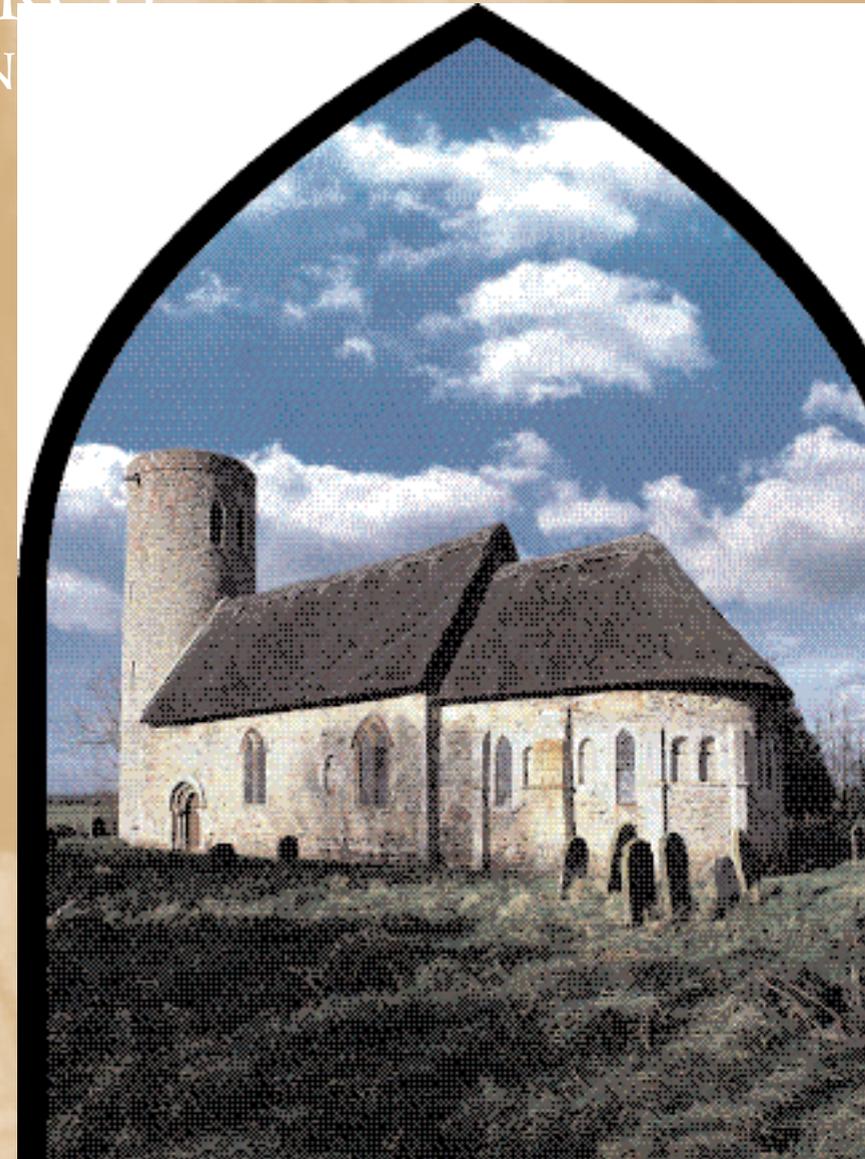




THE CHURCHES  
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# ST MARGARET'S CHURCH

Hales, N



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# ST MARGARET'S CHURCH

*by Stephen Heywood (Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and Conservation Officer with Norfolk County Council)*

## HISTORY

The small Norman parish church of St Margaret stands on an isolated site long since abandoned by the settlement which was grouped around it. The village now centres on the crossroads three-quarters of a mile (1km) to the north. The fields around the church have revealed some mediaeval pottery indicating the former existence of quite sparse settlement, and just to the west of the churchyard a small copse covers a double moated site which was probably the site of the hall.

The Domesday book refers to a number of manors at Hales. The principal manor stands to the west of Hales Green just over a mile to the west of the church and retains part of its 16th-century hall and great barn. St Margaret's church and the adjacent moated site of a hall are situated close to the eastern edge of the parish and may be associated with another manor which was held by Ralf Baynard immediately after the Norman Conquest. This estate, which included land in the adjoining parish of Kirby Cane, later became the Fitzwalter fee.

In 1270 the church was granted by Alan, son of Elias of Heckingham and Ralph de Chedgrave and his wife Emma, to St Olave's Priory at Herringfleet which maintained the vicarage and appointed vicars. The income from any lands went in part to the priory and part to the incumbent. The last mention in the records of a vicar, called Hugh Croke, is in 1458. He was probably the last vicar before the prior of St Olave's closed the vicarage and collected its entire revenue leaving the church to be served by a chaplain from the priory.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south-east (Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: Interior looking east (Borris Baggs)*



The appropriation of St Margaret's by the priory has meant that a minimum of works took place and that the church, stripped of its living, was poor. It is probably thanks to its impoverishment that its Romanesque chancel was never replaced and that very few improvements were made after its appropriation. Appropriation was common practice and in Norfolk, by the end of the Middle Ages, about 37% of parishes had been taken over by monasteries.

At the Reformation, with the dissolution of the monasteries, the church passed to the crown with the priory which was dissolved in 1537. It then went into the ownership of an improprator who appointed a stipendiary (or salaried) curate. In 1603 John Hill was the improprator with a stipendiary curate paid £5 per annum. In the chancel is the inscribed tomb of Peter Lawes, improprator and priest of the church, who died in 1722. In 1841 the benefice was united with that of Heckingham under a single incumbent. This measure was presumably due to the small congregations in these parishes. (The church of St Gregory at Heckingham is now also cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust.)

The north door of the church had very elaborate Romanesque ironwork which was recorded by the artist John Sell Cotman. Unfortunately the fine engraving is the only record that remains of this bold decoration.

Despite the removal of its own vicarage there were ambitious proposals for improving the building during the last years of the 19th century. Plans, drawn up by the architect Herbert J Green in 1895, proposed the removal of the western gallery, the installation of a screen in the tower arch, a new roof and the replacement of the box pews and three-decker pulpit. In the event only the pews and nave roof were replaced, and the 18th-century pulpit was reduced in size to its present form.

St Margaret's was made redundant in 1973, there having been no services for some years. A year later it was vested in the Churches Conservation Trust. Repairs have been carried out under the supervision of Michael Gooch of Norwich and subsequently of Roger Taigel and Chris Codling. There is an annual service in July and other events occur from time to time. The church is normally kept open.

*Right: Hales, St. Margaret, by John Sell Cotman (1838); nave north doorway. The arch has five principal bands of ornamentation consisting of chevron, chip carving, barrel or double cone and roundels. The original ironwork on the door is now lost. Reproduced by permission of The School of World Art Studies and Museology, University of East Anglia.*



NORTH DOORWAY HALES CHURCH.  
 TO HIS HONOURABLE LORDS THE BISHOP OF NORWICH AND HIS SUCCESSORS IN EXISTENCE BUILT BY HIS ANCESTORS AND HIS SUCCESSORS IN THE YEAR 1150.  
 THIS PLATE OF ONE OF THE FINEST BY THAT NATION WITH WHICH HIS MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED  
 JOHN SELL COTMAN.

## EXTERIOR



The humble size of this small aisleless church, built of rubble with thatched roofs and a typical East Anglian round western tower, is in contrast to the richness and sophistication of its decoration.

Each doorway, constructed with fine limestone imported from Normandy, has three arches carved with Romanesque motifs supported on colonettes. The four corners of the nave are decorated with roll mouldings and the one surviving original window on the south side is

flanked with little nook shafts. In itself this reaches a rare degree of elaboration, but more unusual is the surviving apsidal chancel. Its curving plan is supported by buttresses and decorated with blind arcading and all the limestone dressings have roll mouldings. There is a bold string-course decorated with drilled conical bosses at the level of the sills of the blind arches. These have roll mouldings and chamfered imposts. Some of the arches are further decorated with half roundels. All this, and in particular the sculpture on the doorways, suggests a date around 1140 for the nave and chancel.

**CHANCEL** Apsidal chancels were the rule in 12th-century parish churches yet very few survive because they became very unpopular towards the end of the century and the majority of chancels were either demolished and rebuilt with straight east walls or else just the apse was taken down and rebuilt flat. An example of a chancel having had its apse removed can be seen nearby at Framingham Earl where the beginning of the curve of the apse has clearly been cut off by the replacement. The reason for this change in fashion was probably due to the desire for impressive windows on the main axis of the church and in particular to the east. The fashion started with stepped rows of lancet windows such as those in the east wall of Blakeney church. It became *de rigueur* with the arrival of bar tracery in the 1240s.

At St Margaret's it appears that there was never enough money to rebuild the east end of the chancel. Instead an attempt was made to flatten the east wall internally and a simple 'Y'-tracery window was inserted in the late 13th century replacing the narrow Norman loop window. The other windows in the chancel are 13th-century lancets, also slight enlargements of the original Norman loops.

The buttresses, in particular the large pair at the level where the apse begins to curve, suggest that the chancel was originally vaulted with masonry. It probably had a barrel vault with

a semi-dome in the apse penetrated by the windows. The patched masonry along the top of the chancel wall is also evidence of the former vault which was part and parcel with the masonry of the upper parts of the chancel walls. When the vault was taken down, or when it fell down, the tops of the chancel walls had to come down too and were rebuilt to a slightly higher level than originally, with markedly inferior workmanship.

This arrangement of barrel vault and semi-dome survives in the contemporary church at Fritton nearby, which retains its apsidal chancel and has managed to keep its masonry vaulting with the original loop windows penetrating the vault. However, the decorated blind arcading, the number of roll-moulded buttresses and the provision of chamfered plinths renders the chancel at Hales outstanding amongst surviving Romanesque parish churches despite its lost vault.

*Left: The apse (Boris Baggs)*

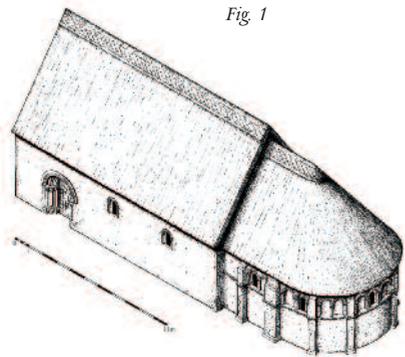


Fig. 1

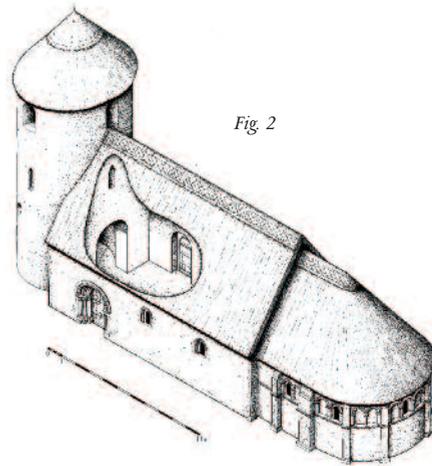


Fig. 2

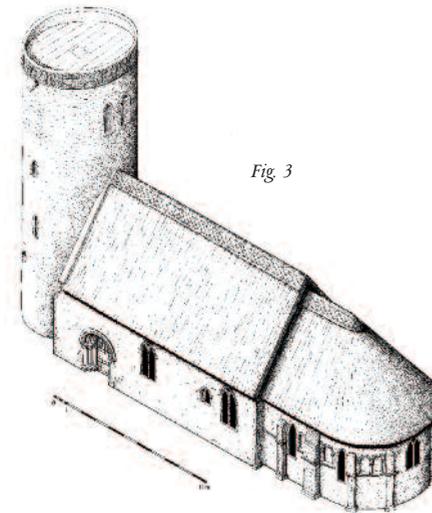


Fig. 3

Figure 1: Nave and chancel without tower showing original window plus supposed positions of others

Figure 2: Tower added with cut-away to show tower arch and triangular-headed upper doorway

Figure 3: Heightened tower and heightened nave. Rebuilt west gable-end

(Sue White)

**NAVE** Pieces of the original chancel arch have been reused in the upper parts of the masonry of the nave because, when the chancel arch was rebuilt in a larger form, the nave walls were also heightened by three feet (90cm). Pieces of shaft laid on end can be seen as well as the occasional piece of carved stone. This major work of heightening appears to have taken place during the 14th century possibly at the same time as the alteration of the chancel windows and the demolition or collapse of the chancel vault.

The masonry of the nave was originally plastered but most of this has fallen away to reveal an astonishing mixture of materials including flint, glacial erratics, ferruginous conglomerate (brown coloured, large and rough lumps of stone) and Roman tiles. As the nave walls have not been repointed the subtle changes of mortar around the inserted windows and the hairline horizontal cracks which occur every few courses can be detected easily. Also the put-log holes which housed the scaffolding poles can be seen even though they have been carefully filled in. On the south side of the nave the put-log holes which correspond to the heightening of the nave have wooden boards forming the lintels over the holes.

The quoins and dressings are, however, of the finest limestone imported from Caen in Normandy. There is one surviving original Norman window on the south side of the nave. It is blocked but retains its external face, which is extraordinarily elaborate for a simple loop, flanked by miniature shafts with cushion capitals and bases supporting a tiny roll-moulded enclosing arch.

The nave doorways are rightly considered to be among the best in East Anglia. The north doorway, which is the principal entrance, has two orders supported on free-standing shafts (see page 3). There are two orders decorated with chevron ornament, the well-known zigzag decoration occurring in Anglo-Norman major buildings from around 1100. There is another arch enriched with a pattern of chip carving while the middle order has the distinctive motif of barrel shapes or double cones which occur for the first time in the region on the west face of the north transept of Norwich Cathedral. This motif was commonly used by the Norfolk school of Romanesque architectural sculpture centred around Norwich Cathedral. The flanking shafts have small volute capitals and in turn are flanked by panels of chip carving, a decoration known in Normandy before the Conquest. Finally there is a hood-mould studded with richly-carved petalled roundels.

The south doorway is treated in a different way but just as richly and using another distinctive motif characteristic of the Norfolk School. This can be seen on the second innermost arch where there is a single string of billet moulding which is a band of short raised roll moulding sections with blank spaces in between. In this case the roll mouldings are in fact of a 'keel' shape, almost triangular in section (see page 8). Keel mouldings were quite commonly used in Romanesque sculpture of the middle years of the 12th century. Characteristic of the Norfolk school is the use of keel billet on the one hand and on the other that the sections are decorated with drilled holes. Fragments of this type of ornament have been found at Norwich Cathedral and they were probably part of the Romanesque cloister which was under construction from about 1130 to 1140. It was demolished and rebuilt as a result of the damage inflicted on it by rioting Norwich citizens in 1272.

In this doorway the supporting shafts are treated differently by carving the intermediate angles with bold roll mouldings giving the impression that the doorway was flanked by five pairs of shafts rather than two. The shafts have simple cushion and scallop capitals and the hood-mould is decorated with a diaper pattern.

Apart from the one window mentioned, the nave windows are all later mediaeval insertions. The cusped lancet on the north side is possibly a remodelling of an original Norman window as it is directly opposite the surviving window on the south, but there is no direct evidence for this as the external dressings have been completely replaced. The other three windows are each of two lights with unremarkable Y tracery in two instances and one with cusped lights. Peeping out from beneath the right hand jamb of the easternmost window on the south side of the nave is a tiny piece of ashlar relating to an earlier window.

An interesting detail for which there seems to be no obvious explanation are three small scratched sundials on the south-east nave quoins and a further one on the south doorway. They have central holes from which the gnomon projected and are often described as mass dials used for indicating the times of services and events rather than for telling the time.



*Left: Detail of southern carved doorway showing 'keeled billet' moulding (Kate Weaver)*

*The dentil imposts to the tower arch (Kate Weaver)*

*The basketwork imprint on one of the circular double-splayed windows (Sue White)*

**TOWER** The west wall of the nave is largely obscured by the tower, but it can be seen that the gable of the wall has been rebuilt further to the east in order to accommodate the curve of the round tower. The tops of the nave western corners are surmounted by sloping ashlar copings abutted to the rebuilt gable which is of substantially reduced thickness. The date of this gable must be contemporary with the heightening of the nave in the 14th century but, more importantly, it shows that the tower was not built at the same time as the rest of the church and that it was added to an existing building. It must have been added shortly after the construction of the main body of the church because it is still early mediaeval in technique. In fact, it is decidedly more primitive with hardly any dressed stone employed. This has led some to regard the tower as earlier than the nave and chancel, but a cursory glance from within the tower shows that it was built up against an existing wall up to the level of the original eaves.

The exterior of the tower reveals very little of its original openings. The first floor stone-dressed loops can be seen and the storey above has simple Gothic windows which are insertions into the blocking of much larger semicircular-headed openings. It is plain to see from within the tower that these openings were the bell openings belonging to the first phase of the tower and the nave of the church

before it was heightened. The present bell openings of paired pointed openings on the east-west axis and single lights to the north and south belong to a heightening of the tower in conjunction with the heightening of the nave. (The southern light has been blocked up whilst the northern one has a cusped arch.)

The ground floor of the tower, which is entered through the doorways beneath the gallery, has the most interesting of the windows. There are two partly blocked circular windows which have embrasures or splays to the inside and outside faces of the wall. The internal splays are visible and reveal the clear imprints of basketwork showing that the windows were built by using basketwork shuttering threaded through a central board and left *in situ*. This technique can be seen in many early churches in the region and although often regarded as an indication of Anglo-Saxon date, it is no more than an indication of indigenous workmanship – a practical response in an area which has no local source of good quality freestone and an abundance of low-lying ground ideal for the growing of osier. In this case the windows cannot be earlier than the middle years of the 12th century.

At the time of the addition of the tower it was necessary to build an arch through the existing west wall in order to gain access and to make the ground floor of the tower a fitting

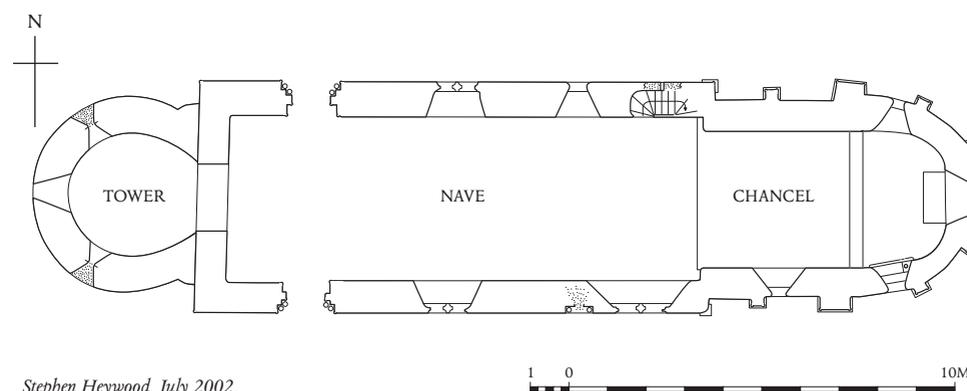
extension to the liturgical space. A large archway, partly blocked and obscured by the west gallery, is visible and the arch springs from crudely carved dentil imposts. The round double-splayed windows, the rubble dressed openings and the crude decoration are in distinct contrast with the sophistication of the nave and chancel. The wealth available for the construction of the nave and chancel had disappeared by the time it was considered necessary to build a tower. Therefore it was constructed with virtually no expensive imported materials and using local craftsmen to build the typical Norfolk round tower.

The round western tower is only found in East Anglia, north Germany, north Poland, southern Sweden and the Orkney Islands with some

isolated examples elsewhere. They are most numerous in East Anglia where it was the norm throughout the 12th century and continued to be used occasionally until the end of the Middle Ages. The examples across the North and Baltic Seas demonstrate the strong cultural links which existed between East Anglia, northern Europe and Scandinavia.

The reconstruction drawing shows a small doorway with a triangular head in the east wall a few feet above the tower arch (Fig. 2, page 6). The doorway is now blocked and cannot be seen from the nave. Its function was to provide access between the upper floor of the tower and the nave roof space. These upper doorways are common in round-towered churches and a particularly impressive example can be seen nearby at Haddiscoe.

There were two bells in the tower, probably of the late 13th century. One bell, inscribed **+IHC REX IVDEORUM** (Jesus King of the Jews), is now in King's Lynn Museum. The other bell is inscribed: **+[ST] MARGARET A DEI NOS PRESENTET SPEI** (Margaret shows our hope in God).



*Stephen Heywood, July 2002*

## INTERIOR

The interior of the chancel now has a plaster vault and the chancel arch is a 14th-century replacement of the original. Below it are the remains of the late mediaeval screen.

The rood-loft, a platform which projected from the top of the screen, had the cross standing in the centre and was accessible via the rood-stair to sacristans and choir singers. The rood-stair at Hales survives on the north side and is accommodated within a former window recess. Most of the screen itself has been lost yet the lower panels survive with traces of colour and one panel only retains its delicately traceried head. The rails have an embattled decoration and from them protrude the rudely severed mullions of the screen.

On the north side of the chancel is the aumbry with its surviving wooden shelf. Opposite is the piscina accommodated within the window reveal on the south side of the chancel. Beside the piscina the low level of the window sill provided a *sedile* or seat for the priest to move to at certain times prescribed in the liturgy.

At the west end of the nave is a very well-preserved 15th-century font. It has an octagonal bowl the sides of which are carved with angels holding shields alternating with roses. The base of the bowl has heads with outspread wings at each corner and the stem is decorated with lions.

The 17th-century font cover, with a strange silhouette on the underside – artist and subject unknown – is stored elsewhere for reasons of security.

The west gallery and pulpit are 18th century. The gallery stair enables one to see how the crudely carved dentil impost of the inserted arch are returned onto the east face of the west wall. Other furnishings are simple, with local panments on the floor, clear glazing and holders for oil lamps – there is no electricity. The 1815 organ is now at Bury St Edmunds Cathedral.



**WALL PAINTINGS** A fragmentary wall painting of the giant St Christopher is immediately opposite the north door. Its position is typical, presumably so that a passer-by can easily see it through the open door and so gain protection from accident on his journey. The painting is of 14th-century date. Some details of his head can be made out along with the infant Jesus on his shoulder.

Further to the east on both sides of the nave are painted consecration crosses each in the shape of a *patée* cross. In the window reveal on the north side of the nave a little niche has been carved out. A painted gable of red and white squares and a foliage trail sprouting from the top give it a certain architectural status.

Behind the pulpit is a well preserved 14th-century painted figure of a saint holding a scroll and a staff, normally interpreted as St James the Great. Above this figure is a firmly painted foliage trail in red on a white ground of c. 1300. High up in the spandrels of the chancel arch are 14th-century angels blowing the 'Last Trump'. The angels' trumpets point down towards where the rood-loft stood surmounting the former screen.

The chancel has a further pair of consecration crosses this time in the shape of a *potent* cross. Significant areas remain of an upper border with a red vine scroll above a solid chevron pattern.

Contemporary with this are the decorated reveals of the east window which have red and yellow chevrons on the internal angles of the opening. Shallow niches have been made to each side of the east window. To the south the recess has painted IHC monograms in each spandrel and stencilled rosettes to the back of the niche and between it and the east window, and the niche is accentuated by a red line surrounding it.

*Left: Pulpit and wall painting, possibly St James the Great (Boris Baggs)*

# THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

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St Gregory, Heckingham  
12 miles SE of Norwich and 1 mile E  
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St John the Baptist, Hellington  
6 miles SE of Norwich off A146

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*Right: The south door (Christopher Dalton)*  
*Back cover: The 15th-century font (Boris Baggs)*

