

# A Look at Glemsford's Church

## Clive Paine's Exploration

### Jubilee Weekend: 1 June 2002

As part of the Jubilee Celebration, Glemsford Local History Society collaborated with the Parochial Church Council in inviting Clive Paine to lead an exploration of the History of the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin. His talk took those present through the history of the building, using evidence from the fabric of the church and other sources, such as a number of medieval wills.

Beginning with a generalised hypothesis, based on the history of the Christian faith in the middle ages and beyond, Clive built a fascinating story of change by calling on the detail that so many of us either have previously not noticed or had ignored.



## The Context

In his introduction, Clive started by putting the church building into its context, referring to the Domesday Survey of 1086, which shows that a church was already present. He assumed that the early building would have used flint as the basic material. He speculated about the siting and size of an early Norman structure, from a time when ecclesiastical buildings were almost literally erupting across the whole kingdom. Glemsford's church site would be related to the position of the Park Farm, held as it was by the steward to the Abbot of Ely. The clergy and patron would have been responsible for the Chancel, so Clive began his exploration to the west of that

divide. A general view of the architecture places the building in the mid-14th Century, when a remodelling was carried out of the earlier 13th Century rebuilding of the Norman structure. The period between 1200 and 1500 was a time of great prosperity, population growth and inter-parish rivalry, which would have shown itself in church building and refurbishment. The cloth trade was the key: Sudbury, Bury and Ely were all important markets for the product.

Looking more closely at the building itself, Clive referred to the recognisably Decorated style of the North and South aisles and arches, at a time when there were no side chapels. The detail on the pillars shows that the North aisle was probably added before the South, a fact which in turn highlights the stages of development through which the church was put. The South aisle is longer than the North, which adds to the picture of gradual change. Similarly, the clerestory shows matching variations in styles.

The main windows of the aisles are recognisably later than the aisles themselves, matching the Perpendicular style of the period between 1380 and 1530. Clive related these apparent additions to the desire of local populations to keep up with new styles as a reflection of their faith. Wills of 1447 and 1452 provide evidence of the addition of windows to the South and North aisles respectively, while a will of 1474 talks of the development of the clerestory windows, with the north side being made to match the south. This would have coincided with the heightening of the roof.

In passing, Clive noted that the North aisle roof was probably original 15th century work.

Concluding his introduction to the church on the lay side of the Chancel, Clive pointed out that the tower was a completely new structure of 1860, built to replace an original which was found to be in danger of collapse, and the Chancel arch was a similar Victorian structure.

## The Exterior

After this detailed look at the interior, Clive next led the audience on a walking tour of the exterior.

His first comment was a fascinating observation that the style of the flint flushwork was exactly in the style of one John of Melford who had been responsible for the work on the Lady Chapel at Long Melford. The building of the Golding Chapel (the south chapel) in 1497 matches the time of that Melford structure, and the two are the only buildings with that design. As is well known, the Golding chapel was built using a bequest of £40 to build a chapel to the east of St John's altar (in the South aisle) over the grave of John Golding. The battlements of the roof of the chapel contain an inscription which was originally deciphered by Richard Deeks. This probably originally read:

*"John Golding and Joann his wife the founders of this chapel on whose [soul] God [have mercy]"*,

although the words "soul ... have mercy" were later erased, probably by Puritan zealots.

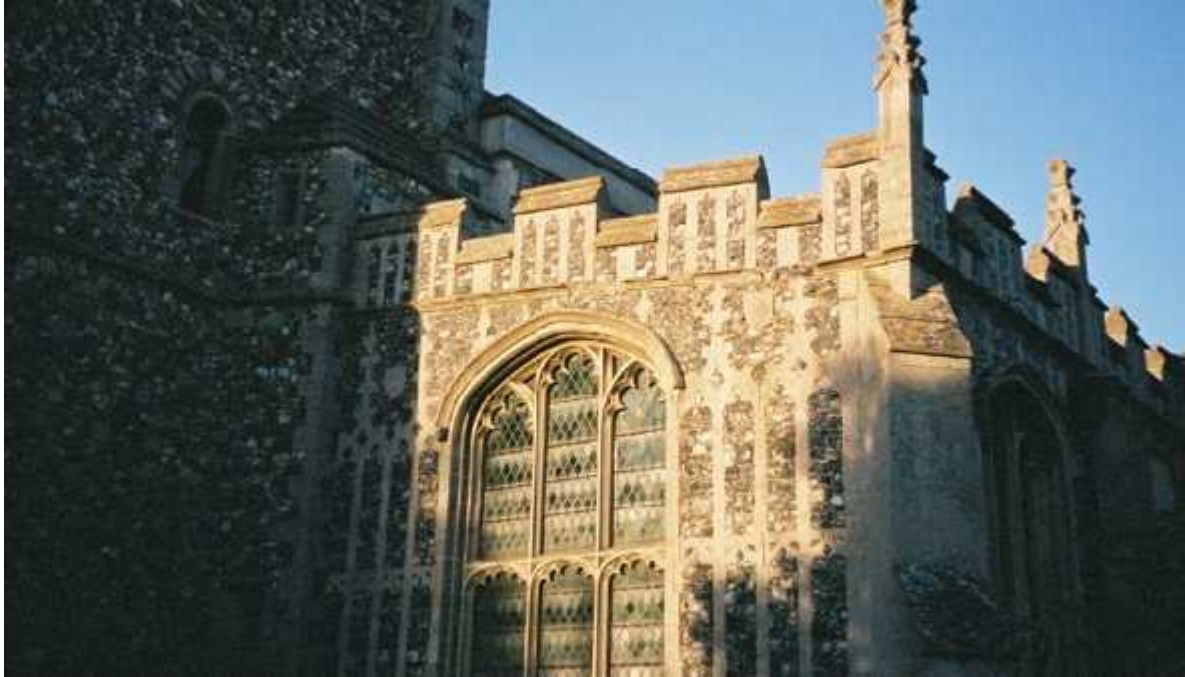
As we moved round the east end of the church, Clive pointed out the totally different flint work on the Chancel end which was created during the Victorian restoration. This took us to a close look at the North chapel, which is sometimes ignored in favour of its more famous South counterpart.



The North chapel carries a dedication to the Mundy or Mundes family:  
*"[Pray for the soul of] John Mundes and Margaret his wife and John Mundes son of aforesaid John Mundes Margaret Elizabeth with whose goods this chapel..."*, with the date 1525.



John Mundes was a prosperous wool merchant, even more prosperous, perhaps, than John Golding. The chapel was built by 1533 when the younger John's will was proved. The exterior wall of the chapel contains what Clive described as a "very, very rare survival" in the form of John Mundy's merchant mark. This mark is also repeated inside the church.



Our tour of the exterior included a vain search for the foundation stone of the tower's Victorian reconstruction, and finished with a return to the Golding chapel to view the very rare mass dial in the pillar by the Chancel door.



## The East End

After some excellent refreshments, Clive resumed his talk by considering the Choir and Chancel, beginning with evidence of the Rood Screen and Loft. Visually, the evidence for these features exists in the closed doorways in the South aisle pillars, but further evidence exists in a will which refers to a Trinity statue which apparently stood in front of the Rood staircase. Clive explained the religious significance of the Rood Screen in separating the lay congregation from the mysteries of transubstantiation. Davey's record of the church (1831) shows that the Screen had gone by that date. In passing, we were also told that the pulpit, now at the entrance to the choir stalls, was a 17th Century structure which was installed on the second pillar of the North aisle, facing across the nave towards what would have been a congregation seated in high-backed box pews. There was also evidence on a pillar at the west end of the existence of a musician's gallery from the days before the church organ.

In the Chancel itself, we were introduced to the arches in the south side which would have been constructed at the time of the Golding chapel (1497) which, again, match the work of John of Melford. Taking this development further, Clive demonstrated how windows, which had originally been in the North wall before the construction of the Mundy chapel, had been dismantled and reused in the chapel wall. Here was clear dating evidence and a picture of the sequence of developments.

Moving to the altar end of the church, photographic evidence has revealed the existence of windows at the North east and South east end of the chancel which would have disappeared during the Victorian reconstruction. This rebuilding coincided with the development of Anglo-Catholicism: Clive surmised that the blocking of windows would have been in order to enhance the "mystery" of the altar by creating a need for candlelight on the altar.

As he finished his fascinating tour of the church, Clive referred to the 1913 reredos, the roof of the North chapel which deserves much closer examination, the carving on the font, and last of all, to the 15th Century doors, carved from solid timber sometime between the 1460s and 80s, which he described as “the best preserved medieval doors in Suffolk” A dramatic end to an evening of discovery.

## And finally

It was a wonderful evening. Nearly 60 people sat, walked and listened in wonder at the accessible erudition with which the whole was presented. Almost coincidentally, the event also proved a successful fundraiser for the two organisations.

I hope I have done justice to Clive’s work here. The work is entirely his. Any mistakes are mine (for which I apologise - I would be grateful for any corrections).

We are immensely grateful.

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**The "Suffolk Churches" site has a lot of detail about the church too. Simon has put together some excellent work on Suffolk Churches in general, and there are some great, detailed pictures of St Mary's, Glemsford. Well worth the visit.**

