

*This is the second of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church*

## **WHEN WAS ALL SAINTS' CHURCH BUILT?**

This is a question that I have been asking myself since I moved to Swanton Morley some three years ago and started trying to understand the architecture of the church. I am still not sure that I have the right answer, but I thought that you might like to share my thoughts on this issue.

If you stroll round the church and look carefully at the stone 'tracery' in the windows then you will notice that it varies quite a bit. The windows can, in fact, be divided into two main 'families'. The oldest is the nave family, which includes the side and east windows in the side aisles, and the high east window of the nave. The youngest is the chancel family, which covers all the windows in the chancel. In between, in terms of both age and design, are the windows at the west end of the church and in some of the windows of the tower.

It now seems to be generally accepted that the nave family can be attributed to a master mason called Robert Wodehirst, so he probably did the initial designs for the nave. Now we do know something about him. He was still training at the Palace of Westminster at the time of the Black Death in 1349. By 1358 he was still working in London, but by then he was on the highest specialist's pay carving vault bosses for the cloister at Westminster Abbey. Shortly afterwards he qualified as a master mason and it was probably in about 1360 that he did the designs for the new nave at Swanton Morley.

At that time Swanton Morley appears to have been a very wealthy village and Wodehirst's designs were very ambitious. Not only was it a very large church with a huge space underneath the tower, it was also being built to a very high standard. The flintwork at the base of the west façade is quite exceptional and the mouldings and decoration around both the south and north doors are excellent.

### **Work suddenly stops in 1362**

Then, just as the building got to the level of the bottom of the windows, work stopped. This is revealed by a distinct break in the masonry of both the north and south aisle walls, but it can be seen more clearly on the north wall. If you look at the sill-level stringcourse (a long narrow line of stonework that juts out just below the windows), you will find just above it four courses of square knapped flints, topped by a narrow course of red tiles. The fact that this discontinuity runs the full length of the nave at the same height is very significant for it shows that work was not proceeding from east to west, as was usual, but was being done in layers. Now, this layer approach was only feasible when quick progress was anticipated, so it suggests that funds were available for a speedy completion, and that the break was unexpected.

The most likely explanation is the collapse of the spire at Norwich Cathedral in 1362. Wodehirst was awarded the contract to rebuild the clerestory and this would immediately have become his priority. The skilled labour was probably diverted to Norwich and the walls at Swanton Morley capped and thatched for protection. It is probable that most of the windows for the aisles had already been delivered.

In order to find out when work probably re-started at Swanton Morley it is necessary to look at what was going on in Norwich. Prior to the collapse of the spire, the major project at the cathedral had been work aimed at completing the cloister. Work on this also stopped in 1362 when the spire collapsed and it did not recommence until 1381, after the completion of the new clerestory. If work could not re-start any earlier than this on the cloister then it would seem unlikely that skilled men could have been spared for Swanton Morley.

This allows us to look in a new light at the will that Sir William de Morley wrote in April 1379. He actually made gifts to several churches, and the relevant section reads as follows:

“I give to work on the fabric of St Paul’s London 20s. Also I bequeath for the repair of Holy Trinity Norwich (i.e. Norwich Cathedral) 20s. Also I give my gilt chalice to the parish church of Swanton, which they may reclaim ... Also I give to work on the fabric of the same church already begun 10 marks (£6-13-8)”

He specifically refers to the *repair* of Holy Trinity, so the sum of 20s was presumably intended to help pay for work on the clerestory that was still under way. So far as Swanton Morley is concerned, however, the words *already begun* do not necessarily mean that work was in progress. In fact, it seems more likely that he was referring to the fact that there was a partially built church in existence.

Now, these were troubled times and Norfolk did not escape from the upheaval caused by the Peasants’ Revolt. It was, in fact on 17 June 1381 that Norwich opened its gates to a band of rebels led by Geoffrey Litster, a dyer from Framlingham. The Swanton Morley area must also have been affected because Sir Thomas Morley, who had succeeded the above Sir William, was among several noblemen captured by Litster. It was, in fact, the warlike Bishop Despenser of Norwich who put an end to the local revolt. There was a battle at North Walsham later in June at which Litster was captured and executed. These events probably further delayed work at both Norwich and Swanton Morley.

Taking all the above into account, it is not unreasonable to suggest that work did not re-start at Swanton Morley until the end of 1381.

### **Work restarts in about 1381**

After this long delay, swift progress was now necessary. Thus, although existing supplies of knapped flints may have been used where possible, plastered and limewashed walls of rough flint rubble were used elsewhere as necessary. The side and east windows of the aisles would have been the first items to be installed, and we may perhaps find here an explanation of why just two of these windows – the adjacent east and side windows in the south aisle - do not have embattled transoms. If all the other windows had been essentially completed prior to the break and just two remained to be made then it is quite probable that these two were made by other masons using the same templates. It is not difficult to see how, after a twenty-year break, it could have been forgotten that the transoms were meant to be embattled.

Work also re-started on the west front, but the windows had not been made and by now styles had changed. This can be seen by looking at the west windows of the two aisles and the west window of the nave (in the face of the tower). If Wodehirst did not design these windows then they were certainly designed by a mason who had been influenced by him. By 1390 the main body of the nave was probably complete and at least the east end was roofed. However, only the lower part of the tower was complete. It is likely that, as the 14<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close, the nave was complete and the tower half built – certainly above the top of the west nave window, and probably to the top of the sound holes.

We do not know when work started on the chancel; we only know that the church was not consecrated until 1440. This suggests that it was not started much earlier than the turn of the century. What we do know is, that when work started on the chancel, there was a major change in the style of the windows, and this style makes it unlikely that they were designed before 1400. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that the huge windows in the bell chamber of the tower are very similar to the big east window of the chancel, making it likely that they were built at the same time. This is interesting because the nave was the people’s part of the church and would have been paid for by the congregation, and by people such as Sir William de Morley, whilst the chancel belonged to the rector and he would normally have been expected to pay for its rebuilding. Perhaps the same mason was employed, but he was paid separately for the tower.

A final piece of information is that in 1441 a certain John Fox left a bequest to provide a lead roof for the nave. Now, the original roof was presumably thatched, and this would have required a steeper pitch. Is it possible that, when the shallower pitched roof was introduced, the opportunity was taken to put in the little clerestory?