



ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH IN HISTORY

There is no doubt that a Church has stood on the little green eminence above the High Street and the harbour of Gorleston for over 1,000 years and it may well be that St. Felix, Bishop of Dunwich erected a small wooden Church here in the 7th century. There are, however, rubble foundations left below the pillars of the present building which are the only remains of the Church that existed in the 10th century.



The present Church is the product of three medieval centuries of building, (the 13th, 14th and 15th) and the flint tower, with its 127 steps climbing to a height of 90 feet, was begun soon after the reign of Henry II. This monarch granted the rectory and the great tithes to the Prior and Convent of St. Bartholomew in Smithfield and these were retained by the Convent until 1553, soon after the monasteries were dissolved.

The base of the tower, with a fine arch opening to the nave, is 13th century and the rest of it dates from the 15th century. In both ancient and modern times it has served as a watch tower and is still a good landmark for ships entering the harbour. During 1907-1909 the tower was restored as a memorial to Gorleston Lifeboatmen who lost their lives at sea.

The great arcades running the length of the Church are chiefly 14th century and it may be noticed that the capital from which the north arch of the Chancel springs is carved with oak leaves and acorns - the only one so treated in the Church.

At one time a magnificent screen of carved oak stretched across the Church dividing the nave from the Chancel and the side Chapels. Under the Chancel arch was the usual rood loft, the doorway leading to which may still be traced.

The 7 Sacrament Font is very defaced. It is, no doubt, very ancient and is formed out of an octagonal block of stone, having 7 of its sides charged with sculptures of the sacraments. Starting east and working clockwise, the sculptures represent the Last Judgement, Ordination, Marriage, Baptism, Confirmation, Mass, Penance and Extreme Unction.



The very fine Royal Arms (right) dated 1644 (Charles I) is a relic of the days when Henry VIII made himself head of the Church of England and "Defender of the Faith". Thereafter it became compulsory for the Royal Arms to be displayed in all churches.

Among St. Andrew's other treasures are an oak chest of the 14th century, bonded with iron and



having three locks, of communion plate, there is a silvery gilt chalice bearing the date 1567 and also a plate and flagon, the gift of a former churchwarden, James Downey who lies buried in the church.

The church fell into a very bad state in the early part of the 19th century but in 1872 a complete restoration was undertaken. The thatch on the roof was replaced by tiles. The north wall of the church was entirely rebuilt as was the south porch. C.J. Palmer tells us that the western portion of the church had been walled off and a large ugly vestry erected in which parish meetings "frequently of a disorderly character" were held. This "monstrosity" together with an organ gallery were removed, bringing the church back to its original dimensions. Some years later the Norman Altar stone was discovered beneath the sanctuary and restored to its original position. When the north wall was rebuilt, the beautiful 14th century Easter Sepulchre recess, with its cusped arch canopy was preserved and built into the new structure. This is now open to form the entrance to the church from the Chapter House via the Choir Vestry also known as the South Meeting Room.

The Gorleston Psalter

This is a remarkable illuminated manuscript from the early 14th century that was either created at St. Andrew's Church or was commissioned by it. The work of the school of artists and scribes that created it can be traced in other fine manuscripts in East Anglia, placing St. Andrew's at the centre of a wonderful flourishing of medieval art and culture. It is now held by the British Library Archives Reference - Add MS 49622.

A fuller description of the psalter can be found on the separate tab for the Gorleston Psalter.



The Bacon Brass

There is but one brass remaining and this, somewhat mutilated, was returned to the church in a remarkable manner. This is the well known Bacon Brass (right), an effigy of a cross legged knight. The Bacons were Lords of the Manor some seven centuries ago and the brass is probably a portrait of Sir John who is mentioned in the Inquisition Rolls of 1292. The figure had been torn from its stone matrix and had been considered destroyed, until it was discovered in a collection which was sold in 1830. Mr J. G. Rokewode purchased it and returned it to Gorleston Church where, at the expense of Mr. Dawson Turner, it was restored to its stone and placed vertically on the north wall of the Lady Chapel.

Lost Art

In common with many other medieval churches, St. Andrew's was decorated by mural paintings. Unfortunately, these were uncovered but then destroyed in the 1872 restoration. Nevertheless, they were recorded before they were destroyed and some sketches remain. On the north wall were paintings of St. Christopher and the Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead. Also, on the south wall of the Lady Chapel there was a rich painting possibly of the Holy Trinity. These are dated to the late C14th. There were also two painted shields of the Trinity and the Passion. In the late C19th it was also still possible to see traces of paintings in a pillar supporting the Chancel Arch – one of St. Anne and the Virgin and one of St. Catherine or St. Etheldreda. There are no surviving sketches of these last two unfortunately, as far as we know.



The life-size cut-out pictures of Moses and Aaron (left) are currently located at Gressenhall, part of the Norfolk Museums Service. Painted in oils on the board, they formerly stood in the nave of St. Andrew's, where they were used for some year as an altarpiece. They predate 1643 as they are recorded in William Dowsing's diary. Photos courtesy of Norfolk Museums Service Moses - NWHCM:L1971.2.1 Aaron - NWHCM:L1971.2.2

The Organs

It must have been about the time that the church was restored in the late 19th century that the organ was rebuilt by the famous London organ builder, J.C. Bishop and Son. This was a two

manual instrument of 22 speaking stops which was placed in the south aisle. The opening recital was given by Dr. Frank Bates, who was organist of Norwich Cathedral from 1886 until 1928. This organ was rebuilt by Binns in 1902 and in 1957 the Binns Organ Tuning Company of Bramley, Leeds, enlarged it into an instrument of three manuals with electro-pneumatic action and a detached stop-key console. During the 1970s it was felt that the then instrument was not big enough for the task of supporting the singing of a large choir and congregation. It was obvious that a much finer instrument was needed.



A fine three manual Norman and Beard organ became available. It was built in 1904 for St. John's, Lowestoft, which had been declared redundant in 1973. Benjamin Britten's mother, Edith Rhoda Britten, who was secretary of the Lowestoft Musical Society was the organist and is reputed to have played it regularly. The organ was purchased by the Roman Catholic Church of St. John Baptist, Norwich and had in fact been moved there by Storr Brothers in 1974. When the Roman Catholic Church was elevated to Cathedral status soon afterwards, it was decided that this instrument, still in its dismantled state, should be built but sold again. St. Andrew's were happy to purchase it for £500, the same amount that the Roman Catholic Church had paid for it originally. Yet the cost to restore, rebuild and enhance was in the region of £20,000 which was raised under the direction of the then organist, Gregory Underwood. The first necessity in the restoration of the organ was to deal with the action which was replaced with a new electro-pneumatic action. Other alterations also took place including tonal alterations and a new console (including electric draw-stop and piston action). All this work was carried out between 6th November 1978 and 29th June 1979 and the completed organ was dedicated by the Bishop of Thetford, Rt. Rev. Hugh Blackburne, on 6th July 1979. The opening recital was played by Dr. Arthur Wills, organist of Ely Cathedral on 23rd July 1979.

Church Fees Board

During the removal of the old organ in 1978, a Church Fees Board dating back to 1842 was discovered and is now on display in the church.

The Tower: The Bells

Within the tower there were apparently four bells for many years – one of them having "I am mad in ye worsheppe of ye cros" on it; two of them having been cast in 1619. Lester and Pack of London cast one bell in 1763. These bells were removed in 1872, when a new ring of six, cast by Mears and Stainbank, was presented by Miss Miriam Chevalier Roberts. In 1937 the ring was augmented to eight, through the generosity of the daughter of the donor of the six in 1872. The first peal on the eight bells (Grandsire Triples) was rung on 13th April 1946. The tenor weighs 10.5 cwt (533Kgs) and the bells are tuned in the key of G.

The Tower: The Clock

The clock in the tower was erected in 1977 by the parishioners as a memorial to the Rev. A.S. Clemens, Vicar between 1966 and 1976.



The Chapter House

This octagonal building adjoining the church on the north side was erected in 1970 to replace the old St. Andrew's Church Hall and Rooms, which were situated on the corner of the High Street and School Lane, now the site of the High Street Shopping Precinct. Its official name is The Forbes Phillips Chapter House and is named after the Rev. Forbes Alexander Phillips who was the incumbent between 1893 and 1917. He is still remembered by some for his eccentricities and it is interesting to note that in his book "Gorleston", A.W. Ecclestone devotes a whole chapter to this character. One of the Chapter House's first uses was for the St. Andrew's Festival in November 1970. During this period The Slater Trust Youth Wing was added following a donation given by the Trust in memory of J.H. Slater who had lived in the parish.



The official opening of the Chapter House was carried out by the Mayor of Great Yarmouth (Councillor Kenneth H. Hammerton) and was dedicated by the Rt. Revd. Dr. Launcelot Fleming, Bishop of Norwich on Sunday 14th February 1971 prior to Evening Prayer.

Information taken from "A short history" which was prepared for the Church Open Days on 4th and 5th August 1989, from previous works by Mr A.A. Meldrum (Churchwarden 1965 - 69), Mr. G.K. Underwood (Organist 1969 -88), (Mr. A. Cooper (Tower Captain 1973-83) and from his book "Gorleston" by Mr. A. W. Ecclestone. Notes on the Gorleston Psalter and Lost Art from researches by Jeremy Bowden.
Updated 2024 J & S McBride