

St Mary's

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Church of St Mary
Houghton-on-the-Hill

Introduction

Towards the end of the twentieth century the village of Houghton-on-the-Hill and its church had dwindled to one farmhouse and an ivy-clad ruin. However, thanks to funding from several government bodies, numerous charities and private donations, together with the enthusiasm and hard work of The Friends of St Mary's, the site has experienced a startling renaissance. Visitors from many parts of the world now come to see the remarkable wall paintings, to worship at the church and to appreciate its beautiful setting.

This booklet tells the story of Houghton-on-the-Hill throughout its history, drawing on what we know about the deserted village and the surrounding landscape, the church and its unique wall paintings.

We hope you enjoy your visit.

Trustees of the Friends of St Mary's Trust

For further information, please log on to www.hoh.org.uk

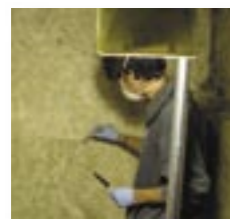
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Norfolk County Council

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St Mary's The Village

Origins

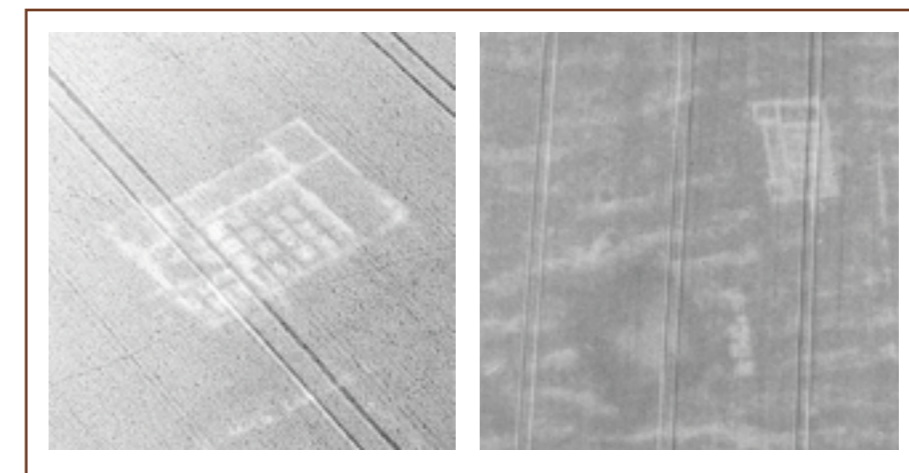
The springs at Houghton, which are situated to the west of the present church at the bottom of the hill, may have been one of the original attractions of this site for settlement. Field walking has uncovered evidence of occupation in the area over a long time span, including prehistoric flint implements and a spearhead from the Late Bronze Age (2350BC – 701 BC). **Fig 1**



Fig 1: Bronze Age spearhead found in Houghton parish
 Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service

During the Roman period (43 AD to 407 AD) a settlement here would not have felt remote for its time. The Roman road called the Peddar's Way ran just west of the present church, straight through the site of Houghton Farm, and another road ran east-west one kilometre south of the site. Aerial photography in the area has picked up the shape of a large villa and possibly a temple, in crop marks. It is thought that the building was owned by a prosperous Romano-British farmer of the late 2nd- early 3rd century. The grid of underfloor heating can be clearly seen, as well as the shape of two substantial wings of the villa, and possibly a veranda. **Figs 2 & 3**

Several Early Saxon (411 – 650) items have been found in fields near the River Wissey, which indicate that there may have been a settlement there. **Fig 4**



Figs 2 & 3: Crop marks showing the Roman villa and associated buildings
 Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service:
 Derek A. Edwards



Domesday Book

The first mention of the village on the hill is in Domesday Book of 1086. At that time Houghton was one of many manors held by Reynold, son of Ivo. A man called Herlwin held (or leased) land in Houghton from Reynold. It was at about this time that the present nave of the church was built, and either Reynold or Herlwin could have been benefactors of the new building and its paintings.

Fig 4: Saxon strapwork found near the river
 Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service: Sue White

The infamous Sir Robert Knolles

According to the 18th century historian Francis Blomefield, the manor here was leased to Sir Robert Knolles in 1376 (died 1407). He was an infamous military commander during the Hundred Years War who led a company of mercenaries in support of Edward the Black Prince in Spain. Afterwards he went on to plunder France, ravaging Normandy and the Loire. Back in England, in 1381, he also helped defeat the Peasants Revolt. His principal seat was at Sculthorpe in north Norfolk, and he spent money on restoring the church there and at Harpley, near Swaffham. It is therefore conceivable that it was Knolles who oversaw the major alterations to the church during the 14th century.



Fig 5: Aerial view of the deserted village showing the hollow way to the right of the church.

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The medieval village

The village lay on the valley slopes to the north of the church, overlooking the Wissey, but seems to have shrunk during the late middle ages. Surviving earthworks consist of a hollow way, which would have been the main street in the village, running north from the church. To the left (west) of the track are ditched or scarped enclosures - raised platforms or *tofts* on which houses were built and enclosed. **Fig 5**

In 1334 the village's contribution to the Lay Subsidies (a central government tax on possessions), was one of the lowest in the local administrative area or *hundred*, indicating that the village was small. It was not granted a reduction in contributions immediately after the Black Death (1348-49), when many villages had lost such a high proportion of their population they could no longer pay the tax. But the village was allowed a reduction of 26% in 1449. This

suggests that in the century after the Black Death the village population suffered a major reduction from which it never recovered. In 1524-25 contributions were still low.

The eighteenth century historian, Blomefield, writes of a Guild of St Mary existing here in 1497; and a guildhall croft is mentioned in a manorial court document of 1630. Guilds, similar to freemason societies, were established by local people to raise money, pray and say masses for their own members in time of need, but also for charitable works such as repairs to the church. The guild would have had a chapel in the nave, perhaps with an altar in one of the niches, and would have held special celebrations on the patron saint's day.

The shrinking village

By 1603 the rector reported only fifteen communicants, that is, adults who took communion. In 1676 this had risen slightly to eighteen. In 1664 the hearth tax recorded seven individuals charged for fourteen hearths, seven of them in one household - presumably Houghton Farm, the only substantial dwelling in the village.

A 'fyshpitt' is recorded which was also identified on the 1839 tithe map as one of the ponds north-west of the church, on the other side of the lane. A watermill, mentioned in 1684, may have been situated near the field named 'Mill Close' on the tithe map of 1839 - a site west of the farm, down by the river.

By the 18th century only a pair of cottages remained by the church, which Blomefield described as 'a cottage or two' on his visit. The tiny hamlet seems to have migrated from the spot north of the church, along the green lane, to form a small cluster of cottages on the edge of Houghton common. This may have occurred during the late medieval period when many villages drifted from their original sites to re-form around commons where livestock could be grazed. The cottages by the church survived until the 1990s by which time they had become derelict, and were demolished. **Fig 6**



Fig 6: Cottages near the church, demolished in the 1990s

The tithe map of 1839 records that there were four landowners in the parish at that time. One was the lord of the manor, Lord Ashburton. William Lyde Wigget owned Houghton Farm and land around the church. He also 'occupied' a number of plantations in the parish, which he presumably held for shooting. The other two landowners were the owner of the cottages by the church; and the rector, Henry Say, who owned a substantial barn in the enclosure immediately to the east of the church, now gone. Around half a dozen further cottages still stood at the end of the common. These few dwelling places housed what William White's *Directory of Norfolk* describes in 1845 as 'a small parish containing only forty-one souls' - which presumably included children.

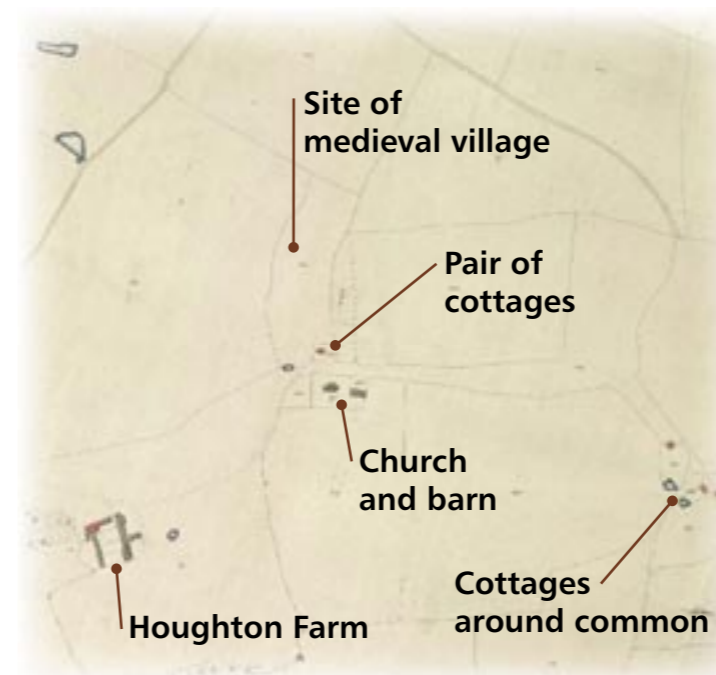


Fig 7: Tithe map of 1839 showing the cluster of cottages on the common, to the east of the church

The adjacent village, North Pickenham, was much larger and, in the late 19th century, had a number of shops and services as well as the Blue Lion pub. This is where the inhabitants of Houghton would have shopped and socialized.

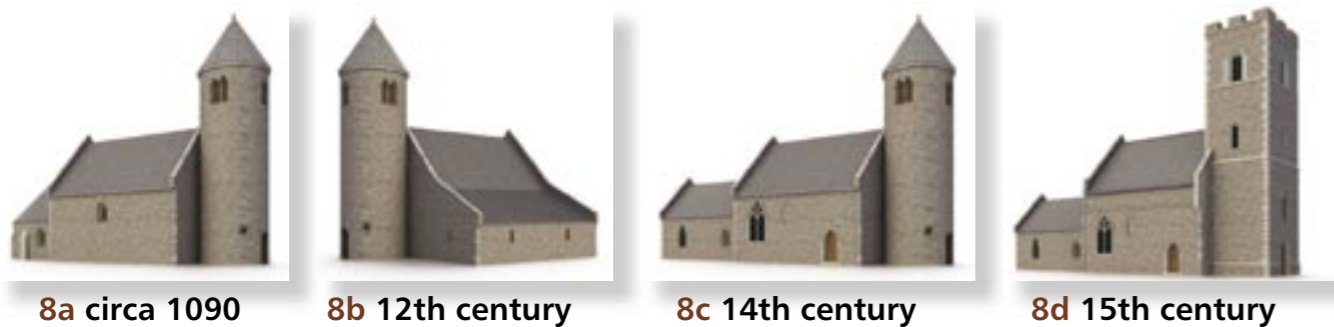
For example, a woman called Eliza Burton of North Pickenham married Robert Tooke from Houghton-on-the-Hill on 23 April 1829. Robert Tooke, his wife, and four children decided to leave this tiny backwater in 1838 and made a new life in Ontario, Canada, where Robert's death was recorded in 1869. This kind of emigration may be a clue to the further decline of the village throughout the next century. **Fig 7**

St Mary's

The Church

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Fig 8: The changing shape of the church



The church of St Mary has been a place of worship for over 900 years. During this time the building has often been altered, extended, reduced and re-decorated according to the needs and practices of changing times. **Fig 8**

The Nave

The nave is the earliest part of the surviving church. The architectural features found here which are commonly held to indicate an early date are:

Long and short work: This is where lengths of cut stone were used to form corners in a pattern of long thin sections set vertically interspersed with short horizontal pieces. **Fig 10**



Fig 10: Long and short work and Roman brick, 'a' on plan

Double-splayed windows: In these windows the frame, forming a small opening, is positioned in the centre of the thickness of the wall. Splays in the fabric around this frame, both inside and out, direct light into the building. **Fig 11** The blocked double-splayed window in the north wall at Houghton still retains its original timber frame – a very rare survival. The two windows, high up on either side of the nave were the only source of natural light when the nave was built.

Re-used Roman brick: Roman brick looks like thick clay tiles. They were salvaged from the ruins of Roman buildings. There is evidence of a Roman villa near by which could have been the source for the bricks used here (see page 3). **Fig 10**

Narrow, semi-circular-headed chancel arch: round-headed opening cut straight through the wall thickness. (**'c' on plan**)



Fig 11: Double-splayed window, 'b' on plan

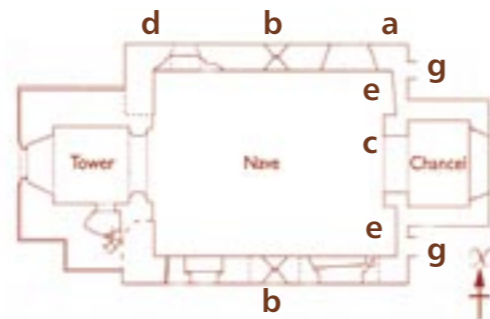


Fig 9: Plan of the church

Saxon or Norman?

There is disagreement over the dating of these features where they are found in East Anglian buildings. Some architectural historians believe that they indicate a Saxon date¹. However, in East Anglia the Anglo-Saxon tradition was to build with timber due to the lack of good building stone. For example, the most important buildings in this area prior to 1066 – the abbey at Bury St Edmunds, and North Elmham cathedral in Norfolk – were both timber-framed. It is generally agreed that the Normans brought with them a tradition of building in stone and began a huge programme of construction after the Conquest².

If this is so, then no flint church in Norfolk pre-dates 1066. The use of Anglo-Saxon techniques in these stone buildings simply indicates that Saxon masons were brought in from other areas to work for their new Norman masters. That this overlap existed is proven by the use of Anglo-Saxon techniques alongside universally-accepted Norman features. **Fig 12**

The undeveloped simplicity of the nave's double-splayed windows and plain chancel arch at Houghton suggests that it was built no later than 1100. The mid-12th century north doorway - with its tiny external shaft supporting a miniature Romanesque cushion capital - is inserted into the original nave wall, which must therefore be earlier. (**'d' on plan**)

The former south aisle

At around the same time as the north door was inserted, in the mid-12th century, a south aisle was added (now demolished). **Fig 8b** Creating the openings into the aisle from the nave destroyed much of the original wall paintings on the south wall. The shapes of the two semi-circular headed archways through the wall to the aisle can still be seen on the outside. It is even possible to see traces of the original plaster underneath the arches. Archaeological excavation in this area found the stub of foundations for a tomb. Local legend has it that this was the tomb of Robert de Nevile, who became lord of the manor in 1270 through marriage.



Fig 13: Example of niche altar at Hauxton in Cambridgeshire

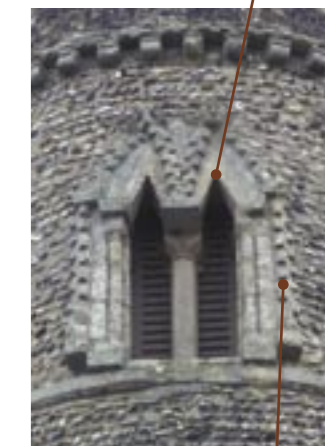
Death of de Nevile

Blomefield reported that de Nevile was 'inhumanly put to death for his criminal conversation with a lady at Craven in Yorkshire' around 1280. In other words, he had an affair with a married woman – which was punishable by death. De Nevile's wife, Mary, lived a further forty years and established a chantry chapel here in 1304. Two priests were appointed and would have prayed for the souls of her and her family in order to shorten their time in purgatory.

This chantry chapel, and the Guild's chapel (see page 4) may have had altars in the niches in the east nave wall. (**'e' on plan**) Altars in this position were common, although niches created for them in the thickness of the wall are found less often. **Fig 13**

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Fig 12: Bell opening at Haddiscoe Church: Triangular-headed openings (Anglo-Saxon)



Biliet moulding (Norman)



Fig 14: Semi-circular chancel at Hales near Loddon, Norfolk. The original chancel at Houghton-on-the-Hill may have looked like this

14th century changes

Excavations have located the position of the south wall of the aisle indicating that the extension was rather narrow and had no foundations. This, together with the crudely cut archways, suggests the building was poorly built. It was demolished, probably in the 14th century, when the population was shrinking. A new south door was provided and, at around the same time, a large window in the Decorated style was inserted at the east end of the north nave wall – possibly to light the Guild’s altar in the nave. The nave walls were also heightened – the evidence for which can be seen from the outside.

19th century

At some point prior to 1830 the double-splayed windows in the north and south walls were blocked. Bryant, writing in 1903, notes that they were only partially re-opened in 1889. He also recorded that further restoration and re-roofing was undertaken in 1895.

The Chancel

The original Romanesque chancel was constructed at the same time as the nave. **Fig 8a** It is likely that the chancel had a semi-circular or *apsidal* east end as was usual in the 11th century. **Fig 14**

This is how Blomefield described the building in the 18th century:

At the east end of the nave is the chancel, separated by a gate or wall, near a yard thick, through which is an arch about twelve feet high and six in breadth, which leads into the chancel; which seems much more antique than the body and the tower; it is in length about twenty-six feet, and of equal breadth with the body.

11th century chancels were seldom so long. It is more likely that the original chancel was extended during the 14th century, when alterations were also undertaken in other parts of the church. **Fig 8c** Ladbroke’s drawing of circa 1830 shows the double-splayed openings blocked and there is a suggestion that the external walls of the nave were rendered, which could have hidden their age, and led to Blomefield’s mistake. **Fig 15**



Fig 15: St Mary’s church drawn by Ladbroke 1830

License to demolish

The only surviving evidence of the original chancel is external stubs of wall either side of the existing chancel. (**'g' on plan**) The present chancel was built in the 18th century. When granting permission to demolish the earlier building in 1760 the church authorities stated:

That the chancel of the parish church of Houghton-on-the-Hill is in so ruinous a condition as to render it necessary to have the same taken down and rebuilt. That the said chancel now contains twenty eight feet in length which makes it larger than necessary for the said parish which is very small and consists of but few inhabitants, there being only two farms in the said parish and those at present leased to one person insomuch that the congregation in the said church seldom exceeds to number eight or ten persons. Therefore you must humbly pray our license and faculty to take down the said chancel and to rebuild the same twenty feet in width and five yards in length only in good and substantial manner.

In fact the new chancel was much smaller than the one proposed – only nine feet long and thirteen feet wide. **Fig 15**

Tower

The present tower was built in the 15th century. The use of brick indicates this date, as do the four centred arches over the bell openings. During repairs to the floor evidence of the foundations of a round tower were temporarily uncovered. This round tower was probably contemporary with the 11th century nave. **Fig 8a**

There was one bell in Blomefield's time. Bryant, writing in 1903, states that the tower west window was inserted during restoration works in 1857, when the bell was also re-cast. The bell now stands on the floor in the tower chapel. It has 1611 inscribed on one side and *C & G Mears Founders London Recast 1857* on the other.

Rectors

In 1474 the rector was John of the order of Carmelites, who Blomefield thought was John Barber, recorded as dying in 1498, leaving a legacy to the church.

Robert Say was rector in the parish for a large part of the 18th century. He was here when the rector's position at Houghton-on-the-Hill and North Pickenham was combined with Beachamwell in 1740. It was he who oversaw the demolition of the chancel after permission was granted in 1760, and perhaps it was he who instructed the builders to ignore the license to build in 'good and substantial manner' and instead sanctioned the tiny chancel we see today. A grave slab in the chancel marks his burial there in 1784. Unfortunately, this slab was broken, his grave dug up and his bones stolen after the church had been abandoned in the late 20th century.

There is no above-ground evidence of a rectory near the church, although it is likely that the platform on the eastern side of the hollow way is where it was located (see page 5). It is possible that the lone pair of cottages, which survived in this spot until the late 20th century, were converted from an 18th century building. However, the 19th century rectors, Henry Say, (presumably a relative of the earlier rector), and William Ewing, both lived at North Pickenham.



Fig 16: St Mary's church in the 1990s

Abandonment

During the early 20th century, the church was used less and less with only a tiny population to sustain it. In 1916 it was damaged when a First World War zeppelin ditched its bombs in the churchyard.

The last baptism was in 1933, and the last wedding in 1925 when a Miss Anderson became Mrs Colwell. She was a servant at Houghton Farm where her father was

under-shepherd. She remembered that her father lived in a hut in the fields close to the sheep at lambing time. Every Sunday, her mother took the children to Sunday school at the church and slipped over the fields to see her husband.

Summer services were still occasionally held, with music provided by a harmonium taken up to the church each April by horse and cart, and taken back down again in October. The church was finally abandoned in 1937, and in 1953 the local paper reported that:

Holes in the roof and the windows let in the rain and the wind, ivy and brambles surge over the walls and unhampered through the windows. Plaster is crumbling from the walls to form a damp and dirty carpet.

Restoration

By the early 1990s the roofs of the nave and chancel were in ruins, and the whole church was shrouded in ivy. **Fig 16** Then two events occurred which transformed the fortunes of the church. Bob and Gloria Davey moved to the village and became committed to saving the abandoned ruin after finding evidence of Satan worship at the isolated spot. At around the same time the County Council began a programme of repairs to ruined churches in the county and included St Mary's on its list. The initial repairs to re-roof the building and make it safe were funded by Norfolk County Council, English Heritage and Breckland Council. **Fig 17** It was during these repairs that the wall paintings were partially uncovered and their importance first realised (see chapter 3). A Steering Group with representatives from English Heritage, the County Council, the Council for the Care of Churches, and the Friends of St Mary's was formed to oversee works to the church and conservation of the paintings, assisted by wall painting experts from the Courtauld Institute of Art.

Between 1996 – 2006 The Friends of St Mary's raised funds for all the windows to be replaced, based on photographic evidence and surviving stubs of tracery. This work, as well as other repairs to the floor and tower, has enabled the church to become a living building again.

In 2006 a substantial Heritage Lottery Fund grant enabled the Friends to arrange for the wall paintings to be conserved for posterity.



Fig 17: Repairs to the roofs under Norfolk County Council's Ruined Churches Repair programme in the 1990s

St Mary's

The Wall Paintings

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'The most important discovery of Romanesque wall painting in England for twenty years...'³

Traces of surviving wall painting at the church were noted in the list description of 1987. During initial repairs to the church in 1996 further traces of paintings on the east wall emerged and their potential significance was realised. Remarkably, despite being exposed to the elements for over fifty years, large areas of 11th century wall paintings were found to have survived.

Romanesque painting (circa 1000 – 1170) is rare across Europe. Much of the importance of the paintings at St Mary's stems from their very early date. The image, which helped to date the paintings from the outset, was the quatrefoil cross on God's knee – an Anglo-Saxon motif which occurs in a number of manuscripts of the 11th century. **Fig 18** The latest known date of its use in a painting is circa 1120. This, together with the architecture of the church, indicates a date of circa 1090 for the paintings here.



Fig 18:
Quatrefoil cross
on God's knee

Telling the Christian story

Wall paintings were used throughout the medieval period to illustrate Christian themes, at a time when very few people had access to the Bible, and most people could not read. They were designed to strike awe in the hearts of the congregation.

In the 11th century the interior would have looked very different. All the walls were painted, in a scheme designed around the architecture of the building, incorporating the windows, doors and chancel arch. Within this single artwork, stories from the old and new testaments and other allegorical material were brought together to proclaim the Christian message.

Colours

The wall paintings would have been richly coloured. During conservation, traces of lime white, vermillion, red lead and green earth were found. The red and yellow colours we see today were the 'setting out' paintings over which further detail and colour were applied.

With only two high windows in the north and south walls the nave was dark and cut off from the outside world. Numerous candles would have been used to illuminate the bright colours of the paintings.

Guide to the paintings

The layout and images used in the paintings at Houghton make them unique. However, in the late 11th century the content was probably not uncommon, but was either based on an existing scheme at another church, or perhaps copied from a manuscript which the patron commissioning the paintings had access to.⁴

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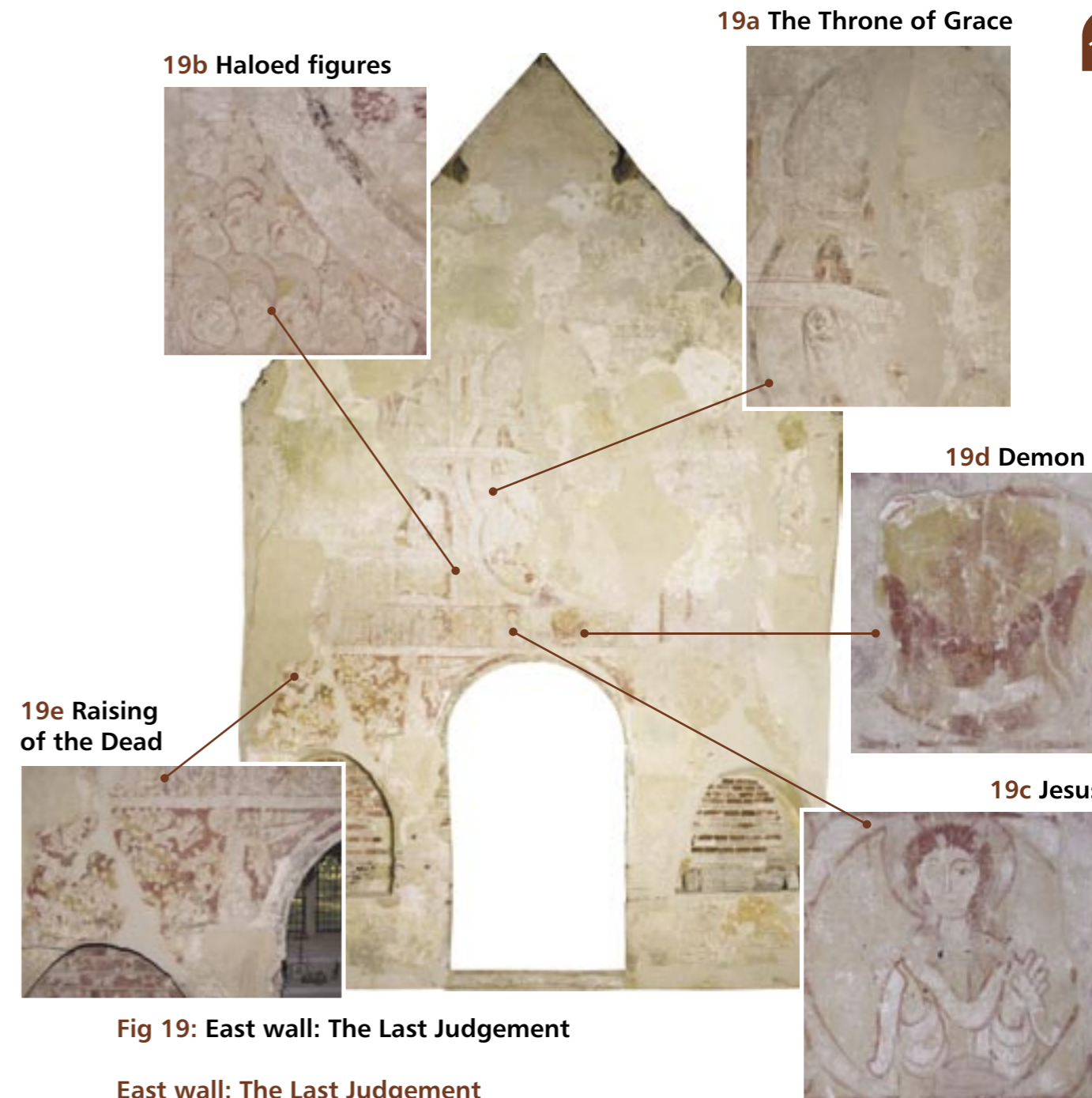


Fig 19: East wall: The Last Judgement

East wall: The Last Judgement

As the congregation entered the church, the main focus would have been the east wall, which illustrates the Last Judgement. In the centre, over the chancel arch, is a representation of the Trinity (God, Christ and the Holy Ghost) set within a triple mandorla. **Fig 19a** Though much of this image has been lost, it is still possible to discern God seated on a throne; he supports Jesus on the Cross in front of him; and to the left of his halo the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, flies with wings outstretched.

This way of representing the Trinity is known as the Throne of Grace or *Gnadenstuhl*. Previously, the earliest known examples of the Throne of Grace appeared in two French manuscripts: one from the first quarter of the 12th century and the other from 1125. Houghton, dating to around 1090, is therefore the earliest known example of the Trinity in this form. Because St Mary's has always been a small and isolated church, the use of

the Throne of Grace here suggests that the image must have appeared in other churches much more widely than previously thought, and considerably earlier than art historians had realised⁵.

Surrounding the mandorla is a collection of haloed figures – saints or martyrs – who all look towards the Trinity. **Fig 19b**

The rest of the wall is divided up into a number of scenes, framed by painted borders or arcades. On God's right hand are three figures with halos wearing red and white tunics. The figure nearest to God holds a staff.

The scheme on God's left hand is more damaged. Fragments of halos can be seen, suggesting another group of saints. However, further to the right, other fragments show a number of figures tumbling towards the ground. These are probably the Damned, being driven down towards the mouth of Hell although, unfortunately, this part of the scheme is lost. One of the figures bears a crown, indicating that he is a king⁶.

Beneath these scenes is a band of roundels containing figures holding scrolls. The central figure with a crossed halo, who looks straight out, probably represents Jesus, although his lack of a beard is unusual. **Fig 19c** To his right are further haloed figures holding scrolls – either saints or apostles – who all turn towards him. To his left, two further roundels survive. Although much damaged, it appears that these contain demons looking towards the centre, also holding scrolls in apparent mockery of their counterparts on the other side. The demon next to Jesus has a large red head, with white bulbous eyes, and he holds the scroll awkwardly, with his elbows raised. **Fig 19d** The figure to his left is more damaged – only his pointy red teeth can be clearly seen⁷.

Below this band, on the north side, is a scene of the Raising of the Dead. **Fig 19** Two angels stand either side blowing trumpets to waken the dead, who rise up from their coffins. The angel just to the left of the chancel arch is most clearly seen: it has four wings, two spread out behind it and two folded down nearer the body. **Fig 19e**

Thus, the 11th century parishioners entering the church would have been met with a terrifying reminder of the consequences of sin, and the rewards for living a Christian life – the Damned on God's left side, the Chosen on his right.

North wall: The Old Testament

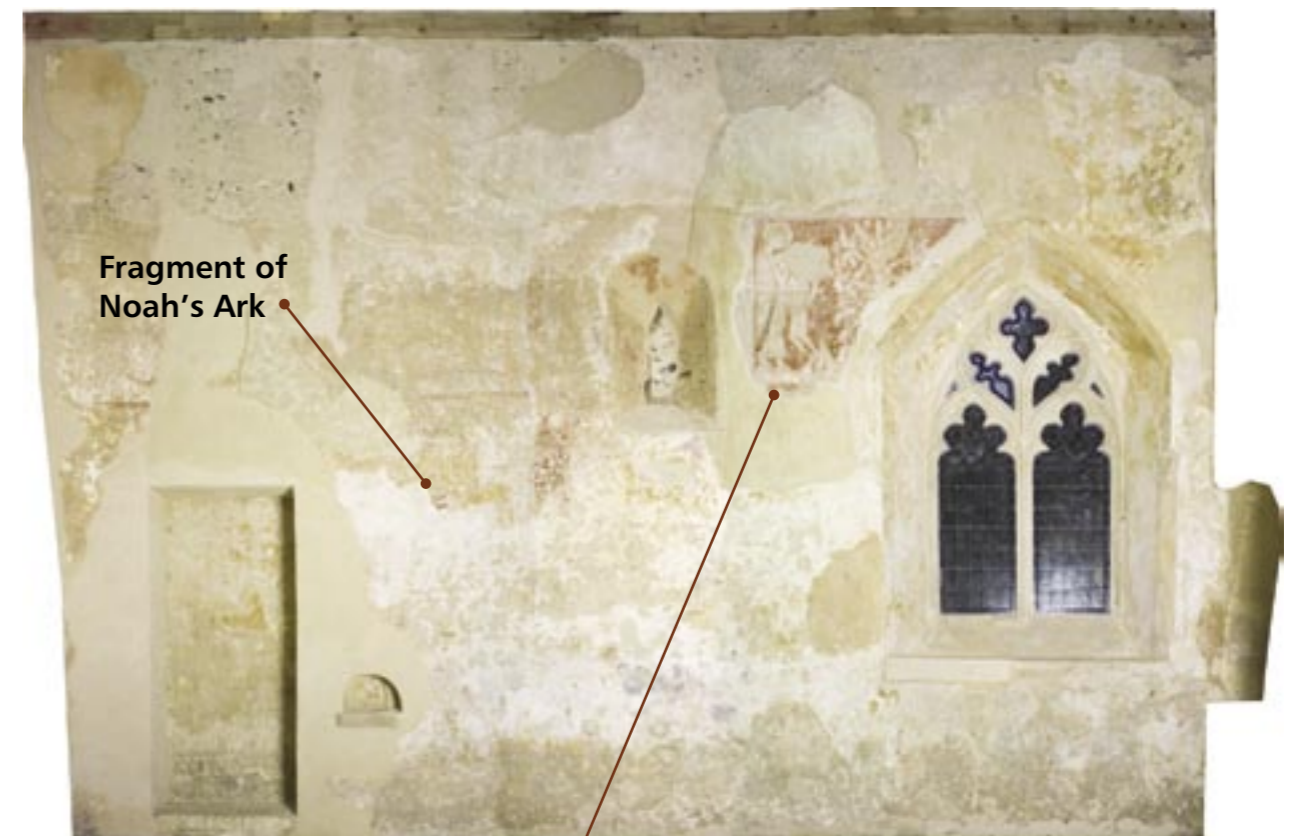
There are further survivals of wall painting elsewhere in the nave that date from the same late 11th century period. It appears that the north wall was divided into upper and lower bands, separated with red or white borders, which run around the double-splayed window. The splays around this opening are decorated with a red and yellow 'cushion' pattern.

In the upper band, at the eastern end of the north wall, the Creation of Eve is shown.

Fig 20b The large figure of God, with a crossed halo, holds up Eve, who has just been created from Adam's rib. He lies slumped against the Tree of Knowledge where fragmentary traces of the serpent can be seen entwined in the branches. It is likely that this painting was one in a series along the upper wall illustrating the events of Genesis, up to the Creation of Eve. The scheme may have continued with a further scene showing the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, in the space now occupied by the window.

In the lower band several fragments of painting survive, but little can be identified with confidence. In the centre of the wall a figure in a red robe raises his arms, apparently holding an object. To the left of this is a large rectangular yellow structure, with a red robed figure at the top. It has been suggested that this is a depiction of Noah's Ark, and may have formed part of a scheme of Old Testament stories⁸.

Fig 20: North wall: The Old Testament



20a God creating Eve



20b Creation of Eve



Fig 21: South wall: Wheel of Fortune

21a Skirt; Wheel

South wall: The Wheel of Fortune

Much of the original painting scheme on this wall was lost when the arches through to the south aisle were punched through in the 12th century. **Fig 21**

The most significant painting is a fragment, in the central upper part of the wall, of a Wheel of Fortune⁹. To the left stands a white-robed figure, with a flat red hat. As with other figures elsewhere in the church, black semi-circular lines represent folds in the skirt of his robe.

Fig 21a The man grasps the red-outlined spoke of a large yellow wheel, of which only a small part survives. The scale of the figure is much larger than in the schemes on the north wall, and would have been the most important picture on this side.

The Wheel of Fortune was a popular image from the 12th to the 14th century, illustrating the progression of life. **Fig 22** However, this is the earliest known example of just a handful surviving in the county. Early depictions have a figure of blind Fortune in the centre, turning the wheel to which humanity is helplessly attached. In later versions this pre-Christian figure is replaced by God, in order to illustrate that all events are part of His divine plan.



Fig 22: A Wheel of Fortune from the 14th century

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West wall

Only a few small areas of painting survive on this wall and it is not possible to identify a coherent theme. On the upper part of the west gable a demon with a hooked nose and spiky hair is holding a sinner upside down by the leg. **Fig 23a** Above this scene is a red and yellow chevron border marking the upper boundary of the scheme.



23a Demon

Fig 23: West wall

Significance

Several aspects of the paintings in this church are unique, giving them an international significance. The layout of the Last Judgement scene on the east wall, with the Throne of Grace and the opposing saints and demons, the Wheel of Fortune, and the possible representation of Noah's Ark, are all elements with few parallels in western art of this period. In each case they are the earliest known examples. The fact that they were created in a small church in a remote part of Norfolk casts new light on the development of European Romanesque painting.

Later painting schemes

The layer of Romanesque paintings is only one of many later paint schemes applied one on top of the other over the centuries, of which fragments of six have been identified. On the east nave wall, 15th century foliate scroll work can be seen to the right of the chancel arch. On the left side, fragments of post-Reformation black and white texts in a black and white frame survive.

When the arches into the south aisle were blocked up in the 14th century a new painting scheme was applied to the south wall. The most obvious survival from this period is the red foliate scrollwork over the south door. During the 15th century this scheme was covered in a thick layer of plaster and another scheme superimposed, including a giant figure, probably St Christopher, above the south doorway. This hunched figure is difficult to discern – he has a dark robe on, and the outline of a leg can be seen just above the right hand door jamb.

Conservation

It is known that further areas of the 11th century scheme underlie some of the later paintings and plaster. However, in order to reveal the earliest paintings it would be necessary to destroy later layers. In past eras restorers might have considered the later paintings to be of little interest and taken the decision to destroy them. These days, a more conservative approach is taken. Not only do the later paintings have their own historical significance and interest which justifies their conservation – in addition, the process of uncovering is not without risk and could cause damage to the Romanesque scheme.

In this context, the conservation project of 2006 was restricted to stabilising the paintings as found. Tobit Curteis Associates carried out careful re-adhesion of plaster layers and paint layers, as well as removal of limewash residues and, most significantly, the extensive green micro-biological growth which obscured the paintings. This work has vastly improved their appearance, revealing for the first time the demons on the left hand of God, the Wheel of Fortune and the possible depiction of Noah's Ark. **Figs 24 & 25**

The scheme was carried out with the support of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £190,000, as well as smaller grants from Norfolk County Council and the Council for the Care of Churches. At the same time electricity was brought to the church to provide appropriate lighting for the paintings, and new furniture provided to protect the fragile plaster on the walls.

Computer images of how the church may have looked in 1090 as well as the full report on the iconography of the paintings and programme of conservation can be found on the website: www.hoh.org.uk



Figs 24: Careful removal of green micro-biological growth during conservation **(Inset) Fig 25:** Test area showing the difference between cleaned areas and green square of micro-biological growth

The future

The responsibility for maintaining the church, opening it to the public, and raising funds for repair is held by the Friends of St Mary's, and its team of volunteers. A conservation and management plan has been drawn up for the building, including a timetable for regular maintenance and repair inspections. The aim is to ensure that the church and its remarkable paintings are protected for all to appreciate. Saved from abandonment, St Mary's has once again become a place for people to worship, contemplate and study.



Fig 26: The Last Trump

Notes

¹ For example, Tayler AM & J *Anglo-Saxon Architecture Vol 1 & 2* Cambridge (1965) pp 325-326 – gives a date of 1050 – 1100 for St Mary's; Batcock, N 'The ruined and discussed churches of Norfolk' *East Anglian Archaeology* Vol 51 NAU (1991) – Batcock estimates the date as 1050 – 1060s.

² See Heywood, SR 'The round towers of East Anglia' in Blair, J (ed) *Minsters and Parish Churches: the local church in transition, 950 – 1200* Oxford (1988) pp169-177

³ Park, David & Heywood, Stephen 'Romanesque wall paintings discovered in Norfolk' *Minerva: The international review of ancient arts and archaeology* March/April Vol 8 No 2 (1997) pp8-9

⁴ This information, and much of the following interpretation of the wall paintings, is adapted from Tobit Curteis's report following completion of the conservation scheme: Curteis, Tobit *St Mary's Church, Houghton on the Hill, Norfolk: Conservation of the wall paintings*. Unpublished report for The Friends of St Mary's Trust, Tobit Curteis Associates (2006)

⁵ Park & Heywood (1997) p8

⁶ Identified by David Park in Curteis, Tobit (2006) p3

⁷ Identified by Tobit Curteis *ibid* p3

⁸ Identified by David Park *ibid* p4

⁹ Identified by Tobit Curteis *ibid* p5

Further Reading

Penn, K *Report on an archaeological evaluation at St Mary's Church, Houghton-on-the-Hill, N Pickenham, Norfolk* NAU (May 2000) Report 497

Penn, K *Report on an archaeological evaluation at St Mary's Church, Houghton-on-the-Hill, N Pickenham, Norfolk* NAU (May 2001) Report 585

A full archive of articles and reports on the church, including the conservation and management plan, can be found at www.hoh.org.uk

Further local stories and information can be found at www.saintmaryschurch.org.uk

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