



# ST MARY'S CHURCH

AKENHAM, SUFFOLK



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

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AKENHAM, SUFFOLK

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## ST MARY'S CHURCH

AKENHAM, SUFFOLK

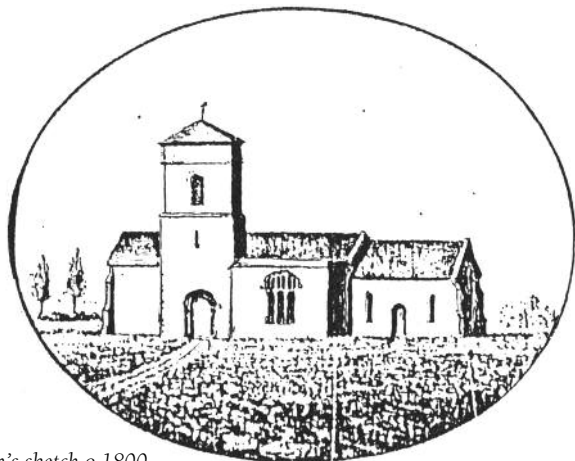
by ROY TRICKER

This small church, which has been aptly nicknamed 'St Mary's in the Fields', stands on a rise amidst the meadows, over a quarter of a mile (0.4km) from the nearest road. The 1,017 acres (411.5 hectares) of Suffolk countryside which formed its small parish, now the northern part of the parish of Whitton with Thurleston and Akenham, are still traversed mostly by footpaths and tracks, with only one metalled road (from Ipswich to Henley) passing through it.

The church stands in the western part of its former parish, not far from its southern border with Whitton and a few hundred yards (metres) from Rise Hall, which was one of its ancient manors. Formerly known as Rice Hall, it belonged to the Rous family in the 13th century and the Hawys

*St Mary's in 1842 by Henry Davy*





*Isaac Johnson's sketch c.1800*

family during parts of the 17th and 18th centuries. John Hawys, who purchased Rice Hall from Edmund Withypole, was Town Clerk of Ipswich. Members of his family are buried beneath the south chapel. Akenham Hall, the other manor, is near the Henley road, about a mile (1.6km) north of the church. It was owned, together with the patronage of Akenham, Claydon and Hemingstone churches, by the Brewse family, then later by John Aylmer (1521–94 who became Bishop of London), followed by his son, Samuel, whose memorial is in the floor of Claydon Church. William Blois, in the 17th century, noted the Brewse arms, impaling Stapleton and Calthorp, in stained glass in one of the chancel windows.

Akenham (meaning the village belonging to Aca) and its church are mentioned in the Domesday Survey and before 1066 they were owned by 'Godwin the priest'. It has always been a small place, with only a few scattered farms and cottages and with no village centre. Its population in 1855 was 131 but in 1871 and 1921 only 84 people lived here. Within two miles (3.2km) (as the crow flies) of St Mary's are five other parish churches and also the site of St Botolph's Church Thurleston, which stood beside Thurleston Lane, about 0.7 miles (1.1 km) to the south-east. This may have closed as early as 1528 and its ruins were later converted into a barn. David Elisha Davy, who saw it in 1834, calculated that the church measured about 51 ft 10 in (15.8 metres) long by 21 ft 3 in (6.5 m) wide, and noted that much of the original east, south and west walls then remained. In the west wall was a beautifully proportioned Early English window, but the other windows and doorways had lost their identity. The ruins were dismantled in the

mid-1860s, when some of their mediaeval stonework was taken for reuse in the new tower and south aisle at Whitton church. It is thought that other materials were taken to build the flint walls and towers which are still a feature of the Old Rectory garden at Claydon. It has also been suggested that the small Norman window now in the north nave wall at Akenham church may have come from Thurleston. The dismantling took place at the behest of the Revd George Drury, who was then not only the Patron and Rector of Claydon and Akenham, but also patron of Whitton-cum-Thurleston.

For much of the time since the Reformation, Akenham has shared its rector with St Peter's Claydon (now also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust) and occasionally with Hemingstone. Claydon and Akenham parishes were consolidated when Thomas Gooch was Bishop of Norwich, between 1732 and 1742. In 1930 Akenham was transferred into the care of Whitton-cum-Thurleston and a service was held here every Sunday until November 1940, when the blast from a landmine shattered the windows and damaged the roof. The abandoned church stood derelict and disused and in 1957 a scheme for its demolition was planned. At a Consistory Court hearing in 1959 however, despite the disapproval of the diocesan Bishop, a faculty for its complete repair was granted to Mrs Marjorie Hall of Rise Hall who, with some of Akenham's 64 residents, had campaigned to save St Mary's. She had gained the support and involvement of the Friends of Friendless Churches, who were able to provide much of the £3,000 needed for the repairs. These were carried out under the supervision of Mr Eric Sandon and the church reopened on Easter Sunday 1962.

In July 1976 St Mary's was declared pastorally redundant and in April 1978 it was vested in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust, to be maintained and conserved by and for the Church and the Nation as a sacred, historic and beautiful building. Further repairs were carried out in 1990, under the direction of Mr Shawn Kholucy and the work of conservation and care of St Mary's in the Fields continues.

## EXTERIOR

Whether approached by the gentle ascent from Rise Hall, or along the track from the east, the journey to St Mary's is memorable, as are the views of the church in its rural **setting**, on rising ground, surrounded by fields and farmland and isolated, except for nearby Glebe Farm. Here in the heart of the countryside it hardly seems possible that the town centre of Ipswich is only 2¾ miles (4.4 km) away, although from the churchyard are views southwards towards the houses of Whitton Estate's suburban sprawl on the other



*Exterior from the west* (ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND)

side of the valley and the 19th century spire of Whitton's church of SS Mary and Botolph, which is now the parish church of Akenham also.

An iron gate gives access to the **churchyard**, which is still owned and used by the parish. Amongst the older memorials here is the elegant chest-tomb (to the south-west of the tower) of Mr Fynn Aldus (d.1762), the top slab of which is carved with his coat of arms. Beside the north wall of the chancel is the flat ledger-slab, with coat of arms, to the Revd Oliver Thorne, rector here, who died in 1720. The simple solitary headstone on the north side of this churchyard is perhaps the best known of all Akenham's graves. It commemorates two-year-old Joseph Ramsey, who died on his birthday, 19 August 1878. The events surrounding this little unbaptised child's burial, which later became the subject of a lawsuit, known as the Akenham Burial Case, were to play an important part in reshaping the burial laws of England (see p.10). On the south side, near the tower, is the base of what was Akenham's War Memorial – a simple stone cross recording the names of three brothers who lost their lives during the 1914–18 War. Although

vandals have destroyed their memorial, their names and their sacrifice are not forgotten and are recorded on a later plaque inside the church.

The exterior of the church has great charm, the variety of mellow colours in its **building materials** blending with the greens of its surroundings. Like the majority of Suffolk churches, its walls are built mostly of flints gathered from the fields, although the chancel walls are faced with render. By contrast the short south aisle is faced with mellow Tudor or 17th century bricks. The building comprises nave and chancel, and a tower to the south of the nave (also forming a porch), to the east of which is a short south aisle or chapel. It was restored in 1854 at a cost of £300, which was donated by Mr Robert Woodward of Rise Hall. As yet no written accounts giving details of the work have been discovered, but presumably it included the new gable ends to the nave and chapel, the renewal of much of the stonework in the nave and south chapel windows and the present embattled parapet on the tower, which replaced a tiled pyramid cap. Little alteration was done to the chancel, because this part of the church was the responsibility of the rector.

The **nave** has a three-light Perpendicular west window and a two-light north window, both originally 15th century, but greatly renewed in 1854. Also in its north wall is a small but beautiful Norman window (c.1100) which retains most of its original stonework, although the stone at its base appears to have been reused from elsewhere. Its sides have tiny shafts, with cushion capitals, of which the western one is renewed. Whilst it is highly likely that the core of this wall may well be 11th or 12th century, it is possible that this window may not belong here. It was not visible in 1827, when DE Davy visited the church, but it may then have been blocked and external evidence of it hidden by render. It has been suggested that the Revd George Drury (Rector and Patron 1846–95) may have had it brought here from the ruins of Thurleston church, but Davy noted no Norman window at Thurleston on his visits there in 1827 and 1834. If it is in its original position, it would have been extremely close to the doorway (now blocked, but visible from inside) which was later placed in this wall (possibly during the 14th century) just to the west of it. Any further evidence which may help to solve this mystery would be welcomed.

The north side of the **chancel** has a square-headed late-14th or early-15th century two-light window. This retains much of its original stonework, as does the three-light Perpendicular east window, of similar date. The hood-mould which frames its arch rests upon original carved corbel heads. The two single Early English lancet windows in the south chancel wall are at least 150 years older, as is the priest's doorway between them. In the sill

of the eastern lancet window are faint traces of the name of John Suckerman carved into the stonework. He was rector here from 1621–57 and he requested in his will that 'My body be buried at the chancel door of Akenham, without the chancel window'.

The **south chapel** is thought to have been added in the 17th century by the Hawys family, whose burial vault is beneath it. It is possible, however, that this short aisle, of mellow brick, could be originally late-15th or early-16th century, as there is a recess, possibly for a piscina, in its south wall and in Henry Davy's etching there was a fine three-light Perpendicular window in this wall. The present windows, of stone and divided horizontally by transoms, date from 1854, when the lean-to roof was replaced by a cambered roof and the present eastern gable constructed. Part of the outline of the original (and larger) eastern window may be seen in the wall beside the present two-light window.

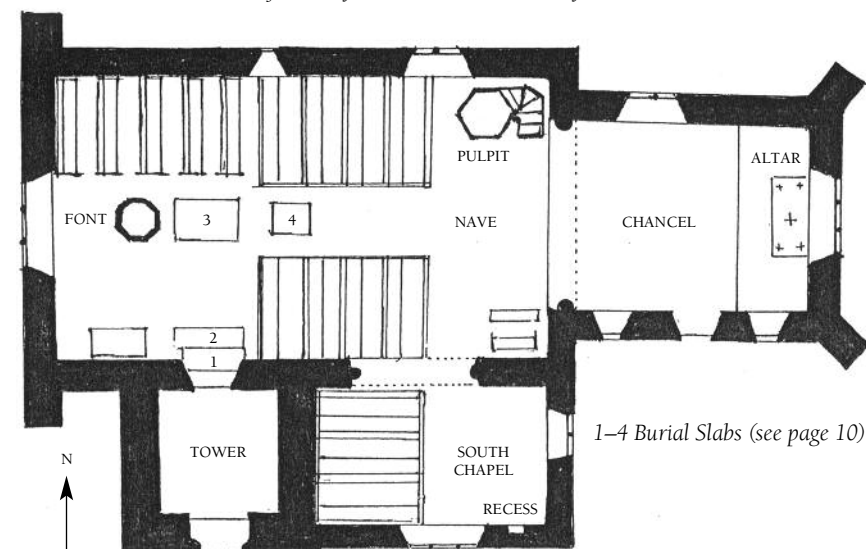
The simple unbuttressed 14th century **tower** is one of 23 south porch towers in Suffolk (others nearby are at Barham and Witesham). Its large outer entrance arch shows the considerable thickness – about four feet (1.2 m) – of its walls and is framed with Tudor bricks, as are the small single-light south and west windows which light the stage above. Bricks also fill the small 'put-log' holes, where wooden scaffold poles were placed when the tower was being built. Above the small window on the south side was once a rectangular sundial. The upper stage is noticeably narrower and has single-light belfry windows. These were almost certainly originally two-light windows, which have lost their mullions and tracery. The heads of their arches have been entirely renewed, although some original stonework remains in their sides. The parapet, which is faced with split flints, is entirely work of 1854 and Henry Davy's etching shows the tiled pyramid cap which it replaced. The tower did originally have a parapet because beneath it, on the east and west faces, are the mediaeval gargoyles which threw rainwater from the tower roof clear of its walls. On the south side a fine mediaeval lion's face peers out. There were also smaller carvings at the four corners, of which only that at the south-east corner has survived.

## INTERIOR

The church is entered through the base of the tower. The single **bell**, in the bell-chamber above is unusually large for a church of this size. It has a diameter of  $47\frac{3}{8}$  inches (1.2 m), weighs approximately  $13\frac{1}{2}$  cwt (686 kg) and was cast at the Ipswich bell-foundry of John Darbie in 1678.

A simple 14th century doorway, with a late-18th or early-19th century

*Plan of St Mary's Church, Akenham (Roy Tricker)*



door, gives access to the bright interior, with brick floors, limewashed walls and clear glass in the windows affording plenty of light. Visitors have remarked about the atmosphere of peace and devotion here. This has been moulded by centuries of prayer and enhanced by craftsmanship from a variety of periods, as people from different times and traditions have altered, beautified and left their mark upon the building. The walls of the nave lean slightly outwards and the north wall of the chancel tapers, so that the chancel is about 1 ft 8 in (0.5 m) narrower at the east end than at the west.

The interior has altered somewhat since D E Davy visited it in 1827. Then the Ten Commandments, inscribed upon two tablets, were fixed each side of the east window and above the communion table (then enclosed by three-sided rails) was a 'Glory' – the 'IHS' monogram of Our Lord's name, surrounded by rays – painted upon a small square. Painted texts of scripture were displayed on the nave and chancel walls and on the north nave wall hung a large framed set of royal arms of King George II. These were provided as a result of the Archdeacon's Visitation in 1736. The church then had a square pulpit and the south chapel (with its floor two steps above that of the nave) was separated by a carved screen.

The position of the octagonal **font** at the west end, near the entrance, symbolises a person's entry, by Holy Baptism, into the family of the Church. It dates from the 15th century, as is seen in the elegant Perpendicular window designs (each different from the others) which adorn its stem. The bowl is also panelled with a variety of tracery designs and a hanging shield. The simple lid has a turned finial which may well be 17th century. The reed **organ** nearby was made by the Smith American Organ Co., of Boston, USA.

The nave **roof** is of simple construction and is strengthened by sets of two horizontal beams, linked by vertical king-posts. The chancel has a plaster ceiling, with carved (and maybe mediaeval) cornices at the tops of the walls. The south chapel roof, constructed in 1854, has mini-hammerbeams and pendants.

The Tudor-looking **chancel arch** and **south chapel arch** may well date from the 16th or 17th centuries and rest upon moulded corbels. The position of the **recess** in the south chapel wall suggests that it may have contained a piscina drain, for the disposal of water used at a nearby altar before the Reformation.

In the north wall of the nave are traces of the splay of its **blocked doorway** and nearby, beneath the Norman window, is the **war memorial plaque** which replaced the desecrated churchyard memorial. It records the names of Amos, George and Philip Purkiss – three brothers from Akenham who perished in the 1914–18 War.

There are three sets of **seating** in the church. The western part of the nave, on the north side, has five benches, with simple flat-topped ends, whilst the chapel is furnished with three pews with doors. Presumably these date from the 1854 restoration. The eastern half of the nave has two blocks of four pews. Although of similar construction to the benches behind them, the traceried panelling on their ends and linfold panelling on their doors appears to be later and could date from 1862 when, according to White's Directory, further repair work took place at the church.

The hexagonal **pulpit**, with an elegant balustrade to its staircase, the **reading desk** opposite and the **communion rails**, appear to have been made at the same time and their simple Gothic design suggests the early part of the 19th century, but after Davy's visit in 1827. The **altar table**, hidden beneath its altar-cloth, is a rather makeshift construction, presumably installed by Fr. Drury in the mid-19th century. The shallow carved borders down its front sides suggest that perhaps something more elaborate was intended and the small stone mensa-slab, inset into its table-top at the place where the bread and wine were actually consecrated, was not only a sign



*The 15th century font, with 17th century lid*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

of very 'advanced' churchmanship but was also illegal in the Church of England when Fr. Drury installed it.

The three wrought-iron **chandeliers** (now the only means of lighting the church), were given in 1991 and 1995. The long kneeler at the communion rail is also a recent gift to the church, showing that St Mary's, although retired from full-time employment as a parish church, is nevertheless still loved.

In the floor of the nave are **memorial slabs** to people who have been part of this tiny community in the past. (The numbers correspond with those on the church plan.)

1. Beside the south door is a slab with a brass inscription of c.1500, in Latin, requesting prayers for the soul of SYSILIE, wife of PETER JOIY. It is interesting that this slab was later reused and an inscription lower down commemorates 'ANN PALMA, Maid', who was buried on 3 May 1660.
2. Beside it is a worn burial slab, which has no inscription, but which may once have had a brass fixed to it.
3. East of the font is a ledger-slab, with coat of arms, to ELIZABETH FYNN, daughter of Francis Copinger of Bramford, who died in 1683, and to her husband, ROBERT FYNN, who died in 1686. Her epitaph states:

'For Nineteen yeares I liv'd a Virgin life,  
For Seaventeen more, being married, liv'd a wife.  
At thirty six Pale Death my life Assailed,  
And as I lived I Dy'd beloved, bewailed.'

In 1827 this slab surmounted a chest-tomb beside the west wall of the nave.

4. A small ledger-slab to the east of it commemorates MARGERY LEWYS, who was buried on 13 April 1642.

## THE REVEREND FATHER GEORGE DRURY AND AKENHAM

During the 18th and 19th centuries, four clergy by the name of George Drury were at various times rectors of Claydon with Akenham, because the Drury family were patrons of the living, with the right to appoint the parish priest. The last of the clerical Drurys was rector here for almost 50 years from 1846–95. He became known far and wide as a devout but uncompromising priest of the Catholic Revival in the Church of England. Like his fellow Tractarians, who put into practice the ideals of the Oxford Movement, he saw the Church of England not as a Protestant sect but as

part of Catholic Christendom. He placed importance upon the teaching of Holy Church, her sacraments, priesthood, orderly and dignified worship, churches furnished along pre-Reformation lines and many other ideals which, thanks to pioneering and much persecuted people like him, are now part of Anglican church life. Then however, they were regarded as heretical, illegal and unpatriotic.

At Claydon, Fr. Drury helped to pioneer the establishment of the first Anglican Benedictine monastery, when the Revd Joseph Lyne (then known as Brother Ignatius) and his small community lived at the rectory in 1863–64. Fr. Drury founded a community of Benedictine nuns at Claydon and developed extremely advanced Anglo-Catholic worship, ceremonial and teaching in its beautifully adorned church, with incense, banners, lights, vestments and outdoor processions through the village streets. His blatant and forthright 'popery' did not endear him to sturdy Suffolk Protestants, especially those who were farmers (and therefore many of their employees) in and around Claydon and Akenham.

Akenham achieved national notoriety in 1878 with the burial of two-year-old Joseph, the unbaptised child of Edward and Sarah Ramsey, who were members of Zoar Baptist Church in Ipswich, but lived in Akenham. Edward was employed by Mr EE Gooding, of Akenham Hall, who worshipped at Tacket Street Congregational Church, Ipswich.

Civil Law decreed that any parishioner had the right to be buried in his parish churchyard, but Church Law insisted that only Anglican clergy could conduct the burial service and they were forbidden to conduct a Christian service at the burial of any person who had not been baptised.

On an August afternoon in 1878, the Rector arrived at the churchyard at the agreed time of 5pm to receive the appropriate certificate and to witness to child's decent burial (but without any service), as was his duty. Mr Gooding however had arranged for the Revd Wickham Tozer (Minister of St Nicholas Street Congregational Church in Ipswich) to conduct a service in the meadow outside the churchyard before the child was buried. When the service did not begin until 5.30pm and seemed likely to last for a considerable time, the impatient rector interrupted it, asking that the coffin be placed in the grave. He could then return home and would not need to witness the completion of a service of which he strongly disapproved. A rather unpleasant verbal altercation then took place, which resulted in the rector locking the churchyard gate and storming off. The coffin had to be lifted and passed over the hedge for burial when the service had ended.



The Revd Wickham Tozer, keen to expose this 'Burial Scandal', anonymously wrote for publication in the *East Anglian Daily Times* a graphic account of the proceedings, which was very derogatory towards the rector. Mr Frederick Wilson, the editor and proprietor of the *East Anglian Daily Times*, was a very willing confederate for Mr Tozer in his zeal to expose such 'scandals' perpetrated by the Established Church and particularly by members of its Catholic wing.

Fr. Drury took great exception to the article and, being no stranger to litigation, promptly sued Mr Wilson for libel. The trial took place during March 1879 at the Court of Common Pleas at Westminster and its details were well publicised in the national press. Although the jury returned a clear verdict in favour of Drury, the damages awarded to him were a mere 40 shillings, although Wilson had to pay the costs of the trial. Donations poured in to Mr Wilson from burial reformers and other sympathisers throughout the land, which more than covered the costs involved. It is said that with some of the residue Mr Wilson erected the little lad's headstone in Akenham churchyard.

The widespread feeling caused by the Akenham Burial Case and other related incidents did much to hasten the passing of the Burial Laws Amendment Act in 1880. This permitted burials in any churchyard in the land to take place using any appropriate form of service, or even without a religious service.

Fr. Drury was a knowledgeable and talented person. He made bricks in his own kiln, he designed and made stained glass, he built mock mediaeval walls, towers and a shell-lined grotto in his rectory garden and he was an early pioneer of magic lantern pictures. In the early years of his ministry here he tried to maintain Akenham church as a going concern. Its restoration in 1854, although paid for by Mr Robert Woodward, almost certainly had his support and input. He had steered the restoration and remodelling of Claydon church in 1851–52. He set the small mensa-slab into the altar at Akenham and introduced an altar crucifix. Brother Ignatius and his monks took part in services here during their time at Claydon in 1863–64. The 1851 Ecclesiastical Census records Sunday services on alternate mornings and afternoons, with about 25 people present in the morning and 40 in the afternoon, and also 12 children. An average of 8–10 people received Holy Communion quarterly.

By the 1870s, however, circumstances had changed somewhat. Fr. Drury had gained national notoriety for his 'extreme' practices at Claydon, his dabbling with monks and nuns, the monitions and discipline meted out to

him by the Bishop of Norwich and various scrapes, stories, legends and litigation. Akenham had also changed. Its population had declined and many of its residents had become Nonconformists. Mr JA Smith, who then lived at Rise Hall, never attended the church, although clearly the parishioners had elected him as their churchwarden (doubtless to annoy the rector, who did not recognise him as such). It is not surprising therefore that in 1878 the church was described as being dirty and unkempt and that on many Sundays there was no congregation, despite the fact that the rector walked over from Claydon prepared to conduct the one Sunday service, should anybody decide to turn up.

Fr. Drury appears to have concentrated his attentions upon Claydon, the larger village, where he lived and where (despite the opposition he suffered) he had a reasonable congregation, including several Anglo-Catholics who came from other parishes to worship there. He died on 2 December 1895, at the age of 76. His successor, the Revd Ansell Jones, was less extreme and less controversial – a gentle 'Prayer Book Catholic', whose 32 year ministry at Claydon and Akenham was calmer and more peaceful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Detailed accounts of the events surrounding Joseph Ramsey's burial may be read in *The Akenham Burial Case* and *In a Country Churchyard*, both by Ronald Fletcher, whose research I gratefully acknowledge. I am grateful to Marjorie and Josephine Hall for their help and advice, and also to the staff of the Suffolk County Record Office and Lambeth Palace Library for the use of material in their care.

*Front cover: St Mary's from the south* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

*Back cover: The interior, looking north-east* (RCHME).

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