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CHURCH OF ST MARY

Stonham Parva,
Suffolk



Church of ST MARY

by Roy Tricker (Field Officer with The Churches Conservation Trust 1991–2002, church enthusiast, historian and lay canon)

Exterior

St Mary's stands in a peaceful setting towards the southern border of its former parish and almost half a mile (0.8 km) from the busy A140 Ipswich–Norwich road. Presided over by its delightful 15th-century tower, the exterior displays a pleasing mixture of colours and textures. Cream-coloured rendering covers much of the flint-rubble walls, blending with the dark cores of the knapped flints in the buttresses, the exquisite flushwork patterns in flint and stone, the variety of materials in the rubble walls of the tower and the mellow red tiles which cover the nave and chancel roofs. Its character is enhanced by crow-stepped gables to the nave and chancel, the small south chapel to the east of the porch and the approach to the priest's doorway, beneath a half-arch cut through a buttress.

Although the core of the nave and chancel may well be earlier, most of the visible work here dates from the 14th and 15th centuries. The chancel now has a later three-light east window with reticulated (net-like) tracery in the style of c.1330 and the north-west window of the nave is late 14th century. In the late 1400s, the nave was heightened and given its handsome clerestory, with three-light windows, embattled parapet and crow-stepped gable. It was probably intended to build a north aisle, but this was never done,

so the north side of the nave appears rather tall. The pair of double Perpendicular windows on the south side of the chancel have hood moulds resting upon original carved corbel heads; more may be seen in the south window of the chapel. In the chancel are a flushwork panel with the 'IHS' monogram near the top of the east wall, a small rectangular memorial to William Blomfield on the south wall, and distinctive drainpipes dated 1886, the year of the restoration of the chancel.


The south chapel, which has a three-light east window and a two-light south window (note the delightful corbel head), was added a little later in the 15th century than the porch which it adjoins.


The porch has flushwork in its buttresses and a pleasing entrance arch, resting upon half-octagonal responds, with concave sides, moulded capitals and bases. The porch roof is mostly original and has foliage carved in the spandrels at the sides. It shelters a fine south doorway, with little flowers in its hood mould and large corbel heads. Its sturdy oak door has admitted worshippers and visitors for at least 500 years.

The crowning glory is the 15th-century tower – a grand essay in Suffolk flintwork, with effective use of flushwork patterns, which rises 69 ft (21 m) to the top of the pinnacles. Towers like this, with pairs of short

double belfry windows and two-tiered parapets, are distinctive to Suffolk. Nearby Mendlesham has one and at Horham is a tower with many similarities to this one.

At all four corners are diagonal buttresses, faced with flushwork panels. Around the base of the walls is a flushwork base-course, with trefoil-headed panels. The west doorway has a grand Perpendicular arch, which is studded with tiny flowers and set beneath a square hood mould, resting upon weathered lions, with Tudor roses in the spandrels. Above it is a frieze of stone quatrefoils and a central shield, now worn away, but originally displaying the arms of the Crane family, who lived at the Hall nearby and probably gave money towards the building of the tower. The great west doors show splendid 15th-century woodcarving, their traceried panels terminating in tall crocketed finials. There is a tall three-light west window, and a single window lights the ringing-chamber above. The pairs of double belfry windows have quatrefoils in flushwork beneath and Tudor bricks in the flintwork above. Here the south side is arranged differently, with a three-light belfry window and the embattled stair turret, which reaches the full height of the tower.

'The tower parapet is richly decorated, with large central  monograms in the upper band on east, north and west faces. Between the monograms and crowns there

are, as on many other churches, small circles of freestone representing the host. The stair turret leaves too little room for a fourth monogram on the south, but there is an apparently blank shield in an octofoil of which Henry Chitting before 1620 noted 'on the steple in ston, a fess inter cross fitchy (drawn) a scallop in the chief' possibly for Brandling, though the Jernegans held the manor here in the later 15th century. Only the  at Rougham is larger. Each device has smaller letters in its four spaces:

East face (crown of 7 finials)

M A above and R I below


North face (crown of 7 finials)


D ns above and T cu below

(and a smaller  beneath)

West face (crown of 9 finials)

P le above and N A below

The parapet display holds most of the sentence '*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum*' (Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee [ending 'Mary' again with the small monogram]). The eight panels around the font bowl here are also in praise of Mary including a  monogram with a crown of five finials, the whole circling shown in the manner of the 'Norwich' workshop.

Most unusually there is a panel at the peak of the east chancel gable:  bound with a large reversed S.'

Interior

The heightening of the nave and the provision of clerestory windows in the 15th century has made the interior lofty and bright. When David Elisha Davy visited the church in 1829, a schoolroom had been built against the north side, which stretched almost the entire length of the building. It was entered through the north doorway of the nave and the north nave windows had shutters which were opened during services for the children, who also occupied a large gallery which filled the north side of the chancel.

The wide **chancel arch** and the **south chapel arch** have octagonal responds and moulded capitals, whilst the **tower arch** is almost completely blocked by the **gallery** and a lath and plaster **partition**, containing a door to the tower base. Here is a rare survival of 18th-century reordering – which 19th-century restorers usually swept away – with a rustic and almost domestic feel about it. The partition and door, the gallery, with its panelled front, supported by iron pillars, and the **vestry** enclosure to the south, are all of this date, as is also the **wainscotting** around the lower parts of the nave wall.

The present **organ**, built by Rayson of Ipswich in 1929, has two manuals, pedals and ten speaking stops. Music at Stonham Parva hit the local papers in 1872, when an October

Evensong turned into an unholy battle of wits (and voices) at the Magnificat, between the curate-in-charge, the Revd William Barlee, who dictated that it should be spoken, and the organist, Edgar Harvey, who, together with his choir, were determined that it should be sung.

In 1928–29 the old box-pews in the nave and chapel were replaced by the present pine **benches**. These were made by Ernest Barnes of Ipswich to the designs of H Munro Cautley.

The 15th-century **font** is a fine piece of stonework and is an unusual variation of the typical East Anglian design. Against its broad octagonal stem are four lions and four buttresses and beneath the bowl are angels with outstretched wings. Carved in the eight panels of the bowl are an angel with a shield (south); a heart, pierced by a spear and sword and surrounded by a crown of thorns – an emblem of Our Lady (south-west); Christ crucified, and flanked by his Mother and St John (west); an angel holding a heart (north-west); the crowned ‘M’ for Maria – this panel has been cut away, maybe due to an earlier position of the font against a wall (north); a handsome Tudor rose (north-east); an angel with a shield (east); and another crowned ‘M’ motif (south-east). The Christ crucified relief is an extremely rare

late-medieval example of the crucified figure with legs apart rather than crossed. Stylistically, this form ceased to be used in all artistic representation after c. 1200. The carving may have been copied from a 12th-century example in Norwich Cathedral.

Above the south doorway hang the **royal arms** of King Charles II (c. 1660) painted on canvas, with the lion bearing an uncanny resemblance to the King. For many years the arms were thought to date from the early part of the reign of Queen Anne (1702–07), but conservation work revealed that the ‘A’ for Anne had been superimposed on the ‘C’ for Charles.

A plain 18th-century parish **chest**, for storing documents and valuables (and with the customary three locks) stands at the east end of the nave. The **pulpit** dates from 1886 and the small medieval recess in the wall nearby may have once contained a piscina.

The glorious double-hammer beam **nave roof** is a masterpiece of the 15th century woodcarvers’ craft. Against the wall-posts are human figures, seated beneath carved canopies. Sadly their heads and some of the canopies have been mutilated, probably by the Puritans in 1643. The carved spandrels beneath the hammer beams are exquisitely carved with varieties of flowers, foliage and

shields. At the ends of the hammer beams are tenons, where an array of hovering angels were once fixed. The south-eastern wall-post and hammer beam were renewed in the 17th century, but show fine woodcarving of this period, with an abundance of leaves and grapes.

In the south chapel is the 17th-century **communion table**. On the chapel wall are the **painted initials** ‘J.G.’ and the date 1703. These probably refer to James Gibson, a benefactor to the church and parish, who may well have paid for the restoration of this chapel and its roof.

The **chancel** underwent a very thorough restoration in 1886. This was carried out by Mr G Nevard of Nayland to the designs of the Ipswich architect Edward Fernley Bisshopp. The cost of £600 was entirely paid by the rector, the Revd W B Coyte. Bisshopp replaced the old plaster ceiling with the present handsome oak **arch-braced roof**. This rests upon stone corbels, carved with the emblems of the four Evangelists and of SS Peter and Paul, above which are carved figures of the saints themselves, in wood.

Between them are angels, bearing shields with the Instruments of the Passion; the wide cornices also have two tiers of hovering shield-bearing angels. The roof is studded

Memorials

with bosses, and more angels may be seen near its apex. Bisshopp also designed the **stalls** (with poppyhead ends and carved emblems of the four Evangelists and also other creatures) and the **communion rails**. The tiled **floor**, by Carter, Johnson & Co. of Manchester, contrasts with the earlier brick and pavement floors of the nave and chapel. The **altar** is a more recent gift to the church, in memory of Brigadier R B Hilton, who died in 1973.

The 15th-century arch of the **east window** was filled in during the 19th-century and replaced with a traceried window in the Decorated style of the early 14th century. Of this date also is the elegant **angle-piscina** in the south sanctuary wall, with its cinquefoil-headed arch and smaller trefoil-headed arch. The window sill beside it is lowered to form **sedilia**, where the clergy could sit during parts of the service.

The tower houses a ring of five **bells**. The treble and 2nd were cast by Thomas Mears II at Whitechapel in 1817 and 1816 respectively, and the 3rd is by the famous Miles Graye I of Colchester, cast in 1617. The 4th is medieval (c. 1480) and probably by Reignold Church of Bury St Edmunds. It is inscribed *Virgo Coma Due Nos Ad Regna* (Virgin crowned, lead us to the realms). The tenor bell, cast in 1729 by Richard Phelps of Whitechapel, weighs approximately 10 cwt (508 kg).

In the floors and on the walls are a few memorial inscriptions, commemorating people who have been part of this church and parish.

In the nave floor are three worn burial slabs, and also ledger slabs to Barnaby Gibson of Westwood Hall (d. 1758), and to 17th-century members of the Blomfield family, who were yeoman farmers here and owned Clockhouse Farm from c. 1520–1916.

Among the plaques on the walls are the following:

- A marble plaque in the chancel to the Revd James R Vernon. He was curate here for a time, then was assistant preacher at St Paul's Covent Garden and Lecturer at St Mary-le-Bow, in London. He died in 1824, aged 30, whilst residing at Stonham Parva and his uncle, William Tassle, erected this plaque in his memory.
- The War Memorial, on the north wall of the nave, has a marble scroll, recording the names of nine Stonham people who died in the First World War (1914–18) and a rectangular plaque with the names of four others who perished in the Second World War (1939–45).

Acknowledgement

The Trust is grateful to Gerald Stedman and the Staff of the County Record Office for help in compiling this guide. The description of the tower parapet on page 3 is reproduced by kind permission of the authors from *Decoding flush flintwork on Suffolk and Norfolk churches* by J M Blatchly and P Northeast, 2005, Ipswich, Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History.

Photograph by Christopher Dalton

- A small but fascinating marble plaque, also on the north nave wall, has a cherub at its base and a skull, with crossbones and hourglass at the top. More bones, a spade and pickaxe, and other emblems of mortality may be seen at the sides. In the centre is the half-figure of Gilbert Mouse of Stonham Parva and an inscription which tells that he became the servant of two Lord Chancellors of England. He died in 1622 and is buried at St Margaret's church, Westminster, although he bequeathed money to be used for the good of needy people here in his home parish.

For many years Stonham Parva was held in plurality with nearby Mickfield, (where the medieval church was closed in the late 1970s), but in 1972 it was united with Earl Stonham, where the church is only a mile (1.6 km) away. Since then, this scattered parish has done much to keep its church intact; but eventually it was decided that St Mary's should cease to be a parish church and, in January 1990, it was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust). During 1991–92 extensive repairs were carried out under the direction of Mr Shawn Kholucy of Hoxne, including the restoration of the glorious nave roof and the replacing of the corrugated iron which had covered it for many years with red pantiles.