

# HIDDEN IPSWICH: Inside the historic church that was nearly destroyed

Danielle Lett is given a tour of one of Ipswich's finest architectural gems

**A**s I made my way up Stoke Street in Ipswich, I was taken aback by how stunning St Mary Stoke church really was.

I'll preface by saying I'm not religious, but I can most certainly appreciate religious architecture. It's beautiful, fascinating, and undoubtedly an important part of culture and heritage.

There's centuries' worth of history packed within the walls at St Mary Stoke, and I was there to find out more.

As I entered the door, I was greeted by Reverend Sophie Cowan, and church historian John Barbrook, who were there to show me around.

"This church is a gem," says John, as we make our way around the architectural marvel.

St Mary Stoke, which is Grade I-listed, is actually split into two parts, even though it's one church.

If you're standing at the back of the church facing the front, the left-hand side is what remains of the medieval church, which dates back to the 14th and 15th centuries. And the right-hand side is the Victorian extension, which was designed and built by acclaimed architect William Butterfield between 1871-72.

Prior to the construction of the medieval and Victorian church however, the place of worship that first stood on this plot of land was actually a wooden Saxon church.

"We are told that the long-gone Saxon foundations of the building were probably laid down when the folk north of the river had

**RIGHT:**  
Rev. Sophie Cowan  
at St Mary Stoke,  
Ipswich

**BELOW:**  
St Mary Stoke in  
Ipswich

**INSET BELOW RIGHT:**  
A brass lectern at St  
Mary Stoke

Pictures:  
CHARLOTTE BOND

little or no access to the south, except by boat or at the time of a very low tide that enabled them to cross by a ford situated just down river from the present Stoke Bridge. The first permanent wooden bridge across the river at this point was claimed to have been built in around the year 900 AD, although heavy carts still had to wait upon the tide and use the ford. However, some local historians now believe that a bridge existed here at a much earlier date," explains John.

The medieval church originally seated 100 people, but as the population in and around Stoke grew thanks to the arrival of the railway in 1846, more seating was needed, and Butterfield's extension brought the church's capacity up to 500.

"William Butterfield was essentially the justification for our Grade I-listing," says John. "He designed and built cathedrals and churches across the world, and St Mary's Stoke was one of them."

The church was designated Grade I-listed status in 2004, and it's not hard to see why.

A number of its features date back to the original church, including the ancient recessed piscina with a drain hole. This is where hands and vessels were washed during communion, and while no longer used, still sits on the right-hand side of the sanctuary.

One my favourite original features however had to be the wooden beam ceiling - because this wasn't just any ordinary ceiling. If you look closely, you'll

notice a series of carved figures - and these have a fascinating back story behind them.

"William Dowsing got a parliamentary warrant to go around and purify the churches as Parliament was afraid the Church of England was becoming too Catholic, and people would start worshipping idols," John explains.

William Dowsing, also known as 'Smasher Dowsing', was a Suffolk-born puritan and iconoclast during the English Civil War. Mostly active in East Anglia, he visited over 250 churches and chapels across Suffolk and Cambridgeshire during 1643 and 1644, and removed or defaced anything he deemed idolatry.

"If you look up, there's little heads and faces on the end of the beams - they're the saints of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John."

As you move eastwards up the aisle towards the altar, the carvings pictorially tell the story of the Passion of the Lord in the days leading up to Easter.

"When the church heard Dowsing was coming here, they went around and cut all of the figures off and hid them, so when he got here there was nothing for him to do."

It wasn't until 200 years later that they put them back up, though.

Stained glass windows were also seen as idolatry, and the colourful stained glass windows you can see today are part of the newer church. These were paid for by Baroness Willoughby, the wife of Lord Gwydyr (Peter Burrell) of Stoke Park in 1863.

"This is my favourite stained glass window," says Sophie.

"You've got the grapes of the vine, representing the blood of Christ, the acorn leaves which remind of the saints and mystics, and the passionflower in the middle with a cross in the centre. At the top, you've got the Greek symbols alpha and omega, which represent Jesus being the beginning and the end."

The stained glass window above the altar on the east side was installed when the nave was built in 1872, and illustrates the Lord's birth, baptism, crucifixion, resurrection, and Pentecost. Below that is the annunciation of the virgin Mary, Christ in the temple, Christ carrying his cross



to Calvary, and his resurrection. And the smaller windows of the Apostles high above were given in memory of Captain Lacon of the Goldrood by his widow.

To the left of the sanctuary step and side altar is the clergy vestry doorway, and is another feature from the original church.

"When this was built, this doorway used to be the entrance to a little winding staircase that the altar boy would use to reach the walkway on top of the ornate wooden screen that separated the chancel from the nave. But when that was taken away, the doorway became surplus and they built the vestry on there."

To the right of this door is a pair of framed war memorials - one from the First World War and one from the Second World War, commemorating the men from the parish who lost their lives in battle.

And beside these is a section of exposed wall.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Suffolk has very little natural







stone, and doesn't have quarries. When big buildings were built years ago, the only material they had was rubble, so that's what they used. When the church was restored in the 19th century, they plastered and painted over that, covering it up. This bit is only exposed because one of the memorials was taken down and some of the wall came off with it."

Over in the corner is a striking brass lectern. In the shape of an eagle, this actually originates from neighbouring St Peter's Church. Dating back to 1902, the design, the emblem of St John, is said to depict an eagle carrying the word of the God to the world.

As we head outside, I ask John about the church's exterior. What makes this place of worship stand out is its striking chequer-board flint pattern on the face of the porch.

"This was reputed to be a favourite design of Richard Phipson, a prominent architect of the Victorian years. He used this

design extensively on several local churches, including St Mary le Tower in Ipswich. However, it now seems likely that the actual porch design, like that of the nave, was the work of Butterfield," explains John.

You'll notice how the graveyard at St Mary Stoke is rather hilly - that's thanks to hundreds of years' worth of burials, which is a typical feature of ancient church graveyards.

According to John, there's around 3,600 or so recorded burials in this church's graveyard.

But perhaps what surprised me the most as

I wrapped up my visit was that what is now the car park was once a plot of land that housed a school on it.

"In 1966, the Old School was demolished and the south aspect of the church was opened up to full view from the road."

Before it was demolished, it was used as cottages, then the church school, then briefly as Stoke Poor House, before becoming a hall for the Girl Guides and Scouts.



**RIGHT FROM TOP:**  
The more recent part of St Mary Stoke, Ipswich

The wooden ceiling beams in St Mary Stoke church - with carved faces on them

An exposed part of church wall - showing the original wall

One of the stained glass windows in St Mary Stoke church

**INSET LEFT:**  
The former Stoke School, which stood next to St Mary Stoke, Ipswich

