

ST ETHELBERT'S CHURCH, EAST WRETHAM

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.

St Ethelbert's was largely built in 1865 to replace a mediaeval building on the East Wretham site. It was mainly paid for by the Wyrley Birch family who lived at Wretham Hall in West Wretham, 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 a mediaeval one at Elsing near Dereham. Its carving took two men nine months and it carries figures of seven saint Frescoes on the east wall were done by the Rev Whalley. The Royal Arms of Queen Elizabeth 1 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.

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.

In the churchyard, which was levelled and enclosed at the time, are graves devoted to Czech and Polish airmen who flew from the Wretham airfield during the second world war.



Starting on the front row, left to right these Czech graves belong to the following people :

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 left to right:

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 left to right:

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 Chlost (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) Church Yard

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 to preach and celebrate Holy Communion, he had an extra point of interest to look at – a vault under the church uncovered by accident.

Church 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.

Guides to the church are available inside it to visitors
The church belongs to a team ministry, which embraces two churches in Thetford and the villages of Croxton, Kilverstone and Wretham.

The current Rector is the Rev Canon Robert Baker, The Rectory,
Redcastle Road, Thetford IP24 3NF
, Tel: 01842 762291.

St Ethelberts churchwardens are Mrs Eileen Kitson, 4 Windmill Lane, East Wretham, Thetford, IP24 1QR, Tel: 01953 498609, and Mr Ian Salter, Wretham Lodge, Wretham IP24 1RL Tel 01953 498997.

Services:

Regular services at St Ethelbert each month are Holy Communion on the first Sunday and Morning Prayer on the third Sunday. Both begin at 9-15am and both services use the Book of Common Prayer.

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 last winter, former EDP journalist John Kitson, a resident of Wretham for over 20 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.

St Ethelbert was erected by builder and stonemason Robert Bartram, of Millgate Street, Aylsham. Corsham and Ancaster stone was brought in by rail, lime came from Heydon and Mildenhall, roof tiles from Staffordshire and the floor tiles are Minton.

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, now part of the Thetford team ministry, also has a memorial by Sir Edwin Lutyens.

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 jrandeikitson@greenbee.net . It costs £3, with £1 for postage and packing. Cheques made payable to Wretham PCC, to which all proceeds are devoted.

Wretham services resume in August.

After the long lockdown caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, St. Ethelbert at Wretham will reopen for services on Sunday August 2nd..

On that morning, a service of Holy Communion at 9.15am will be led by the Rev Canon Bob Baker, who will also take a service of Morning Prayer on Sunday August 16th, also at 9.15am.

From then services will continue in their normal twice a month pattern, with a variety of preachers.

Sadly, all services will be without singing of hymns or chants, due to the current regulations.

Church members will undertake a thorough clean of the church building before services resume. In the lockdown period, repairs to both sides of the crossing arch have been completed, as well as repairs to ceiling plaster in the kitchen

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