



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

*Registered Charity No. 258612*

PRICE: £1.00



ST MICHAEL'S  
CHURCH

COSTON, NORFOLK





THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO  
ST MICHAEL'S CHURCH  
COSTON, 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 more than 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:

**BOOTON, ST MICHAEL THE  
ARCHANGEL**  
12 miles NW of Norwich and W of B1149

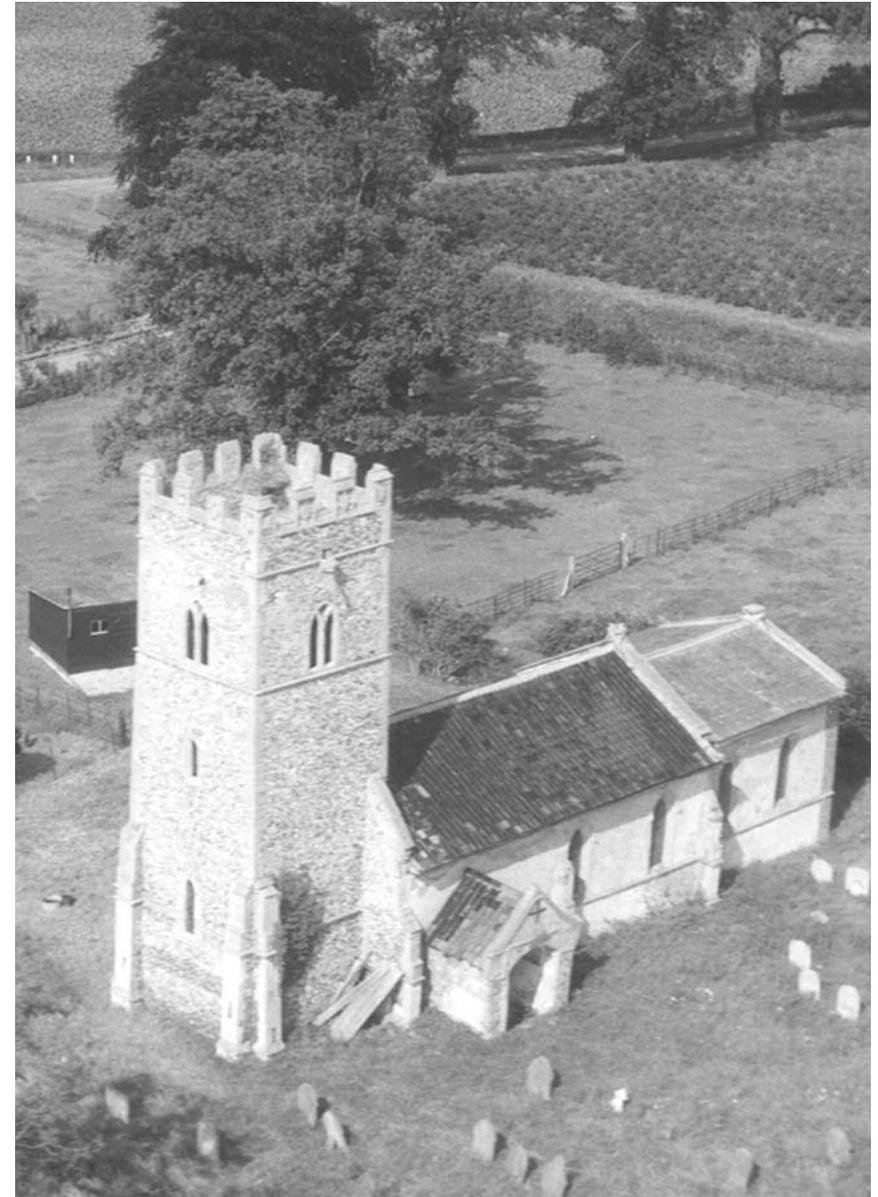
**BRANDISTON, ST NICHOLAS**  
11 miles NW of Norwich and W of B1149

**EAST BRADENHAM, ST MARY**  
15 miles W of Norwich and S of A47

**LITTLE WITCHINGHAM, ST FAITH**  
10 miles W of Norwich off A1067

**NORWICH, ST JOHN  
MADDERMARKET**  
Pottergate

**NORWICH, ST LAURENCE**  
St Benedict Street



*The church from the air in August 1965*

(COMMANDER P J GREENWOOD: © CROWN COPYRIGHT/MOD)

easternmost window on the north side is uncomfortably close to the present line of the east wall.

Coston is only some 350 acres (142 hectares) in extent and the largest recorded population was 65 in 1821. This declined to 24 in 1982. During the 20th century the condition of the building also declined and in 1979 it was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust. Repairs have been carried out by Neil Birdsall and Ruth Blackman of the Birdsall and Swash partnership of Hingham.

St Michael's is remotely situated and has a stillness and simplicity that signal it as a house of prayer, a place of retreat for us as it was for archdeacons for 600 years. Even the earliest of them would not find very much altered now.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south-east* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

*Back cover: Seventeenth century pulpit* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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Series 4 no. 71

August 1997

## ST MICHAEL'S CHURCH

COSTON, NORFOLK

by ANTHONY BARNES

Visitors will usually approach the church from the road to the east and, as they enter the churchyard proper, most of the building's history becomes apparent.

The windows of the nave and chancel – where there is also a low side window – are all of a date: eight lancets from the middle of the 13th century and typical of the Early English style of building. At sill level there is a string-course which runs almost all round the building, rising to accommodate doorways and the buttresses and lower window of the tower. It has the effect of holding the design together, for this is not a church that has, like so many, grown like Topsy.

On the east face of the tower are the traces of an older nave roof at a much steeper pitch. The Y-tracery in windows in the higher stages of the tower might suggest a slightly later date than the rest and the parapet is later still. The east wall of the chancel, where there is no string-course, is largely of brick, with a Perpendicular window reset in it. The porch, mostly of brick, is early 16th century. The nave and porch roofs are pantiled and the chancel roof is slated. Nave and chancel were rendered, but much of the render has been lost since the photograph taken in 1905.

The interior of the porch, like that of the church, is a wonderful mixture of faded ochres and related colours, with carvings on the label-stops on each side and a door of considerable age.

Inside, the floor is of brick. The north doorway opposite is now blocked. Beside it is a holy water stoup (and, outside, slight traces of a porch which was presumably no longer required when archdeacons ceased to live on the



*Decorated base of window moulding*  
(ANTHONY BARNES)



*Chancel arch, north side*  
(ANTHONY BARNES)

site of what is now the Old Rectory to the north of the church). The font and massive timber roof are 15th century. In the thickness of the wall on the north side of the chancel arch is a staircase leading to where the rood was once located. The inner chancel arch ends in a carved stone knot and equally unexpected carvings are to be found at the bases of the mouldings in the windows. There is a piscina in the south wall of the nave, but none in the chancel, evidence pointing to the chancel having been shortened. Most of the furnishings are 19th century – the church was repaired in 1850, with seating for 80 – but the communion table is late 16th century, the handsome pulpit 17th century and the parish chest 18th century. The priest's desk and choir stall were made up from the box pews

removed in 1850. The bell is by Mears of Whitechapel, 1848.

The only memorial is to the two men who died in the First World War. The brass had already gone from the ledger-slab in the floor when Blomfield wrote in the 18th century. There are a number of old gravestones outside in the churchyard and a particularly sad 19th century one to a 15 year old member of the choir who was killed by a stroke from a sail of the Runhall mill.

Coston, sometimes spelt Corston, is not mentioned in Domesday Book. In 1257 it became exempt from other dues and belonged to the Archdeacon of Norfolk as his country seat. It may not be entirely fanciful to suppose that this role and the church are contemporary, and that this special status was connected with the quality of the building, its carving and string-course and homogeneity. The parish was always tiny, barely a mile across (1.6 km), if that.

Until the start of the 17th century the archdeacons served as rectors. Thereafter the duties were performed by local clergy until the union with Runhall in 1855. As archdeacons tend to be ecclesiastical movers and shakers it is not surprising to find three rectors who subsequently became bishops – Richard de Mitford who went to Chichester in 1390 and on to Salisbury in 1395; John Hales who was Bishop of Lichfield from 1448 to 1459; and Charles Trimnel who became Bishop of Norwich in 1708.

In Blomfield's time the roofs were of lead, except for the porch, which

was tiled. In 1763 a 'ruinous and decayed' nave roof was replaced with tiles. In 1809 a faculty was granted to remove and sell the lead of the chancel roof, to raise the gable wall and to provide a new oak roof at the right pitch and covered with Westmorland slates. The cost would be £87 less the £36 for the old lead. What actually appears to have happened is that the chancel was shortened by one bay, the gap being infilled with brick and, presumably, the old east window and three corbels from the demolished bay. In 1992 the infill was found not to be bonded to the piers on each side and in the course of the consequent work clear evidence was found of foundations further to the east. As well as the missing piscina referred to already, the



*Interior looking east in 1973*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)