stonework has been re-cut.



There are dropped sill **Sedilia**, forming the seats of the sub-deacon, deacon and priest below the south window.

The fine **Roof** is original and untouched above the Ceiling. The few movable seats and fittings are mostly utilitarian and simple. The chief treasures, the Chalice and a 1755 two handled Caudle Cup inscribed "Gift of Mary, relict of Robert Oneby Esq., late Impropiator of this Parish of Wantisden" are kept safely elsewhere.

Footnote:-

In 1972 a letter from the Diocesan office stated:-

"The view is that sooner or later Wantisden Church will have to be declared redundant. It is something of a luxury which we simply cannot afford".

Forty years later we are still enjoying that luxury.

The Churchwardens are
Mrs J Kemball of Staverton House, Wantisden and
Mr Nigel Harding of Rendlesham.

The Secretary of the Friends of Wantisden Church:
Mrs Ann Whitmore, 6, Church Lane, Eyke,
Woodbridge, Suffolk, IP12 2QT, from whom
Membership forms can be obtained. Membership is
by donation.

Web: www.wantisdenchurch.weebly.com

Acknowledgements

The Guide to Suffolk Churches by D. P. Mortlock
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Untold Tales of the Suffolk Sandlings by Valerie
Fenwick and Vic Harrup 2009, Butley Research
Group.

H. Munro Cautley Suffolk Churches 1937

Norman Scarfe A Shell Guide to Suffolk 1976 edition

The Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and
Ireland www.crsbi.ac.uk

St. Christopher Wall Paintings in English and Welsh
Churches . Elizabeth E Pridgeon Ph D Thesis 2008

The late Gwen Dyke former Headmistress of Butley
Middle School who wrote the First Edition of this
guide, a long serving member of the PCC and a loyal
supporter in the fight to keep the church open.

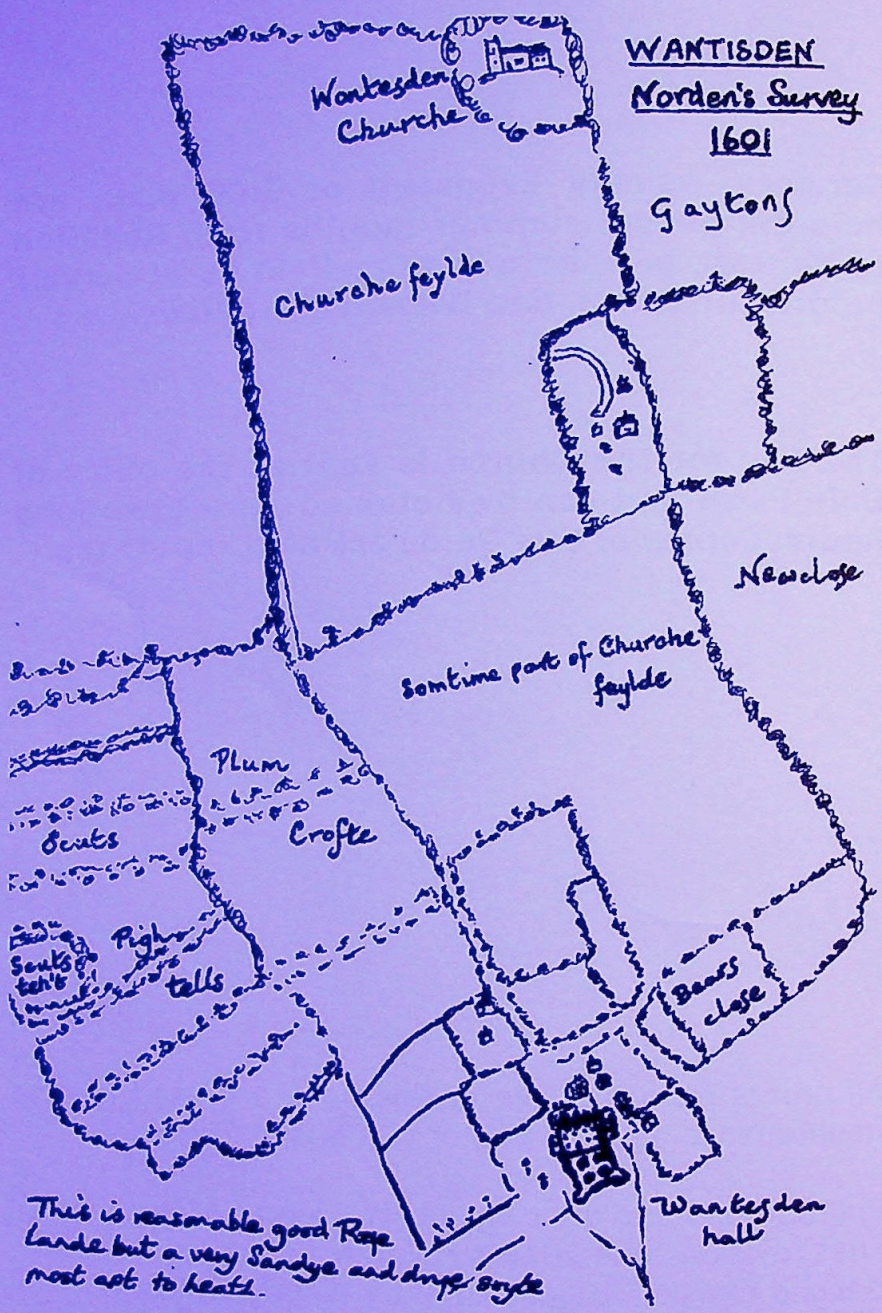
Services, usually Evensong at 3.00 p.m., are held during the summer months from Rogation to Harvest, and there is a Candlelit Carol Service before Christmas. See Website for details.

The key for the Church is kept at the office of Dale Farm and can be obtained during working hours. Copies of this Guide are also kept there.

All profits from the sale of this book are used for the maintenance and running of Wantisden Church.

Photographs and print layout Mr. John Colles
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Third Revision January 2012 by Wendy Colles.

WANTISDEN
Norden's Survey
1601



This is reasonable good Rape
lande but a very Sandye and drye soyle
most apt to heath.