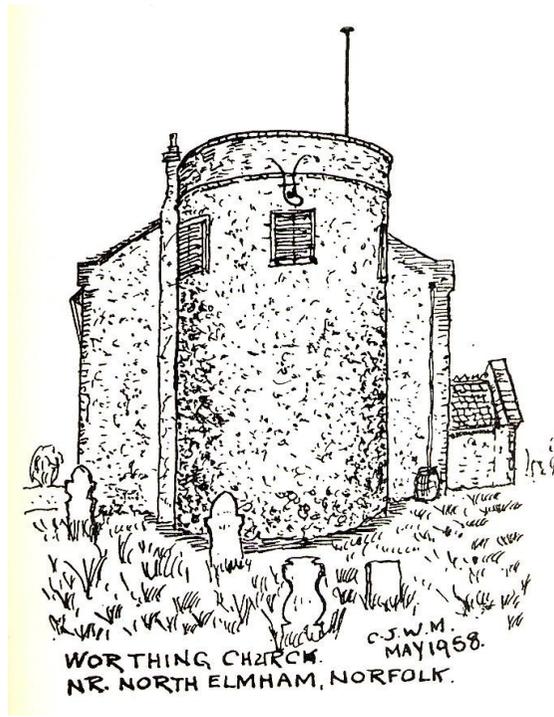




# The Round Tower

Vol. XLV No 2

December 2017



£2 to non members  
[www.roundtowers.org.uk](http://www.roundtowers.org.uk)

Great news that All Saints, Threxton have been awarded a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Initially they will receive £14,700 for the 'development' stage of their repairs project and will be able to apply for the remaining £96,800 as soon as this is completed. The Round Tower Churches Society have also agreed to help them with a grant of £2,000.



**The next issue is March 2018 and the deadline for contributions is the 15th January 2018.**

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#### **Membership Subscription**

Minimum £20 (overseas £30) a year of which 25% goes towards the printing and posting of magazine and administration. The rest goes to the Repair Fund of the RTCS.

Magazines are published in March, June, September and December. The membership renewal date is the first day of the month following the application for membership.

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## **THE ROUND TOWER**

The quarterly magazine of the  
Round Tower Churches Society  
[www.roundtowers.org.uk](http://www.roundtowers.org.uk)

**Vol. XLV No 2. December 2017.**

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There are good reasons to receive the magazine as a PDF as well as a paper copy. Firstly colour photographs are in colour. Secondly the text can be read in as large or as small a font size as you like.

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### **Mass Dials: more questions than answers...**

The chances are that anyone who has visited even a handful of medieval churches anywhere in the country will have come across a 'mass dial', or 'scratch dial', etched in to the outside of at least one of them. Although not strictly speaking graffiti, these early sundials are often found alongside early inscriptions. They usually take the form of a compass drawn circle, or sometimes a rectangle, with a series of straight lines radiating out from a central point - just like a sundial but most usually carved in to a vertical surface. The central point is often a hole into which a stick or nail was once inserted, and in some cases the rusted remains of this can still be made out. These dials are most often to be seen on the south side of the church, sometimes located on the porch, a nearby pillar, or the priests door leading in to the chancel. Many examples are very deeply etched into the stonework, suggesting that the lines have been gone over time and time again, and can usually be seen without any need for specialist lighting. The fact that they are so deeply cut into the building, and are so easy to spot, has meant that they have long been the subject of interest and study.

The dating of these Mass Dials is particularly fraught with dangers. Early scholars studying them suggested that the cruder the inscription was then the earlier it was likely to be - and even came up with a form of style guide to support their theory. In essence, if it was just a simple circle with a few straight lines radiating outwards then it was likely to be early. If it was more complex, and particularly if it included numerals, then it was likely to be later. The problems with such a very convenient system are pretty obvious, and relied totally upon the idea that these designs had evolved and become more complex over time. Whilst that may well be true of things such as church architecture, it certainly isn't something that can be generally applied to inscriptions carved in to the church stonework. To complicate matters further there are a number of very early dials that can be securely dated as belonging to the very late Anglo-Saxon period, such as that still to be seen at Kirkdale in North Yorkshire, and these are by no means simplistic. Indeed, the only reason that it was possible to date these inscriptions at all was the fact that they included examples of text that were clearly early in date.

Similarly, a number of quite elaborate examples, such as that from Hellhoughton in Norfolk, included text that indicated that they date from the eighteenth or nineteenth century - and were more like the traditional sundial than any Mass Dial. The result is rather a confusing mess. If we accept the traditional way of dating these dials then we must also accept that Anglo-Saxon dials were highly decorative and complex in design, and that they underwent a sudden decline in quality with the arrival of the Normans, only to make a long and slow evolutionary climb back towards complexity in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Put simply it just doesn't make a great deal of sense, and whilst it may well be 'convenient' it certainly isn't backed up by the evidence.

And that is rather the problem with Mass Dials. None of it really makes any sense. Just about all the accepted wisdom concerning these inscriptions, not just with regards to dating, rather fails to stand up to close scrutiny. The most obvious problem with them is the actual interpretation of what they are supposed to be; simple sundials designed to indicate the times of church services. On the surface that might make sense - but then you begin to look a little deeper and a number of questions present themselves. The most obvious thing is that they would be of little use to members of the congregation, who were alerted to service times most usually by the ringing of the bells. Perhaps then they were for the use of the bell ringers or parish priest, to indicate the service times; which would at least explain the presence of a few of them near chancel doors. However, the problems don't stop there. Whilst most of these dials are to be found on the south side of parish churches, particularly around the porch and doorway, there are a significant number that are found on other sides of the church, including the north side. Obviously a mass dial located on the north side of a church is simply not going to work. The usual interpretation is that these dials were inscribed into stones that were originally on the south side and have since been re-used during a rebuilding of the church, only to find themselves on the shadowy north side. Whilst this might be 'possible' the sheer number of misplaced examples would tend to make this particular interpretation at least very improbable. Even in churches such as

Worthing in Norfolk (our cover drawing), which is so small and modest as to have been completed in only one or two building phases, a Mass Dial, inscribed into a large section of stone, has found its way in to the masonry of the east end. If it is re-used material then it is difficult to suggest exactly where it originally came from - because it most probably wasn't Worthing church itself.



Photograph by Dave Betterton

Worthing is interesting in the fact that it rather highlights one of the other fundamental problems with the current interpretation of Mass Dials. That found at the eastern end of this remote and modest church is meant to have been relocated there from the south side. However, the south side of the church already has an additional two or three Mass Dials, all now to be found around the south doorway and inside the modest porch. Once again the traditional interpretation is that the Mass Dials were already there when the decision was made to build the porch - and they eventually found themselves inside a building where,

once again, they couldn't possibly function. In the case of Worthing, where the south door is of confident Norman work and the porch a late medieval addition, this could of course be the case. However, there are a large number of churches where the porch and doorway appear to have been built at the same time, and yet Mass Dials are still to be found inside. Which rather brings us to the third question concerning the traditional interpretation of these intriguing carvings. At Worthing, and at many, many other sites, we have not one but many examples of Mass Dials. Some sites can boast as many as five or six examples spread across the building, almost always all but identical in design. Looking again inside the porch at Worthing you find two Mass Dials, one above the other, on the left hand side of the doorway.



Mass Dials inside the porch at Worthing as photographed by RTCS founder Bill Goode in 1976.

At St Botolph's church, Ratcliffe on the Wreake, in Leicestershire you have no less than five almost identical Mass Dials laid out along the lower edge of a window surround. Why should this be so? What exactly is the point of having more than one? Are they meant to indicate the time in London, Paris and Rome? I think not. Are they all the work of copycat artists, who simply emulate the first dial that was inscribed in to the stonework? Once again, it is possible - but if this is the case then these copycats went to a great deal of trouble to achieve very little.

These problems with the interpretation of Mass Dials provide a great many questions, but very few answers. If these enigmatic little inscriptions are not meant to function as some form of time keeper then exactly what were they for? Whatever they were intended for was obviously pretty clear to people living all over the country, and given their numbers, must have been widespread. Even supposing that the majority of them may have been used as some form of sundial, the sheer number of examples that do not fit this pattern and form is startling.

Matthew Champion

**This is an 'abridged extract' from Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches by Matthew Champion. Matt tells us that “this chapter has had more feedback than most of the other chapters put together. It's almost as though everyone has sat there thinking "this is a bit odd", but haven't quite gotten around to thinking about just how odd. I must admit that I am still puzzled slightly. We either have to start thinking about ritual inscriptions of the hours, or come up with a really plausible explanation for hundreds of examples across the country that don't fit the pattern they are meant to fit”.**

**Matt is the Project Director of The Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey. His blog is full of interest to Norfolk church crawlers and can be visited at <http://medieval-graffiti.blogspot.co.uk>**

## Summer Tours 2017. Part One.

**May** gave us an overcast start to the 2017 Tour season, which began in the Lothingland District on the Norfolk/Suffolk border.

**Fritton St Edmund's** tower is circular for its full height of 43 feet with both nave and chancel thatched. The apsidal Norman chancel is offset from the Nave, with the north wall of the former almost in line with the north wall of the latter. Coursed rubble walls and pilaster buttresses suggest an early date for the chancel, perhaps 11<sup>th</sup> century. Inside the church are wall paintings of St Christopher on the north wall of the nave, St John on a jamb of a south nave window, with 13<sup>th</sup> century scroll wall painting in many places. Beyond the 14<sup>th</sup> century screen the chancel floor has a lower level, while the roof is barrel vaulted. The sanctuary is also vaulted and has three Norman slit windows and a pillar piscina. A remarkable survival in the sanctuary is a series of early wall paintings depicting the Martyrdom of St Edmund. A wall plaque from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the nave commemorates Lieutenant Buxton of the 19<sup>th</sup> Lancers 'killed at polo in Rawalpindi'.



Fritton St  
Edmund.



Fritton St Edmund.

**Ashby St Mary** is remote, approached along a rutted track leading from a farmyard. By now the sun was shining and our visit was made even more enjoyable by the sight of bluebells in the churchyard. Here, both nave and chancel are thatched under a continuous ridge. The tower stands 50 feet high, round for about one third of its height, while above is a contemporary octagonal stage. This has brick quoins and window dressings and may date from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. Bill Goode, in his book, stated that the 'heavy battlements at each corner hide the vaulted roof of groined brickwork that covers the tower'. In the church there are two consecration crosses on the north wall, while a 13<sup>th</sup> century piscina and a dropped window sill sedilia can be seen. Looking upwards, the thatch is clearly visible above the rafters.

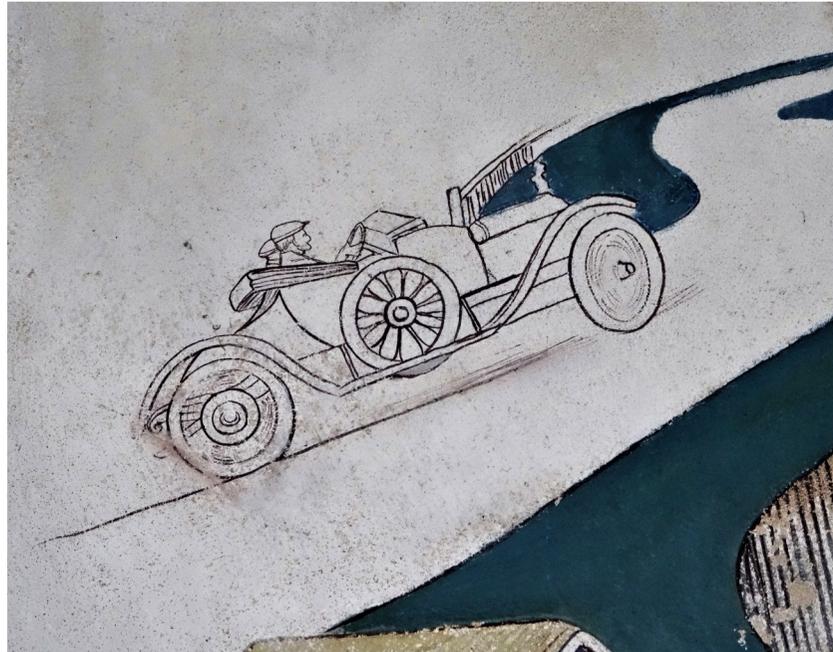


Ashby, St Mary

**Lound St John the Baptist** has a tower circular for its full height of 57 feet. Against the exterior south wall of the nave is the ‘crucifixion’ war memorial, designed by Sir Ninian Comper after the Great War. Lound is known as the ‘Golden Church’ because of Comper’s lavish painting and gilding in the 1914 restoration. The medieval font was repainted and topped by a magnificent tall golden cover, which points the way to the spectacular organ case over the tower arch. However, for many it was the Comper screen which stole the show, topped by a colourful rood group. Even the St Christopher on the nave north wall belongs to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Comper included an image of himself, driving his Rolls Royce. For the second time in the day, there were bluebells to be seen in this churchyard.



Lound, St John the Baptist



Lound, St John the Baptist

**June** welcomed our tour with a fine sunny day, to West Central Norfolk.

**South Pickenham All Saints'** tower is 40 feet high, circular to about 30 feet, then topped by a later octagonal belfry. At the chancel end of the church, the East window has fine reticulated tracery. The interior is dominated by the colourful organ case in its loft above the tower arch. This came from the church at West Tofts in the Stanta Battle Area and is attributed to Augustus Pugin. Inside the chancel, is a 14<sup>th</sup> century angle piscina with traceried heads and a dropped window sill sedilia.



South Pickenham,  
All Saints

**Threxton All Saints** stands in a small hamlet with a farmyard its nearest neighbour. The tower is circular for the full height of 30 feet, with Y-tracery belfry openings. Y-tracery windows can also be seen in the south wall of the chancel, while the slightly later windows in the nave south wall have cusped Y-tracery. There is a jigsaw of rearranged medieval glass in a window in the 14<sup>th</sup> century north aisle. It includes the wounds of Christ and what appears to be a donkey's tail. A variety of tracery designs can be seen on the face of the 14<sup>th</sup> century font bowl. As I write this we have just heard the news that Threxton has been awarded money from the Heritage Lottery Fund for essential work. Our Society had already promised them £2,000.00.



Threxton, All Saints.

**Merton St Peter** stands overlooking the park of Merton Hall. The tower is Norman, circular for its full height of 42 feet, with four double headed belfry openings. The chancel has plate tracery windows and there is a clerestory on the south side of the nave. Many delights are to be found inside the church. An early 15<sup>th</sup> century hexagonal font (an unusual shape for a font bowl) has shields and angels with vertical wings. A 14<sup>th</sup> century square headed chancel screen has an ogee arch over the entrance and spandrels with delicate wheel pattern tracery. A two decker pulpit dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> century as do the altar rails. There are brasses to the de Grey family and some excellent stained glass. One panel shows a spider, its web and a fly, above a grid. An inscription below reads 'Dum Loquimur Fugit Hora' (while we speak time is escaping). Sadly, Merton was one of the churches attacked by lead thieves a while back. Our Society was able to give an immediate emergency grant to make temporary repairs.



Merton, St  
Peter



Merton St Peter with temporary plastic roof covering.

Stuart Bowell

**Round Tower Ancestors.**

Recently, going through my family history records it occurred to me to wonder how many round towers were involved. I spent a pleasant evening re-reading my notes but ended up a bit disappointed as only three round tower churches had appeared- and, one of those, Needham, had just one baptism way back in 1810.



The font at Needham photographed by Bill Goode in 1975.

The other two churches were Wramplingham and Bawburgh. Wrampingham has most significance in my history as this is where the Barham surname appears. I noticed from my records that my great, great grandparents, John Barham and Ann Smith were married in the church on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1813 and I could not resist visiting the church two hundred years later. So it was that on the 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013 I spent a very pleasant time in Wrampingham church and mused that without the marriage in 1813 there would be no me! Quite coincidentally we visited Wrampingham on our tour on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2014 and this enabled me to remember my great, great grandfather, another John Barham

who was baptised in the church on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1814. This is my last connection with Wramplingham church as this John moved to nearby Wymondham to get married and raise a family. There the family stayed and I, myself, count Wymondham as my home town.

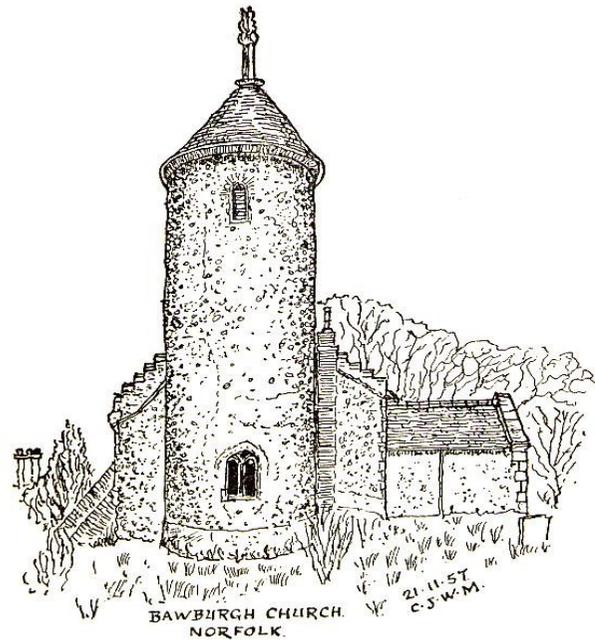
The earliest connection I found with Wramplingham church was the baptism of Henry Smith on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1716. So, there was yet another visit to Wramplingham church on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2016 to remember one of my five great grandfathers.



Wramplingham photographed by Bill Goode in 1974.

Bawburgh church features on my mother's side of the family and it is nice to be connected with St Walstan as so many of my ancestors were but simple agricultural labourers. My earliest connection with Bawburgh is for the baptism, on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1763, of the wonderfully named

Hephzibah Brett, one of my four great grandmothers. The most recent involvement with Bawburgh was the burial, on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1895, of Frederick Daines who was one of my great, great grandfathers. There is a gravestone to Frederick and his wife, Elizabeth, to the north of Bawburgh church tower and it was erected by their son Octavius. He was, actually, their tenth child, but as two had died as infants he seems to have been promoted to number eight!



Bawburgh. Drawing by C W Messent

I almost found a fourth round tower connection as younger siblings of my great, great grandmother, Susannah Thane, were baptised at Bungay Holy Trinity. Unfortunately Susannah was baptised at Gorleston and was married at Thwaite St Mary, so this one had to be recorded as a near miss!

A recent visit to Hellington church has raised hopes that I may be able to raise my round tower total to four but this needs further research. A little to the west of the porch is a gravestone which is inscribed in memory of “Harriet, only child of Henry Smith, formerly of Wrampingham and twenty years respected housekeeper of Mr G Barham of Holverston Hall. She died in Norwich in 1875 aged 96”. The age may be an overstatement as I have found a Harriet Smith baptised at Wrampingham on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1785.



Hellington.  
Photograph by  
Paul Hodge

Richard Barham

Eds: we are publishing Richard’s thoughts about his Round Tower Ancestors to mark the end of his long service as Treasurer and Membership Secretary of RTCS. Members will be pleased to hear that Richard will continue to be involved in the organisation of the Summer Tours and in leading people round the churches. He is also continuing to manage the distribution of The Round Tower. We would like to thank Richard for his invaluable contribution to the Society and to wish him well in his partial retirement.

## **Haddiscoe, St Mary.**

On December 16th and 17th (Saturday and Sunday) there is a display of Christmas trees in the church decorated by local groups and there will be stalls and refreshments. A good opportunity to see the repairs to the ceiling that were completed in the summer and to support this splendid round tower church. This photograph was taken by Bill Goode in 1969 before he founded the Round Tower Churches Society. We are delighted to report that we are still going strong so many years later.



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