

ST ETHELBERT'S CHURCH, EAST WRETHAM

Members of the current congregation worship in a church last rebuilt in 1865 and at the start of 2022 have embarked on a new period in its long history.

After a quarter century as members of a benefice based in Thetford, which also included the villages of Croxton and Kilverstone, the church at Wretham looks to a new beginning as it becomes part of a group of eight parishes centred on Ss. Peter and Paul Church at East Harling. It will see St. Ethelbert with a new priest in charge, the Revd. Simon Richardson.

It also brings a change to the pattern of services at Wretham. There will still be a service on the first and third Sundays of the month, continuing in an old established pattern of worship, using the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible.

To accommodate the needs of the other parishes and the work of those taking services in so many churches, the starting time is now a little later, at 9.30am. The first Sunday of the month will see a service of Morning Prayer and the third Sunday Holy Communion will be celebrated. Details of services on special dates during the church year can be found on this website or in the current copy of Wretham News.

One thing will not change – the outlook emphasised by Simon Richardson during his first sermon in the church – the importance of love and kindness, not just among church members but especially to those in the local community.

History of the church building.

St. Ethelbert was at one time King of East Anglia and a Christian. In AD 794, he travelled to the palace of Offa, King of Mercia, to seek permission to marry the pagan king's daughter, Alfreda. But he was murdered in Herefordshire for dynastic reasons and became widely revered as a martyr. He was buried at Hereford Cathedral, which is dedicated to Our Lady and St Ethelbert.

His feast day is May 20th. While there are a relatively small number of churches carrying his name, there is one a short distance away at Larling.

The present structure was largely built in 1865 to replace a mediaeval building on the East Wretham site, the third to be there. It was mainly paid for by the Wyrley Birch family who lived at Wretham Hall in West Wretham, itself later burned down and demolished, and by the Rector for many years, the Rev. James P. Whalley.

Much of the old church material was re-used, especially the lower part of the tower, while the original Norman doorway inside the south porch dates from the 12th century.

The only bell survived from before the Reformation.

The design of the rebuilt church was by London architect Richard Armstrong, the building work done by Robert Bartram of Aylsham. Records tell of lime from Heydon in Norfolk and from Mildenhall in Suffolk, with stone from Ancaster and Corsham and roof tiles from Staffordshire. Cost of the rebuilding work was £1748.

The font is of Corsham stone and the intricately carved cover, suspended on a lead counterweight, was designed by J.A. Reeve and based on a mediaeval one at Elsing near Dereham. Its carving took two men nine months and it carries figures of seven saints.

The Royal Arms of Queen Elizabeth I are set in the glass of the vestry window.

The James Corps organ, fully restored in 2004, is a particularly interesting piece of Victorian organ work, made by James Corps and Grade II listed by the British Institute of Organ Studies.

There is a wall tablet in the tower from West Wretham church, dedicated to William Grigson, who died in 1787. There are various memorials to members of the Wyrley Birch family, both inside the church and along the outside west wall. The kitchen and toilet were installed to celebrate the Millennium.

Commonwealth War Graves.

In the churchyard, which was levelled and enclosed at the time, are graves devoted to 12 Czech and two Polish airmen who flew from the Wretham airfield during the World War II. They are the subject of a well attended service on the Wednesday before Armistice Day, which the public are welcome to attend.



Czech graves (front row, from left):

Jan Stefek (npor. del. Pilot Officer) 25/02/1915 to 06/04/1942
Milo Slavovic (por. let. Pilot Officer) 05/10/1916 to 04/06/1941
Stanislav Zeinert (por. let. Pilot Officer) 09/12/1915 to 26/05/1941

Second row from left:

Jindrich Horinek (set. Sergeant) 01/01/1912 to 06/04/1942
Frantisek Binder (rt. Sergeant) 22/10/1914 to 04/03/1942
Frantisek Dusek (cet. Sergeant) 15/08/1920 to 25/05/1941
Alois Keda (rtm.let. v. zal) 15/02/1915 to 06/04/1942

Third row from left:

Rudolf Vokurka (rt. Sergeant) 24/02/1917 to 06/04/1942
Jan Bambusek (cet. Idg. aircraftman) 25/09/1913 04/04/1942
maxmilan Stoczek (cet Sergeant) 10/10/1918 to 25/05/1941
Rudolf Grimm (cet. Sergeant) 08/04/1911 to 06/04/1942

Fourth row right hand side:

Jan Stanovsky (cet. asp. Flight Sergeant) 20/12/1914 to 06/04/1942

Fourth row middle & left graves are Polish:

PLT - S Chlostka (t.t.c.) 22/05/1947 Aged 41
PTE - M Sieprawski 23/10/1946 Aged 38

The body of the very last grave was actually buried in West Tofts (St Mary) Churchyard

Extra interest for Bishop's visit.

When the Bishop of Thetford, (the Rt. Rev. David Atkinson) made a visit to St Ethelbert's at East Wretham in 2005 to preach and celebrate Holy Communion, he had an extra point of interest to look at – a vault under the church uncovered by accident.

While mowing the churchyard, secretary John Kitson had gone through a small hole in the ground outside the north door to the church up to a full leg length and further investigation revealed a completely brick lined entrance to a vault under the north aisle of the church.

In the vault, which measured around 40 feet by 10 and was six foot high, were four adults and one child's coffins, all members of the Wyrley Birch family.

They had lived at the former Wretham Hall and had largely paid for the building of St Ethelbert's, which had been consecrated in 1865. They are commemorated not only within the church but in the largest of the memorials in the churchyard.

Earlier records had not shown the vault as existing and it had only revealed itself after one of three stone slabs had cracked across the middle and collapsed. After photography and careful examination it was re-sealed.

**St. Ethelbert churchwardens are Mr. Ian Salter, Wretham Lodge, Wretham IP24 1RL
Tel 01953 498 997 and Mrs. Sharon Ford, Station House, Hockham Road, Wretham,
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Guide for Wretham Church.

A blow by blow account of its rebuilding, hand written by its rector almost 150 years ago, has allowed a retired journalist to produce the first comprehensive guide to St Ethelbert's church at Wretham and shed light into its history.

The church was demolished and rebuilt in 1864-5, the third church on the site.

The cost was met by the Wyrley Birch family, owners of Wretham Hall, and by the Rector and their son in law, the Rev James Park Whalley. He lived opposite the church in what is now Wretham Lodge. The family paid for the nave, the Rector the chancel.

His great great grandson, Dr. F.L.Whalley, of Lee-on-Solent, Hampshire, discovered his relative's record of the work and sent them to Norfolk. Over a winter, former EDP journalist John Kitson, a resident of Wretham for 30 years and church secretary since 2002, pored over the 32 pages, largely hand written in pen, and gradually transcribed them.

They showed that the church was designed by Scottish born architect William Armstrong, who practised in London and was involved in the design and later alterations to the former Haveringland Hall in Norfolk.

While Norfolk craftsmen carried out most of the work, including carving the intricate font cover, stained glass came from Whitefriars in London and the Grade II listed organ was built by James Corps. The church also has a memorial by Sir Edwin Lutyens to 2nd Lieut. Patrick Noble, killed in France during WW1 and the son of Saxton and Celia Noble, one time Wretham Hall owners.

The result remains one of Norfolk's most interesting examples of Victorian church design – not least the work of the talented Rector. Mr Whalley took 18 months to hand paint the intricate font cover, painted the entire organ casework (itself fully restored in 2004) and a range of wall paintings in the chancel.

The Rector's notes make clear his thoughts - and sometimes impatience and anguish - at the building process, include detailed articles from The Times and local newspapers of the rebuilding and consecration service and the inspiration he found for his own work in that of Italian Renaissance painter Benozzo Gozzoli. The copious notes are reproduced in full as the second half of the book. They have greatly helped the detailed description of the church in the first half.

The fully illustrated 74 page guide, printed in Wretham by James Barke, is available in the church or from John Kitson, 4, Windmill Lane, Wretham, IP24 1 QR, tel 01953 498 609, email kitsonje42@gmail.com It costs £3, with £1 for postage and packing. Cheques made payable to Wretham PCC, to which all proceeds are devoted.

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