

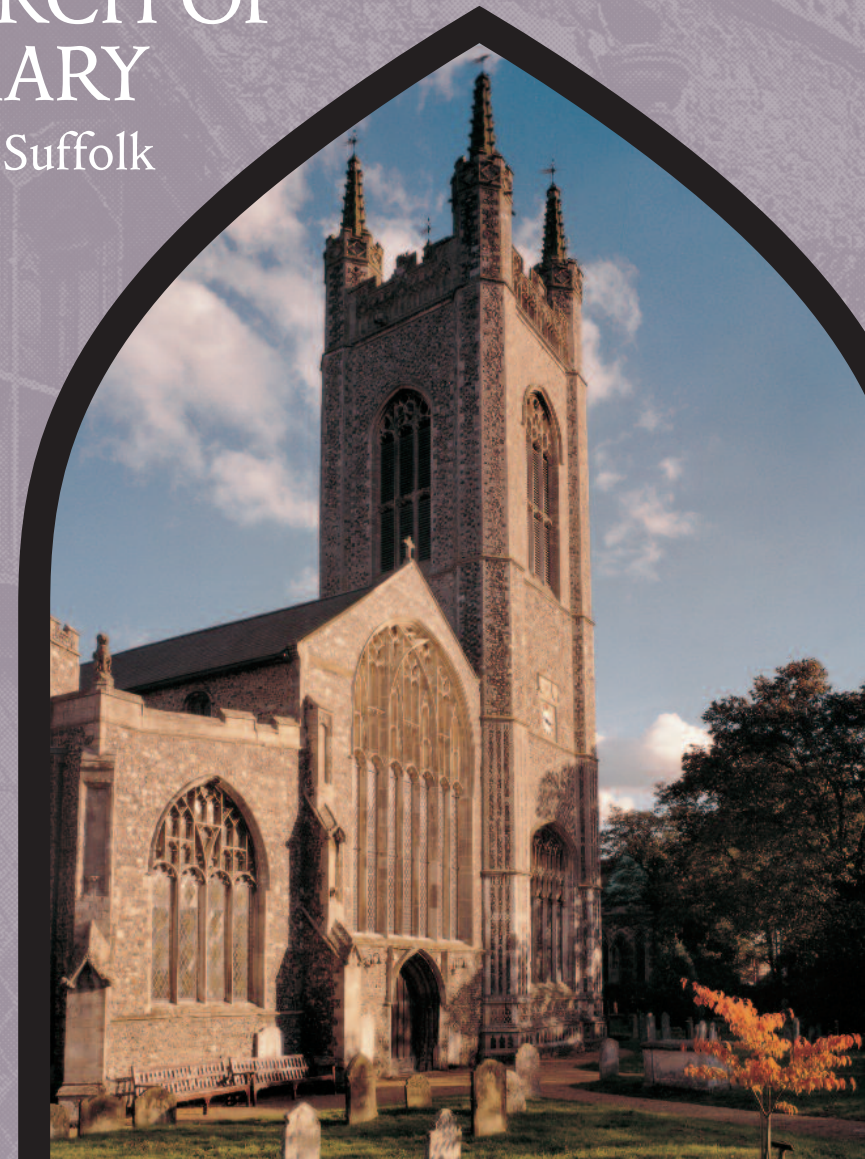


THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



THE PRIORY CHURCH OF ST MARY

Bungay, Suffolk



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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www.visitchurches.org.uk Registered Charity No. 258612 Spring 2005

£3.00

THE PRIORY CHURCH OF ST MARY

*by Roy Tricker (Field Officer with The Churches Conservation Trust 1991–2002,
church enthusiast, historian and lay canon)*

HISTORY

The lofty tower of this grand church is a landmark for miles along the Waveney Valley, which divides the counties of Suffolk and Norfolk, and is the focal point of the market town. The name 'Bungay' is thought to have indicated the island of Buna's people. Here two ancient churches stand within about 200 yards (183 metres) of each other. Holy Trinity, which is now Bungay's parish church – and which, with its round tower proclaiming a thousand years of history, is well worth a visit – was at least 250 years old when the earliest visible parts of its larger and grander neighbour took shape.

The present church of St Mary is the parochial nave, aisles and tower of the priory church of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Holy Cross, built for an order of Benedictine nuns which had been founded about 1160 by Gundreda, wife of Sir Roger de Glanville. It replaced an earlier Saxon church on this site, which was one of five churches in Bungay mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086. Stretching eastwards from the present east wall are the ruins of what was the conventional quire, where the nuns heard Mass and recited their daily round of Offices. These fragments incorporate work of the 13th century and stretched some 60 feet (18.3 m) eastwards from the nave, deflecting very slightly to the north.

*Front cover: The west front
(Boris Baggs)*

*Left: The Resurrection –
a 17th-century Flemish carving
given by Sir H Rider Haggard
(Christopher Dalton)*



Below: External north wall of the priory ruins (Boris Baggs)

Right: Interior of the ruined quire, looking north-west (Boris Baggs)

It was during the 15th century that the present nave, aisles, porch and tower were built, and wills of mediaeval people shed some light on this work. In 1442 Thomas Crofte bequeathed money towards building the tower; in 1444 a chaplain named Reginald Cakebread left £1 towards building the 'new' tower, which is also mentioned in wills of 1456 and 1471–73. The aisles and porch were clearly being worked upon during this period too and were possibly completed about 1450. Other bequests include

3s. 4d from Roger Culpin in 1456 for a new reredos at the high altar and 20d in 1461 from Elene Cooper towards painting it (also 12d to paint the new image of Our Lady of Pity). Bequests of 1457–60 provided money towards making and painting the new rood-screen. In 1514 Thomas Fynch asked his executors to make an altar on the north side of the church with images of SS Cornelius and Ursula flanking All Saints.

The 16th century saw great changes at St Mary's. After 1536, when the priory closed as a result of the dissolution of the lesser monasteries by King Henry VIII, the nuns' quire and the monastery buildings were allowed to go to ruin, whilst the nave and aisles were retained as the parish church. With the Reformation in the mid-16th century, much of the colour and carving, the great Rood, the statues and a host of other visual aids to teach the faithful were removed, and the interior was equipped for the liturgical requirements of the Reformed Church, with its services and scriptures in English. More damage was done by the Puritans in 1643–44 in their zeal to rid churches of 'superstitious images and inscriptions'.

Their inspector, William Dowsing of Laxfield, probably visited this church to specify which carvings, paintings, stained glass windows, Latin inscriptions, etc. were to be destroyed. The greatest damage of all, however, was caused by a terrible fire on 1 March 1688 which devastated



the town, leaving some 200 families homeless and badly damaging this church, especially the tower and south aisle, melting the bells and destroying much of what was combustible inside. It is said that the inhabitants, seeking refuge, entered the church with their treasured possessions already burning. Following this disaster, major restoration and refurbishment took place. The south aisle roof was completed in 1699 and a handsome new altarpiece was installed in 1701 – the year that the church was reopened.

When David Elisha Davy visited St Mary's in 1810, the internal decor formed a wonderful 18th-century period-piece. The interior was seated with uniform wainscoted box pews, the entire length of the south aisle was filled with a large gallery, and upon another gallery at the west end stood a fine organ, at that time a rarity in parish churches, which had 1,100 pipes and 21 stops – the gift of Robert Scales, who died in 1728. Dominating the interior, rising majestically above the communion table, which was enclosed on three sides by rails, and filling the width of the east wall, was the mighty panelled altarpiece. This had five compartments, with the Ten Commandments in the centre, above which were the royal arms of King William III, flanked by the painted figures of Moses and Aaron, who were in turn flanked by the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed.

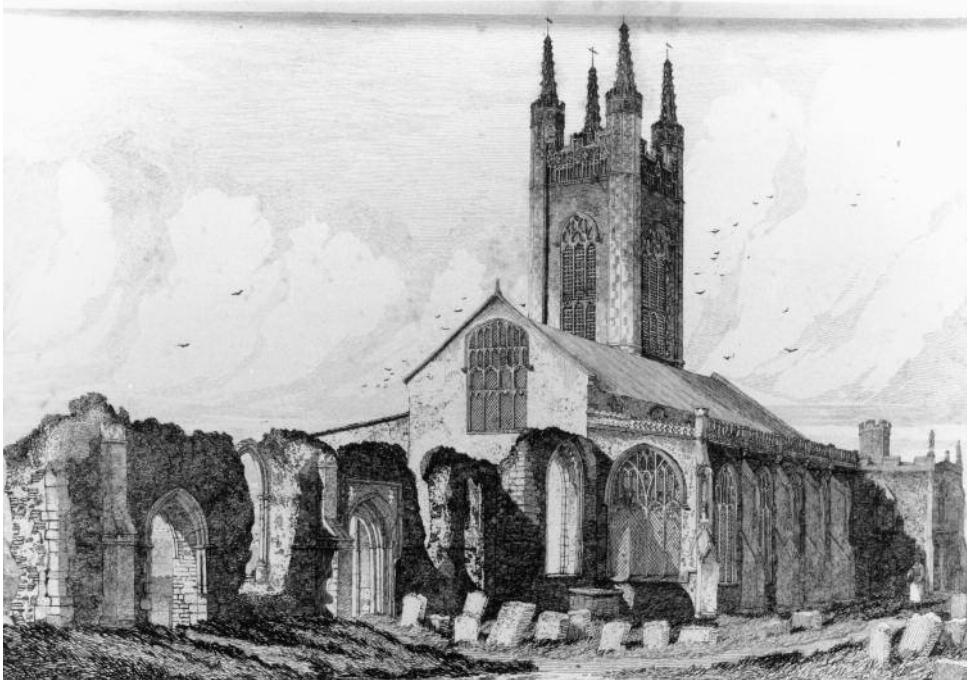
Davy returned in 1830 to find that the vestry of 1819 had been added, the east window had been filled in 1827 with coats of arms in painted glass, the gift of the Duke of Norfolk, and the pulpit had been moved from its position on the south side of the nave to the centre of the church, in front of the communion rails.

In November 1838 what later became the Incorporated Church Building Society gave a grant of £100 to provide additional seating for 245 people – 125 places were to be free of pew-rents – and in 1850 the town provided money for the south aisle wall to be refaced and its windows to be lengthened downwards, where the mediaeval cloisters had once joined the church.

In 1862–65, under the direction of Thomas Jeckyll of Norwich, a restoration took place which revealed the stone mouldings of the north aisle windows, hidden by plaster for years, the small north doorway was discovered and also a rood-loft staircase in the south aisle wall. The blocked porch windows were reopened and reglazed, and the altarpiece was replaced by the present stone panelling and reredos – the work of Mr Henry Nursey of Bungay.

During 1879 the church was closed for several months whilst further restoration took place, this time to the designs of Richard M Phipson,





Church and ruins from the north-east, by Henry Davy, c.1840 (Photograph J K Clayden)

which included extensive repairs to the tower by Messrs Cornish & Gaymer of North Walsham, and to the roofs of the church with wood supplied by Robert Morris of Ditchingham. Those present at the reopening service by the Bishop of Norwich on 25 November would have seen the church transformed internally by the removal of the galleries in the south aisle and at the west end, and also of the tall box pews, which had been temporarily replaced by chairs.

The new oak benches did not arrive until 1904–06, and since that time much has been done to enhance and maintain St Mary's. Both Bungay churches had their own parishes and parish priests until 1946 when Canon W M Lummis, who had been vicar of Holy Trinity since 1941, took charge of the new united benefice. Holy Trinity had been influenced by the ideals of the Oxford Movement and had developed a moderate Prayer Book Catholic tradition, whilst St Mary's had always remained

on 'the low side of middle' in its churchmanship. In 1977 however it was decided that Bungay should have one parish church and, accordingly, St Mary's retired from full-time parochial use. In 1981 it was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) to be conserved by and for the Church and the Nation as a sacred, beautiful and historic building. Since then extensive work has been carried out on its maintenance and repair, under the direction of its appointed architects, initially Mr Neil Birdsall and subsequently Ruth Blackman, of Birdsall, Swash & Blackman.

EXTERIOR

St Mary's stands in a large and interesting churchyard, parts of which were once occupied by the priory buildings. Its crowning glory is the magnificent **tower**, set at the west end of the south aisle, which is a masterpiece of 15th-century design – graceful, elegant and handsomely proportioned. It is the first of a series of East Anglian towers, all built with octagonal buttresses at the corners which are carried above the parapets to terminate as pinnacles. Others in the area are at Eye, Redenhall and Laxfield. These towers, built under the patronage of John de la Pole of Wingfield, Duke of Suffolk and Thomas de Brotherton, Earl of Norfolk, incorporate leopards and roses in their decorative work – seen here in the stone frieze beneath the west window of the tower and in the leopard which stands guard on the north aisle parapet. Wymondham Abbey has a western tower of similar construction and Dedham in Essex has a slightly later tower in the series. It is highly probable that Reginald Ely – the first master mason of King's College Chapel, Cambridge and one of the outstanding architects of the 15th century – had a hand in the design of the Bungay tower. He made bequests to the church in his will, including 15s. for the Church to 'Pray for the souls of me and my wife' – so it is possible that he may have lived in Bungay.

The tower is worth examining in detail, especially its western face, where there is flint-and-stone 'flushwork' panelling in the base-course and lower parts of the buttresses and also over the

west window. Here is the crowned 'M' – an emblem formed so that it incorporates all the letters of 'Maria' – in honour of the church's patron saint. There is exquisite stonecarving in the frieze beneath the west window and in the embattled parapets. The comparatively low-set west window of c.1450 and the shallow stage above, with its clock-face on the west and intricately-patterned 'sound-holes' to provide light and ventilation for the ringers, draw the eye upwards to the lofty bell-chamber, with its tall three-light windows, the traceried stone parapet and the distinctive corner-turrets with their own embattled parapets and crocketed spirelets, crowned with vanes added in 1778. The tower is 90 ft (27.4 m) high to the top of the battlements (87 ft 6 in (26.7 m) to be exact from the present ground-level on the south side) and the weathervanes are about 110 ft (35.5 m) above Bungay. A newel staircase of 40 steps inside the south-west buttress gives access to the clock-chamber, from which further ascent to the bells and the parapet is by means of another newel staircase of 75 steps in the north-east buttress.

The clock, by Gillett of Croydon, was given by the Town at a cost of £123 in 1884, although the present dial dates from 1923. The ring of eight bells was cast by Thomas Mears II of Whitechapel in 1820 and retuned, quarter-tuned and rehung in a new frame by Taylors of Loughborough in 1969. The tenor bell weighs 15¾ cwt (800 kg).

The west front c.1840 by Henry Davy. The south aisle was restored in 1850 and the clock replaced in 1884 – otherwise little has changed (Photograph J K Clayden)

The west wall of the **nave** is pierced by a magnificent seven-light window. This attempt by early-15th-century craftsmen to go as far as they dared to create walls of glass has a height of 28 ft (8.5 m), a breadth of 16 ft (4.9 m) and occupies a remarkable amount of the surface area of the west end. Its upper half is an amazing display of tracery design, combining the grid-like patterns of the Perpendicular style with the intersecting arcs of the 14th-century Decorated style of architecture. Beneath it is the great west doorway and on the wall to the north is an oval wall plaque to Thomas Bardwell, a local painter and pioneer of the 'conversation piece'. Its two cherubs have remained but the inscription has completely eroded away. It reads

*'Thomas Bardwell, portrait painter.
Died Sept. 9th 1767, aged 63'*

St Andrew's Hall, Norwich contains nine portraits of mayors of Norwich, painted by him between 1747 and 1765.

Nearly opposite the west door is a large stone which probably arrived in the Ice Age. It is still called the **Druid's stone** and it was the custom for children to dance round it 12 times to raise the Evil One. Some think that it is a Ley or Direction stone. It may have marked the site of a pagan temple or meeting place before the first church was built on the site.

The **south aisle** was refaced with flints in 1850 and following years, when the late Perpendicular three-light windows were lengthened downwards

by some 6 ft (1.8 m). In mediaeval times the north walk of the priory cloisters was set against this wall, the windows being short and high-set so as to be above the roof of this northern side of a quadrangle of covered corridors which gave access to the main monastery buildings, including the church. Foundations of the cloisters remain beneath the churchyard.

The **vestry** was erected in 1819 and its window has very basic intersecting tracery in wood. The **east wall** has a high-set window which was probably constructed after the priory was dissolved in 1536, although there could well have been a window here above the roof of what was probably a much lower monastic quire.

Further east are **remains of the priory** both above and below ground. What can now be seen in the doorways, and more especially the carved stonework in the remains of the windows and arches of these ruins, is predominantly work of the 13th and early 14th centuries, and is earlier than the nave and aisles. There appear to have been short transepts eastwards of the nave and much of the north wall of the long eastern arm of the great church remains.

The **north aisle** is a noble piece of craftsmanship from the early decades of the 15th century, with



INTERIOR

its stone parapet of quatrefoils and shields and beautiful open-work cresting (seen also at Blythburgh), although only one of the pinnacles which once crowned it – that at the north-west corner – remains. Beneath it are intriguing carved heads, including a dog, a face with a hand holding open its mouth and, at the eastern corner, a little kneeling figure in armour. The walls are strengthened and enhanced by elegant buttresses with sloping gables, the gable ends resting upon tiny carved faces, and also niches with pedestals for their former statues. Towards the east end is a small doorway, giving access to the chapel here, with its own holy water stoup nearby.

The fine two-storeyed **porch** has a large holy water stoup and the blocked remains of another flanking its outer entrance, where in the spandrels each side of the arch are a knight with a lion and a lion with a mouse. From the corners of the parapet a chained begging monkey and a hound with folded paws peer out. Inside, the vaulted stone roof is studded with bosses, the central one displaying the Instruments of the Passion, surrounded by eight little angel faces. The north door incorporates ancient studded panels which came from a 16th-century house in Earsham Street. Many years ago this porch was used as a schoolroom for Bungay children; in the winter they were taught in the parvise (or priest's chamber) above.

The absence of a structural chancel here creates an interior of unusual proportions, but emphasises the considerable height of the nave and the great breadth of the building (63 ft/ 19.2 m), which is not far short of its length of 72 ft (21.9 m). Plenty of light floods in through the windows – much of their glass was replaced after damage during the Second World War – and particularly through the great west window.

Late-14th-century **arcades** divide the aisles from the nave, the eastern arch on each side being narrower than the rest. The clerestory above is pierced by comparatively humble two-light windows. Some of the timber framework of the **roofs** is 15th century, especially in the north aisle, although a great deal of renewal took place after damage by the great fire of 1688 – especially in the south aisle roof, where the date of its completion (1699) appears on one of the 18 carved bosses and four half-bosses which adorn it. Also here are a harp, a trumpeting angel, a lion, etc. The north aisle roof is studded with 32 carved bosses and four half-bosses, including two at the west pointing fingers eastwards; amongst the variety of designs, some of which are mediaeval, are two-headed eagles, a skull and crossbones and a splendid bat.

Near the entrance is a carved wooden **dole cupboard**, where bread was left for collection by the poor. Although restored in the 19th century, it bears the date 1675 and a rebus (a kind of pun) of a large 'Q' and a rat, for Curate, with his initials, and also mitred bishops



View through the arcade to the north aisle and chapel (Boris Baggs)

being pulled downwards by hands. The **font** dates from c. 1700 and is attractive craftsmanship of the period, with cherubs and roses on its bowl and a fluted stem. Its cover is partly 18th century and partly of 1925. It is interesting that both Bungay churches have 18th-century fountains, which are not common in East Anglia.

The ancient **stone bowl** on the floor nearby is thought to be part of a Saxon or Norman font; it was discovered near the staithe in 1924. Fixed to the wall is a **lead panel**, preserved from the north aisle roof when it was stripped in 1950, and bearing the names of the churchwardens and of the plumber who laid it. The oak **benches** were installed between 1904 and 1906. Behind the western nave benches are two **chests** – the northern one has characteristic carving of the 17th century, whilst its southern partner is probably a century later. The **pulpit** dates from c. 1700.

Several **memorials** on the walls and in the floors commemorate people of the past who were part of this church and town. Some 18th-century ledger-slabs may be seen in the southern aisle floor and elsewhere, but the wall plaques on the north aisle wall are especially worth pausing to admire and read. That to Robert Scales, who gave an organ to the church and who died in 1728, was praised by the sculptor Thomas Scheemakers when on a visit to Bungay to work on the Wilson monument at Holy Trinity. Thomas Rawlins of Norwich made the tablet to Peregre Brown (1743). Also commemorated are Edward Cooper (1764), Henry Williams (1773) and Thomas Miller, a bookseller, who died in 1804. The arch of the **small doorway** in this aisle is attractively framed with carved foliage spandrels.

The War Memorial Chapel at the east end of this aisle has a 17th-century Flemish **carving of**



Left: Interior looking east with the high altar (Boris Baggs)

Right: The remarkable wooden dole cupboard of 1675 (Boris Baggs)



high-set east window above the sanctuary is the work of two glassmakers. The angels with musical instruments in the upper section are the work of J Powell & Sons, whilst the scenes below, of Our Lord's Baptism, Transfiguration, Crucifixion and Ascension are the work of E Baillie of London, given c. 1870 by the Revd G R Wales of Ditchingham in memory of his aunt.

The **high altar** and its gradine are a memorial to Sidney Owles (a churchwarden), who died in 1933, and were designed by H Munro Cautley, the Diocesan Architect and authority on East Anglian churches. Lining the lower part of the east wall are Henry Nursey's stone panelling and **reredos** of the 1860s, with the Ten Commandments and the 'IHS' monogram of Our Lord's name central.

The **organ** was rebuilt by J W Walker of London in 1901 and underwent further restoration in 1925 and 1962, when more pipes were added. It has two manuals, pedals and 21 speaking stops.

The eastern section of the south aisle once formed the Chapel of St Eligius – artisan and bishop in France in the 7th century and patron saint of smiths, farriers and metalworkers. All that remains of this is the elegant 15th-century **piscina** in the south wall. Although its recess is wide and its drain has two small holes, this is a single piscina, into which was poured the water from the washing of the priest's hands at the

Eucharist. Above the recess are a carved mitred head at the centre and griffins at the sides.

Some people come to see St Mary's not because of its architecture and fittings, but because of the **Legend of the Black Dog**. A terrible storm struck the town of Bungay on 4 August 1577, and from this event has come the legend of the Devil appearing in the form of a Black Dog in St Mary's church.

*'Alldown the church in midst of fire,
The hellish monster flew –
And passing onward to the quire
He many people slew.'*

A similar event took place at Blythburgh on the same day, where claw-marks were left on the door. It is certain, however, that if any had been left on the woodwork here at St Mary's, they would have been lost in the fire just over a century later.

the **Resurrection** forming the central panel of its reredos. This was the gift of Sir H Rider Haggard of Ditchingham House – the author of *King Solomon's Mines*. Also of the 17th century, but much restored, is the **communion table** here. The **communion rails**, here and in front of the high altar, were both given as memorials in 1924. A reminder of the mediaeval altar in this chapel is the **piscina** in the south wall.

Its carved stonework has been defaced, but enough remains to show that it was once very beautiful. The **glass** in the four-light east window of the chapel shows four of the Seven Acts of Mercy expected of Christ's followers. It is the work of Alexander Gibbs, who exhibited it in the London Exhibition before its installation here in 1863 – the gift of Richard Mann to commemorate members of his family. In the

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the national body that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that the church is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 330 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free.

A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

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

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All Saints, Ellough
2 miles S of Beccles

St Margaret, Hales
12 miles SE of Norwich and W of A146

St Gregory, Heckingham
12 miles SE of Norwich and 1 mile E of
Loddon off B1136

All Saints, South Elmham
5 miles S of Bungay

The Trust has also published a free Educational Booklet for teachers' use on school visits, with ideas for educational and community approaches linked to the National Curriculum. For further details and to obtain the Booklet contact the Education Officer by email: central@tcct.org.uk

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Simon Cotton and Eric King.

Right: View northwards towards the pulpit and north aisle (Boris Baggs)
Back cover: The font of c.1700 (Boris Baggs)

