

ST. LAURENCE CHURCH, SURFLEET

Brief Notes for our Visitors

Price : 1p (at least!)

WELCOME TO ENGLAND'S PISA !

Perhaps it was our famous "Leaning Tower" which caused you to stop and look. So first, a few words about

THE TOWER

When the church was built, before any real form of drainage had taken place, the ground in these parts could only be termed a bog. As the Tower was being built some 700 years ago, the foundations began to sink. The result is that the tip of the Spire - added later, and built at a different angle - is over 6' out of the perpendicular. Although the two western pillars of the church were buttressed in the 15th century to arrest any further movement, the Tower is still moving - outwards; to the north; and downwards! Just inside the west door a cross cut into the stone floor marked a point directly beneath the tip of the Spire - but even this mark might by now have to be cut in a different place.

The Tower can claim to surpass that of Pisa in a number of matters. It is older than Pisa. Its angle of lean is reputed to be greater than Pisa's - although the Tower does not have the height to emphasise the angle. And it contains the lightest peal of twelve bells in the world, hung for change-ringing. This is the only peal of 12 in the Fens; and because of the lean, two of the bells are technically "outside" the church.

THE NAVE

Although the church appears to be built in the Perpendicular style (late 13th-early 14th centuries) much of the work, including the Tower, is of the earlier Decorated Period, and the pier bases give evidence of Early English and even Norman architecture. There is also a reference to the patronage of St. Laurence's Church being presented to the monks of Spalding Abbey in 1180.

The interior of the church as we see it today is due largely to the zeal of the Revd. Henry Law James (Vicar, 1898-1932) who restored the church completely between 1900 and 1908. When he became Vicar the fabric was in a very poor state. The belfry was filled with rubble; the chancel used as a lumber room; and the only altar was in the north aisle. He swept away all the heavy, spiritless Victoriana, ugly box pews, and the cumbersome and unsightly three-decker pulpit. (See photo at back, showing church before its restoration). He installed the present seating, had the Rood Screen and Loft constructed, the choir stalls erected, and the organ built. He was also responsible for the clock's lovely six-bell chime.

Above the SOUTH DOOR is a hatchment of the Buckworth family, and various memorial tablets to them along the south wall. The Latin inscription on one tablet reads : "Here lies Everard Buckworth, Bearer of arms. Born 1693. Died 1751. You can perceive who I was from this tablet. My true character you will know elsewhere, namely on that last day when I also shall know your character. Go your way, traveller, and take good care that you will then appear as good."

The FONT is 15th century, octagonal, Perpendicular, with a carving of tracery and flowers, and a decorated deeply-buttressed stem. Note the unusual concave moulding of the base.

Above the NORTH DOOR are the Royal Arms, ordered to be set up in all churches after the Restoration. They used to hang above the Chancel arch where the discolouration of the stone can still be seen. They are the arms of Queen Anne. The "GR IV" was probably added later when George IV was in the area - a way of pleasing the Monarch while watching the pennies! The outside of the door is said to be pitted with the musket-shot of Cromwell's troops, who used the church to stable their horses.

The NORTH AISLE was shortened by one bay in the 15th century, although the reason for this is not clear - perhaps a further attempt to relieve pressure on the Tower. The arch of the old bay, and its pillars, can still be seen in the wall behind the north choir stalls, as well as one the outside of the church.

The LECTERN is 19th century. Beside it is an 18th-century PARISH CHEST, or Churchwardens Chest - a reminder of the days when the churchwardens were responsible for parish affairs. The chest would be used for storing parish papers and accounts. Note the provision for three padlocks - the chest could only be opened when the Vicar and the two Churchwardens were present. (Was this an early form of security system?) The chest bears the names of the two Churchwardens of that day, W. Obrey and R. Eakland, and the date 1719.

The PULPIT is the top section of the old 17th-century three-decker pulpit

The CHOIR is structurally part of the Nave, and is unusual in being in front of the Screen.

The CHANCEL ARCH is of the Early English period (early 13th century) and has a spiral staircase on the south side leading to the gallery.

THE CHANCEL and SANCTUARY

The CHANCEL is small in comparison with other ancient churches. The position of the Priest's Door and the Tomb show that this area must at one time have been larger. As with the north aisle, the Chancel was also reduced in size in the 15th century, perhaps for the same reason. A contract for this work is dated 1418. A letter of 1420 from the London mason reminds the church officers that the account has not been settled!

The EAST WINDOW also dates from this time; but the square "kitchen" windows cut into the north and south walls are 16th-century. The south window contains fragments of old stained-glass dug up from the churchyard. This is the only stained-glass in the church - a legacy of the wanton destruction of churches during the days of the Commonwealth.

The CHANCEL ROOF is a fine hammerbeam, cut down from a larger roof, perhaps that of the Nave. The present Nave roof dates from 1830.

The cross-legged Knight in the SANCTUARY is Sir Hugh de Cressy (1313-1347). After returning victorious from the Battle of Cressy in 1346 he rebuilt the Nave, Tower and Spire as a thank-offering for a safe return. He left instructions in his will that he be buried at the side of the High Altar in the Church of St. Laurence, Surfleet!

The BISHOP'S CHAIR, or "throne", was carved by Belgian refugees in 1916 out of some oak beams which used to support the bells. The Chair was the gift of Miss Emma Smith.

The HIGH ALTAR is the focal point of the church. The Reredos and its furnishings are a fitting memorial to the Revd. Henry Law James who did so much to beautify the church. Note the absence of Judas Iscariot in the depiction of the Last Supper.

THE EXTERIOR

Note the SOUTH PORCH with its fine 13th-century 'dog-tooth' moulding.

the WEATHER VANE at the top of the Spire, in the shape of a grid-iron on which the young St. Laurence, Archdeacon of Rome, is reputed to have been burnt to death in the persecutions of 258 A.D.

the ambattled PARAPET running around the church, and beneath it a ball-flower frieze of the Decorated style.

the weathered stone of the Tower showing that the original roof was much steeper than the present one.

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We hope you have enjoyed your visit here, and that these brief notes have helped you to enjoy our church a little better.

The church is here to remind us of God's continuing presence in the world, so do not leave the church without praying for God's blessing upon those who Minister and worship here, as well as for yourself that you may come in safety to your journey's end.