

## Wednesday 5 July

# St Mary, St Mary and just to be contrary, another St Mary

This year's conference started with three churches all dedicated to St Mary.

**St Mary the Virgin in Earl Stonham**, rebuilt in the 14th century, has an impressive, late 15th-century hammer-beam roof adorned with winged cherubs, angels, elaborate pierced friezes and heavily carved pendants. Amongst the interesting furniture is a large clamped constructed chest. Chris Pickvance is studying chests of this type dating from late 12th to early 14th centuries and discusses this example below. It has particularly large chip-carved roundels.

Talking to the churchwarden, it transpired that there are extensive records of work carried out on the church and on the purchase of furniture. In 1825 there is a quote for box pews, oak at £175 and pine at £125. These were to replace the 15th-century pews because they were 'unsightly and not suitable for holy worship'. The records state that the seat supports should be of 'Memel fir', named after the Baltic port from which it was imported.

Over the chancel arch you can still see some of the original wall paintings. It is possible to make out the figure of Christ standing on a rainbow with a horned devil-like creature on one side and sinners descending into the mouth of a dragon.

The churchwarden had set out a triple sand glass for us to see. This rare survival is now kept under lock and key but originally sat on the 17th-century pulpit and allowed the timing of sermons to the quarter, half or three quarter-hour.

*Alison Dewing*

### The Earl Stonham 'roundels' chest

The Earl Stonham roundels chest belongs to the group of clamped chests with pin hinges that is distributed mainly in South East England from Wiltshire to East Anglia; the V&A's example is W.30-1926. At 1.76 m wide it is one of the largest in the group. David Sherlock's attempt to dendro-date it in 2008 (see his book *Suffolk Church Chests*) was unsuccessful but it is likely to be 1250–1350. Its most striking feature is the four large chip-carved roundels which immediately link it to roundel chests in Sussex. The 'feet' are missing but would have been either plain or



The Earl Stonham 'roundels' chest, 1250–1350

slightly shaped. It is likely that the chests were painted originally; in some there are the remains of polychrome in the roundels.

Less striking but equally important is that many members of this group of chests originally had a single central lock. Turning the key moved a long iron sliding bolt concealed under a wooden cover allowing prongs on the bolt to engage with iron staples fixed to the lid which entered apertures in the cover (See the St Ebbe's chest *RFS Newsletter* 55, Autumn 2011). As usual, here the bolts and their wooden covers have been lost but two staples remain in the lid. Other points of similarity with some chests of the Sussex group are a) the iron studs on the pegs in the mortise and tenon joints on the façade, b) the till box with a tapering lower compartment, accessed by a tilting bottom, which has to be released by removing a peg concealed under a movable muntin in the applied grid, and c) the shaped till box lid. Whether chests with a single lock had less valuable contents, or were located in vestries and treasuries is unknown. How a chest with so many connections with Sussex comes to be in Earl Stonham is a mystery. Sherlock says that the village is named after a Bigod earl, one of whose descendants, a duke of Norfolk, also had land near Chichester in the thirteenth century.

*Chris Pickvance*

### St Mary's in Dennington

This is a huge church built by Lord Bardolf, a hero of Agincourt, who is buried here in an elaborate alabaster tomb of c.1450, within one of the striking parclose screens. The pulpit of 1625 was converted in 1628 into a three-tier arrangement. There are three interesting small chests or trunks, one thought to be 14th century with elaborate wrought iron straps and three locks, another smaller oak box completely bound in iron, and the third is carved out of a large solid chestnut stump to create a small storage space lined with purple cloth.

The church has a number of fine early carved bench ends, one is carved with a Sciapod (or Skiapode), a mythical one-footed giant from Ethiopia. This creature was said to be able to run down wild beasts and take shelter from the sun under its own giant foot. Another fascinating item was a sand table in use from 1830–80 to help teach children to write.

Our third church was **St Mary's, Ufford**, ostensibly a 15th-century church beautifully built in flush knapped flint, like many others in Suffolk; however, there are also Norman elements remaining and evidence of rebuilding and additions from the 13th and 14th centuries. Inside, the most striking feature is the magnificent triple telescopic font cover of c. 1450. It is adorned with elaborate carved

finials and figures and topped, 18 feet above the font, with a pelican pecking her breast to feed her young, a symbol of piety. Much of the original polychrome paint and gilding is still visible.

There is much to see in the rest of the church, including 15th-century carved bench ends, the lower half of a painted



Chest carved out of a solid chestnut stump



A bench end carved with a Sciapod

rood screen decorated with female saints and the alternating tie and hammer-beam roof. On an altogether different scale and easily missed are two icons; one of St George and the Dragon the other a Madonna and Child, each exquisite in their detail and craftsmanship.

*Alison Dewing*