

St. Peter's Church, Bruisyard

This ancient church stands on gently rising ground overlooking the River Alde. Its antiquity is possibly confirmed by Saxon features evident in the tower's flint work. Although some believe it to be Norman, others believe the origin of the round tower has an even earlier date and have suggested it was originally built by a Count of the Saxon Shore as a defensive structure to cover the ford in the river below. We do know that small barges could sail upstream, probably as far as Badingham, the source of the river Alde being a little further on and near to Brundish.

Round towers were built from late Saxon times until about 1400, and there are a total of 181 still standing, more or less! - in England, of which 38 are in Suffolk.

The belfry openings are of 14C tracery and restoration was made in the 1960/70s. The single west window in the tower area is a 1911 memorial showing the Good Shepherd and made by Jones and Willis. From the outside there is slight evidence of two earlier circular flint framed openings at about 8 feet in height from the ground facing north and south. These are just visible as a variation in circular patches of flint work. The pointed tower arch is about 16 feet high and likely to indicate that the tower was built in post Norman times.

The round, inexplicably tapered flint tower with massive walls, houses one bell. It was cast at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and hung here at the beginning of this millennium. Given in memory of a former parishioner, it now rings out from a belfry which once housed three medieval bells. Two were sold in 1814 probably in the 19C to provide funds for the restoration of the building. A further one was sold to Lawshall Church in 1980 as the belfry was not in a condition to support it safely.

Dedicated to St. Peter, there is evidence to indicate that at one time the Church's dedication included St. Mary - as the figures in the Victorian east window suggest. This is reinforced by the knowledge that Bruisyard Abbey (now Bruisyard Hall) was dedicated to St. Mary of the Annunciation. The glass was made by Jones & Willis in 1906.

The nave walls have been heightened at some time, perhaps in the 15C, probably to facilitate the change of roofing material from the original steeply pitched thatch to tiles.

After its Dissolution, The Abbey (Convent) property was sold to Sir Nicholas Hare of Bruisyard, Suffolk, M.P. for Downton, Wiltshire in 1529 and Speaker of the House of Commons in 1539, eventually becoming Master of the Rolls (1553-1557). He was knighted in 1538. He died in Chancery Lane in 1557 and was buried in the nearby Temple Church, London

Later his son, Michael, a staunch Roman Catholic, and one time privy councillor to Queen Mary, acquired the Abbey's land and buildings from King Henry V111 following the dissolution, added the South Transept to the church to provide himself and his family with a fitting burial place. He also built the fine Bruisyard Hall, which still exists, on the site of the old Abbey. Some of the building materials for the transept were possibly re-used from the Convent. Two of the windows, facing east and west are now blocked up.

He and two of his wives, Elizabeth Hobart and Mary Brudenel, are buried here. The brass of his effigy is missing but the brasses of the two ladies are there, providing excellent examples of what the well-dressed lady was wearing in the early 1600 hundreds. There were no surviving children.



Protected by a modest south porch is the main doorway of the early English style, with probably its original wooden door still hanging there.

The Norman north door has been blocked for many years, and further along, more visible from outside, the complete frame of an earlier, Norman doorway, is embedded in the wall.

The nave has a simple arch-braced roof. The braces from the principals to the ridge are

ornamented with small carved figures.

The icons fixed to the 19C rood beam represent St. Francis and St. Clare. They were made by the present-day Poor Clares at Arundel, since the Reformation a Roman Catholic Franciscan Order.

The rood stair is encased in a massive buttress behind the simple wainscot pulpit dated to the 18th century. This pulpit has a tester to amplify the preacher's voice.



The fine set of Laudian altar rails (with narrowly spaced balusters to prevent dogs profaning the altar) were moved from their original position to the chancel step. The chancel has some 15C poppyheads bench ends incorporated into its choir stalls.

The present altar rails are Victorian. The altar itself is a simple Jacobean table. Behind the altar are Victorian Decalogue boards, showing the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer.

The south window, near the pulpit, with its pleasant brick mullions and tracery, has quaintly dated graffiti scratched into the glass by a glazier.



The font dates from the 15th century and is typical of the kind often seen in Suffolk churches. Its bowl is ornamented with hanging shields and supported by demi angels in the corona, above a frieze of fleurons. the stem being guarded by four seated

lions. The bowl was split, in centuries gone by, when a staple was driven into the stone to provide for a locked font-cover. It was restored in the 1990's with a grant from Adnams the brewers. The present cover is modern.

In the south wall of the nave is displayed a set of Royal Arms, which is painted on rough sacking, and is a sort of approximation to the Arms of the House of Hanover before the Peace of Amiens (1802) when it was agreed that the French fleurs-de-lys should no longer be incorporated in the Arms of England, but had been part of the Royal Arms since 1405.

In the Chancel there is a copy of the "Madonna della Sedelia" (of the chair) the original of which is now in the Galleria Palatina, Florence, Italy. The *Madonna della Sedia* is a Madonna painting by the Italian renaissance artist Raphael, dating to c. 1513-1514



Raphael manipulated the vantage point so that we gaze upward at Mary and the infants Jesus and John the Baptist. It was donated to St. Peter's in 1988 by Mrs Audrey Heriz-Smith formerly of "Clock House" and was previously owned by her late mother, Mrs Florence Pilkington.

In the south wall of the sanctuary there is a simple ogee-headed piscina, for the priest to wash the chalice, set into the reveal of the arch above the sedile, the seat for the priest, deacon or sub-deacon awaiting his part in the distribution of Holy Communion.

Still in regular use is the impressive silver communion plate bearing the name Bruisyard and dated 1568.

Buried beneath the nave floor are the remains of Elizabeth de Burgh, Duchess of Clarence, (d.1363) whose husband, Lionel of Antwerp, Duke of Clarence, second surviving son of Edward 111, died a few years later (d.1368): her mother, Maud Plantagenet, Countess of Ulster, who died in 1377, was the Prioress of Campsea Abbey. They were both buried at Clare Priory but moved to Bruisyard some years later.

Only the matrices of their small brasses remain.

Also buried here is one of their confessors, Fr. Simon Tunstead who was the 29th English Provincial of the Order of Friars Minor.

He died in 1369 and, since he had an inevitably wide knowledge of Franciscan

houses throughout England, it is interesting that he chose this tiny church as his final resting place.

The Parish bier is housed in the Hare Chapel with its original leather straps to hold the coffin when bodies were brought from their homes to the graveyard.

On an adjacent wall is a "Table of Kindred & Affinity", setting out which relations one may not marry, and a "Succession of Bishops", listing the bishops from the time of the Apostles until 1928.

Also on the walls is an interesting set of Ten Commandments, a Decalogue, printed on paper by Laurie & Whittle and dated 1794. It is believed to be quite rare and now in course of being restored.

According to D P Mortlock " very few examples of these cheap and popular productions have survived and this one is worth preserving". (The Popular Guide to Suffolk Churches – No. 3 East Suffolk- Acorn Editions 1992).

The Commandments are held by Moses, who is flanked by Aaron and Joshua.



St Peter's is one of six parish churches in the Upper Alde Benefice in the Diocese of St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich.

Further information about St. Peter's, or any of our sister churches at Badingham, Cransford, Dennington, Rendham and Sweffling, will be found on the Benefice's website at www.upperalde.info

A Convent of Minoresses

The Roman Catholic Order of the Poor Clares, named after their founder, [St. Clare of Assisi](#) who was granted the 'privilege of poverty' by Pope Gregory IX on 17 September 1228, were introduced into England by Blanche, Queen of Navarre, the wife of Edward, Earl of Lancaster at the end of the 13th century.

The Abbey of Minoresses at Bruisyard in Suffolk was founded in October 1367 by Lionel, Duke of Clarence, who replaced the chantry priests' college (remembered in the name of College Farm nearby) on this site by nuns of the Order of St Clare.

There had been a small college of Friars Minor for brethren in the parish from 1354-1366. St. Francis had formed the Order of Friars Minor for men in 1209, and then in 1212 he and St. Clare formed the Order of Minoresses for nuns, who were known as the Poor Clares, with great emphasis on the vow of poverty.

This was the fourth foundation of this order in England, the first being in the parish of St. Botolph's without Aldgate, London, 1293-4, the second foundation at Waterbeach, the third at Denny.

Thirteen sisters from Denny formed the first community at Bruisyard and the Abbey was on the present site of Bruisyard Hall. These Minoresses followed what is called the 'Isabella Rule', the rule approved by Pope Urban IV in 1263 for Isabella, sister of St. Louis and her convent at Longchamp near Paris.

The Minoresses were allowed to own property in common but kept enclosure: '....each woman who shall be brought to this order for to nyze (draw nigh) to our Lord Jesus Christ and to His full sweet Mother should dwell all the days of her life enclosed as a treasure kept to the sovereign king.'

They were under the authority of the Friars Minor who provided them with chaplains and confessors. They wore a brown habit, white kerchief and black veil.

Bruisyard was always a small house though their annual revenues were valued at £561 12s 1d when suppressed in 1542 after a licensed reprieve of three years granted by King Henry VIII. This income was derived from lands, tenements and rents in places as far afield as Debenham and Sawston. Maria Page, who was Abbess at this time, signed the surrender of the Abbey.

The Felbrigg Psalter

The church used to have a finely embroidered 13th century psalter, known as the Felbrigg Psalter, used by one of the nuns at Bruisyard. This, the oldest known English embroidery on a book, is now in the British Library. Its covers may well have been the work of the nuns here, but it was probably written and illuminated in Northern France in the mid-13th century.

It belonged originally to Sister Anne Felbrigge, whose father, Sir Simon Felbrigge, was standard bearer to Richard II, who came from Felbrig, near Cromer in Norfolk, and whose mother, Margaret, was a cousin of Richard's Queen, Anne of Bohemia.

The psalter carries a note recording its transfer to the Abbey on the death of Sister Anne.

Two embroidered panels, depicting the Annunciation and the Crucifixion, are set into the binding of the manuscript and, although very worn, the embroidery is a fine example of English work. The panels are worked in coloured silks and silver gilt thread on a twofold linen ground. The stitches used are split stitch for the silk whilst the metal threads are surface-couched on the background in a chevron pattern.



This method of attaching the threads was very rare in England at this time. A close inspection of the remaining metal threads shows their construction: a thin layer of silver gilt wound around a core of silver thread. Where the coloured silk threads survive they show various shades of greens, blues and grey, browns, fawn and white, and a striking deep rose pink. It is the earliest embroidered book binding to survive, the next oldest dating from around 1536.