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We strongly recommend checking our website [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk) for the most up to date opening and access details and directions.

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*Historic churches, due to their age and previous use, often have uneven and worn floors. Please take care, especially in wet weather when floors and steps can also be slippery.*

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## CHURCH OF ST MARY

Rickinghall Superior,  
Suffolk



# Church of ST MARY

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

## *History*

St Mary's stands beside the B1113 road to Stowmarket, just south of where it crosses the A143, which by-passes the adjoining villages of Rickingham and Botesdale. Botesdale (which has its own medieval chapel of ease) is in the parish of Redgrave, whose glorious church is now also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. The parishes of Rickingham Inferior and Superior have shared the same priest for many years, although the old civil boundary between East and West Suffolk once divided them. Rickingham Inferior's round-towered church, which is now the parish church for the united parishes, stands in the valley about half a mile (0.8 km) to the north and was always known as the 'lower' church. Rickingham Superior church, situated at the north-west end of its parish, on high ground and rather aloof from its population, was known as the 'upper' church.

Because Rickingham and Botesdale had three Anglican churches within a mile (1.6 km) of each other, St Mary's retired from full-time parochial use in 1977. In 1981 it was placed in the care of what is now The Churches Conservation Trust.

Rickingham Superior and its church are mentioned in Domesday Book of 1086 and the Manor of Rickingham was owned in the

14th century by the de Hyntlesham family. There was also a Manor in Rickingham Superior known as Facon's Hall, which was mentioned in the 16th century, but for many years now the Rickinghalls have been grouped together. It is very probable that the population of Rickingham Superior moved down to the old coaching road from Norwich to Bury St Edmunds as the use of this highway increased leaving the church and a very few houses away on the higher ground. Like many villages in the area, the Rickinghalls possessed a large amount of common-land, but this was enclosed in the early 19th century.

No traces of the church mentioned in 1086 remain in the present building; the earliest work to be seen here today dates from the 14th century.

## *Exterior*

St Mary's has a peaceful and rural wayside setting, affording pleasant views of the north Suffolk countryside. Although it comprises only chancel, nave, south porch and square western tower, it has a fine and noble exterior, incorporating several features of beauty and antiquity, and well worth inspecting and standing back to admire.

### **Tower**

The tower is neither ornate nor particularly lofty, but is attractive and beautifully proportioned. It dates from the 14th century and is a worthy example of the Decorated period of English architecture, which is seen in the west window, the belfry windows and the small quatrefoil openings that light the middle chamber. The flushwork parapet, once crowned with corner pinnacles, was added in the 15th century, and may well be the work of the Aldryche family of North Lopham. Beneath the stepped battlements are traceried panels and also wheels and other motifs, including the 'IHS' monogram of Our Lord and the 'MR' for His Mother. Flushwork panelling, using dressed stone and knapped (split) flints, is a common and attractive feature in East Anglian churches, where durable stone for carving was rare and had to be brought from other parts of the country.

More flushwork can be seen at the bases of the nave buttresses and on the porch. At the base of the tower parapet, on the north and south sides, are fine gargoyles, which discharge rainwater from the roof. Carved into the stonework of the south-west tower buttress, about 7ft (2.1 m) from the ground, is a mason's mark, showing a square and compasses, which is one of the finest examples in the county.

### **Chancel**

The chancel dates from the early 14th century and its three-light Decorated east window has good tracery, based upon a 'skeleton' design of simple intersecting tracery. Of similar date is the southern priest's doorway, which has an ogee-shaped arch, terminating in a foliated finial and flanked by corbel heads, of which the easternmost is now very decayed. The north and south walls are each lit by two windows. The eastern windows are in the Perpendicular style of the 15th century and the smaller western windows have depressed Perpendicular arches, with simpler tracery. In the churchyard to the north of the chancel are some attractive 18th-century headstones.

Remembering that the maintenance of the chancel was the responsibility of the rector, whilst the parishioners shared the upkeep of

the rest of the church, it is not surprising that this chancel is rather small and humble in comparison with the wide and lofty nave, which is a magnificent piece of 15th-century craftsmanship.

#### Nave

It is clear that a major rebuilding took place in the 15th century because a will, dated 1442, bequeathed 40 shillings to the 'dedication and sanctification' of the church, and it was probably at this time that the present nave took shape. East Anglian churches are rich in late Perpendicular architecture and here we see a worthy example of this style at its zenith. The masonry has been ingeniously constructed to form a chequer pattern, combining stone, pebbles and knapped flints, carefully arranged. The five buttresses each side not only support the nave but also add great dignity to the structure.

The outstanding feature of the nave is the large and magnificent three-light windows, set above a frieze of blank stone shields. It has been said that the aim of 15th-century church builders was to get as near as they dared to creating walls of glass and here they came as close as anywhere to achieving this! These windows have very low four-centred arches, framed with bricks in the masonry above. The mass of tracery in their upper parts is based upon a skeleton of simple intersecting

tracery, possibly influenced by the 14th-century east window. A window on the north side has been shortened to accommodate the north doorway, which has a continuously-moulded arch and decayed corbel heads. The east wall of the nave on this side has a slight abutment containing the rood-loft stairs. The south-west window is also shortened because to the south of it stood a small chapel; this may have been a chantry chapel, or possibly the Lady Chapel, which was repaired with money bequeathed in 1474. When the foundations of the chapel were excavated in the 1950s, it was found to have extended about 14ft (4.27m) westwards of the porch and 8ft (2.44m) south of the nave wall. It is known that chapels of Our Lady and of St Margaret of Antioch existed here before the Reformation.

#### Porch

The 15th-century porch has two storeys; the upper chamber (or parvise) provided accommodation for a priest and its staircase ascends from the north-west corner.

Part of the wall of the former chapel now serves as a large western porch buttress and incorporates some moulded stonework. The south face of the porch merits inspection. Its fine entrance arch has blank shields in the spandrels and above, in flush work, are crowned 'IHS' and 'MR' motifs. This may well

be the work of Norwich craftsmen and probably dates from the rededication of the church in 1442. The window above gives light to the parvise; a smaller window can be seen lower down on the east side. The porch was originally crowned with pinnacles.

Inside, the porch has a fine groined roof with a tierceron vault. On its eastern window sill have been scratched some graffiti of considerable age, including the outline of a human hand.

### *Interior*

The interior is bright and spacious, the lofty nave being 58ft (17.68m) long and no less than 30ft (9.14m) wide. The magnificent windows are framed with **wall arcades** – a rarity in Suffolk but a particular local feature of the Norwich City churches. Along the north and south walls are narrow **wall seats** of stone (such seats in churches gave rise to the expression 'the weakest go to the wall'). Elegant stone shafts rise from the floor to help support the roof above.

Beneath the south-west window is a **low arch**, which led to the lost chapel, and a **staircase** of 13 steps nearby leads to the parvise above the porch. This room preserves its original 15th-century **roof timbers**.

The stone **pinnacle** near the entrance is from the tower parapet, and the **bier** nearby, made in 1763, was used to carry the coffin at funerals.

The octagonal 14th-century **font** has a plain stem, supporting a bowl which is a masterpiece of the medieval stonemason's craft. This is beautifully carved with intricate patterns on its cardinal faces, alternating with four different three-light traceried panels. There is also a fine Victorian brass ewer.

Above the 15th-century tower arch is a small quatrefoil which may have served as a **sanctus bell window**. On the tower walls hang a **benefactions board** (1843) and two **peal boards** (1845 and 1913). St Mary's has a ring of six **bells**, which were rehung in a new frame by Bowell of Ipswich in 1906. The treble bell was cast by Taylor of Loughborough in 1850, the 2nd by Bowell in 1911, the 3rd, 4th and 5th are rare examples of the work of John Goldsmith from his village bell foundry at nearby Redgrave, cast in 1712 and the tenor, which weighs 10½ cwt (533.43 kg) was cast by Thomas Newman of Norwich in 1741.

Much of the **woodwork** in the church dates from 1868, when the building was closed for five months and underwent a major **restoration**. Before this the interior presented a very different appearance. When David Elisha Davy visited St Mary's in 1843, the nave was filled with box pews and had a

small square pulpit on the south side. The chancel, which had a thatched roof outside and a plaster ceiling inside, contained a small Communion Table, railed in on three sides, with painted tables of the Lord's Prayer and Commandments on the east wall above it.

The architect for the restoration was W M Fawcett of Cambridge. He largely rebuilt the Cambridgeshire churches of Knapwell and Longstowe, and was responsible for minor works in several of the Cambridge colleges. The contractor was C Bishop of Diss and the stonework and glazing were done by Herbert Osbourne of Stowmarket. At this time the nave received a new deal roof – a copy of the old oak roof, which remained – a gallery was removed from the west end and the tower arch was opened out, the walls were replastered, the box pews were replaced by oak benches, the carved pulpit, stalls and altar were installed, the porch staircase was cleared of muck, and the parvise – which was made accessible for the first time for 30 years – was fitted out as a vestry.

Towards the east end of the south nave wall is a piscina, showing that an altar stood nearby in medieval times. There were probably altars each side of the chancel arch, beneath the carved and painted rood screen, all traces of which have now gone, which almost certainly stretched across the nave from north to south. The staircase which led to

the rood loft surmounting the screen remains intact and its lower and upper entrances can be seen to the north of the chancel arch. It was possible to walk along this loft to tend the lights which burned in honour of the great Rood or Crucifix, flanked by Our Lady and St John, above. Money was left for a new candle beam in 1448, which probably indicates that the rood loft was also being made.

The chancel (35ft × 17ft (10.67 × 5.18m)) is small in comparison with the nave and is surmounted by a 19th-century 'wagon' ceiling. Its south-east window is lowered to form sedilia, where officiating clergy could sit during parts of the medieval Mass. Nearby is a 15th-century piscina, with a beautiful niche, which has an embattled top and a trefoil ogee arch. Into its elaborate drain was poured the water from the washing of the priest's hands at the Eucharist.

The south-east window in the chancel contains two roundels of old painted glass and borders made up of medieval fragments. The figure on the pillar (east) and the lion (west) may be 18th century. Remains of 15th-century glass can also be seen in the window above the north nave door, where there is canopy-work in the tops of the three lights and more glass survives in the tracery, with a flowering plant at the very top; the red, blue and yellow colouring is particularly vivid here.

Other windows contain 19th-century glass, inserted as memorials. The east window, by O'Connor (1868), shows in the centre light the Crucifixion and Jesus the Good Shepherd. The other lights show Jesus teaching, with a child, and Simeon with the infant Jesus.

The south-west chancel window, showing two scenes from the life of Samuel, commemorates Samuel Speare (1853–73), a young man from a poor Rickingham family who went as a missionary to Zanzibar at the age of 15. He returned five years later to Burgh-le-Marsh in Lincolnshire to help in the parish while studying for ordination. Maybe it was the contrasting climates of Zanzibar and Lincolnshire that caused his illness and death at Burgh in November 1873 aged only 20. In the central quatrefoil are (appropriately) four black angel faces. The glass is by Heaton, Butler and Bayne, who also made the west window in the tower, showing the calling of St Nathaniel, 'the Israelite in whom there is no guile' (St John 1, v. 47).

The organ, which stood at the west end of the nave, was made by Conacher in 1868 and had a single manual, with five speaking stops and a small pedal-board with one stop. This instrument is now in regular use at Hinderclay church.