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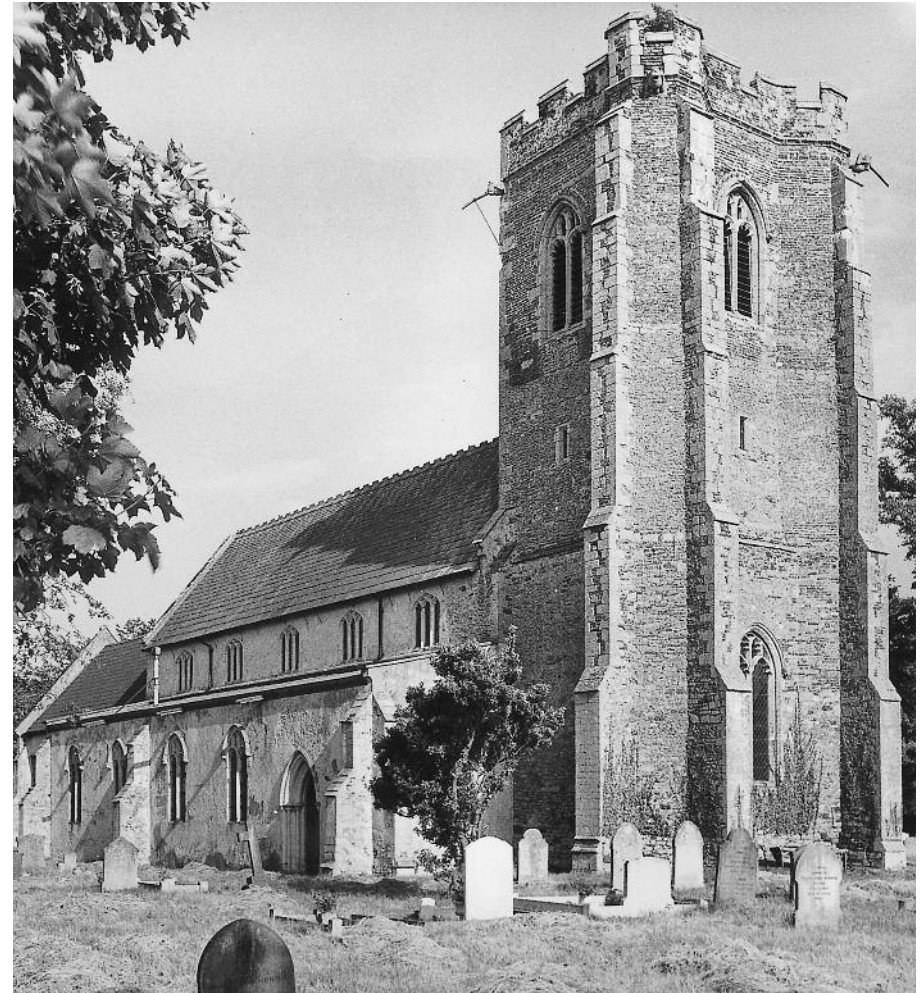
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CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

WIGGENHALL
NORFOLK





THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO
CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN
WIGGENHALL, NORFOLK

Many years ago Christians built and set apart this place for prayer. They made their church beautiful with their skill and craftsmanship. Here they have met for worship, for children to be baptised, for couples to be married and for the dead to be brought for burial. If you have time, enjoy the history, the peace and the holiness here. Please use the prayer card and, if you like it, you are welcome to take a folded copy with you.

Although services are no longer regularly held here, this church remains consecrated; inspiring, teaching and ministering through its beauty and atmosphere. It is one of more than 325 churches throughout England cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust was created in 1969 and was, until 1994, known as the Redundant Churches Fund. Its object is to ensure that all these churches are kept in repair and cared for, in the interests of the Church and Nation, for present and future generations.

Please help us to care for this church. There is a box for donations or, if you prefer to send a gift, it will be gratefully received at the Trust's headquarters at 89 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH until 30 September 2002. We will be moving to new offices in the autumn of 2002, so please look out for announcements in our churches or visit our website www.visitchurches.org.uk for details of our new address.

We hope that you will enjoy your visit and be encouraged to see our other churches. Some are in towns; some in remote country districts. Some are easy and others hard to find but all are worth the effort.

Nearby are the Trust churches of:

ISLINGTON, ST MARY
3 miles SW of King's Lynn off A47

KING'S LYNN, ST NICHOLAS
St Anne's Street

WALPOLE ST ANDREW, ST ANDREW
8 miles W of King's Lynn off A17

WEST WALTON, ST MARY TOWER
2 miles N of Wisbech off B198

CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

WIGGENHALL, NORFOLK

by SIMON COTTON

There are now four Wiggenhalls: St Mary the Virgin, St Mary Magdalene, St German's and St Peter's; but there was only one parish in 1086 at the time of the Domesday survey. This, like many others, radiates from the grazing area to the south known as the Smeeth. At this time the land was unreclaimed marshland. Shortly before 1200, however, draining and banking operations, partly instigated by Crabhouse nunnery, began to convert it into rich farming land.

Agriculture cannot have been easy, as 12 serious floodings occurred between 1250 and 1350. Wiggenhall was flooded four times between 1330 and 1338 alone. Yet the mediaeval prosperity was so great that in the assessments for the 'tenths and fifteenths' taxes in 1334, Wiggenhall was fifth in the whole county of Norfolk. This wealth built the fine Marshland churches – the Wiggenhalls, Walpoles, Tilneys and Terringtons.

The place name derives from 'Wicga's halh'. Halh is the Old English word for 'a corner', and the reference is generally to a remote valley or a recess in a hill.

St Mary's church – often referred to in mediaeval wills as 'St Mary the Mother of Christ', to distinguish it from its neighbour St Mary Magdalene, stands apart from its small village, up a long lane, with only the Georgian Old Vicarage and the Hall for company. It may well have originated as a chapel for the Kerviles at the Hall. St Mary's Hall was largely burnt down in 1800, but the Tudor gatehouse and stable block survived to be incorporated into the replacement building of 1864.

After the Kerviles became extinct in 1624, the Hall eventually passed in 1727 to Sir Robert Browne. Browne was sometime British Consul in Venice, paymaster of His Majesty's Works, MP for Uttoxeter, Staffordshire (1734) and Wiggenhall St Mary's most celebrated resident. He was created Baronet in 1731–32.

Since the 1939–45 war, the population of the tiny village served by this church has become much reduced, and another church, St German's, is



The church from the north-east

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

less than a mile (1.6km) away. The burden of maintaining two large churches was becoming more and more difficult: St Mary's was formally declared redundant with effect from 1 April 1981, and came into the care of the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust, on 24 November 1982.

The church owes a good deal to its setting. The churchyard is surrounded by orchards on two sides and by open fields on the others, and is perhaps best seen on a bright clear winter's day. On such a day, with sunshine pouring through the windows onto the forest of elaborately carved bench-ends, it looks as fine as any Norfolk church.

Apart from the north and south doorways, and the priest's door into the chancel, possibly retained from the earlier 13th-century building, the entire church was built around 1400. The window tracery is early Perpendicular, still retaining elements of the Decorated style. The church is important as an almost complete example of the early Perpendicular period, and as one of the first buildings to make a good deal of use of brick

as a building material. Other examples nearby include Walpole St Andrew (also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust) and Wiggshall St Mary Magdalene.

There was a sensitive restoration by G E Street in 1862. Plans for an iron-work screen, a sacristy, font and canopy did not materialise and his work was confined largely to providing the nave roof tie-beam with king posts.

EXTERIOR

The church consists of tower, nave, north and south aisles, south porch and chancel.

The tower may have been built over a long period; there are two distinct courses of material. The lower part is built of rubble, while the belfry is of brick which might suggest a date well into the 15th century. The west window and belfry windows are of the same design however. There is a stair turret at the south-west corner and another at the north-west corner. The tower houses six bells in an ancient oak bell-frame:

Treble by John Warner, London, 1873

Second by John Warner, London, 1873

Third by John Draper, Thetford, 1638

Fourth by John Warner, London, 1873

Fifth by John Draper, Thetford, 1638

Tenor by Joseph Eayre, St Neots, 1765

There are fine gargoyles at the south-west and north-east corners, the former very masculine, the latter clinging on for all he is worth.

The porch probably dates from about 1400. It has a stone barrel-vaulted roof. Much brick has been used in its construction. Over the entry is a sundial, with the inscription 'Joseph Rockley, Esq Churchwarden 1742. Tempus Fugit'.

The clerestory is evidently older on the north side than on the south. The clerestory and chancel roofs were originally thatched but in 1862 were covered with Westmorland slates. These were replaced with pantiles in 1985; the north aisle roof was re-covered in lead in 1938, the south in 1923, incorporating sheets dated 1826 and 1818 respectively. The porch roof has a lead covering evidently of much greater age.



Dole cupboard and bench end

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

INTERIOR

The royal arms over the tower arch formerly hung over the south door. They date from the reign of George III, before the union with Ireland (1801) and have the name of the churchwarden, J Sutterby, and the date 1791.

The door to the tower stairs has stout iron binding, a reminder of the days when towers were strongrooms for the village.

The chest is late 18th century. The dole cupboard is dated 1639. On the other side of the nave is the font. It must be pre-Reformation (i.e. before 1550) and it bears signs of staples which were used to lock down the previous mediaeval font cover. Fonts were locked to prevent theft of the holy water which was kept in them and only renewed twice a year. The delightful cover is dated 1625 and is surmounted by a pelican 'in its piety'. It was believed in the mediaeval period that this bird would sometimes feed her young with blood from her own breast. The pelican became a symbol of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and of the Holy Communion which commemorates this. The initials MF and PH are probably those of the churchwardens.

On the west wall of the nave is a monument to Edmund Hardwick (1759), surmounted by the Hardwick arms.

To these so mourned in death, so loved in life
The Childrens Parent, and the Widow'd wife.
With Tears inscribes this monumental stone
That holds their ashes and expects her own.

The flaming urns are a Baroque symbol of resurrection.

The vestry screen has panels which may be part of a Jacobean chancel screen that disappeared around 1860.

There are a number of ledger slabs in the floor. The most interesting inscription is to Etheldreda Hardwick, who died on 31 December 1691.

Fond world farewell and weep no more my dearest friend
In vain with tears lament no more my destin'd end.
For God hath spoke the word and cut the thred of live
And so concluded all my sorrow grief and strife.
Our life is frale, we must be done when God does call
If death approach we're pilgrims weak and helpless all
Naked wee cam and naked to the silent grave
Wee hast, those lodgings thou as well as I must have.



Carved bench ends (CHRISTOPHER DALTON)



The font and 1625 font cover with the pelican in her piety above

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

The benches on the south side of the church date from about 1400 and those on the north side from about 100 years later, to judge by the pediment headdress worn by St Mary Magdalene. These bench-ends are considered to be among the most remarkable and complete in the country.

As well as the carving of the ends, there are beautifully pierced and traceryed backs. The motif VRA stands either for *Virgo Regina Ave* or *Virgo Regina Assumptio*: Hail Queen of Virgins or Assumption of the Queen of Virgins. The most notable ends are the main figures flanking the centre gangway. These include representations of the Virgin Mary as well as St Andrew, St Paul, St Agatha, St Mary Magdalene, St Edward the Confessor, St Leonard, St Agnes, St Etheldreda and many unidentifiable male and female figures.

The rood-screen has lost the upper part, but what remains is an excellent example of late mediaeval work. It has the figures of eight saints painted on the panels – from north to south they are:

1. St Mary Magdalene, holding a box of ointment.
2. St Dorothy, holding a basket of flowers and fruit.
3. St Margaret, thrusting her cross into the dragon.
4. St Scholastica, in a black cowl-like headdress and a red cloak.
5. St Catherine, with a sword.
6. St Barbara, with the tower in which her father imprisoned her.
7. St Mary the Virgin and the Holy Child.
8. St John the Baptist with the *Agnus Dei*.

Below these panels are the names of the donors: Thomas Lacy, Omphrey Karvyle armiger, Mathu Clerke and John E... . None of the donors can be positively identified: there were two Humphrey Kerviles, who died in 1526 and 1541 respectively, whilst the Lacys seem to have been a prolific local family. There was a Thomas Lacy, who had not yet attained his majority, living at Stow Bardolph in 1489; a Richard Lacy was living at Saddlebow in 1509, whilst William Lacy was the incumbent of St Mary from 1515 to 1541. Stylistically the screen painting can be dated by the costume of St Scholastica to c.1500, so a likely date would be the period 1500–25.

In his will of 1509, Richard Lacy left money to buy a 'candlestick' of latten (probably a candelabrum) to hang before the rood-loft, like the one



Bench ends from the west end

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

in St German's church. It seems likely that the screen was new then and that the 'candlestick' was part of the new ornaments for the rood-loft.

The organ in the north aisle is a good two-manual instrument by George Maydwell Holdich (c. 1850) with tracker action. It has a mahogany console. The organ was given by G Helsham, JP, a former resident of the Hall.

The pulpit is 17th century Jacobean: it has the wrought iron stand for the hourglass for timing sermons. The sounding board was reinstated in 1983.

The parclose screens were erected to screen off the altars at the ends of the aisles. The north-side screen is substantially a renewal, and the other has been much restored, but they are contemporary with the main screen. One of the cusps in the entrance to the south-aisle screen has a leopard's face, which occurs in the Kervile arms.

The heart brass in the south chapel marks the place of burial of the heart of Sir Robert Kervile (c. 1450) who is said to have died abroad and to have requested burial of his heart in his home church. His wife is said to have despatched a monk to retrieve the heart. The inscription reads '*Orate p aia Dni Roberti Kervile Militis de Wygenhale Filii Edmundi Kervile de Wygenhale, cujus cor hic humatur*'. (Pray for the soul of Master Robert Kervile, Knight, of Wiggenhall, son of Edmund Kervile of Wiggenhall, whose heart is buried here.)

The brass eagle lectern is mediaeval. About 40 examples survive in England of which 30 are similar to this one. It bears the inscription '*+ Orate pro anima fratris Robti Barnard, gardiani Walsingham Anno Domini 1518*'. It is not known if Robert Barnard had any connection with Wiggenhall, but it is known that a Friar Bernard was Warden of the Franciscan Friary at Norwich in the late 15th century and he may later have become head (or warden) of the Walsingham Friary. The lectern is said to have 'come from Walsingham' and there were two brass lecterns in the parish church of Little Walsingham in 1552, although this is probably coincidental. The eagle has lost its claws, which may have been silver.

Only part of the original mediaeval stained glass remains. We know from the accounts of 18th-century antiquaries that once there was much more. A figure, probably St Jude, survives from a series of the 12 Apostles, in the clerestory windows on the north side, painted around 1520. The glass in the aisle windows was painted earlier. This is armorial glass of between 1375 and 1400, including various coats of arms, such as those of Kervile, Attlelathe, Kerdeston, Howard, Thorpe of Geyton, Scales, Bardolf, Illey and Wesenham.

The fine monument in the south chapel is to Henry Kervile, the last of the family, who died in 1624. He and his wife are portrayed in recumbent alabaster effigies – he in ruff and armour and she in ruff and hood, farthingale and mantle. Below them are figures of a girl and boy, the latter in chrisom cloths, who died in infancy. The Kervile arms (three leopard's faces with a chevron between) appear here, as in so many other places. The piscina for the priest to wash his hands and the chalice at Mass is in the south wall by the altar.

Above it are the remains of a consecration cross. When the church was consecrated by the bishop, 12 of these crosses were made on the inside

walls (and the same number on the outside) and were anointed with holy oil. Candles were lit beside them then and on the anniversary each year.

Until the Victorian restoration, this church had a fine chancel screen with doors, dating from 1626, just to the east of the present screen. When Brandon described the church in 1846, he wrote 'the old Puritanical arrangement of the chancel remains unaltered, the Communion Table being carried out into the middle and seats put all round'.

The sedilia (seats for the priests at Mass) is formed out of a windowsill; beside them is a piscina. The chancel was oak panelled in 1930 to the designs of W D Caroe; he also designed the reredos. The altar was elevated on several steps, in the Victorian fashion, but some 50 years ago these were removed and the altar stands more at the mediaeval height.

The choirstalls are Victorian, a simpler version of the design of the nave benches, whilst the simple communion rails are c.1950.

Opposite: The Kerville monument of 1624 (KATE WEAVER).

Front cover: Exterior from the south-east (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

Back cover: The eagle lectern (ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND).

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