

# Norfolk County Preface

Download as PDF

## Landscape, Geology and Building Materials

Norfolk has the wide skies of a landscape without dramatic features. It is, however, undulating for the most part rather than uniformly flat. The whole county is also tilting gently into the North Sea, lifted up along one edge at Hunstanton in the north west and sloping down towards Yarmouth in the south east. Norfolk's ancient, pre-Cambrian bedrock is nowhere visible, being overlaid by much younger strata of sedimentary material. These upper layers are somewhat soft and unsuitable for building material, but the most recent of them—the county's ubiquitous chalk—contains particles of flint that are very tough indeed. These immensely durable lumps of silica were formed from the remains of countless spongiform creatures floating in the prehistoric oceans once covering this part of the globe. The chalk in which the flint nodules are suspended consists itself of the dense residue of that ocean's marine life and extends over most of the county. Flint was successfully exploited as a construction material by the Romans at Caister-on-Sea and Caister St Edmund and was consumed in great quantities during the massive building programme of the Anglo-Norman era. The vast majority of the county's medieval churches are constructed from it. Masons working in the region in the 12<sup>th</sup> century deployed flint with considerable skill, laying it in even courses of carefully selected pebbles—regular in size and shape—as in the western tower of **Gissing** church.

The oldest of Norfolk's sedimentary layers are exposed only where they were thrust upward at its north-western edge, giving the county the crest of high ground overlooking the Fens known as the Western Escarpment or Greensand Belt. Running south from Hunstanton is a narrow belt of iron-stained Lower Cretaceous sandstone known as carstone. This, with its distinctive gingerbread colour, is the closest the county comes to possessing good indigenous building stone. It was often used for quoins and other dressings in flint masonry, as at St Mary's, **Gayton Thorpe**. A local outcrop of Lower Cretaceous grey quartzite provided most of the stone for **Castle Rising** castle. Used in the same way and similar in appearance to carstone, but often with a darker, crustier surface, is the ferruginous conglomerate, a younger rock, likewise found in buildings in the north west of the county. It can be seen in the upper section of the tower at **Bessingham** and in the ruined church at **North Elmham**, once identified as the Saxon Cathedral of East Anglia but now acknowledged as a post-Conquest structure. Parallel with the carstone belt and overlapping it is a narrow band of Upper Cretaceous chalk yielding the fairly durable white clunch. This carves well, was popular for internal furnishings later in the Middle Ages and was sometimes used for interior facings in the Romanesque period in parish churches.

Though complex and varied, Norfolk's geology does not include any freestone. Ashlar had to be shipped in from Caen in Normandy, or from the closest quarries of the limestone belt, such as Ancaster, Barnack or Clipsham. In the parish churches of the 11th and 12th centuries, costly imported ashlar was reserved for doorways and other expensive, pre-fabricated elements. The cathedral at Norwich and the county's four other major Romanesque monastic churches, together with a number of lesser ones and several massive and elaborately decorated castle keeps were built substantially of limestone, usually brought in at great expense. All had walls, and most also had piers, faced with freestone with a core infill of flint and rubble. **Norwich Cathedral** was built in this way, using ashlar from two different sources: milky Caen stone from Normandy, combined with biscuit-coloured Barnack from Northamptonshire.

Much of Norfolk's wildwood had already been cleared for cultivation long before the Norman Conquest, with considerable consequences for the county's medieval landscape. In the north west, Bronze Age deforestation culminated in the development of heathland. In the east, shortage of wood for fuel in the early Middle Ages led to the digging of peat trenches, subsequently flooded to form the man-made lakes now known as the Broads. Lacking great tracts of dense woodland, Norman Norfolk did not provide the Crown with vast hunting grounds. Royal demesne was relatively evenly spread across the county as a consequence, rather than concentrated in areas of forest, as in well-wooded Worcestershire and Warwickshire.

Norfolk is a big county—fourth largest in England—watered and drained by numerous small rivers and by a remarkable system of major structural waterways. It was along these that the county's pivotal medieval towns inevitably developed: King's Lynn at the mouth of the Great Ouse, Yarmouth at the mouth of the Yare, Thetford on the Little Ouse, and Norwich at the headwaters of the Yare and the Wensum, which between them span the county for almost 50 miles, linking its northern region with its eastern coast.

## History

In 54 BC, the Roman occupying forces accepted the submission of the Iceni, the group of tribes hitherto dominant in Norfolk. The centre of Roman control, Venta Icenorum, was located just south of Norwich at Caister St Edmund. By the late 1st century AD, it boasted public buildings and a grid of streets. The Roman settlement of Norfolk was extensive, reaching all parts of the county. The network of Roman roads, including the Peddars Way and the Pye Road, must have formed the basis for the county's medieval land transport routes.

This part of eastern England was among the first to be settled from continental Europe, even before the mid-5th century, by the migrating Anglo-Saxons. Soon after 630 AD, under Sigeberht, head of the ruling Wuffings dynasty, the East Anglian Kingdom received Felix, a Burgundian, as its first bishop. The pre-Conquest bishopric was coterminous with the kingdom of the East Angles and included both Norfolk and Suffolk. The seat of the see was at Dommoc, possibly present-day Felixstowe. In the late 7th century, a second see was established at Elmham. In the last decades of the 9th century, the Kingdom came under Danish control. It was eventually absorbed into the realm of Edward the Elder, king of the Anglo-Saxons, in 917. A further wave of Danish incursions took place in the first half of the 11th century. The enduring legacy of the Scandinavian occupation of the region seems to have been linguistic.

The most significant noblemen in Norfolk following the Norman Conquest, as revealed by their holdings in the Domesday survey of 1086, were William de Warrene, Earl of Surrey, and Roger Bigod, sheriff of Norfolk, both also major figures in national politics. At this time, Norwich was England's second biggest city and Norfolk the most densely inhabited and prosperous of all the English counties, with the country's largest working population, despite the county's lack of valuable mineral resources and freestone quarries and its modest provision of timber. The main factor underpinning Norman Norfolk's economic success was its agriculture; the county was endowed with wonderfully fertile soil, good grazing and the lowest rainfall in the kingdom. With over ninety miles of coastline, medieval Norfolk inevitably also developed as a maritime economy. The North Sea fisheries and the mercantile opportunities afforded by contact with the coastal towns of the Low Countries must always have contributed to the county's wealth.

At the Conquest, the cathedral church of the East Anglian diocese was a wooden building at North Elmham. The seat of the see was transferred in 1071 to a church in Thetford. In 1091, Herbert de Losinga was consecrated bishop of Thetford, having been required, notoriously, to purchase his bishopric. In 1094, the see was relocated for the last time, and Herbert became first bishop of Norwich, with proposals for a new cathedral church already in hand.

## Major Buildings

Norfolk's major Romanesque churches were monastic foundations, and thus, with the exception of the Cathedral, were damaged at the Reformation in the 16th century and are either ruinous or have virtually disappeared. Norwich Cathedral was begun by Bishop Herbert de Losinga in 1096 and completed by his successor, Everard, before 1145. Much survives of its original design and fabric. The sculptural decoration of the church itself is fairly restrained, unlike the series of double capitals and decorated vousoirs that came to light at the cathedral in 1900. Found to have been reused in the construction of the existing Gothic cloister, these are now assumed to be components of its dismantled Romanesque predecessor. Several of the carved capitals bear lively and intriguing figural scenes and are among the finest of the period in England. A large relief of a bishop was carved for the niche on the external north wall of the north transept.

Norfolk possessed over 70 religious houses in the 12th century, a vast number, even given the size of the county. Of these, at least 14 were founded in the time of Bishop Herbert, who clearly presided over a period of considerable monastic expansion. Admittedly, the county presented him with a fairly clean slate; only the pre-Conquest Broadland monastery of St Benet's at Hulme had certainly survived. Norfolk's major traditional Benedictine priories, in addition to the cathedral, were **Binham** (founded before 1093) and **Wymondham** (begun c1107), each still with a largely Romanesque nave. Of **Carrow**, a mid-12th-century Benedictine nunnery, only a fragment of the substantial church survives. The county's three Cluniac priories—**Castle Acre** in the north-west, founded by William Warenne after 1089, its cell at **Broomholm** in the north-east (f. 1113) and **Thetford** in the south-west, begun in 1107 by Roger Bigod—are all ruinous, much of their fabric dispersed. Norfolk had no 12th-century Cistercian houses. Foundations of Augustinian canons were numerous in 12th-century Norfolk, although their Romanesque churches at

**West Acre, Pentney, Hempton, Coxford** and **Little Walsingham** are all lost. Of the county's nineteen Norman castles, **Yarmouth, Mileham, Castle Acre, New Buckenham, Weeting, Norwich** and **Castle Rising** all had a masonry tower. The two last, begun c1100 and c1140 respectively, are the only ones where interesting architectural sculpture remains.

## Lesser Buildings

Norfolk has some 650 medieval parish churches, an extraordinarily high number that nevertheless represents only 75 per cent of the original total. Norfolk's wealth and the considerable size of its population were clearly factors here. Few of the county's Romanesque parish and non-monastic churches have survived intact or as well as St Lawrence at **Castle Rising**, albeit restored, or **Tilney**, All Saints. More commonly, the presbytery of a Norman church was remodelled or its nave extended by the addition of an aisle. In such cases, an ancient Romanesque carved portal was sometimes dismantled and reassembled in the new aisle wall, as at **Larling** in the 14th century. No fewer than 125 of Norfolk's parish churches have a distinctive circular tower at the western end of the nave. Until relatively recently, the western round tower was thought of as an Anglo-Saxon form but it has now been established that no example in Norfolk predates the second half of the 11th century.

Romanesque sculpture can still be found at over 190 sites in Norfolk, including on some 96 decorated doorways. It has long been noted that a group of doorways in the south-east of the county, in a triangle of territory between the rivers Yare and Waveney, are decorated with motifs from the same distinctive vocabulary of ornament, including the double-disc, double-cone, dice, wheel moulding, and jambs with pseudo-colonnettes on plinths supporting elevated bases. Some twenty of these doorways, including those at **Hales, Heckingham** and **Chedgrave**, appear to be the product of a single workshop or workshop tradition, active across Norfolk and at its margins. There are just three decorated tympana *in situ* in the county: one is at **Tottenhill**, while the other two, bearing identical geometric decoration, are inside Norwich cathedral—apparently misassembled—and at **Marham**. At **Haddiscoe** church, the carved figure of a seated ecclesiastic in a chasuble survives in a decorated niche above the south door. Most of the county's forty-one fonts are simple, square or basin-shaped and sometimes decorated with low-relief arcading. A few, all in the north west of the county, also bear figural reliefs, such as **Burnham Deepdale**, with the Labours of the Months, and **Fincham**, with rustic Old and New Testament scenes. Three fonts, again in the north west, are richly carved and, with their corner colonnettes and decorated supports, constitute a stylistic group. They are in churches at **Sculthorpe**—also bearing full-length figures in relief—**Shernborne** and **Toftrees**. The first paid tithes to Cluniac Lewes Priory in Sussex—established by William Warenne, founder of the influential Norfolk dynasty—while the last two were possessions of Binham Priory. The carving on the font at **Castle Rising** church, belonging to Lewes, and on the font base at **Hautbois** is related but coarser.

© The British Academy and Jill A. Franklin, revised 2014

### Select Bibliography

I. Atherton, E.C. Fernie, C. Harper-Bill and H. Smith (eds), *Norwich Cathedral. Church, City and Diocese, 1096-1996*, London and Rio Grande, 1996.

F. Bloomfield and C. Parkin, *An Essay toward a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 11 vols, 2nd ed, London, 1805-1810.

H. J. Dakingfield Astley, *Memorials of Old Norfolk*, London, 1908.

D. Dymond, *The Norfolk Landscape*, Bury St Edmunds, 1985 and 1990.

T. Pestell, *Landscape of Monastic Foundation*, Woodbridge, 2004.

N. Pevsner and B. Wilson, *The Buildings of England: Norfolk*, 2nd ed, Harmondsworth, 1997.

VCH: *Norfolk*, 2 vols, London, 1901 and 1906.

T. Williamson, *The Origins of Norfolk*, Manchester, 1993.