

St Mary's-in-the-Marsh, Norwich by Richard_Harbord. Published in The Round Tower March 2011

St Marys was first built when the *burgh* of Norvic was extended southwards on the opposite side of the River Wensum in the late Anglo-Saxon period. It was a chapel subservient to the church of Thorpe St Andrews. St Marys is mentioned in two, undated Anglo-Saxon Wills, confirming its early foundation. The Great Survey of England made in 1085, lists 43 chapels in Norwich as well as 22 churches so St Marys was included in the former number.

The first Norman Bishop, Herbert laid out the new cathedral priory in 1096 and its precinct covered St Mary's parish. The chapel was retained so it became the parish church of the precinct. Uniquely amongst English cathedral/ priory precincts, St Marys was allowed to retain its independent burial yard. The mid 18th century historian Francis Blomfield (4.50-53) cites a late medieval cathedral register which says (not very reliably) that Bishop Herbert rebuilt St Marys along with several other parish churches. It stood in the Lower Close near to the builders' yard serving the emerging cathedral. Temporary wooden buildings were erected on the Almonry Green at that time (1096-1119) but it is likely that the wooden chapel of St Marys was converted into a flint/ stone church. It is less likely that a western round tower was added to it at the same time.

We only know that the church had a round tower from a land survey made in **1775**. Most of what follows is an analysis of that document. (*NRO*, DCN 127/11 – published in '*Medieval Norwich*', 2004; page 55). The Norman nave and chancel were probably much shorter than they were in the Middle Ages. The church originally sat in the middle of its burial yard. During the Middle Ages it acquired a long plan in proportion to its narrow width so it seems to have been extended eastwards as far as the burial yard boundary. The new chancel east wall abutted a Stable block so there is unlikely to have been an east window.

A choir school was established on the opposite, northern side of the Lower Close in the 13th century. Some Rectors of St Marys served as choir masters so the choir sang in St Mary's Church as well as the cathedral. This may have been one of the reasons for extending the church's chancel. The small burial yard was probably over-crowded with graves and that limited the opportunity to expand the nave and provide aisles. Instead, a small southern transept or side chapel was added with square buttresses. This is shown on the 1775 plan as well as a shallow projection where the southern porch may have stood. Did this porch point towards the 'church stile' and a path to St Faiths Lane?

In **1526** the rector was buried in the tower space and another one was placed there in **1539**. The tower's footprint as shown on the survey plan, is small. Perhaps the tower had decayed so much by 1775 that its size had shrunk since the 16th century.

The walls of the chancel still survive in the cellars of no 12 Lower Close. The nave was about the same width as the chancel (6.07 metres, internally) and may have shared the same continuous lead roof. Given an overall external size of 7.3-7.9 metres by 27.0 metres, the church would have had a seating capacity of about 120 people which was equal to the number of dwellings in the mid 18th century Cathedral Close.

Some of the Rectors of St Marys were wealthy enough to endow new building work to the cathedral but less inclined it seems to invest in a large rebuild of their own church. St Marys escaped the late medieval 'make-over' that changed many of the city's wealthier churches.

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In 1460 a bequest paid for a rich vestment, an ordinal and processional cross. St Marys was well endowed with valuable plate, jewelled ornaments, vestments, liturgical books and bells. Its most notable feature was a seven-sacrament Font of a type, for which Norfolk is famous. Circa AD 1470 in style and associated with Lollardry, it has figures sumptuously carved in stone – evangelists seated at the foot; canopied bishops and hermits standing against the stem and angels supporting the bowl.

A bequest for the repair of the church was made as late as **1540** but it was closed by the Bishop in **1560**. What movables and valuables had survived the county-wide sequestration programme in the **1552** 'Church Goods Survey', were taken to St John (Maddermarket?). The font was moved to the South Ambulatory of the Cathedral where the congregation was granted consent to hold services. It was badly defaced in the Civil War but many of its features can still be read. It was recently moved from the Ambulatory to the inside of St Luke's Chapel.

The church's stonework; its roof timbers and lead covering were sold off leaving it an empty shell. This was converted into a house for Mr Holland, a hatter - no 8 Lower Close. He retained the north wall of the former church and inserted several mullion and transomed windows into it. One of these survives and has been left exposed on the first floor of no 12, Lower Close, in the Cathedral Estates Office (not open to the public). This big Tudor window has a 5 by 2 light, timber frame. A much smaller blocked early window can be seen from the cellar steps below. When foundations were built for no 10, Lower Close, the last remains of the church tower were probably destroyed. A distant view from the east and showing the north side of this house with its row of gables and tall chimney stacks, that was painted in 1711. It is displayed in the Strangers Hall Museum, Norwich.

In 1775 the survey plan described above was made prior to the demolition of no 8. In its place, a terrace of three Georgian town houses was built (nos 10-12 Lower Close). The foundations and the north wall of the former church were retained as a central spine wall to the new terrace. In this way a relict of the medieval building was preserved. A heritage plaque attached to no 12, records the site of St Mary's Church on the same site.

Summary.

This article sets out to clarify some of the misinformation given in an earlier article on St Mary-in-the Marsh – see below (2). There is no division of opinion between Professors Gilchrist and Fernie as Scales suggests. The allegation is based on the assertion that Gilchrist thought the church wall retained in no. 12 Lower Close is 'Saxon' but that is not the case. Scales confuses the Anglo-Saxon church as an institution and the building fabric, which is much more likely to have been Norman or later, as described above.

The proportion of known, round tower churches in Norwich is much smaller than the county as a whole – 10% as against 17% in Norfolk. This suggests that there is scope for discovering more round tower churches in the city that have been lost historically. It is a

city that is rich in the number of historic churches but many are inaccessible to investigation. A few of the lost churches have been explored archaeologically but much more needs to be done in this area so that we can improve our very hazy understanding of the origins of the church round tower.

(1) *'Norwich Cathedral Close'*, Professor Robert Gilchrist, Boydell Press 2005.

(2) *RTCS* magazine, vol XXXIV, no 1, September 2006, page 21; a review of item (1) by John Scales.