

The Church of St Michael and All Angels, Braydeston

The church of St Michael and All Angels, a Grade 1 listed building, stands alone on Braydeston Hills. Its surrounding churchyard, a haven for birds and other wildlife, looks down over farmland and up to the wide Norfolk sky.

A church at Braydeston is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 and almost certainly stood on the current site. Part of the exterior wall on the south side showing the faint outline of a doorway since filled in with flint, is possibly of Saxon date. A little to the west of this is another ancient doorway, now bricked in, of a later date. As with most old churches, the original building has been altered and repaired many times over the centuries.

The church is now entered through a sixteenth century porch on the north side. Of interest here is the stone seating topped with wood. At some time in the distant past, people have carved a Nine Men's Morris board together with several outlines of shoes. It may have been used as a schoolroom at one time.

Much of what can be seen of the church building inside is of the 13th/14th centuries. On the south side can be seen vestiges of pillared arcading, indicating that at one time there was either a south aisle or chapel, long since vanished. The stone shelf, piscina for the washing of hands and sedilia (seating for the clergy) in the chancel are thought to be of that date and the font at the west end of the church dates from around 1340.

The tower is of a later date as are most of the windows. In 1440 John Berney, an important local landowner and friend of the famous Paston family, left money in his will for the erection of this tower. It has a claim to fame: of the hundreds of mediaeval church towers in Norfolk, only 3 have a 'fireplace cum bread oven' in them and Braydeston church is one of them. It is thought that the sacred wafers for communion were baked in this. The church's one remaining bell was donated by a William Palmer of Norwich around the same time and is inscribed in Latin, translating as "This bell was made to praise the good saints". There were two others, sold in 1762 to raise much needed funds.

There is a small brass plaque near the altar marking the grave of John Berney's son, Osbert. He was wounded during the siege of Caistor Castle in 1469, when he assisted the Paston family in its defence during the Wars of the Roses. Whilst most of the chancel screen is relatively modern, part of it is 15th century. In 1489 Robert Palmer left 6 marks in his will for a new "perke" or screen. It includes the delightful carving of a pelican feeding her young, which has a Christian symbolism.

Back in the Middle Ages the church would have been full of colour. The walls and wooden screen were probably painted with Biblical scenes to instruct the largely illiterate parishioners. Above the chancel would have hung the Rood or Cross showing the crucifixion of Christ which would have been decked with candles and flowers at certain times. Now the church looks very modest, with whitened walls. The only colour other than altar cloth, kneelers, some floor tiles and flowers is in the East window, a Decorated period window with 20th century stained glass. It was installed in 1921 as a War memorial to parishioners William Beck, Arthur Cole, Charles Mason and Walter Meire who lost their lives in WW1. The two Braydeston men

killed in WW2 , Geoffrey Broom and Frank Read, are commemorated on a wall plaque. There is also a Roll of Honour on display near the back of the church, listing all Braydeston men - and women - who served in the world wars, some of whom of course never came back.

Other memorials in the church tell sad tales. The beautiful sculpture of a mourning woman on the north wall of the Chancel was erected by his mother to Spencer Frost, who drowned in the Canton River in China in 1847. Another is to all three sons of Rev. Thomas Drake, who served at Braydeston church from 1824 to 1836 whilst living at Braydeston House. They were drowned in 1830 at the respective ages of 11, 27 and 30 when their boat overturned at Langley. Perhaps even more tragic are the floor slab memorials in the chancel to John and Elizabeth Cotton and their children. John was a landholder and also a churchwarden at Braydeston for many years during the 18th century. Two sons died at the age of 19, two years apart; their daughter Ann died aged 2 and a half, and nine other of their children, not named, are also buried here.

The Pulpit, like the pews and most of the chancel arch, is 19th century, but the metal hour-glass stand attached to it is somewhat older. It no doubt assisted the clergy in timing the length of their sermons!

The church continues to be used weekly by its parishioners as it has been for hundreds of years. In the Middle Ages those living near the River Yare or Lackford Run had difficulty in reaching the church in bad weather but would have had access to St Clement's chapel near what is now Station Road. St Clements, of which no trace survives, was closed at the Reformation in the 16th century but dispensation was given by the Bishop for Braydeston parishioners to be given Holy Communion by the Rector of Brundall when necessary. These days of course the church can be easily accessed by car or foot as those who use or visit the church and the many hikers and dog-walkers on Braydeston Hills know.

A short history of St Michael and All Angels can be purchased at the church.

A few years ago the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies carried out a detailed survey of the church building and furnishings. A copy can be read at the Norfolk Record Office in Norwich.