



The Round Tower

Vol. XLIII No 2.

December 2015



Engraving of Eccles church tower among the dunes from a book on Norfolk churches by David Hodgson. 1798-1864.

£2 to non members
www.roundtowers.org.uk

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David Stannard is a lover of good cuisine, a mine of information about fish and fisheries and an enthusiast for the lost round tower church and village of Eccles. David and his wife Ros are founder members of the Eccles Lost Village Project, a loose collective of people who live close enough to react and become “rescue archaeologists” when spring tides or storm surges expose the ruins on the beach. Many of you probably went to see the excellent Raging Sea Exhibition at Waxham Barn in the summer of 2012. We were delighted when David agreed to speak to us at our 2014 Study Day. We were even more delighted when he then offered to write an article for The Round Tower.

Are you paying the correct amount for your RTCS membership? Please see page 14.

An EDP article about the theft of lead from Merton and the immediate offer of assistance that we were able to offer starts on page 15.

This magazine also includes a review in our occasional series on music in round tower churches, part two of the 2014 Summer Tours report and a report on how we have spent or allocated the very generous Brian Harmer legacy.

The next issue is March 2016 and the deadline for contributions is 1st February 2016.

Please send items for publication either as email attachments or on disc as **separate** files – text, photos, drawings etc., or by post to:-

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Membership Subscription

Minimum £20 (overseas £30) a year of which 25% goes towards the printing and posting of The Round Tower 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.

To join the Society or to make any enquiry about your membership please contact :-

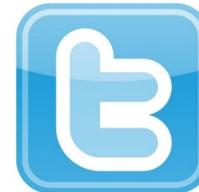
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THE ROUND TOWER

The quarterly magazine of the Round Tower Churches Society

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www.roundtowers.org.uk

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Eccles St. Mary next the Sea – a round tower church of distinction

Synopsis

This article reviews the available evidence for determining the architecture and history of the round-towered church of Eccles St. Mary next the Sea, Norfolk ruined by coast erosion in the late 16th century. It also shows how the surviving church steeple played a significant role in the social history of the east coast by acting as a seamark, a lighthouse and early 19th century Broadland tourist attraction. The old steeple was also recognised by the emergent scientific world as a significant type locality for recording and understanding the effects of coastal change.

Introduction

From its location on the coast of Norfolk the church of Eccles St. Mary next the Sea started to suffer from the deprivations of the raging sea in the 14th century, within about two centuries of it first being erected in the Saxon-Norman period. During 1570 much of the structure was seriously damaged by storms [Stannard 2014] and as a result the nave and chancel were demolished, but the church steeple was retained until it finally toppled into the teeth of a howling storm in January 1895. However, from this unhappy situation we can still retrieve much information about the church and its construction, and indeed gain an insight into the rather unusual uses to which the building has been put, thus greatly contributing to the rich coastal heritage of north Norfolk.

The Church of Eccles St. Mary next the Sea

Blomefield's History of Norfolk provides ample evidence culled from a range of contemporary documents that St. Mary's was a flourishing parish church in late medieval times. Whilst we have only scant written descriptions of the church on which to base an architectural chronology, we do have a number of other pieces of evidence. These include an accurate 19th century ground plan (see page 11) of the

ruins, a modern archaeological survey of the site undertaken in the mid-1990s and a comprehensive collection of paintings (pages 12-13) and photographs of the steeple and church ruins through Victorian times.

Eccles St. Mary's church is not mentioned in the 1086 Domesday Book which certainly suggests, but does not absolutely prove that there was not a church at Eccles at the time of the Conquest; Domesday was frequently silent about churches. The first written records of a church at Eccles currently available come from the 1254 Norwich Taxation and the 1291 taxation of Pope Nicholas. [Pestell & Stannard 1995]. Blomefield provides a list of Rectors for Eccles St. Mary next the Sea with the first entry being Thomas Walcott in 1315.

Evidence of a Phased Construction

Archaeological evidence points to the church initially comprising an early phase of just a rectangular nave and chancel constructed from selected, well coursed flint cobbles obviously obtained from the nearby beaches. The foundation trenches of the nave and chancel exposed in 1993 suggest that they were built at the same time, perhaps in late Anglo-Saxon times [Pestell T.1995]. Examination of the up-turned lower portion of the steeple ruins revealed a flat construction face on the circular structure where the tower masonry was butted up against the existing nave wall, confirming a later construction date of the round tower [Pestell and Stannard 1995]. The best estimate for a construction date of the round tower is the late 11th or early 12th century [Pestell T. 1995]. A plan of the church foundations made by Charles Teasdell of Great Yarmouth during a beach scour in November 1893 shows a third phase of construction with the addition of a southern side aisle. Archaeological investigations some 100 years later in 1993 confirmed that the foundations of the original nave walls were retained on which the pillars for the new aisle were built. Further additions to the structure include a south porch and possibly a north porch (shown in W.H. Cooke's plan following the scour of 1862) and also a series of buttresses recorded by Teasdel located on the southern wall and north

western corner of the nave. At least one of these buttresses included blocks of Caen stone indicating a post-Conquest date for the structure and possibly coincident with the belfry addition of the late 14th century. However it may also be that they are linked to coast erosion problems experienced in 1338.

Evidence for this erosion event comes from the granting of a Royal Licence in 1338 to both Lords of the Manor of Eccles (the Manor was divided into two halves or moieties) for half an acre of land because:

'the parish church of St. Mary's on the coast threatens to become a ruin on account of the destruction of the area of the churchyard by the sea.' [Attributed to Blomefield].

Some have suggested that this means that a new church was built at Eccles, but the evidence for this is scant and it seems that the ruins investigated on the beach during the 1990s tell a story of alterations and additions to the building during late medieval times, but not complete replacement.

'If a new church had been built after 1338 we might have expected a single phase building and most probably one without a round tower'[Pestell T. 1995].

The Steeple

We are on much firmer ground in describing the steeple using the comprehensive range of 19th century artistic and photographic illustrations of the structure showing that it was about 25m [75 feet] tall and principally built of coursed well selected flint cobbles. The distinctive architectural features of the steeple are the embattled octagonal belfry surmounting a circular tower base. Many round tower churches display a similar architectural style with historians arguing that in some cases, as with nearby Potter Heigham, the two features were built at the same time reflecting the architectural preferences of the period [Stephen Hart 2003]. A compelling argument for both

components being contemporaneous is the absence of any belfry openings in the lower circular portion. However Eccles St. Mary's steeple has two such openings, one above the other, in the western face of the basal round tower. Both of these round-headed apertures may be in the Norman Gothic style [1066-1200], but from their lancet shape are more likely to be in the slightly later Early English style, dating the basal round tower to the period 1200-1275.

The existence of an original upper opening at a higher level than the nave implies that the round tower would probably have housed at least one bell. From the evidence supplied by the 1552 Inventory of Church Goods we can be reasonably sure that Eccles St. Mary's only ever had two bells.

The upper octagonal belfry has four double openings at each of the cardinal points in the Gothic Decorated style [1275-1375], and the fact that the western opening is not exactly aligned with the two lower apertures confirms that this portion of the structure was a later addition.

The belfry shows extensive use of freestone with long and short quoins of Caen limestone at each of the angles of the octagon, ashlar framing for the four double apertures, shaped capping pieces for the battlements and a stone stringing course just below them. Over the years many examples of this masonry have been retrieved from the foreshore at Eccles and may still be found in walls and gardens in the local area. A squared block of worked Barnack stone was retrieved from the foreshore in the 1990s and this may be one of the last few pieces of ashlar framing of the middle west window of the basal round tower seen in Robertson's 1894 oil painting on page 12. In which case it is consistent with an early Saxon-Norman date for the basal round tower.

There is an obvious distinction in the coursing of the cobble work of the circular base with that of the upper belfry, which is set back within the greater circumference of the older structure. The absence of a stringing course can be an argument for a basal round tower and octagonal belfry being of the same age but Stephen Hart [2003] suggests that:

‘the most convincing indication that the circular stage is earlier than the octagon is a round-headed tower arch between nave and tower.

Modern Improvements for a Confident Future

Just such a feature at Eccles is indistinctly shown on a few grainy photographs, but is best revealed on an accomplished water-colour by Edward Wilkinson [fl. 1880] dating from the mid-1870s. The artist clearly shows the rounded head of the tower arch is formed from voussoirs of dark medieval brick or tile. This tall arch structure has subsequently been in-filled with coursed flints to form a much lower pointed ‘Gothic’ style arch in the modern style of the age, concurrent with the construction of the octagonal belfry. This view also shows the extensive scar of the remnants of the cobble nave walls, and above the apex is the hint of another infilling which may indicate the existence of a former round-headed eastern facing belfry aperture in the original round tower.

A Clue to the Date of the Octagonal Belfry

Caen stone provides general dating evidence for the construction of the belfry as some time in the late 14th or early 15th century, however, a clue from a will dated 1381 may better define this date [NRO NCC Heydon 195]. In that year Reginald de Eccles left a legacy of ten marks [£6:13s:4d] to purchase a new bell for Eccles church. Perhaps this new bell was to be rung to celebrate a newly completed octagonal belfry? Whatever the reason for Reginald’s gift the enlargement of the church at this time clearly demonstrates that by the 1400s Eccles St. Mary was benefitting from a prospering community, with little indication that coast erosion formed any serious threat to its continued success.

A Catastrophic Yet Varied History

Given the somewhat catastrophic and varied history of Eccles St. Mary next the Sea we should not be surprised that over the centuries the building has been used for a variety of purposes never envisaged by the people who first built it as their place of worship.

Although the church was dismantled and the parish united by a Deed of Union in 1571, Rectors still continued to be appointed to Eccles St. Mary as a 'sine cure' Rectory, defined as '*one without cure of souls*' [Tanner's Index]. They were paid a stipend from the tithes of the parish, even though they had no parishioners and rarely lived in the village, with their only duty to provide a 'reading-in' service in the precincts of the steeple to claim their stipend. The Reverend Hugh Humphrys gained his incumbency of Eccles St Mary as his dowry when he married the daughter of the Lord of the Manor of Eccles in 1886 [Draft Presentation of Hugh Humphrey 1886].

The Deed of Union [Tanner's Index] relates that the site, lead, bells and whatever remained of the glebe land became the property of the Lord of the Manor, Thomas Brampton, and undoubtedly he quickly turned the site into a salvage yard disposing of the masonry and valuable bells to the highest bidder.

The decision to retain the steeple may point to its use as a coastal warning beacon given the troubled international politics of the time. Late 16th century and early 17th century maps of Norfolk show that the steeple acted as a lighthouse, whilst Henry Hyde's probate inventory of 1592 tells us that the steeple became a humble store shed in the sand dunes for old barrels and fishing gear [NRO DN/INV 9/314].

Remaining in the dunes for some three hundred years, in 1839 the steeple entered the emergent world of modern science when it was visited by the most eminent geologist of the day Charles Lyell, friend and confidante of Charles Darwin. In writing his seminal work '*Principles of Geology*' Lyell identified Eccles steeple as a type locality for the study of coast erosion, and just about every other geologist studying the subject has followed, both physically and metaphorically, in his footsteps.

By the early 1860s the sea had continued to erode the foreshore resulting in the dunes retreating landwards leaving the steeple fully exposed on the foreshore, thereby creating one of Norfolk's first tourist attractions. Visitors flocked from far and wide to view the curious old steeple, now dubbed 'The Lonely Sentinel'. Many of these visitors took

the opportunity to record their visit with magnificent watercolours of the steeple, thereby leaving a legacy of historic illustrations that today we can use to track coastal change in an age before the widespread use of photography

Conclusion

The steeple finally toppled in January 1895, but frequent beach scours often exposed skeletons from the graveyard fuelling the interest, and imagination of many people. The idea of a hungry sea gnawing at a lonely graveyard created the myth and legend of the 'lost village'. This legend accompanied by some scientific interpretation and artefacts retrieved from the site has served to provide financial support through a series of fund-raising exhibitions focussing on the Eccles story. Together with the annual August beach service, which serves to commemorate the former 'reading-in' service; visitors to these fund raising events have generously contributed many thousands of pounds to make essential repairs to nearby Hempstead church.

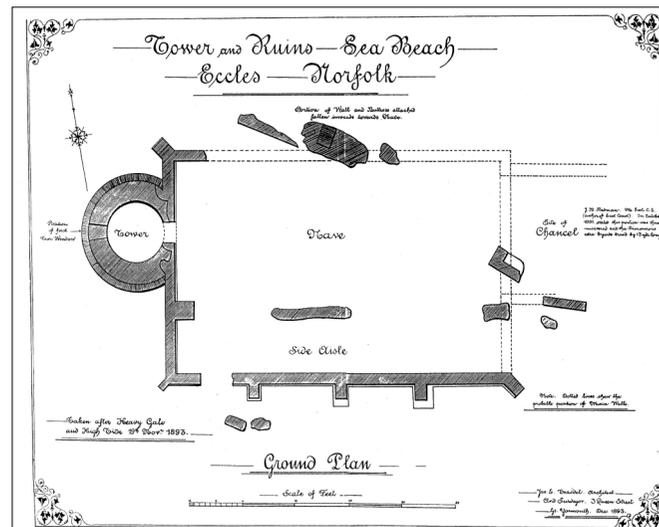
Following the building of offshore sea defence reefs at Eccles during the mid-1990s the site of St Mary's next the Sea is now well covered by several metres of sand and is in danger of being forgotten. Although the site of the Eccles Deserted Medieval Village appears in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record [NHER No 8347] there is still a need to ensure that any information on the site is properly recorded in the scientific record, if only to act as a guide for properly dealing with whatever may be exposed in the future.

A place of worship, burial ground, sea mark, salvage site, warning beacon, lighthouse, store shed, curious form of dowry, geological type locality, tourist attraction, archaeological site and charity fund raiser: what will the next role be for Eccles St. Mary next the Sea?

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A Copy of Teasdel's Ground Plan of the Site

Taken during a severe beach scour in December 1893 the plan was made as part of an attempt to save the old steeple by concreting the base of the structure.

Source: Reserve coll'n Norwich Castle Museum



Eccles Steeple and Nave Ruins

This oil painting by W. A. Robertson [active 1890s] dated 1894 shows the misalignment between the lower west windows of the round tower base of the steeple and the western aperture of the octagonal belfry. A few remaining blocks of ashlar masonry surrounding the middle window (formerly a belfry aperture) are also shown.

Private collection



Eccles Steeple in Ruins

An oil painting by Aubrey A. Blake [active 1900}, a leading figure of the Norwich Art Circle. This probably dates from the summer following the fall of the steeple in January 1895. The large block of upturned masonry on the far right clearly shows the flat surface of the base of the tower which abutted the nave.

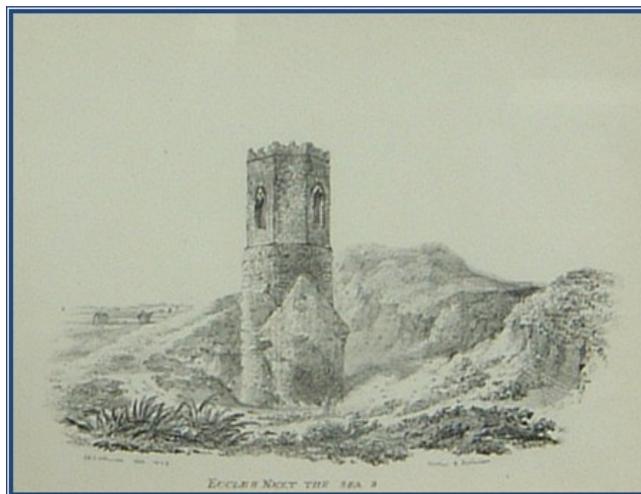
Private collection



The Steeple of Eccles St. Mary next the Sea

Edward Wilkinson's watercolour of the steeple circa 1870 clearly shows the original tall nave arch with its rounded head formed in dark brick or tile. Subsequently the arch was in-filled to form a smaller pointed 'Gothic' style arch when the upper octagonal belfry was added. The nave ruins formed of well coursed flint cobbles are also illustrated.

Private collection



Eccles next the Sea

Ladbroke's 1823 lithograph of the steeple in the sand dunes shows the lower round tower with remnants of the nave wall still in place.

Source: J.B. Ladbroke Norfolk Churches

There will be a follow up to the Eccles article at some time in the future with a reissue of the report of the archaeological work at Eccles.

STANDING ORDERS.

Are you paying the correct amount for your RTCS membership?

The Round Tower Churches Society supports our churches with grants to help them with the ever increasing cost of repairs and renovations. If all members were paying a minimum of £20 for their membership we would have many hundreds of pounds more that we could use to help our round tower churches.

Many members opt to pay by Standing Order—any changes to this have to be carried out by the individual member contacting his or her bank. A significant number of members are still paying for their membership at the old rate. Please check, and if you are not paying the correct annual membership subscription of at least £20 please amend your standing order.

Norfolk Churches Trust Cycle Day 2015.

John Scales offers his thanks to those generous people who helped him to raise £213, half for the Norfolk Churches Trust and half for All Saints, Woodton. He tells us that thirty years ago he used to visit twenty or more churches and chapels in the day. This year he just managed to reach double figures with which he is now content, particularly as five of them had round towers. John tells us that he only fell off his bike once.

Eastern Daily Press article. ‘Norfolk church ravaged by lead thieves gets first grant to help rebuild’.

A historic church which has been twice ravaged by roof raiders has received a welcome boost after a heritage group donated funds towards repairing the damage.

St Peter’s Church at Merton, near Watton, was struck by thieves overnight between Thursday, August 21 and Friday, August 22, and the small village community is facing a £25,000 bill to fix it.

Now church heritage group the Round Tower Churches Society has come forward to give £500 grant to get the fundraising under way.



Merton. Picture by Ian Burt

Stuart Bowell, chairman of the Round Tower Churches Society, said: “Norfolk has a rich heritage of round tower churches and this latest theft of lead in Breckland from a roof could cost about £25,000 to repair. This is the second theft of lead within the past four years from St Peter’s Church, Merton, near Watton. The Round Tower Churches Society will be making an immediate initial grant of £500 towards the cost of repairs”. The Society, which was set up in 1973 to safeguard the country’s heritage of distinctive round tower churches, has given grants of more than £160,000 to help with conservation and repairs.

Carole Haggitt, churchwarden at St Peter’s Church, said: “Anything we are given is welcome, we are very pleased that they have identified the urgency with which we need funding. We are a small church in a very small village and we have to pay for things straight away including the temporary roof. It looks like it is going to cost at least £25,000, possibly more with labour.”

Doug Faulkner. Eastern Daily Press

A delightful afternoon at Burnham Deepdale.

On 20th September we enjoyed an afternoon of organ and harpsichord music at St Mary’s introduced and played by Gerald Gifford. Gerald Gifford has enjoyed a long and successful career as a musicologist and broadcaster and is an acclaimed organ and harpsichord performer with many commercial recordings to his credit. A member of the Professorial staff at the Royal College of Music for over thirty years Mr Gifford has recently taken early retirement and has been elected Honorary Keeper of Music at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Mr Gifford lives at Thornham.

The organ in St Mary’s was built by E.W. Norman of Norwich in 1886, was rebuilt in about 1913 and has just completed a six month rebuild by Robert Ince. Mr Ince was present at the recital to hear Mr Gifford give the organ a thorough workout and it obviously passed with flying colours.



The organ at St Mary's

Gerald Gifford

The harpsichord used for the recital was built in 1989 and was modelled on an original 1756 harpsichord now forming part of the musical instrument collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The instrument has recently been re-voiced and reconditioned by Ferguson Hoey of Reepham and very splendid it sounds and looks too.

Gerald Gifford introduced every recital item with humour and erudition. He played organ works by Handel, Bach and Mozart and harpsichord works by Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Rameau and Haydn.

During the interval we were entertained with tea and homemade cakes. Many thanks to Mr Gifford, Mr Ince, Mr Hoey, the Rector, Churchwardens and the recital organisers for making this such a memorable afternoon. All proceeds were in aid of St Mary's Church.

Paul Hodge and Anne Woollett

Summer Tours 2014 - Part Two

Runhall, All Saints, was the first stop on our July tour. Approached from the south up a sloping churchyard, the church has a rather square appearance. Here the chancel was burnt down in the 16th century and never rebuilt. The post Norman tower is circular to its full height of around 40 feet and was added to an earlier church. Beneath the south porch, the entrance door has some interesting ironwork. Inside even more ancient ironwork can be seen on the tower door; a dragon, serpents and horseshoe designs. In front of this door is a 14th century font, with tracery on bowl and shaft. Wall Memorials from the two World Wars, tell us that nine men from the village died in the Great War and four in the second conflict. The chancel burned down and has never been replaced.



Runhall, All Saints

By the time we reached **Wrampingham, Sts Peter and Paul**, it was dull and overcast. Here the tower is circular to just above nave ridge roof height and has a contemporary octagonal top with Decorated belfry openings. There are six lancet windows with a continuous hood mould, linked by a string course, on either side of the chancel. Inside, the chancel windows are deeply splayed and have delicate shafts in between with hood moulds ending in decorative heads or leaf decoration. A polished wooden Memorial Plaque, has the names of seven parishioners who died in the Great War and one in World War 11.



Wrampingham, Saints Peter and Paul

Colney St Andrew's Tower is generally accepted as being 11th century and is circular for its full height. The weathervane is in memory of a parishioner who flew Sunderland flying boats. The porch has side windows formed of brick, including the tracery. However, its most interesting feature is the Memorial stone above the entrance. This tells us of John Fox 'an honest and industrious labourer, 79 years old'. He was killed in a nearby road accident involving horses and a wagon in 1806. Features of the interior include a very fine 15th century octagonal font, while in the floor of the chancel is a chalice brass memorial to a former rector who died 1503. After our tour we were given tea – a monumentally delicious affair, with an outstanding selection of savouries and cake.



**Colney, St
Andrew**

North Norfolk was our destination in August, our first stop being **Gresham** All Saints. The tower underwent considerable repairs during the late 19th century and is circular for its full height. A Seven Sacrament font is the great treasure here. The panels are a microcosm of the part played by the church in medieval life. Many churches find bats an inconvenience but here they are celebrated in the form of a memorial in the chancel. It is in loving memory of the three younger sons of Lt. Col. R.C. Batt, who all died during WW2.

At **Bessingham** St Andrew the tower is generally considered to be pre-Conquest. A lot of iron bound conglomerate has been used in the building of this church, with large blocks forming the quoins of the west end of the nave. The banding of materials in the tower shows distinct stages of construction, year on year. Double triangular headed belfry openings are formed from conglomerate, while the later battlemented top section is of white flint. Inside the church, a tall narrow tower arch with a triangular headed upper doorway above supports the view that the tower is Saxon. A simple brass plate, names the two men who 'gave their all' in the Great War. Interesting 'roofs' are always looked for during our tours and here is an arched-braced example to both nave and chancel.



**Bessingham,
St Andrew**

The only entrance to the tower of **Sustead** Saints Peter and Paul is by an exterior door to the south. As at Bessingham, iron bound conglomerate is used for the quoins at the west end of the nave. Between the nave and chancel is a fine 15th century red brick rood stair turret. Graffiti on the porch includes a left hand spanned with the thumb turning the corner of the stone (as if holding on to the stone). Armorial shields decorate the bowl of the 15th century font and the chancel has a double piscina. Fragments of medieval glass in the nave windows show musicians and a delightful St Catherine with her wheel.



**Sustead, Saints
Peter and Paul**

September's tour, in Suffolk, started at **Onehouse** St John the Baptist, not an easy church for visitors to find. Onehouse is my neighbouring parish and I witnessed the partial demolition and sensitive rebuilding of the tower during the 1990s. How splendid it looks now! A much mutilated 12th century font appears to have heads at each corner and arms outstretched along the sides of the bowl. A simple brass plaque names the 3 men from the parish who gave their lives in the Great War. Brass oil lamps can still be seen here.

Beyton All Saints is one of only two round towers which have buttresses, the other is at Ramsholt. There was much Victorian restoration here, but some of the woodwork in the chancel is pleasing, especially a pious pelican and a delightful unicorn. More modern still, is a memorial window to a local farmer who died in the 1960s, showing a colourful interpretation of the parable of the sower.



Beyton, All Saints

The belfry openings on the south side at **Risby** St Giles are unusual, being a double row with each opening framed with flints. Much awaits the visitor inside the church. Panels on the 15th century font are well preserved, but the stem below the bowl has been crudely damaged. On the north of the nave, wall paintings survive, notably a Bishop wearing a mitre and Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, whose face framed by her long flowing hair, has a look of admiration and awe. Between nave and chancel the rood screen is one of the narrowest I have ever seen and has some fine carving. A brass plate in the tower tells us the bells were rehung, by Alfred Bowell of Ipswich, in 1909.

The end of a tour season is time for reflection; things we have seen, the company we have enjoyed, the hard work of 'Lyn and Dick, and the welcomes from parishioners, churchwardens and clergy.

Stuart Bowell

Brian Harmer's Legacy.

In 2008 we were happy to report that the Society had received a very generous legacy of £35,500 from the estate of the late Brian Harmer. Brian had been a founder member of the Society and served on the Committee for many years. Initially he was Information and Records Officer and later he combined this role with that of Treasurer.

When the legacy was received the Committee felt that it would be appropriate if we could eventually record a list of those churches that benefited from Brian's generosity. Now that the money has all been spent or allocated a list of the churches that have benefited or will benefit is shown below.

The Committee are certain that Brian would approve of the way that his legacy has been spent.

| | | | |
|------------------|-------|----------------|-------|
| ASHBY ST MARY | £1500 | POTTER HEIGHAM | £1000 |
| BAWBURGH | £1000 | RAMSHOLT | £1000 |
| BRAMFIELD | £1000 | RICKINGHALL | £1000 |
| BRAMPTON | £1000 | ROCKLAND ST P | £ 500 |
| BURGH CASTLE | £1000 | SEDGFORD | £2000 |
| CRANWICH | £2500 | STOCKTON | £1000 |
| CLIPPEBY | £1000 | SOUTHEASE | £1000 |
| CROXTON | £1000 | SWAINSTHOPE | £1500 |
| EDINGTHORPE | £3000 | SYDERSTONE | £1000 |
| FRITTON ST C | £1000 | SYLEHAM | £1000 |
| GREAT RYBURGH | £1000 | THEBERTON | £1000 |
| HARDWICK | £1000 | THREXTON | £1000 |
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