

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

**Church Trail - A short guide to the
exterior.**



LOTTERY FUNDED

Welcome to the church of St. Mary the Virgin, a beautiful building in one of South Norfolk's most attractive villages. Although the present-day church appears to be mainly 15th century in construction, we know that there was a place of worship here centuries before this, and that the area had been inhabited since at least Neolithic times, with the flint tools of Saxlingham's early dwellers coming to light in nearby fields. From excavations made when drainage works have been necessary, we know that the first tower of the church was of the round East Anglian type, probably built during the 12th century. Like so many other such towers, it would have looked out over a considerable watercourse, now little more than a stream, which runs to the north of the church. This area has many such river valleys, and many such towers – according to the fashion of the age, they were round, probably deriving from similar towers in northern Germany, with which East Anglia had strong trading-links. (A tour round a few of them would make an interesting drive on a summer's afternoon! Try Tasburgh, Morningthorpe, Topcroft, Bedingham, Woodton and Brooke, for a start....all usually open at the click of the latch!)

We know that there was a church of reasonable size here in 1086, the year of Domesday Book, William the Conqueror's great tax assessment. It was assessed to pay sixteen pence in tax

The church today has a nave, (the people's church), a chancel, (the priest's church), a Victorian north aisle and northern vestry dating from 1867, and a south porch largely rebuilt at the same time. The west tower contains eight bells, an unusual thing to find in this part of Norfolk, not historically a rich area. Restored at Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 2013, the project included the casting of three new bells, while their 400-year-old counterparts are retained at the church, one becoming the clock bell. The clock itself, on the tower's south face, is unusual, one-handed, with a sundial beneath. It was put here in 1794, and refurbished in 1988.

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Looking around the outside of the church, it's easy to see that the chancel has been made longer and higher: this accords with the liturgical changes during the 13th century, and the middle window on the south side of the chancel fits this date. Later, the walls were heightened by about four feet, and the new east and south-east windows put in.

The other window, further west in the chancel, is a low-side window. Usually fitted with a shutter or a grille, such windows were used for the ringing of a sanctus-bell at the high point of the mass, the Elevation of the Host, the moment when it was considered in Catholic England that the bread and wine of the mass were translated into the actual flesh and blood of Christ. Folks working in the nearby fields would have stopped for a moment, signing themselves with the sign of the Cross, thus joining in the act of consecration. This was the Age of Faith, and worship was part of the whole of life, not just one service on a Sunday.

A little further to the right is a small door, the priest's door, which he used to obtain access to the church, and it dates from the first rebuild, in the late 13th century.

In the Victorian north aisle are several bits of reused stone, including some brown grit-stone, probably from the nearby ruined church at Saxlingham Thorpe. When the aisle was being erected, the builders were told that they could use any fallen stone from the old church, declared redundant in 1688, but that they were not to demolish any part of the fabric still standing. A Victorian economy drive!

The south door into the nave is of around 1600, and its particular feature is the two wrought-iron grilles through which one can see into the church, while those inside can look down the path. These have been called Judas windows, and other local churches have the same feature, but no satisfactory explanation has been found for them.

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The south porch was partly reconstructed in the 19th century, but a porch certainly existed before then. Porches played an important part in the marriage service during the middle ages, part of the service took place there, as did parts of the baptismal service, and the legal matters of the parish were discussed in the church porch. The stoup, the little niche which held a bowl of water for parishioners and visitors to cross themselves on entering is still here, while above it is a consecration cross, marking the spot where the Bishop of Norwich would have touched the wall of the church with holy oil on its consecration. This is the sole survivor of many such crosses originally here.

There are some interesting and well-carved tombstones in the churchyard. Thomas Barnham was a well-sinker, and his headstone is carved with a pump. Note too how many of the Victorian inhabitants of Saxlingham lived to a very great age, as opposed to the awful scale of infant and childhood mortality in earlier times.

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

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