

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

Church Trail - Stained Glass



LOTTERY FUNDED

The church of St. Mary the Virgin at Saxlingham Nethergate is a place of many historic and interesting items, but by far the greatest is its stained glass, a wonderful collection, dating from comparatively modern glass, some from the high Victorian era, through Georgian examples to much from the 15th century, and further back to very early glass from around 1250, and of national importance.

Much of the glass was formerly in the east window, but moved and rearranged by George King and Son, who had their workshop in Norwich, during the 1950s. As the effect of strong sunlight and external conditions generally on stained glass at that time was not known, much of the important glass was placed in windows on the south side of the church. It is probably best to look at the various windows in reverse order, starting with the youngest, and working through to the very old and important glass. So take a seat in the nave to begin your tour, and look first at the most westerly window on the south side of the nave, near the south door. It's an RAF memorial window, given in 1953 by R.S.Lawrence in memory of his son, a Battle of Britain pilot killed in action. It depicts St. Michael and the dragon.

The next window along, near the pulpit, was given by Dr. Webb-Ware in memory of his uncle and aunt, Thomas and Florence Webb-Ware. The main lights have St. Edmund, patron saint of East Anglia, the Virgin Mary and St. Withburga, who was Abbess of a nunnery at Dereham. Edmund holds the arrows of his martyrdom, Mary holds a lily, and Withburga a model of her church. The lower panels show scenes from their lives. Withburga's panel shows a spring which sprung up at Dereham after her body was stolen from her grave and taken to Ely. If you visit Dereham and go round the west end of the church, you will find that the spring is still there. The window's designer, Hugh Arnold, was killed in the first World War. His window is perhaps a bit 'busy' for present-day tastes, but has lovely colours, the faces of the saints so serene.

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If you look up into the chancel, the lower central panel of the east window comes next, from 1878. It is of Victorian glass dedicated by Frederick Gooch in memory of his father, Archdeacon John Gooch, and shows the Crucifixion. The rest of the window's glass is medieval.

Now if you look at the central window in the north aisle, there is more Victorian glass, this time in memory of Matthew Sallitt, who died in 1866. He was churchwarden and chairman of Saxlingham PCC. It was installed by Hardmans of Birmingham in what was then the new north aisle, and depicts the Good Samaritan. It is often considered gaudy to modern taste, and one quotation I found seems relevant – ‘Demand was such that quality was sacrificed’.

Now the north-east window in the north aisle – here is glass of the Renaissance, the 16th century. These are the coats of arms of two Cheshire families, and they pair with other shields at Merton, near Watton. The small crowns in the western window may have belonged with these shields, and possibly John Gooch brought this glass to Saxlingham, as he had friends in Cheshire.

The final window in this part of the church is the east window of the north aisle. Here is medieval glass placed in a window of 1867. The canopy tops were once very fashionable, and date from around 1400. They may well have been in the east window originally. Of the same date, a bishop, an archbishop, and Edward the Confessor. The delightful little ‘musical’ angels, of about 1420, play a shawm and a rebec. The rose badges come from later in the 15th century – they were the badge of King Edward IV. One central panel has Continental glass; possibly St. Francis of Assisi, as the robe has the knotted girdle worn by Franciscans. Now it's time to move up into the chancel, where the important medieval glass is to be found.

First look at the small window, called a ‘low side window’, which is the first one on the south side. From this little window a sanctus bell would have been rung to indicate to folk working in the local fields that the mass being conducted in their parish church was at its most sacred point. They could cross themselves and join in the consecration. The small round panel of around 1500 shows the Virgin Mary, her mother, St. Anne, and the Christ child. Again, this is continental glass. The other two panels, rather fragmentary, are a Resurrection and a Nativity. Probably originally from the east window, they are 15th century.

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Now the north chancel window. 15th century again, it shows the four Latin Doctors of the church, Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory and Jerome. Apart from Jerome, in his red Cardinal's hat, they are mainly bits and pieces, but at Ashill, near Watton, there is a set of almost identical figures, in complete form. Above are 'Norwich' angels, one with scourge and nails and another with a censer.

The east window has original glass in its top lights, but we don't know what the main lights contained. The glass is mainly 15th century. There are two roundels of St. John and St. Matthew from an Evangelists' series, and the monograms IHS, for Christ, and M, for Mary, are of the same period, 1395-1420. The heraldic glass is interesting, because here are the medieval lords of Saxlingham – the rampant lion of the Verdon family, the cross engrailed, (with a wavy edge) for the Noone family, and the three crowns, 'chess rooks' in heraldic terms, are for a Fitzsimon, whose nephew was a Verdon. The smaller shields show the arms of the Lords of Saxlingham Thorpe, where the church was made redundant in 1688, and some of its glass is certainly here. The Bouchier and Louvain families have their arms here, as do the de la Poles, Wingfields and Morleys. These were some of the most powerful families in the land. Finally, the top lights in the east window have, on the left, Pentecost, on the right Ascension, and the Coronation of the Virgin in the centre lights. This image was a prime target for vandalism at the time of the Reformation, and remaining images of it are rare, especially in glass, although Stratton Strawless, north of Norwich, also has one.

So to the central window on the south side, with patterned grisaille (from the French word for grey) glass of about 1250 at the bottom and two saints from a series of twelve above. They are mid 14th century or a bit later, St. Philip, with his basket of loaves, and St. James the Less, with his fuller's club, because he worked in the cloth trade. This is not glass originally from Nethergate – look at the surrounds of the two figures. They were made to fit into the top lights of a window, but none of the Nethergate windows are the right shape. The colours in these panels are noticeably different from those of the south-east window. These golds, browns and yellows are the German palette, without that wonderful deep blue of the French palette, used in the one remaining window, the furthest east on the south side.

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This is the window that is most famous of any here. It contains the oldest figurative glass in Norfolk, of around 1250, in the glowing French colours that we can see at Canterbury, Chartres or Bourges. Look at the hands and feet of the saints in the roundels: they cut into the borders of the panels, a sure sign of very early glass.

Between the two pairs of roundels are diamond shapes of grisaille, patterned with leaves, giving them the name of maple-leaf grisaille. This is early 14th century glass. But it is the roundels which command attention, and in the top left are two apostles, St. John and St. James – their names are there. The top right panel shows the beheading of an unknown saint, and it was a great thrill, when the glass was cleaned and conserved recently, to see the victim's face for the first time in decades. The bottom two roundels are even more exciting. On the left is the killing of St. Edmund. He stands with his hands tied to a tree behind him, while the archer takes aim. Many people, particularly in East Anglia, consider that Edmund should still be England's patron saint, as opposed to the 'foreign' and probably apocryphal George.... Finally, on the right is a panel which is completely unique, no other depiction of Edmund like this exists. The saint kneels and offers up the arrows of his martyrdom to God. And the conservation work by local firm Messrs Devlin Plummer was so good that we can now see his face too!

Seven hundred years separate the young Battle of Britain pilot from Edmund, King and Martyr. Both died fighting for something in which they passionately believed, and they are commemorated here, in this House of God, filled with the most wonderful 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

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