

Potter Heigham, St Nicolas by Arnold Butler

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The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names is unsure about the derivation of Heigham but has no doubt that there were potteries in Potter Heigham at one time (there is a lot of brick in the church). It was Echam in Domesday and Hegham Pottere in 1182. Blomefield was still calling it Higham Potter in 1808.

The village was much nearer the sea a thousand years ago and the church was built on slightly rising ground in a very flat landscape. It is now in the heart of the Broads and Hickling Broad Nature Reserve (for walking in after visiting the church) lies due north.

In the C14 there was a series of arguments between the abbot of Holm and the bishop of Norwich as to who controlled Potter Heigham and in 1351 'the rectory, which had formerly been appropriated to the abbey by Pope Lucius, and many secular clergy had after possessed it as rectors, was this year appropriated ... by William, Bishop of Norwich, to that abbey, for the support of two students (monks of this abbey) in divinity, or cannon law, at Cambridge'.

The church has been much admired in the past: its West tower, clerestoried nave, chancel, North and South aisles, and Southern porch. One of the most recent complements comes from Mortlock and Roberts who found it 'one of the nicest Broadland churches' in 1981. Cautley gave it two stars in 1949....

The tower is one of the very few W.J.Goode was unable to climb to the top: there are no turret stairs. However, he estimates the total height to be 48 feet. An early round tower rising to 35 feet had an embattled octagon belfry stage added in the C14, starting just above the high nave ridge. The four belfry windows at the Cardinal points are Decorated: they alternate with blind arcades of the same pattern and are encircled by bands of grotesque heads below and above. The ground floor window facing West was inserted in the C14. Goode found enough evidence to call the tower Saxon, in refutation of earlier writers who all said Norman. He found large flints between tower and church a guide to Saxon origins and the construction of the tower walls with whole flints from chalk beds were further evidence.

The curved East wall inside the tower showed that tower and church were built at the same time. Of three bells in the tower, two are pre-Reformation but they are no longer rung. There is no lightening conductor.

The church itself is of whole and cut flints, with quoins of dressed stone. There are three buttresses on the South side and three on the north. The nave was rethatched in 1992 and inside there are pictures of the work in progress. The aisles have lead roofs. The fabric is mostly C14 with important C15 modifications.

Remarkable are the six tall Perpendicular clerestory windows on both north and south sides of the church. The combination of flint and red brick is most attractive. The aisles have fine three-light square headed windows, later Perpendicular, replacing lancets, which appear on either side of the tower. The east window is Victorian in Decorated style: a painting in the church shows the original with intersecting tracery. There is a simple little priest's door on the south side and a large blocked door on the north.

The handsome two storeyed south porch is of flint, stone and brick. Two small pointed brick windows over the entrance are on either side of a larger niche which, surprisingly, contains a half-length figure, crudely carved in white stone, of a wild man of the woods with a club- a woodwose- more usually found on the stems of East Anglian fonts. It was clearly put there in the mistaken belief that it represented St Nicolas, after being dug up in the churchyard. There are fragments of old glass in the porch windows.

Of all the interesting artefacts in the church, font, paintings, roof and screen stand out- perhaps in that order. Only fifty years ago the paintings would have come first.

The C15 octagonal two-stepped font is of brick and tile and is reckoned by Cautley *the* feature of the church. It is certainly unusual- remarkable rather than beautiful. The intricate brickwork is made up of small bricks, characteristic of their early date, with special mouldings to form the quatrefoils of the panels below. Overhead in the roof is the old wooden roller pulley (rare) which used to raise the font cover.

Wall paintings which once covered the walls of the aisles are fading fast. They have suffered much. They first got a battering in the C15 when the larger windows were put in. Then came the Reformation whitewash. Today damp and the acid from bat droppings are doing their worst.

In the north aisle St Cristopher no longer extends his welcome to travellers, but to the east it is still possible to make out the figure of St Anthony, Abbot, once especially venerated in this church, in his red cowl and holding a crozier. A nearby nativity sequence is almost gone, with only part of the Annunciation being discernible. In the south aisle the Seven Works of Mercy can still just be made out: caring for the hungry; the thirsty; the naked; the prisoner; the stranger; the sick; and the dead. H.O. Mansfield (1976) says these works of Mercy are probably the earliest example of the subject in England.

The high nave roof is a grand sight. It is C15 single hammer beam. The wall posts spring from modern stone panels. There is delicate carving in the spandrels and along the wall plates. Over the chancel arch is an impressive old rood beam (with modern lettering) and a modern rood, carved in the Black Forest and put up in 1909. The stairs to the rood are in the south aisle. The shapes of the figures which once stood at the foot of the Cross- Our Lady and St John- are still discernible.

The screen retains lower panels, partly defaced, in original red and gold, depicting from north to south St Mark, St Augustine, St John, St Gregory, St Jerome, St Eligius, St Luke and St Ambrose. St Eligius, patron saint of farriers, is third from the south and holds a claw hammer. He was a worker-bishop, in Limoges, born in 588 and popular in Friesland just across the sea from Norfolk.

The restored Laudian altar-rails have a chequered history. At one time, according to Cox (1911) they were cut up for fronts to the choir stalls, and cast iron supports inserted. Today there is a mixture of ancient and modern, but the gaps would still be too wide for Archbishop Laud: a fox terrier could get through. The holy table is crude Stuart in origin and there are 16 poppyheads on early benchends. The marble monument on the south wall of the sanctuary refers to a parson Robert Myhill who suffered much in 'Oliveran' times. There are still Myhills in the village today.

There are three piscinas. The one on the south wall of the sanctuary is restored. In the cill of the window alongside it is possible to make out the line of the old sedilia, lost when the cill was raised. In each aisle there is a piscine at the east end, interesting because (Blomefield, 1808) Potter Heigham had pre-Reformation guilds of St Nicolas and St John and so these aisles may well have been the guilds' side-chapels.

At the west end are a three-lock chest dated 1615 and a holy water stoup under a triangulated head of dressed stone.

The floor is of interest. In the sanctuary there is a brass inscription to Richard Baispoole of Potter Heigham, Gentleman, 1613, and a ledgerstone in Latin to parson Clement Atwood and his wife Mary, 1699. In 1808 there was another brass inscription in the sanctuary, inscribed to a pre-Reformation vicar, William Childerhouse, who died on February 1524.

Chancel ledgerstones include one, using rustic grammar, to

John Thaxter Jan 3 1732/3 aged 63 Years.
Also 7 of his Children lay here
And when Christ come all will appear.

Another C18 ledgerstone reads:
Also between ye Altar and ye Church lieth 17
Bodies of ye Family of WHITES they were
Lovers of ye Church Loyal to their Prince True
To their words Just in their dealings Kind to
Their Neighbours Charitable to ye poor and
Died in hopes of a Joyfull Resurrection till then
Let their Bones rest.

In the churchyard are several old tombstones: they include those of Elizabeth Coke, 1738 and John Blaxel, 1787. There are also a number of brick tombs that including that of Leonard Flaxman, 3 Jan. 1798, with the inscription:

Our life hangs by a single thread
Which soon is cut and we are dead
Then boast not reader of the might
Alive at noon and dead at night.

Life did indeed hang by a thread in Potter Heigham in 1789, when fishing and agriculture provided the barest of livings. As late as 1865 Walter White wrote of seeing there 'labourers' cottagers of which Norfolk should be ashamed, for they are as wretched as Irish cabins'. In the C20 the development of tourism in the Broads changed all that and modern housing has largely submerged the old village. Its flavour was remembered in the 'Boy John' letters and broadcasts of Norfolk humourist Sidney Grapes (1888- 1958): he was a churchwarden at the church until his death and the oak vestry perpetuates his memory.

Wikipedia says the following about Sidney Grapes: a British comedian, the owner of a bicycle shop and later a garage in Potter Heigham. In the years before the Second World War, he acquired a reputation as an amateur Norfolk dialect comedian, performing at social functions in many parts of the county and on the radio. However, he is most famous for The Boy John letters which appeared in the Eastern Daily Press. Grapes reported the events in the Boy John's village, and, in addition to the Boy John - a farm worker - they featured as their main characters his Aunt Agatha, Granfar, and old Mrs. W, their neighbour.

Most of the letters ended with a PS containing one of Aunt Agatha's aphorisms which became famous throughout the county, such as "Aunt Agatha she say: all husbands are alike, only they have different faces so you can tell 'em apart". The Boy John letters can be purchased from Mousehold Press.