



St Mary, Stalham

The initial thing that struck me about St Mary's is the ethereal glow that radiates from the cleverly implemented lighting which illuminates both the interior of the west tower and chancel. This evocative golden light creates a wonderful ambience that I have not experienced anywhere else.

The nave and aisles of the church were constructed in the 14th century with the tower hailing from later in the 15th. When the belfry of the tower fell, the bells were subsequently sold to a Dutch merchant and became part of an enchanting local legend. The story goes that the merchant's vessel was sadly lost not long after it departed the shores of nearby Happisburgh. From then on it was said that, before a storm, the tolling of St Mary's bells can be heard far out to sea.



The church's chancel was rebuilt in 1827 with the rest of the building continuing to undergo extensive restoration throughout the remainder of the century. Renovations included the construction of the nave's scissor braced roof and the rebuilding of the south porch.

In the chancel is the large marble memorial and tomb of Katherine Castell who died in 1718. Her memorial states that she was married to a John Riches and later to the Reverend William Smith, a prebendary of Norwich Cathedral. The bottom part of the tomb is a chest upon which three cherub faces are exquisitely carved. Each of the round faces bears a slightly different expression, and are eerily lifelike - especially when bathed in the light emanating from behind the altar.

Created by London based firm Clayton & Bell, the east window depicts a large scene of the last supper. Underneath this are three further scenes showing Christ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, his trial before Pilate and lastly carrying the cross. Founded in 1855, Clayton & Bell were prolific producers of stained glass and were influenced not only by medieval design but also by the emerging artistic movements of the time. The firm's designs can be found throughout the world and were still in operation until 1993.

In the Lady Chapel is another 19th century window dedicated in 1888 to the mother and sister of the then vicar, Neville White. The central figure of St Mary is beautifully executed in a pre-Raphaelite style with highly patterned lights either side bearing the inscription, "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit doth rejoice in God my saviour".



The church also has an impressive octagonal 15th century font which sits atop a set of three steps. On the sides of the bowl are carved six pairs of apostles as well as depictions of the Holy Trinity and Baptism of Christ. The font, however, has not always stood in this location, for during the reformation it was buried under the church floor in order to save it from certain destruction. It was not until 1864 that it was rediscovered, restored and returned to its rightful place.









