

St, Nicholas – Parish Church of North Walsham

- A Short History

There has been a parish church in North Walsham [or Walsam as it was known at the Time] since Anglo Saxon times. With the coming of Christianity, the village was provided with a church, some land and a priest. During the reign of King Canute, a Norseman by the name of Skiotr gave the village of Walsam, it's church and estates, to the Abbey of St Benet at Holme, in the Bure Marshes near Horning. As the weaving industry of the area flourished, the Abbot of St. Benet's, being the Lord of the Manor, was entitled to the tithes collected, making the Abbey very wealthy. So much so, that during the early 14th century the Abbot began extending both the abbey and the parish church in North Walsham. Today, this extension enables the Town to be able to claim that they have the largest Church in Norfolk that has always been solely a parish church.



The original church is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, and the tower of this church is still in existence today, being the oldest building in the town at well over 1000 years old. It is incorporated into the present church building and stands to the immediate north of the present tower ruin.

The 'Black Death' [Bubonic Plague] ravaged the country in 1348, and again in 1361 and 1369, causing work on the church extension to be reduced and probably halted, due to a lack of qualified tradesmen. When work on the church resumed, the original design had to be altered due to the use of less/non skilled labour, leading for example to the much simpler tracery on the church windows.

During the peasant's revolt of 1381 many protestors tried to seek 'sanctuary' in the church but to no avail, when Bishop Henry le Despenser of Norwich, set about putting down the rebellion, during a battle on the edge of the town. Many fled to the church, but Henry and his men just followed them, as the church was still not complete and not consecrated and massacred them.

The church was eventually completed, and consecrated by the same Bishop Henry le Despenser, in 1406.



It was the largest 'Wool Church' in Norfolk, and it is noted for its spacious interior, the lofty columns and the absence of a Chancel Arch making it seem light and airy. It also contains many interesting artefacts, for example, a 15th century font cover, which is richly carved and decorated, and has a rare telescopic mechanism. Of similar age



are the remains of a wooden screen, which separates the Chancel from the Nave, its panels carved and painted with a selection of saints.



Also of note are a 14th century communion table in the south chapel, which also, during the medieval period, contained a shrine to Thomas Beckett, popular with pilgrims on their route to Bromholm Priory at Bacton.

Another unique item is a Royal Arms Board at the west end of the church. On one side can be seen the coat of arms of the Commonwealth, and on the other side the Arms of Charles II. Other interesting items include an Iron bound chest with 7 locks, possibly used as the Parish Chest to keep the parish records and all the



important documents in, 2 remaining tip-up seats from the monk's medieval quire, and a wooden Armoury Chest – used during invasion preparations against the Spanish Armada. Finally, there is also the tomb of Sir William Paston, designed by himself about 2 years before his death. It shows him, in his armour, lying on his side, propped up on his right elbow.



The Church is entered on the south side from the marketplace, through a pinnaced porch with rich carvings and heraldic shields. The statues, which are replacements, depict St. Benedict, [with St. Benet's Abbey and Norwich Cathedral at his feet], St. Nicholas [to whom the present church is dedicated] and in the centre is the Virgin Mary and the infant Christ [the church being originally dedicated to the Virgin Mary]. The name change occurring after the reformation.

The most prominent feature of the church is its tower, which in its heyday reached 147 feet tall. A later spire was added increasing its height to around 180 feet, making it second only to Norwich Cathedral. It is rumoured that this was also done to 'beat' Cromer Church, St. Peter's.

However, in May 1724 a combination of bell ringing [a peel of 6 bells] and weather set up vibrations in the structure such that on 16th May one side of the steeple collapsed at between 9am and 10am, fortunately without seriously injuring anyone, although the town doctor, who was walking past at the time was slightly injured.



Attempts were made to raise funds for repair, but the weather continued to weaken the structure, with further falls occurring in 1835 and again on 17th February 1836 [the last major fall], following which the East wall of the Belfry was dismantled as a safety precaution. Some stabilisation work was carried out in 1939. Then, in 2014 further stabilisation and renovation work was carried out. Plans have also been drawn up to renovate the tower, and one version, minus the spire, by the eminent architect Sir Charles Nicholson, can be seen inside the North Porch of the church.

Today, even in its ruined state, the tower still dominates the town from whichever direction you approach.

By Colin Young, March 2025

Sources:

The Official Guide to North Walsham 2023 – 2024

Wikipedia