

Norfolk, Autumn 2013

We visited Norfolk at the end of September and beginning of October, when the weather was warm and mostly sunny. Orchard trees were laden with apples and plums, and the hedges were bright with blackberries. Here and there a patch of flowers survived on the verges and in the fields, hardy champions, maverick poppies, and others that Anna had difficulty identifying. Acorns, crab-apples, beech mast, and chestnuts, sweet and horse, hung on the branches or fell in profusion into the road; the leaves were turning, only waiting for gales to scatter them. The woods and hillsides were yellow or brown or a dark, sapless green, all tending to gold in the low rays of the sun. It must be lovely in spring and high summer, and in the snow too it must look spectacular, but it's hard not to feel that this country is at its best in autumn.

Weathered and worn by time, rich and strong, past their splendour, quiet but not desolate, the churches we were there to see had something of autumn about them. Most had Saxon or Norman origins – ‘The Round Tower standing here bears witness to one thousand years of regular Christian worship,’ says the guide to All Saints, Gresham – but the glory days were in the fifteenth century when the wool trade financed ambitious building and restoration, with exquisite work like the screen paintings of the nine orders of angels at St Michael and All Angels, Barton Turf, or the seven-sacrament octagonal fonts at Gresham and St Margaret's, Cley-next-the-Sea.

Something that struck me was the way bits of one church have been passed on to another. Bells and fonts in particular have moved about, and several churches have old (mediaeval) glass, but not in its original place, and often made up of bits from different places. This is not surprising, of course, since windows are the most vulnerable part of the building. St Michael and All Angels, Plumstead, has (in addition to its Victorian windows) mediaeval glass from Norwich and from Holland, taken from Catton Hall, Norwich, and donated in 1950. St Mary the Virgin, Barningham Winter, has Dutch glass dated 1613, taken from Barningham Hall in the 1950s, as well as fragments of fifteenth century Norwich glass.

We were surprised to find the churches open. Most warned that anti-theft devices were in operation, and someone came round to shut things away in the evening, but all day the doors were unlocked, though with notices reminding us to keep them closed for the sake of the birds. Some, were redundant churches, like St Peter's, North Barningham, which was saved from demolition in the 1960s and is now cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust. But most were still in use, although it was only on the Sunday morning that we encountered ‘something going on’. I think it was only St Julian's in Norwich that had a light burning, but there were other signs of activity, such as children's corners, requests for donations of food and notices offering counselling for those in financial difficulties.

North Barningham was the first church we visited. The first thing that struck me was the spaciousness. Emptiness and silence hang in the air. And then there was what the guide-book describes as a wheel cross in the floor of the nave. It is, in effect, a rose window made of stone and brick, something over a metre in diameter. The guide-book is at a loss to explain its practical or liturgical purpose – did it mark where the font stood, or the entry to a vault? Of all the decorative features we were to see during our week of church-going, this was the one that most appealed to me.

We were struck all the time by the fanciful inventiveness of the patterns of brick and flint on the local houses and barns. Churches also used brick, sometimes for decorative effect with the flint, but sometimes, it seemed, just to fill in spaces where flints would not fit, with no attempt to create a pattern; presumably in these cases the walls were originally covered in roughcast of some sort. Brick often appears in buttresses, possibly because buttresses sometimes had to be built quickly, and I guess brickwork takes less time than flintwork. One feature we had not seen elsewhere was flushwork, where patterns are created with outlines in ashlar stones filled in with flints. We first noticed it on the parapet of the tower at Plumstead, and after that we saw it everywhere, usually high up but also sometimes in the lower courses, as at St Michael and All Angels, Barton Turf. Interestingly, most guide-books seem not to think flushwork worthy of mention, presumably because it is such a standard feature in East Anglia.

The North Barningham guide-book (one of the more substantial) is written by someone called Derek Palgrave (secretary of the Palgrave Society, a family history society), which is appropriate because the church contains several notable memorials to members of the family: a late mediaeval brass image of a knight and lady, two substantial seventeenth century monuments, and a stone slab dated 1710 on the floor. The 1611 monument to John and Urith Palgrave has classical figures (representing, the guide-book tells us, Justice, Toil and Peace) which have all been defaced. There is also a fulsome memorial to their daughter Margaret Pope. The memorial to their son Austin and his wife Elizabeth (died 1639 and 1633) has beautifully sculpted busts – Anna was particularly impressed by the carving of Dame Elizabeth’s ruff. The 1710 slab commemorates Augustine, son of John Palgrave, but I could not find any memorial to this John, apart from his appearance in the list of his father’s offspring. Why did Augustine do nothing for his father?

This makes me think of John Aubrey, and how shocked he was at a young man who was unable to say where his father was buried. I’m not sure that I have ever taken these things particularly seriously—I remember the dead, but don’t feel strongly about tangible memorials—but in these ancient churches the testimony of stones suddenly began to seem more important. I was troubled by the missing John Palgrave, and wanted to know why this gap in the series had been left unfilled. Perhaps he died during the Civil War or the time of the Commonwealth, when anything like the elaborate monuments to his father and grandfather might have been seen as out of place in a church. Was it changing customs, or did he leave things in such a bad way that there was no money to pay for a monument? It’s hard not to speculate on the family dynamics at work here, the comings and goings, the fluctuations in family fortune, the oscillation of fashion, the way one generation feels towards the one before. Perhaps the Augustine who died in 1710 thought his father a fool and his grandfather a tyrant, and so was disgusted by the whole business of erecting monuments.

In each of the churches we visited after this I took note of the family monuments, mainly from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and particularly where it was possible to follow a line through two or three generations. It’s like looking through a window at people you don’t know and watching as they sit by the fire, get up and cross the room, bring in a tray of tea things, fold their newspaper or close their book. You don’t know what is happening, but you feel suddenly involved in a moment of intimacy.

At Gresham, accordingly, after looking at the ten commandments and the octagonal font I jotted down a few details, scattered on plaques around the walls, of the family of Lieutenant Colonel Reginald Crossley Batt (1872-1952) of Gresham Hall. His first wife Violet died in 1910, aged 29, just a year after the building of Gresham Hall. She left a son, William Frederick (1904-1990) who married Elizabeth (1908-1988). Reginald’s second wife Eileen Augusta died in 1924, aged 47, leaving three sons, known only by their initials: Major E C Batt died of wounds at Alexandria in 1940; Major R D Batt was killed in Normandy in 1944; Lieutenant R W Batt died while serving in Newcastle in 1944, a few weeks after his brother died in France. We had a long walk ahead of us to get back home, so we were in a hurry, and it seems from the guide-book that I missed six memorials to the Spurgin family, John Spurgin being the rector who died in 1893: ‘He ever set forth the great doctrine of Justification by Faith only.’

At Plumstead a floor slab to Peter Wilson and his wife Theophil, who died in 1728 and 1720, is remarkable for the number of fossils clearly visible in the stone. A wall plaque commemorates Theophila Fleming, wife of William Henry Fleming and daughter of Peter Wilson. She died in 1742, aged 42. The altar, reredos and carved candlesticks were presented by Rev Joseph Whiteside, rector, in memory of his son killed at the battle of the Somme. This is recorded on a wooden plaque. Other wooden plaques commemorate other victims of the Great War.

We had seen the magnificent Barningham Hall from the road. It was originally one of the homes of the Pastons, but later passed to the Mott family. The partly ruined church of St Mary, Barningham Winter, is in the grounds of the hall.

Here it took a little while to work out the various generations of Motts. John Thruston MD of Emmanuel College Cambridge, buried in 1776 at Market Weston, devised his property on a young cousin called Thomas Vertue, who took the name of Mott. Presumably the direct line of Motts had died out and Thruston and Vertue were related to the family in some way. Thomas died in 1788,

aged 28, leaving a son, John Thruston Mott. John Thruston Mott married Sophia and they had four children, three of whom (Henry, Augustus and Sophia) pre-deceased him. He died in 1847, aged 62, leaving his first-born son John Thomas Mott (1809-1884). John Thomas Mott's son was John Stanley Mott, whose only child was Theresa Caroline (1868-1941). She married Charles Edward Radclyffe DSO who was missing at the battle of Loos in 1915. Their son was Charles Edward Mott Radclyffe (1911-1992) whose wife Diana died in 1955, aged 41.

John Thomas Mott erected a marble slab to his parents and brothers and sister, and in 1879 dedicated a window in memory of Thomas Mott (originally Vertue) and Dr Thruston, the benefactor of the family. The window shows two scenes from the Gospel of Luke: Simeon saying, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,' and the Good Samaritan. The choice of Luke is perhaps significant, since the family's benefactor had been a doctor, and the two episodes define a certain sort of Christianity, a religion of peace and benevolence, which seems at home in this setting. John Stanley Mott is named on the tablet he erected for his father, and also on his daughter's tablet, but so far as I could see had no memorial of his own. There is a brass plaque to Charles Radclyffe commemorating his loss in the war. Charles Edward Mott Radclyffe gave the Dutch glass from Barningham Hall in memory of his wife Diana, and himself has a simple plaque.

Although Charles Mott Radclyffe evidently still owned Barningham Hall after the second war, it seems that his widowed mother did not live there continuously, because there is a mention of a Mr and Mrs Briscoe of Barningham Hall on a plaque dated 1937 recording their contribution to restoring an early fifteenth century brass of John Winter.

We spent most of our visit to Norwich in the Cathedral, but also saw St John's, Maddermarket, and St Julian's. St John's has a very Victorian feel to it, but its mediaeval brasses, seventeenth century monuments to husbands and wives, and eighteenth century testimonials to upright Norwich citizens, all speak of its long history. Some of the memorials detail benefactions, such as those of Francis Gillians, worsted-maker, who died in 1719. He left £100 to provide a fund to bind one apprentice per year, and rents from various houses to pay clergymen to preach on particular days, with anything left over to provide clothing for poor tenants. The monument was erected in pursuance of his will by his widow and executrix, Lidia.

As for St Julian's, it's a memorial more than anything else to mid-twentieth century anglo-catholicism. It was run-down, it seems, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and then almost completely destroyed in the war, but devotees of Lady Julian saved it from demolition. I didn't warm to the reconstructed building, although it's hard to say why. Perhaps it's because it is so insistently the house of God. Other churches celebrate the decent secular lives led by local people over the centuries; St Julian's is more suggestive of the spiritual life. There was, however, a nice human touch in the notice asking those leaving a request for an intention to write it out clearly.

The cathedral, by contrast, represents the civic side of Christianity. The tone was set by tablets such as this from the early eighteenth century: 'Beneath these steps lay interred the truly Religious and Virtuous Mrs Mary and Mrs Anne Echard, Loved and Lamented by all that knew them.' Or again by the comment on Charlotte Lucy Bignold (1835-1924), eleventh child of Sir Samuel Bignold MP: 'for two generations she occupied a leading position in the social, political and philanthropic life of Norwich and Norfolk.'¹ The memorial to Thomas Tawell (died 1820, aged 57) is more specific:

In 1805 he purchased a spacious dwelling house and extensive garden ground and settled them for a perpetual Hospital and School for INDIGENT BLIND PERSONS ... whose melancholy situation he could but too well estimate having himself passed many years deprived of the blessing of sight. Whilst acutely feeling for the afflictions of others he sustained his own with Resignation and Cheerfulness.

While I was hurrying from one end of the aisle to another, looking for Anna who was chasing up

¹ Samuel Bignold was for nearly sixty years secretary of the Norwich Union Life Insurance Society and Norwich Union Fire Insurance Society. According to his DNB entry he turned down a request from Disraeli for a loan from the Life Insurance Society on the grounds that it was a bad risk, but was charmed into providing a loan from his personal funds.

mediaeval treasures, I caught sight of a marble figure, a young woman at prayer. I went to look closer. She is called Violet Vaughan Morgan and the sculpture is by Francis Derwent Wood RA. It is oddly located in a corner, and part of the inscription on the base can only be read by peering round and leaning over. On one side is a passage from Wordsworth:

... I knew a maid
A young enthusiast, ...
Birds in the bower, and lambs in the green field,
Could they have known her, would have loved; methought
Her very presence such a sweetness breathed,
That flowers, and trees, and even the silent hills,
And everything she looked on, should have had
An intimation how she bore herself
Towards them and to all creatures. God delights
In such a being; for, her common thoughts
Are pity, her life is gratitude.

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On another side are some lines signed VVM:

No voice shall break the glory of the stillness
Or touch the joy that our two soul's fulfil
And we shall see the splendour of the morning dawn on the hills.

And then there is the tribute from her parents:

In Caister Churchyard was laid to rest ... all that could die of Violet the lovely
and beloved only child of Penry and Evelyn Arden Vaughan Morgan.
Sweet Vi who on February 22 1919 aged 20 years passed from this life to life
eternal.

I'm wondering about the apostrophe in the second of VVM's verses, and I'm not sure whether in the last line of the Wordsworth it should be *pity* or *piety*. Several lines are omitted from the Wordsworth: 'Her eye was not the mistress of her heart; / Far less did rules prescribed by passive taste, / Or barren intermeddling subtleties, / Perplex her mind ...' A few intermeddling subtleties perplex my mind when I read all this, and I want to know how sweet Vi came to die. The influenza epidemic, perhaps, or did she spend too long watching the morning dawn on the hills? And whose was the second soul, someone alive or dead, real or imaginary, friend, brother or lover? Searching the Internet only deepens the perplexity. A prize in the English faculty at Oxford bears her name, and if you search for her you will find how many famous people have won it over the years. You may also come across the unsubstantiated rumour that she was secretary to the Bishop of Norwich who, at the age of 56, was planning to marry her.

Derwent Wood's sculpture captures something of the 'young enthusiast' in the face of the kneeling woman. When someone dies so young we look everywhere for comfort and explanation. People sometimes use the phrase 'ready for heaven', which always raises a protest in my mind when I see it. Sweet Vi's parents seem assured of the life eternal, but their chief comfort, one feels, lies in the memory of her sensitivity and spirituality, and the thought that she lived with an intensity and reached a pitch of fulfilment that did not depend on length of years. It's as though seeing 'the splendour of the morning dawn' can compensate for all the little experiences and moments of understanding that make up a whole life.

By contrast, the memorial to Osbert Parsley tells of a genuinely complete and fulfilled life. It starts in Latin saying the tablet was put up by his fellow musicians in 1585, and then goes on in English verse.

Here lies the Man whose Name in Spight of Death
Renowned lives by Blast of Golden Fame:
Whose Harmony survives his vital Breath,
Whose skill no Pride did spot whose Life no Blame,
Whose low Estate was blest with quiet Mind
As our sweet Cords with Discords mixed be;

Whose Life in Seventy and Four Years entwined,
As falleth mellowed Apples from the Tree;
Whose Deeds were Rules, whose Words were Verity;
Who here a Singing-man did spend his Days
Full Fifty Years in our Church Melody,
His Memory shines bright whom thus we praise.

Parsley, who was also a composer, started his musical career as an employee of a Benedictine Priory, and lived and worked on through the dissolution of the monasteries and the religious comings and goings of Mary, Edward and Elizabeth.

Barton Turf is where we found the most exciting medieval treasure of our journey, the painted rood screen. It also has a beautiful eulogy on the memorial to Anthony Norris (1711-1786) and his son John who died at the age of 26.

Reader, when thou art informed that the Son had a comprehensive Mind enriched with pure Religion, abstruse Knowledge, classical Learning and every elegant Acquirement thy first Regret for the Feelings of his Parents will be absorbed in lamenting the Loss which the Community sustained by being thus early deprived of such an exalted Character. To this Decree of Heaven the Father submitted with a truly pious Resignation.

Admire then the Greatness of his Soul and know that he lived not for himself alone but for the Public, his eminent Abilities being constantly employed as a Christian in the exemplary Discharge of every religious Duty, as a Magistrate in dispensing Justice with Mercy, as a Scholar in digesting the Productions of classic Ages and of Modern Times, as an Antiquary and Historian in collecting the various Revolutions of Families and Possessions in his native County. Ever anxious for the Edification of Others, his Faculties at last became exhausted, and his Mind ceased to be active ere he ceased to be.

Sarah his Relict, though now deprived of the endearing Names of Wife and Mother, yet still retaining the grateful Remembrance of those tender Connexions, in humble Confidence of a future Union, consecrates this Monument to the beloved Memory of an affectionate Father and a dutiful Son.

Anthony Norris was an antiquary of some note, and although he published nothing left a great body of material and himself has a place in the DNB, where the exhaustion of his Faculties is glossed as 'the gradual onset of senile dementia'.

Anthony Norris's benevolence is described in large, general terms, which nonetheless combine to give a vivid and affecting impression of the man. Other memorials have more facts. The bequest of John Francis (1787-1870) is specified in the sort of detail we saw in the worsted-maker's tablet in the cathedral. He left £1100 in 3% consols 'to be expended in the purchase of Clothing, Bread and Coals to be distributed during the winter of each year amongst the deserving poor of this parish who attend the Church.' He also paid for a stained glass window above the west door of the church, and left a further £750, again in 3% consols, to be spent 'chiefly in and towards the education of the poor children of this parish'. The spreading interests of the Francis family are hinted at elsewhere. John's son or grandson, Charles George Francis (1850-1922) is described as 'of Norwich and Newcastle on Tyne'. His two sons died young, Frank in Birmingham in 1928, and Robert in Perth, Australia, in 1926.

After exploring half a dozen churches we were impressed by their variety. Each had a different feel, hard to pin down, but evident as soon as we pushed open the door. Partly it depends on the size of the building, some spacious and airy, others more confined. And then there are variations in the light, the colour of the stonework and woodwork, the extent of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century restoration. When you come down to detail the differences are endless, each church having its own beauties, its own oddities, and its own people. It's obvious why devotees come back again and again, either to study one church in depth or to immerse themselves in the richness of the whole county. Had we had more time I should have liked to work my way round the graveyards, so that my acquaintance was not limited to the families from the big houses. The gravestones, worn away by wind and rain, are harder to read than the indoor tablets, and the information tends to be more sparing, but still there are stories to be extracted, personalities to be

imagined.

There is another way of appreciating the churches – not in detail, but as presences in the landscape, some massive and defiant, others crouching, sheltered by the trees. All Saints, Walcott, has a tall 15th century tower which stands straight, as the guide puts it, against the blustering winds. We were going to drive past, but it was so impressive we could not resist going in. The interior is spacious, and despite the interesting items enumerated in the guide, piscina, sedilia, font, rood-screen, war memorial, lectern, it is this spaciousness that is the most striking feature. There is a large floor slab commemorating John Collinges, doctor of divinity, who died in 1690. Most of the long inscription is in Latin, with Hebrew and greek tags at top and bottom. Between 1785 and 1887 the cure of souls was entrusted to just two men: John Hewitt, 65 years perpetual curate who died in 1850, and Horatio Nelson William Comyn, vicar for 37 years, who died in 1887 – and to judge from his christian names was probably born in 1805.

St Peter's Matlaske is a little church, with a modest round tower and a comparatively small floor area. It was the only church we visited where there was no guide-book available, so until I looked on the Norkfolk Churches website I didn't understand why it seemed curiously truncated – the chancel fell down in 1726. It was getting late, so we didn't stay long. By this time I was losing my capacity for accumulating detail, but I was struck by the large Romesse stove, probably about a hundred years old, and by a memorial to Henry Gunton (late captain in the 50th Foot) who died at Krishnagur near Parametta in 1844. Reading this cursorily I assumed this was in India, but looked again and found it was New South Wales. I suspect that in Scottish churches we would have seen rather more references to sons who died in far away places.

This was to have been our final visit, but on our way out of Norfolk we passed through Cley-next-the-Sea, and had to stop to visit the spectacular St Margaret's. It is built on a slight eminence (from which at least two other churches can be seen) above flat ground which in earlier centuries was sea. It is massive, almost like a cathedral, and highly decorated both inside and out. The first thing that struck me was the red and black stones on the floor – and then it was the size, the empty, silent space, something which, even after a week of churches large and small, I still find thrilling. Floor slabs record centuries of gentlemen and merchants, kind parents, sincere Christians, often three or more generations together. It was a prosperous and stable town.

But even in such a solid place life remained fragile. Rev Robert Moore, Rector of this parish and Perpetual Curate of Weybourne, died in 1847 aged 42: 'His afflicted widow who is left with six children to mourn his irreparable loss pays this humble but affected tribute to departed worth and excellence.' We can hear the Trollopian irony in *departed worth and excellence*, and imagine the anxious widow packing up her belongings to make way for the new rector, bundling her quiverfull of daughters off to stay with relatives, wondering who will marry them, and how she will pay for her pampered son to go to Cambridge.

The scriptural authority for the insecurity of human life is, 'Therefore be ye also ready for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh.' (Matthew 24 44) This verse appears on the marble beside the altar commemorating John Winn Tomlinson (1775 to 26 December 1855), where it has a slightly smug sound. The man was eighty years old, and had probably dined well. He had more reason than Rev Moore to be expecting the Son of Man. Still his family (the six out of eight daughters who survived him) thought it worthwhile to record how well prepared he was: 'On the day before his death he attended the morning and evening service and received the sacrament with his family at this altar. The next morning after rising in good health he was seized with a fit of apoplexy which ended his life before the close of that day.'

Shortly after we got back to St Andrews we attended Lillias's funeral at Cameron Kirk. Although I'd like one day to see more of Norfolk, it was a relief after all that richness to be back with Presbyterian austerity. It is a lovely building in a lovely place. Apparently Lillias chose Cameron because she didn't want to be near the sea. People say, however, that when the wind blows the sound of the sea can be heard in the churchyard.