

The rood or chancel screen was the visual focus of the medieval parish church, separating the sacred space of the chancel from the more public nave. In East Anglia, many richly decorated screens survive as testimony to the impressive craftsmanship of medieval painters and carpenters and also to parish pride and patronage. These screens are a unique reminder of the engagement of ordinary people with the Christian Church and of their devotional preferences, representing one of the most important means of communication before widespread literacy. As a body, existing fifteenth-century rood screen paintings form the most significant corpus of late medieval English painting. This series aims to draw attention to some of these medieval treasures and to encourage visitors to explore the beautiful churches where these screens are to be found.

Remember that these painted screens are very old and fragile. Please do not touch the painted surfaces nor lean anything against them.

Collect the complete series:



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St Peter Hungate Church
Princes Street
Norwich NR3 1AE

Opening hours:

Saturdays 10:00 – 16:00 Sundays 14:00 – 16:00

Entrance free

Written and produced by Hungate in collaboration with Sarah Cassell at the University of East Anglia as part of the 'Heaven's Gate: Medieval Rood Screens from Norfolk' exhibition. Hungate promotes the astonishing wealth of medieval art and artefacts still surviving in Norfolk. Designed by Brian Williams Korteling. Printed with support of the Barbara Whatmore Charitable Trust.

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Many of the photographs in this set of rood screen trails are taken from the book "Norfolk Rood Screens" by Paul Hurst ARPS, text by Jeremy Haselock FSA, to be published by Phillimore of London in December 2012.

HUNGATE ROOD SCREEN TRAILS: NO. 4

Houghton St Giles • Binham • Morston • Salthouse
Upper Sheringham • Beeston Regis



Hungate
www.hungate.org.uk



HOUGHTON ST GILES.

TF 924 354. postcode - NR22 6AQ

Normally open. Parking just off road

This is a simpler church than most of those around it, beautifully cared for. Although it was rebuilt in the 19th century, care was taken to use as much old material as possible, even preserving evidence of the different dates of the earlier church in the shape of the south side windows.



When the door was replaced some of the medieval furniture, with its non-repetitive pattern, was incorporated. All the poppyheads on the bench-ends are different. As elsewhere, whoever carved them was given his head and they are a delight. So too are the Laudian altar rails, designed to keep dogs out of the sanctuary.

The Screen

At Houghton St Giles, an unusual selection of saints adorns the twelve panels of the screen, which is notable for its richness and use of expensive pigments. The style of the figures indicates that the screen dates from early in the 15th century. It is also painted with patterns on the reverse.

From the north the figures are: St Emerica, St Mary Salome with St James the Great and St John the Evangelist as infants, the Virgin and Child, St Mary Cleophas with her four children (the apostles St James the Less, St Jude, St Simon and also St Joseph Barsabas), St Elizabeth with the infant St John the Baptist, St Anne teaching the Virgin to read, St Gregory, St Jerome, St Ambrose, St Augustine, St Sylvester with a female donor figure, and St Clement.

Some of the panels may not have been put back in the correct order, as the figures depicted do not always match the names written on the transom above the panels. For example, the panel showing St Anne teaching the Virgin to read was originally positioned at the furthest north.

The figures on the north side form a set known as the Holy Kinship. This purported to show the traditional family of Jesus from his maternal grandmother St Anne, which included five of

the apostles and John the Baptist. Traditionally, the north side of the church was where the women were segregated. The division of the saints here into male and female broadly supports that pattern.

It is rare for the Virgin Mary to be depicted on the dado of a rood screen. The choice of Marian iconography will have been due to the focus of many pilgrims to Walsingham on fertility and conception, invoking the support of her family as well as of the Virgin. By the 15th century Walsingham had become the most visited shrine in England. St Giles was the last resting stage for pilgrims using that route.

BINHAM PRIORY.

TF 982 399. postcode - NR21 0DQ

Normally open. Car park

The church, with its surrounding ruins, can be seen from far off, most impressively perhaps from the narrow road from Walsingham. Only the priory's nave still stands complete, but enough of the rest survives for it to be possible to visualise the plan of the whole priory, founded in 1091. Small labels and an excellent exhibition in the church explain it all.

One enters the precinct through the remains of the priory gatehouse to be faced by the celebrated west front. The two huge windows are bricked up now but the tracery above, around and below them is largely still intact. This can be dated to before 1244 and is one of the earliest (if not the earliest) examples in England of this state-of-the-art French style.

Looking at the walls, one can see that the pointed arches of the west front relate to only the three westernmost clerestory arches and then diagonally down to only the last one at ground level. Everything beyond is round-arched Norman. Clearly there was a break in building, probably between 1180 and 1240.

What surprises as one enters is the great height of what is now not an especially large parish church, comprising what was only the nave of a far bigger building. It is full of light and the prevailing tone of the furnishings is of the limed wood of the benches and the unexplained timbers in the arch above the sedilia to the right of the altar.

There is a Seven Sacraments font, with the Trinity in the eighth space and figures of saints below. The benches have poppyheads of great variety, a few remaining figures and open backs. There is decorative Norman carving everywhere and more delicate Early English work around the south-east corner.



The Screen

The church at Binham was a Benedictine priory and was dissolved during the Reformation. The screen is now positioned at the side of the church, and only the south side of the original dado remains, as well as a single panel of Christ as the Man of Sorrows on the wall nearby. What is particularly rare and fascinating about the surviving part of the screen is that it is a palimpsest: some of the original figures of saints can be seen through Biblical texts added at the Reformation. Careful reading of the Black Letter texts indicates that they come from the Great Bible of 1539 and are taken from the epistles of St Peter and St Paul. These texts were added within about fifty years of the screen itself being built, as other screens painted by the same set of artists are known to date from around 1485-1500.

Although it is difficult to make out some of the figures beneath the Biblical text, they are very distinctively painted and are from the painting workshop also seen at Foulden, Cawston, Elsing, Foxley and Sparham. There is considerable debate over which saints are represented, although some are clearly recognisable from their attributes. On the first panel St Michael, St Catherine, St George and St Margaret can be seen. On the second panel, King Henry VI is the first figure. Although never sanctified, Henry VI had a significant cult following. The other three figures on this panel are hard to make out. The first is a female saint wearing a crown, but the other two cannot readily be identified. On the third panel, St Christopher, St Barbara (probable), St Walstan and St Helena (probable) are found. The fourth panel again depicts male and female saints in turn and begins with a female saint. She is followed by St Alban, then another female saint, and finally St Sebastian.

These palimpsest images are the perfect illustration of the complex changes in the practice of Christianity during the Reformation.

MORSTON ALL SAINTS.

TG 008 438. postcode - NR25 7AA

Normally open. Parking east of church.

The church stands on a high mound where the road takes two right-angle turns – perhaps the sign of a very early site and a superb setting. Part of the tower fell in 1743 and William Morris would have approved of the “honesty” of the red brick repairs. Few of the windows are alike, showing most styles from the 12th to the 14th centuries. This is one of the fine series of churches standing along Norfolk’s north shore and flints from the beach are to be seen everywhere: the houses around, the rather elegant walls giving access from the west, whole round flints surrounding the graves. In contrast is the big table tomb by the door with its weeping ladies on the side panels. The garden of remembrance is planted with sweet-smelling lavender.

One goes in to a breath-taking white interior. The 13th century arcade has round columns with some carved faces that are well worth discovery. The font is later, with symbols of the evangelists and seated saints on the bowl and very narrow steps up to it. Above the chancel arch are an 1823 royal arms and a long undecipherable text. In the chancel itself, good stall fronts, altar and altar rail, typical of the unusually high standard of all the furnishings here, including the modern candelabra.

Free of clutter, evidently cared for, containing something of every, or almost every, one of its eight centuries, this is a place for private prayer or meditation like few others.

The Screen

While the upper part of the screen has been destroyed, both the carving and the painting on the dado of Morston’s 16th century rood screen are of real interest.

As the screen is designed to have only eight panels, two traditional sets of four saints are depicted, on typically alternating backgrounds of red and green. The four Evangelists are on the north side of the screen and the four Latin Doctors of the Church are present on the south side. The figures are in turn: St John the Evangelist, St Matthew, St Luke, St Mark, St Gregory, St Jerome, St Ambrose, and St Augustine. Some of the faces of the figures have been scratched, either during the Reformation or in the English Civil war.



While the painted figures are somewhat rustic in character (St John's eagle, for example, looks more like a pigeon), the carving of the spandrels is of very high quality.

Particularly lovely is the carving of the angel above the panel of St Luke. In the spandrel above St Ambrose, there is a man with a sword, and over St Matthew, Christ is depicted showing his wounds, and handing a key on a ribbon to St Peter. These carvings have been subjected to iconoclasm too, but retain a lot of their original paint and lively carved detail.

SALTHOUSE ST NICHOLAS.

TG 076 436. postcode - NR25 7XH

Normally open. Parking.

There are many pictures of the church taken from the hill above, standing out against the marsh and the often threatening sea beyond. It is a beacon and must have been valued as such when Salthouse was a port.

The tower is the oldest part of the building. The rest was rebuilt by Sir Henry Heydon and completed in 1503. The nave windows are unusually tall and thin. This, together with the hall-like interior (with only a short chancel beyond), makes one wonder if some ideas for the style were imported from across the North Sea.

There is a great sense of space inside, making the church a good venue for art exhibitions. The fine arcades lead the eye up to old roofs with carved panels all along the wallplates. Underfoot is a floor made up of a patchwork of pammets and bricks and near the chancel, well-worn encaustic tiles. The font has large well-fed lions round its stem. Sentiment and economy have led to the re-use of old furnishings, for instance behind the choir stalls.

Down below are a welcoming café and pub, with the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's bird-watchers centre a short distance to the west.

The Screens

Finding the surviving parts of the screens at Salthouse is like following a treasure trail. Here, there were once three screens, or rather one large one, crossing the nave and aisles. Parts survive, scattered throughout the church and all have been cut down to the transom.

Eight panels depicting sixteen figures are now positioned at the end of the nave. A section of the screen containing four other figures is in the south aisle. An inscription on the transom there reveals the date of the screens – 1513. Another section is behind the pulpit and further portions are built into the choir stalls. Portrayed on the screen are a mixture of apostles and prophets, carrying scrolls bearing either the apostles' creed or abbreviated quotations from the books of the relevant prophets. At times, the abbreviations are difficult to make out, which means that not all the figures can be identified with certainty, particularly as they are now out of their original order.

The first sixteen figures from north to south are: St Matthew, a prophet, a prophet, St Thomas, a prophet, St John the Evangelist, a prophet, St Peter (probable), St Andrew, a prophet, St James the Great, prophet, St James the Less, prophet, St Jude or Simon, and a prophet. On the screen now located in the south aisle, the figures are; St Matthias, Zephaniah, St Jude (he is labelled as Thaddeus), and Daniel. It is unusual that St Jude seems to appear twice on the screen. It is possible that St Simon is depicted holding the boat, rather than Jude.

On part of the screen now located in the choir stalls, a churchgoer has scratched a tall ship into the paintwork, probably during the 18th or 19th century.

UPPER SHERINGHAM ALL SAINTS.

TG 145 418. postcode - NR26 8AE

Normally open. Parking.

A mile away from Sheringham itself and definitely upper, in a quieter environment and close to an entrance to Sheringham Park, the church is in the centre of its community.

The tower is c.1300, the rest later with a much more recent south porch, all rather firmly restored in the 19th century. The font has columns and nicely carved tracery. The rear sections of the nave pews are cut back so that the family and godparents can comfortably gather round. Many of the pews have delightful carvings – a mermaid, a cat with its kitten and other beasts. The great treasure is the rood screen with its floor and stair. Not

many have survived so well. Here the reformers seem to have been satisfied with removing the figures of the crucified Christ and those attending him.

Beyond that is an 18th century communion rail and a chilly monument to Abbot (a name not a title) Upcher who commissioned Humphrey Repton to landscape Sheringham Park but did not live to see the work done. The Upcher mausoleum is north of the chancel. Another Upcher is remembered in a window, unusually incorporating a photograph. On the north wall of the nave is a modest monument to Cecil Upcher, who did so much to care for and beautify Norfolk churches.

The Screen

All Saints, Upper Sheringham is one of only a handful of East Anglian churches to retain its medieval rood loft, as most were removed in the Reformation. The large parapet spans an area wider than that of the screen and its underside is vaulted. This loft would once have provided access to the Crucifix or rood above via the turret stair to the north side. It was customary in the medieval period to burn candles before the rood, and it is also known that on Good Friday, a priest would sing the Passion from the loft.

Both the screen and the rood loft at Upper Sheringham now appear dark brown in colour. However, there are traces of the original pigments, especially on the loft structure. In keeping with the traditional colour scheme of medieval screens, red, green, white and gold can be seen.

It is possible that the panels on the dado of the screen once held the figures of saints, although many such dados were painted with decorative or floral designs. The panels have, however, been stripped of their paint. A many-legged monster with a heron or crane's head and a dragon can be found in the spandrels at the front of the rood loft.

BEESTON REGIS ALL SAINTS.

TG 174 432. postcode - NR27 9QT

Normally open.

Go in by the Beeston Regis Holiday Camp sign and under the railway to the car park.

The church presides over the holiday camp as many a medieval church on a hill presides over more substantial dwellings. The sea is just beyond and those who built the tower without stone quoins must have known that sea air damages flint much less than all but the best stone.

There are old poppyheads on the benches in the aisles. Look for the carved heads on each side of the chancel arch and in the south aisle. Surely they must give clues to contemporary fashionable hairstyles. The roofs are fine with panels along the wallplates. Note the Laudian altar rail and, to its right, the sedilia and piscina with, most unusually, a window behind them. From outside this looks like an insertion, perhaps rescued from the ruined priory nearly next door.

The embroidered hassocks have had their colours controlled and they sit where they are used, on the pew floors. Here they can be admired without distracting the eye from the other delights to be found in a church. Here too, the children's corner is nicely furnished and located so that the children can be part of the action if they want. Everything in this well cared for church is in its proper place.

The Screen

Beeston Regis boasts an attractive and well-preserved apostle screen with lovely spandrel carvings over ogee arches. The carvings include ivy leaves, roses, hops, eagles and dragons. The upper part of the screen has been restored.



The north side figures are: St Simon, St Paul, St James the Less, St James the Great and St Andrew. Although the saw shown here is a known attribute for St Simon, on Norfolk screens he is more often shown carrying a fish. This choice of attribute might suggest an awareness of printed depictions of saints from the Low Countries where this device was more common.

The south side figures are: St Peter, St John the Evangelist, St Bartholomew, St Matthias, St Philip and St Thomas. It is unusual for figures to be depicted side on, as St Thomas is here. The saint is depicted in the same way on the screen at Walpole St Peter, which shares other similarities, such as the use of stencils, and seems to have been decorated by the same painting workshop.

A Thomas Rook bequeathed £4 to the making of the rood at Beeston Regis in 1519 and it is highly likely that the screen is of a similar date.

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 

