

THE ORIGINS OF BLAKENEY CHURCH

John Wright

There is a prevailing view that Carmelite friars built Blakeney church in 1296 – hence the events of 1996 celebrating the 700th anniversary of the founding of the church. Since 1296 the chancel has survived largely unscathed by the rebuilding of the rest of the church in c.1435 and by subsequent renovations. This article looks at the arguments for the role of the Carmelites and the date of 1296 and concludes that there is no real evidence for either.

Introduction

A recent pamphlet produced for Blakeney church sets out, in attractive style, a brief history of the building. It includes the unequivocal statement that *the magnificent Early English chancel, the oldest part of the church, was built for the Carmelite Friary in 1296*. The introduction to the pamphlet has a little more to say about the role of the friars: *The Carmelite Friary at Blakeney was founded in 1296, and what is now the chancel of St Nicholas' Church was their monastic church. ... There was no doubt a small nave to match, but by 1435 the prosperity of the town had financed the rebuilding of the nave and tower on a grand scale. ... If funds had been over-abundant, and the Carmelites had not retained their monastic rights over the glorious chancel, this might also have been swept away in favour of a later style.*

The supposition that the Carmelites built the chancel appears in the church Guide first published in 1954 together with some supporting argument. It is evident that the author, Charles Linnell, was postulating a theory rather than stating a fact, for he says that certain features of the chancel can be accounted for *if the chancel was used as the conventual church for the Carmelite Friary*. He adds that *the Friary was founded in 1296 and the chancel at Blakeney, if not already erected, was certainly being built about this time*. He notes that the old nave was demolished and the present nave and tower erected in 1435, and follows this with the suggestion that *had not the Carmelite Friary rights over the chancel (as seems possible), the chancel might also have been rebuilt at this time*.

Linnell therefore stops short of saying that the chancel was actually built in 1296, neither does he say outright that the Carmelites built it. Others before him had linked the chancel with the Friary: Bryant, for instance, says that the priests' door on the north side *was used by the Carmelite monks, being the entrance nearest their monastery*.¹ Subsequently, Pevsner took up the suggestion that *when the remainder of the church was rebuilt in 1434 the C13th chancel remained, probably because it was the domain of the Carmelites*.²

Arguments for the role of the Carmelites

Linnell's supposition that the chancel was used as the Friary church appears to be based on only three apparent facts:

- * firstly, that the priests' doorway is of thirteenth-century date, contemporary with the

rest of the chancel fabric, and faces north – in the direction of the Friary,

- * secondly, that the thirteenth-century tomb recess on the north side of the chancel is in a place where one would expect the founder's tomb to be,
- * thirdly, *and most convincing of all*, the will of John Calthorpe (1503) provided for his body to be buried in the White Friars *that is to say in myddys of the chancell*. Calthorpe was one of the benefactors of the Friary and his grave and brass lie in front of the rood screen in Blakeney church.

Regarding the date of 1296, he says that in other parts of the country *the latter part of the thirteenth century might be a little late for such a splendid example of the Early English, but in East Anglia it is as well to allow a time-lag of fifty years or more in the development of the gothic style*.

This seems to be the sum of the arguments put forward by Linnell, although the present Guide book notes that at Ingham a house of the Trinitarian Canons used the chancel of the parish church as their collegiate chapel, separated from the nave by an open-work stone screen, and at Bungay *a nunnery used the chancel as the nuns' church*. Amongst writers on church architecture, Gerald Randall notes that in thirteenth-century parish churches *the existence of rib vaults is often a sign that the chancel was monastic, and there are fine examples at Blakeney, Norfolk, and Kirkstead, Lincolnshire*.³ The Kirkstead church was originally a chapel belonging to the Cistercian Abbey and was located by their gate for the use of travellers and laymen: the Cistercians, unlike the friars, did not open their churches to the laity.⁴



The first church

In the Guidebooks to Blakeney church there is no mention of any building before the one erected in the thirteenth century. This gives the impression that none existed. Not so, for one did exist and there is documentary evidence for it.

It is generally accepted that by the eleventh century most people had access to a church, if not in their own village then within a walkable distance. It is unfortunate, then, that Domesday (1086) mentions so few churches and thereby gives the impression that few existed. Suffolk is the exception, for here the Domesday Book shows that at least 418 of the eventual 520 medieval churches were in existence.⁵ For Norfolk the equivalent figures are 217 mentioned out of the 750 or so known to have existed by the mid-thirteenth century. Comparison with Suffolk suggests that the Domesday record in Norfolk is deficient but, fortunately, there is no need for supposition at Blakeney. The parish is one of only six in Holt Hundred to have had a church mentioned in Domesday. The seven churches (two in Langham), all on Bishop William's holdings, were endowed with between 6 and 32 acres of land and were valued at between 5d and 16d. In terms of both acreage and value, Blakeney was the largest.

Whilst the Domesday entry is clear evidence of a church, there is also some further documentary evidence for a church before 1296. The 'Norwich Taxation' of 1254 lists the 30 parishes in Holt Deanery (equivalent to Holt Hundred) according to the value of the benefice.⁶ Blakeney (with Glandford) is valued at £26.13s.4d, the largest of all by some way. In a second valuation made in 1291 (the Taxation of Pope Nicholas) the values of two thirds of the parishes had increased. Blakeney, now valued at £33.6s.8d, is again the highest in the Deanery, well ahead of Salthouse and Field Dalling (both at £26.13s.4d). For comparison, Cley is valued at £23.13s.4. There is some evidence for an earlier, perhaps an 'original', taxation made in 1219, but the results have not survived. While the actual figures for 1254 and 1291 are open to interpretation, it seems clear that Blakeney had a church well before 1296 and that, as suggested by Domesday, it was richly endowed by local standards.

It would be expected, therefore, that the list of rectors should begin before 1296 but this is only just true: the first listed in the church Guidebook is Hamon Peche with a date of c.1286.

However, at Blakeney is one of those historical complications which make research so interesting, for anyone attempting to demonstrate that there was no church here before the Carmelites arrived could argue on two fronts. Firstly, that the early church references are not to Blakeney at all but to 'Snitterley' (various spellings) which might be a different settlement. Secondly, of course, even if the two names do refer to the same place the previous church was not necessarily on the site of the present one.

An early theory for the change of name was that the village of Snitterley, having been lost by coastal erosion, was rebuilt on higher ground, acquiring the name 'Blakeney' in the process. This is not the place for detailing such a theory, except to say that the landward movement of the shingle bank (now Blakeney Point) over many centuries may well have overwhelmed several islands of glacial sand and gravel as it is still doing at nearby Salthouse. On such an island (known locally as an 'eye') a village separated from its supporting farmland might have existed – just as the remains of a medieval chapel can still be seen on Blakeney Eye.⁷

The more commonly-held view is that the Domesday village of Snitterley was a 'mainland' settlement on the site of, or close to, the present village. The name 'Blakeney' first denoted

the small sheltered haven behind the incipient Point whose seaward end had then barely reached a point due north of Blakeney village. The most likely derivation of the name is from 'bleak island', with bleak carrying the meaning 'bleached' – ie white rather than black (though other possibilities have been mooted). Such a description might relate to the shingle ridge itself, or perhaps to one of the eyes – which may have had a small fishing community, if only in summer.

A hybrid theory is that Snitterley lay not on the site of the present old village (High St. and Westgate St.) but somewhere else, still close to the present church. This allows the possibility that Blakeney was established in the vicinity of the quay on a site that was, at first, physically distinct from the existing Snitterley.

The documentary record shows that 'Blakeney' appeared in the 1200s as the name for the haven, a name that became known to many North Sea mariners, London fish merchants and Government officials. For some time Blakeney remained the name used for the fishing and trading settlement while Snitterley continued to be used for matters unrelated to the sea: for the manors, the church and property generally. Later the village became known as Blakeney alias Snitterley, especially in formal documents.

These various possibilities make it difficult to demonstrate that the early churches of Snitterley do lie under the present church of Blakeney. The present structure contains a few fragments of early twelfth-century stonework which might – or might not – have come from a previous church on the same site.

However, the most relevant conclusion is that Snitterley/Blakeney already had a prosperous church serving the local community before the Carmelite Friars decided to move in.

The Carmelite Friary

The next question to address is when did the friars move in? The 'traditional' view of the founding of the Friary at Blakeney is that it was established in 1296 when John and Michael Storm and John and Thomas Thober, copyhold tenants of Sir William Roos, gave 13½ acres to the Carmelites. The friars were to build a chapel and necessary buildings on the site, Sir William and his wife Maud giving them 100 marks and promising to put up other buildings themselves. The church and all the offices are said to have been completed by 1321.⁸

A more recent view is that a supposed foundation document is unreliable and that the evidence of the Chancery Warrants and Patent Rolls should be given precedence. In 1304 the Warrants show that an inquisition was ordered to see if Michael le Bret might grant 1½ acres to the Carmelites – and there is no indication that the Carmelites were already there. In 1316 the Rolls record that a pardon was given to the friars to retain the land given by le Bret, with permission (possibly retrospective) to build houses on the land. It is not known for certain when the principal buildings were completed but there would have been substantial progress by the time Sir William Roos died in 1316. Subsequently, between 1329 and 1352, the Patent Rolls record further land grants totalling 13½ acres, all bar one acre from the four tenants named above (no doubt the source of the figure in the foundation document).

In neither account is there any indication that the friars should have built their chapel or church anywhere other than on land which they had been granted. Their buildings were

completed, the friary was successful, and their church survived the Dissolution in a sufficiently complete state to appear on a map of 1586. Indeed, beneath a note in the Frere Manuscripts for Blakeney that the monastery was founded in 1321 ('or 1311' is inserted) a different, and somewhat later, hand has added *the steeple of the church remains for a land mark yet.*⁹

So the friars had their own church. With a church and other buildings to erect on their own site within the space of only a few years, there does not seem to be any good reason for the friars to involve themselves in the rebuilding of the chancel of the parish church, or in taking over a newly built one. According to the church Guide, the patron of the church in 1305 was Sir John de Cockfield and not till 1375 did the patronage pass to a monastic house (Langley).

If it is accepted that the friars had no formal role in the parish church then the door in the north wall of the chancel should be seen as a priest's door, as it is in other churches. It was not unusual for churches to have such a door so that the priest could lock a door to the nave and depart directly from the chancel – that part of the church which, by the thirteenth century, was recognised as his responsibility. Such doors were usually on the south side of the chancel but a north door is not unique and would be convenient with the village lying in that direction (though the old rectory, which goes back to the early 1500s at least, lies to the west).

And what of John Calthorpe who willed his body to be buried in the middle of the *chanisell* of the White Friars? The simple solution to this question is surely that at the Dissolution, soon after his burial, his remains were moved to the *nave* of the parish church. Why should his family let him lie in a building being put to secular use, perhaps as a farm building, and likely to become a ruin?

John Calthorpe was not the only person to be buried in the Friary. It was not uncommon for parishioners to prefer a friary to their own parish church as a place of burial. In 1523 Henry Sheppard willed that his body should be buried *in the chirchyerd of our Lady called Wyght ffreres in Snyterley befor the autyer of Seynt Anne.*¹⁰ It so happens that there is a small (undated) brass in the parish church to Henry and Katherine Scheppard – possibly the same Henry. If so, with the Dissolution following only 15 years after his death, his family, too, may have wished to perpetuate his memory in the parish church even if his remains rested elsewhere.

In his will made in 1537, only months before the Friary was dissolved, John Barker seems to have hedged his bets. He willed that his body should be buried in the church of St Nicholas in Snitterley but he also left 20 shillings to the friars to sing two trentalls: *the oone within the Snyterley churche the other at their place.*¹¹

The church Guide cites Ingham church as a possible analogy for the connection between Blakeney church and the Carmelite Friary. Ingham, however, is not at all like Blakeney for there the parish church (chancel complete by c.1344) and the former Trinitarian Priory (founded in 1360) are parts of the same building – 'interlocked' as Pevsner puts it. At Bungay the parish church of St Mary was originally the church of the Benedictine nunnery¹² founded in c.1160, though this does not seem to advance the argument for linking the Carmelites with Blakeney church. Gerald Randall says that he would not have linked the Blakeney chancel with the Friary had he known at the time that the two were physically separate and that the Friary definitely had its own church. Neither does the Easter Sepulchre, or founder's tomb, in

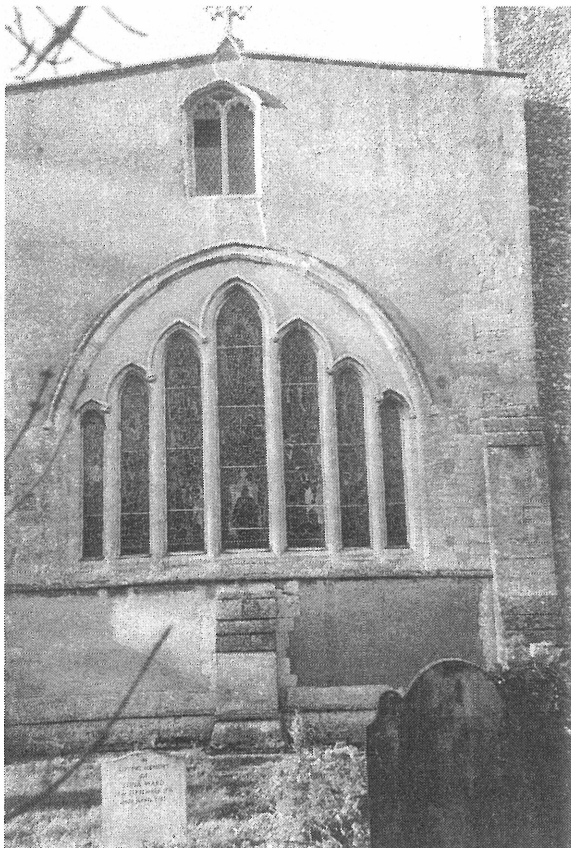
Blakeney chancel demonstrate a Carmelite presence there – unless some positive evidence can be produced.

Dating the chancel

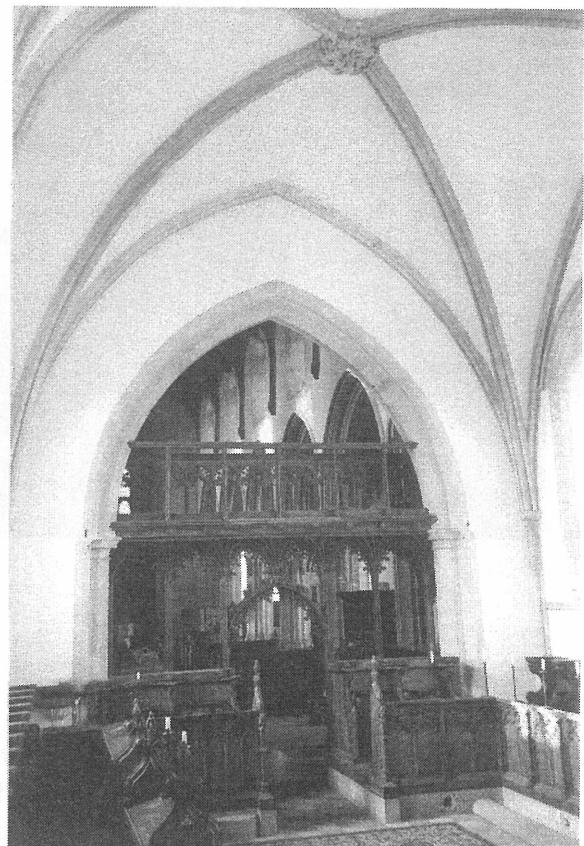
If the White Friars had no role in the building of the chancel is there any other evidence to date its erection to 1296? In the absence of documentary evidence dating the chancel has to be based on the architectural features still to be seen – though this process will not produce a precise answer.

So what are the main features of the chancel? The following notes are drawn from four sources: Pevsner, the church Guide, notes in the County Council's Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), and the description of the church as a Listed Building.

Compared with the outside appearance, the inside of the chancel is low for there is an upper room above it. To use Pevsner's words, the chancel is rib-vaulted and has two quadripartite bays with transverse wall arches. The ribs are elegantly formed with hollows and filleted rolls, springing from triple colonettes with moulded capitals and bases, and there are two stiff-leaf bosses. The east window has seven stepped lancet lights under one arch, and a hoodmould with stiff-leaf stops. One lancet window remains on the southern side, lighting the Sacristy behind the altar.



Seven-light east window



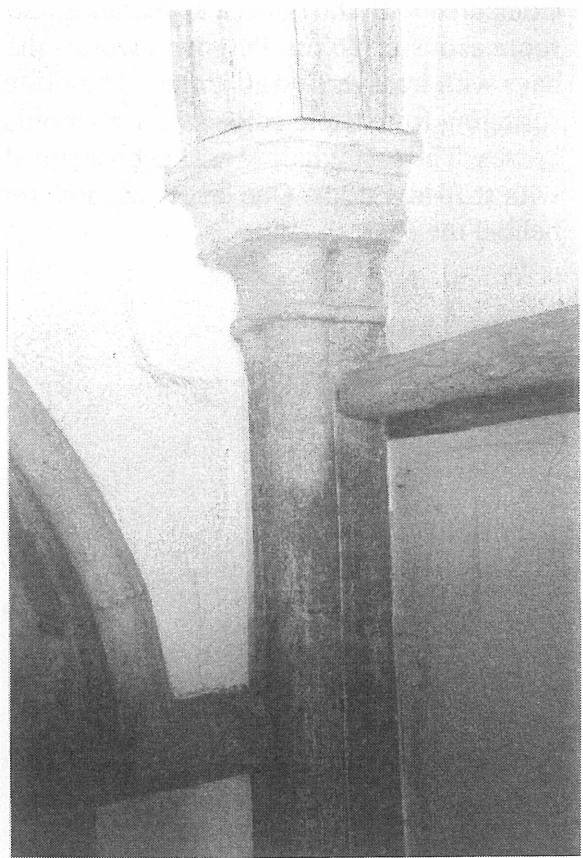
Chancel arch and rib vaulting

Outside, the chancel walls are fully rendered so that no flint can be seen. The SMR notes say that the chancel has a stone plinth-top and rests on a rubble foundation, and that the buttresses all seem to be original thirteenth-century work.

All sources agree that the main structure is Early English in style and there are other elements of the same date: the priest's door, the restored sedilia and the founder's tomb or Easter Sepulchre which has Early English colonettes supporting a Victorian canopy. There is also evidence of fifteenth-century work. The windows in the north and south walls appear to have been enlarged and now carry nineteenth-century copies of fifteenth-century tracery, and in the room above the chancel is a fifteenth-century window opening into the nave. The Guide suggests that the chancel walls were raised at this time, and that the corner turret, such a distinctive feature of the church, was built to give access to the upper room – though why it is so much higher than is strictly necessary is another interesting question.



Priest's door



Rib, capital and clustered shaft

If the chancel is Early English in style then it should be dated to the thirteenth century. In the Guide, Linnell admits that the date of c.1296 would be very late for the construction if judged purely on stylistic evidence. Books on church architecture seem to confirm this view. Rib vaults, though not common in parish churches, were being used in small square chancels even in the twelfth century (as at Tickencote in Rutland). The rib vaulting in Kirkstead, Lincolnshire, very similar to that at Blakeney, is dated to the mid-thirteenth century. Salisbury

Cathedral, built between c.1200 and 1275, has quadripartite ribbed vaulting, and it also has tiers of lancet windows with minimal stiff-leaf decoration. Ockham, in Surrey, has the only other seven light window in the country (for which it is famous). The window is dated to c. 1260 by reference to the design of its capitals, but here, too, there is something of a puzzle. It has been suggested that the window may have been taken from Newark Priory where two periods – late twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries – are represented by flint walls from which all dressed stones have been removed. Pevsner suggests that the Ockham window appears to replace three single lancet windows whose remains can be seen on the outside.

There is plenty of evidence to date lancet windows back to the late twelfth century, and very soon plate tracery (piercing holes in the blank spaces above grouped lancets) was also being developed. By the 1240s bar tracery, a development of plate tracery, had arrived in England from France – at Binham Priory and Westminster Abbey. In parish churches this ‘Geometrical’ style (the first phase of ‘Decorated’) usually dates between 1260 and the early 1300s.

Stylistically, therefore, Blakeney could easily be dated to the middle of the thirteenth century – unless, as the Guide suggests, architectural styles in East Anglia were 50 years out of date. It can be accepted that some isolated parts of the country were ignorant of architectural innovations elsewhere and, in any case, not every community would have felt it necessary (or could afford) to employ the latest designs.

Yet Blakeney was not isolated. It was a major maritime centre with links to London and the seaboard of western Europe, it lay in a rich and populous county not far from the great medieval city of Norwich, and close to the pilgrimage centre of Walsingham. Blakeney and its patron could not have been ignorant of what was happening in the thirteenth-century world. Moreover, in the 100 years or so between c.1240 and 1340, there are local examples of the very early introduction of new architectural forms: geometrical tracery at Binham, early flint flushwork at Wiveton, and the work of the Ramseys at Cley.

There is, therefore, no reason to assume a 50-year time lag for Blakeney church. Taking the evidence as it stands, a date in the mid-to-late thirteenth century would be much more in keeping with architectural styles than a date of 1296 (or later). Indeed, that is the view taken in the latest edition of Pevsner. However, as Pevsner also makes clear, the major styles had long periods of overlap so Blakeney chancel might not have been built until the late 1200s, but dates into the 1300s are very unlikely.

Conclusions

The first part of this article has shown that there was a church in Snitterley / Blakeney from Domesday times, which tends to be forgotten when looking at the present structure. The second part argues that the Carmelite friars did not begin to build their Friary until after 1300 and that with their own church to build there was no reason for them to rebuild the parish church as well. This effectively removes the date of 1296 as the founding date for the (present) parish church. Thirdly, an appreciation of the architectural style suggests that the chancel was almost certainly built in the second half of the thirteenth century - probably nearer to 1250 than to 1300, though not actually ruling out 1296.

This conclusion is not quite the 'finished article', however, because it raises three issues which need further attention.

Firstly, the arguments about what the names Snitterley and Blakeney actually meant ought to be looked at in more detail to see if it is possible to deduce whether there has been continuity of settlement on the present site since late Saxon times. Secondly, the Friary should be investigated to establish, if possible, the chronology of its development, the physical extent of the site and its fate after the Dissolution. Of greater relevance to the church, however, is this question: if the friars did not build this superb chancel, then who did? Who was the patron who had the wealth and motivation to fund the work?

Acknowledgment

This article began life as an accreditation essay for a UEA Extra-mural course at Blakeney tutored by Gerald Randall. It has benefited greatly from his comments but the views remain those of the author.

REFERENCES

- 1 T. H. Bryant, *Norfolk Churches: Hundred of Holt*, Norfolk Mercury, 1902.
- 2 N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, Norfolk 1, Norwich and North-east Norfolk*, Penguin, 2nd edition 1997, p.396.
- 3 G. Randall, *The English Parish Church*, Batsford, 1982, p.53.
- 4 C. Platt, *The Abbeys and Priories of Medieval England*, Martin Secker & Warburg, 1984.
- 5 D. Dymond, *The Norfolk Landscape*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1985, p.81.
- 6 W. Hudson, The 'Norwich Taxation' of 1254 with the Taxation of Pope Nicholas, *Norfolk Archaeology* Vol XVII, 1910.
- 7 J. Wright, 'The chapel on Blakeney Eye: some documentary evidence' and P. Carnell, 'The chapel on Blakeney Eye: initial results of field surveys' *The Glaven Historian*, No. 2, 1999.
- 8 *The Victoria History of the County of Norfolk*, Vol 2, Archibald Constable, p.425.
- 9 Norfolk Record Office (NRO), Frere MSS, Blakeney.
- 10 NRO, Norwich A/D Will, H. Sheppard, 1522/3 (Randes 164).
- 11 NRO, Norwich CC Will, J. Barker, 1536/7 (Mingaye 71-72).
- 12 N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of Suffolk*, 2nd edition, 1974, p. 120.