

# THE CHURCH OF SAINT MARY THE VIRGIN CLOPTON



A SHORT ILLUSTRATED GUIDE



## ***WELCOME TO ST MARY'S CHURCH***

People have worshipped on this spot for at least 1000 years and parts of the building that we see today have stood for at least 700 years. This beautiful church, which is not a museum or ancient monument, is a living, working building, still in regular use for Christian worship and witness – the purpose for which it was built. Generations of Clopton folk have altered and beautified St Marys over the centuries and the care which is lavished upon it by its present-day custodians shows how much it is cherished, wanted and used.

We hope that you will enjoy exploring St Mary's and that this guide will point you to some of its features of beauty and interest. There is a detailed history of the church at the end of this guide.

### ***Exploring the Exterior***

It is worth pausing to enjoy this church in its setting, elevated above the road and with pleasant views over the Suffolk countryside. Only ¼ mile south is Burgh church (also well worth a visit); both churches were built beneath the site of an ancient earthwork which had been an Iron Age fort and later a Roman encampment. It stands near the southern tip of its large parish (of about 2,074 acres) and at least 2 ¾ miles from Clopton's northern extremity.

Like its neighbour at Burgh, St Mary's comprises just a nave and chancel, with a northern vestry and a tower to the south of the nave, which also serves as the porch. Its walls are built of flint rubble, gathered from the fields, with stone which was brought (as far as possible by water) from the East Midlands and from Ancaster, for corners, windows, etc. It stands in a large, picturesque and sloping **CHURCHYARD**, containing several interesting memorials to former Clopton residents.

The three-light windows in the west and north walls of the **NAVE** are fashioned in the Perpendicular Style of the 1400s, although its two-light north-east window, with simple 'Y' tracery, is of c.1300 or just before. The two-light south window received new stonework in 1882, when the eastern sections of the nave walls were refaced. The **CHANCEL** was totally rebuilt in 1883, on the mediaeval foundations to the designs of Herbert J Green, who chose the Decorated Style of architecture (of c.1320-30) for the design of the two-light north and south





windows, the three-light east window and the **PRIEST'S DOORWAY**. The three foundation stones (with crosses) may be seen in the east wall and the two buttresses. All the new stonework is of Ancaster stone. The northern lean-to **VESTRY** and organ chamber was built as a temporary structure of timber and is now protected with roofing-felt.

Clopton's massive **TOWER** dominates the exterior. It is one of the largest of some 22 south porch towers in Suffolk (like nearby Burgh, Grundisburgh, Playford, Culpho and Little Bealings). It rises about 80 feet and sturdy diagonal buttresses strengthen its southern corners, whilst angle buttresses support its east and west walls on the

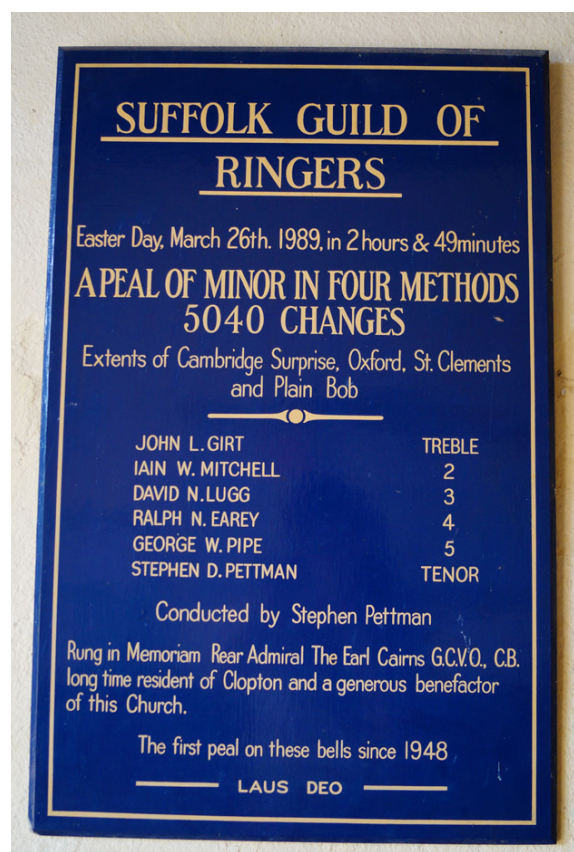
north side. The keen eye will detect traces of small square put-log holes in the masonry, where the mediaeval builders placed their wooden scaffold poles as the tower gradually rose (probably between c.1380-1420). The handsome entrance arch is flanked by foliage corbels renewed in the 1880s. Small rectangular openings light the ringing chamber above, whilst the large two-light early Perpendicular belfry openings enable the sound of the six bells to be heard. Beneath the embattled parapet, carved eastern and western gargoyle faces throw rainwater from the roof clear of the tower walls and an intriguing pig-like face peers out from the southern side. The little incised cross on a piece of re-used stone in the south wall of the tower is a mystery – some experts believe it to be a consecration cross. Over the years the movement of the old bellframe had acted as a battering ram when the bells were rung and this caused the tower to crack so the bells were not rung for many years. In 2009 extensive repairs were made to repair the cracks and make the tower safe. Following the repairs to the tower fundraising began to install a new metal bellframe lower in the tower and rehang the bells. This work was completed in 2013.



## *What to see inside the church*

Entering the porch we appreciate just how massive this tower is. Internally it measures 10 ½' east-west x 11 ½' (north-south) and the walls at its entrances are an amazing 5 ¼ feet thick. Carved into the stonework of both entrance arches is assorted **GRAFFITI** – some of which is of considerable age. In the stonework to the left of the door by which we enter, about 5' from the floor, and measuring c.3"x2" is a beautifully preserved merchant's mark (thought to be that of a wool-stapler), dated April 8 1570. On the (inner) east side of the outer entrance arch, a certain John Cooper wished us to know in 1681 that he was the adopted child of Thomas Cooper, the Archer. Several other folk from various periods have recorded their initials, etc.

On the west side is a 19<sup>th</sup> century **BIER**, used to transport the coffin at funerals, also a piece of ancient **TIMBER** from a belfry window, into which the louvres fitted. A **PEAL BOARD** on the wall above records a peal rung on the bells at Easter 1989 (the first since 1948). The nearby ladder gives access to the chamber above and thence to Clopton's ring of six **BELLS**. Four bells were recorded here in 1547 and in 1788 the five bells in the tower were recast by W & T Mears of Whitechapel, who added a new tenor bell, weighing 12 cwt and with a diameter of almost 43 inches. The third bell was recast in 1880 at Messrs Moore, Holmes & Mackenzie's bell foundry at







Redenhall, near Harleston. In 2013 three of the bells, which were found to be cracked, were repaired and all the bells were retuned before being hung on the new frame.

The inner **ENTRANCE ARCH**, which is massive and deeply chamfered, dates probably from 1300 or just before. Its inner stonework is different and may well have been added in the 1400s when the tower-porch was completed. The **DOOR** by which we enter is 19<sup>th</sup> century, but its mediaeval hinges have been re-used, also the iron boss for the former sanctuary ring.

Inside, St Mary's is bright and spacious; light floods in through the clear glass of the windows, including the large west window, to illuminate a nave which measures about 57  $\frac{3}{4}$ ' x 20  $\frac{3}{4}$ ' and a

chancel about 29  $\frac{1}{2}$ ' by 17  $\frac{1}{2}$  '. The keen eye will notice that the nave walls lean slightly outwards, betraying their great age.

At the west end, near the entrance (symbolising our entry into the Family of the Church by Holy Baptism) is the octagonal **FONT**, in which Clopton babes have been baptised for 600 years. Unusually it still has its original base step, which is carved with quatrefoil (four-lobed) designs. A plain (and maybe renewed) stem supports the beautiful bowl, which has eight shields set in quatrefoils. In mediaeval times these shields may have been painted with emblems and symbols to teach the faith to the people. The font is crowned by a beautiful late 19<sup>th</sup> century **COVER**,



with four radiating traceried ribs, in the fashion of genuine 15<sup>th</sup> century font-covers.

The western area has been cleared of seating to provide much-needed space for people to gather. It provides a worthy setting for the **MEMORIAL and STANDARDS** of 493<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group who were stationed at Clopton & Debach World War 2 airfield. The **SEATING** in the nave, with simple curved-topped ends, was provided in 1890 and we will gladly forgive you for lying flat on your back on one of the pews in order to admire the beautiful



15<sup>th</sup> century **NAVE ROOF** with ease and without neck-strain! This is a single hammer-beam roof, the upper part of which is strengthened by collar-beams, which are linked to the top ridge by vertical king-posts. We can see where HJ Green sensitively restored it in 1882 (the newer timbers are browner in colour), but this fine piece of design, carpentry and structural engineering has been keeping the weather out since the late 1400s. Along the tops of the walls are beautifully carved



cornices and the triangular spandrels which link the wall-posts to the hammer-beams have 32 intriguing carvings, including a **LIZARD**, jester, the lily and crowned 'M' for the church's patron saint, figures, shields and foliage designs. Herbert J Green in 1882 replaced the angels (removed by the Puritans in 1644) on the ends of the hammer-beams; the eastern and western ones have been skilfully





coloured. He also added the shields at the base of the wall-posts. These show the Instruments of Our Lord's Passion and death, and other Christian symbols. In each case, the northern shield is linked to its southern counterpart, working from west-east, we see:-

*North - 1. Nails, 2. Hammer & pincers, 3. Scourges, 4. IHS monogram for Jesus, 5. Crown of thorns, 6. Alpha and Omega, 7. Wheat sheaf.*

*South - 1. Ladder, 2. Spear & sponge, 3. Pillar, 4. XP (chi-rho) monogram for Jesus, 5. Cross, 6. Triangle & Trefoil (the Holy Trinity), 7. Grapes.*

In the south wall near the nave's east end is a **PISCINA** recess, into which the disposable water from Eucharists celebrated at a nearby altar was poured, reminding us that there were once altars each side of the chancel arch, beneath the rood screen which separated the chancel from the nave – all long disappeared.

The oak **PULPIT**, with its traceried panels and circular base of Portland stone, cost £60 and was given in 1887 by friends of the Revd Samuel Hooke (rector 1879-1906), who shared his keenness to promote the Temperance Movement. Mr Simpkin of Colchester created it, to the designs of Brightwen Binyon of Ipswich. The **LECTERN** opposite is also late 19<sup>th</sup> century.





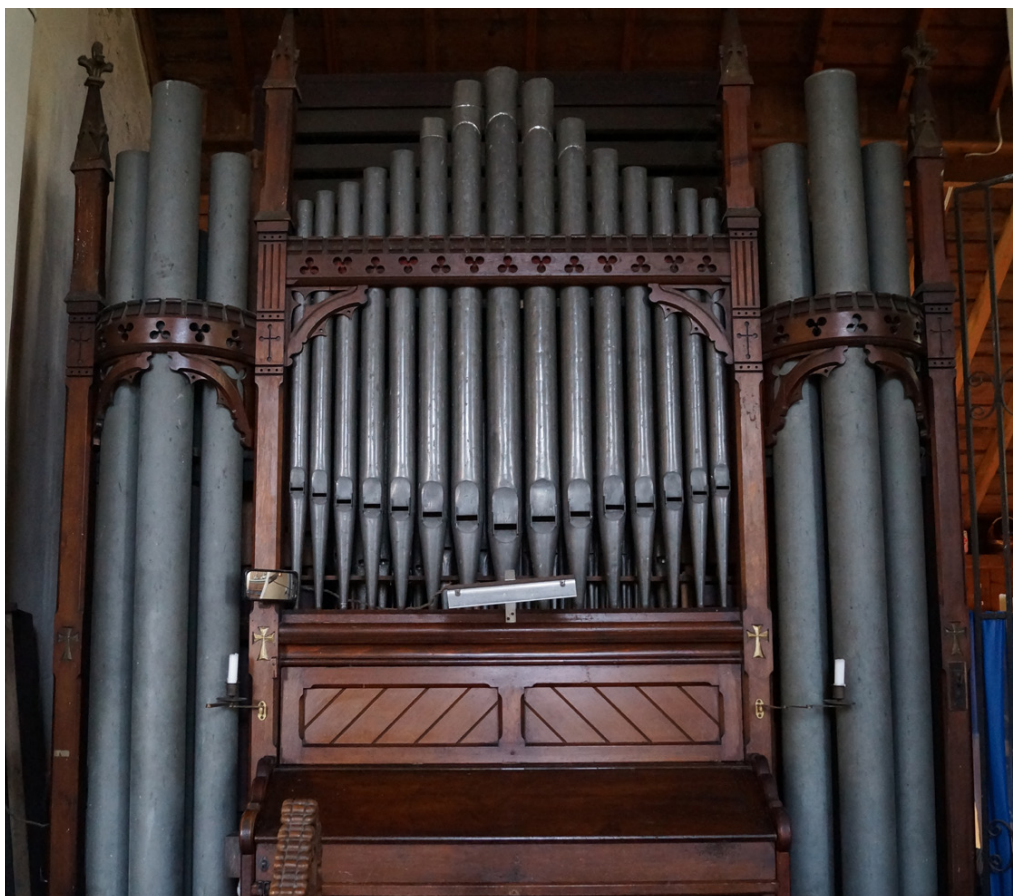


The **CHANCEL ARCH** was built to H J Green's designs in 1882. It rests upon large foliage corbels with carvings of Jesus the Good Shepherd (north), the Parable of the Good Samaritan (south), and carved heads at the base. 17<sup>th</sup> century woodwork from the **FORMER COMMUNION RAILS** has been re-worked to divide the chancel from the nave.

The **CHANCEL** was totally rebuilt in 1883, but it shows its architect's skill at re-creating mediaeval design. The **WINDOWS** reproduce work of the early 1300s and the east window is embellished with little internal stone shafts. The south-east windowsill is lowered to form **SEDILIA** (seating) and above is reproduced a 15<sup>th</sup> century single hammer-beam **ROOF**, with **ANGELS** at the bases of the



wall-posts. The ends of the **CHOIR STALLS**, made in 1896 by West & Collier of Oxford, terminate in foliated crosses and fleurs-de-lis. The **ALTAR** and the simple arcaded **REREDOS** above it were given in 1957 in memory of 24 year old Flying Officer William Michael Lacey, whose aircraft crashed 1½ miles away in 1956. It was given and made by his father, W J Lacey, to the designs of Michael Farey of Regents Park (who designed the London churches of St Luke West Kilburn and St Michael Tokynton. The **CHANDELIER** was made by S C Pearce of Bredfield in 1978 and given in memory of Jack Digby. The **ORGAN** built by William Hill has two manuals, pedals and 10 speaking stops. A plaque records its restoration in 1951 in memory of Rose Chamberlain. In 2013 the organ was restored by Roger Pulham.



The east window contains **STAINED GLASS**, showing the Sacrifice of Isaac, made in 1887 by Thomas Curtis of Ward & Hughes (London). It commemorates the Revd George Taylor (rector from 1829 until his death in 1847, and also of Marlingford, Norfolk from 1814-47), his wife Elizabeth and their family, including their son, the Revd George William Taylor (rector 1848 until his sudden death from apoplexy in 1867, aged 44).







## *Memorial Inscriptions*

There are several memorials to people of the past who have been part of this church and community. In addition to those already mentioned, the following may be seen –

The only remaining **LEDGER SLAB** in the floor commemorates **JOSEPH TYE**, who died in 1685.

*David Elisha Davy noted several other slabs, mostly in the former chancel and now lost, including those to Christiana Suckerman (1617), Alis Sely (nee Blow, 1623), daughter-in-law of Thomas Sely, Portman and Bailiff of Ipswich, the Revd Francis Folkard (rector 1723 until his death in 1753), his wife Deborah (1779) and their family, the Revd Richard Rogers (1685) and his wife, the Revd John Grove Spurgeon (rector 1788-1829) and his wife and parents, also a stone in the nave marking their family vault.*

The following people are commemorated by **PLAQUES** on the walls:-

The Revd **JOHN CAUSTON** (rector 1627 until his death in 1631). *Sanctuary, north. This memorial was found in the churchyard broken into three pieces. It was restored in 2009, and placed in it's original position, with money raised by Dr John Blatchley*

The Revd **GEORGE TAYLOR** (December 1847) and his daughter, **MARIANNE** (October 1847). *Chancel, south).*





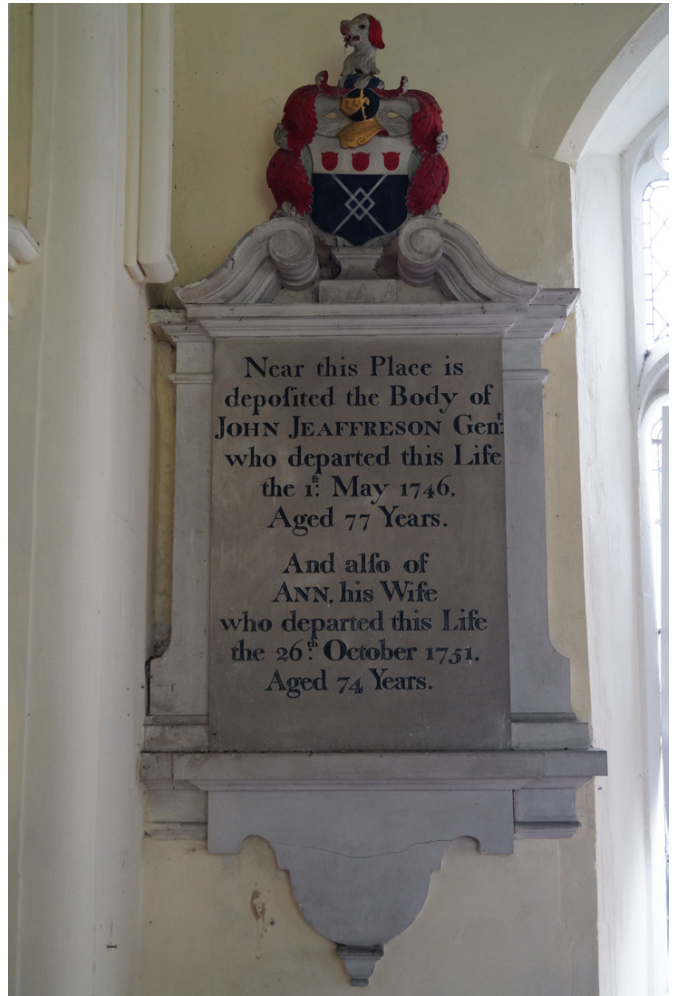
The Revd SAMUEL HOOKE (1906) – erected by his ‘devoted servants’ Henry and Alice Mendham (who had cared for him throughout his time here, Henry also being organist and choirmaster). *Chancel, north.*

Handsome wall-plaque, with coat of arms, to JOHN JEAFFRESON (1746) and his wife ANN (1751). *Nave, south-east*

**WAR MEMORIAL**, commemorating 15 Clopton people (and former residents) who died in World War 1. *Nave, south.*

MARIA ATTHILL (1888), who died at Clopton rectory and was buried at Brandiston, Norfolk. *Nave, north.*

A wooden plaque near the entrance records the installation of electricity at the church in 1951, thanks to a legacy from Mr R S VESEY.



## History of Clopton Church

### *How old is the Church?*

The answer to this question is far from simple. St Mary’s, like most churches, has gradually evolved over the years as people of different periods and Christian traditions have adapted and altered it and have left their mark upon it. From what we can deduce from the building itself and from what little documentary evidence we have, some of the landmarks in its long history are as follows:-

**Before 1086** – The Domesday Survey of c.1086 records the existence of a church here, which had almost certainly been in use for several years before

then, so this spot must have been a Holy Place for at least 1000 years, as indeed was our near neighbour at Burgh. Both churches being built beneath the ancient earthwork and Roman encampment.

*c.1280-1351* – The earliest roughly datable features that we see today are the great south doorway, with its deeply-moulded arch and the simple ‘Y’ traceried north-east nave window. The cores of the nave walls may be much older. It appears from Isaac Johnson’s drawing that the mediaeval chancel had early 14<sup>th</sup> century windows. A document is said to exist which records the dedication of the High Altar by the Bishop of Ely in **1351** and this may mark the completion of the chancel.

*The 1400s* – This was a time when much rebuilding and alteration took place in Suffolk churches and at Clopton the south porch tower gradually grew between **c.1380 and 1420**, and the present font was installed. A little later the Perpendicular style windows replaced earlier ones in the nave and towards the end of the century the nave received its fine hammer-beam roof.

*The 1500s and 1600s* – This period saw great changes in the internal décor of the church, which was equipped for the ‘reformed’ worship of the Church of England, by Law Established. Much of beauty and importance to medieval church-folk was taken away by law in the **1540s** (including stone altars, rood-lofts and rood crucifixes, wall-paintings, etc.). The Puritans in **1644** had a further ‘purge’ of what they believed to be ‘superstitious images and inscriptions’; they destroyed and defaced stonecarving, woodcarving (including roof-angels), beautiful paintings and most of the mediaeval stained glass. Although William Dowsing, their Inspector, does not record in his *Journal* a visit to Clopton, doubtless the locals destroyed everything that he might have disapproved of, should he pay a surprise visit.

*The 1700s-1859* – This was a period of considerable neglect in the care of churches and often repairs were not the most tasteful, but the Churchwardens’ Accounts show that Clopton folk were conscientious in the care of their church. In **1714** the tower and windows were repaired, but Tom Martin records that on 5<sup>th</sup> November **1724** ‘the 1<sup>st</sup> bell fell down as they were ringing, but did no hurt’. In **1788** Messrs Mears of Whitechapel were commissioned to recast Clopton’s five bells into a ring of six, to be paid for by a Parish Rate levied in 1788 and 89. The nave roof at the time was covered with lead, apart from a small section at the west end, which was tiled. In **1807**, the parish applied for a Faculty to sell the lead and replace it with Westmorland slates, also to do other repairs to the church. The accounts then record payments of £89.3s. to James Mays for repairing and



sheathing the roof for slating and of £81.13s.6d to William Morris for slating the roof. Further sums were paid for bricklaying and whitewashing and Jacob Thompson received £78 for equipping the church with a new set of pews.



*Clopton Church circa 1790 by L.G. Spurgen*

Mr Mays returned in **1809-10** to provide a new window frame, which was glazed and painted by Charles Cottingham. This may well have been the south nave window, which had been renewed in timber, as is seen in Henry Davy's picture. **1824** saw the re-leading of the tower roof and the provision of a new pole for the weather-vane and in **1825** the roof was repaired, given a ceiling and whitewashed, also the box-pews were painted.

The Churchwardens' Accounts do not record payments for the chancel, because its maintenance was the responsibility of the rector. It was around **1800**, or just before, that the mediaeval chancel was replaced by a new and shorter (19'x19') chancel of brick and flint. This was described by later writers as 'shallow, archless and plain' and as 'modern and of singular ugliness'! The north and south sides had small single lancet windows and in the east wall were two small lancets, flanking a larger, round-headed window.

David Elisha Davy visited the church in **1818** and in **1844** where his notes tell

us much about the church as he saw it (also all the monumental inscriptions that he found in the church and churchyard). In the tiny chancel (which was roofed with tiles and had a ceiling) stood the Communion Table, which was enclosed by three-sided rails. The nave was furnished with box-pews of deal, described as 'uniform and neat'. On the south wall were boards inscribed with the Lord's Prayer, Creed and 10 Commandments, facing the Royal Arms of King George III on the north wall. Davy noted that 'the church seems lately to have undergone thorough repair and is in a good state'.



*Clopton Church September 1843 by Henry Davy*

In his notes of **1844** he described the shapes of the windows in more detail, those on the north side of the nave being much as we see them today. The pulpit, in the nave's north-east corner, was 'ordinary and plain', the roof was ceiled below the rafters, the font was described in detail and its measurements given. He also noted the addition of a small western gallery, on the front of which was inscribed, 'Erected 1834, Wm Steel, Churchwarden'.

A detailed and accurate drawing of the church from the south was made in **1843** by Henry Davy of Ipswich (no relation to David Elisha), showing the shortened chancel and the sloping churchyard, with its chest-tombs.



A Terrier, dated **1845**, listing various church possessions, mentions ‘a carpet (cover) for the Communion Table of scarlet cloth and gold fringed – and one for the pulpit and cushion of the same’. These must have added a much-needed burst of colour to the interior.

On March 30<sup>th</sup> **1851**, the day of the Religious Census, the weather was so terrible that the rector would not send in the numbers attending church because ‘a return of numbers present would only mislead’. It was calculated that the average morning congregation was 25, with 50 scholars and in the afternoon 120 + 50 scholars. Holy Communion was monthly, with between 16-22 communicants.

A visitor to an afternoon service in June **1859** commented that the church was ‘kept in most admirable repair. There is an organ and some pains seem, in a homely way, to be taken with the singing’. The organ was probably the harmonium which was purchased for the church in 1857-8 for £4. A notice on the church door informed parishioners that there was to be no more playing on graves by children and no more grazing of cattle in the churchyard. The Revd George W Taylor, aged about 35, addressed a congregation of 120. He had ‘a complexion of florid bronze and the clear eye of health. Excellent reader, flowery preacher. This is one of our pleasant visits’.

**1879-1906** – During this period the rector was the Revd Samuel Hooke AKC – a hardworking bachelor priest who was far from satisfied with the state of the church when he arrived and was determined that it should be restored. His obituary records that over a period of 20 years he raised in the region of £3,000 for the church, not only from parishioners but from his friends and contacts all over the country. Clopton was his first and only living and he was previously curate at Stow Bardolph in West Norfolk and in Great Yarmouth’s vast parish.

From July **1882** until well into 1883 the church was in the hands of the builders and services took place in the Mission Church, which had been constructed out of an old barn in the rectory grounds. A newspaper reporter described the Christmas 1882 services and celebrations there – the seats arranged with a central aisle, facing the altar, with the pulpit on the left-hand side and the lectern on the right. He also described the amazing decorations which were financed by Mrs Atthill of East Ruston, Norfolk, a great friend of the rector and a member of his congregation at Great Yarmouth.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February **1883** and in stormy weather, the three foundation stones were laid for the new chancel – the central one by Mrs Atthill (who had been a generous benefactor to the restoration work) and the others by Canon Potter

(rector of Winesham and Rural Dean) and the Revd Hooke. The nave restoration was just about complete; new floors had been laid, the walls replastered and a handsome new chancel arch built. Its windows had been restored and filled with 'Cathedral' glass, the ceiling had been removed and the mediaeval roof stripped, cleaned, restored and given new angels and oak bosses on the hammer-beams. The old high-backed pews had been taken out, to be replaced by chairs until further money was raised for benches. The c.1800 chancel had been taken down and pieces of mediaeval stone reused in its walls were carefully put to one side for use in the new chancel, the walls of which were to follow the mediaeval chancel's foundations, which had been excavated.

The architect for this work was Herbert John Green of Norwich, who restored several Norfolk and Suffolk churches and rebuilt the little churches at Darmsden and Willisham. The contractor was Robert Tooley of Ipswich and the cost was about £800 for the nave and £500 for the chancel. It was hoped, when funds allowed, to provide benches, a pulpit and a vestry.

**1887** marked Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and much activity in Clopton and its church, which was duly recorded in the pages of the *Suffolk Chronicle*. In Samuel Hooke, Clopton had a remarkable rector who was skilled at making Christianity real to country people and, as part of Canon Hay Aitken's Church Parochial Mission Society, occasionally conducted missions in other parishes. In his own parish he was not afraid to innovate, so Clopton folk enjoyed annual Flower Services, where flowers in abundance were brought to the altar and then distributed to Hospitals etc. and in the summer there were Open Air Services held in meadows and on local farmers' lawns. A Parish Mission was conducted in 1886 by the Revd Robert Monro of the CPMS, who returned in May 1887 to preach at three services. This was also a time of great protest over the payment of tithes and, whilst many clergy stood their ground, the *Suffolk Chronicle* noted that Mr Hooke 'has generously returned 10% of this year's tithe'. May 1887 also saw the choir's outing to Great Yarmouth (where they were given dinner by Mrs Atthill) and a good congregation at the Ascension Festival, which was 'always considered a high day here'.

On the afternoon of Monday October 27<sup>th</sup> **1890**, the Bishop of Norwich dedicated the new nave benches, made in deal and oak by Mr Baring Smith of Ipswich for c. £150, most of which was raised by the rector. At the evening service the preacher was the Revd E L Savory, rector of Palgrave and the collection raised £8.9s.2d.

June 1<sup>st</sup> **1896** saw the re-opening of the church following the introduction of



handsome new choir-stalls, also a new altar frontal and ‘an ancient piece of rich oak carving’, discovered by the rector, which had been fashioned into a ‘super-frontal’. The vestry had been enlarged, the organ overhauled and the refurbished ringing-chamber was almost complete. The carpentry work was executed by Mr F Dowsing of Clopton.

*1906 onwards* – Although the Revd Hooke’s restoration and refurbishment has left the church much as we see it today, much has been done since that time (and indeed is still being done) to keep St Mary’s intact and beautiful.

One thing now missing is the weather-vane which crowned the tower, which was taken down in **1930** because its condition was becoming ‘a source of anxiety’. In November of that year the Bishop came to consecrate the new extension to the churchyard.

*Having first discovered St Mary’s as a twelve year old cycling church-enthusiast in 1959, it has been a pleasure to research and compile this short history and guide for its 21<sup>st</sup> century visitors and pilgrims.*

*I am very grateful to Doris Main for inviting me to write this guide, also James Hall for his valuable help and to the Staff of the Suffolk Record Office for the use of material in their care.*

*Roy Tricker. 2013.*



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