

# A Brief History of SS. Peter and Paul Church



## Early Fakenham

The history of Fakenham is still to be deciphered. Without doubt there was considerable settlement in the district from pre-Roman times but the first straightforward evidence about Fakenham's population comes from the Domesday Book. In 1086, apparently, there were '5 Villeins, 20 Bordars and 4 Serfs' in residence. With wives, children and a few extras added, the settlement may have numbered around 150 souls. The figure was to grow to about 1,000 by the time of the next official survey in the 18th century.

The oil painting of a former Rector, Dr John Hackett, was bought by subscription for the church in 1941. It was painted by Joseph Highmore and is situated in the Trinity Room created in 2005 with a grant from Trinity College Cambridge and many generous donations from Fakenham residents and supporters of the church.

The church chest in the chancel is medieval.

The windows in the nave were re-glazed in the 1960s and given by local people. The Clerestory windows were replaced in 1968, the gift of another local resident. The east window was given by the Reverend Charles Norris in 1805. It contains detailed scenes of Christ's life. It was restored in the mid-1980s. The west window was re-glazed in 2007. The only medieval glass in the church is the medallion or roundel in the westernmost window of the north aisle now in the Trinity Room. These fragments of old glass were used to create the roundel in memory of Mr & Mrs E G Saunders in 1964.



At the end of 1989, an anonymous donor gave the full cost of installing permanent floodlighting for the church tower. Fakenham church tower is now a beacon to the area for miles around by both day and night, an inspiration to those who know and love this ancient town and church.

In May 2014, an intense and devastating fire destroyed the neighbouring department store, shop and flats in the Upper Market . It started just as morning service began in church on the Sunday and would have melted the church lead roof and damaged the glass but for the dedication of a group of firefighters with one of the fire crews who sprayed water onto these for well over two hours.

On 23rd February 2017, the north west pinnacle on the tower crashed through the nave roof, brought down by storm Doris. Miraculously no one was hurt. In early 2019, the church was rewired and new lighting installed, part funded by a legacy.

We hope you enjoy your visit to Fakenham and its church. Please take time to rest and enjoy the peace of this holy place where God has been worshipped for half of Christian history. If you are moved to prayer, may you find Him here, close to you, as have 40 generations of Fakenham people.

## Church History

Although not mentioned in Domesday, Fakenham Church is likely to have existed at the time in some shape and form. Stones in the north east corner of the present building are thought to be Saxon, so people have probably worshipped here for over 1,000 years. From just after the Conquest, an Early English stone church was built. The north doorway (into St. Peter's Garden via the Trinity Room) was part of it. In the 14th century the present chancel and nave were built in the Decorated style. Concurrent with this major work the right of appointment to the living was passed to King's Hall, Cambridge. When this college was united with Michaelhouse in 1546 its name became Trinity College which has ever since kept its patronage of Fakenham Church.



The Tower was added in the 15th century but a period of neglect was to follow. In 1597, the Rector, Dr Robert West, recorded that 'The chancel is ruynowes and decayed for want of tiling, glasings and pavyng'. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the minister of Fakenham conformed to and accepted the Prayer Book and in common with other churches put on display the Royal Arms.

A notable visitor in the next century was John Wesley who, in 1781, arrived on horseback from Norwich. He preached in the town before riding on to Wells.





Major restoration took place in the Victorian era under the eye of the flamboyantly named Reverend Michael Angelo Atkinson. The nave and chancel roofs date from this time as do the pine pews. During the incumbency of the Reverend A E Humphreys at the turn of the century, a parish mission was set up which led to the founding of a Mothers Union branch, a Men's Bible Union and a Young Women's Bible Union. Mr Humphreys also supported a small theological college in the town and was for a time the joint vicar of both Fakenham and Hempton.

In the last war, the church narrowly escaped damage from a stick of bombs in 1941. Neglect of the fabric was arrested in 1951, since when thousands of pounds have been spent on upkeep and improvement. The roofs were re-slatted, windows replaced and, in 1971 the nave altar area was created. More recently the creation in 2005 of the Trinity Room, two toilets and improved kitchen facilities have proved a major asset. The Historic Churches Trust has been instrumental in supporting this work, much of which has also been made possible through generous public support.

As with many medieval buildings there is always work which needs to be done either to maintain the building in a good state of repair or to maintain it as 'fit for purpose' in the 21st century, as with the removal of the old pews from both the north and south aisles in 2005 and 2007.

Our next major project in 2024 will be a much-needed improvement to the access of the church. We hope to enable everyone to come and go easily by remodelling the main entrance and removing the steep ramp and wooden doors with easy access doors and a graduated slope. Whilst a legacy from



the late Doug Flegg will help, a significant sum of money is needed from grants to enable us to go ahead.



## The Church Building

The Tower is 115 feet high and is accessed from an interior spiral stairway by 146 steps. Above the west door is a series of monograms of the letter 'P,' standing for St Peter and St Paul to whom the church was dedicated. In 1828 battlements, pinnacles and weather vanes were added.

The two most recent restorations took place in 1889 and 1963. The clock face, which is much relied upon by townsfolk, measures 10 feet across. Its hands are 5 and 6 feet long. Generations of clock winders have kept the clock on time by manually winding it twice a week. In 2023, the clock mechanism was automated by Michlmyar of Norwich thanks to a generous legacy by the late Raymonde Nelson.



The porch may have been added when the tower was built in the 15th century. It originally had an upper room reached from the inside by a stone staircase. In 1602, this was said to have been used as a powder magazine for the region. The little door by the side of the porch is all that remains.

The font is octagonal and built in the Perpendicular style of the 15th century. The eight panels depict the emblems of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, together with emblems of the Passion, the Trinity and the Royal Arms. The empty panel may well have represented the crucifixion, which would have been removed at the time of the Reformation.

The nave pews were installed as part of the Victorian restoration. Prior to that there would have been curtained box pews and, for a time, galleries in the north and south aisles. The oldest tombstone in the nave is in the memory of



Covenant Hempsterley who died on 24th July 1689. The splendid brass eagle lectern was given by Mrs Damant in 1887 in memory of her husband. In 1971 a Nave altar was created on a dais erected in front of the chancel screen. The four panels depicting Faure's Requiem at the back of the church were a gift of the artist Dorothea Harvey. The hassocks, embroidered in the 1980's were designed by book illustrator Eliza Trimby, niece of the then Rector, Hugh Buckingham.

The Chancel Screen dates from the 14th century but was much restored in 1864. Its earlier appearance has been revealed through a drawing by J S Cotman, the famous artist of the Norwich School. The high altar dates from the 19th century and replaced earlier examples in both stone and wood.

The painting behind the altar, known as the Reredos, represents St Peter and St Paul and the writers of the four gospels. A survivor of the 19th century restoration is the fine 14th century sedilia on the south side of the Sanctuary.



The three stalls include a piscina which was used for washing communion vessels. A painting of St Cecilia, patron saint of organists and music, adorns the north wall.



The magnificent organ was set in place in 1926. It was overhauled and enhanced by the addition of the pedal trombone stop in 1985 which was paid for by donations from friends of the church. A parclose chapel, once enclosed by wooden screens, formerly occupied the space where the organ now stands. It was dedicated to St Mary.



The east end of the south aisle was also once a parclose chapel, dedicated to St Thomas. It was removed in 1971 to make way for the new Nave altar. A new chapel was created in the mid 1980's through the generosity of Val and Ethel Aldiss.



If you would like to donate to our church, to help us keep its heritage for future generation, you can make a one-off or a regular donation via the Parish Giving website.

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Thank you.

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