

ST MARY'S CHURCH AKENHAM

Often called 'St Mary's in the Fields', Akenham church stands to the north of the parish of Whitton with Thurleston and Akenham and is accessed by footpaths and a rough vehicular track. Although the building is redundant and in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, services are still held there at Christmas and Harvest time and evensong takes place during the month of August. The churchyard remains the responsibility of Whitton PCC.

Originally the church was transferred into the care of Whitton-cum-Thurleston and a service was held every Sunday until November 1940, when the blast from a landmine shattered the windows and damaged the roof. The abandoned church stood derelict and disused until 1957 when a scheme for its demolition was planned. At a Consistory Court hearing in 1959 however, a faculty for its complete repair was granted to Mrs Marjorie Hall of Rise Hall who, with some of Akenham's 64 residents, had campaigned to save St Mary's. She had gained the support and involvement of the Friends of Friendless Churches, who were able to provide much of the £3,000 needed for the repairs and the church reopened on Easter Sunday 1962.

In July 1976 it was declared pastorally redundant and in April 1978 it was vested in the Churches Conservation Trust, to be maintained and conserved by and for the Church and the Nation as a sacred, historic and beautiful building. Further repairs were carried out in 1990 and the work of conservation and care continues to this day.

EXTERIOR.

A simple solitary headstone on the north side of this churchyard is perhaps the best known of all Akenham's graves. It commemorates two-year-old Joseph Ramsey, who died on his birthday, 19 August 1878. The events surrounding this little un-baptised child's burial, which later became the subject of a lawsuit, known as the Akenham Burial Case, were to play an important part in reshaping the burial laws of England (see below). A tablet in the chancel also commemorates this event. On the south side, near the tower, is the restored War Memorial a simple stone cross recording the names of three brothers who lost their lives during the 1914—18 War. Their sacrifice is also recorded on a plaque inside the church. This memorial was re-built and unveiled in 2016 (see also below).

Like the majority of Suffolk churches, St Mary's walls are built mostly of flints gathered from the fields, although the chancel walls are faced with render. By contrast the short south aisle is faced with mellow Tudor or 17th century bricks. The building comprises nave and chancel, and a tower to the south of the nave (also forming a porch), to the east of which is a short south aisle or chapel. The simple unbuttressed 14th century tower is one of 23 south porch towers in Suffolk (others nearby are at Barham and Witnesham). Its large outer entrance arch shows the considerable thickness — about four feet (1.2 m) — of its walls and is framed with Tudor bricks.

INTERIOR.

The church is entered through the base of the tower. The single bell, in the bell-chamber above is unusually large for a church of this size. It has a diameter of 475/5 inches (1.2 m), weighs approximately 13' cwt (686 kg) and was cast at the Ipswich bell-foundry of John Darbie in 1678.

A simple 14th century doorway, with a late-18th or early-19th century door, gives access to the bright interior, with brick floors, lime-washed walls and clear glass in the windows affording plenty of light. Visitors have remarked about the atmosphere of peace and devotion here. This has been moulded by centuries of prayer and enhanced by craftsmanship from a variety of periods, as people from different times and traditions have altered, beautified and left their mark upon the building. The walls of the nave lean slightly outwards and the north wall of the chancel tapers, so that the chancel is about 1 ft 5in (0.5m) narrower at the east end than at the west. The position of the octagonal font at the west end, near the entrance, symbolises the entry, by Holy Baptism, into the family of the Church. It dates from the 15th century, as is seen in the elegant Perpendicular window designs (each different from the others) which adorn its stem. The bowl is also panelled with a variety of tracery designs and a hanging shield. The simple lid has a turned finial which may well be 17th century. The reed organ nearby was made by the Smith American Organ Co., of Boston, USA.

The nave roof is of simple construction and is strengthened by sets of two horizontal beams, linked by vertical king-posts. The chancel has a plaster ceiling, with carved (and maybe mediaeval) cornices at the tops of the walls. The south chapel roof, constructed in 1854, has mini-hammer beams and pendants.

In the north wall of the nave are traces of the splay of its blocked doorway and nearby, beneath the Norman window, is the war memorial plaque which replaced the desecrated churchyard memorial referred to earlier. It records the names of Amos, George and Philip Purkiss — three brothers from Akenham who perished in the 1914 —18 War (see the Story of the World War One War Memorial, researched & written by James Manning B.E.M.).

There are three sets of seating in the church. The western part of the nave, on the north side, has five benches, with simple flat-topped ends, whilst the chapel is furnished with three pews with doors. Presumably these date from the 1854 restoration. The eastern half of the nave has two blocks of four pews..

The hexagonal pulpit, with an elegant balustrade to its staircase, the reading desk opposite and the communion rails, appear to have been made at the same time and their simple Gothic design suggests the early part of the 19th century. The altar table is a rather makeshift construction, presumably installed by Fr. Drury in the mid-19th century. The shallow carved borders down its front sides suggest that perhaps something more elaborate was intended and the small stone mensa-slab, inset into its table-top at the place where the bread and wine were actually consecrated, was not only a sign of very 'advanced' churchmanship but was also illegal in the Church of England when Fr. Drury installed it!

The three wrought-iron chandeliers (now the only means of lighting the church), were given in 1991 and 1995 and are used to great effect at the annual Carol Service. The long kneeler at the communion rail is also a recent gift to the church, showing that St

Mary's, although retired from full-time employment as a parish church, is nevertheless still loved.

In the floor of the nave are memorial slabs to people who have been part of this tiny community in the past..

THE AKENHAM BURIAL CASE.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, four clergy by the name of George Drury were at various times rectors of Claydon with Akenham, because the Drury family were patrons of the living, with the right to appoint the parish priest. The last of the clerical Drurys was rector at Akenham for almost 50 years from 1846—95.

Akenham achieved national notoriety in 1878 with the burial of two year-old Joseph, the unbaptised child of Edward and Sarah Ramsey, who were members of Zoar Baptist Church in Ipswich, but lived in Akenham. Edward was employed by Mr EF Gooding, of Akenham Hall, who worshipped at Tacket Street Congregational Church, Ipswich.

Civil Law decreed that any parishioner had the right to be buried in his parish churchyard, but Church Law insisted that only Anglican clergy could conduct the burial service and they were forbidden to conduct a Christian service at the burial of any person who had not been baptised.

On an August afternoon in 1878, the Rector arrived at the churchyard at the agreed time of 5pm to receive the appropriate certificate and to witness to child's decent burial (but without any service), as was his duty. Mr Gooding however had arranged for the Revd Wickham Tozer (Minister of St Nicholas Street Congregational Church in Ipswich) to conduct a service in the meadow outside the churchyard before the child was buried. When the service did not begin until 5.30 pm and seemed likely to last for a considerable time, the impatient rector interrupted it, asking that the coffin be placed in the grave. He could then return home and would not need to witness the completion of a service of which he strongly disapproved. A rather unpleasant verbal altercation then took place, which resulted in the rector locking the churchyard gate and storming off. The coffin had to be lifted and passed over the hedge for burial when the service had ended. The Revd Wickham Tozer, keen to expose this 'Burial Scandal', anonymously wrote for publication in the East Anglian Daily Times a graphic account of the proceedings, which was very derogatory towards the rector. Mr Frederick Wilson, the editor and proprietor of the East Anglian Daily Times, was a very willing confederate for Mr Tozer in his zeal to expose such 'scandals' perpetrated by the Established Church and particularly by members of its Catholic wing. Fr. Drury took great exception to the article and, being no stranger to litigation, promptly sued Mr Wilson for libel. The trial took place during March 1879 at the Court of Common Pleas at Westminster and its details were well publicised in the national press. Although the jury returned a clear verdict in favour of Drury, the damages awarded to him were a mere 40 shillings, although Wilson had to pay the costs of the trial. Donations poured in to Mr Wilson from burial reformers and other sympathisers

throughout the land, which more than covered the costs involved. It is said that with some of the residue Mr Wilson erected the little lad's headstone in Akenham churchyard.

The widespread feeling caused by the Akenham Burial Case and other related incidents did much to hasten the passing of the Burial Laws Amendment Act in 1880. This permitted burials in any churchyard in the land to take place using any appropriate form of service, or even without a religious service.

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