



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

Little Wenham,
Suffolk



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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Little Wenham, Suffolk

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

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

INTRODUCTION

The small parish of Little Wenham, also known as Wenham Parva, covered some 940 acres (380 hectares) of rural Suffolk, the church and manor house being situated near its southern border with Capel St Mary. The railway branch line from Bentley Junction to Hadleigh crossed the parish, between Capel St Mary and Raydon Wood stations. Passengers used this line between 1847 and 1952 and it finally closed to goods traffic in 1965.

Wenham's name may well be derived from the Old English *Wynn*, meaning pasture, and *Ham*, indicating a settlement or estate. Little Wenham has always had a tiny population and has been in the care of the rector of Capel St Mary since 1786, although Capel (as its name signifies) was originally a chapel-of-ease to either Great or Little Wenham.

The main access route to the church is along the little road beside the *Queen's Head Inn* at Great Wenham, which becomes a track and, after 0.7 miles (1.1 km), reaches a glade with farm buildings, a large 16th-century brick and timber barn, and the church elevated on a small ridge. Having been known for some years during the 20th century as 'St Lawrence', in 1998 the church again resumed its original dedication to 'All Saints'.

*Front cover: Effigy of Sir John Brewse
(d. 1585)*

*Left: SS. Margaret, Catherine and Mary
Magdalene, south of the east window
(Boris Baggs)*





Exterior from the south-east in 1842, by Henry Davy

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHURCH

The beginnings and development of All Saints' are very closely linked with the nearby manor house, which stands in private grounds to the south of the churchyard, and is a rare and interesting survival of a late-13th-century fortified manor. It is a castle-like building of flint, mediaeval brick and dressed stone. It has a vaulted undercroft and storeroom at ground level and, at first floor level, the great hall, from which a stone screen leads to the chapel. Above the chapel is a small tower chamber. The design of the original windows and other features of the house are of the same period and style as the original work in the church. It is almost certain therefore that both church and manor house are the work of the same architect and craftsmen, working during the period 1260–80, when Early English was evolving into Decorated architecture.

The nave and chancel form the church as originally built and Robert Chapeleyn, Little Wenham's first recorded rector (although he doubtless had unrecorded predecessors), was

instituted in March 1307 to a beautiful and almost new parish church. It may have been during his 21-year incumbency that the east wall was adorned with its exquisite paintings and the font was installed.

During the 15th century the north nave wall was given a large three-light window, the south doorway was sheltered by a timber porch and the lower section of the western tower was built. Evidently work stopped on the tower for a few years and sometime in the early 16th century it was completed to a different design, with a simple belfry stage in red brick, which was cheaper and more easily obtainable than flint and stone.

The manor of Little Wenham was owned by the feudal baron, John de Vallibus (or Vaux), who died in 1287, but was held from him by Hubert de Muchensy, who may have been the builder of the church and manor house. The Debenham family acquired it in the mid-14th century and remained here for about 100 years. Gilbert de Debenham's will requested that he be buried in the south wall of the church (he died in 1371) and



Exterior from the south-west, c.1798, by John Constable

a later Gilbert Debenham in 1417 bequeathed 13s. 4d towards the building of the tower. Elizabeth Debenham's marriage to Sir Thomas Brewse of Topcroft, Norfolk (he died in 1514) began the Brewse family's long connection with Wenham. This was to last over 200 years, until 1695, when John Brewse sold the manor to Joseph Thurston, a Colchester barrister. He married Mary Rebow, daughter of the Recorder of Colchester and their younger son, Thomas, is believed to have been the last person to inhabit the old manor house. He sold the estate in 1765 and during the next 130 or so years the land was farmed by different people, part of the unoccupied manor house was used for storing grain, the parish lost its resident rector and the church became neglected.

A letter of 1558 in the Acts of Privy Council, concerning 'lewde and sydytious words' allegedly spoken by Sir Raff Backhouse, parish priest of Wenham Parva, ordered that, upon the next market day in Ipswich, he should be set in the pillory and one of his ears should be cut off, and that he should then be imprisoned, to await trial by the Justice of the Assizes.

During the Reformation in the mid-16th century, much of the colour and carving which adorned the mediaeval interior of the church was destroyed. Further destruction took place in 1643–44 at the hands of the Puritans, whose inspector, William Dowsing, recorded in his journal, 'Feb, the 3rd. Whenham Parva. We broke down 26 superstitious pictures [probably in glass] and gave order to break down 6 more: and to level the steps [in the chancel]. One picture was of the Virgin Mary'.

The antiquarian David Elisha Davy visited Little Wenham in 1807 and his notes give some idea of the interior of the church at that time. The roofs of the nave and chancel were hidden by plaster ceilings and at the west end was a small square gallery. The nave was furnished with box pews and seats, described as 'very ordinary' and to the north wall was fixed the royal coat of arms of Queen Anne. The stone screen dividing off the chancel was then more complete and Davy described a 'solid masonry screen, 1ft 4in (0.4m) thick and 4ft 10in (1.5m) high, above which, on each side [of] a pointed arch doorway, are 8 trefoil arches 2ft 10in (0.9m)

high, supported by 10 pair of plain round pillars, over which a wall rises 1ft 6in (0.5m)'.

In the chancel were oak seats with lions carved upon their ends and in its south-east window was a shield in stained glass. The communion table at the east end was neither raised upon a step nor protected by rails. On the east wall above it, in three compartments, were the Lord's Prayer, Creed and Ten Commandments.

When Davy paid a return visit in 1828, he noted that the ancient font had been taken away and replaced by a 'small wooden basin, elevated on three legs and movable, as the occasion requires', and also that the stone screen had been 'taken down to the height of the pews and the dead wall to that height still left'.

In 1878, under the Dilapidations Act of 1872, the chancel roof was repaired and the upper

part of the east wall was rebuilt. Between 1878 and 1892 one service was held each Sunday at 3pm, but this ceased in 1892 because the nave roof was dangerous. At about that time a meeting was called to decide upon the possible closure and demolition of the church. It appears that those present were strongly in favour of pulling the church down, until Mr John Keeble, a platelayer, who lived at the gate house beside the railway, stood up and exclaimed 'Let the old girl stand! 'Er be there for 600 years. Let 'er be!', which made such an impact that the building was saved. Mr Keeble died, aged 80, in 1899 and his gravestone may be seen in the churchyard. The condition of the church had deteriorated to such an extent that in 1899 the Registrar General had the marriage registers closed to further marriages and sent to Somerset House.

Towards the close of the 19th century, the Wenham estate was purchased by Frederick Arthur Crisp of Playford Hall, who set about putting the dilapidated manor house into good repair, carefully preserving and conserving its features, many of which had been hidden beneath a massive growth of ivy. When members of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology visited in 1901, great progress has been achieved at the house, but they noted at the church its 'fallen roof, broken-down pews and desecrated chancel, bearing all the signs of neglect'. There was a gaping hole in the roof and the three-light north nave window had lost its mullions and tracery.

It was Miss Rosa Crisp (the owner's sister) who came to the rescue of the church in 1903. Through her efforts the roof was renewed and relaid and the building restored. At this time the doorway to the rood-loft stairs was opened up, the nave piscina discovered and sufficient stonework from the discarded font was collected for it to be reconstructed. The architect for this work was almost certainly Mr John Shewell Corder of Ipswich, who restored several East Suffolk churches (e.g. Hepworth, Semer and Swilland) and historic houses. He was an authority on timber-framed buildings and was engaged by Mr Crisp to restore the mediaeval manor house nearby, and also two pairs of brick and timber estate cottages, one of which bears the date 1911.

Occasional services were held at All Saints' until 1976, when it was declared pastorally redundant. Because of its great historical value and interest, it was vested in June 1978 in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust. Since then repairs have been carried out under the direction of Mr Jack Earwaker and latterly under Mr Shawn Kholucy.



EXTERIOR

Remote at the end of a farm track, this remarkable collection of buildings forms a rare survival of rural England. A large Elizabethan brick and partly timber-framed barn faces the church, which is perched upon its ridge. Very little about the church, or its surroundings, has changed since Henry Davy of Ipswich etched its exterior from the south-east in 1842, or even since John Constable made a small pen, grey ink and watercolour picture of the building from the south-west about 1798. Steps ascend the steep bank to an unspoilt and beautiful churchyard, containing several chest tombs, some surrounded with iron railings.

The western **tower** is 45ft (19.4m) high and mostly 15th century (money was left towards it in 1417), but clearly it was never completed as planned. Its lower two stages show pleasing craftsmanship in flint and stone, with flushwork panelling around the base course and in the western diagonal buttresses. Above the elegant triple Perpendicular west window is a trefoil-headed niche for a statue. Small single windows light the stage above on three sides. During the 16th century the belfry stage and parapet were added in mellow Tudor brick. Even the staircase vice on the south side was completed in brick; it is lit by tiny quatrefoil openings.

The **nave** and **chancel**, beneath a continuous tiled roof, were constructed c.1260–80, almost certainly by the masons who built the manor house. The walls are punctuated by horizontal

string courses beneath the windows and are strengthened by gabled buttresses. Beneath the gable ends, at the four corners, carved corbel faces peer out – creatures with pointed ears at the east and human faces at the west, the north-western one having curly hair, a fine set of teeth and a grin.

The three doorways are late 13th century, as are many of the windows. On the north side of the chancel is a single lancet window, its smaller lower section forming a low-side window, once equipped with a shutter to enable a bell to be rung at the climax of the daily Eucharist, so that workers in the fields could pause and join in prayer. The three-light east window has plate tracery, adorned with delicate cusping which is visible from inside. The other original windows have simple ‘Y’ tracery. About 150 years later, the north nave wall received its large three-light Perpendicular window and a former window to the east of the central buttress was blocked to accommodate the rood-loft staircase inside. The short high-set six-light window in the south wall of the chancel is entirely work of c.1903.

In the stonework of the buttress to the east of the porch are four mediaeval mass dials, used to calculate the times of services before the days of clocks. Above these is the metal gnomon for a much larger sundial, probably of 18th century date.

The rustic timber **porch**, has a brick base of c.1800, but some of its original 15th-century

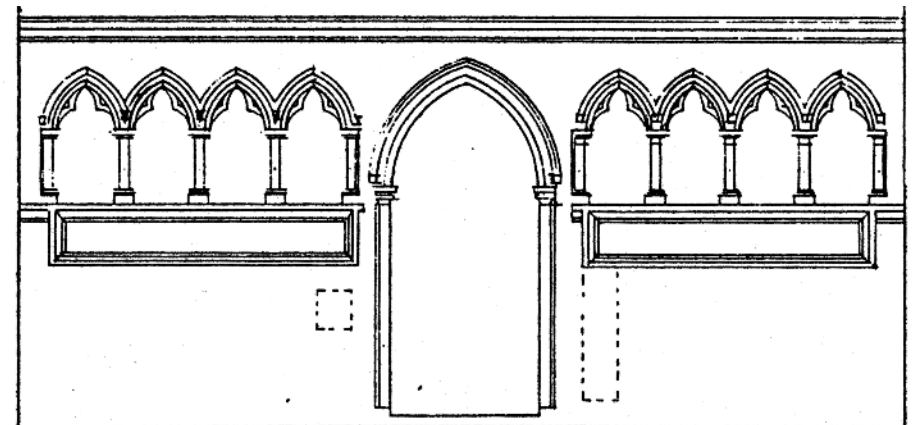
INTERIOR

timbers survive. In its sides are turned balusters added in the 17th century and above the entrance are three simple decorative niches cut into the timbers. Slots each side of the entrance suggest that it was once equipped with a sheep-gate, like that still in use at the Trust’s church at Badley, some 13 miles (21km) to the north, near Stowmarket. A brick near where the eastern seat joins the wall bears names of workmen who repaired the porch in the late 19th century. In the stonework of the doorway, amidst later and less welcome graffiti, is a mediaeval pilgrim’s cross.

*Wenham Parva stone rood screen taken down c.1820.
(This drawing by Mr Birkin Haward is reproduced with his kind permission)*

This single-celled nave and chancel, measuring some 56ft (17.1m) in length and 20ft (6.1m) in width, contains a variety of interesting features of different periods. The interior is beautifully light and the absence of superfluous furnishings creates in this small church the impression of space and dignity.

Beside the entrance is a recess for a **holy water stoup**, where mediaeval people made the sign of the Cross in holy water (as an act of cleansing and rededication) upon entering the building. Nearby stands the early-14th-century **font**, its plain octagonal bowl resting upon a central pillar and eight hexagonal shafts. Having been removed from the church sometime between 1807 and 1828, it was rediscovered and pieced together in 1903.



In the base of the tower is a late-18th-or early-19th-century bier, which was used to transport coffins at funerals. On the south wall hangs a framed **photograph** of Mr John Keeble in his billycock hat. It was his lone intervention which saved this church from demolition in the late 19th century. In the nave wall above the tower arch is a small **sanctus bell opening**, which gave a ringer in the tower a direct view of the high altar, so that he could sound the church bell to announce the Sanctus and the consecration at the Eucharist. The present bell weighs 3cwt 1qtr 11lb (170kg) and was cast in 1714 at Thomas Gardiner's Sudbury bellfoundry. The west window shows the considerable thickness (about 4ft (1.2m)) of the tower walls.

The simple table now used for literature dates from the 17th or early 18th century and, like some of the other furnishings, was provided from Wenham Hall by the Crisp family. On the north wall nearby are two pieces of 17th-century woodwork which formed the door and part of the side of a former **box pew**. The **Lord's Prayer**, painted on a board in 18th-century lettering, with the injunction to 'Pray without ceasing', was originally placed, together with the Creed and Commandments, on the east wall of the chancel.

On the north wall, opposite the entrance, is a 15th-century **wall painting of St Christopher**, which is now very much faded, but still faintly shows the saint's curly hair and the Christ Child



whom he carries, with a darkened halo and a hand raised in blessing. People going on journeys would need only to open the church door in order to see the patron saint of travellers and ask him to intercede for their safety. Mrs Eve Baker, who conserved the wall paintings in 1960, discovered evidence of an earlier painting of the Virgin and Child beneath St Christopher.

The present single-framed and braced **roof** was entirely renewed in 1903, although the two **tie beams** which span the nave are much older. Most of the **seating** in the nave has been brought in from elsewhere, apart from the two 16th-century rear benches, which have Elizabethan linenfold panelling.

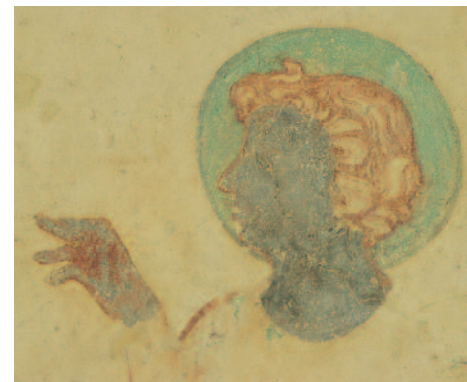
The 18th-century **pulpit** has the 'IHS' monogram of Our Lord's name, set beneath a 'Glory' (the sun's rays) in simple marquetry, and also an attractive curved stairway, with twisted balusters. In the north wall nearby is the Tudor brick **staircase** which led to the rood loft, that once projected into the nave above the screen

Left: The 18th-century pulpit

Right: St Mary Magdalene (Boris Baggs)

Below: The Christ child (Boris Baggs)

and beneath the great crucifix, with Our Lady and St John at the foot of the cross, reminding mediaeval people of the central fact of their faith – Christ crucified. All that now remains of the rood complex is the base of the **screen**, which is a rare example of a stone screen (or, more accurately, rubble covered with plaster). A stone screen also separates the chapel of St Petronilla in the nearby manor house and another may be seen in Bramford church, near Ipswich. The upper stage, with its two-light openings and central entrance arch, was removed sometime between 1807 and 1828. The rectangular panels each side formed reredoses to the side altars once here. In the south wall nearby is a **piscina** for the disposal of water from the washing of the hands of the priests ministering at the south altar. Its northern counterpart may have been in the small **recess** just east of the rood-loft staircase entrance.



There was originally a piscina for the high altar in the south wall of the sanctuary but John Brewse's (1585) monument has replaced it. West of this monument is a single **sedile**, beneath a late-13th-century arch, which provided a seat for the priest during parts of the Eucharist in mediaeval times.

The large monumental recess in the north wall opposite may well have also served as an **Easter Sepulchre**, into which the Sacrament was ceremonially placed on Good Friday, where it remained until Easter, symbolising our Lord's burial in the tomb.

The **communion rails**, with twisted 'barley-sugar' balusters in late-17th-century style, were added when the church was restored in 1903, as was the present **altar table**. The chancel floor is paved with 18th-century square pavers and early-19th-century bricks. Its south-western area however retains its **mediaeval encaustic tiles**, a few of which still have traces of the yellow and black glaze which adorned them.



MONUMENTS and MEMORIALS

This church has several fine memorials, commemorating people of the past, as follows:

- In the south nave wall is a large **late-14th-century tomb recess** with an elaborate canopy, its arch cinquefoil-headed and sub-cusped, with foliage in the spandrels. Above is an ogee-shaped canopy, terminating in a finial which reaches to the roof and is flanked by traceried panelling and tall pinnacles. The tomb chest has four quatrefoils containing shields. This may be the tomb of Gilbert de Debenham, who died in 1371, having requested burial beneath the south wall. In 1960 Mrs Eve Baker discovered very faint traces of a wall painting of Jesus, with arms outstretched and flanked by angels, in this recess.

- A **16th-century tomb recess** fills the north sanctuary wall. The tomb chest, which has three shields within lozenges, is set beneath a Tudor arch. The upper part of the recess is panelled inside and above it is a bas-relief of the Brewse arms, with a helm, a Saracen's head crest, and also three blank shields each side.

- This tomb recess now frames a **marble plaque** to John Brewse (d.1785) who was Colonel Commandant of the Corps of Engineers. This was placed here after the Brewses had sold the estate.

- Beside the chancel wall is a stone **coffin lid** of late-13th- or early-14th-century date, with a cross carved in relief. This probably covered the body of a priest.

What must be the most wonderful of all the surviving mediaeval colour here may be seen on the east wall, each side of the window, in a remarkable set of **wall paintings**, created for the newly-built wall c. 1280–1310. Nearly 700 years of existence have caused the faces of the people portrayed to oxidise and turn black, and some of the other colours to fade or change. Much of the vitality and detail of these characters and their costumes remains however. On the north side the Blessed Virgin Mary carries her son – both with curly hair. He is reaching for the branch which she holds in her other hand and they are flanked by two figures. Of the beautiful canopy above them only the green leaves of the crockets remain, along with the cinquefoil-headed arch above their heads. On the south side, beneath richly crocketed canopies, with gabled windows above, are three female saints with their emblems, their brown hair showing beneath their veils. On the left is St Margaret of Antioch, her spear plunged into the dragon's gaping mouth. In the centre, St Catherine carries the spiked wheel of her martyrdom. To the right is St Mary Magdalene, with the alabaster pot of precious ointment with which she anointed Jesus.

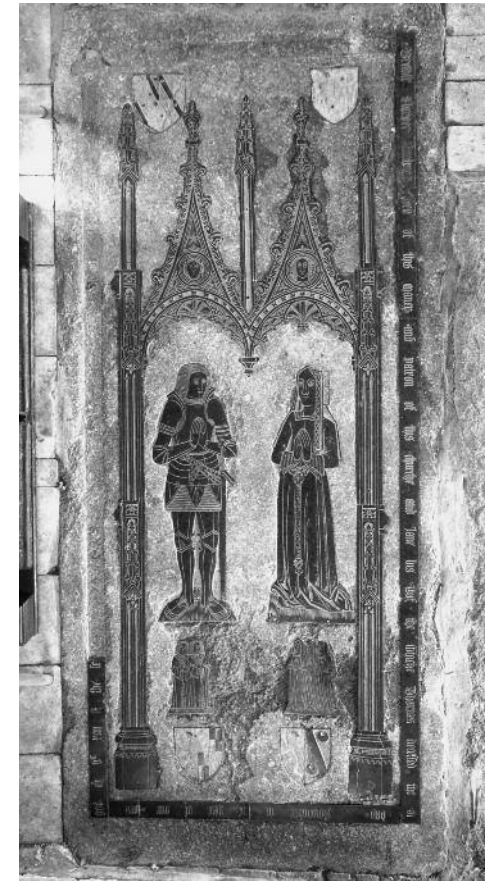
Left: 14th-century tomb, possibly of Gilbert de Debenham, in the south nave wall (© English Heritage. NMR)

Right: The brass of Thomas (d.1514) and Jane Brewse (© English Heritage. NMR)

- In the south wall of the sanctuary is the **monument to John Brewse**, who died in 1585. He kneels upon a cushion beneath a small Classical arch. His effigy, dressed in armour, with sword and spurs, is beautifully preserved, with its colour carefully renewed. The surrounding stonework is painted to resemble figured marble. Two shields with coats of arms flank the recess and there are three more on the pediment above. When John Constable made an ink drawing of this monument in 1798, it had iron railings.

- Above the priest's door, Alice Walker (who was related to the Brewses) has a marble **cartouche plaque**, with a cherubs' heads and a garland, a Latin inscription and an English epitaph to her in verse. She died in 1683.

- In the chancel floor is the magnificent **brass** of Thomas Brewse (1514) and Jane his wife, which is remarkable because it is almost complete. It measures 7ft 3in (2.2m) by 3ft (0.9m) and the two effigies are 2ft 4in (0.7m) tall. Thomas wears Tudor armour and Jane wears a long dress with fur cuffs and collar, a kennel headdress and veil. Beneath them are their two sons and their three long-haired daughters. The effigies are set beneath elaborate double crocketed and pinnacled canopies, which have survived complete and contain two human faces in roundels. Four shields display the arms of the Brewses and their alliances in marriage. Around the edge of the slab is a border (part of which is missing) with the inscription.



The five **ledger slabs** in the sanctuary floor as follows:

- The southern slab is now illegible, but may be for Miss Mary Thurston and her brother Thomas (he died in 1771).
- Joseph Thurston (1714) and Mary, eldest daughter of Sir Isaac Rebow (1736).
- William, son of Sir John Brewse (1677) and Dorothy, née Hobart (1710).
- Children of Joseph and Mary Thurston – Joseph (1732, aged 28), Ann (1732, aged 29), Elizabeth (1700, aged 12 days) and Leming (1703, aged 28 days).
- Dame Susannah Brewse (1660), wife of Sir John Brewse.

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity 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.

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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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St Mary, Akenham
3 miles N of Ipswich off A45

St Peter, Claydon
4 miles NW of Ipswich off A45

St Mary-at-the-Quay, Ipswich
Junction of Key Street and Foundation Street,
SE of town centre, near the docks

St Mary, Washbrook
3 miles W of Ipswich off A1071

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*Right: The east end, looking through the stone screen
Back cover: The Virgin and Child, north of the east window (Boris Baggs)*

