

Acknowledgement

Norfolk Museums Service. One from the chancel was of Geoffrey Langley, 1436, prior of Horsham St Faith and removed from there when the priory was dissolved. Appropriately it is now back in Horsham St Faith's church. The organ is now at South Walsham and homes have been found for many of the other fittings.

The bells hang in their original 15th-/16th-century frame – designed for four but later enlarged to contain six. They were restored and added to by Thomas Newman in 1737. The third was cast by William Revel of London in about 1356, that is before the tower was built, and may be the oldest bell in Norwich.

The clock is believed to have been made in the early 1500s by the monks of Hexham Abbey, and is one of some 40 that were repaired by the Suttons, rectors of West Tofts in Norfolk and Brant Broughton in Lincolnshire, and presented to churches in Norfolk. They presented this one to Sporle near Swaffham, from which it came to St Laurence's in the 1890s.

The author is indebted to Mr Roy Tricker for permission to draw on his unpublished extended history of St Laurence's in the preparation of this guide.

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Historic churches, due to their age and previous use, often have uneven and worn floors. Please take care, especially in wet weather when floors and steps can also be slippery.

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£1.00

CHURCH OF ST LAURENCE

Norwich, Norfolk



Church of ST LAURENCE

by Anthony Barnes (*Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and Director of the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust, 1984–92*)

History

There appears to have been a church on this site before Domesday Book of 1086 and the south porch contains a small amount of masonry of c.1300. The rest of the church was built in the 15th and early 16th centuries. A will of 1459 provided for the building and roofing of the south porch, and later wills show when the tower was built and internal furnishings were installed.

In 1584 an arrangement was made, some details of which remain obscure, to supply fresh water from the waterworks at New Mills via the tower of St Laurence's to the fish market and neighbouring properties. There was also a St Laurence well, the water from which was made available to a brewer, Robert Gibson (commemorated in an adjacent street), provided that he gave a street pump, which is still to be seen in Anchor Quay to the north of the church.

There were repairs in 1663 and at various times thereafter, box pews for the chancel arriving in 1739 and a new pulpit 15 years later. In 1744 there was an enlightening comment on the neighbourhood when there were complaints about linen being left to bleach in the churchyard and nails being driven into the church walls for clothes lines. During the 19th century constant efforts were made to make the tower safe, the worst

incident being the fall of one of the tower buttresses in 1865.

Also in the 19th century, the tradition of 'ritualistic' churchmanship was founded, with the arrival in 1861 of the Revd E A Hillyard. He had been curate to the diarist vicar of Dereham, Benjamin Armstrong, and his churchmanship was developed with the arrival in 1864 of Father Ignatius and his Benedictines at Elm Hill. Ignatius, because only in deacon's orders, needed a priest to say Mass for his community. Mr Hillyard was the lucky man and soon there were daily celebrations for the monks, to the horror of some of the congregation (and the bishop). The new regime was emphasised when, with Mr Hillyard's approval, some of Ignatius' 'third order' reduced the box pews to firewood, the loss of rent from them endangering the church finances.

The relationship did not continue for long, as Ignatius objected to the attendance at a charity dance of Mr Hillyard and some of his other supporters. Finding Mr Hillyard unrepentant, the monks were forbidden to go again to St Laurence's. Mr Hillyard maintained the Catholic tradition, both at St Laurence's and at his next parish at Belper in Derbyshire; and his successors in Norwich kept it going, with varying dedication and against the

background of a radically reduced local population, until the church was closed by Order in Council in 1974.

St Laurence's was one of the churches to be steered towards the Norwich Historic Churches Trust. The cost of repairs and the steep and difficult access made it virtually impossible to find an alternative use for the church. A Sheriff's appeal in the 1980s raised £25,000, the most urgent repairs were carried out and fears for the building's collapse were staved off. However, the church remained in limbo until it was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in 1992. Since then repairs to the tower, the north porch, the roofs and ceiling and the rood stair have been carried out under the supervision of the late Roger Taigel of Norwich and of Ruth Blackman of Birdsall, Swash and Blackman of Hingham.

Exterior

St Laurence's is one of five churches along St Benedict's Street within one hundred yards (90 metres) of each other. It stands almost precariously on a steep slope above the river, from which it is now separated by substantial buildings. Previously the river was wider and there was a herring fishery below the church.

The precariousness is emphasised by the great size of the church and by the narrowness of the surrounding churchyard, made narrower still on the south side by the widening of the footpath along St Benedict's Street (for which the city paid the parish £50).

Like the other great 15th-century churches in Norwich, St Laurence's seems to be built almost as much of glass as of stone, so large and numerous are the windows. The quality of the flintwork and the extensive use of ashlar show that its builders lavished money on it. Like the other great churches, also, there is a low-pitched roof over a nave and chancel with no structural division. There are aisles north and south, providing chapels at the east end, a sacristy on the north side, two-storey porches on each side and a very tall west tower, which can be seen from many points around the city.

On each side of the nave are large Perpendicular windows, with a clerestory of 11 windows above. The turret on the south side houses a stair giving access to the lofts above the screens. Of the two porches, the one on the north is finer, perhaps because it faced, if obliquely, towards the Duke of Norfolk's palace. The south porch is the one most commonly used. Its eastern window is the oldest masonry still to be seen in the church – Y-tracery presumably dating from around 1300.

The west tower is 92 feet (28 metres) high and massive to match. Here the flushwork base-course and decorative stone shields, which are to be seen elsewhere around the church, are at their most elaborate. The doorway is particularly fine. In its spandrels are well-preserved carvings of St Laurence, the patron saint, who was martyred by being roasted on a gridiron; and of St Edmund, King of the East Angles, who was martyred near Hoxne by the arrows of the Danes. His severed head was guarded by the wolf that can be seen peeping out from beneath a bush. The doors probably date from 1663.

The distinctive spirelet at the top of the tower, which adds 20 ft (6.1 m) to its height, was added in 1893 to the designs of James Smyth Benest, more of whose work may be seen at the west end of St Andrew's Hall.

Interior

The interior is now almost without furnishings, so that the fine proportions of the arcades and the light let in by the large windows can be well appreciated. **Ten steps** at the east end lead the eye to the altar, an effect dating from a 19th-century ritualistic reordering. Photographs show how splendid the church looked in its heyday.

Carved angels, fretwork tracery and stars decorate the 15th-century hammerbeam roof and the corbels on which it rests. Some old timber may still be seen in the aisle roofs, which were largely renewed in 1925. Also of the 15th century are the framework supporting the floor of the ringing chamber in the tower and the finely carved font below. So too are the doors to the north porch, reversed when the south door became the normal entrance, and the delicate vaulting of its lower chamber.

Little remains of the screen, but the rood beam above of 1927 is still there, as is a large part of the painted reredos behind the altar. This was designed by Edwin Tench (who also designed the memorial to parishioners who died in the Great War) and painted by Mr A Kingston Rudd. Among his models were George V and Archbishop Lang.

There are a number of memorials around the walls and on ledgers in the floor, the one of widest interest being that on the east wall of the north aisle to Sarah Glover (1786–1867), a music teacher and daughter of a former curate who invented the Sol-Fa system used for years to teach the rudiments of music. Above her memorial is a jumble of medieval stained glass rescued from being hidden behind the organ.

Other ledgers show the imprint of brasses, most of which are now in the care of the