



# A History of Gissing Church



*An interpretation by Avril Pierssene*

## **Introduction**

This is not an architectural study of the church's fabric. It is a story of the people who were inspired through their beliefs to build it, look after it and be associated with it. The hope is that, by learning their story, we can appreciate the legacy that they have left us and remind ourselves that the church is a community of people, not just a building.

Most of the building that we see today has stood for at least nine hundred years, which is testament to the skill of those who constructed it. And the elaborate stone carvings around doorways, the magnificent double hammer-beam roof with its carved angels, the flint-work on the north porch and the elaborate memorial monuments, are all the work of talented and experienced craftsmen.

These artefacts would have been labour-intensive and expensive to produce. So one thing we can be sure of is that whoever the people were who paid for the church to be built and enhanced were wealthy people, and probably members of, or associated in some way, with the nobility. And most members of the nobility are visible in the historic records, especially if they are associated with the Church, for the Church was the seat of learning and its leaders could read and write.

## **Obscure origins: Anglo-Saxon, Danish or Norman?**

As with other round-towered churches in our region, experts have had different opinions about its age: some experts have suggested that St. Mary's Church in Gissing dates wholly from after 1066 when the Normans (who settled here with King William I after the battle of Hastings) brought expertise in building in stone. Certainly, the stone carvings on the nave doorways are of the Norman style. The chevron (zig-zag) motif is one which was typically used by them. The first zig-zag motif appeared in England some time between the years 1100 and 1115 during the reign of King Henry I. Gissing Church has not just chevron motifs, but also scallops (a border of shell-shaped curves) and billets (a border of short cylinders with spaces between), which were introduced a little later. There's an ornamented string course with billet work towards the top of the tower. The windows at the top of the tower have round arches, which also suggest a post-Conquest date. (The Anglo-Saxons often built their openings with triangular-headed tops.)

The lower window on the tower also appears to confirm that the tower as well as the nave dates from the Norman period: as shown by the chevron patterning on the stones. But the zig-zag pattern we see here does not appear to be created in the making of the stones. The Normans usually cut their stones into the shapes of three-dimensional chevrons at the quarry, and then transported them when completed to fit them on site. Here the chevron markings appear to have been etched (ie scratched and carved) onto the stones afterwards, the original stones having been flat. If this is correct, then the lower part of the tower may date from the Anglo-Saxon period, and the upper part only was built by the Normans. The double-splayed round windows half-way up the tower are definitely an Anglo-Saxon feature: they used round baskets as a frame round which to set the flints. And there is other evidence for a pre-Conquest date: Pevsner tells us that Saxon foundations have been found under the north porch.

## Danish influence

The people here at the time before the Normans conquered were not just Angles and Saxons, but also Danes, many of whom were descended from the Vikings who invaded England in the ninth century. It is worth noting that round-towered churches are to be found mainly in the east of England and that similar towers are to be found in Denmark. Furthermore, the flints in our tower are un-knapped, like those in Denmark. (The skill of knapping, ie shaping, flint came later). This suggests a Danish origin for our tower. Norfolk was part of the region in the east of England that came under the Danelaw, established when the Saxon king, Alfred, in 878 made a treaty with the leader of the Danes allowing their nobles to take control over the Saxons in the east and establish their own laws. In Norfolk, the Saxons and Danes co-existed, but it was the Danes who had the upper hand. That is, at least until the Saxon king Athelstan in 933 re-established control, ordered the minting of a national coinage for the whole of England, and introduced new laws.

One law, which Athelstan introduced in 937, was aimed at laying down what was needed for a local leader to claim the status of thegn. A thegn is a Scandinavian term for an aristocratic retainer of a king or nobleman: a military freeman. (After 1066 thegns became merged into what later became known as knights.) One requirement was that the thegn's land must have a bell tower. A thegnly church was owned privately, and tithes and donations provided an income for the owner. In a document of the time it says *'If a coerl throve, so that he had fully five hides of his own land, church and kitchen, bellhouse and burh-gate seat, and special duty in the king's hail, then he was thenceforth of thegn-right worthy.'*\* This evidence from the legal documents of the time suggest that Gissing church, with its early bell-tower, was built by an individual of thegnly status who served the king.

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\* *coerl* = person not a thegn by right of birth  
*kitchen* = a building in which to cook food  
*burh-gate seat* = a road

*hide* = enough land to support a household  
*bellhouse* = a tower in which to hold a bell  
*king's hail* = summoned by the king

The earliest historical record that we have that mentions land associated with Gissing is from the Anglo-Saxon period. It mentions a Thurketyl the Dane. According to Francis Blomefield, the local eighteenth-century historian who had access to many early charters and other documents (a good source for details about the ownership and succession of the different Manors in Norfolk), Thurketyl gave one part of the land he owned in Gissing to Bury St. Edmunds monastery in 962. We don't know who this Thurketyl was, but possibly he may have been the same person as the Thurketyl, who, having decided to renounce the world, became a monk at Crowland Abbey in about 946. He was of the nobility, a kinsman of Archbishop Oskytel of York, and had great wealth.

This Thurketyl persuaded King Eadred to give him Crowland, which was then a poor and struggling house surrounded by swamps and marshes. He was elected abbot shortly after he acquired it, and endowed it with six manors. He died in 975. Whether or not Thurketyl the Dane who gave land to Bury monastery was the same person as the Thurketyl of Crowland, he probably lived too early for him to have built the tower of Gissing Church that we see today.

But there is another Thurketyl of a later date who appears in the records too. In about 1038 this later Thurketyl bequeathed land in Shimpling and Roydon to his wife Leofwyn. It happens that Shimpling, Roydon and Gissing all have round-towered churches dating from the Anglo-Norman period, which suggests a common origin. As names tended to be kept within families, it's possible that this later Thurketyl may have been a descendant of the one who gave land to Bury monastery.

## **Norman conquest**

In 1020 King Canute expelled the canons from the secular monastery at Bury St. Edmunds and founded a new abbey of Benedictine monks on the same site. According to the so-called 'Domesday' Survey that was conducted in 1086 by William 'the Conqueror' to establish land ownership, abbot Baldwin of Bury Abbey was lord of the manor of Tivetshall at that time. He was also lord of Gissing Manor, which was a 'berewick' (an outlier) of Tivetshall Manor. It seems that the land on which the church stood was part of Gissing Manor, the part that was later divided up into two, to be known afterwards as Gissing Manor and Hastings Manor. The other main manor that had land in Gissing was Gissinghall Manor, which had land, not only in Gissing, but also in Roydon and Eye.

The ownership of land in 1086 was based on the feudal system, which was imposed in England by King William. The king was at the top of the social ladder and granted land to his tenants-in-chief, who were usually lords or leaders of the church, in return for their help in the Conquest. Next down the social ladder were under-tenants who held the land from the tenants-in-chief, and so it continued to the peasants at the lower end of the social ladder who could hold a small area of land in return for working in the fields. A manor was land that belonged to those at the top of the social ladder. A single individual often had manors in many different places and had one manor as his main place of residence, known as his 'seat'.

There are five people recorded as owning land in Gissing at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, and at least five different manors had land here. One land-owner was King William himself. The other four fit into the category of a close companion of his, namely: Robert Malet (who looked after the king's land here), Roger Bigod, Reginald FitzIvo and Abbot Baldwin. They were all tenants-in-chief.

An examination of the Domesday Book reveals that many of the most elaborately or expertly decorated Norman churches that have survived (and Gissing Church can be counted among these) are on land that belonged at that time (1086) either to King William or to one of his close companions. It's likely that one of these five people recorded as owning land here in 1086 owned the land on which the church stood. The question is, which person and which manor did he have?

If the tower of Gissing Church was built before the Norman Conquest then the only person mentioned in the records who could have owned the land on which the church stood is Abbot Baldwin: for he is the only one we know about from the records who was here before the Norman Conquest. As Thurketyl the Dane had given land in Gissing to the earlier monastery in Bury, which presumably was passed on to the Benedictine abbey after 1020, then it's possible that the manor in Gissing of which Abbot Baldwin was overlord in 1066 included the land that Thurketyl had given away in 962. Blomefield tells us that Abbot Baldwin gave his manor in Gissing to Fulcher de Mayneris, who was one of his knights and the abbey's head steward. In 1086 Fulcher was lord of the manor as well as manors in Roydon, Shimpling, Tivetshall and Semere in Norfolk, and six manors in Suffolk. He was a man of some means and could perhaps have contributed to the building or re-building of the church by the time of the Domesday Book in 1086.

## **The Hastings family**

The hereditary post of steward to Bury Abbey was associated with Gissing: it eventually passed from Fulcher to a family from Flamville in Normandy, who had been given land in Leicestershire where they had their seat at a place now known as Aston Flamville. Then the post of steward, together with the manor lands in Gissing, passed to the Hastings family when Erneburga de Flamville married Hugh (de Hastings) of Fillongley in 1132. Not only did Hugh become steward to the Abbey, and therefore inherited lands belonging to Gissing Manor, but he was also steward to Henry I and was given Ashill Manor in Norfolk as part of his post as steward, a post that was also hereditary.

Like the Flamville family, the Hastings family had also been given land, not only in Leicestershire, but also in Warwickshire, where they had their seat at a place called Fillongley. Hugh's family may have originally been Danish. According to Blomefield, the Hastings family here came from Hastings and Rye in Sussex where for a long time they held from the Crown. Erneburga Flamville's family were definitely Norman. In the marriage between Hugh of Fillongley and Erneburga de Flamville in 1132, we see the first mingling of Danes with Normans, which echoes what we see in the building of the church: a Danish/Norman transition.

We see the same mingling in the next generation. Hugh of Fillongley and Erneburga de Flamville had a son, William, who inherited both the stewardship to Henry I and to Henry II, and the stewardship of Bury Abbey. William was lord, both of Fillongley and Ashill, and he also married twice: his wives were Maud Banaster and Ida d'Eu. Ida was the daughter of Sir Henry d'Eu, a Norman, who was Lord Hastings. Ida's mother was Margaret of Champagne, niece of King Stephen. Sir Henry d'Eu founded Foucamont Abbey in Normandy in about 1130. William was the first of his line to assume the name of Hastings, perhaps because his second wife was the daughter of Lord Hastings.

William's wife, Ida, is interesting as, not only was her father Lord Hastings so had connections with the town of Hastings like her husband William, but she was also descended from 'Turketil, Seigneur de Turqueville' five generations back. Turketil is the same name as Thorketyl and lived at about the same time as the Thorketyl who gave land to Bury monastery in 962. Could Turketil be the same person as Thorketyl? It would not be surprising if Turketil was a Dane, for the Normans were originally from Denmark: even William 'the Conqueror's ancestors were Danish. But whatever Ida's origins, she found herself connected with the nobility, for her brother, John, married Alice d'Aubigny, daughter of William d'Abigny, Earl of Arundel. So both William and Ida were connected with the royal court, William through his post of king's steward, and Ida through her family. It is very likely that they would have had the means and status to build a church such as ours at Gissing.

As noted earlier, the Hastings family had their seat at Fillongley in Warwickshire. Over the south doorway of Gissing Church is a stone carving of what most people think looks like the head of a muzzled bear. This may simply be a symbol representing the conquest of Christianity over paganism, or good over evil. But a muzzled bear is also a symbol used in the coat of arms of the county of Warwickshire (usually a muzzled bear standing with a staff in its hand). Could the muzzled bear carving over the doorway here be a reference to the owner's seat in Warwickshire?

This could be a clue to who built the nave of the church. If it really was someone whose seat was in Warwickshire, then we are looking at a manorial lord from Warwickshire who lived at the period in time when elaborate decoration like that which we see on the south doorway of Gissing Church was in fashion. As noted earlier, this elaborate style of carving arrived in England later than the simple zig-zag motifs, in the mid to late twelfth century. It is possible that Hugh of Fillongley, Warwickshire, husband of Erneburga, or their son, William de Hastings, may have begun the building of the first stone nave to replace an earlier wooden one associated with the round Danish or early Norman tower. And their son, William de Hastings, who was born in about 1134, could have been responsible for completing the building of the nave, more or less as we see it today.

Contemporary with the Norman-style stonework, there is a stonemason's mark near to the floor on one of the stones of the south doorway, which can be seen from inside the nave.

As well as the Norman-style stone carvings, there is another early feature on the main external fabric of the nave: the scratch (or mass) dial. It's located on the left side of the south doorway at about eye-level height. It shows a large hole in the centre and sixteen small holes circling below. A metal or wooden peg (a 'gnomon') was inserted in the central hole so that,

if the sun was shining, a shadow was cast as a line that would give an indication of the time of day. This was a helpful guide for the priest so that he could tell when he needed to be ready to take the next service. It was called a mass dial after the word 'mass' meaning a church service. Such dials were used in the days before church clocks were invented. (The first clocks appeared in about 1280.)

## **Butley Abbey patronage**

It is difficult at this distance in time from the eleventh and twelfth centuries to disentangle the confusion between the different branches of the Hastings family. It is one of William de Hasting's sons who we find in the earliest firm evidence that we have of ownership of the church here. It is a charter (dated some time between 1188 and 1214) that tells us that Sir Thomas de Hastings gave a 'moiety' (share) of the church's patronage to the canons at Butley Abbey.

Translated from the original Latin, the agreement reads:

*'To the faithful in Christ to whom this present writing shall have come, John, by the grace of God bishop of Norwich, greetings in the Lord. We want it to come to the notice of everyone, in the cause of God and the consideration of religion, that to the church of St. Mary of Butley and the canons there serving God, the church of Gissing, with all that belongs to it in pure and perpetual alms, be, at the petition and presentation [request] of Thomas of Hastings the patron of the same church [be given], just as in the charter of the said Thomas that is contained in the same charter that the said canons have [in their possession]...'*

It seems that Sir Thomas de Hastings, whose wife remains a mystery, inherited the manor here from his elder brother, John. (That is, Gissing Manor, not to be confused with Gissinghall Manor). If the church stands on land that had previously belonged to Bury Abbey, the fact that the patronage was given to Butley Abbey shows that the manor in which it stood at that time was no longer owned by the abbot of Bury. When Abbot Hugh I died in 1180, the abbey's possessions fell into ownership of the Crown, due to Hugh running up enormous debts. The Hastings family presumably were given back the manor here, along with its churches, by the king shortly after that date.

Butley Abbey was founded in 1171 by Ranulph de Glanville within months of the murder of Henry II's archbishop, Thomas à Becket. Henry II wanted to show remorse for the murder and confirm his adherence to the church, so he encouraged the foundation of new abbeys and monasteries. Butley was one of these new foundations created by Ranulph, his chief justiciar. Ranulph's uncle, Roger de Glanville, married Gundreda de Beaumont whose first husband was Hugh Bigod (Roger Bigod's grandson). And Hugh Bigod's grand-daughter, Margaret (daughter of Roger Bigod, 2nd Earl of Norfolk), married William de Hastings who was John and Thomas de Hasting's half-brother. So there were family connections between the Hastings family and the Glanvilles, which gives a good reason for Thomas de Hastings to give his share of the patronage of the church to Butley Abbey.

Thomas's half-brother, William de Hastings, inherited Ashill Manor in Norfolk, together with the post of king's steward, and also Gayton Thorpe Manor from his wife. Interestingly,

the church at Gayton Thorpe has a round tower with Saxon-style windows. According to the local tradition the tower dates from around 950 or 1000 AD and was built on to a church dating from 50 years earlier. A Thorkil was lord of a manor in Gayton Thorpe in 1066. If the tower of the church at Gayton Thorpe is considered to be old enough to have been built soon after 950, is it possible that the lower part of the tower of Gissing could be as old? If so, then it adds weight to the idea that 'our' Thurketyl (who could be the same person as Gayton-Thorpe's lord called Thorkil) could have founded Gissing Church.

It may be the same Thomas de Hastings (whose half-brother was William of Ashill Manor), who turns up in an account contained in the chronicles of Bury Abbey, written by Jocelyn de Brakelond in 1182 when the abbot was Samson of Tottington:

*Thomas de Hastings came with a great multitude of knights, and brought with him Henry his nephew, who was not yet a knight, and for whom he demanded the office of steward with the customary dues thereof, as his charter provided. And to this demand the abbot at once answered, "I neither deny, nor wish to deny, his right to Henry. If he were able to serve me in his own person, I would grant him the means of supporting ten men and eight horses in my court. And if you will present a steward to me who knows how to fulfil the office of steward and is able to do so, I will receive him on the same terms as my predecessor had his steward on the day whereon he was alive and dead, that is, I will allow him four horses with the things needful for them. But as you will not agree to this, I will make complaint before the king and before the chief justiciar."*

So the matter was postponed. It may also be the same Thomas who owed service at Norwich Castle for Gissing in 1198.

Giving a share of the patronage of Gissing church to Butley Abbey meant that Butley had the right to appoint a vicar. Blomefield tells us that Gissing Church was still a rectory in 1200, and that the gift to Butley was in 1209. The rector in 1200 was John, who may have been John de Hastings, Thomas's older brother. It would be quite natural for the owner of the church to act as rector if that was his vocation. And when John died, his younger brother Thomas, may not have wanted to take on the role of vicar and decided therefore to give the patronage to someone else.

The other share of the patronage was given to Butley Abbey in 1217 by Thomas's grandson, another Thomas de Hastings who married Amicia in 1216. (It's not clear why there were two shares.) It was probably this Thomas de Hastings who acquired official recognition of his rights in Gissing in 1227 after a Quo Warranto writ. (A Quo Warranto writ was a legal order from the king demanding that the person to whom it was addressed demonstrated by what warrant he had obtained a particular right.) Thomas de Hastings claimed that his ancestor, William de Hastings, had the manor of Gissing in the fee of Bury Abbey in the time of King Henry II (1154–1189) and confirmed by King Richard I in 1196. According to a charter, Thomas had '*assize of bread and ale, free-warren, liberty of enclosing, and liberty of faldage, throughout the town*' (Gissing), as well as '*other folks land*' as his own.

Blomefield tells us that in 1271, in the time of King Henry III, in addition to the patronage of the church being with Butley Abbey, everything else connected with the church was also appropriated, *ie. 'all the offerings, the tithes of the mills, a vicarage-house and meadow, and an acre of land adjoining, and twenty acres more of the church's free land, and all other small tithes, except*

*hay, which, with all the corn tithes, and the rest of the glebe, together with the rectory manor, and all its appurtenances, were to belong to the prior, who was always to present to the vicarage.'*

The first vicar under this new arrangement was William of South Elmham. Butley Abbey continued to appoint vicars until the Reformation, and the church became a full rectory again in the time of Charles II.

## **Medieval knights**

Meanwhile, the land on which the church stood continued to belong to the Hastings family. Thomas de Hastings and his wife, Amicia, had an only son, Nicholas, who married Emmeline in about 1258. When Nicholas's father, Thomas, died in 1246, this Nicholas assigned his manor in Gissing to his mother. (His mother re-married, her second husband being Sir Robert de Bois of Fersfield). He also gave two of his other manors, Gayton-Thorpe and East Winch, to the Priory of Pentney in Norfolk, together with '*a messuage (a mansion-house) and two carucates of land (the amount of land that a team of oxen can plough in a season) to be ever held of his manor of Gissing by one knight's fee, and a pair of gilt spurs or 7d a year, at Easter.*' What this means is that the Priory of Pentney had to provide a service in return for the manors given, the service being the provision of a knight to serve Nicholas whenever needed, always ready to be on call. Though Pentney was given Gayton-Thorpe and East Winch manors for its use, they were attached to Gissing manor and therefore still owned by Nicholas de Hastings.

This was part of the feudal system, whereby the king was the supreme feudal lord who depended on his noblemen to provide armies. His nobles were paid in 'fiefs' (or 'fees') for their services, and those who served the nobles were called vassals. Vassals were bound, under penalty of losing their lands, to follow their lord in all his quarrels against any person. It felt an honour to be a vassal of the nobility. A fief (or tenure) was hereditary and so if given 'for ever' it could be passed down to the son of a holder.

## **The chantry chapels**

This Nicholas, whose mother re-married after the death of his father, is probably the Nicholas de Hastings who, in 1281 three or four years before he died, founded a chantry chapel here. Chantry chapels were built specially to provide a place where a priest could regularly pray for the souls of the dead. Wealthy members of the nobility had such chapels built for the souls of their ancestors, so that their ancestors could be forgiven their sins and assured a place in heaven. Sir Nicholas made an agreement with a Sir Adam de Gissing to provide a vicarage for the priest who was to be the person to pray for the souls of the departed. This is confirmed in a charter, which reads:

*It is agreed between Sir Adam de Gissing, knight, and Nicholas de Astingg on 29th September...that, whereas a certain chapel may be sited in the churchyard of Gissing by the aforesaid Nicholas, founder of the said chapel, by whom thus it is provided, and with the confirmation of Lord William, Bishop of Norwich, that a certain chaplain shall officiate at the chapel by celebrating divine service successively for the honour of all souls who may have bestowed any goods for the maintenance of the chapel or the*



*chaplain (whoever successively shall serve), whether from lands or from rents or from tenements or from any goods, Sir Adam, for the salvation of his soul and the souls of his ancestors, and successors, in order that, as regards all endowments, alms and prayers made in the chapel in perpetuity, has remised and quitclaimed to the chapel and chaplain there serving God, all right and claim which he had in one messuage and three acres of land and one rood in the town of Gissing which Robert de Thelveton, chaplain of Robert de Gissing, acquired from Sir Adam, concerning which agreement was made between Sir Nicholas and Sir Adam as follows: that the messuage with the aforesaid land remain for the support of the chaplain of the chapel; also that neither Adam or Nicholas nor their heirs are to claim any right in the messuage and land, to have nor to sell, but to remain wholly to the chapel and chaplain serving there in perpetuity.'*

This tells us that Sir Nicholas de Hastings provided the chapel, and Sir Adam de Gissing provided the chaplain together with a house and land to support him. And both had no claim on the house and land that were provided for the chaplain. The house referred to was one which was already in existence: it was one that Sir Adam had provided for his own chaplain, Robert de Thelveton. Sir Adam married Agnes de Thelveton, daughter of Matthew de Thelveton. Presumably, Adam's chaplain, Robert de Thelveton, was closely related to his wife. We don't know where the house referred to was located, but it had *'three acres of land and one rood* (a quarter of an acre) *in the town'* with it.

Neither do we know for certain where the chapel was. It has been described as being in the east end of the churchyard. Searches in the churchyard have failed to find any evidence of a separate building. But, if we take it that the chapel was built at the east end of the church, taking up space in what was then the churchyard, then we are probably describing what is now known as the Kemp chapel at the east end of the church on the north side. (Or maybe what is now used as a vestry on the south side of the church.) The Kemp chapel has its own little entrance doorway with a pointed arch, two large windows in the early English style and, inside, a piscina with a pointed head and continuous hollow chamfer (groove).

All these features are characteristic of the style of building that was popular in the late thirteenth century. The original south chapel (now the vestry) also dates from the same period, though this was completely re-built in the late nineteenth-century and the position of its doorway was moved. The crypt below was not disturbed, which presumably was built at the same time as the original chapel. But if so, who was buried there? For the early Kemps were buried in the north chapel from 1376 to 1705 and were not buried in the crypt under the vestry until after that date. Was the crypt the original site for the burial of the Hastings family? Or was it never used as a burial place until the Kemps started using it in 1695?

Crypts were originally used as a safe place for valuables, such as relics, against marauders.

At the same time as (or soon after) the north and south chapels were added, access was given to the chancel by the insertion of two pointed archways. Those on the south side of the chancel still remain, but the two pointed arches on the north side were replaced by one large rounded arch at a much later date.

Nicholas de Hasting's grandson, another Nicholas, was a knight, retained by Ralph Lord Greystock to serve him in *'peace and war for the term of his life... with two yeomen and four grooms; in consideration of which he was to be furnished with all accoutrements for his own body, and also with one saddle, according to the dignity of a knight; and in case he should lose any great*

*horse in the war, he was to have recompense according to the estimation of two men.'* On account of his retainer, Sir Nicholas had the manor of Thorp Basset in Yorkshire, adding to other manors that his family and wife had inherited in Yorkshire and Northumberland.

This last Nicholas had two sons, who each inherited a share of his estates in Gissing. His younger son, William de Hastings, inherited what became known as Gissing Manor. His elder son, Sir Ralph de Hastings (born in 1291), inherited what became known as Hastings Manor in the same parish and, in 1321, married Margaret de Herle. He was Sheriff of Yorkshire and governor of York Castle in 1337. In 1346, he took part in the Battle of Neville's Cross at Durham when David II, King of Scotland, invaded northern England in an attempt to establish Scotland's independence from England. England at the time was embroiled in the Hundred Year's War with France. King David thought he could take the English by surprise while they were busy with their wars with France. But the Scots were beaten, and King David was taken prisoner. Sir Ralph de Hastings, however, was wounded during the battle and died of his wounds shortly after.

While Ralph de Hastings was away fighting battles, another member of the Hastings family (Isabelle) in 1324 married Allen Kempe. Francis Blomefield tells us that Isabelle was the grand-daughter of the William de Hastings who inherited Gissing manor: this William granted it to her son John (1325–1376) whose burial here is recorded on one of the boards (currently on a wall in the Kemp chapel).

After this William's brother, Ralph, died fighting the Scots, Hastings Manor passed to his son, another Ralph (1322–1397). He was Sheriff of Yorkshire, Sheriff of Hastings and Lord of Kirby in Leicestershire. He retained John Kirby of Wiggenthorp in Yorkshire as his knight and was himself a knight, retained by Henry, Duke of Lancaster, to serve him both in peace and war, for 40 marks per annum, out of his manor of Pickering in Yorkshire. He married, firstly, Isabel de Sadington in 1352, and, secondly, in 1384, Maud de Grey. In 1353 he sold both Hastings Manor and Dawlings Manor in Gissing to Thomas Gardiner of Chedeston in Suffolk.

The year in which Ralph de Hastings sold Hastings manor to Thomas Gardiner was only four years after England was first hit by the deadly plague known as the 'Black Death'. It cost nearly a million lives in about twelve months. Afterwards, the rural economy was in a state of chaos. Many landowners faced great difficulties with the higher cost of labour and smaller profits from major commodities like wheat. It's possible that Ralph was among those struggling financially and could be the reason he sold his manor to Thomas Gardiner. Further outbreaks of plague continued throughout the next few decades.

The font dates from about 1400. It has a plain octagonal bowl except for triple pilasters at the corners. The polygonal stem has canopies.

Thomas Gardiner's grand-daughter, Katherine, married Robert Buttevelyn, Lord of Flordon. Robert inherited Dawlings Manor in 1400, and his grand-daughter, Julianna Buttevelyn, the daughter of Sir Robert Buttevelyn Junior, inherited half her father's estates in 1451 when her relative, William, died without issue. (The other half went to her sister.) She married Robert Duke of Brampton in Suffolk.

Robert and Juliana's daughter, Alice Duke, married one of the Kemps, through whom presumably the Kemps inherited Hastings Manor. (And presumably already having Gissing Manor from their ancestor John.) In about 1460 Robert Kemp I (1427–1485), whose family seat was in Weston in east Suffolk, and whose wife was Margaret Curzon of Stutton in Suffolk, acquired the manors and churches of Flordon and Gissing, and land belonging to the manors of Hastings and Dawlings in Gissing, together with other properties in Gissing and elsewhere in Norfolk.

## **The double hammer-beam roof**

It may have been during Robert's life that the double hammer-beam roof was installed. He lived during the years when the Lancastrians were fighting with the Yorkists for supremacy, the period known as the 'War of the Roses'. This came to an end in 1485, the same year that Robert died, when Henry VII, the first of the Tudor kings, became king. By then, landowners (who had turned to sheep farming instead of arable) and wool merchants were enjoying increased wealth. A lot of money was spent in the last decades of the fifteenth century on building or re-building churches and on large, timber-framed houses with richly-decorated porches. England was still heavily wooded, and so timber was plentiful. The lavish expense that must have been spent on the double hammer-beam roof here could be a reflection of this renewed prosperity. Some close relatives of Robert were merchants, and some married members of the Royal Court, and one married Sir William Dane, who was Lord Mayor of London.

The fashion for installing angel hammer-beam roofs lasted between about 1395 (with the first roof at Westminster Hall in London) and 1534. Double hammer-beam roofs followed single ones, so Gissing's roof was probably installed at some time between the second quarter of the fifteenth-century and the first quarter of the sixteenth. At the time the roof was installed, the church here was still Roman Catholic. When Henry VIII broke with the Roman Church, religious images (including angels) were no longer tolerated.

The nave roof is one of only four double hammer-beam roofs in Norfolk and thirty-two in the country. It has collar beams and king posts, which is unusual for Norfolk, but common in Suffolk, so there's a likelihood that it was made in a Suffolk workshop. It may be significant that the families most likely to have commissioned it to be made (the Dukes and Kemps) originally had their seats in Suffolk. The nave at Brampton Church where the Dukes had property was once covered with a fine oak roof. Now, only traces remain. Maybe the Dukes had a penchant for fine roofs and repeated their commission for one at Gissing when they inherited the manor here. It has even been suggested by some people that the roof was a re-used one, having come from another church, by way of explaining why the figures at the lower ends of the wall posts have been cut off and the absence of corbels on which they should rest. Did the roof come from Brampton Church?

The angels on the ends of the hammer-beams hold the emblems of saints, symbols of the passion and musical instruments.

One aspect of the Roman Catholic tradition was the placing of a large 'rood' (wooden cross) with a figure of Jesus on the cross, facing the congregation, at the junction between the nave

and the chancel, where there was a screen at floor level that separated the lay population from the priests and on top of which there was a platform on which it was possible to walk. The top of the screen and the rood (which needed to be decorated in different ways at different times of year) was accessed via a staircase. The screen here has long since gone, but the staircase remains, with its doorways at the bottom (which is high above the nave floor) and the top. The staircase has three steps, one with a wooden tread, above which it becomes a tunnel (ten to fifteen feet long) hacked out of the wall sloping gently up to emerge at the round-headed doorway east of the chancel arch. Blomefield tells us that John Gibbs, the local priest who was deprived of his living in 1690, was still allowed afterwards to sleep in this tunnel where he could see the altar when he woke.

## **The north porch**

Another practice due to the wealth of the nobility in the fifteenth century was the building of elaborate porches. Gissing's porch, built in 1474 in the Perpendicular style, has very fine knapped flint-work known as flush-work. ('Knapped' means shaped by chipping.) The knapped flints were given flat edges and were arranged into intricate shapes and patterns made attractive by the contrast in texture and colour between them and the stone between which they were laid. It is labour intensive to produce and requires much skill in execution. Flush-work is a fashion that started in East Anglia due to the area having a plentiful supply of flints. It can be seen on many medieval churches. The porch here originally had an upper floor (evidenced by the large window), which in 1690 was inhabited during the day by John Gibbs. There are two large niches built into the front of the porch either side of the doorway that used to contain statues. They are located above two carved heads adorned with crowns.

The question as to why the porch was built on the north side of the church rather than the south side (the more elaborately carved south doorway evidently having originally been the main entrance) has not yet been answered.

Ten years after the porch was built King Richard III founded a new 'college of arms'. Coats of arms had become important symbols of aristocratic lineage among the nobility by this time. They were displayed at tournaments and worn by heralds on their tabards or surcoats. So when the second member of the Kemp family to qualify for burial in the Kemp Chapel died in 1526, it's not surprising that he had a memorial showing his coat of arms. It's one of four memorials in the Kemp Chapel to show coats of arms exclusively, and they are the earliest ones. This one to Robert Kemp II, who died in 1526, is located on the west wall and has a shield surrounded by an attractive multi-foil border. Born in 1446, Robert married twice: Elizabeth Appleyard and Anna Clifford. The monument shows the Kemp and Buttvillein quartering on the left, with the 'chequy' (like a chequerboard) impaling on the right referring to the Clifford arms.

Church services were still Catholic and still being spoken in Latin at this time; and the English translation of a part of the Bible was considered heretical. The year in which Robert died (1526) six thousand copies of William Tyndale's new, printed edition of the New Testament were burnt.

In his will, Robert requested that he 'be buried by his wife in the Lady Chapel of Gissing Church' and made bequests to the altar here and to the high altars of Flordon, Burston and Tivetshall. He settled his lands on his eldest son Bartholomew.

## **The Kemp family burial ground**

In 1532 Bartholomew sold the family seat at Weston in east Suffolk, and with the funds purchased property in Gissing not yet owned by the family. Two years later King Henry VIII declared himself the 'supreme head' of the Church of England, breaking with Rome, and in 1536 dissolved the monasteries. Which meant that the advowson (the right to appoint a priest) of Gissing Church fell upon the monarchy instead of Butley Abbey.

The Chantry Act of 1545 abolished all chantry chapels, and so the Kemp Chapel ceased to be a place to pray for the souls of ancestors. But it continued to be used as a family chapel and burial ground, and at this time probably had pews installed for the Kemp family. When the Kemps had become lords of the manor, they first buried their ancestors there (from 1376); but later (after 1695), they buried their family in the crypt which lies beneath the current vestry.

Bartholomew was buried in the Kemp Chapel (as listed on the board there) and so was his wife (according to Blomefield though she isn't listed), but the brasses to their memory have been removed.

Bartholomew's eldest son, Robert Kemp (1516–1596), succeeded to his father's estates in 1554. He married twice: his wives were Elizabeth Smithwine and Elizabeth de Grey, daughter of Thomas de Grey of Merton. In 1574 Robert purchased the advowson of the church, but Queen Elizabeth took it back on a technicality and the Kemps didn't more permanently get the advowson until the reign of Charles II. There are two monuments to Robert's memory. One is a brass on the floor of the Chapel which shows the Kemp arms with those of his first wife, together with the words: *'Here lyeth buried Robert Kemp Esquire who married Elizabeth the daughter of John Smythwine Esquier and had issue Too <two> sons and three daughters. He died the XXVII of Aprill in the yeare of our Lord 1596 aetis vae LXXX'*.

The other memorial is on the north wall and has the Kemp family motto 'Spero Lucem' with it, which means 'I hope for the light' and expresses a desire for spiritual enlightenment and consequent happiness. It shows Kemp quartering Buttvillein, impaling de Grey, quartering Cornard, Baynard and Manning. In other words, it shows the arms of Robert Kemp with the arms of his second wife, Elizabeth de Grey. While Elizabeth de Grey, who died two years before her husband, is listed as being buried here, Robert's first wife, Elizabeth Smithwine, is not.

The fourth memorial showing only a coat of arms belongs to Robert's son, Richard (1541–1600), who stated in his will that he desired to be buried in the chapel at Gissing with the rest of his ancestors. Situated on the floor of the chapel, the memorial shows the Kemp arms and the Cockerham arms of his wife (Alice) with three leopard faces. By 1556 he was enrolled as a student of law at Gray's Inn in London and later was appointed as Councillor of the Law to the town of Ipswich while he was living in nearby Washbrook. In connection with his marriage settlement, it's recorded that he had property belonging to the manors of

Hastings in Gissing, Flordon and Dallings in Norfolk, and Redisham in Suffolk. On the death of his father he moved to Gissing, and in 1579 he purchased Gissinghall Manor in Roydon. At the call of arms in 1599 Richard provided one lance and two light horsemen at his own expense. After he died, his widow, Alice, re-married. Her second wedding is recorded as having taken place at Gissing Church on the 17th September 1601. Her new husband was Edmund Poley.

Richard's only son, Robert Kempe, was born in Hampstead in 1567. In 1582 he entered as a student at Gray's Inn just as his father had done. Also like his father, he moved to Gissing when he inherited his father's estates. His third and fourth sons were baptised here in 1600 and 1601. When he died in 1612 a monument was erected by his widow, Dorothy (nee Harris), to his memory, the earliest of the large monuments adorning the north wall of the Kemp Chapel. After his death she lived at their manor house at Flordon where she died in 1626 and was buried, as she desired, beside her husband in the family chapel at Gissing. (Though her name does not appear on the board there.)

Dorothy was a strict puritan. It must have been difficult for her when her son, another Robert, became an ardent Royalist. However, had she have lived long enough, she would undoubtedly have been pleased to see the stained-glass windows of the church removed. The churchwardens' accounts for 1643–5 show that Gissing parish paid 6s 8d *'to the visseter when the picters were pulled down in the windeows'*. It then cost the parish £1 9s 4d to re-glaze them. They even had to provide the ladders *'to pull down the crosses of the church and stepple'* at a further cost of 1s 8d. Not only was Robert unlike his mother in being a Royalist, but he also didn't want to follow his father and grandfather and become a lawyer, even though, like them, he was entered as a student at Gray's Inn in 1614. Four years later he was knighted by James I and later became the first Kemp to become a baronet. When civil war broke out in 1642, the army raised in support of the king by Robert and others was no match against Cromwell and, being defeated and surrounded by Cromwellians intent on destroying him and his property, Robert fled for safety to Rotterdam. As with his mother, his name is not listed on the notice board as among those buried in the Kemp chapel.

Robert's son, another Robert, became the 2nd Baronet. Following in the family tradition, he also trained at Gray's Inn, though he may never have practiced as a barrister. He moved from London and for a while lived in Gissing. The Hall house where he resided here had been badly damaged by a fire during the Civil War, causing the walls to be weakened, and its treasures had been whisked away by the family to other, more secure, residences. In 1700 Sir Robert pulled the Hall house down (only the moat now remains) and converted the greater part of the park into a farm, for which in 1702 he built a large house on a more elevated spot to the north. At the same time he moved his seat to Ubbeston, the manor of which he inherited from his second wife, Mary Sone. In 1660, the year of accession of Charles II, he was elected the Tory MP and Justice of the Peace for Norfolk. He was the first of the Kemps to drop the 'e' from the end of his name. He died in 1710 and was buried in the vault under the current vestry: his monument of white marble with Corinthian columns hangs on the north wall of the Kemp chapel. His name, together with those of both his wives, is listed on the board there.

Robert, the 3rd Baronet, and his son, another Robert, the 4th Baronet (MP for Orford), were both buried in the vault. A fine memorial tablet to the 3rd Baronet is on the south wall of the chancel between the two pointed arches.

It may have been at about this time that the two pointed arches into the Kemp chapel were replaced by the one large archway that we see today. The screen dividing the north chapel from the chancel dates from the seventeenth century, apparently having been formed from the sides of box pews. Other furniture in the north chapel also dates from the seventeenth century, including a table and a chest. The drop-handled bier is dated 1700.

Sir John Kemp, the 5th Baronet, lived and died in Tooting. He only mentions Gissing in his will as the place where he wanted to be buried. He asked that his funeral should be conducted in the same simple way in which his late brother, Sir Robert, was buried, namely, with a hearse and one coach only. His widow, Elizabeth Mann, was given Sir John's '*chariot, chaise and horses*'. He died in 1761.

Sir Robert's younger brother, Thomas, died the same year. Thomas had become Rector of Gissing (as well as Rector of Flordon) in 1730. His predecessor as rector had been the Rev. John Calver in whose time (1694–1730) the old rectory (possibly located in Lower Street) had burnt down, destroying most of the church documents kept in the church chest. (Fires were not uncommon in days when many buildings were built of timber and homes were lit by candles.) Blomefield tells us that it was Mr. Calver who built a new '*parsonage-house with a barn and stable all of brick*'. It had a '*garden, an orchard and 49 acres of glebe*'. This is presumably a reference to the site where Sir Robert Kemp, the 2nd Baronet, had built the '*large house*' after pulling down the old Hall in 1700. Though Sir Robert himself had not personally used the house, presumably it became the rectory for the then incumbent, Mr. Calver. And then continued to be the rectory when Thomas Kemp was instituted Rector in 1730.

Thomas's daughter, Mary, wished to be buried '*in a private manner*' at Gissing, even though she lived in Westminster. An obituary notice in the '*Gentleman's Magazine*' informs us that she had been an invalid from birth, enduring '*misery daily with the utmost patience and resignation for twenty-five years. Her character is said to have been exemplary, her disposition mild, and her piety and goodness of heart unbounded.*' Mary, who died in 1784, is among those listed on the board as having been buried in the family crypt here. Her mother, Priscilla Holden, erected a monument to both her and her brother John and to her father, Thomas, the rector, and her uncle the 5th Baronet. It's a large tablet memorial in the chancel.

When the Rev. Thomas Kemp, the rector, died in 1761, he was succeeded in his post by the Rev. Edward Howman, who died in 1811. He and his wife, Ann, were buried in the churchyard close to the south chapel. Their two flat tombstone slabs, inscribed with their names, can still be seen there.

Sir John Kemp, the 6th Baronet, died in Westminster, London, in 1771 aged only seventeen. There's a tablet to his memory on one of the walls of the abbey cloisters. The board in Gissing Church tells us that he was buried here in the crypt.

Another death at an early age is recorded on one of the memorials inside the church: that of Jane Coleman, wife of William Kemp of Antingham. She died in 1705 at the age of nineteen.

In 1804, Sir William Kemp, the 9th Baronet, died '*instantly on the spot*' after falling off his 'hobby' (the forerunner of the bicycle). He is not recorded as being buried in the crypt here, but his widow, Sarah, is.

Some time before 1820 a gallery was inserted at the west end of the nave, together with clerestory windows to let in more light. A drawing by Ladbroke, dated 1820, shows the position of the windows (which were later filled in). (Some people have suggested that it may be the insertion of the gallery that necessitated the statues on the lower hammer-beams of the roof to be cut off in order to accommodate it.) Ladbroke's drawing also shows prominent cracks in the tower, giving the impression that the church was not in a good condition at this time.

Sir William's son, another William, the 10th Baronet, was born in 1791. He graduated from Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1813, and three years afterwards was instituted as Rector of Gissing and Flordon. He was not just spiritual overseer of both places, but also patron of both livings and lord of both manors. He enlarged the house-cum-rectory in Gissing that his ancestor had built in place of the old Hall, and connected it directly to the farmland which it overlooked by removing the lane that passed in front of it and re-directing the road so that it passed the back instead. (Known still as New Road.) William died in 1874.

Later in the same year, William's brother, Sir Thomas Kemp (who became the 11th Baronet), also died, aged eighty. He lived as a bachelor in Long Stratton and is the last name listed on the board in the Kemp chapel as having been buried in the crypt here.

The bell frame in the tower was built in 1832 by Robert Ayton. There are five bells: three are marked Ipswich 1670 and may be the set mentioned in 1552 that had been re-cast for change-ringing. The other two, made at Downham Market, are dated 1832.

## **Victorian restoration**

Sir Kenneth Hager Kemp, the 12th Baronet, born in Erpingham, was a J.P. for Norwich, a lawyer, a colonel in the British Army, and a banker. He was also a first-class cricketer playing for both the Norfolk and the England teams.

Together with the help of John Sharp who was rector from 1874 to 1883, he also embarked on a programme of restoration of the church. The building must have been in a very poor state before the work was started. The population of the village at the time was about 400, enough presumably to make the project seem worthwhile. But the number of residents was already in decline, having been nearly 600 in 1830.

In 1876 (the same year that Sir Kenneth married Henrietta Hamilton, and the Board School was built) he faithfully restored the north chapel (removing the pews) and in 1879 rebuilt the south chapel without disturbing the vault beneath. He rebuilt the east gable end of the chancel, putting in the east window. He restored both the tower and the porch. He removed the west gallery, and replaced some of the angels on the lower hammer beams of the roof. He laid a new floor which he paved with Minton tiles and put in new furnishings, including pews, pulpit, communion rails, floors in the tower, north and south doors, the door to the porch stair, the benches in the porch and the porch gates.



Sir Kenneth also built modern premises for his tenants and farmers. The old glebe and rectory were exchanged in 1879. The new glebe farm consisted of about 84 acres. The house, standing in about 3 acres of land, was erected out of the proceeds of the exchange. (*Norfolk Churches* by H.M. Cautley) He sold Gissing Hall in 1923 and died at Sheringham in 1936. He had one son who pre-deceased him, and the Kemp baronetcy became extinct. Thus ended a long line of Kemp family connections with the church.

The war memorial in the corner of the churchyard gives the names of those from Gissing who died fighting in the First World War.

## **A home for bats**

We don't know how long the church has been a home for bats, but an account by a Gissing village schoolgirl, living at the beginning of the twentieth century, included mention of them when she was a chorister attending church services: *"If old enough to be in the choir we entered the church by the side door, where we had to be pretty nippy as bats had the habit of hibernating between the top of the door and the stone work, and there they hung upside down until we opened the door, and then 'plop'."*

The *'Shell Guide to Norfolk'* published in 1957 tells us that, in reference to Gissing, *'On weekdays a large stuffed owl is secured to the pulpit book-rest to scare away bats.'* Today, we have no stuffed owl, but a survey of the bats, three species of which are still present, has recently been done and advice given on bat conservation.

New gates at the entrance to the churchyard were installed in 1950.

## **A united benefice**

Resulting from a decline in congregation numbers during the twentieth century, in 1980 St. Mary's Church became part of a united benefice, joining with four other local parishes, namely Burston, Shelfanger, Tivetshall and Winfarthing. The number of people on the electoral roll in the year 2000 was 28 with an average of about fourteen people attending services each week.

## **A building at risk**

To mark the millennium the church tower was restored, and a few years later the nave roof was repaired and re-tiled with the help of a grant from English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and sponsorship from individuals. When the chapels were found to be in danger of collapse a few years later, St. Mary's was put on the English Heritage register for buildings at risk. Another appeal to the Heritage Lottery Fund for financial help for further restoration work was successful, and in 2017 the church underwent another major restoration programme.

It is hoped that the building will find a new lease of life and will still be standing here for at least another nine hundred years