



REDUNDANT
CHURCHES
FUND

ST JOHN
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BAPTIST
WAKERLEY

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INTRODUCTION

The tower and spire of Wakerley church stand above the tiny village, and form a distinct feature of the Welland valley, clearly visible from far across the river.

Wakerley has a very long history, lying as it does just off the prehistoric Jurassic Way from the north-east towards Somerset. The name is probably derived from the Anglo-Saxon, meaning willow copse.

Domesday Book (1086) records a priest at Wakerley. Though it does not explicitly record a church, it is unlikely that there was not a place for the priest to say Mass. There is no trace of such a building remaining but the chancel arch and the masonry of the nave walls are clear indications of early 12th century work. The tower, spire, chapels and porch were added in the 14th and 15th centuries when the chancel was rebuilt. J B Corby of Stamford restored the church in 1875 and designed many of the interior furnishings. The building from the outside looks today much as it did in the 15th century. In contrast, a complete church of the Norman period can be seen nearby just over the river at Tixover.

The population of the village of Wakerley has not exceeded 100 in recent years and the village is only half a mile from Barrowden, which has a larger population and a sizeable mediaeval church. By 1970 Wakerley church had become unsafe and could no longer be used for worship. Urgent repairs were carried out and services were resumed but the cost of upkeep was too much for the local congregation and in 1972 the church was declared redundant.

With the long association between this church and the Burghley family, it

was hoped that it might be taken over by the Marquis of Exeter. However, it came into the care of the Redundant Churches Fund in October 1974. Substantial repairs to roofs and walls have since been carried out under the supervision of Messrs Bond and Read of Grantham.

The churchyard contains a good 18th century tomb-chest. On the east there is a lychgate built as a 1914-1918 War Memorial.

NOIT EXTERIOR

The east window of the chancel is in the 15th century Perpendicular style; the paired windows on the south side, with square moulding over, are probably 17th century and the priest's doorway, also on the south side, a 19th century renewal.

Two identifiable remains of the Norman building can be seen in the east wall of the nave at the south-east corner: just above the roof of the 19th century lean-to shed is a frieze and, higher, two corbels remain of a table that once ran along the wall. Another fragment of the frieze remains at the north-east corner of the nave.

The east window of the south chapel is a good three-light Perpendicular window of the 15th century, those on the south side are square-headed windows probably 17th century. To the west of the chapel is the former south doorway, blocked in 1904, dating from the time of the building of the nave; the north doorway is the one which was most used in this case and this is why it was provided with a porch. The window to the west of the doorway is in the style of the mid-14th century.

Construction of the tower, built in local limestone, began about 1350. The mouldings of the tower arch inside, and the flowing tracery in the west window belong to this period. The belfry stage has two two-light windows on each face, the windows having a transom half-way up. An interesting feature is the differing design of the heads of the belfry windows; those in the west and east faces have rectangular heads, the north one has pointed arches with 14th century tracery, and the southern one has at some time been restored with semi-circular heads. There is a frieze of quatrefoil

ornamentation running round the top of the tower, below the embattled parapet.

The tower has angle buttresses running as far as the base of the top stage, above which they become pilaster strips. The tower and spire are distinctive examples of the work of a local band of stonemasons who built many churches in the vicinity.

The 15th century spire is recessed, beginning below the level of the battlements. It has ballflower ornament and two tiers of lucarne openings, those at the lower level set on the north, south, east and west sides, the higher tier alternating. Both tiers have traceried gables and carved figures at the eaves.

On the north side of the nave there is a window contemporary with the porch and north doorway; the chapel on the north side appears externally to be of the same period as that on the south side.

The church is entered through the north doorway, which has the heads of a woman and a man carved as stops at the end of the hoodmould. The door itself, though of the 19th century, has much older ironwork.

The furnishings, such as the pews and pulpit, are Victorian, or altered in the 1875 restoration, but the nave roof is of considerable interest. It was reconstructed in 1737-38 re-using earlier timbers. Its wallposts rest on carved stone corbels and it has coloured busts and figures on the main beams.

The unusual and remarkable 13th century font, in the north-west corner, has only two of the four faces of the bowl visible. One face has a pointed trefoiled arch, the other a quatrefoil with leaf and flower decoration.

There are three bells, the treble and tenor, 1598 and 1599 respectively, by Newcombe and Watts of the Leicester foundry, the second by Thomas Norris of Stamford in 1663.

The chancel arch, although originally probably round-headed and later

INTERIOR

altered to a pointed arch, bears roll mouldings and has a zigzag motif showing its Norman origin. The half-piers (responds) bearing the arch have at their base a flat zigzag pattern whilst their capitals have magnificent carving with beaded interlace. The northern capital has two knights on horseback and a castle, whilst the southern one has monsters and a foliage trail. Authorities differ on whether this is the work of the craftsman who carved the tower arch at Castor, a few miles away, a church consecrated in 1124 and who was also active in the area at Wansford, Sutton and Maxey; or whether this is the craftsman who carved the Prior's doorway at Ely Cathedral (c 1140).

The arch is flanked by two blind arches which once acted as reredoses for side altars. When the church was enlarged in the later Middle Ages, these altars were moved into the side chapels. These chapels still retain the piscinae in their south walls to enable a priest saying Mass to wash the chalice. That in the north chapel has an ogee arch as its head. The chapels also retain shelves for statues of saints, whilst the south chapel contains a tablet to Anthony Pepper (1664). Both of the east windows of the chapels contain fragments of mediaeval glass. The arcade of the south chapel is somewhat earlier in style than that of the north chapel which was built — or rebuilt — in the 15th century.

The south wall of the south chapel has a lozenge frieze of Norman origin, possibly reset from the Norman nave. More of this remains in the south wall of the nave, just to the west of the chapel. Also remaining from the 12th century church is a clerestory window above the arcade into the south chapel.

The organ, by Bedwell and Son of Cambridge and Bournemouth, bears a brass plate recording its gift in memory of Major General George Hatchwell of the Kings Royal Rifle Corps, by his widow Clara Constance in September 1913. The family lived at Fineshade Abbey.

The chancel has mainly 19th century furnishings. The Victorians, as was their practice, raised the sanctuary, partly obscuring the Cecil monuments in the floor. They gave the sanctuary its encaustic tiled floor and tiled dado at the east end. They also stripped the plaster off the walls.

The piscina, with ogee head, in the south wall, is mediaeval.

The monuments in the church are, with the exception of the monument on the chancel north wall to Richard Cecil (1663) a grandson of Queen Elizabeth's Lord Burghley, mainly of the 19th century. The Cecil monument appears to be an early 16th century Easter Sepulchre adapted to its later use. It was the mediaeval custom to reserve the Sacrament here, with a crucifix, from the morning of Good Friday, after the ceremonial Adoration of the Cross, until the morning of Easter Day.

The Redundant Churches Fund is grateful to Dr Simon Cotton for his notes about the history and architecture of this church.

As you will have read in the text, this church is now in the care of the Fund. This body was set up in 1969 to preserve churches no longer needed for regular worship but which are of historic or architectural interest. The Fund's main income is provided by Church and State, but the constantly increasing number of churches entrusted to it (181 in January 1985) means that its resources are severely stretched. Contributions from members of the public are therefore gratefully received, and if there is no money box in the church or the keyholder is not available please send any contributions you feel able to make to the Fund at the address shown.

REDUNDANT CHURCHES FUND

Published by the Redundant Churches Fund
St. Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe
Queen Victoria Street
LONDON EC4V 5DE

Printed by Direct Design (Bournemouth) Ltd., Printers,
Sturminster Newton, Dorset

January 1985

Photographs by Christopher Dalton