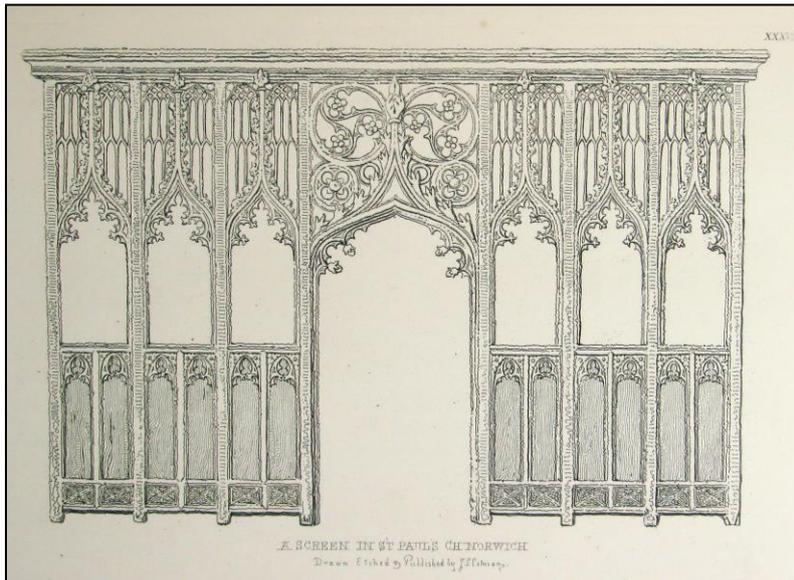


Medieval Timber Screens from St Paul's



John Sell Cotman, 'A Screen in St. Paul's Ch. Norwich'
© Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery/Norfolk Museums Service

The medieval screens from St Paul's no longer survive. However, John Sell Cotman's etching of a medieval screen from the church visually records a remarkable example of 15th-century timberwork. Published in 1812, the etching implies that the screen had survived essentially complete into the early 19th century. Norfolk antiquarian Francis Blomefield also recorded a screen being in the church. He stated that it bore the initials C.L. and a plain cross (for Christopher

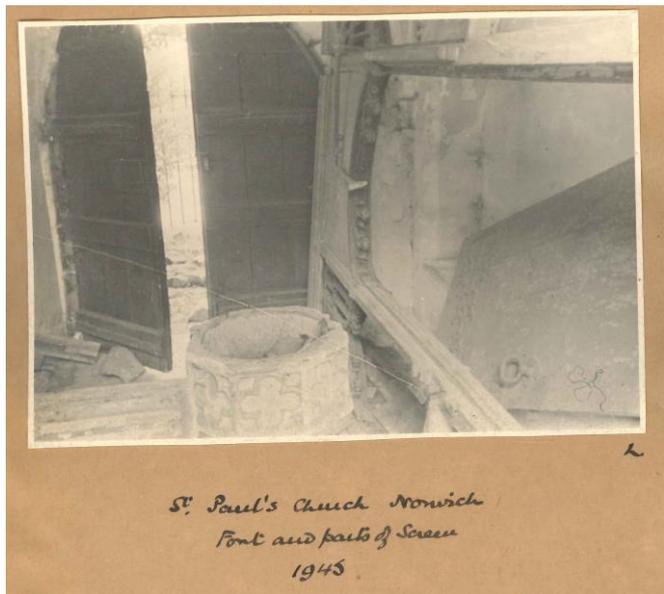
LeStrange), plus E. and D. conjoined, for Elizabeth Drury 'who was buried in the church, and was at rest'. On this basis Blomefield attributed the screen to Christopher Le Strange who was buried in the chancel in 1445, and by association implied a date of making for the screen (Blomefield 1805-10, 4.435 and 437).

This interpretation of the evidence is, however, deceptive. In fact, Cotman's visual depiction and Blomefield's written description relate to two different screens. Interior photographs of the church taken by George Plunkett in 1938 show the remains of Cotman's screen, having been cut down in width and a central door added, filling the base of the tower arch. Blomefield's screen, that with the initials, is seen beneath the arcade arch dividing the chancel from the north chapel. Blomefield's dating is also misleading. On close inspection the initials do not read C.L. or E.D. Those that can be deciphered are 'T' on the dexter shield and 'C' on the sinister. Each figure has additional elements which are difficult to construe. What is clear is the style of shield which, in being *à bouche*, plausibly dates the screen nearer to 1500 than the mid-century.

The somewhat florid style of both screens, and suggestions of flowing tracery, could be inferred as indicative of a construction date in the 14th century. However, the variation which is characteristic of Norfolk screens with large circular elements framing the central opening from the earlier period, such as Wolferton, Merton and

Holme Hale, is absent here. The well-ordered symmetry, strong mullions which cut through the dado and emphasise verticality, and the form of the shields all indicate a construction date c.1500.

St Paul's church underwent considerable alteration in 1870 which, according to conservation architect J.P. Chaplin writing in 1950, 'destroyed a good deal of the character and the present building is not of much interest'. This matters for our knowledge of the screens' history because, in 1883, C.E. Keyser described the 'rood screen' as 'destroyed' (Keyser 1883, 188). Given the later photographic record it seems more probable that the screens had been removed from their original locations during the 1870 restoration and that Keyser, not knowing their whereabouts, presumed them destroyed. In fact, their destruction did not occur until nearly 70 years later. Despite being damaged in the 1942 air raids on Norwich, substantial parts of the church (notably the round tower) and its fittings (including Cotman's screen and a 15th-century octagonal font) survived the War. In the context of subsequent regeneration works in this part of Norwich St Paul's church became an inconvenience to city planning and was razed to the ground. One of the two remarkable late medieval timber screens from St Paul's church was last recorded in a photograph taken by John Todhunter in 1945. The screen, seen lying on its side in the porch, and the octagonal font seemingly on their way out of the church.



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