

**The Church of St Mary the Virgin,  
Saxlingham Nethergate**

**Church Trail - A short guide to the  
interior of the church**



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

**FONT.** A 15<sup>TH</sup> century font, made in an East Anglian workshop which specialised in fonts of this type. On the bowl, angels hold shields which show the arms of the Trinity, three chalices denoting the Eucharist, the three crowns of East Anglia, and the instruments of the Passion. Between them, the alternating panels show the symbols of the Evangelists. At the base of the font's stem are four lions; these are usually included on such fonts, and the Saxlingham ones are extremely cheerful. (Some fonts have snooty lions, others are rather glum, but ours obviously enjoy it here!)

**ROOF.** Basically of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, restored in 1867 and 1955. The dark stain is unfortunate, and makes it difficult to see the detailing. There are carved braces beneath trusses with elaborate tracery. The corbels, small carved figures, at the base of the braces, are certainly original, and the costumes worn by the women date them from 1425 – 1450. There are more lions!

If you look at the west end of the roof, against the tower, you will just be able to make out a niche behind the most westerly tiebeam. This is a sanctus bell window, where a seated watcher would ring a bell at the high point of the mass, during the middle ages. It obviously predates the present roof, as the wood hides the window.

**ROOD SCREEN.** Given as a memorial to Mr. Campbell Steward by his widow Elise in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They lived at the Old Hall, on the left of the little green when you go out of the church. The screen is on the site of its medieval predecessor, which would have had the rood beam above, a crucifix in its centre, flanked by statues of the Virgin Mary and St. John.

**CHANCEL.** Look for the arch in the south-west wall of the chancel, in which the low-side window is set. It shows where the stairs would have led up to the loft above the rood screen. Most such lofts were removed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, at the Reformation, when England became a Protestant country. (Just two lofts remain in Norfolk, at Attleborough and Upper Sheringham).

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Further along on the same side, the door between the two larger windows is the priest's door, through which he gained access to the church. To the east of it, the low window sill formed part of the medieval 'sedilia', a Latin word used for the seats in which the clergy sat during mass. This type is called a 'dropped sill sedilia', and the seats would have accommodated three clergy, priest, deacon and sub-deacon. To the east again is a 'piscina', another Latin word for the little niche with its drain, where the priest washed his hands and the vessels after mass. The drain ensured that the water drained away into consecrated ground.

Beneath the east window, against the east wall, is a screen of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is interesting because the tracery at the heads of its bays alternates between the old-fashioned 'decorated' motifs, and the newer 'perpendicular'. It has been said that it was removed from Norwich Cathedral to Saxlingham, but there seems no proof of this. On the north side of the sanctuary, look for the little cupboard with a brass door. Here the elements of Holy Communion are kept. It's called an 'aumbry'.

ORGAN. Made by the Norwich firm of Norman & Beard, and installed in 1896. It was restored in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Messrs J & R Ince. With two manuals plus foot pedals, it is considered to have a very fine tone.

NORTH AISLE. This is now called St. Andrew's Chapel, and was built in 1867. It was consecrated as a chapel in 1948, and formed a thanksgiving for the fact that no Saxlingham lives were lost in World War II.

During the Georgian era, the furnishings here were the standard ones of the time, with the emphasis of the service firmly on the Word – declaimed from the high pulpit – rather than on the altar, as it was in medieval times, and as it is today. It was in Victorian times that almost all the Georgian fittings – not only here but in the churches of England generally – were swept away, and thus the interiors of churches like this one are largely the result of Victorian restoration, with new sets of benches, lecterns, screens and pulpits being placed there to replace the old box pews, high pulpits and galleries.

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The MEMORIALS are very varied, according to the times in which they were placed here. Some give a salutary reminder of how short life could be before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eleanora Hardwick died suddenly at 17, John Warmoll was just 21, while Charlotte, young daughter of Archdeacon John Gooch, was 13. The Rev'd John Baron, DD, has the most spectacular monument, on the south sanctuary wall. He had been Dean of Norwich, and died in 1739 at the age of 62, but his two daughters, Mary and Ann, had long predeceased him, in 1707 and 1712. Perhaps saddest of all are the deaths of the two daughters of the Rev'd Farley Wilkinson, curate, who died, one aged eleven months, in December 1840, and the other approaching her fifth birthday, a month later. In an age when it is fashionable to criticise the NHS, we might perhaps reflect on the fact that these young parishioners probably died of diseases that today would be considered innocuous, preventable, or that have now been eradicated, due to advances in medical science.

The west tower contains eight bells, which ensure that it is a joyous place for bellringers. When the bells were rehung in 1898, there were only six; the Rector of the day, Rev'd R. Pitt, who was a keen ringer, gave two extra bells in 1908. At that time a sub-frame was attached above the main bell frame to hold the two new bells at a cost of £106 25s. To strengthen the tower and cast eight new bells in 2013 is costing in the region of £200,000. But the resulting work, which has been very generously supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, a bequest from Jack and Peggy Armstrong and vast amounts of local fund-raising, will give Saxlingham an octave peal far finer than the former one. Two of the 17<sup>th</sup> century bells no longer used will be retained in the tower, while the third will be used as a clock bell. This fine peal will give us the opportunity to teach 'the exercise' to a whole new generation of ringers.

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Our church has many treasures, but the greatest of them is the stained glass, for which Saxlingham is renowned. In age it covers a period of seven hundred years, from the 1950s back to about 1250. This is covered in a separate guide - "Church Trail - Stained Glass".

This document has been prepared by Kate Smith, a local historian, as a part of St Mary's Bell and Tower Restoration Project.

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For further information on The Heritage Lottery Fund please visit their website: [www.hlf.org](http://www.hlf.org)

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