

ST MARY'S CHURCH, WASHBROOK, SUFFOLK



In Saxon times this area was called Great Belstead, while the present village of Belstead lay in Little Belstead.

The oldest surviving part of the church is indicated by the tiny Norman windows in the north and south walls but there is such an aura of sanctity about the spot that it could well be that this was a sacred place well before Christianity found its way into this secluded valley. Some link the sarsen stone beneath the west wall of the tower with this possible pre-Christian worship.



The next development of the church came in the 14th century when the present chancel was built at the same time as the manor of Amor Hall passed from the monastery of Aumerle to the nunnery at Dartford. Just about the time that England was beginning to recover from the Black Death.

What ever the reason that period gave to the church its greatest treasure – the stone stalls in the choir and the Easter Sepulchre



The 15th century with its devotion to the Rood saw the opening of the large window to the west of the chancel arch and the arch itself shows signs of the wood insert that may have been painted with the usually representation of the crucifixion group. There certainly was a rood beam as during the 19th century restoration the remains of the rood stair were taken away.

William Dowsing found less to remove in Washbrook church than he did in Copdock – recording only 26 superstitious pictures. And a fine Stuart pulpit was provided with a sounding board later turned into a

table on which later Washbrook brides signed the marriage register and sadly stolen during the restoration work in the 1990s. The present pulpit is of 1866 and leaves much to be desired.

In 1670 the Vicar of Washbrook became to Rector of Copdock – though each parish retained its separate identity until 1982 when an Order in Council united the two parishes into The Parish of Copdock with Washbrook. The civil parish was united in 1994 to The Parish of Copdock and Washbrook!



The nineteenth century brought the manor into the hands of the Lord Walsingham of the de Grey family and in 1829 he spent several hundred pounds on renewing the roof, repairing window frames and providing seats in the chancel and “benches for the poor”. He also paid for “an elegant and costly window with the arms and crest of the noble donor” originally in the east window but now in the west window.

By the mid 19th century the manor had passed into the hands of Revd James Tooke-Hales-Tooke who ruled the parish as a benevolent despot. He built the Rectory, the Church Cottages, provided the school and between November 1865 and April 1866 paid for the church to have a thorough restoration which cost in the region of £1,200 (when a working man’s wage was 15/- (75p) a week.

Luckily we have the sketches of Elizabeth Cotton of Amor Hall to show us what it was like before the eccentric architect Edward Buckton Lamb was let loose on it (go to see how he rebuilt St Margaret’s Leiston). He made a baptistery for the newly restored font, a new vestry, and divided some of the benches into compartments. Above, literally, he covered the roof in two tone tiling. One of Elizabeth’s sketches show the south wall with a painting and the rood-loft staircase beside the three-light window



As the 20th century developed the spread of houses along the London Road and easier access to Copdock church meant that it became better endowed with lighting and heating whilst Washbrook church stayed firmly in the nineteenth century modernised only with lights and heating from bottled gas.



In spite of a rearguard battle fought by those parishioners who loved the place and who felt that they owed it to their forbears to keep it open, an unsympathetic cleric backed by newcomers in the PCC voted it into redundancy. Luckily there was no question of its ever being suitable for light industry or housing

and so in 1993 it became what Roy Tricker calls “a lady in retirement” in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. The nave and the chancel were re-roofed (still with the two tone tiles) and the east wall was rebuilt. Even the strongest opponents of redundancy were relieved that the CCT was responsible for repairs when two disastrously heavy storms flooded the church up to a foot of water and the porch was filled with potatoes from the Amor Hall fields.



BUT - This is a church that is still greatly loved and which is packed for services that are held about four times a year. It is possible to be married there by special license and with a payment to the CCT and as the churchyard is still the responsibility of the PCC funerals and interments can take place.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

OUTSIDE

In the churchyard by the east wall Three Cullingham headstones

Thomas (who died in 1781 aged 31),
 ‘Young people, all that here pass by’
 As you are now, so once was I
 And as I am so you must be
 Therefore prepare to follow me’.

His father nearby epitaph (1801
 ‘As time and hours pass away’
 So doth the life of man decay
 Weep not for me, my glass is run
 It is the Lord, His will be done’.

The Tower with its sarsen stone, brick parapet,
 The continuous nave and chancel roof
 the rough flush work round the base of the walls
 the outline of the original east window

INSIDE

the bier in the tower

the table of fees

the carvings in the 19th century wagon roof

the collecting shoe offertory box made in the late 19th or early 20th century.

The 15th century font, recut in 1866

The tiny carvings of the 19th century benches

The exquisite carvings of the mid 14th century chancel stalls, Easter Sepulchre, sedilium and piscina with ogee curves and carved animal and human faces, moulded capitals and bases,

Brass plaques to those who died in the two Great Wars, whose names are recorded on the War memorials in Copdock Church and in the Garden of Remembrance in Copdock churchyard.