

THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS ~ ARRINGTON



A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE CHURCH BUILDING

THE CHURCH

Welcome to our Parish Church which is the smallest in the group of five churches in the Orwell group. It is a humble building but through its structure and its history reflects the lives of the living church in this small part of Cambridgeshire. We hope you will find peace here whether this is your first, or a return visit. We have two regular services a month, an evening service on the 2nd Sunday of the month and a Communion in the morning on the 4th Sunday of the month.

AN EARLIER CHURCH

The earliest historical record of Arrington appears in 941 when Theodred an Anglian Saxon bishop of London owned land here. Later another Saxon, Aelfric a Kings thegn, held a manor here. It is likely that one of these two men would have founded or refounded the earlier church and churchyard. However the first historical mention of a church and priests lands does not appear until after the Norman conquest in 1087 when the church was already in existence. At this time the church was given to the Abbey of St Martin in Normandy.

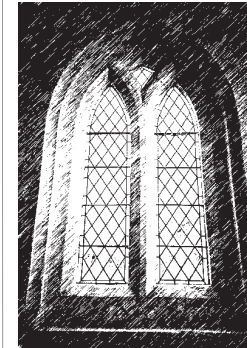
Very little is known about this earlier church, but the oldest object we have in the church is the circular limestone baptismal font that would have come from this earlier building. The upper part of this font would have stood on the ground. A child could then be lowered into it. Baptism before the date of this font may have taken place in the spring that still exists just along from the church in Church End.

There was also a large ironstone slab found at the east end of the church in 1999 which would seem to relate to this earlier building. Traces of ash were also found on the south side of the nave underneath the medieval tile.

The dedication to St Nicholas (aka Father Christmas) was known from as early as the 1500's and it is believed may represent an early dedication or at least from the 13th century. It

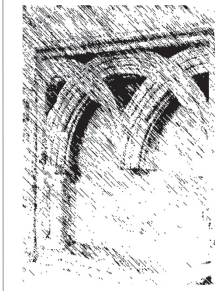
is not an unusual medieval dedication as St Nicholas was patron saint of children, merchants as well as sailors and others. His popularity in the west stems from the 11th century.

A REBUILT CHURCH - THE CHANCEL



Some time, probably between 1250 - 75, it was decided to rebuild the church using local materials of chunch (a form of chalk) and field-stones. The east end with its large east window and four smaller windows on the north and south sides represent what was the extent of a particularly long chancel. This new chancel would have provided a radical change from the earlier much darker church as it flooded this part of the building with light. Glass would have been used, possibly for the first time.

This chancel represented the domain of the priest, who was now separated from the people by the chancel screen; the people only distantly viewing the rite of consecration of the bread and wine at the altar and only receiving it two or three times a year.



To provide for the more elaborate rituals that developed, a double piscina was built within the southern wall. This was used for the washing of the communion vessels as well as the priest's fingers.

The interlocking arcs and scalloped bowls of the piscina are all contained in a rectangular frame and is similar to that found in Jesus College, Cambridge (formerly St Radegund's Priory).

The priest also had his own door on the south wall and there is a small low window, still with its pins for an inward opening shutter. The reasons for this small window opening are not entirely clear. Some opinions, are that is for those who would not have been allowed into church because of contagious diseases but could still engage with the service.

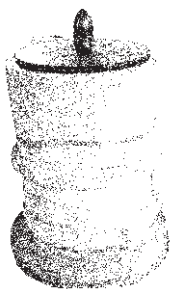


Although a number of churches in the locality were rebuilt like St Nicholas around this time, they all had subsequent changes made to them. The chancel of St Nicholas was never subject to these changes (except for the loss of the chancel screen and altar) and so retains its 13th century form.

A REBUILT CHURCH - THE NAVE

The nave, the peoples part of the church was separated from the chancel by the screen. The nave was also part of the rebuilding programme. The arcades that represent this part of the programme imply that the north arcade was built first, as it has 'hollow' (concave) chamfers similar to the chancel. The arcade is supported on octagonal pillars (the eight sides symbolise resurrection). The arcade gave access to a north aisle which would then offer more space.

The south arcade shares forms we find in the tower (straight chamfers) and recent work on the tower has revealed that the south arcade meets the tower in a very uncomfortable manner implying that the south arcade is actually later than the tower itself. If this is the case then a wall from the earlier church must have remained into the 13th century. Like the north arcade the south arcade offers more space especially at a time when the village was still growing.



We have already mentioned the font but its siting near to the main door of the church symbolised rebirth in the journey back to God. When it was moved from the old church it was placed on a short stem, with a step for the priest to stand on when baptising the child. This tiny step was then cut back at a much later date.

The current windows are all from the removed aisles and re-used. Three in the north date from around 1400 those in the south date from around 1350 and 1400. The later date of all these indicate some changes to the aisle some 50 to a 100 years after the aisles were formed.



We do not know whether there was a north door. This could have an impact on how the windows were distributed. If there was a north door, then one of the south aisle windows maybe an East window for that aisle.

The current doorway is 13th century that has been turned inside out. This means it now open outwards whereas originally it opened inwards. The door itself is either from a north doorway or else dates from after 1536.

We know very little about the colour scheme of the church either in the medieval period or later in the Victorian period. Certainly there are small traces of medieval colour still visible, red and yellow ochre blocks were painted onto the north arcade arch and where later limewash has come away, there is also evidence of bright red in the Piscina. Recently a fragment of a figurative wall painting has emerged on the west wall of the nave.

THE PORCH, THE TOWER & THE ROOF

The porch is an early 19th century construction that predates the later restoration. The size of the notice-board shows how few and how small notices were in the 19th century.

The tower is built into the higher ground to the west of the church. As a consequence the floor is higher than the nave. It has an original window of around 1300 similar to the chancel. The top stage of the tower was rebuilt possibly in the 18th century when the small spire may also have been added. The tower used to carry three bells however only one bell now exists by a Thomas Dyer from 1583. He was a Hertfordshire bell founder from Hitchen.

The roof structure is believed to be a medieval trussed rafter type and supported a thatched roof. The date of the ceiling is unknown. The aisles appear to have had their own roofs. The tiling may date from the 18th century.

1536 -41 AND AFTERWARDS

The church suffered significant decay after these dates. There were complaints about the first vicar from the congregation and from the first vicar about the congregation. There were also complaints that the church needed re-thatching and had broken windows and seating.

The aisles were removed presumably due to structural decay which the village could not afford to remedy and the arcades blocked in red brick probably in the 17th century (analysis of brick sizes). The outside was then covered in a lime mortar screed, parts of which can still be seen on the outside of the north arcade. However the small low window was presumably blocked due to changes in liturgy. The chancel screen was also lost for similar reasons and the colour programme changed from vibrant colour to white or cream. At some point the octagonal piers were mutilated presumably to accommodate seating which in turn was changed again in the 1898 restoration and re-ordering.

Some of the complaints about the building extended up to 1685, and a date of 1685 is found on the cills of the southern windows of the Chancel. These are not of clunch and indicate that these elements of the windows needed replacing.

By the 18th century the tower also needed attention so that the whole of the upper stage was rebuilt. The priests door was blocked probably at the same time

In 1898 a restoration programme was undertaken. This meant installing heating, concreting some of the lower interior walls, building the yellow brick vestry, replacing the pews and seating, installing oil lamps, an organ, and re-tiling and setting of the floor. The east window dates from just after this project.

In the 1980's the roof was thoroughly overhauled and re-tiled. In 2000 structural movement meant that the East window was on the verge of collapse and extensive monitoring was undertaken and stainless steel tie bars then inserted to arrest further deterioration. The electric heating and lighting was renewed along with all the power and lighting cabling.

Visit www.beneficeorwell.co.uk for current news and events