All Saints Church Great Thurlow

Down the centuries



The flint-faced church is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 although the earliest fabric is C12th so it is possible an Anglo Saxon timber church could have been re-built after the Norman Conquest. The exterior corners of the narrow chancel feature slender stone columns that are a hallmark of Norman architecture.

The core of the nave is thought to be C12th but it was remodelled in the C15th when the north and south aisles and clerestory were added. The embattled parapets of the nave and north aisle echo that of the tower, crowned with an C18th lead cupola.

James Vernon funded a major restoration in1741, as recorded in the window of the south chapel. It is one of three windows re-arranged by stained glass artist and suffragette Joan Howson. Her work was part of the 1956 programme of 'repair and beautification' by the Vestey family which also included a new altar reredos by Laurence Bond and a tower screen with modern ringers' gallery for the ring of six bells.



A late C19th project, led by architect William Fawcett, had already seen the removal of plaster ceilings and the west gallery as well as a new chancel arch and additional benching.

All Saints has been described as one of the best restorations of a Suffolk church. The building is listed as Grade II*. Adjacent to the church is the fine C18th Great Thurlow Hall.

On the mighty river



Flowing through the Thurlows, the Stour, meaning 'mighty river', was the reason for early settlements. There is also evidence of the Romans being in the area. The Domesday book of 1086 records that a freewoman called Edred possessed Great Thurlow. The two Thurlows have long been part of large estates with wealthy owners who have greatly supported the churches as well as leaving a legacy of fine buildings.

By 1272, the manor of Great Thurlow was held by Gilbert Peche who was granted charters by Henry III for an annual fair which continues today. The line continued through his daughter Katherine and her offspring. When Thomas Soame came to the area in 1582, it was the start of a dynasty in the Upper Stour villages that lasted for the next three centuries. It is likely the two Thurlows were run as one from 1613 until 1715 when Sir Cordel Firbrace took over Great Thurlow. James Vernon was recorded as Lord of the Manor in 1741 and the estate passed to his grandson John Vernon in 1756. When he died in 1818, his sister Lady Arethusa Harland inherited the estate. It was she who gifted the iron bridge over the Stour tributary to alleviate flooding of the then main route to Bury St Edmunds.

The next owner of the Great Thurlow estate was W.H. Smith, prominent politician and founder of the renowned book and newspaper chain. His son and heir had a reading room built in the village in 1903. Charles Foster Ryder bought the estate in 1906 and Great Thurlow Hall was the childhood home of Sue Ryder, the great charity worker. In 1942, the whole estate passed from the Ryder to the Vestey family. Ronald Vestey funded a major church project and purchased Collis Mill in 1959 to restore it as a visual amenity for the village.



1 Norman font



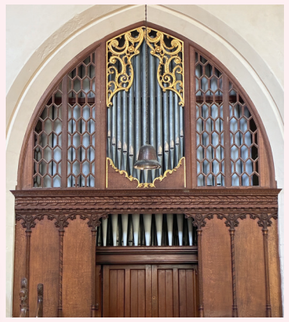
Head to the west end to admire the sturdy stone font with its C12th bowl. It was moved from opposite the porch in 1849.

2 Pulpit



The octagonal oak pulpit is early C17th with blind arches in the top panels and a reading ledge inside the drum.

3 Organ



The 1782 organ, by Holdich of London was restored in 1982. The elaborate oak and pine casing was installed in 1964.

In the churchyard



This gravestone, west of the church, is for Mary Traylen who died aged 30. It shows 'death behind the curtain' with a carved relief of Death being driven from the corpse. See also the fine gravestones to the south.

All Saints church welcomes all visitors and there is a schedule of key holders in the porch. The building is maintained and cared for entirely by volunteers so we are always grateful for donations. Please scan the QR code to find out how to donate.

marionwelham.co.uk 2026

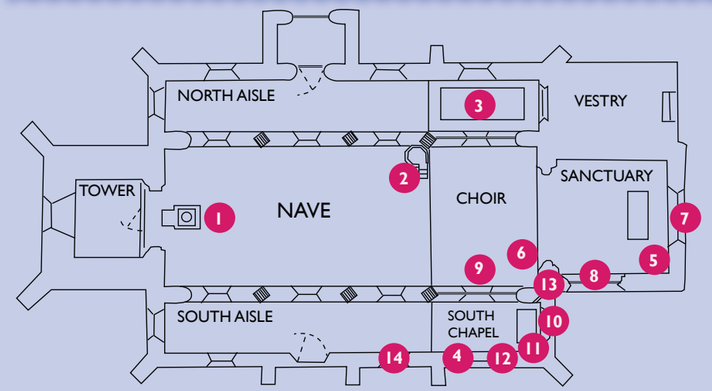


More to discover

4 Heraldic window



This glass features Katherine, daughter of Sir Gilbert Peche, Lord of the Manor. She married first Sir John Aspall, and second Sir Thomas Notbeme. She died in 1406. Her great grandson John Gedding, who died in 1469, is featured in one of the brasses on the chancel floor with his wife Margery.



5 Mediaeval brasses



Left is the brass for Anne Drury, wife of Thomas Underhill who may have helped to fund the tower. He died in 1508 and only his torso, in Tudor armour, survives. Anne wears an outer garment hitched up to show the garment underneath in typically East Anglian style. A plate of their nine sons and another of their daughters are missing. The nearby brass of John Gedding and wife Margery shows him in the armour of the Yorkist period and his helmet, with visor raised, is the only example in Suffolk. Margery wears the mantle and veil of a mourning widow and in the folds of her garment is a lapdog with bells round its neck.

6 Frink maquette



On the east wall to the right of the chancel arch is a 1975 bronze maquette of shepherd and sheep by Elisabeth Frink. In memory of Ronald Vestey, it was given by his three daughters in 1990.
Dame Elisabeth Frink was born and grew up in the Thurlows.



7 A place of peace



Stepping through the chancel arch, rebuilt in the C19th, the large classical reredos in blue and gold, emits peace and calm. Between the gilded columns, topped by ornate Corinthian pilasters is a floral brocade reredos panel, under the words *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. Above are winged cherubs holding candlesticks. They frame the window by Harry Harvey of York with the theme 'All Saints' in which Christ in Majesty is surrounded by his 12 apostles. It is all part of the 1956 legacy of Ronald and Florence Vestey.

8 Evangelists in glass



The window in the south wall of the chancel features three restored C15th angels with feathered bodies and standing on wheels. Note also the evangelistic symbols: the winged man for Matthew; lion for Mark; ox for Luke, and rising eagle for John. Look closely to see the diamond-shaped "quarries" of glass with flowers and symbols, repeated in the west window on the south side of the ringing gallery.

9 Chapel screen



The screen was added in 1962 but the top beam is early C17th, shown by the inscription from the Warren family pew, later taken over by the Vernons as Lords of the Manor.

10 Benefactors window



The east window in the south chapel features heraldic fragments to honour the benefactors of All Saints. A fine armorial section records the 'repair and beautification' of the church in 1741 by James Vernon, Lord of the Manor. It is believed to be the relatively rare work of glass painter Wm Price the Younger who died in 1765. Below is a similar inscription recording the work of Ronald and Florence Vestey in 1956, the year when the glass was rearranged by Joan Howson.

11 Vestey memorial



This handsome alabaster wall tablet, with a dove in flight, is in memory of Florence Ellen McLean who married Ronald Arthur Vestey in 1923. They had a son and three daughters. Take time to read the other memorials for families with links to the church.

12 Piscina

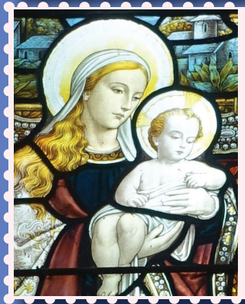
The stone basin in the chapel may have been built into the south wall as part of an earlier church. It is a good example of a piscina which were used for draining water used in the Mass.

13 Squint



A long squint cut obliquely into the south pillar gives a view of the high altar. During Mass, it allowed the act of consecration by a priest at a side altar to co-ordinate with the celebration at the high altar. It is one of two, the other in the north chapel, now obscured by the organ casing.

14 Saints window



The early C20th window by John Cameron in the south aisle features St Mary with the infant Jesus and St Elizabeth with John the Baptist. It is in memory of Elizabeth Canning, wife of the Rev. Wayman, who died in 1899. It was a gift from their children. More C20th glass is in the south and north aisles.