

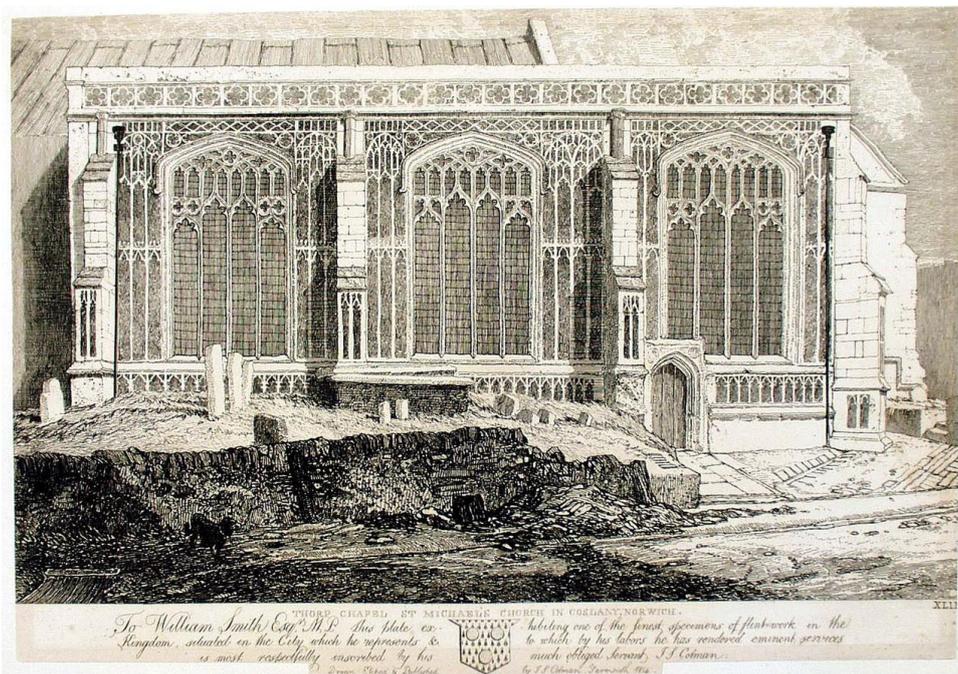


THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES OF NORWICH: CITY, COMMUNITY AND ARCHITECTURE

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The Thorpe Chapel

THE REMARKABLE EXTERIOR of the Thorpe Chapel at St Michael Coslany attracted the attention of several artists working in the 19th century. The graphic quality of John Sell Cotman's 1814 etching particularly appreciates the tonal qualities of the architectural patterns composed in flint and freestone on the exterior of the church. By contrast Sillett's view reduces the flushwork to white ashlar lines of tracery pattern set into a uniform dark grey wall. By the later 19th century, such picturesque antiquarianism had developed into a more archaeological investigation of medieval architecture. Edward Preston Willins' 1881 measured drawing of the chapel exterior supplemented by architectural details including 'moulding profiles' which show the shape of the template used when cutting the freestone.



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FLINT FLUSHWORK was a popular craft technique and visual aesthetic in East Anglia from the late 13th century. As a mode of decoration it was used specifically and uniquely on the external surfaces of churches and other ecclesiastical buildings (Luxford 2006). Flushwork was popular across East Anglia as a means of patterning surfaces or to carry inscriptions and monograms. The latter use was particularly restricted in Norwich where surviving examples are limited to the porches at St Michael at Plea, St Mary Coslany and St John Sepulchre. Examples of flushwork designs mimicking tracery patterns are a little more common, notably the Ethelbert Gate, the nave plinths at St Michael at Plea, and the towers

at St Peter Mancroft and St Michael Coslany. Thorpe's chapel was clearly intended as an ambitious architectural showpiece and its impact is heightened by there being nothing else of its kind in Norwich.

IN 1497 ROBERT THORPE, citizen and alderman of Norwich established a chantry chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary located to the south of the chancel (Ward 1999, 304). Credited as founder of the chapel and adjacent aisle in an inscription on his tomb (Kirkpatrick after Weever), Thorpe probably oversaw much the building of his chapel in his lifetime. There is no specific bequest to its making in his will (written and proved in 1501) rather a general gift of 40s to the reparation of the church (PROB/11/12). It was apparently sufficiently well advanced by 1501 for him to request burial therein. Thorpe's ambition may have been spurred on by similar work just 200 meters away at St Martin at Oak. There a south aisle with chapel dedicated to the Virgin at its east end was founded on the instruction of Thorpe's fellow alderman Thomas Wilkyns in 1492. Thorpe would undoubtedly have known about and witnessed progress on that project. He may even have sought to blatantly excel it when commissioning his own chapel and aisle at St Michael's.

ROBERT'S WIFE Agnes (d. 1503) played a central role in completing and furnishing the chapel. The terms of her will (PROB/11/13) inform us that her concern was with the working, rather than the making of the chapel. Instructions include paying for a priest to come from Cambridge twice a year, at Christmas and Easter to sing for eight days on each occasion, and the purchase vestments and an altar cloth of red and blue velvet displaying the marks and names of her two husbands and the scripture '*Benedictus deus in donis suis et sanctus in omnibus operibus suis*' ('Blessed is God in His gifts and holy in all His works').

THE MEMORIAL to her first husband, Gregory Clerke - who had died in 1479 - also includes an inscription recording her death in 1503 and may have been commissioned by their son Gregory (d. 1516). Gregory junior was buried in the south aisle next to his wife Elizabeth before the image of St Barbara 'standing upon the pillar' and left money for the leading of the north aisle, for a pair of large silver candlesticks for the high altar, and for a cope and chasuble of blue velvet. Although not requesting burial in the chantry chapel he did make provision for a secular priest to sing and pray 'in the chapel of our Lady' for his soul, those of his wives Elizabeth and Joan, and of his father, mother and 'father in law' Robert Thorpe. Despite Gregory's legacies to the church, after Agnes Thorpe's death the project on the south side of the church appears to have languished for in the event the two western arches on the south arcade were never undertaken, reaching only as far as pre-existing porch which was eventually demolished in 1747.

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