



THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES OF NORWICH: CITY, COMMUNITY AND ARCHITECTURE

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The Nave of St Michael Coslany

THE EARLY 15TH-CENTURY west tower of St Michael's was built onto an aisleless nave. Many decades later work began to transform the body of the church by constructing arcades and aisles. The north aisle was apparently begun first, and the burial of Joan Ferrour is recorded there in 1496 (Cozens-Hardy and Kent 1938, 31). In 1504 Richard Hert, priest, requested burial 'within the holy sanctuary upon the north side of the church of St Michael of Coslany in Norwich within the precinct of the new aisle there to be edified' (NCC RYXE 84).

THE CHAPEL OF ST WILLIAM at the east end of the aisle (north of the chancel) was under construction in 1511, funded in large part by William Ramsey (PROB 11/17). It was not until 1516 that leading the roof on the north side of the church was envisaged, as recorded in the will of Gregory Clerk (PROB 11/18). By that time construction was well advanced on the chancel chapel and aisle on the south side of the church.



St Michael Coslany, interior view looking east
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AS WE SEE IT TODAY, the nave of St Michael Coslany was constructed between about 1496 and 1516. It is one of four churches with similar arcades built in the years around 1500 (Haward 1995, 100-01). The others are St Martin at Oak (south nave arcade-1490s), St George Colegate (both nave arcades c.1500) and St Andrew (nave and chancel arcades from about 1506). All are characterised by tall, diamond section piers (deeper north-south than east-west) with shafts at the cardinal points; all support four-centred arches. There are however significant differences. There is no indication at St Michael's that a clearstorey was

envisaged and nor is it likely. It would have obscured the middle storey of the tower on the eastern side and served to detract from the freestanding height of the tower. Before the raising of the floor levels in the church to combat the risk of flooding, the arcade arches would have stood 25' (7.62m) above the ground, considerably more than the 20'6" (6.25m) of contemporary work at St George Colegate. It would thus have been an impressive 'hall' church, in which the slope of the aisle roofs continued more or less uninterrupted up to the apex of the nave roof, and the overall open width of the main space was privileged over the addition of upper windows.



St Michael Coslany, interior view looking north east
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THE NEW NAVE ARCADES used the same foundations as the earlier solid walls. The procedure was to cut a vertical section from the wall where a pier was to be located, and then to construct the pier in the void (Woodman 2015, 279-80). Once a pair of piers was in place, work could begin on gradually cutting into the masonry the shape of the arch between them. This void could then be filled with the voussoirs that would constitute the arch. The masonry must have been very carefully propped during this process to prevent the wall above from collapse. The whole operation seems to have been achieved without removing the roof. It is likely that the wall plate supporting the eaves of the roof would have helped distribute the downward pressure of the roof structure along the length of the wall. The next pier to be built would have stood in the opening of the south doorway into the old aisleless nave, but there is no indication that work ever started on it. As a result the old south door into the nave is still in place, and the porch in front of it survived until the 18th century.

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