

Salle Church

People sometimes ask, on first seeing Salle Church, why was so large a church required for what cannot ever have been a big population? I doubt if there were ever more than about three hundred inhabitants of the parish. The church is not a mausoleum for the ostentatious tombs of a wealthy family of local landowners; indeed, the modesty of the building is as remarkable as its size. Its most beautiful adornments, a series of nine carvings depicting scenes from the life of Christ, hang high in the roof of the chancel, anonymous and only with great difficulty to be discerned. True, the building serves the people, but its chief purpose is to proclaim the glory of God; this it does nobly.

With very slight differences what you see now is what you would have seen towards the end of the 15th century, when Salle Church was completed. It was begun about 1400 and finished before the end of the century. Over the great west door, flanked by its two angels with their censers, are two rows of shields, with the arms of persons of local interest; two of the shields have the instruments of the passion, and one shield has the arms of Henry V when he was Prince of Wales – 1400 to 1413. The heavy oak doors, with their massive hinges and bolts of local blacksmith's work, are the original ones; you enter this church as worshippers have done for more than five hundred years. Inside the church you stand under the ringers' chamber with the font in front of you. It is a 'seven sacraments' font with carvings of the sacraments and of the crucifixion on its eight sides. Below each panel is an angel bearing a symbol of the sacrament (e.g., a lyre to represent the harmony of marriage) and over the font a splendid cover suspended from a sort of crane operated from the ringers' gallery. There are forty of these 'seven sacraments' fonts in England, twenty-five of them in Norfolk and thirteen in Suffolk; unfortunately, almost all of them have been sadly mutilated, the one in Salle not quite so savagely as some others.

Over the two porches at the west end are rooms reached by spiral stairs; the south one has its roof reinforced with iron; perhaps it was a treasury; the north one may have been a chapel. It has a solid oak door with a massive bolt, and a handsome groined roof.

The nave is lofty and spacious; between the font and the back pews is an area of open space, so that the first impression that a sensitive visitor experiences is of calm. Later one may find those unostentatious details of decoration which make every visit a fresh delight, but at first it is the majestic proportions of the place that give it its quiet power.

Architects have remarked on the skill of the medieval builders in supporting so weighty a roof with simple arch bracing; no fussy hammer beams. But some eighty years ago it was found necessary to pin the walls together with iron rods, still leaving

clear lines from floor to roof; the roof decorated with angels. There are angels all over the building – outside, over the west door, and on the roof, and inside the fragments of ancient glass.

In 1611 Lord Knyvett – who arrested the Gunpowder Plot conspirators in 1605 – gave the clerk's and minister's desks and the sounding-board behind and over the pulpit, making a 'three decker'. This, until the restoration in 1910-1912, stood halfway down the nave, on the south side. At the time of that restoration the church was so badly damaged that the little congregation could only use the chancel and entered the church by the small door on the north side. Frank Lillingstone, rector from 1902 to 1909, set to work to collect money for the restoration which was completed soon after his death with generous donations from Sir Woolmer White and Sir Alfred Jodrell. Early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth the rood screen was cut down to its present height; the saw marks may still be seen in the oak. Many churches escaped this vandalism – Ranworth and Cawston among them. But the result in Salle is not wholly unhappy; it has opened up the whole inspiring length of nave and chancel.

By 1450 there were seven guilds with altars and chaplains in Salle. All the altars have long since disappeared, leaving only hints of where they stood. There is no evidence of any college of priests here; which makes the twenty-six misericord stalls in the chancel hard to explain. These stalls have beautiful carved figures of animals, birds and people, the carving almost as fresh and lively as when the anonymous craftsmen left them five hundred years ago. Even the panels in the screen (only eight of them painted) have tiny carvings of birds, and of dragons, in their spandrels. It is much to be regretted that the nine carvings of scenes from the life of Christ are hung so high in the chancel roof that they can only with difficulty and binoculars be seen. But perhaps they might not have escaped the puritan desecrators if they had been accessible. They are carved with great freedom and very moving simplicity of composition.

Only four of the monumental brasses which used to be in the church now remain (and one other fragment). One of them is of Geoffrey and Alice Boleyn, great grandparents of Anne Boleyn. I have been told that, at the time of the 1910 restoration, excavations unearthed the skeleton of a young woman who had six fingers on one hand, and this gave support to the tradition that Anne Boleyn is buried in Salle; but the tradition is almost certainly untrue.

Talking about Salle is, though I cannot stop doing it, of little worth. Salle must be experienced and allowed to speak for itself.

Caughtley ranked three Norfolk churches as pre-eminent: St. Peter Mancroft in Norwich, Walpole St. Peter in the Fens, and Salle. Another authority, Pevsner, ranked Salle among the fourteen great Perpendicular Churches of North-east Norfolk and Norwich.

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