

The Three Churches of Reepham

Records show that in 1368 Archdeacon Swyneflete made an official visitation of his Archdeaconry of Norwich to compile an inventory of church goods. In Sparham Rural Deanery he found "Refham Omnium Sactorum, Refham Michaelis and Refham Marie".

In other words, All Saints, St Michael's and St Mary's, suggesting that even in those days the name "Refham" was given to the group of parishes that include Hackford, Whitwell and Kerdiston, as it still does today. The archdeacon found three churches, each sharing one graveyard, as they do now, though the surroundings and the churches were very different then.

St Mary's churchyard runs parallel to St Mary's church, All Saints churchyard surrounds the ruin of the old church and St Michael's look westward from its church, making the three churches share the same churchyard. How it comes about that three churches should be built together is not known. It is not likely that the population of the three parishes were ever large enough to warrant three churches. From the point of view of today, it would seem more sensible to build one large church for them all.

The fact that three parishes were once three villages, with local loyalties and different views, and would wish to have their own church, could be the only reason for this.

In those days, churches were used daily for the offering of masses for the dead, and the worship of the living. There would be altars in each church, in regular use, with a number of priests presiding. The local guilds, mentioned by William Cubyt in his will in 1479, would support altars in the various churches. Why did they not build Whitwell Church nearer to Whitwell and nearer to the people? Why not build Reepham Church similarly? Why build three churches so close together that the chanting from one church could be heard in the other?

One answer could be that the churches stand on one of the rare outcrops of rock in the area. The rock, it is suggested, was there, so the three churches were built on the rock.

However, in 1957 there was extensive excavation all round the church for water mains and no trace of rock was found. The three churches appear to be built on sand, which is quite sound and stable. During the excavation, several skeletons were uncovered under part of the main road, and near many of the shops around the churches. So, it would seem that the churchyard extended out further than it is now and perhaps many of the houses and shops actually have graves under them.

Another theory is that three landowners, or three rivals of some kind, each built against the other. But there is no evidence of this view. No one knows who built the churches, even though it is possible that St Mary's was built by the Kerdiston family. Details of origins were lost or destroyed, and no records in existence even mention the possibility that the churches were built in rivalry.

The most widespread and likely theory is that the churches were built because the boundaries of Hackford, Reepham cum Kerdiston and Whitwell meet at this point, or nearly so. All Saints would be convenient for the majority of Hackford people. St Mary's would be not far off for the Reepham people, but the Kerdiston people would have a long journey to church. The majority of the Whitwell people lived some distance away, so perhaps they did not consider it a bad thing to walk: a mile or two to worship in those days.

Men of substance in this period liked to endow a church; the Kerdistons may have built St Mary's. This is the opinion of Canon Parsons on his history of Salle Parish Church, and it is quite likely that the de Vaux family built All Saints, as their coat of arms used to be on the chapel of St Michael's. And maybe the Whitwell family was responsible for the setting up of St Michael's. No one really knows. After all, it is not such a remarkable thing that the three little parishes should wish to have each. It is only remarkable that their boundaries made it convenient for them to build them so close together and to share one churchyard.

The tangle over the boundaries has extended over the centuries and a fascinating story tells how, during the Civil War, the inhabitants of Hackford refused to billet a detachment of Oliver Cromwell's men because, in the commanding-officer's instructions, Hackford was described as "Reifham". Cromwell's men deserved sympathy, for as the centuries passed, less and less of the parishioners themselves could tell where Hackford ended and Reepham began.

The Church of St Mary

Of the church which then existed there remains the tower, part of the arcades and some of the walls and the west window, though this was restored in the 20th century.

The tower is in a strange position, midway along the south arcade. It has a stringcourse over the door, which shows that it once stood exposed to the elements. One would normally expect an arch rather than a door in this position. The tower obviously belonged to an older church, now gone without trace. The tower door has some very remarkable ironwork dating back to the 14th century.

The belfry contains a bell weighing about 10 cwt, which replaced a large bell then known as the "Great Bell", which was sold in 1790 to help pay for restoration work. There is also a small bell dated 1810.

In 1958, the tower was restored completely and re-roofed with copper. There is a reinforced concrete floor to the silence chamber, bound into the tower walls as a means of preventing movement. The work was necessary by the deep fissures in the flint walls.

The nave was formerly a clerestory, which was removed in 1790. A medieval wall painting was found on remains of the clerestory on its north wall, between the positions of two former windows. The painting is thought to depict "The Three Living and The Three Dead" and a sketch of it can be found in the church chest. In 1790, more restoration work was carried out, when the old roof was taken down and a barrel vault formed and roofed with Cumberland slate, instead of the former lead. These slates, some small and some large, weathered until 1957, when they were replaced because they were found to be crumbling.

The arcades remain from the early building. There is slight difference of period between the north and south arcade. The stone cross with figures built into the base of the west pillar of the north arcade is reputed to have marked the point where the three parishes meet.

The chancel is lower than the nave. Whereas in most churches there is a step into the chancel, here there is a step down.

There is a canopied tomb on the north wall of the sanctuary and is famous for its exquisite detail. The monument is of Sir Roger de Kerdiston who died in 1337. At the front of the tomb chest are the figures of eight weepers and over it is a tall canopy with two cusped arches with crocketed ogee gables and a central pendant. Sir Roger, in armour, lies on a bed of cobbles. His crossed legs rest on a heraldic lion, his arms are folded over his body, with his right hand resting on the pommel of his sword on his left side and his left hand just touching the cobbles by his right shoulder. Despite the armour and the cobbles he lies on, he looks to be in peace.

In pre-Reformation days [the church] possessed a famous image of Our Lady and to this shrine pilgrims came from far and near.

The font is Norman and made from Purbeck marble and is supported by five pillars made in the 15th century.

The Church of St Michael's

In many ways St Michael's church has a more splendid exterior than St Mary's. Its walls are higher and it has a handsome tower looking west toward Reepham's fine Georgian square.

The tower has an ornamental turret with shields on the battlements, placing it in the 14th century.

There are six bells in the tower, dating from 1789. An interesting entry in a register states: "On Wednesday, November 18th, 1789, the five old bells from Whitwell steeple were carried to Downham and exchanged for a Peal of Six, which were brought to Whitwell, November 20th, 1789, and hung [by] Thomas Osborn of Downham."

The pulpit is Jacobean and its superb carving is a fine example of the art of woodcarving. It was restored with great skill in 1893.

The east window is of the 1930s and is a good example of the use of stained glass, with its rendition of the Ascension of our Lord.

There is a carved oak at the front of the west galley which came from nearby Booton Church. In the 19th century Booton Church was built with a majority of carved oak, and the front of St Michael's gallery was restored from some of the "linenfold carving".

There used to be a chapel on the southeast side of the nave. The remains of the piscina can still be seen near the door.

The church clock has been replaced but still retains the motto of the previous one: "Remember Eternity".

The Church of All Saints

A small portion of All Saints still remains in the southwest churchyard. This existed up until 1544 when it was destroyed by fire.

Pictures still in existence show that All Saints had a tower that survived the fire but was taken down in 1790. There is a list of rectors of Hackford (All Saints) from 1317–1542, among whom is Thomas Boleyn of the family of the ill-fated Ann Boleyn. He was rector at All Saints in 1436.

These medieval churches are still standing. The two churches of St Mary's and St Michael's are now not only united in a structural respect but are served by one clergyman. No longer are the parishioners of the ancient parishes of Whitwell and Hackford to be found only at St Michael's and those of Reepham with Kerdiston at St Mary's. Union in its widest sense was accomplished in 1930, and no one seems at all perturbed because Reepham boasts two churches, while Whitwell church, at least officially, belongs to the past.

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From an article published in The Reepham Magazine, Winter 1987