St. Margaret's Church
IPSWICH

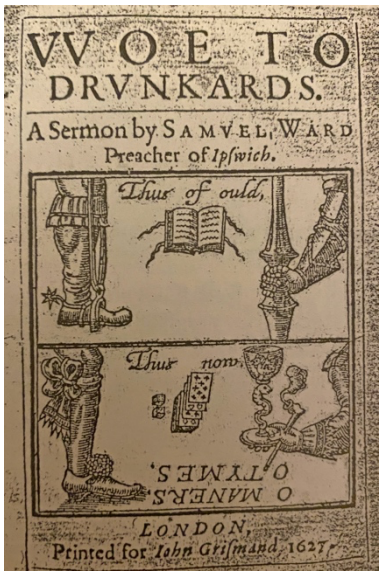
The loss of our medieval heritage

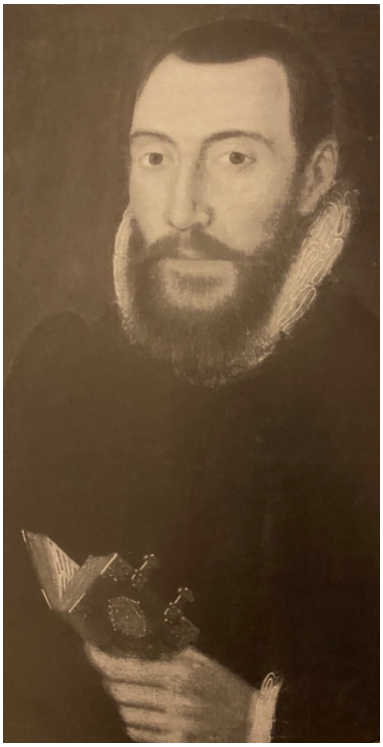
In the 15th century, East Anglia was one of the wealthiest areas of England as a result of its wool trade and its external maritime links to the Low Countries. Norwich was the second largest city in the kingdom and churches were built, extended, and refurbished throughout East Anglia (Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire) by their wealthy parishioners mindful of their spiritual welfare. It has been estimated that East Anglia has the largest concentration of medieval churches in the world. (Michael Rimmer)

Ipswich thrived during this period and still has its twelve medieval churches which served a population of less than 3,000. St Margaret's, one of the finest medieval churches in Ipswich, was built by the Canons of Holy Trinity circa 1300 when their Priory church could no longer accommodate their parishioners. The Canons had acquired considerable endowments and control of almost all the other churches in Ipswich. The parish church was also supported by such wealthy local landowners, town dignitaries and craftsmen such as the de Leyham, Tylmakers and Halle families. Consequently, St Margaret's had the funds to follow the latest architectural trends in the C15th. Externally the results are still there. The roof was raised with a splendid clerestory in the latest Perpendicular style, richly decorated with flushwork and its donors' initials which are still there. However, the interior, which still retains its magnificent double hammer beam roof, has been stripped of almost all references to Catholic practices during the Henrician, Edwardian and Elizabethan reformations in the C16th and during Puritan iconoclasm of the C17th.

Ipswich became known as a Puritan hotbed in the later C16th and early C17th. Its trade links with the Low Countries ensured that its merchants were fully aware of growing Protestantism in that area and through into Germany. It was in the English House in Antwerp that William Tyndale, who had been condemned as a heretic for his translation of the Bible into English, took refuge from Henry VIII's law enforcers in 1535 together with Thomas Poyntz, an Essex merchant. From 1568-1648, determination to practise their Calvinist faith (amongst other grievances) led the Dutch to rebel against and finally defeat their Spanish overlords. Ipswich, thus, had this example of militant Protestantism on its doorstep.

In Elizabeth's reign, Ipswich Town Corporation began to appoint a series of Puritan Town Preachers, the most notable of these being Samuel Ward whose fiery rhetoric brought him into such dispute that he fled to safety in Holland after 1638.


VVOE TO
DRVNKARDS.
A Sermon by SAMVEL WARD
Preacher of *Ipſwich.*
Thus of ould,
Thus now
O MANERS,
O TYMES,
LONDON,
Printed for *Iohn Griſmand* 1627.


Samuel Ward

William Prynne, whose Puritan polemics lost him his ears, called one of his pamphlets "Newes from Ipswich".
To Puritans such as Prynne, Archbishop Laud's attempts, supported by Charles I, to create more formal dignity in the Anglican Church, smacked of a return to catholic practice. Hence its full polemical's not very catchy title:-

> *Newes from Ipswich discovering certaine late detestable practises of some domineering lordly prelates, to undermine the established doctrine and discipline of our church, extirpate all orthodox sincere preachers and preaching of God's word, usher in popery, superstition and idolatry: with their late notorious purgations of the new fastbooke, contrary to His Majesties proclamation, and their intolerable affront therein offred to the most illustrious Lady Elizabeth, the Kinge onely sister, and her children, (even vvhiles they are novv royally entertained at court) [i]n blotting them out of the collect, and to His Majesty, His Queene, and their royall progeny, in blotting them out of the number of Gods elect.*

In this volatile religious environment, medieval St. Margaret's, whose interior furnishings were fully aligned with catholic practice, was a prime target. Before 1532, it would have glowed inside like a richly decorated casket. Light would have filtered through stained glass windows: all now gone. Like all medieval churches, its walls would have been brightly painted with Biblical stories. Their purpose was to impress the Christian message of salvation through a godly life and the awful alternative of damnation: all we have now is a memory of a St Christopher traditionally placed opposite the south door to welcome worshippers (see article on Heritage website).

A glimpse of what we have lost lies in small English churches which were not so rigorously changed such as Hessett (Suffolk), and the remarkable rediscovered church of St Mary's at Houghton on the Hill in neighbouring Norfolk, which has an extensive cycle of paintings. All these rare survivals are faded and it is to their Victorian successors that we need to look to get the real impression of the colour and effect of such a total scheme of decoration and, of course, what we have lost. Many churches in this period were extensively restored by wealthy patrons interested in returning their churches to what they thought was their medieval glory. In Suffolk the indefatigable Mildred Howard, wife of the Vicar of Huntingfield, spent most of the daylight hours for seven years (1859-66) climbing on scaffolding to cover entirely the church ceiling with brilliantly coloured paintings. It is remarkable. The bold colour is quite shocking to those used to the scraped stone or whitewashed walls of current Anglican churches. Outside Suffolk, wealthy Victorian patrons also commissioned murals. More muted than Huntingfield but still glorious is Holy Innocents' church, Highnam, in Gloucestershire (1849-51) built, painted and named by Thomas Gambier Parry to commemorate his beloved wife Isabella and their children, all but one of whom died in infancy (the survivor was Hubert Parry, the composer). However, the most complete revival of medieval style in the C19th came with the revival of Catholicism in England from 1830 and was distinguished by the exuberant work of Augustus Pugin.

The most commanding feature of a medieval church interior would have been a large cross or rood (Anglo Saxon for cross) high in the chancel arches. It either hung or, more usually, stood at the centre of a strong platform or beam (known as either the candlebeam or Rood Beam) and traditionally was flanked by the figures by the figures of the Virgin and St John the Evangelist. This was incorporated into the top of a screen (Rood Screen) which was built behind and below it. H Munro Cautley in his book "Suffolk Churches" details exactly their construction. Together they were designed to separate the east end of the church where the Sacrament was kept and where monks and officiating clergy carried out the Holy Offices from the rest of the church. This would maintain the area's sanctity while enabling the secular congregation in the west end to view the service. This separation of the sacred from the secular fulfilled a decree of the Lateran Council of 1215 by the reforming Pope Innocent III. The need for a screen was still felt in 1638 as Richard Montague, the Bishop of Norwich, in whose diocese Ipswich lay, declared:-

> *"Is your chancel divided from the nave or body of the church. Is there a decent door to keep out boys, girls or irreverent men and women? And are the dogs kept from coming to besoil or profane the Lord's Table?"*

In defence of the parishioners, it should be remembered that the church was the only public building in most places and, consequently, was used for meetings, elections etc.

One hundred and fifty-four Rood Screens survive in Suffolk in various states, mostly from the C15th, Suffolk's wealthiest period. Their lower part and gates consisted of painted panels of the Saints particular to that church. Rising from that, wooden arches, whose design mirrored perpendicular windows and framed the view of the altar. Some coving linking the screen to the beam such as Bramfield and Eye, replicated fan vaulting; a tour de force of the carver's skill. All would have been finely coloured and gilded and, in some cases, this has survived.

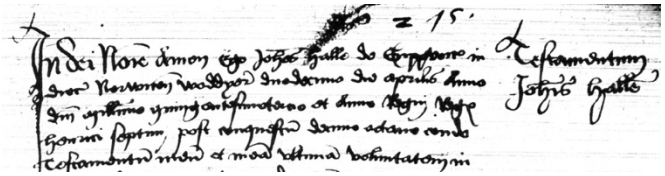
St Margaret's certainly had a screen and it is thought that two wooden pews in the Sanctuary may have been constructed from it.

When it disappeared is unknown. The clues to its position within the church lie in the blocked spiral staircases at the end of the north and south aisle exterior walls and the arch through the pillar by the side of the pulpit.

These stairs would have led to a strong platform between the staircases, piercing the chancel pillars. In the centre would have been the large cross traditionally flanked by the figures of the Virgin and St John. On it candles would be placed; hence the term candlebeam commonly used to describe the rood beam in Suffolk.

Bequests to St Margaret's confirm the existence of such a beam. At Easter, 1349, Nicholas Cardenty left 3s rent from the tenement of Robert de Framelingham for three "*lumina*" before the cross in St Margaret's church. In 1453, Galf Shryd gave 10s for a new candlebeam and, in the same year, Robert Cady gave 6s.8d to the new candlebeam while William Selnett gave 20s "*to make a cross on candlebeam*".

Finally John Halle, the great benefactor of the church roof and clerestory asked to be buried in front of the Rood in his will of 1503, a most privileged position!



Below the candlebeam, the screen would have been painted and gilded, but no other wills survive from St Margaret's to give us details. We can surmise, however, what it might have looked like from the over 140 Suffolk wills that Simon Cotton et al have

unearthed containing bequests for the making, gilding and painting of roods. The amounts are generous and, with the money, came instructions as to its use. Robert Clifford in Aldham in 1525 was very specific and detailed.

> *"I bequeath I will have the rood there upon the candlebeam set up higher and Mary and John and two new angels and the breast under the rood korvyn(coving) and when that is done I will have all this painted and gilt whatsoever the cost. I will have bought two standards of brass to stand in the choir and I will my executors bestow therein 40s. I will my executors shall buy four candlesticks of brass for the candlebeam, I give six kine(cows) unto the church to keep my obit with as long as the world stand ."*

In Lavenham, Clare, Drinkstone and, above all, Eye and Southwold wonderfully detailed carved screens remain: the latter two much refurbished. Remarkably, for the first four of these churches wills survive to give us again an idea of cost, their age and their donors. In Clare, in 1465, Richard Pumpey als Tylney gave 20 marks to make a new vault before the cross; in 1466 ten marks was given to the Rood loft; in 1478 a new Rood loft was ordered and in 1502 £5 was donated to paint and gild the candlebeam. In Eye, the painting and gilding of the screen as bequested by Joan Busby and others is still evident. Southwold was gifted £20 for a new candlebeam by John Colton in 1459 and other generous donations are also recorded.

Another loss from St Margaret's and all other English medieval churches is that of their chapels. St Margaret's had a Lady Chapel whose existence is confirmed by wills of pious parishioners and is still at the east end of the south aisle. It is first mentioned in the will of John Mundi in 1334 who left 5s in annual rent from a messuage in St Nicholas Parish to burn two tapers on the newly constructed altar of St Mary in St Margaret's church, one in front of the picture of the Blessed Mary and the other in front of that of St John the Baptist. The chapel is specifically linked to Richard de Leyham of a prominent family in the parish in the will of Andrew Spicer 1340. He left an annual rent to pay for two large candles for the lighting of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the chapel of Richard de Leyham in the church of St Margaret, *as he has been accustomed to do*. The first extant mention of a Lady Chapel is in the will of Arnald le Skynner of 1319 who left the rent of a messuage formerly of John le Chapman in St Margaret's for two tapers on the altar of Blessed Mary in the Conventual church of the Holy Trinity of Ipswich for 100 years. It is not clear whether this is in the new church or in the previous building attached to the Priory and dedicated to the Holy Trinity.

There were doubtless other chapels in the church as was normal at the time and in current Catholic churches. One to St Margaret was probably at the top of the north aisle as befitted the patron saint of the church. Johanna (wife of Richard Webber) in 1311/12 left to the Fraternity of St Margaret's as an allowance a tenement bought of Matilda dil Jay. Isabel Tylmaker's will of 1460 left 3s 4d to the Guild of St Barbara in the parish of St Margaret. References elsewhere to the Guild of Corpus Christi and St Katherine at St Margaret's would point to two more chapels as was the norm for Guilds.

St Margaret's also had an Angel Roof which had become very fashionable in C15th East Anglia. This fashion derived from its inclusion in Westminster's Great Hall renovated for Richard II (1377-1399) between 1395-8. The King's carpenter, Hugh Herland, created a masterpiece of art and engineering using hammerbeams to cover

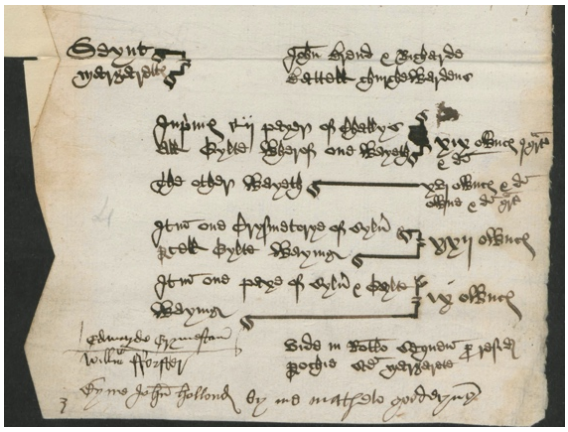
a huge span, without the need for columns. Herland had links with King's Lynn where its wealthy merchants were happy to copy this new fashion and the earliest angel roofs are to be found there. The fact that St Margaret's had such a roof points again to the prosperity our church in this period and its parishioners' desire to trumpet it by following the latest trend and to outdo local competition. Almost 70% of all English medieval angel roofs survive in East Anglia and their individuality, painting and gilding give us an idea of what St Margaret's ceiling would have looked like.

We know who gave the money for St Margaret's to follow this fashion as their initials can be seen in external flushwork of the new clerestory and double hammer beam roof inside where the angels once "flew". (See Heritage site article on the Double Hammer beam roof). We can only speculate as to their size, painting and gilding and, for an idea, look at the magnificent roof in Southwold which has been restored.

All these bequests reflect the strong adherence to traditional catholic teaching in Suffolk on the eve of its uprooting by the protestant theology of Martin Luther and royal diktat. The break with Rome, necessitated by Henry VIII's need for a divorce and abetted by powerful reformist ministers, led to doctrinal change and, inevitably, the complete removal of any fixtures in churches which reflected catholic practice.

Henry VIII (1509-47) and his successors issued a stream of Royal Instructions that led to the stripping of St Margaret's catholic furnishings. As a town church in what became a Puritan stronghold, it was inevitable. Further out into Suffolk, the influence of the powerful catholic Howards, Dukes of Norfolk, based in Framlingham and other traditional gentry meant much more survived. In 1538 Henry instructed that "*such images as had been abused to superstition be taken down*".

Under his son, Edward VI, in 1547 Orders in Council were issued "*that all images whatsoever shoud be taken out of churches*" and "*that they take away all shrines, tables ,candlesticks, trindills or rolls of wax, pictures, paintings and other monuments of feigned miracles, so that no memory of them remain in walls and windows, exhorting the people to do the like in their several houses*". In London, almost all the Roods were destroyed although the one in St Paul's Cathedral fell on and killed one of its destroyers; certainly not an example of being saved by the Cross. Urged on by fiery rhetoric from, for example, Bishop Ridley (1500-55), mobs went to work in many places.



This febrile mood was evident in Ipswich where the churchwardens of St Lawrence paid £12 to replace nine stained glass windows with plain, as they thought the former contravened Edward's injunctions. Evidence of the loss of at least some of St Margaret's stained glass is contained in the parish response to another Order in 1552 and the reason is more prosaic. The churchwardens were ordered to prepare inventories of all church goods that should be surrendered to the Crown and hand over the proceeds of their sale. However, churchwardens were permitted to retain

money for repairs. In St Margaret's, the churchwardens declared that they had used monies to for "*Glasyng of the wyndowes of the churche which were decayed with the great tempest of hayle, pavying and ledyng with other necessary repaoacons*" (See Heritage page for a copy of this inventory).

The need and greed for money shown by both Henry and Edward drove these depredations as much as reforming zeal. In 1553, another order was issued that the parishes should not sell any of the churches' valuables. In fact, many churches were being looted of their treasures by their own parishioners, who found good use for altar cloths, copes etc. as hangings, and acquired the chalices. Henry Heylyn in his "History of the Reformation" 1661 called these people "forestallers": a neat way of describing theft and denying the royal coffers. Commissioners, who were appointed in January 1553 to take everything except those items necessary for a service, noted that a number of items mentioned in previous inventories were missing. Nevertheless, they collected from Suffolk 4161 ounces of plate besides £413.8s for plate sold by the churchwardens and other sums totalling £496.8s. Roods, candlebeams and rood screens mostly disappeared during this period. Under Edward, roods and many screens went, but equally many which had been hidden away were restored in the reign of Mary when there was a return to catholic practices.

In 1561, Elizabeth reissued instructions for the removal of roods and screens. Some were converted into other pieces of church furniture: pews etc. Those that have survived are usually in small country parishes and areas where the local gentry were quietly opposed to change and things were hidden. Roger Martyn, the churchwarden at Long Melford, recorded that he had hidden a reredos, bell, organ and clock in his own house and hoped his heirs would have a chance to restore them. The carving on fonts was quite often plastered over only to be rediscovered in the C20th.

Contemporary Elizabethan writers concurred with the terrible level of destruction visited upon churches in the zeal to rid them of all trace of catholic practice.

Holinshed's Chronicles(1577) sums up Anglican services:-

> *"As for our churches themselves, bells and times of morning and evening prayer remain as in time past, saving that all images, shrines, tabernacles, rood lofts and monuments of idolatry are removed, taken down and defaced, only the stories in glass windows excepted, which for want of sufficient store of new stuff and by reason of extreme charge that should grow by the alteration of the same into white panes throughout the realm, are not altogether abolished in most places, but by little and little suffered to decay, that white glass may be provided and set up in their rooms."*

The antiquarian, John Weever (1576-1632), said "*they crackt a-pieces the glass windows wherein the effigies of our blessed Saviour hanging on the Cross or any one of his saints was depicted."*

All of this calls into question the usual vilification of William Dowsing as “the Great Destroyer” of the furnishings of the medieval East Anglian church. There is no doubt that it came within the remit of his orders from the Earl of Manchester, which led him on a path of destruction in the Eastern Counties between 1643-4.

Photo Credit: Portrait of William Dowsing, Christchurch Mansion, Colchester & Ipswich Museums Service, Ipswich Borough Council Collection.

William Dowsing, a local Parliamentarian, was born in Laxfield in 1596, moved to Coddenham and finally, before 1641, Stratford St Mary where there is NO evidence of iconoclasm for example the flint flushwork frieze with prayers for the souls of the Mors family etc. remains. (Oliver Cromwell has been alleged to have forbidden the destruction of the superb glass in King’s College Cambridge where he had studied. His troops certainly used it as a training ground and left graffiti.) Thus, is some Puritan partiality is at work?

Dowsing was a yeoman farmer with a considerable library, now dispersed, of which almost 50 books can be linked to him. He not only wrote his name on the title page but also carefully annotated them. Religious books sat alongside ones on political theory and classical history. ”*His habits of reading suggest an obsessively tidy mind*”, the sort of man who would be punctilious in his fulfilling orders.

In August 1643, he was sufficiently well known to be appointed as the Provost Marshall of the armies of the Eastern Association (Cambridgeshire, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Lincolnshire) and, in December 1643, "Commissioner for the destruction of monuments of idolatry and superstition” by the Earl of Manchester. This later commission required him to enact a Parliamentary ordinance of 28 August 1643 which stated that "*all Monuments of Superstition and idolatry should be removed and abolished*". It was a task entirely in keeping with his strict Puritan views on any imagery in church and obsessive belief that he was carrying out God’s work by a thorough purge of any remnants of Catholic worship.

These monuments were defined as "fixed altars, altar rails, chancel steps, crucifixes, crosses, images and pictures of any one of the persons of the Trinity and of the Virgin Mary, and pictures of saints or superstitious inscriptions." In May 1644, the scope of the ordinance was widened to include representations of angels (a particular obsession of Dowsing's), rood loft and holy water stoups, and images in stone, wood and glass and on plate.

He was allocated some 500 churches to “visit”, too many for himself alone, so he appointed ten deputies who seem to have been less stringent. He reserved Ipswich, Samford, Stow and Hadleigh for himself.

How he carried out these duties is detailed in his Journal. How much of what he ordered was carried out can, in some instances, be checked by the records of the church wardens who accounted for the expense of such works. However, only seventeen records relevant to this area and time have survived and, for St Margaret's Ipswich, 1644, the year of his "visit", are missing.

Dowsing's Journal records "*Margarett's Jan. 30 (1644). There was 12 Apostles in stone taken down and between 20-30 superstitious pictures to be taken down, which the godly man, a churchwarden promised to do*".

John Blatchly, in the Journal of William Dowsing edited by Trevor Cooper, suggests that the 12 condemned Apostles in stone were, in fact, wooden ones carved from the wall-posts, set on stone corbels and probably white-washed to look like stone.

Dowsing does not mention the hammerbeam angels which were roughly hacked off, to be replaced in 1694 by heraldic shields. However, he is almost certainly the culprit as his loathing of "cherubim" and their destruction is clear in other church entries. Some Suffolk angels did escape, either because they were too high up (Blythburgh) or overlooked in the gloom of a wintry church roof.

The superstitious pictures left to the "godly" churchwarden to destroy have generally been interpreted as faces/images in stained glass windows. If so, it seems that 20-30 stained glass windows had survived until then against the odds. Although not mentioned in his Journal, the font was defaced except for an image protected, it is thought, by its placement at the time against a pillar.

Dowsing was not the greatest destructive element in our church but came at the end of a long line of demolition. The final visual triumph of Protestantism in St Margaret's came in 1694. The magnificent hammer beam roof was completely cleared of colour and newly painted panels inserted to celebrate the expulsion of Catholic James II and the accession of Protestant William and Mary in 1688. Shields of the local notables who organised this replaced the angels. Parliament had passed the Act of Succession barring catholics from the throne. For Protestants it was the Glorious Revolution and St Margaret's, stripped of all its medieval furnishing and colour, was the visual result.

Ann Woodings
March 2025

Reading List

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