



## The Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin Great Shelford

The earliest church on the site of which there is evidence was Norman. This was replaced about 1400 when the church was apparently completely rebuilt "with Bell Tower and Chancel"<sup>1</sup> by Thomas Patesley (Rector 1396 - 1418). The tower was surmounted by a 14m high stone steeple which was blown down in 1708. This event would have weakened the tower as most of it collapsed on November 23rd 1798. The present ashlar faced unbuttressed tower with its octagonal upper stage was constructed in its place in 1800-01 using local labour<sup>2</sup> and material salvaged from the wreck. In the rebuilding the westernmost bay of the nave was lost, so that the nave is now nearly square in plan. Apart from these changes the main structure of the building seems to be that which was built in 1400. The style is described as Perpendicular but because of the date of its construction the building shows many features of the earlier period of architecture.

### EXTERIOR.

The South Porch. Like most of the south side of the building it was constructed of clunch (locally quarried chalk blocks) faced with flints. It has an original vaulted 15th Century statue niche in which a modern statue of the patron saint has been placed. The niche has nicely carved crockets and finials and possibly arms. The sundial above it is dated 1789. Inside the porch, note the carved bosses including one of a pelican feeding its young and another of the Green Man. The room in the upper storey could have accommodated a chantry priest or curate. On the west side you can see the door to this room which must have been reached by a staircase. The porch forms part of what was obviously intended to be an impressive southern façade to the church, hence the crenellation. To the right of the window next to the Porch one can see in the wall one of the reused Norman stones with chevron carving.

Most of the rest of the exterior seems to have remained largely as built around 1400. The east window however is a Victorian restoration. Also the sacristy was built on to the north side of the chancel in 1912 and the choir vestry with the organ loft above it were added to the eastern end of the south aisle in the same year. There is a prominent Rood Stair Turret at the north eastern corner of the nave.

### INTERIOR.



Figure 1: The Font

**The Tower.** The Baptistry has a Victorian mosaic floor. The octagonal medieval Font has rather worn original carvings under the bowl which could date from the rebuilding of the church as they bear the arms of the diocese of Ely and of John Fordham, Bishop of Ely 1388-1425. Notice also the original stout door to the tower stairs. A belfry was often used as a place of security for valuables. There is a ring of 8 bells full details of which will be found posted on the wall.

**The Nave.** There is a fine medieval roof with alternating tie beams and hammer beams. Wooden carvings of angels are attached to the hammerbeams. "Four have hands raised in prayer; two others hold a book and a scroll [respectively].

The remaining two figures are evidently human and have the priest's tonsure. One holds a church - surely

<sup>1</sup> As inscribed on Patesley's tomb

<sup>2</sup> The workmen left their graffiti on the SW corner. High up you can see 'Daniel Austin Bricklayer 1801'

intended for Patesley; the other a book - perhaps a parish chaplain."<sup>3</sup> Notice the carved headstops to the mouldings of the arcade arches of which "all are female and conventional save one. This is a lively carving - might it be the master mason's portrait?"<sup>4</sup>. Most of the nave furnishings and the Minton tiles on the floor date from a restoration of the interior of the church in the 1860s but the screen at the East end is original. The Pulpit, complete with backboard and decorated sounding board is dated 1636 and was originally a "three decker". Hanging on the west wall is a copy of a rubbing of the brass of Thomas Patesley.



Figure 2: Roof Figure

**Wall Paintings.** The painting of the Last Judgement, or 'Doom', above the chancel arch, is rated by many as one of the finest in the country. The chancel arch springs from two rather horrid devils showing that the "Doom" painting was an integral part of the original scheme of decoration. In the centre of the arch is Christ, wearing the crown of thorns and the scarlet robe, bearing the 'glorious scars' of the cross. He sits on a rainbow. On one side of Him is the sun, on the other a moon (with a face). His left hand is raised in the frontal gesture of judgment. His right hand blesses. Angels<sup>5</sup> on each side bear the cross, the spear and the sponge on the javelin. To His left is John the Baptist, wearing camel hair - the camel's head and neck still attached; he was the prophet of wrath to come. To Christ's right kneels the Virgin Mary interceding for sinners. Above them angels sound the last trump and below the dead rise from their graves. On the left the redeemed enter through the gate of the heavenly city, welcomed by the blessed ones on its wall. On the right demons drag the doomed off to Hell with a great chain. When this painting was discovered under layers of limewash and restored some were afraid this would not be pleasant to look at. "With some relief we found nineteenth century repairs had cemented our Hell!"<sup>6</sup>



Figure 3: The Doom Painting

**South Aisle.** Note the Norman stonework at the eastern end forming a niche over the altar of the Resurrection, probably a relic of the earlier building. The carved screenwork above is the work of Loughnan Pendred. In the south wall is a reused 12th Century Piscina another relic from the earlier building<sup>7</sup>. Above this the stained glass of 1881 is by the Cambridge glazier, W.H.Constable.

<sup>3</sup> Hale, p 7

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> It is said that they are supposed to represent archangels because they have crosses on their heads.

<sup>6</sup> Hale, pp 6 & 7. Hale's description is rather confusing as he seems to have used "stage right" and "stage left"

<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that this piscina is an indication that the south wall formed part of the earlier building.

**North Aisle.** The Chapel, retaining its early 15th Century Parclose Screen, has been made into a War Memorial. The carved reredos is in memory of Aulay Macaulay, brother of the novelist Rose Macaulay, who was killed on the NW Frontier. The modern carved Virgin and Child is by the Oberammergau born Anton Wagner. Notice some fragments of 15th Century glass in the windows of this aisle and also a window (1878) by W.H.Constable showing three figures possibly representing Faith, Hope and Charity.

**Chancel.** The east window by Constable depicts scenes from the Passion, the Last Supper and Ascension. Above the Sedilia is yet another Constable window (1875) showing the Corporate Works of Mercy. The carved stonework in the north wall are the remains of the tomb of the widow of William Redman, a late 16th Century Bishop of Norwich. The Victorian restoration gave the chancel a Minton-tiled floor and a good roof with stencilled decoration, possibly by Bodley. The choir stalls were installed c1890 but notice the good carving. There is also some particularly fine medieval carving on the reverse of the Rood Screen showing (inter alia) The Green Man.



Figure 4: The Screen & Chancel

### Bibliography

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