

**The Sacristy at the Church of St Mary & All Saints Willingham Cambridgeshire**  
**The Case for an Anchorhold**  
**March 2005**

## 1.0 Introduction

This paper is the result of preliminary research following a conservation and repair project carried out by Fairhavens of Anglesey Abbey under the direction of architects Freeland Rees Roberts in the Autumn of 2004.

The ‘Sacristy’ at Saint Mary and All Saints Willingham, situated on the north side of the chancel, had fallen into disrepair. Its unusual construction, an interlocking ashlar stone roof without a weathering surface (i.e. no tiles or lead), had led to rain ingress through the joints and considerable algal and mould growth had built up on the internal roof surface. An initial report by conservators Nimbus Conservancy recommended the raking out and re-pointing of the stonework joints with hydraulic lime mortar. Combined with localized replacement of severely damaged roof stones and other conservation measures this work has now been completed.

Although referred to as a Sacristy the original use of this small but beautiful chapel-like structure has never been determined and it was by chance that one of the staff at Freeland Rees Roberts, Randolph Miles, visited the site and surmised that the use could be that of an ‘Anchorhold’. His wife Laura Miles is studying Mediaeval English at Selwyn College Cambridge and the subject of her MPhil project is the literature of Anchoresses. But what is an Anchorhold?

## 2.0 Anchorites and Anchorholds

From as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD until the reformation a substantial number of religious people lived hermitic lives in England and all over Europe. It appears that they were most common in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many lived in caves and rustic huts in remote places but there were others who were attached – quite literally – to churches. These people were called anchorites (*fem. anchoresses*) from the Greek *anachoretēs* meaning “one who lives apart”. A cell, called an ‘anchorhold’, would be built, sometimes in the churchyard or other part of the village, but often adjoining the church itself.<sup>1</sup> There were no rules as to the situation of the dwelling but it was often on the north side of the church so the anchorite could “deliberately forego the sunshine with the rest of natures gifts”<sup>2</sup>.

Once the cell was ready the anchorite would be ‘enclosed’ there, devoting themselves to prayer and devotion, sometimes for the rest of their lives. The bishop had to vet all candidates carefully for the decision to be enclosed was an

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<sup>1</sup> The appendix of Rotha Mary Clay’s book *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* 1914 (RMC) lists nearly 300 anchorites and maintains this must be a fraction of the actual number as records are limited and few physical remains of cells survive. From this one can surmise that between the 12<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries virtually every parish in England would at some time have had an anchorite living in some part of the village.

<sup>2</sup> RMC p 81

extremely serious one and it was an embarrassment if the anchorite left the cell early for some reason, as happened at Shere in Surrey in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when an anchoress left her cell after three years and was ordered by the bishop to return ‘on pain of death’.<sup>3</sup>

Because they were removed from normal life the enclosure ceremony was similar to a funeral service, the anchorite being considered “dead to the world”. The order of enclosing provided that the candidate should fast and make confession, keeping vigil throughout the preceding night. After the mass and prostration before the altar he or she would process with the bishop and clergy, carrying a lighted taper, to the cell, the bishop leading whilst clerks chanted a litany. After solemn prayers the door would be shut and the procession would return to the church<sup>4</sup>.

In many cases the anchorite was literally ‘walled up’, though they were usually locked in with the door locked or barred from the outside. Occasionally the anchorite would even venture from the cell, to dispense teaching and alms to the community, the amount of time they spent in the outside world being left as a matter of conscience rather than imprisonment. They might also receive visitors; children, for example, could be given lessons, or a priest enter to say mass or hear confession. Sometimes they had servants and in some instances there would be more than one anchorite with two or three lodged together in adjoining cells.

More commonly there would be one solitary anchorite and he or she would remain confined in the anchorhold, out of sight from the common populace. The cell communicated with the church, usually the chancel, so that the anchorite could watch and take part in church services. Through an opening they could pray to the Blessed Sacrament; on the opposite side there would be a small ‘parlour’ or ‘world-side’ window through which they could receive food and communicate with the outside world though remaining hidden by a shutter or curtain, often a black cloth bearing a symbolic white cross<sup>5</sup>.

If the inmate were a priest the cell would be made a consecrated oratory but even if not the anchorhold could still be provided with an altar as recommended by Aeldred (an 11<sup>th</sup> century bishop and manual-writer for anchoresses): “arrange thine altar with white linen cloth” he wrote “which betokeneth both chastity and simpleness..In this austere setting set an image of Christ’s passion that thou may have mind and see how he set and spread his arms to receive thee and all mankind to mercy if thou will ask it”.

### 3.0 The Lives of Anchorites

In her book, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (pub. 1914) Rotha Mary Clay describes a typical candidate for enclosure: “The would-be anchoress might be some maiden ‘without the habit of a nun’ who desired to devote herself to religion in the village where she had been brought up...she might be one who

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Alexander *Tales of Old Surrey* 1985

<sup>4</sup> RMC p 94

<sup>5</sup> Rotha Mary Clay (RMC) p 79

affects the solitary life”. They were “usually attached to a church in order that they might derive spiritual advantages from it and at the same time confer spiritual benefits on the parish.”<sup>6</sup>

Anchorites were not expected to support themselves, and, although there is evidence of them living by the ‘labour of their hands’, trading was frowned upon. Usually, prior to enclosure, the anchorite would have to make arrangements for people, from the local manor for example, to provide them with sustenance. The bishop was careful not to license anyone unless he was satisfied that such arrangements were secure and permanent<sup>7</sup>. Alms could be received and by the 15<sup>th</sup> century this had become a lucrative source of income for some anchorites, attracting the disapproval of many commentators of the day.

Usually however anchorites lived in extreme poverty, sustained by simple, chiefly vegetarian, foods. The ‘Ancren Riwle’ (a rule book for anchoresses written by a 13<sup>th</sup> century bishop) warned anchoresses not to grumble if these were inedible. They might ask for more palatable food but reluctantly and tactfully ‘less men say this anchoress is dainty and she asks much’<sup>8</sup>. There was no regulation dress but in winter a pilch or thick garment to keep out the cold and in summer a kirtle with mantle, black head-dress, wimple, cape or veil. The one stipulation was that the dress must be plain.

It is hard for us, with our modern, sanitary lives to imagine how normal bodily functions could have been accommodated. There is little detail about this in the accounts of the time, probably because the standards for the general populace were so basic, but it is likely that a simple latrine would be dug into the floor. The anchorite was encouraged to wash, however and although extreme ascetics gloried in squalor the various rules for anchorites did not encourage personal neglect. One directs “wash yourself as often as you please” another quotes St Bernard “I have loved poverty, but I never loved filth”<sup>9</sup>. The keeping of animals was also considered carefully by the manuals. The Ancren Riwle states charmingly: “you shall not possess any beast, my sisters, except only a cat...Christ knoweth it is an odious thing when people in the town complain of anchoresses’ cattle”.

The Anchorite was warned to watch their health, flagellation and the wearing of hair shirts was expected but wanton self-neglect was seen as counter productive, getting the balance right was clearly not easy. The Ancren Riwle says “let not anyone handle herself too gently lest she deceive herself. She will not be able to keep herself pure ..without two things: the one is giving pain to the flesh by fasting, by watching, by flagellations, by wearing coarse garments, by a hard bed, with sickness and much labour; the other thing is the moral qualities of the heart, devotion, compassion, mercy, pity, charity, humility...yet many anchoresses are of such fleshly wisdom and afraid lest their head ache and their body be too much enfeebled, and are so careful of their health, that the spirit is weakened and sickeneth in sin”.

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<sup>6</sup> RMC p 73

<sup>7</sup> RMC p 103

<sup>8</sup> Ancren Riwle.

<sup>9</sup> RMC

The Riwle also warned anchoresses not to think that enclosure would get easier as the years passed. It warns of the later years, with temptations unabated, when she might think that after such a long period God had quite forgotten her: “An anchoress thinks she shall be most strongly tempted in the first twelve months...nay! it is not so. In the first years it is nothing but ball play”.

One fault was considered to be that of sitting too long at the parlour window. “Love your windows as little as possible”, cautions the Riwle, “and see that they be small”. It warns of bad women who will come to the window whispering soft words and putting wicked thoughts into the anchoress’s head so she cannot sleep<sup>10</sup>. Putting out a hand through the window, to heal the sick for example, was frowned upon.

On the subject of servants Aeldred advised: “First choose an honest ancient woman...no jangler, no roller about, no chider, no tale-teller but such one that may have good conversation and honesty. Her charge shall be to keep thine household...to close thy doors and to receive that should be received and to avoid that should be avoided. Under her governance should she have a younger woman to bear greater charges in fetching of wood and water and setting of meat and drink”. The Ancren Riwle stipulated that the older woman who went about the village should be plain and the younger one kept inside as much as possible. It was inevitable that gossip would be brought back to the anchorhold by these servants and recycled to passers-by at the parlour window. A common saying was ‘from mill and from market, from smithy and from anchor house men bring tidings’.

At the end of his or her life the anchorite was often buried in the anchorhold. Six skeletons were found at Compton in Surrey beneath where the anchorhold would have been.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the grave would be made ready at enclosure and kept open as a memento mori, the anchorite bidden not just to meditate on their own mortality by staring into the empty grave but, with their bare hands, to scrape up some earth from the pit each day.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.0 Julian of Norwich

The most famous English anchoress was Julian of Norwich (1342-1412). She prayed for illness as a penance and got her desire at the age of 30. She nearly died in her mother’s arms but survived and lived for at least another 40 years. Her writings, known as the ‘Revelations of Divine Love’, describe in detail the “shewings” she experienced during her grave illness, and are thought to be among the finest contributions to religious literature produced in England. She is best known for her optimism with such words as “All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well”, and for a kind of early feminism insisting, as she did, in calling God and Christ “Mother.”

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<sup>10</sup> RMC p 122

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Alexander

<sup>12</sup> Ancren Riwle

## 5.0 The Demise of Anchoritic Life

With the coming of the Reformation the practice of paying religious people, through alms or otherwise, to pray for and on behalf of their benefactors became discredited. Prayer and devotion to God began to be seen as the responsibility of every individual and not something that could be assigned to others, however religious or selfless they may be. Hermits and anchorites became anachronisms and numbers began to decline. When the monasteries were dissolved in the 16<sup>th</sup> century anchorites disappeared from the scene altogether and the anchorholds were either pulled down or put to other uses, such as vestries.

## 6.0 Willingham Church

St Mary and All Saints is a large parish church in the centre of Willingham, a village on the edge of the fens 12 miles to the north west of Cambridge. From Bronze Age times until the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century Willingham lay on the main route from Cambridge to Ely via the Aldreth Causeway, and later by means of the bridge at Earith. Being on this important route large processions of ordinands, sometimes as many as 300, processed through Willingham to Ely on a regular basis.

The church was officially founded in 1244 but there is evidence of a Saxon church and a Romanesque building on the site<sup>13</sup>. Most of the current building dates from the first part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century with the tower added in about 1340 and the spire shortly after.<sup>14</sup> The church is famous for its wall paintings that decorate most of the nave walls.

## 7.0 The Sacristy

The Sacristy was built onto the north side of the chancel, a blocked window on the north wall of the chancel indicating that it was built later. Stylistically the Sacristy is typical of the first part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century so it would appear that it was added fairly soon after the chancel was built, possibly when the tower was being added in the 1340s. It measures 4.3 x 3.0 m, has three windows with reticulated tracery: a tall three-point arched east window, and two square headed windows, one at low level on the north side and one at high level on the west side. It has a steep pitched stone roof of Barnack limestone braced internally with three traceried stone arches. The red tiled floor, probably Victorian, shows evidence of an altar at the east end beside which a pedestal-type piscina remains. Access is by means of a pointed arch doorway from the Chancel and the opening in the masonry is set at a pronounced angle, orientated on a north west/south east axis.

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<sup>13</sup> There are fragments of Saxon and Norman church in the south porch put there by the Rector John Watkins during his restoration 1880s

<sup>14</sup> Canon Bywater (rector 1937-65)

## 8.0 Evidence for an Anchorhold at Willingham

There are several features of the Sacristy that suggest its use as an anchorhold and these are:

### i.) The Squinted Doorway

The doorway between the Sacristy and the Chancel is a 'squint' door, that is an opening that penetrates the thick wall at an angle. From the plan it can be seen that the angle is directed toward the east end of the Chancel in such a way that anyone placing themselves in the Sacristy could just see the altar, and the Blessed Sacrament that would have been placed there, while remaining virtually invisible to anyone in the main body of the church. Such an opening is sometimes referred to as an 'Anchorite's Squint' and was a means of allowing a recluse to take part in church services, and pray towards the altar at any time of the day or night, without being seen. There is no sign that the doorway was at any time less than doorway height and from this we can assume that - if this was indeed an anchorhold - it was the type that allowed people to access the cell. There is a small rectangular niche, to the east of the doorway on the Chancel side that may have served as a small window to the cell. Perhaps the doorway was cut and the smaller opening blocked up when the practice of walling in anchorites fell out of favour.

### ii.) The World-Side Window

The small window on the north side of the Sacristy measures approximately 900mm high and 600mm wide. Being only 1.3m above floor and external ground level this would have made a perfect 'parlour' or 'world-side' window for an anchorite. One can just imagine villagers coming to this window for advice, to ask for prayers to be said, or to pass in food, drink and alms.

### iii.) Window Hanging

Small pockets can be seen either side of the east window. Prior to the window being glazed, much later than the 14<sup>th</sup> century when it was built, these might have provided hanging points for curtains that would give any inhabitant some degree of shelter from the cold.

### iv.) Stone Bed

During the conservation works a cement repair at low level on the north side of the Sacristy was stripped revealing that the wall behind was constructed of rubble rather than the ashlar work of the main structure above. Measuring approximately 3m long and 700mm high the construction suggests that something was built in at this point, possibly a bed constructed of stone for an inhabitant to sleep on and at one end sit at the 'world-side' window (see inside elevation looking north).

### v.) Location

It has been mentioned how anchorholds were frequently placed on the north side of churches, to deprive them of warmth and sun and so increase the degree of penance being offered by its inmate. It is also clear that a position by the chancel was preferred so that the anchorite could view and take part in the

Sacraments. From these requirements R.M. Clay deduces that “traces of the anchorage... may reasonably be sought near the chancel<sup>15</sup> and she mentions various north side anchorholds in her text.<sup>16</sup>

vi.) Architectural Style and Scale

There is no doubt that a great deal of care went into the construction of the Sacristy and its level of detailing suggests a devotional use that nevertheless needed to be expressed with a minimum of decorative fuss. Examples of traceried windows carved into hermit’s caves (*illus.* Warkworth Hermitage) and the illustrations of anchorite’s cells in mediaeval manuscripts (*illus.* St Fremund) show the same delicate balance between austerity and numinance that often appears to be invested in such structures. The size is also what might be expected of a cell to hold a single anchorite. At 140 square feet it is almost exactly the area recommended in a Bavarian anchoritic rule-book which dictated that the cell be of stone, 12 feet square.<sup>17</sup>

vii) The Altar and Piscina

It is clear that at some point there would have stood an altar at the east end of the Sacristy and the stone piscina on the south wall beside it would have allowed the safe disposal of holy water into the consecrated ground as was the custom. We know that altars were often provided in anchorholds either because the anchorite himself was a celebrant; to provide for the anchorite’s own devotions, or to allow a visiting priest to say mass in the cell.

viii) Saint Christopher

A famous hermit from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD was St Christopher who, it is said, carried a child across the river only to find that he had transported Christ who had manifested Himself in infant form. One of the largest wall paintings on the nave wall at St Mary and All Saints is of St Christopher in the act of carrying the infant Christ. Could this demonstrate a particular connection between the church and those who chose to live a hermitic life?

## 9.0 Conclusions and Suggested Research

Clearly no firm conclusions can be drawn from the above, the evidence being no more than circumstantial. It is interesting to note, however, the sheer quantity of anchorholds that must have existed in mediaeval times and contrast this with our scant knowledge of where they might have been. There does appear to be a burgeoning interest in these fascinating structures, and the cultural legacy left by their inhabitants, as the anchoritic conferences held at the University of Wales in Cardiff, and the recent founding in the United States of the Anchoritic Society, attest.

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<sup>15</sup> RM Clay p 84

<sup>16</sup> Examples include: North side of chancel: Leatherhead, Michaelstow in Cornwall, Newcastle; w. end of n. aisle: Hartlip, York (All Saints); n.side of w. tower: Chester le Street; n.(unspecified) Bengeo, Chipping Ongar

<sup>17</sup> RMC p 79

To discover whether the Sacristy at Willingham really was an anchorhold certain steps could be taken, invasive and non-invasive. X-Ray analysis of the floor might reveal further evidence of a stone bed, a latrine or any significant burials, without damage to the structure. Careful excavation could follow and, since the tiled floor is not significant, disturbance to historic fabric may be kept to a minimum. A similar investigation could be made of the niche in the Chancel wall that may once have connected with the Sacristy.

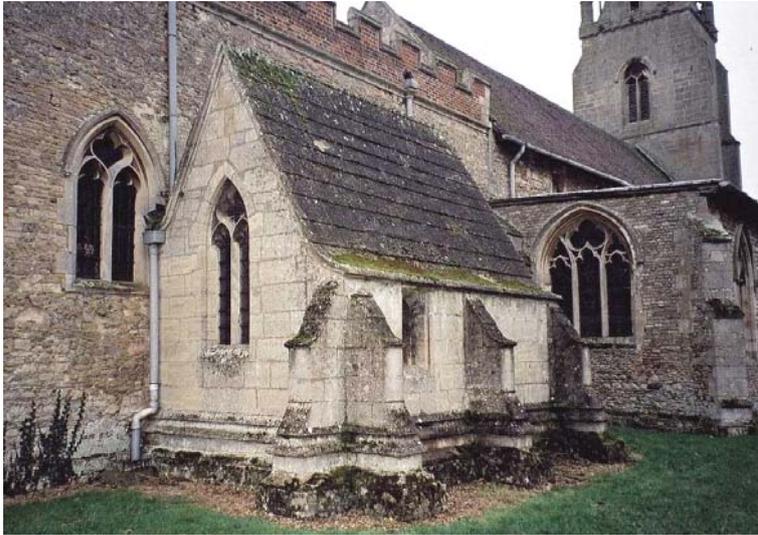
Further historical research may also produce evidence; records of benefactions are a good source for this type of examination. Dowsing (or 'divining') has also been suggested but this may not be desirable for liturgical reasons.

We believe the circumstantial evidence for an anchorhold at St Mary and All Saints is so strong, and the subject so fascinating, that further research would be fully justified. To provide a sensible plan of action and determine what costs might be involved we recommend that the Parochial Church Council seeks the advice of an archaeologist.

**Jeremy Lander**

Freeland Rees Roberts Architects

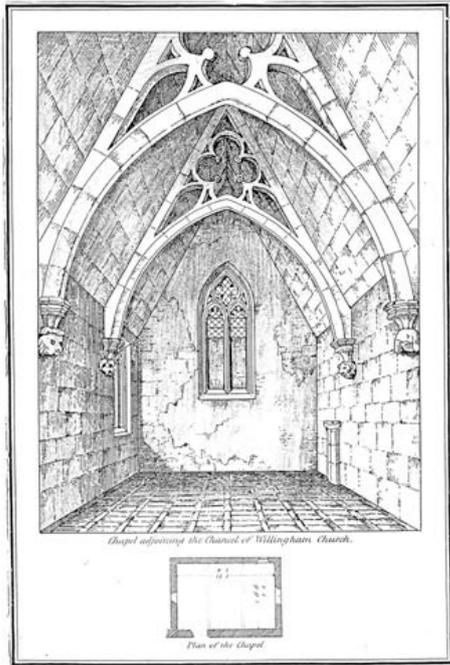
## 10.0 Illustrations



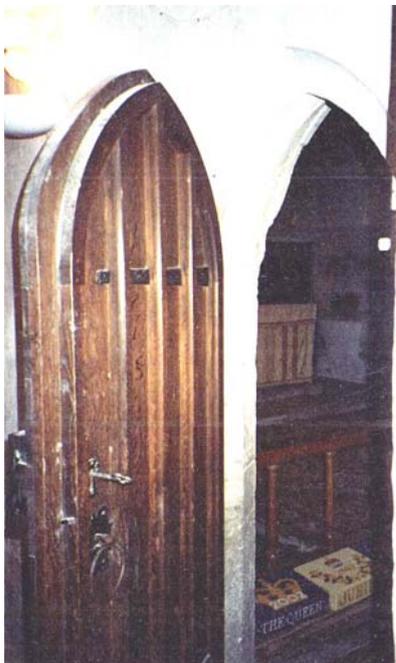
The Sacristy prior to conservation work...



...and after work was completed.



19th century drawing of Sacristy interior



The squint door and niche from the chancel (note blocked chancel window above door)

Looking through the squint door to the altar



The piscina



The stone arches and west window

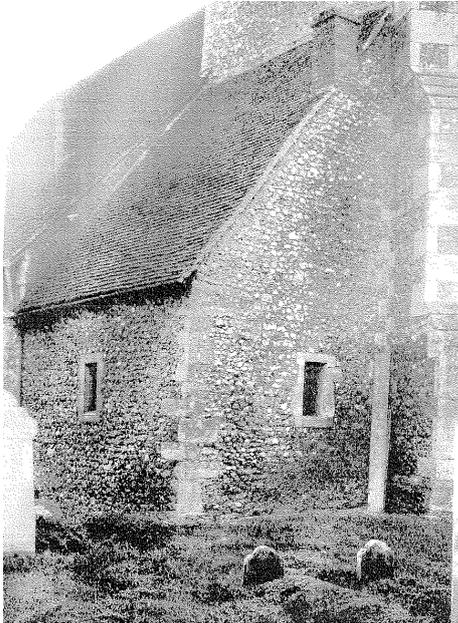


Enclosing an anchoress

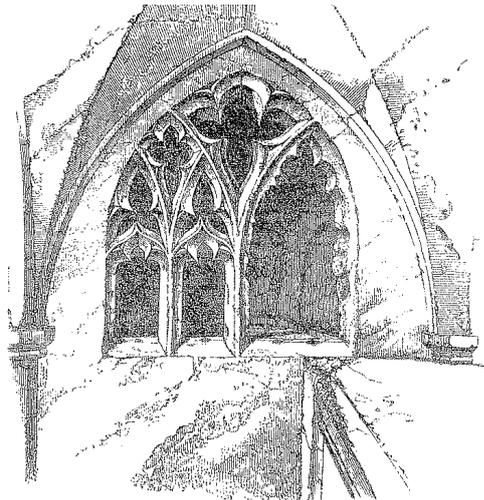




Saint Fremund's Hermitage



Anchorhold at Hartlip



Warkworth Hermitage



Anchorite's squint and doorway at St Julian's, Shoreham