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## The West Doors at St Michael Coslany

THESE DOORS are rare examples of late-medieval carved timberwork still *in situ*. West towers with large doors became increasingly popular in East Anglia from the late 14th century, partly spurred on by an enthusiasm for theatrically inspired processional entry into parish churches on feast days including Corpus Christi and Palm Sunday. The width of western entrances did not always necessitate a pair of doors. They were part of the staging for dramatic entry and as a result bifurcated west doors became the norm.



TWO ANGELS occupy the apex of St Michael's doors. They stand square-on and with straight-legs and torsos, but lean gently away from each other. The dexter angel appears to be in original condition, whereas the body of the sinister angel has been replaced and therefore some detail may have been lost. Both figures are dressed in suits of feathers with cloaks formed of elongated wings, the edges curled in to show the top side of the wing, as well as the underside. Beneath this garb are unfeathered arms and legs, a visual note that angels take human form. The angel on the dexter side has a scroll which runs behind his body, and position of his arms in front of his torso suggests he once held something.

IN ADDITION to the angels are four small birds or winged creatures; their wings extended to varying degrees and arranged to fit within the tracery. Small, and set amongst an ambitiously detailed tracery pattern, these carvings were excluded from John Sell Cotman's drawing of

St Michael Coslany, detail of west doors  
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the door, even though the image is otherwise very faithful to the object (Cotman 1838 pl. 35). Despite their scale, the creatures have a sense of dynamic energy which contrasts the solidity of the angels' poses. The southernmost bird is a pelican 'in her piety', representing Christ's blood sacrifice. In the context of late-medieval Norwich the pelican is most frequently associated with John Wakering, bishop of Norwich from 1415/16 until his death in 1425. For example, the pelican vulning, used on Wakering's small personal seal, is also painted on a shield in the southern spandrel of the reliquary arch in the north presbytery aisle of Norwich Cathedral extended in c.1424. Wakering was also responsible for the earliest phase of the cathedral choir stalls, and

the misericord of stall N12 has a beautifully carved pelican vulning, and two other birds in the tendrils which grow from the moulding of the seat. The tracery pattern of the stalls can also be read as a more ebullient version of the upper part of St Michael's doors. Such formal as well as stylistic similarities between the doors and the stalls encourages the thought that a cathedral craftsman might have been responsible for the doors. But that currently remains speculation.



St Michael Coslany, west elevation of the tower  
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St Michael Coslany, west door  
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THE COMPARISON does however help pin down the date of the doors. A programme of works is implicit in the epitaph of John Prince, priest, d.1420 (Blomefield and Parkin 1805, 4, 492-93). It records Prince's gift of a west window (presumably in the tower, above left) depicting the Orders of Angels ('ordinis angelici'). That the tower was being built during in the 1420s is also indicated by small gifts in the wills of Robert Ardene, priest, d.1422 (NCC HYRNING 97) and John Dowe, d.1428 (NCC SURFLETE 35).

A TRIUMPHANT STONE ARCH of shields (above right), set on the angle to soften the change from outside to inside space, frames the timber doors. The upper parts of the arch, which having been protected from weathering are in reasonable condition, and Cotman's drawing shows that these shields were always blank. Their iconographic resonance was one of defence, denoting the Church militant and pertinently located to protect the threshold of the ceremonial entrance. Slightly larger shields occupy the spandrels where the soft chalky limestone has weathered considerably more than the arch shields, likewise the horizontal frieze of 15 shields above. These shields might have been carved or painted with imagery such as the Arms of the Passion, but there is no direct evidence for such detail.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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