

THE CHURCH OF ST SAVIOUR SURLINGHAM



Fig. 1. Interior looking west

An Architectural History

GR: 630790, 306753

Stephen Heywood FSA
Heritage and Landscape
Department of Planning and Transportation
Norfolk County Council

January 2008

The Church of St Saviour, Surlingham

Introduction

This church is situated on the edge of the marsh a short distance away from the church of St Mary and the centre of the village of Surlingham. The building is a ruin with most of its walls visible but reduced. Until recently (2005) the building was so completely covered in ivy and brambles that any interpretation of the building was very difficult. The parish cut the ivy and cleared the undergrowth and the Heritage and Landscape team, at the invitation of the parish, surveyed the building and were able to establish its considerable significance architecturally as an early Norman aisleless church with an unusual plan of an apse springing directly from a buttressed tower or barrel-vaulted choir. Later alterations were the demolition of the apse and its replacement with a much longer late medieval chancel.

A local trust is intent on consolidating the building and bringing it back into use as an asset to the village as an occasional place of worship during the summer months and a place of special interest in natural surroundings on raised land with the marsh and river below.

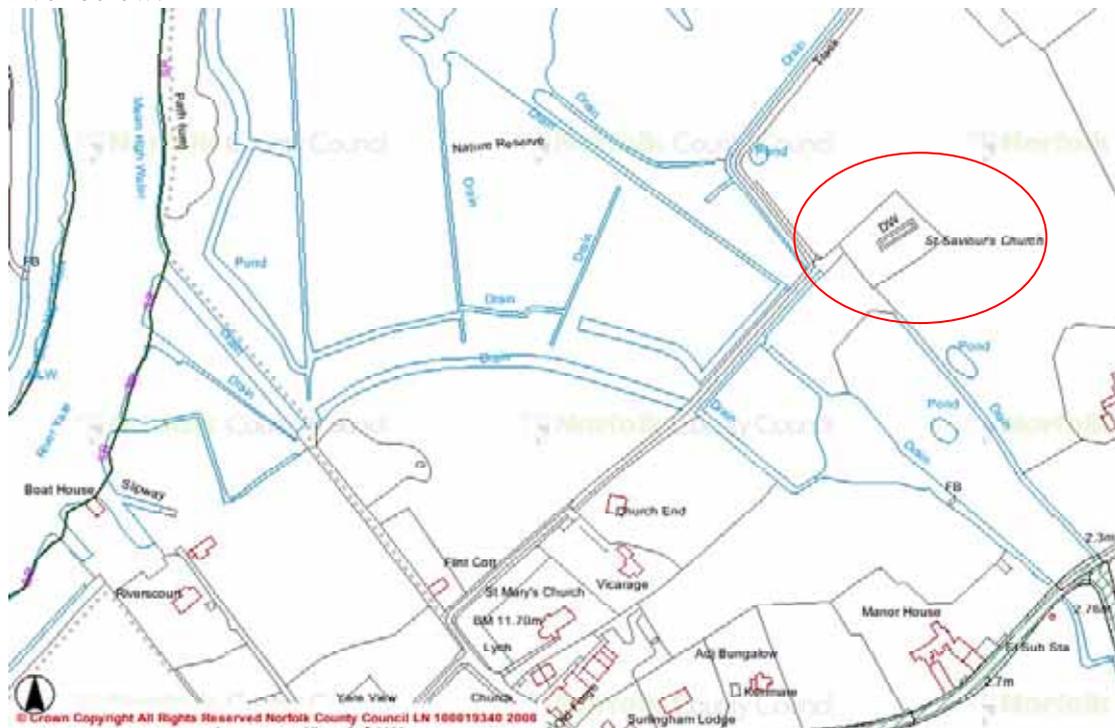


Fig.2 Location

The status of the church of St Saviour was not subsidiary to St Mary as it is today. It was a parish church in its own right carrying out baptisms and burials. In the late 13th century the patroness, Maud de Multon, gave the advowson to the Prioress and nuns of Carrow and it was appropriated to the nunnery who received the tithes and appointed a chaplain with a stipend from them. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries the church continued in use as a distinct perpetual curacy with a barn and 30 acres of glebe. By the early 18th century the population of the parish had declined and in about 1705 an agreement was reached with the church of St Mary. The owner or 'impropriator' of St Saviour pays a rent for which he can continue to enjoy the tithes and glebes belonging to the parish. The service was moved to St Mary's and the church started to become a ruin accelerated by the robbing of materials. In 1726

Francis Blomefield visited the parish and in his notes, published by C L S Linnell, makes the following comments on St Saviour's:

From Blofield I Cros'd Surlingham ferry and saw there the ruins of the old parocjial chapell of St Saviour standing all alone on ye side of a hill.... This church seems not to have been disused many years. The Stepps on which the font stood are left and severall stones in the church overgrown with bushes, briars etc.¹

The Building

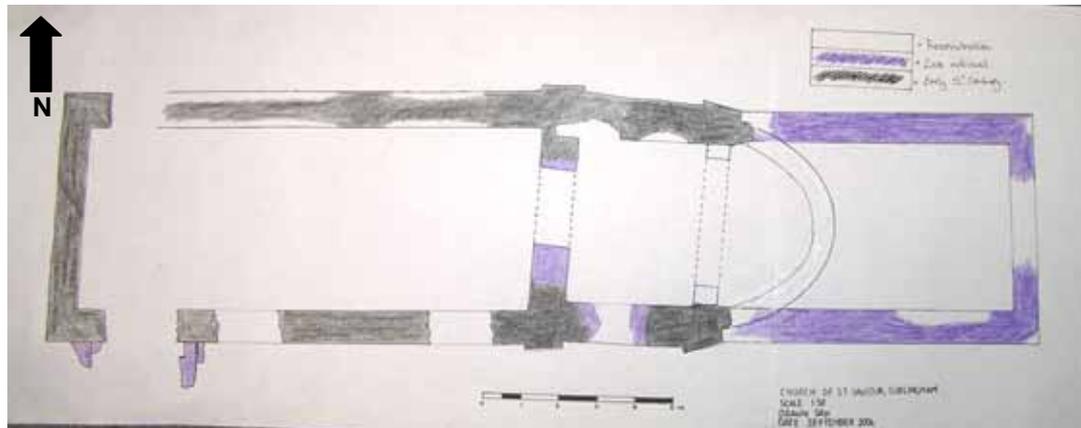


Fig. 3 Plan

The plan of the church had become clearly discernable in 2004 when the ivy was cut back and sections of the ivy trunks removed (Fig.3). The plan is of an aisleless nave with a choir area to its east entered through an arch. The arch is of later fabric but the original flint responds for an arch survive behind the 15th-century brick (fig. 1). At the eastern side of the choir was another arch where the responds have been cut away. Careful examination reveals breaks where the flint courses are discontinued and the

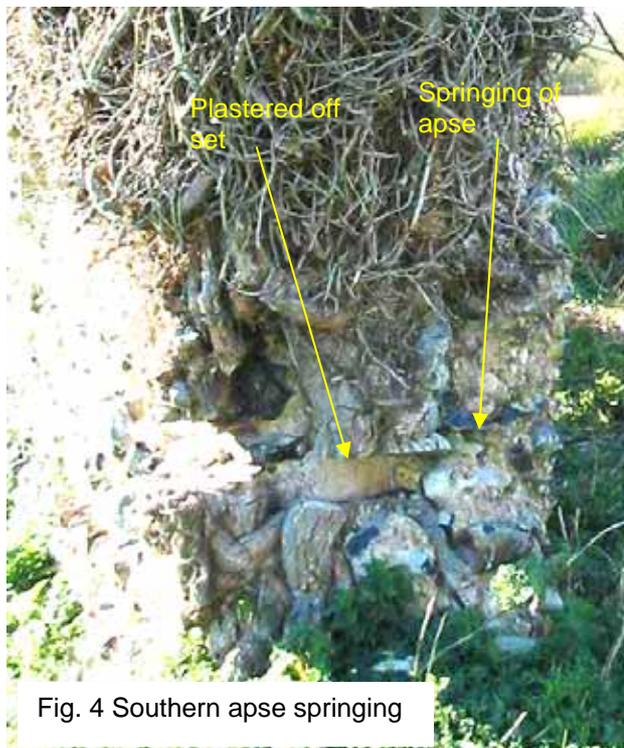


Fig. 4 Southern apse springing

slight roughness discernable leaves no doubt of the former responds. They were cut away when the chancel was rebuilt and extended in the 15th century. An apse terminated the original building. The springings for the apse and the plastered offset were noticed for the first time by the removal of a section of ivy trunk and by the falling away of the remains of the late medieval chancel where it abuts the original work (Fig. 4).

The plan (fig. 3) shows that the area defined by the arches has its north and south walls wider than those of the nave and furthermore the arches are reinforced by shallow buttresses. This has led

most commentators to claim that the walls supported a tower. In relation to this claim several observations need to be made:

- Axial towers are a fairly common early Norman plan type of which there are twenty examples in Norfolk.² However, they never had an apse springing directly from the tower. There was always a straight bay before the turning of the apse. For example, the recently re-excavated chancel at Bawsey St James or the published examples at Guestwick and Framingham Earl.³
- The arches to the east and west were not wider than the nave walls. If there was a tower they too would have been wider.
- In the 15th century the new chancel was added. This work included the removal of the east responds and the rebuilding of the west responds. If there was a tower the removal of the arch responds would probably have necessitated the complete demolition of the tower as the east side of the tower would have been supported on the arch.

The conclusion is that there was no tower and that the wide walls were to support a stone barrel vault and the apse would have had a semi dome. An arrangement such as existed at St Saviour's survives locally at Fritton near Great Yarmouth (figs 5 & 6).



The chancel arch in this example has been altered but the original barrel vault and semi-dome survive.

In the 15th century the chancel was greatly enlarged. The east wall stands with a few remnants of tracery remaining in the former east window. The side walls have fallen to ground level almost. Also from a later period are the remains of a porch to the south, facing, presumably, the site of the former village.

Materials

The facing of the Norman walls is of large flints roughly broken into blocks and laid in very even courses. Free stone has not been employed due to the expense of importing stone from other regions and the quoins and dressings are of roughly knapped large flints. The cores of the walls are a mixture of mortar and flint rubble (fig. 7). The Norman masonry has received no consolidation or repointing since it was built about 900 years ago. Careful observation reveals hairline horizontal cracks every few courses representing the levelling off on the top of the section of wall reached during building. The mortar hardens before the wall is continued and leaves the barely perceptible 'lift lines'. The careful plotting of these lines would reveal the different stages in the building of the church (fig.8).



Fig. 7 Quoins and coursed masonry to nave west wall

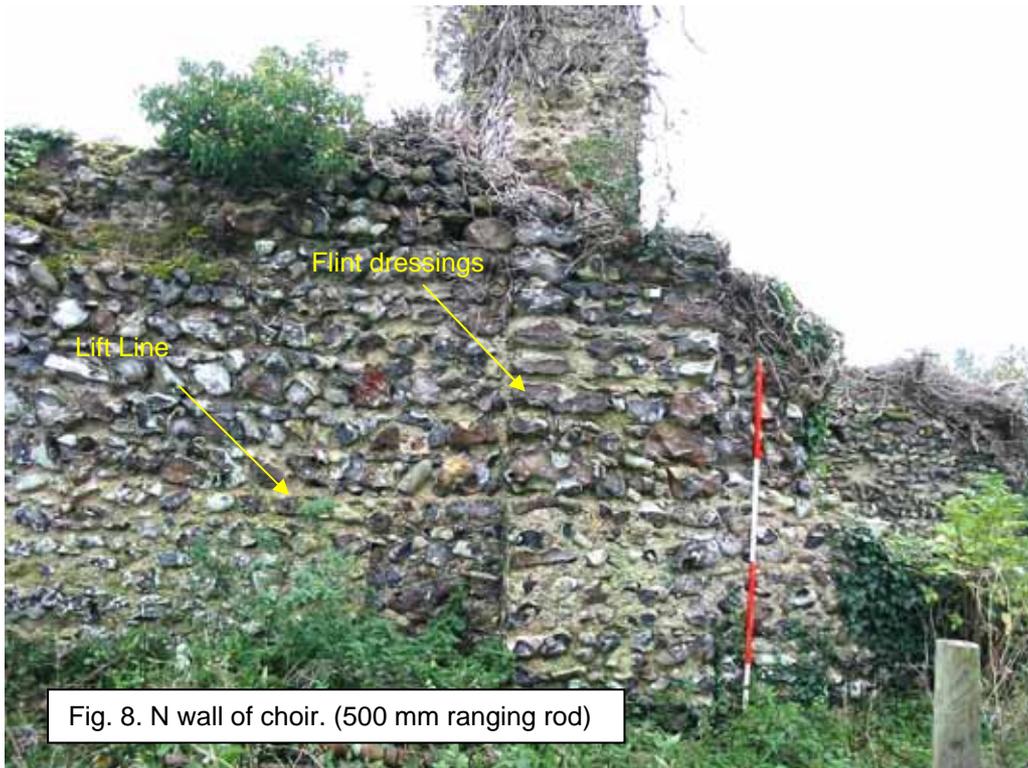


Fig. 8. N wall of choir. (500 mm ranging rod)

The size and quality of the flints used for the building are of remarkable quality and from a mined source in the area. It is interesting that St Mary's Surlingham and the two churches at Kirby Bedon are all of a similar early 12th century date and used this same quality of flint, it all coming from the same productive seam in the area.

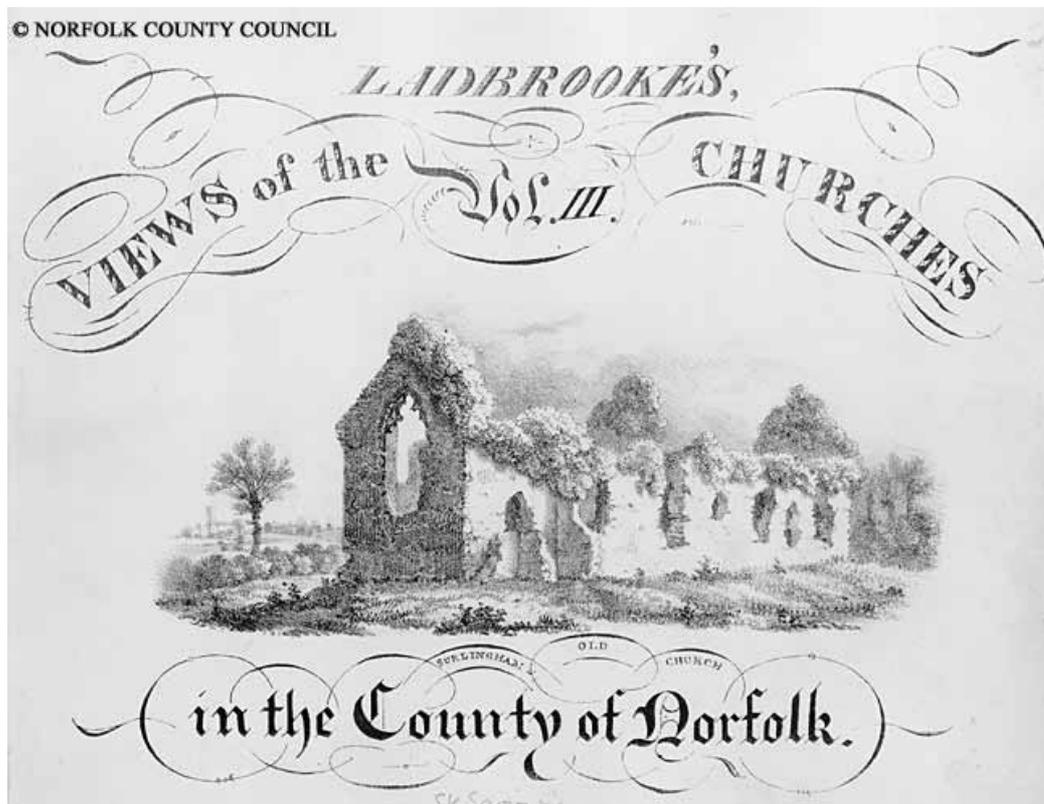


Fig. 9 Ladbrooke's lithograph. View from the north east. 1824

Ladbrooke's view of St Saviour's shows that there was much more of the church surviving in the 1820s than there is today. Although clearly an attractive ruin the walls are shown to be standing up to the former eaves level and the gables are quite distinct. The engraving shows the remains of a porch to a priest's doorway in the north wall of the chancel and some tracery remaining in the east window. The fact that this lithograph of a ruin was chosen for the frontispiece of Ladbrooke's third volume of Norfolk Churches shows that ruins have a special fascination for his public and this romantic association remains strong to this day.

¹ C L S Linnell, 'Some notes on the Blomefield Mss. In the Bodleian Library', *Norfolk Record Society*, 22, 1951. The notes on St Saviour's repeated in N Batcock, 'The Ruined and Disused Churches of Norfolk', *East Anglian Archaeology*, 51, 1991, p.132.

² See S R Heywood, 'Round-towered churches' in *An Historical Atlas of Norfolk*, 3rd edition 2005, Chichester, ch. 29,

³ A Rogerson *et al.*, 'Three Norman Churches in Norfolk' *East Anglian Archaeology*, 32, 1987