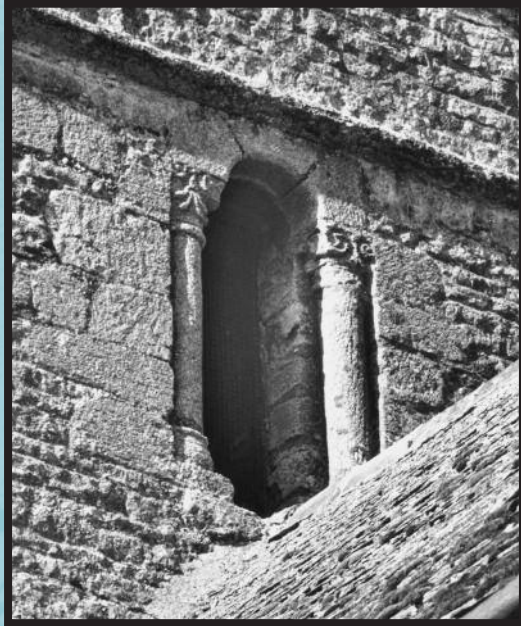




THE CHURCHES  
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# HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

Blatherwycke,  
Northamptonshire



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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*Blatherwycke, Northamptonshire*

# HOLY TRINITY CHURCH

*by Mervyn Wilson (Rector of Bulwick and Blatherwycke 1978–2003)*

## HISTORY

Blatherwycke lies in a rural part of north-east Northamptonshire and the nearest towns are Corby, and Stamford in Lincolnshire. The church, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and now redundant, is the survivor of two. Originally there were two settlements, one on either side of the Willow Brook, each with its own church. St Mary Magdalene to the west, which was closed in 1448, is now only recalled in the name of Magdalen Lane; and a field just above the Glebe Farm, known as Home Close, has evidence of mediaeval building.

In summer Holy Trinity is quite hidden by the surrounding trees: the visitor must pass through the old stone gateway which led to Blatherwycke Hall, and walk on up a potholed drive until on the right, up a narrow rising path, is seen a low square Norman tower, with at its foot the pair of churchyard gates recently redesigned with Alpha and Omega set in the woodwork. Alternatively, if approached along the footpath from the park side, the south aspect of the church will appear among the chestnut trees, before the visitor passes through the iron gate into the churchyard.

The parish is just under 2,000 acres (815 hectares). The form of the country is a plateau cut by the valley of the Willow Brook. The uplands are boulder clay with some Oxford clay in the south-east part; the valley sides are mixed limestone, sand and marls. It was an enclosure within Rockingham Forest. Trees and woodlands have continued to be planted by the landowners to the present day.

*Front cover: North chancel aisle with family pews (Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: Brass of 1548 to Sir Humphrey Stafford and his wife Margaret (Christopher Dalton)*



The name Blatherwycke – Blarewiche in Domesday Book, Blatherwic 1203, Bladrewyc 1230 – is probably a worn-down version of *blaeborn* (blackthorn) and *wic* (dwelling); or possibly 'farm where bladder plants grow'. The former seems more likely, on the grounds that blackthorn was known and valued by our Saxon ancestors; and there is indeed an ancient blackthorn on the high ground of what is left of the park; and early usages of 'bladder' are not of plants but of pigs' stomachs and so forth.

The village is very small, comprising 26 houses with a population of about 60, children included. For centuries it was dominated by the 'Big House'

and it is still almost entirely owned by one family, the Georges. But its known history centres around the Engaines, the Staffords and the Stafford O'Briens.

In the 14th century the Engaine family held a barony centred on Blatherwycke. A consequence of this can be seen in the chancel, unusually larger than the nave. The rector who was responsible for building and maintaining the chancel had greater resources than many, because the Engaines were able to divert to Blatherwycke tithes from Moulton, Pytchley and Gidding, others of their manors.

In the time of Edward III the Engaine inheritance passed to three co-heiresses, one of whom was married to Humphrey Stafford from Worcestershire. The Staffords continued to consolidate their position in Blatherwycke, and in the time of Henry VIII became fully possessed of the manor, where they built a house. The Humphrey Stafford of this period is remembered in a fine brass memorial. His son, another Sir Humphrey, represents the high point of family ambition. He began a great house at Kirby in 1570, but sold it unfinished in 1575 to Christopher Hatton. He and his heirs continued to live at Blatherwycke.

When Henry O'Brien married a Stafford co-heiress, he built a new house in 1720 in the Palladian style, to replace the Elizabethan house, large but unfinished, of the Staffords. At some point in the 18th century the demesne of the house was enlarged, the old village removed, and an extensive kitchen garden, the walls of which survive, was built the other side of the church from the house, and the church became enclosed in the private grounds of the Hall. The Hall was demolished in 1948 by its last Stafford O'Brien owner, who is reputed to have declared 'My family built this house; none other have lived here and none ever shall, for I will pull it down.'

And so the church survives between a half-derelict stable block, the afforested site of the mansion, the wooded grounds (the snowdrops

in early spring are a sight to behold and so too are the recently released Red Kites which frequently float over the church), and the kitchen garden now given over to raising pheasants. There is also the great lake, visible through the trees. This was dug by labourers brought over from the O'Briens' Irish estates at the time of the potato famine. The O'Briens were great Irish landowners with about 25,000 acres (10,000 hectares) in County Clare which they were forced to sell by the Irish Land Acts of c.1920.

In 1840 the entry in Lewis' *Topographical Dictionary* gave the population of Blatherwycke as 227 and recorded that 'a day and Sunday school, in which 19 boys and 12 girls are educated and clothed, is supported principally by Stafford O'Brien, Esq., and a small endowment of £5 per annum left by Benjamin Healey; the mistress receives a salary of £10 for attending the day school, and the master £5 for his attendance on Sundays'. In 1901 the population was 101.





Left: *The Norman west tower (Christopher Dalton)*

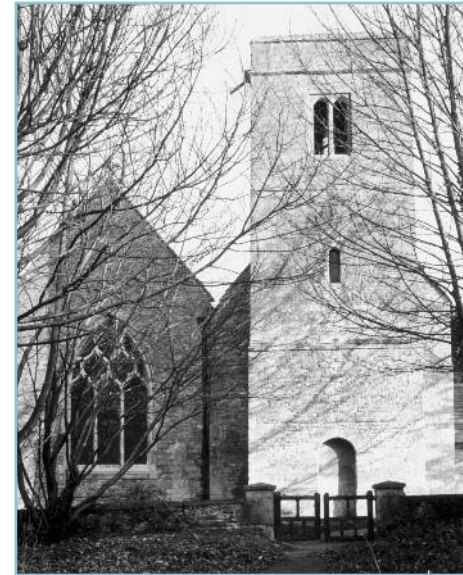
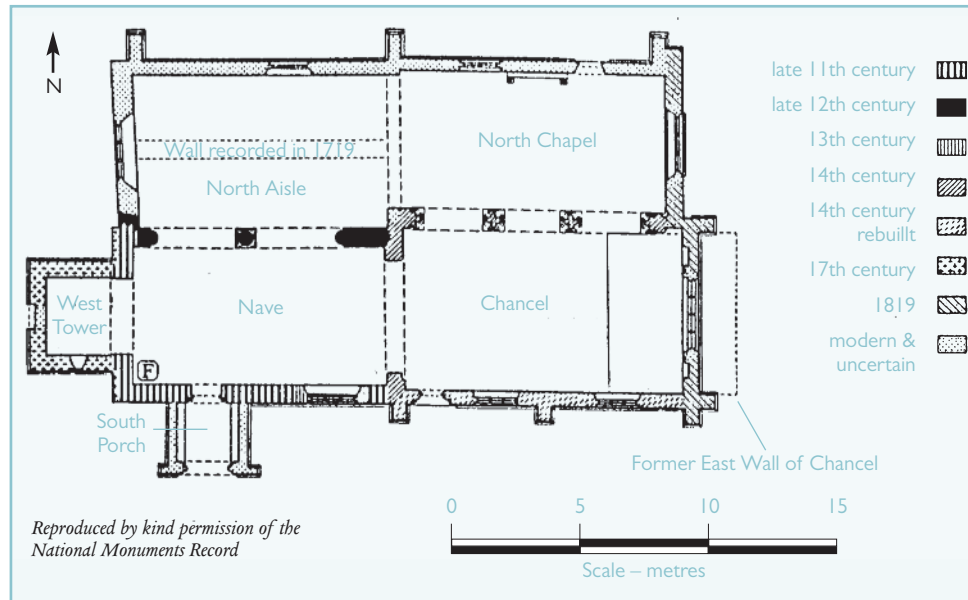
Right: *Column capital on south doorway (Christopher Dalton)*

## The CHURCH

The visitor who approaches the church up the drive passes the grey Norman tower, built of local limestone, and enters the church through the south porch, rebuilt in 1868. Indeed all of the church except the tower, the nave and chancel arcades and most of the south wall, was rebuilt in the 19th century – chiefly, it is presumed, at the expense of the O'Briens. However, the chancel was paid for by the Rector, whose stipend would have been the equivalent of about £40,000 p.a. at present-day prices. (This had become less with the

agricultural depression by the end of the 19th century.) He was responsible for the chancel upkeep and perhaps it was the decision of the rector of the time to shorten it by some seven feet (2.1m) in the 1819 rebuilding of the east wall. The north aisle was widened and rearranged to accommodate the O'Brien family and their household servants.

The present interior arrangement of the church exactly reflects the 19th-century social realities of the parish, and the religious ideas of the time.



Through the south door, there is a small, narrow and rather cramped Norman nave. Looking east, beyond the screen is a light and spacious early-14th-century chancel of rather larger area, the space allocated to the rector and choir. Looking north, there are the plain deal pews reserved for the household staff; past the central mass of masonry lies the family area with many memorials and oak pewing, and the private door at the north-east corner. The layout of the church is a quartered square. The smallest quarter is reserved for the village, the least well-appointed for the servants, the emptiest for the family and the most spacious, airy and beautiful for the rector and choir.

The **west tower**, unbuttressed and of three stages with a plain parapet, is a rebuilding of the 17th century, except for part of the east wall. The wide 11th-century tower arch is built of large stones with a round head, and hollow-chamfered impost which continue to the side walls of the nave. Above is a coeval double-displayed window, now blocked. The upper stages of the tower house three bells, and a clock moved from the stable block adjoining in 1949. In the east wall of the belfry is a single-light window with 11th-century nook-shafts and carved capitals.

**Bells:** Large bell c.1480, recast by Taylor in 1917. Priest's bell cast by Henry Bagley in 1685. Clock bell 1818 by Thomas Mears of Whitechapel.

The **south porch** was rebuilt but not altered in 1868, and retains an ancient worn capital of the 11th century.

The **nave** has a north arcade of two bays of the 12th century. The easternmost capital is foliated in crisp lines. On the south side are two windows – the chief one being of the 13th or 14th century with uncusped intersecting tracery. To its west is a small rectangular two-light 17th-century window of a domestic type. The doorway is 11th century. The pews are Georgian; the pulpit is possibly earlier but was reduced in height, and the IHS monogram fixed to the central panel, in Victorian times.

The **chancel** is mid-14th century, the time of the Engaine tithe diversion. The most interesting feature on the outside is a cornice decorated with what appear to be cats' heads, with huge ears – early mediaeval and much worn. A pencil sketch of 1846 indicates that two of the south chancel windows and the priest's doorway were reset and that the east windows of the chancel and north aisle, which were replaced later in the 19th century, were similar to those in the south wall.

*North aisle piscina, 12th-century arcade and 'domestic' window in the south wall (Christopher Dalton)*



The priest's doorway has fine stonework with two female head stones, one with a wide headdress. Inside, the chancel is approached through a screen, the lower part made from 17th-century communion rails, the upper inferior 19th-century work. The surrounding arch is of the 14th century, with carvings of female heads. The three arches of the chancel north arcade have clustered columns of the 14th century. Under the south wall near the altar lies a well-preserved stone coffin lid carved with a flowered cross of the 13th century; there are two others, much worn, outside. The communion table is 17th century and the present communion rails are Victorian. In 1819 the east wall was rebuilt, shortening the chancel by seven feet (2.1 m). The east window with its coloured glass may be dated from the 1854 monogram outside.

The **north aisle** in its present form dates from the 19th century, perhaps 1855, when the whole church was re-roofed. There had been a north aisle in mediaeval times, but narrower. In 1719 Bridges, the county historian, recorded the width of the nave and aisle as 29 feet (8.8m). There was also a chapel to the north of the chancel, of approximately the same width as the present building. The east wall was rebuilt in 1819. The large stones with iron rings lead down to the family vault. The fine carved pulpit of 1628 was brought from Skidbrooke church in Lincolnshire and stands on the site of the organ, sold to Wansford after the church became redundant in 1976.

#### STAINED GLASS WINDOWS

■ **Chancel, east** Patterned glass of 1854, if the monogram outside indicates the date of glass as well as tracery.

■ **North aisle, east** Stylised medallions in a mediaeval mode depicting the Seven Works of Mercy. By Clayton & Bell. In memory of Augustus Stafford O'Brien Stafford, d.1857.

■ **Chancel, south-east** Three Resurrection scenes. By Tower, of Kempe's firm. In memory of Eleanor O'Brien, d.1918.

■ **Chancel, south-west** Faith, Hope and Charity. In memory of Violet Stafford O'Brien, d.1939.

■ **North aisle, west** A naturalistic scene with bright glass of people looking to a shining cross at the end of a new grave, with various texts in the sky. The arms of O'Brien at the top. By Gibbs, 1865.

■ **North aisle, north** the Good Shepherd. By Heaton, Butler & Bayne. In memory of Horace and Eleanor Stafford O'Brien, d.1929 and 1937.



## MONUMENTS *and* MEMORIALS

There are seven wall monuments, the most interesting being:

- Sir Humphrey Stafford 1548 and his wife Margaret, displaying some notable brasses (see below under Brasses).
- John Stafford 1595 and his wife, with kneeling female and male figures in relief, two daughters, an infant and five sons, placed in an architectural setting. The inscription to Humphrey, his grandfather, is said to be a later addition.



- Thomas Randolph, a poet and dramatist; he was adopted by Ben Jonson, but after some successes in London, his greatest being *The Muses' Looking Glass*, a blank verse play in 15 scenes, he lapsed into a dissipated life and died on a visit to Blatherwycke. The monument was given by Christopher Hatton and made by Nicholas Stone in 1640 for £10.

- Others to Popple, Stafford and O'Brien.

**Ledger slabs** There are 17, dating from the 17th and 18th centuries, in the chancel and north aisle to Jane Smith, Edmund and Elisabeth Popple, Revd Charles Burton, various Kirkhams of Fineshade, various Staffords and O'Briens, and Mary Campbell.

**The benefactors' board** on the nave north wall includes Benjamin Healey and the late-17th-century benefaction by Thomas Cole to provide plum puddings for six of the oldest men of the parish on Christmas day. The charity is still administered, but no plum puddings are now given.

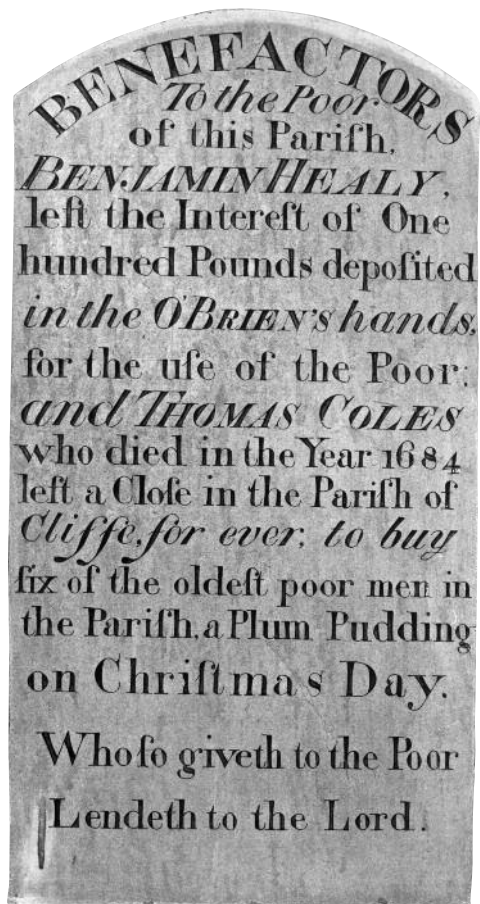
**The font** with circular cross is perhaps of the 12th century but set on a base of 1840 to commemorate 'a merciful deliverance from drowning' in Scotland.

*Left: 12th-century font on a later base*

*Right: Monument of 1595 to John Stafford and his wife (Christopher Dalton)*







The Healy and Coles benefactions (Christopher Dalton)

**Brasses** There are two sets. One is to Sabbian Cressener (1598). The other, a fine one, is to Sir Humphrey Stafford (1548) and his wife Margaret, daughter of Sir Edward Tame – a standing male figure in armour, head on helm; a female figure, top part missing with end of girdle bearing a shield; four shields of arms and inscription. There is also a plate of six male children on the left and an indent for female children on the right.

The **niches** which flank the east window of the chancel, with their crocketed gables, once housed statues and are 14th century, reset. There are two **piscinae**, both in the north aisle, indicating former chapels.

**Hatchments** Three are hung in the north aisle at the family end.

- Probably for Augustus O'Brien Stafford, d.1857.
- For Stafford O'Brien, 1783–1864 (brother of above).
- For Henry O'Brien Stafford, 1814–80.

The **churchyard** is still open for burials. It was extended c.1923. It is a secluded place, more at home to wild life than human. New oak gates were made in 1988.

The graves have been documented on two or three occasions, and particular reference has been made to the strangely placed tombstone (the inscription facing the wall) of a black

servant, Anthony Williams, who had worked at the Hall and who had drowned in the lake in 1836 when trying to save his master who had fallen from a boat whilst fishing. The inscription (awkward to read) is in verse:

*Here a poor wanderer hath found a grave  
Who death embraced whilst struggling with a wave.  
His home far off in the broad Indian main  
He left to rid himself of slavery's chain.  
Friendless and comfortless, he passed the sea  
On Albion's shores to seek for liberty.  
Yet vain his search for aye with toiling brow  
He never found his freedom until now.*

In the north-east corner is a ruinous building attached to the old stable block. The upper part has a Gothic pointed window with rotting wooden tracery. It is said that here the O'Briens fitted out a chapel perhaps in the incumbency of the Revd Alexander Lendrum (1876–90). He is said to have introduced the new ways of the Oxford Movement: new rituals, new furnishings and new arrangements, typical of Anglo-Catholic churchmanship. To the O'Briens, staunch low church Anglo-Irish, this smacked of popery. They would have nothing to do with it, and for a period in the 19th century held their own services here overlooking the churchyard. This alienation did not continue. The last of the O'Briens, the two Misses, who lived on into the 1950s, had been for many years stalwarts of the church, and one was churchwarden.



Thomas Randolph's memorial of 1640 (Christopher Dalton)

## *More recent* HISTORY

In the 1930s the parish of Blatherwycke was held for a time in plurality with Kings Cliffe, the rector living at Blatherwycke. At that time Kings Cliffe, a much larger village, was split into factions behind two warring colonels. The rector's life became uncomfortable and moreover the rectory fell into disrepair.

The Revd Arthur Tindal Hart was the last rector resident in Blatherwycke (1946–59). He was a prolific author: during his time here he wrote several books about parsons in the county and the definitive work on John Sharp, Archbishop of York. In Hart's day there was a substantial congregation, a flourishing Mothers' Union and a Sunday School. But after he left, which coincided with the death of the last Miss O'Brien, and with the passing of an older generation, numbers steadily fell, until by the 1970s village support had almost vanished, the church was declared redundant, and the parish united with Bulwick.

In 1978 Holy Trinity passed into the care of the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust). Considerable repair work has been carried out since, the largest part being the reslating of all roof slopes, under the direction of the architects Robert Read and Peter McFarlane of Bond and Read, Grantham.

### DEDICATION TO ANNIE HERCOCK

This booklet is dedicated by the author to Annie Hercock. Born Anne Swan in 1900 at Deenethorpe, she lived all her married life in Blatherwycke in the same cottage. Before that she had worked a few years as a maid at the rectory. Hercocks were the most numerous extended family of 19th century Blatherwycke. Her husband John William (Hercock) worked as an estate carpenter. She was a fund of information about the village, the O'Brien family, other residents and past histories. She had many more tales about the village than have been included here. A lifelong churchgoer, after the church became redundant, she used to walk to Bulwick on a Sunday morning. She walked every day till she was well up her 80s. She very seldom left the village, and harked back to an earlier way of life. She had no children, and died in February 1996.

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Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

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Wakerley, St John the Baptist  
7 miles SW of Stamford off A43

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to thank John Grove for research principally into the earlier history, and Peter McFarlane of Bond and Read for the more recent architectural description.

*Back cover: The east face of the tower (Christopher Dalton)*