

The Parish Church

The church is much changed from the original church which was recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086. Little evidence of this Norman or possibly Saxon church remains, although some masonry to be seen in the lower stage of the tower may be of this date.

We also know that the church had a South porch that contained a simple 11th century doorway. Unfortunately, the porch and doorway disappeared in a major restoration and rebuilding in 1873. However, we do have a picture of the porch from an etching in 1848.

● **The parish church, St John the Baptist, is located at the bottom of Church Hill in Church Street, accessed from the traffic lights in the High Street. The church is open during the day.**
● **The text here is an extract taken from the excellent guide available to purchase in the church.**

Much of the church that we see today stems from the 19th century restoration but the church still contains many original items of an earlier date.



Photo with acknowledgment to Adrian Pye, <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/2116826>

The Outside

The Western tower (14th century) has diagonal buttresses at its western angles. The two light belfry windows and the similar west window are in the Decorated style of the early 14th century. The restored west doorway is also of this date, although some of the masonry in the lower part of the tower is arranged differently from the rest and may have formed part of the 11th century church.

The clock was given in 1880 and was restored in 1938. The parapet has lovely 15th century flint panelling (flushwork) with traceried panels. Beneath it is a band of flowers (fleur-de-lis) and carved heads, in addition to a large head at the centre of the west side and a gargoyle head on the south side.

The tower is home to a peal of **six bells**. Three of these bells were cast c. 1480-1510 by John Kebyll of London. Another was made in 1609 by Brend, the Norwich bell-founder, and the tenor, weighing 8cwt.3qtr.7lb, is by Lester and Pack of Whitechapel, made in 1762. The ring was completed by the addition of a new treble bell by John Warner of London in 1880. The second bell was recast in 1938, and the bells were rehung in new oak frames by Howell of Ipswich.

A gem in the crown that is St John's can be found in the churchyard on the tombstone of **John Noller (1725)**, which can be found south west of the church steps and in eight yards. The east and west faces of the tombstone are small, inclined oblong recesses which form a simple and imaginative sundial. Every sundial needs a pointer or gnomon projecting in front of the dial to cast a shadow on to a marked scale. Any such projection low down on a tombstone would certainly, sooner or later, be damaged. To prevent this happening, the designer of John Noller's headstone hit upon the ingenious idea of making the edge of the headstone's surface the gnomon and obtained the relative projection by recessing the dial.

As the stone faces east and west, he carved a morning dial on one side (east face) and an evening one on the other (west face). If you look in the recesses on both faces you will see the hour markings 1,2,3,4,5 on the west recess and 7,8,9,10,11 on the east recess. 12 o'clock is not marked because at the moment of noon each dial is completely in shadow.

You will also notice that the dials are not upright on the stone but at a slant. The upper edge which acts as the gnomon is so slanted as to point exactly to the north star, or in other words, be parallel with the earth's axis.



Tombstone with integral sundial

And why was it done? Well, we are not sure, but just as some clocks are marked with tile inscription "Tempus fugit" or time flies, so this gravestone with its sundial marking the passing of time also reminds us, the living, that our time soon passes. Or perhaps it was picking up on another thought about time from the Bible:

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die,"
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)

The Nave

The Font c 1400

This is a typical East Anglian design with octagonal panelled bowl carved with lions interspersed with angels holding shields on which are displayed the instruments of the Passion (East), the Cross (South), the emblem of the Trinity (West) and the three crowns of East Anglia (North). The bowl of the font is original.

The Nave c 1500

Internally the building is harmonious, light and well-proportioned. The aisles are separated from the nave by 15th century (Perpendicular) arcades of four bays, with octagonal piers which have moulded capitals and bases. These are topped by six two light clerestorey windows.

At the West end of the nave is the comparatively modern glazed gallery, from which the church's peal of six bells are rung. The west window of the tower ringing chamber contains the only piece of **medieval glass**, the head of an angel, to survive in this church. Above the ringing chamber is a large Sanctus bell window, which in mediaeval times allowed the ringer of the Sanctus bell to see over the Rood Screen to the main altar.

Stained Glass

The 19th century stained glass throughout the church is of interest because of the subjects represented as well as the makers and artists involved.

The West window of the North aisle is described in *The Popular Guide to Suffolk Churches* as being "a fairly terrible product of Ward and Hughes and features an outlandishly dressed centurion". What else can be said? Beauty is obviously in the eye of the beholder.

The East window of the North aisle depicting two angels against patterned quarries is of interest because of its local connections. It was designed and painted by Mary and Bessie McKean of Saxmundham in 1872 and installed by Mr Howlett, a Saxmundham glazier.

The Victorian tour de force is obviously the West window of the South aisle, designed by the Dowager Marchioness of Waterford, a friend of the poet John Ruskin, and a well known artist and book illustrator. The glass is by O'Connor and Taylor and illustrates Jesus's ascension into heaven, in brilliant colour. Jesus stands in the centre, and the disciples kneel on either side. The drama of the scene is enhanced by the quality of the artist's work and in particular the facial features.

Pews and Pulpit

The existing pews and pulpit date from the restoration of 1873 and are made from New Zealand kaurie pine. They replace the old box pews which were so tall that many folk using them could neither see nor be seen.

The Roof

The whole of the nave is crowned with a splendid 15th century single-hammerbeam arch braced roof, with castellated hammers and wooden demi-figures as corbels below the wall posts.

During the Georgian era, or perhaps before, the roof was covered in with a flat plaster ceiling. A church guide book of 1855 states that at the time only the "ends" of the roof were visible below the ceiling and that the whole interior was disfigured by galleries.

Happily the ceiling was removed in 1932 to reveal this splendid roof. It has been restored and the wall plates have been renewed, as have several of the other timbers. The ancient woodwork is less brown in appearance than the modern. The figures beneath the wall posts are mostly original.



c15th single-hammerbeam arch braced roof.

The Chancel

One of the most distinctive features of St John's is its **weeping chancel**. If you stand in the nave centre aisle and look towards the altar, you will notice that the Chancel is built at a pronounced angle to the nave. This is fairly common in churches built in the shape of a cross (cruciform) but is very rare in a church of this type. The main feature is not the angle, which is much greater than usual, but that it is to the South.

Other churches with weeping chancels incline to the North, representing Jesus on the cross with his head towards the penitent thief on his right. Here it is to his left, signifying that Jesus died for

the impenitent as well as the penitent. Saxmundham church is one of the few in Europe to have this feature.

The Chancel arch and the two bay arcade North and South were replaced as part of the 1873 restoration, but we think that the restorers copied the original forms (Decorated style)

The organ by Albert Pease of Hackney was installed here in the early 1950s. It has two manuals, pedals and 15 speaking stops.

Memorials

Within the church are some finely executed monuments by some famous sculptors. Among them is the memorial, by Nollekens, to Charles Long, who died in 1812, in which a fat putto sits with his torch reversed in mourning against the dark obelisk.

Thomas Thurlow provided the tablet over the vestry door for Susanna Mayhew in 1853.

Sir Richard Westmacott carved the memorial to Rt. Hon. Sir Charles Long, a prominent politician. He was MP for Dunwich and created Baron Farnborough in 1826. His monument here is a cenotaph as he is actually buried at Wormley in Hertfordshire.

There are several wall memorials to the Long family. One on the North wall of the chapel commemorating Beeston Long (1765) and his wife, Sarah, is by William Tyler, who had studied under Roubiliac and was an original member of the Royal Academy. Another, in similar style over the small South doorway, commemorates Charles and Mary Long (1778).

A memorial with anchor and ensign draped over the obelisk commemorates George Long, who as a young man was killed in 1782 leading the storming of Trincomalee in Sri Lanka.

The Long family originally came from Wiltshire, but their association with Saxmundham dates from the 17th century. Lord Farnborough's great-grandfather, Samuel Long (1638-1683), was appointed secretary to the Jamaica Commissioners immediately after the conquest of that island, and on his return to England purchased Hurts Hall, Saxmundham.

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