

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. 6

Irstead • Barton Turf • Catfield • Ludham
Potter Heigham



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IRSTEAD ST MICHAEL.

TG 365 205. postcode - NR12 8XS

Normally open.

Navigating one's way here is not easy but hugely worth it. The church is separated only by reeds and a car park from the river, with its boats and swans. Around it tall oaks protect its thatched roof from some of the weather.

The tower is copybook East Anglian, unbuttressed flint, pleasant tracery, tall wooden louvres. The porch also is a model, two low storeys, so it is no surprise to find there is no longer a floor for the upper room. The door is old and it is worth pausing to admire its ironwork. The notice-boards in the porch and inside are also a model of informative tidiness.

The church is largely 14th century, with an aisle added in the 15th, but both doorways contain stones with chevron decoration from a previous building. The font has delicate slim and unusual carvings, one of the Magdalen, with her long hair and pot of ointment. The pews are early 16th century, a couple of them with well-caressed dogs on the bench-ends. An even older bench-end, said to come from St Benet's Abbey, acts as a handrail up to the pulpit. The backs of the chancel stalls have been carved in a delightful rustic way, dated 1663. There is some medieval glass in the tracery and the remains of wall-paintings on the north wall.

With so many little details to discover in a small place, Instead is a joy.

The Screen

Only the dado panels of this 14th century decorated style screen survive. The four large lower panels have three figures painted on each, which together represent the twelve apostles. Unusually, the backgrounds of the panels are painted in a pale creamy ochre colour and are decorated with trails of leaves and flowers, rather than the typical red and green alternating backgrounds usually found on screens.

The apostles carry their typical traditional attributes and from the north side to the south they can be recognised as: St James the Less (fuller's club), St Thomas (spear), St James the Great (cockle shell, pilgrim's hat and staff), St John the Evangelist (dragon and chalice), St Andrew (saltire cross), St Peter (keys), St Philip (basket of loaves), St Bartholomew (knife), St Matthias (halberd), St Jude (boat), St Simon (fish), and St Matthew (carpenter's square).

If you look closely at the paintings on the screen, you can see that there are the remnants of more than one medieval painted scheme here. Under the figures of St Philip and St Bartholomew, a woven garland-like shape can be made out. This earlier version of decoration appears to show a crown of thorns, as streams of red blood are also associated with the design.

BARTON TURF ST MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS.

TG 344 218. postcode - NR12 8YU

Normally open. Car park

The church stands proud, almost alone and nearly a mile from the village. Its grandeur is enhanced by the avenue of tall trees which leads to the porch. The two-storey porch has tall flushwork panels and many of the handsome Perpendicular windows seem to pick up these tall thin proportions. There is more flushwork at low level on the buttresses and on the tower's battlements. Its west door is old with some remains of its original tracery.

Going inside, the porch is vaulted, a rarity, with carvings where the ribs interlace. On the right, after entering the church, is a rustic door leading to the parvise room above the porch, rather a contrast to the sophisticated quality of the furnishings in general. The whole feel of the broad spaces is wonderfully serene, with an almost classical sense of proportion a worthy setting for the superb screen. There are simple pammets on the



floor, an unelaborate font, a polite pulpit on its stem and late medieval poppyheads on some of the benches. The south aisle appears almost to flow into the south chancel chapel, barely interrupted by the arch and the crenellated organ. At the end is a monument to the antiquary, Anthony Norris. Carved into the columns there are many medieval graffiti, including masons' diagrams. In what was the south porch, there is a well-designed lavatory.

The Screens

Barton Turf's rood screen is among the very finest in terms of its painting. The church also possesses a more rustic parclose screen in the south aisle, painted with the figures of kings.

Within the twelve compartments of the rood screen dado are the nine orders or hierarchy of angels, as well as three female saints. The hierarchy of angels was well established in the late medieval period, the most influential early source being the 4th or 5th century Celestial Hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. The angels here are not in the conventional order, listed, among others, by St Thomas Aquinas. Instead, they have been reordered to suit the hierarchy of the screen, with the most important figures, the seraphim and cherubim, framing the door, high over which the rood once hung.



From north to south the figures depicted are: St Apollonia, St Sitha, Potentates, Virtues, Dominations, Seraphim, Cherubim, Principalities, Thrones, Archangels, Angels and St Barbara.

The south aisle parclose screen, which has been cut down, depicts a sequence of kings. From the north side to the south, they are: King Henry VI, King Edmund, St Edward the Confessor and St Olaf. St Olaf, or Holofius as he is also known, holds loaves of bread, a pun or rebus on his name.

The paintings on the rood screen bear close comparison with parts of a screen and possible altarpiece originally from St Michael at Plea in Norwich, now in Norwich Cathedral.

CATFIELD ALL SAINTS.

TG 382 214. postcode - NR29 5DA

Normally open.

Catfield is a substantial village close to the A149 but its church suffers from being some way to the east with only the school and a few houses around. Four roads lead to it and the tower, as its builders intended, is tall enough to guide one.

This geographical separation has not stopped a very small group of supporters from raising the funds needed to make this large structure sound. It is a huge achievement, one of the best of many such in Norfolk.

Largely 14th century, with some of the later additions perhaps copying the earlier work, it is a broad and light church. The easternmost nave aisle windows reveal that the screen originally extended across the whole nave, one bay west of where it now is. Traces of a stair up to the rood can be seen on both sides. Much of the decorative detail is charming, almost fanciful, as if the carvers felt more free to have fun in this remote place. Above the nave arcade, on both sides, there are late 14th century wall-paintings that are no longer easy to read but which are due to be rescued from further decay. The royal arms commemorate Victoria I – does the 'I' record a failed over-painting of a previous monarch's name or are we to expect as many Victorias as there have been Edwards and Henrys? Beside the pulpit is an hour glass, rarely needed nowadays.

The Screen

The upper tracery of the screen has been removed, but the dado panels survive and depict the figures of sixteen kings. Kings were often found on the medieval screens of greater churches such as priories and cathedrals, and it is probable that



the choice of kings on Catfield's screen reflects that earlier tradition. In fact, the design of the screen and its painting are both early in terms of figurative screens, dating from c.1420-40. The costumes and the crowns of the kings are deliberately archaic.

This deliberate archaism and the lack of halos indicate that the screen depicts

early English kings, of which some only are saints. King Edmund, the East Anglian martyr, is the one figure that can be identified with any certainty, although it seems likely that the figure in the 8th compartment (from north to south) is King Edward the Confessor as he appears to be holding his emblem, a ring.

King Edmund can be seen in the 9th compartment holding the arrow with which he was martyred. The other kings range in age and attributes, and their costumes are delightfully picked out in contrasting colours.

LUDHAM ST CATHERINE.

TG 387 184. postcode - NR29 5AB
Normally open.

Bishops of Norwich were and still are, despite the Reformation, Abbots of St Benet's, on the banks of the Bure, nearly two miles south of the village. For many years they had a residence in Ludham. It was, no doubt, episcopal interest in the church that led to the high quality of so much of the stonework and other fittings – and to having to adapt the tympanum rapidly to the changing situations in the middle of the 16th century.

The tower and chancel are 14th century, the nave and splendid porches from the 15th, including the hammer-beam roof with St Catherine's symbol, a wheel, carved in the spandrels. Subsequent restorations have largely been kind. There are excellent carvings around the piscina and sedilia in the chancel and on the 15th century font. Even the 17th century Ten Commandments on a board on the north side of the chancel are of superior quality. Below it and on the opposite side are

stalls in which small medieval carvings have been incorporated. In the churchyard there is an unusual monument in the form of a pillar designed by the architect C.F.A. Voysey.

St Catherine's is also one of the nodal points of the Open Churches initiative, which is doing so much to make the county's churches accessible and comprehensible.

The Screen

Ludham boasts one of the more complete rood screens in East Anglia, having both an elaborately carved and painted screen and a chancel arch tympanum. The donors, who paid for at least some of the screen, John and Cicely Salmon, are named in an inscription on its transom, which also bears the date 1493. Their brasses can also be seen, set into tomb slabs, in front of the screen. The Salmons contributed £14, a considerable sum.

The painted tympanum, now reinstated to the chancel arch, was discovered in the rood stair in what must have been a particularly satisfying Norfolk Archaeological Society outing in 1879. On its reverse is an Elizabeth I royal arms, painted on canvas. This once covered the wooden tympanum. A look at the painted tympanum suggests that it is the original medieval one,



reinstated and altered in the time of Mary I. Originally the blank space left for the Crucifix (rood) was covered with a sculpted Christ. This was taken down, probably in the reign of Edward VI. When the tympanum was put back, at the time of Mary I, a painted Christ was put onto the blank Crucifix. Records from the period show that this was a fairly common circumstance; it was easier to replace a destroyed sculpted Crucifix with a painted version. When Elizabeth I came to the throne, the Marian rood was covered with the canvas Royal Arms we now see on the reverse.

The carpentry of the screen is outstanding, with an attractive transom and intricate carved buttresses. The painting too is of great interest, both thematically and stylistically. The saints match in mirrored thematic pairs either side of the central door; from the outside they are: intercessory female saints, male martyrs, local East Anglian saints, English kings and the Latin doctors of the church. The north side consists of: St Mary Magdalene, St Stephen, St Edmund, King Henry VI, St Augustine and St Ambrose. Depicted on the south side are St Gregory, St Jerome, St Edward the Confessor, St Walstan, St Lawrence and St Apollonia.

The saints were clearly executed by different artists. The first six on the north side and the last two on the south side are by one painter. The first four (from the door) on the south side are by another hand.

POTTER HEIGHAM ST NICHOLAS.

TG 419 199. postcode - NR29 5LL

Normally open in summer. Parking & key notice with telephone numbers by churchyard gate.

The church is a celebration of how well brick and flint can marry in country where they need to as there is no conventional building stone. This one first sees in the diaper pattern in the churchyard wall. The tower is tall and thin, with a fine late medieval top on round earlier lower stages. In the niche above the entrance to the porch is a not so ancient St Nicholas, more like a "woodwose" than Father Christmas.

There are fragments of stained glass in the pretty porch windows. The interior is full of light, so one can see clearly the detail of the fine roof, with its angels and hammerbeams. Above the font there is a rarity – the spindle for raising and lowering the original cover. The font itself is also unusual, made of the local brick which gave the parish its name. There are sadly faded wall-paintings. On the south wall the corporal acts

of mercy – visiting the sick and the prisoner can be distinguished. Early 17th century altar rails, some bench-ends and an old chest complete a delightful ensemble.

A huge amount of work has been done in recent years to preserve this church. At the time of writing more needs to be done, with the discovery of death watch beetle in the north aisle. None the less, there is an air of serenity here. Walking round, one sees more of the old churchyard wall to the west, with a gate to a public footpath firmly trodden through, that year, a field of barley beyond.

The Screen

At Potter Heigham, both the rood beam and rood screen survive, although the current Crucifix and its attendant figures are not original. There are eight panels in the dado of the screen, and at first it appears that two conventional sets of four saints (the four Evangelists and the four Latin Doctors of the Church) have been depicted alternately. However, in place of the Evangelist St Matthew, St Eligius (also known as St Eloy) appears on the screen. This was most likely at the behest of a donor with a particular devotion to St Eligius, perhaps on account of a profession. St Eligius was the patron saint of smiths.

The figures can be identified both through their attributes and also from the inscriptions beneath. From the north to the south they are; St Mark, St Augustine, St John the Evangelist, St Gregory, St Jerome, St Eligius, St Luke and St Ambrose. Two wills survive which record bequests towards the screen. They are dated 1494 and 1501 and it is very likely that the screen was completed just after the beginning of the 16th century. Fundraising for screens could take many years and could involve many donors.



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 

