

HUNGATE ROOD
SCREEN TRAILS: NO.13



SPARHAM ST MARY THE VIRGIN.

TG 071 197. postcode - NR9 5AQ

Normally open. Parking close to churchyard wall.

The south side is handsome, with fine Perpendicular windows and an extra one, unusually of the same dimensions, in the east gable of the nave. The flintwork is relieved by some brick and by good, relatively recent pointing. The chancel is older. It's worth walking round the rather shabbier north side to admire the niche in the tower west wall above the ancient door. It is most delicately carved with a little vaulted canopy to cover the (absent) figure of the Virgin. Note also the faces on the corbels of the window above.

The scratch dial beside the inner door must pre-date the porch. Inside, the nave is spacious and light, with broad arcades, particularly the western pair which probably demonstrate where the extension began to the earlier 13th/14th century church. The furnishings deserve a careful look: pew ends, benches, a chest, the royal arms, the pulpit and, in the relatively narrow and dark chancel, the altar rails. Back in the light of the nave, enjoy the roof with its angels.



The Screen

Two sections of screen dado can be found on the north side of the church. The former north side of the screen had the usual representations of saints, but the south side is unique as the only surviving memento mori scenes on a screen.

The first two panels of the north section of dado originally contained the Virgin Mary and St Elizabeth, representing the Visitation. These panels were recorded by antiquarians as late as the mid 19th century. The other two panels of this section survive and contain local saint, St Walstan of Bawburgh and an archbishop saint, identified by some as St Thomas Becket.

On the former south side of the screen, the first scene shows a shrouded male corpse rising from a tomb in a church. In the second scene, two richly dressed male and female corpses converse. The two memento mori scenes are accompanied by inscriptions from the Book of Job, which detail the brevity of life. Screens often seem to have been associated with death and commemoration, though never so explicitly as here. It is likely that the panels acted as part of the sepulchral monument of the donor(s) who were probably buried in front of the screen on the south side. The tombs and brasses of the donors of the screen at Ludham can be found in exactly this location.

The paintings here are by the same workshop as at Elsing, Foxley, Binham, on the doors at Cawston and on the south side of the screen at Foulden. Wills at these places indicate a date of about 1500 for the Sparham panels.



FOXLEY ST THOMAS.

TG 039 218. postcode - NR20 4QP

Key from Street Farm just east of the church.

This is one of the Norfolk triumphs. In the early '90s the church looked battered, dark and damp. Inside now there are unusually good pictures of what has been done since and the happy words "Project completed 2005". Donors and doers should be proud.

Externally the church is pleasant but not exceptional, with evidence of work from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The outer arch of the porch with its carved spandrels alerts one to the possibility of better things. The porch gates are pale with decades of sun. The church door is dark with age – notice the corbels on each side.

Dark is also the theme of the furnishings inside except for the early font with its candle-snuffer cover and surprised golden bird on the top. The benches have unusual carved ends, vernacular is probably the word, but with echoes of primitive (such as Native American) designs but also of art nouveau. There are box pews, a two-decker pulpit with older panelling beside it and a gallery with benches that the musicians in Thomas Hardy's novels would recognise (mind your head on the stair). Worship has migrated to the chancel but it must be wonderful to enjoy the light of the nave on the big occasions.

Everything is clean, tidy and loved, even the Mothers' Union Cradle Roll!

The Screen

The screen here is unusual because it has painted doors. In fact, at Foxley, most of the screen is still covered in painted graining and dark varnish, probably dating from the 18th or 19th century.

On figurative screens, the doors are typically the location for the four Latin Doctors of the Church and here we find them in turn: St Augustine, St Gregory, St Jerome and St Ambrose. The Doctors of the Church are also present on the doors of screens at Cawston and Salle. Here, at the foot of St Jerome, a female donor can be seen, along with the damaged inscription which reads 'orate pro a...bs a...ts bay...'. She was probably called Agnes. By St Ambrose, her husband, Giles can be seen. He holds a scroll which bears the inscription 'orate pro anima Giles Bay...'.
(Note: The text in the image contains several errors and is being corrected for accuracy.)



The will of a man called John Baymond survives. He left 4 marks towards the painting of the screen in 1485 and it is possible that these were relatives of his. Another earlier will, of Margaret Hastings in 1459, gives 13s 6d towards the building of a new rood loft, a common traditional term for the rood screen and loft. Fundraising for the building and decoration of rood screens could take many years and could involve numerous small bequests.

The surrounds of the panels have not been cleaned, nor have the dado panels to the north and south. Tantalising traces of figures can be seen beneath the graining on the north side, but without conservation, it is impossible to know the state of preservation of the figures beneath the panels.

The upper part of the screen has been sawn off and reattached. It is likely that this reflects the changes made when more extreme Protestantism came in with Edward VI, only to be reversed when Catholic Mary acceded to the throne in 1553.

NORTH ELMHAM ST MARY.

TF 987 215. postcode - NR20 5JU

Normally open. Parking just to the north.

St Mary's seems to be overshadowed – in interest if not in elevation – by its neighbour and predecessor, the Saxon cathedral. When the diocesan base was transferred to Norwich in 1096, North Elmham gained a new Norman church to compensate. Some of this remains, but the main rebuilding in the 14th century was followed by more in the 15th when the clerestory was added. The main impression now is of the Perpendicular style.

The tower is very imposing and it is best to spend some time exploring the detail of the carving both in the porch and higher up, in the windows and the often formidable gargoyles. The south porch is vaulted and here too the carvings are worth more than a glance. Not all of them are pious.

The interior is very tall. The different dates of its construction work together harmoniously but more interestingly than in many of the big 15th century Norfolk churches. There is a considerable quantity of 14th century stained glass and a whole zoo of carved bench-ends. The font cover is fine but the most impressive contribution is the work of the 17th century village carpenter and parish clerk, Francis Floyd: the screen at the west end, the altar table and, best of all, the pulpit begun in 1614 and finished in 1626.



The Screen

North Elmham's screen once stretched across the whole width of this three aisle church. Although now cut down to the dado, both the carving and the surviving painting are of high quality.

It is not possible to identify all the saints on the screen securely; a number have been lost and the order changed. From the north side the figures are in turn: a Benedictine abbot, St Benedict, blank (lost), St Thomas, St Matthew, St Jude, St James the Less, St Philip, St John the Evangelist, St Paul, St Barbara, St Cecilia, St Dorothy, St Sitha, St Juliana, St Petronella, St Agnes, and St Christina. There are a further four panels which are painted brown. Tantalisingly, these are covered with overpaint. The figures might be only fragmentary beneath, but the iconoclastic scratches visible in raking light at face height show that these panels too were painted with figures.

The advowson at North Elmham was held by the Priory of the Holy Trinity at Norwich, which is probably why two Benedictines are found on the screen. It seems likely that originally the north or south parclose was dedicated to female saints, the rood screen to the twelve apostles and the other parclose to male saints, including the two Benedictine figures.

The antiquarian Carthew, writing in 1840, described a much more intact screen. He states that, at that time, the main doors of the screen were extant and depicted the four Latin doctors of the church: St Augustine, St Gregory, St Ambrose and St Jerome. He also records a now-lost inscription which read in Latin 'Pray for the souls of Robert Pynning and Margaret his wife and all the benefactors who caused this work to be painted'.

Both the stencils used on the backgrounds of the panels and the designs of the figure paintings point to this being another screen decorated by the workshop responsible for the screen at Ranworth. The superb spandrel carvings include George and the dragon and Moorish (Morris) dancers.

GATELEY ST HELEN.

TF 960 245. postcode - NR20 5EH

Key: ring 01328 829618 or 829229. Parking.

The church is approached down a charming path, with bushes on each side and, at the entrance, a model church notice-board. The tower is solidly built and the roofs, unlike so many, are low. The walls are an engaging mix of flint, brick and stone, with an unusual amount of dark conglomerate adding an extra

tone. The shields on the buttress to the left of the porch show the Thorpe arms.

The tower and nave are 15th century, the chancel a 19th century rebuild; but the doorways on both sides date from about 1300 and appear to be all that remains of an earlier building.

Inside, on the left as you enter, there is the reassuring presence of a tortoise stove. There are faint wall-paintings and benches with tracery backs and carved ends. They suggest a local preoccupation with snakes. The royal arms are of King Charles, probably 1st, as the inscription appears to associate them with the commandments, less likely in his son's reign. There is a lovely old roof and there are 17th century communion rails and other furniture in the sanctuary. On the north wall is a monument with rather fleshy angels and more than a hint of a Valentine card.

The Screen

The figures on Gateley's screen may not be particularly well-executed, but their subjects are very unusual; three of the figures were seen as saints, but never canonised. It is also rare to find the Virgin Mary on a rood screen. There are eight panels in total, four to either side of the central opening. The elongated figures stand on pedestals, emulating sculptures, and no stencil patterns have been used to decorate the red and green backgrounds to the figures.

From the north, the figures represented are: St Etheldreda, St Elizabeth, the Virgin Mary, and Puella Ridibowne. The south side figures are an archbishop (possibly St Gregory), Henry VI, a bishop (perhaps St Augustine or St Ambrose), and Sir John Schorn. Each character is named on the pedestal beneath.

Sir John Schorn was a Buckinghamshire priest and beatus (someone regarded as blessed, on the first rung of sainthood), whose most famous miracle is shown here as his saintly attribute, the conjuring of the devil out of a boot. Puella Ridibowne, like Sir John Schorn, was worshipped as a saint, but was never officially canonised. Henry VI was also never officially canonised, but is found on a number of East Anglian screens.

Unusually, the figures do not appear to have suffered from iconoclasm. Perhaps Gateley was well enough off the beaten track to miss the reformers – or maybe the screen was boxed in or repainted and survived without attack for that reason.

MAP OF THE TRAIL

Please note these maps are to be used as a guide. We suggest you use the postcode or co-ordinates on the information pages for more detailed directions



Key

Trail Route ••••••••

Church 

