



Walsoken Church... Society of Antiquarian Ramblers

Yesterday I purchased a lovely copy of the 'Collins Pocket Guide to English Parish Churches' edited by John Betjeman. This admirable project; to capture something of the "atmosphere and artistic merit" of thousands of parish churches was always going to be a challenge. Perhaps nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than in the case of All Saints church, Walsoken. Here's what the book says:

"Late Norman and Early English very fine, with much early decoration. Elaborate roof with some colour. Two screens, carved stalls, a few old benches. Painting of the Judgement of Solomon and a wooden figure of Solomon over the tower arch, and of King David with a harp over chancel arch."

A pithy little summary, but we - Esotericus and Mr. Many Coats - can assure you, this church rewards far greater investigation. I therefore invite you to come with me and explore further...

First of all, there is this; a rather majestic tower in the Early English style; chronologically, the next development from the over-engineered Norman round arches. Built, I assume, in limestone sourced from the quarries in Barnack in nearby Lincolnshire, it inspires the eye upwards (so to speak). Antique now, it would once have been a genuine shock of the new to astonished contemporaries in the thirteenth century (1200s).

Mr. Many Coats and I were very keen to go inside, and, having read the sign on the locked door, we walked to get the key from the nearby rectory. It was no more than a hundred yards away, and yet, in that short distance, we were walking from this outpost of west Norfolk (where the church is) and into eastern Cambridgeshire. Having knocked on the door, we were greeted - after a fashion - by the gentleman in the Rectory, who handed me the keys, told us to sign the visitor book and promptly shut the door (very similar, incidentally, to the 'welcome' received by the marvellous Simon Knott on his visit here a few years previously).

Now, having read a description of this as, 'the finest Norman parish church in Norfolk' (Mortlock and Roberts, 'The Popular Guide to Norfolk Churches; No. 3 West and South-West Norfolk'), we were expecting to be bowled over by round arches and chevron (zig-zag) carving and the like. Instead, the first thing that caught our eyes (and imagination) was this curious little figure - a seated Solomon. The look on his face amused us greatly...

This 'look' was intended to depict wisdom. The painting in the background is Solomon's judgement: a tale of a dispute between two prostitutes who both had babies, one of whom had died. They both lay claim to be the mother of the living baby. They go in front of King Solomon and he settles the matter by ordering the baby to be cut in half in order that they both have a fair share of the child. When one of the women objects, requesting instead that the living child be given to the other woman, canny King Solomon instantly recognises that she is the natural mother, and the baby is restored to her (1 Kings 3). We discussed his expression at length, and the version I am allowed to share here is that we felt he appeared, both, anxious and strained. If the church guide books are to be believed this art dates from the seventeenth century, and Mr. Many Coats was excited to find two other paintings of Solomon from the following two centuries, respectively...

This fixation with Solomon in this particular place remains unexplained - and all the more fascinating for that in the opinion of these Ragged Ramblers.

Having had our attention diverted, we then began to take in the wonder of the Norman architecture which abounded. Looking down the nave from the west end, you will observe how the typically round arches end with a pointed arch at the chancel of the same - late Norman/transitional - period.



The light from, both, the aisle windows and clerestory above, was generous on this beautiful late summer day.

And when we looked up, our eyes feasted on a lovely old hammer-beam nave roof constructed from honest hand-hewn timbers and decorated with angels and diminutive figures standing under canopies. Above the chancel arch is a carving of another Old Testament figure, King David, holding the harp which, as young man, he played so exquisitely that it was used to drive out an evil spirit possessing King Saul (1 Samuel 16:23).

And then there is the seven sacrament font. As you can see, it is an absolute stunner! I marvel and the delicacy of the carving and it is in a remarkably well preserved condition.

See, for instance, the sacrament of Extreme Unction, where the dying person lies in bed about to be anointed with oil by the priest. A rather worn, but nonetheless, recognisable devil can be seen in one of the scenes. The learned Mr. Many Coats explained to me that this one had clawed feet as it predated the sixteenth century (1500s) when devils began to be depicted with hooves

Having given this wonderful font a really good examination I called Mr. Many Coats back, and asked him if he agreed with me that something here did not quite belong....

Looking at the shaft ('stem') of the font, we noticed that the stone was of a different colour from the stand and bowl; that stylistically it seems to belong to a slightly later period. We also noted that thick lines of mortar at both ends of the stem. All of this leads us to believe that this is a composite: a piece robbed out from elsewhere and - far from seamlessly - incorporated into this piece. Who did this, why they did it - all remains a mystery. Once more, a church has the ability to puzzle and intrigue....

If the seven sacrament font represented the finer end of the art in the church, the rustic barn-build of the northern aisle represented the other end of the spectrum. Mr. Many Coats, a horny-handed son of toil, and an accomplished wood worker himself, was very much taken with these massive timbers and this honest work.

And yet, in this church overflowing with so many interesting features, there was also a most exquisitely carved aisle roof on the south-eastern end of the church...

As well as its elegant interlaced lines, I love the rich golden colour of these timbers (a hue which I'm not quite sure is captured by this image).

Although I am nearly at the end of this, my longest ever Ragged Rambler article, there is so much more I might tell about All Saints, Walsoken. However, I want to end on a more personal note. As we have often noted, a special site is so much more than the sum of its features. Here is a scene which sums up some of the further delights of a wonderful church...

Laying down my copy of Mortlock and Roberts by my newly purchased Walsoken church comb (a must-have item for any true Ragged Rambler!), I photographed this bag of beautifully scented crisp red apples which were for sale for a pound. This is just the kind of personal touch which lifts my spirits. The presence of people; of people who love this place was also evident in the lovely flower display - almost certainly a contribution from local women.

I heartily recommend that you take the time to go and see this for yourselves.

Postscript: having published this piece, we contacted one of the Churchwardens to convey our appreciation of their church and the community breathing life into it. We are delighted to have received a lovely reply, part of which I will quote:



"We consider ourselves to be privileged to have the guardianship of such a magnificent building and to have some feedback from Visitors is a real bonus." Thanks Peter