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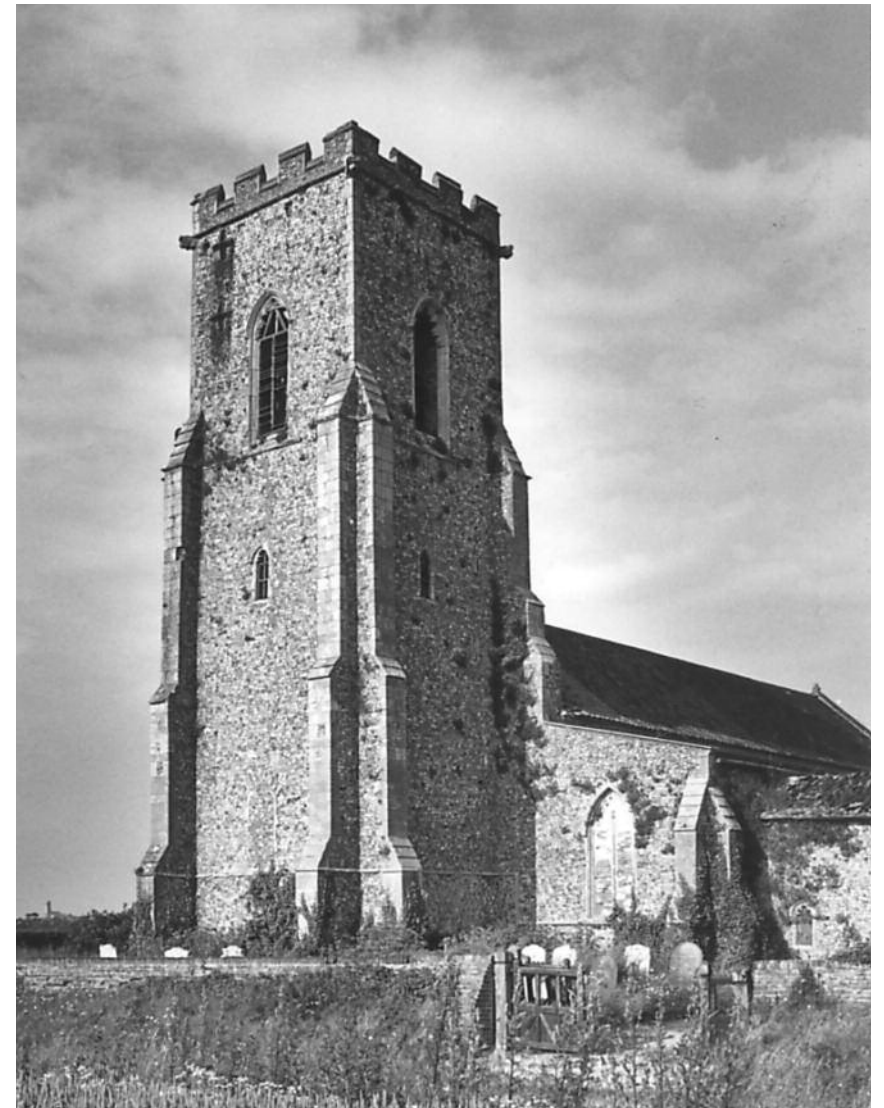
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# ST MARY'S CHURCH

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EAST RUSTON  
NORFOLK





THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO  
ST MARY'S CHURCH,  
EAST RUSTON, NORFOLK

*Many years ago Christians built and set apart this place for prayer. They made their church beautiful with their skill and craftsmanship. Here they have met for worship, for children to be baptised, for couples to be married and for the dead to be brought for burial. If you have time, enjoy the history, the peace and the holiness here. Please use the prayer card and, if you like it, you are welcome to take a folded copy with you.*

*Although services are no longer regularly held here, this church remains consecrated; inspiring, teaching and ministering through its beauty and atmosphere. It is one of 300 churches throughout England cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust was created in 1969 and was, until 1994, known as the Redundant Churches Fund. Its object is to ensure that all these churches are kept in repair and cared for, in the interests of the Church and Nation, for present and future generations.*

*Please help us to care for this church. There is a box for donations or, if you prefer to send a gift, it will be gratefully received at the Trust's headquarters at 89 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH (Registered Charity No. 258612).*

*We hope that you will enjoy your visit and be encouraged to see our other churches. Some are in towns; some in remote country districts. Some are easy and others hard to find but all are worth the effort.*

Nearby are the Trust churches of:

**GUNTON ST ANDREW**

*16 miles north of Norwich and east of A40*

**THURGARTON ALL SAINTS**

*17 miles north of Norwich west of A140*

## ST MARY'S CHURCH

EAST RUSTON, NORFOLK

*by SIMON COTTON, DONALD FINDLAY AND OTHERS*

**E**AST RUSTON CHURCH has one of the most striking settings of any Norfolk church, standing on a slight rise overlooking the sweeping landscape between the Broads and the coast. It stands over a mile away from the village, a straggling settlement on the south side of the Common. There is no record of a church here in the Domesday Book of 1086, but as the area was heavily settled by the Angles and Frisians there was almost certainly one here long before then.

Most of the church as seen today is a 14th-century building. It can scarcely be a coincidence that East Ruston was in 1334 in the top 10 per cent of Norfolk townships for wealth. Most other churches in the area date largely from the 15th century – three Ruston wills of the early 16th century reveal that building work was still going on then: 1513 Edward Peck 'to the buyldyng of the new chapell there xls'; 1516 John Hunston, rector, willed to be buried in the new chapel of St Mary 'edified and builded in the churchyard' (*sic*); 1534 Roger Skinner left five marks to the treble bell and four marks to 'hallowing' the church. This suggests recent building works had left the building in need of rededication. No unambiguous evidence of early 16th-century works survives, except the roof screen inside, but this may have been associated with the demolished north aisle and the building which partly remains on the north side of the tower.

Large churches built by mediaeval piety and prosperity posed problems of upkeep by the 18th century; a faculty was granted in 1771 to rebuild the church. The petition describes it as a large building consisting of three aisles covered with lead, 'a very antient building and is very much decayed'. Some of the roof had actually fallen. The spire on the tower was 'very ruinous'; the north wall had to be pulled down and rebuilt.

It was therefore proposed to sell three of the four bells, two of which were cracked, and the lead, having an estimated value of £356.4s, and to take down the north aisle, building a 'good substantial wall on the north side' and making a new roof and covering it with 'good glazed pan tiles'. The cost of this was estimated as £440.4s. Other churches in the area to undergo contraction at this period were Southreppa, Bradfield, Honing, Gimingham and Cromer.

By the early 1970s the church was again in a very bad state of repair, the tower roof, internal floors and walls being in particular need of attention. The nave roof timbers had been affected by deathwatch beetle and the plaster ceiling was beginning to fall. The cost of any remedial works or partial ruination were beyond the resources of the parish and in June 1977 the church was declared formally redundant. In March 1981 it came into the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. In 1985 major repairs to the south aisle, the roof covering and the towers were carried out by Messrs Bullens of Cromer, under the supervision of Henry Freeland, architect, of Cambridge.

## EXTERIOR

The church, like most in the county, is largely built of flint, the local material, with stone used for windows, doorways and facings to buttresses. The north wall of the nave is of 18th-century brick.

The tower is the most striking feature of the exterior. It was built c.1350, at about the same time as the south aisle; they share a stringcourse. The lowest stage has a blocked window and a niche for a statue; the middle stage has small lancet windows, blocked on the north side, and the belfry stage, divided from the others by a stringcourse, has large windows which have lost their stone tracery. There are gargoyles at each corner and four merlons to each face of the parapet; the slits on the south face show the position of the internal staircase. As far as the belfry stage, the tower has angle buttresses.

It is of interest to compare this tower with the nearby one at Tunstead, built about a generation later as the Decorated style was merging into Perpendicular. East Ruston's tower lacks the large west window coupled with a doorway underneath, and decorative features such as a prominent basecourse and stringcourses at each level. The tower down the road at Brumstead church, to which money was left in 1390, is clearly in the Perpendicular style.



There is a curious ruined outbuilding to the north of the tower which was possibly connected with the small squinch across the north-east angle. This may have been the vestry or chapel, although it would have been an unusual position for either. The will of John Hunston (1516) refers to the Chapel of Our Lady in the churchyard.

The flint base of the north wall of the nave probably relates to the original north aisle. The windows are in the 15th-century Perpendicular style, but are probably 19th-century replacements. Whether they are in the style of the original mediaeval ones is not known. The wall has three solid brick buttresses topped by small gablets; the gable over the chancel arch was repaired possibly about the same time.

The chancel was apparently built in the first half of the 14th century. The north wall formerly had two windows and a doorway, one window apparently having been blocked in the Middle Ages, the other more recently as it has a filling of 18th-century bricks. The east window of the chancel has stonework dating from the 19th century but is in the early 14th-century style, based on intersecting Y-tracery with cusping. The windows in the south wall of the chancel are also in the Decorated style.

The south aisle dates originally from the early 14th century though three of the south windows were replaced in the 15th century. The other south window has early 14th-century Y-tracery, and the bricked up west window is in the same style. The aisle, as already mentioned, has a string-course linked with the tower. It was restored in 1815. One buttress, to the east of the porch, has a mass dial low down on it.

The porch is a 15th-century addition, with a niche over the entrance for a statue of the patron saint. Inside, the corbels for the original roof remain, and there is evidence of a holy water stoup.

## INTERIOR

The south aisle is entered from the porch; it is separated from the nave by piers of 14th-century design, octagonal in form with chamfered arches. The floor is made of pammented tiles with some ledger slabs. One is to Anna Bird (1680), three others further east are much earlier. One of these probably bore a large carved cross, whilst another has a small indent for a memorial brass. The third once held a very fine memorial brass – the size of the indent indicates a large figure with a bordering inscription, probably of the 14th century. There is a memorial tablet on the wall to Anthony John Atthill (1876) and his wife Maria (1888), signed by the local mason, Perfitt of Stalham. The glass in the east window of the aisle, signed by the artist, A. L. Moore, shows the Presentation in the Temple: in the left-hand light is the Blessed Virgin Mary, the centre light has Simeon with the Holy Child, and the right one has St Joseph.

To the left of the altar are three stone steps which once formed part of the stairway leading to the rood loft, over the screen. In the south aisle is a piscina.

The tower is entered from the nave through a small painted doorway, a feature found nearby at Sea Palling and Crostwight, and in contrast to the usual high arch of the period. It has been taken to be the evidence of an earlier tower, the doorway being retained when the tower was rebuilt in the mid-14th century. The door retains its original woodwork: there is a carved head in the wall above. The present single bell dates only from 1819 and was cast at the Whitechapel foundry, London. However, parts of the very fine mediaeval oak bell frame survive in the belfry.

The nave has a curved plaster ceiling of 18th-century design, recently restored, which has two round recesses from which lamps probably once hung. This ceiling was presumably erected as part of the rebuilding programme of 1771.

The font, possibly late 14th century, has traceried panels round the stem. The octagonal bowl is supported by winged angels; the faces bear the symbols of the Four Evangelists – Eagle (St John), Lion (St Mark), Man (St Matthew) and Ox (St Luke) which alternate with heads. The base is surrounded by demons. The carving was recut in 1882 in memory of Anthony John Athill, churchwarden for 32 years. Like many late mediaeval fonts, such as nearby Stalham, the font stands high on two octagonal steps.

The pews in the nave are 19th century: there are a large number of ledger slabs in the floor.

The screen of c.1500 is the most remarkable possession of the church. It has arches in the upper part with almost circular heads, perhaps indicating a very late date. Its most unusual feature is the wide central opening



*The painted panels on the south side of the chancel screen*

with additional uprights inside topped by a pair of small, almost dog-like lions, a treatment unique in Norfolk screens. Also noteworthy are the remains of delicate cusping in the head of the screen and painted decorations on the moulded uprights. The lower part of the screen has four painted panels each side of the central opening, which are especially notable for the unspoilt painting. On the north side are the Four Evangelists (named on scrolls and with their characteristic emblems as on the font):

1. St Matthew as a winged man, open book in hand.
2. St Mark – winged, lion at feet, closed book in hand.
3. St Luke – winged, ox at feet.
4. St John – eagle at feet. He bears the cup and serpent symbolising the story that he rendered a poisoned cup harmless by making the sign of the Cross over it.

On the south side are the Four Latin Doctors:

5. St Gregory as Pope (remarkably the papal tiara is unmutilated). He bears a double-cross staff.
6. St Augustine with crozier as Bishop.
7. St Ambrose with crozier as Bishop.
8. St Jerome as Cardinal.



*The 'dog-like lions' on the chancel screen*

Dr John Mitchell, an expert on East Anglian screens and their paintings, comments that the paintings probably date from around 1490 – 1510, from the style of drapery of the Four Evangelists. The tracery of the woodwork has parallels in other screens made c.1480. In front of the screen is a small brass inscription to Roger and Margaret Skinner (1534). The screen was conserved in 1990 by Pauline Plummer.

The chancel arch was built at the same time as the south aisle. A corbel nearby, like others in the nave, bore the original nave roof. The chancel was heavily restored in 1887 when it acquired its tiled floor, choir stalls and communion rails and wooden reredos behind the altar. The roof was partly restored, the eastern and western sections presumably dating from 1887; the central portion retains its late mediaeval moulded beams and arch-braces with pierced geometric decoration in the spandrels. The original corbels can be seen, with carvings and grotesque animals. The 14th-century windows in the south wall were presumably once faced by corresponding windows in the north wall, one of which remains as an alcove; another can be seen only from outside.

There is a 15th-century piscina under a square label (it has a shelf within, possibly for cruets) and sedilia, formed out of the dropped sill of a window.

*Photographs by Christopher Dalton and  
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