

**The Church of St Mary the Blessed Virgin, Parish Church of Sutterton,  
Lincolnshire**

# **Church Guide**



## **Introduction**

### **The village**

Now by-passed, the village of Sutterton lies at the former crossroad of the A16 and A17. The early history of the village remains unclear, but an Anglo –Saxon Charter preserved in the Arundel Manuscript and dated 1<sup>st</sup> August 869 states

that Sutterton was endowed with a church and a “chapel at Saltenev”. By this date at least, Sutterton was an identifiable village community in its own right. By the 12<sup>th</sup> C Sutterton must have developed and prospered to an extent that it was appropriate for it to have a high status stone built parish church.

The parish consists of about 6,500 acres of fertile farmland situated on the north side of the Bicker Haven, which was in mediaeval times a tidal inlet extending west and north from the Welland estuary towards the parishes of Bicker and Swineshead. The Haven provided an almost direct waterway link to the quarries at Barnack, near Stamford which probably provided most of the material to build the 12<sup>th</sup> C stone church and also, although this is at this stage only conjecture, any earlier stone church which stood on this site. This link was via the River Welland, through Crowland and Spalding.

The name Sutterton is said to derive from Sutari-tun, Danish for shoe maker’s farm. Certainly, there have been boot and shoe makers in the village until quite recent times. However, the origins of the real prosperity that must have existed in mediaeval times is not entirely certain. Traditional theory is that it came from salt production and perhaps the lowered areas in the centre of the village known as the ‘Pools’ played a part in this. It is clear that salt workings were generally situated close to salt water and that spoil heaps were an associated feature. These spoil heap features are difficult to discern near the ‘Pools’, so there remains a degree of doubt as to their origins and purpose, although some years ago the soil in the area which is now the Post Office was tested and found to have an abnormally high salt content. However, the value of agriculture within the parish over the ages is not in doubt and this remains the case today. There is a third possibility that may have been a source of revenue and the reason such a splendid church was built in the village. Pilgrimage in medieval England in the time up to the reformation played a huge part in people’s lives. Suffice to say there is real evidence that St Mary’s was a part of the infrastructure of pilgrimage and we will return to the subject later in this guide.

It seems certain that the early patron of the church was Crowland Abbey.

In past times there have been at least two prominent families living in the parish. There is a commemorative plaque to the Massingberd family in the church. They had land and lived in the parish from the 13<sup>th</sup> through to the 17<sup>th</sup> C. Various sources associate the family ‘Cranmer’ with the village. These

include a former stained glass window over the altar bearing the name of ‘Hugo de Cranmer’ which was recorded by Colonel Holles as having been present when he visited the church in about 1641. The Cranmer family lived in Sutterton, at least until one Edmond Cranmer married Isobell of Aslocton in Nottinghamshire in about 1450. Edmond Cranmer was the grandfather of Thomas Cranmer, who became Archbishop of Canterbury and his brother, Edmond Cranmer, who became Dean of Canterbury. Archbishop Cranmer was burned at the stake as a protestant heretic during the reign of Roman Catholic Queen Mary in 1556. The possibility that some members of the Cranmer family remained in or near the village after Edmond’s departure is a matter for continuing research.

## The Church

The church referred to in the Anglo Saxon Charter of 868 would not have looked like the impressive church on the site today. It would probably have been a simple wooden structure, with wattle and daub infill to complete the walls and it would have had a thatched roof. There is also a distinct possibility that it would have been built on the same site as a pre- Christian place of worship. This wooden church may have subsequently been re-built as a Saxon stone church, but there is currently no hard evidence to support this theory. On the contrary, the mixture of Norman and Early English styles in much of what we see now may indicate that an earlier Norman church was extensively re-built and re-modelled towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> C. The present church is cruciform in shape and with this footprint certainly dates back to the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> C. It was built mainly of Barnack stone ashlar. Much of the stone is in its original place but some is where it has been re-used in changes to the building over the centuries. As time passed the building was altered to keep up with the fashions of the time and generally to enhance its status. An example is the addition of the nave clerestory in the 15<sup>th</sup> C. In Victorian times there was significant re-building, particularly of the chancel and south transept. This was overseen by the architect Edward Browning of Stamford. However, much of the original stone and special features were re-cycled so that the building did not become overwhelmingly ‘Victorianised’. The most striking elements left by the

Victorians within the building are the tiled floors and walls in the chancel, together with the mosaic reredos.

The church is heated by a variety of overhead electric radiant heaters and electric under-pew heaters. These are not good enough when the weather is really cold. The provision of an efficient heating system is a priority for the future.

The church is Grade 1 listed.

### **Now the church in more detail:**

#### **The Nave**

The interior of the nave is dominated by the highly significant Norman arcades of five bays with five round piers to each side of the main body separating it from the side aisles. These piers stand on bases with angle spurs headed by square abaci with chamfered corners. The capitals of the piers are each decorated individually with representations of leaves, waves, mythical creatures and heads. The most easterly piers lean sharply away from the crossing and their bases have tipped and subsided slightly, the piers towards the west also lean, but to a diminishing degree.



**Figure 1** Leaning pier and the extraordinary arch at the east end of the south nave.



Figure 2 Pier capital, nave, north aisle.

The nave is lit by square headed 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> C windows in the north and south aisles and the clerestory together with the massive and splendid west window about which Pevsner rather uncharitably wrote: “...*is an uncommonly wilful design. No-one can call it beautiful.*” He says the window may date from the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> C. Perhaps the two oldest windows in the nave are at the west end of the north and south aisles. The windows in the building are almost all clear glass, so the church is particularly well-illuminated in natural light. The present glass probably dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> C. Although Colonel Holles records that in about 1641 there were at least 5 stained glass windows in the church they seem to have been removed sometime in the following 200 years before the visit by William Monson in 1834. (See below.)

Returning to the two western piers of the crossing which form part of the support the tower; the bases of these are below the present floor and therefore are out of sight. It can be seen that the lowest parts lean at a similar angle to the



easternmost aisle piers. However, about 1.5 meters above the floor the crossing piers straighten to near vertical. The arches connecting the crossing piers to the aisle piers have an extraordinary shape that is necessary to accommodate the different levels and the lean of the aisle piers.

The important crossing arch overlooking the nave has the characteristic zig-zag decoration of the Norman era.



**Figure 3** Crossing arch and indication of earlier roof line on tower wall.

There is an outline on the west wall of the tower, within the upper reaches of the nave, which probably marks the outline of the original roof of the nave before the clerestory was built, and intriguingly, evidence of the outline of another roof below it.

There is a further outline of a pitched roof on the west side of the tower above the present roof. This must have been the original steep pitched shape of the nave roof after the addition of the clerestory. This steepness indicates this roof may have been thatched.

The present roof is timber covered in lead and inside the nave one of the main beams bears the date 1736 together two names, *R. Jackson* and *E Thompson*, presumably the craftsmen who built it. There is documentary evidence held in Lincoln County Archive that the north and south aisle walls were partly re-built during the Victorian re-ordering in 1862 . However, the original very important arch and surround of the carved Norman north door was left in place. D Stocker, in *the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*, has suggested that the



**Figure 4** Detail of lion head, north door.



decoration around the arch of the north doorway is one of the richest Romanesque survivals in the county and that it recalls the decoration on the north portal on the west façade of Lincoln Cathedral. Likewise, the south doorway is original and important. Writing about both doorways D. Stocker suggests there are sculptural stylistic affinities between St Mary's Guildhall in Lincoln and both north and south doorways at Sutterton.

The floor of the nave is a mixture of materials. Real and imitation stone are present. The pews are mounted on wooden staging that obscures a large area of floor below. It seems likely that the floor of the nave was not altered greatly in the Victorian re-ordering. The evidence for this is the grave stones that form the floor of the central aisle remain as described in the early 19<sup>th</sup> C before any of the major re-ordering took place.

The font is Victorian.

### **The North Transept.**

This impressive area of the building is dominated by the large perpendicular window. As in other parts of the church it is possible to see how the building has developed over time. It is clear that there were major alterations to this part early in its life. It had been thought that the 'added' clerestory and the present roof might together date from the 13<sup>th</sup> C. However, a recent dendrochronology survey shows that roof is later, sometime in the second quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> C which might coincide with the installation of the perpendicular window. But, the style of the clerestory is certainly 13<sup>th</sup> C. The original pitched roofline is evident from an outline on the tower wall within the transept. There must have been lancet windows where the great perpendicular window is now. (Rubble infill can be seen to each side of the upper part of the window.) The configuration of the northernmost beam of the present roof with the perpendicular window is compatible with roof and window being of the same date. On the outside north wall of the transept some of the developments and alterations are apparent where there has been infill with rubble and interruption to the string courses. The recent repair work to timber and masonry (2018) has come after inspections by Historic England which found the lead roof of the transept, the masonry and roof timbers to be in such poor condition the building was placed on the 'at risk' register.

Figure 5 below shows the west wall of the north transept after repairs in 2018.

Preliminary work on the stonework repairs on this wall in 2018 revealed a blocked off chimney, unusually within the thickness of the wall from top to bottom, to the right of the buttress. There is a similar hollowed out vertical void on the east wall of the transept, but there, there is no soot or blackening. The date of the chimneys is uncertain but the ashlar to the outside wall to both east and west appear to be contemporary with the clerestory structure.

**Figure 5 West side of north transept after repairs showing the new roof and repaired masonry.**



### **The Servedy/kitchen. (Formerly the Vestry)**

The recently re-modelled servedy (2018) lies to the east of the north transept and is separated from it internally by a 20<sup>th</sup> C oak screen/partition in a medieval arch. The external walls of the old vestry appear to have been rebuilt as part of the 1862 re-ordering. The new servedy is separated from the chancel to the south by a new oak screen that reflects the oak partitions seen through the arch on the

south side of the chancel. The present vestry is now within the re-ordered south transept.

### **The South Transept**

This part of the church together with the chancel and the south porch formed the major part of the re-ordering that was carried out in 1862/3. The walls, roof and window of the south transept were completely rebuilt and the floor was raised. However, it appears the original footprint was retained together with internal walls and medieval arches. Most of the area was known formally as *The Lady Chapel*.

Now (2018), the south transept has been extensively re-ordered. The space houses lavatories (including for the disabled), a room designated for flower arrangement, a general store room and the vestry. Again the oak finish within the crossing and on the north side has been mirrored. The whole area is accessible by wheelchairs.

Prior to the latest re-ordering project, the south transept housed three recumbent 14<sup>th</sup> C stone figures. They were cemented in place on the floor against the south wall. They represent John Boneworth who was chaplain in the parish up to 1400 together with his mother and father. There is a report from 1834 indicating that these figures were standing up in the crossing. However, it seems unlikely that it was their original and intended position. There is no record to show why and when these figures were placed on the floor against the wall and why it was thought necessary to ‘cement’ them in place. Be that as it may, with funding from HLF and the William and Jane Morris Fund, specialist conservators (Skillingtons) have been able to carefully free the effigies from the floor, clean them and provide them with stands so that they may be displayed properly in the chancel. (A copy of the full Report on the conservation of the effigies is available in the church.)

### **The Choir/Crossing**

This area is formed within the four great piers that support the tower. The

ceiling is timber which forms the floor of the bell ringing chamber above. The floor was tiled by the Victorians and they installed choir stalls to south and north sides. The arched opening to the south transept is closed off with an oak screen and the organ. To the north side the arch is open leading to the north transept.

### **The Chancel**

The chancel was re-built as part of the 1862/3 re-ordering. The Lay Rector at the time, C.H. Cust (son of Lord Brownlow of Belton House), took a great interest in the project. He was named in the petition seeking the Faculty for the work to be done and he contributed a significant sum that reflected his liability for chancel repair and which added a generous portion towards the cost of the other works being carried out.

It is possible that much of the original window stone work of the chancel was incorporated in the rebuild. Pevsner wonders if what can be seen now can be trusted as being from the 13<sup>th</sup> C. Notes on the church made by William Monson in 1834 indicate that the east window had five lights instead of the present three and that the piscina was in the east wall, not as now in the south wall. It therefore seems likely that all the east windows are Victorian while those to south and north are, judging from the type of stone and imperfections, most likely to be reused originals.

A picture exists by an unknown artist from the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> C of the outside of the north side of the church. This allows a glimpse of the chancel before the re-ordering. There is no sign of the chancel roof above the walls. Documents in the form of correspondence relating to efforts by the Vicar to identify the Lay Rector (*Thornhill papers in Huntingdon Records Office*) show there had been great concern over the condition of this roof going back to the early 1800s. Be that as it may, the marks on the tower east wall indicates that there was a ridged roof originally, which must have become the template for that re-built by the Victorians.

Fortunately, the Victorians re-incorporated the original and important double piscina and wide arched sedilia within the re-ordered chancel. However, the dominant feature of the space is the Victorian tiling on the walls, particularly in

the east including the mosaic reredos, Also the floor tiles that extend beyond the chancel to the choir and north and south transepts. This decoration probably dates from further re-ordering in the 1870s (*Architect James Fowler*). A description of the church from before the Victorian re-ordering documents the existence of two graves in the chancel area. One is recorded as being of William Cash and the other Joan Escourt. Both have disappeared, presumably because of the re-ordering which included raising the floor levels by a substantial amount.

The recent advice to register Chancel Repair Liability (or stand the chance of the liability lapsing), led to an investigation by the PCC into where the liability (if any) lies today. Before 1772 the then Lord of the Manor (Thomas Thornhill), collected tithes on land in the parish and as a consequence he had the responsibility of repairing the chancel of the church. In 1772, Holland Fen, which is a large area of land several miles to the north of the village where several villages had common rights, was properly drained and enclosed. (It should be noted that the draining and enclosure of Holland Fen was a deeply unpopular measure with local people which gave rise to unrest and rioting.)

Thomas Thornhill was granted for himself over 300 acres of the newly enclosed Holland Fen in lieu of the tithes to which he had been entitled. But, liability for repair of the chancel was transferred to the ownership of about 200 acres of this grant and remains attached to that particular land to this day. The land has changed hands several times since 1772 and presently is owned by a trust, the beneficiaries of which are two individuals in Cheshire. The assertion of Repair Liability relating to the land has been recorded with the Land Registry.

The chancel is now home to the three stone effigies that were formally in the south transept. Each rests on a low stand made of oak. The two below the altar represent the mother and father of John Boneworth, chaplain of this parish who died in 1400. The image of John is very fine with abundant detail but unfortunately the facial features of his mother and father are very worn, Nevertheless they all provide a wonderful record of late 14<sup>th</sup> C costume.

### **The Tower and Spire**

The ashlar faced battlemented tower is topped by a fine 14<sup>th</sup> C recessed,

crocketed spire that rises to a height of 160 feet (almost 50 metres). The spire was re-built in 1787.

There is a frieze around the tower below the battlement. Incorporated in this are massive gargoyles, two on each face of the tower, with the exception of the west face where one is missing. The most interesting decoration in the frieze is at the corners. At the southwest there is a carved figure playing a drum. At the northwest is a figure playing a bagpipe. There is a carved figure at the northeast but the activity is difficult to understand. Another figure at the southeast corner is possibly playing a wind instrument such as a trumpet, but the trumpet (or whatever it was) is lost.

There are a variety of other splendid carved images in the frieze, including lions, other animals, heads, and ornaments.

The spire is rich with carving, in particular the heads decorating the dormers.



**Fig 7** The figure of a drummer on the tower.



## **Church Records.**

As is the case with many Lincolnshire parish churches, the surviving church records have been deposited in the County Records Office at Lincoln. A catalogue of the documents held at Lincoln is on the church website.

[suttertonparishchurch.co.uk](http://suttertonparishchurch.co.uk)

Interestingly, the original church warden's accounts covering most of the years between 1486 and 1536 are held by the Bodleian Library in Oxford. They consist of a calf bound volume of 240 pages. They are in English and a very clearly written. Nevertheless, in their original form they are difficult to read because the spelling and language is of its time. The PCC has obtained a digitalised copy of the accounts. The intention is to make these accessible to all on the web site. (2018).

The original document was bequeathed to the Bodleian by one Rawlinson in the 18<sup>th</sup> C. This was part of a very large bequest of documents and it is not known how Mr Rawlinson came by the accounts from Sutterton, though on the face of things it is hard to see how they could have been obtained lawfully. There is evidence that in the 19<sup>th</sup> C the parish considered trying to reclaim them from the Bodleian. Although this came to nothing, in 1870 the librarian of the Bodleian expressed the view that there ought to be a copy in the parish. At last, this has been done.

The page reproduced over (Fig 8) is an example. This page lists the food consumed at a celebration of the re-dedication of the church in 1490. It begins with amount for the expenses for a trip to Lincoln and home again. Then the cost of a gallon of wine.

Fig 8 below A page from the church warden's accounts listing expenditure relating to a feast to celebrate the re-consecration of the church after extensive re-ordering in 1490.



## **Pilgrimage.**

In the middle ages before the Reformation pilgrimage was a prominent part of everyday life. Medicine was primitive, and to be cured of their ills people often sought the influence of Saints to re-inforce their prayers to God. There was no better way of doing this than to pray at the shrine of a Saint (containing the Saint's corpse) or at a place that held some relic of a Saint or holy person which might have been a bone or an artifact, or where some momentous event had taken place. The middle ages saw a great proliferation of relics and certainly, not all of them were genuine. While some pilgrims were willing to travel great distances, even abroad to visit well known shrines such as Santiago de Compostela in Spain, or in England at Canterbury or Walsingham, it was not always necessary to travel long distances to reach a place where a supplicant could feel there was a chance of some benefit. The power of Saints, or even their images, was taken incredibly seriously by everyone including the ordinary people and there was certainly an order of popularity and importance for shrines that were perceived as being useful places to go to for the individual seeking help, or simply looking to be a better person. Some shrines were only of local importance. Perhaps St Mary's at Sutterton was such a place. Examples of written Wills of Sutterton men from just before the Reformation show that money was being left for '*Our lady of Sutterton, called our Whyte lady*' and in another case money was bequeathed for '*one secular preste saying messe afore our swete Lady of Soterton the space and terme of xij yeres*'. For well frequented national shrines pilgrim routes were established and symbols of pilgrimage evolved. Most often these took the form of tokens sold to pilgrims. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales are an insight into late medieval pilgrimage on the grander scale as well as one of the foundations of English literature.

While pilgrimage in England is no longer the mass activity it was in the Middle Ages, the Caminos to Santiago de Compostela are today incredibly busy and everywhere associated with that place there are symbols of the pilgrimage in the form of a scallop shell. This symbol was certainly associated with pilgrimage in England during the middle ages and St Mary's has its own example high above the great west widow overlooking the road. The reason the carved stone scallop shell exists on the building is unclear. However, in medieval times and to this day, it overlooks the road taken by travellers and pilgrims from Lincoln and the

north of England towards the crossing of the Wash and on to East Anglia, including Walsingham and Bury St Edmonds.



**Fig. 9** Scallop shell above the west window.

### **Plate and Other Objects.**

There is a Chalice and Paten of the year 1569 that is in customary use.

There is a collection of fine brass objects, including two jewelled crosses, candlesticks, bookstands and plates. There are also a silver plated processional cross and another ornate carved wooden processional cross.

### **The Bells**

There is a fine peal of eight bells with the heaviest weighing just over twelve cwt. In addition, there is the Sanctus or Priest's bell on which, in Lombardic lettering, are the words '*Symon de Hatfelde me fecit*' Symon de Hatfelde was a

bell founder who died in the first quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> C. This bell had been dated at about 1353 but given when Hatfelde died, the possibility exists that the bell could be 30 years older, which would make it one of the oldest in the country that is still in use.

The bells were re-hung on an iron frame with ball bearings by Taylors of Loughborough in 1937.

### **External features**

The Churchyard is closed for burials except for the interment and scattering of cremated remains.

Interment takes place in a formal gravelled area with stone tablet memorials. Scattering (i.e. unmarked interment in the ground) takes place in a quiet area to the south marked by a round slate stone.

With the exception of two Victorian box tombs all the tomb stones have been laid down. At present, inscriptions on the laid down stones are largely indecipherable.

There are a number of fine mature trees including two London plane trees, an oak and yews.

The Churchyard is home to a variety of birdlife, including owls.

