

St. Michael's Church, Kirby-le-Soken

Like most villages, Kirby has a mix of old cottages and houses which reflect the varied occupations of bygone years such as blacksmith, wheelwright, carpenter, miller and thatcher. However, it is the stretch of backwater which gives a unique flavour to the village and which is much loved by naturalists and water sports enthusiasts. Thus, although the main occupation of the inhabitants of Kirby for many centuries was farming, shipping has also played an important role, possibly as far back as the fourteenth century, and by the middle of the last century Kirby quay handled everything from sand, gravel, chalk, lime to fertilisers, wheat and, of course, fish. This part of the village also had a reputation for being the place to ply a little 'private' business in the form of smuggling.



The name SOKEN is Saxon in origin and means an area of special, or 'peculiar' jurisdiction. The Soken, including the parishes of Kirby, Thorpe and Walton, had its own manorial customs, rights and ecclesiastical courts which existed from AD 941 until 1858. The Customs of the Soken benefited the inhabitants rather than their overlord and included the rules that 'The Courts Rolls ought to be kept in a chest in Kirby Church, with three locks, one key to remain with the Lord, another with the Steward and the third with the Tenants'. The Court held by the Lord of the Manor dealt with matters concerning land and tenancy being confined to the views of the Steward and the Tenants with "no learned Man in Law" participating.

THE CHURCH

Little of the medieval church of St. Michael now remains except the Tower, parts of the Chancel and the fifteenth century Headstops on either side of the North Door, because in 1833 it was rebuilt. Not only was it in a bad state of disrepair, but too small for the population of nearly a thousand. The rebuilding which cost :- Repairs £637.13 Enlargement £372.33 Total Work £1010.70 including the existing South Aisle, a new gallery at the West end across the width of the church with open benches for the poor, singers and band, and a large Vestry at the East end of the south Aisle, now mostly occupied by the organ. Much of the 1833 rebuilding was altered by Mr Henry Stone, Son-in-law of the Vicar, William Coxhead, in 1870 and 1872, who abolished the gallery and replaced it by a large window at the West end, constructed the North Aisle and rebuilt the Chancel. At each rebuilding and again in 1975, the condition of the roof was a major problem.

Entering the church through the Porch of 1872, immediately inside the door is the narrow **North Aisle** with the fine 'Iona' window at the East (Altar) end. This window is fourteenth century and the modern glass shows St Cedd who brought the Gospel to this area from Lindisfarne, becoming Bishop of the East Saxons and building the famous Chapel of St Peter at Bradwell-on-Sea; also is shown the figure of St Aidan who directed the carrying of the Gospel throughout this land and who taught St Cedd at Lindisfarne and was himself a disciple of St Columba at Iona. This window was given in memory of Maud Baker who gave the land on which the Baker Hall at Kirby Cross is built and her husband Maurice.

In this Aisle, next to the Passion Window, which depicts our Lord's suffering and death, is a list of the Rectors and Vicars of this Parish so far as is known (earlier names are still being found). The Revd Thomas Whittell stands out in this list as the one who under the Marian persecution of 1555 recanted of his faith, but was then "grieved very much in conscience and mind because I had subscribed" and despite rough handling and the certainty of death withdrew his recantation and was burned at the stake at Smithfield Market on 27th January 1556. Of Interest is the enlarged reprint of an article by Leslie Cole on St Michael's Church. This reprint hangs on the wall next to the North door. **The Pulpit** replaces the original Portland Stone pulpit which was installed during the renovation of 1833. The present oak pulpit was given to the Church in 1952 and the stone one removed.





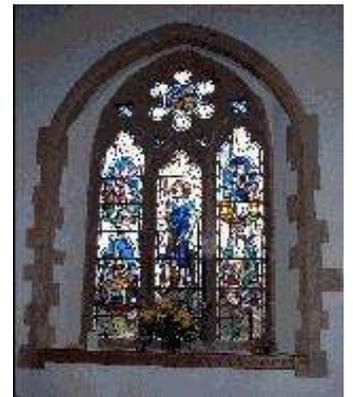
The Chancel now occupied by Choir Pews, is fourteenth century, and on the North Wall is to be seen the remains of a doorway that was once possibly the "Priest's Door". The door is flanked by two windows, one depicting the Annunciation and the Nativity and the other four Saints. St Osyth, martyred by the Danes in the seventh century; St Walstan, the Saxon "Labourer Saint", who lived and worked at Costessy in Norfolk; St Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231), patron of the Third Order of the Franciscans and known for "her extraordinary works of mercy" and St Fiacre of Breuil, of a noble Irish family, he lived at Breuil in France and "tilled his garden and

laboured with his own hands for his subsistence... life most austere, prayer and contemplation... many resorted to him for advice, and the poor for relief".

The Sanctuary contains some fine modern oak panelling and a Piscina of the fourteenth century. Behind the modern Table, installed in 1950, the wall is covered with Victorian tiles. The glass of the East Window shows our Lords caring and healing ministry.

The Piscina in the south wall has a shelf to hold, the Cruet (vessels for the Water and Wine for the Holy Communion) and two Drains or Sacraia connected with the earth, one reserved for the washing of the Priest's hands and the other for the cleansing of the sacred vessels. The Piscina is now 'calf-height, but originally it would have been 'waist height'. In other words, the floor of the sanctuary and the church is 2'6" higher than when the church was originally built by the Master Mason six hundred years ago.

The Window on the South side of the sanctuary was dedicated in 1979 in memory of the Revd John Thomas, Vicar of this parish from 1940-72. It is by Rupert Moore, designer of the St Cecilia and Christ the Carpenter windows in the Nave. The window represents the Revelation of God through Word and Sacrament.



The fine fourteenth century Arch over the Organ possibly led into a "Lady Chapel", long since destroyed.

The Organ was rebuilt by Cedric Arnold of Thaxted in 1959. There was a 'Pair of Organs" (i.e., bellows and pipes) in Kirby Church in 1297, but for many years the music would be provided by the 'village band'. In 1839 the Church purchased a Seraphine, an instrument like a harmonium, and paid a professional player for the church services and then the present instrument (prior to rebuilding) was built by Cartwright and Co of London and dedicated in 1911.

The South Aisle. The altar placed against the organ was the original main altar but the frontals have been renewed. The windows depict the Nativity (nearest to the Organ), then St Michael defeating the Dragon (Revelation 12:7,8), this figure being surrounded by the Arms of the Dioceses in which this parish has been placed from time to time. Then comes a window in praise of "outdoor labours and simple home domesticity" with the centre figure showing our Lord as a Carpenter. There is a memorial on the west wall to those who lost their lives in the first and second world wars, there is also memorial to a past incumbent and a benefactors board. The West window of this South Aisle shows a figure of St Francis, 'the Patron Saint of Animals but in fact a man of "simple and unaffected faith with a passionate devotion to God and man, a love of nature and a deep humility" who in 1209 founded the Franciscan Order. The Franciscan Order is still a tremendous force for our Lord in the world.

The hot dry summers of latter years have contributed to some subsidence on this side of the church and many cracks can be seen.

The oak doors and the plate glass screen separating the Nave from the Tower Vestry were installed in 1967.

The Tower contains the West Window which has the theme of our Lord's Resurrection. The Tower itself is of the fifteenth century and is in three stages with an embattled parapet of chequer work. Note the thickness of the walls at ground level they are approx. 6 feet thick tapering to 18 inches at the top. The Tower was built with two skins with an infill of rubble. Over the years the tower has been much repaired. You will see that the timber beams have now been replaced by steel joists. Gargoyles on the tower and around the church not only decorate the church but serve their purpose of carrying rain water from the roof to the ground below.



The Bells. According to the returns of 1297 there were two bells in a belfry and in 1458, three toned bells, by 1863 "five bells, three sound, all well hung". The present bells, eight in number, vary from one by Miles Graye of 1641 to the Treble and Second by Alfred Bowell in 1926.

Back through the tower doors will be found the Octagonal **Font** which together with the Pillars and Arches of the Nave were renewed or repaired in 1833, they faithfully retain the style and decoration of the fourteenth century, including the typical Ball Flower decoration.

The **Parish Chest** which is original has three locks. The interior is subdivided into two sections and the lid is divided in line with these sections. At one time all the parish records were kept in the chest but about 10 years ago the records were all sent to the Essex County Record office.



Above the Parish Chest is the modern glass depicting St Cecilia, Patron Saint of Music, also St Ambrose and St Gregory, both reformers of Church Music. Two great composers and performers of Church Music are also shown, namely Bach and Palestrina.

THE CHURCHYARD

Against the east wall of the church below the east window is the "Savage Memorial" this is a listed memorial and the words should be noted! We do not have any famous memorial but the churchyard is a large one and beautifully kept by a band of volunteers and there are some intriguing graves, in the north east corner will be found some war graves from the first world war one to a "sailor of the 1st world war" whose body was washed up on Horsey Island which is on the edge of one of our Parish boundaries



The **Church Hall** at the bottom of the drive dates from 1901 it was built on the site of the village school which was demolished due to subsidence in the late 1800's the churchyard was also extended at this time as originally it's boundary was about half way up the church drive.

THE CHURCH CLOCK

The clock was given by Miss Shum who lived at Hill House, Halstead Rd. from whence she could see one of it's 2 faces. It was originally driven by clockwork and weights but is now electrically driven and maintained by Tendring Council as a public clock.

On special occasions St.George's flag is flown from the top of the tower.

