

Story of St. Nicholas Church

The Normans started to build it in about 1120, using pebble rubble gathered from the nearby river bed and indications are that they placed a large block of sarsen stone, buried deep in the ground, at each corner of the tower to give it stability. The church was dedicated to St Nicholas, a popular saint in mediaeval times on account of his fabled gifts of life and freedom to children. At that time, the church comprised the tower, a thick-walled nave and, possibly, a small, rounded apse giving shelter to the altar. A spiral stair gave access to the second stage of the tower which was probably flat-roofed for use as a beacon point in times of emergency. The Norman work is completed with the font, a substantial rectangular block of Purbeck marble which originally stood on a polypod base.

The erection of such a substantial church suggests that twelfth-century Fyfield was an important village. Even so, after less than a hundred years the building was found to be too small and first the north, then the south aisles were constructed, in 1195 and about 1275 respectively. The nave lost its original barrel roof at this time, although the re-roofing was short-lived: the massive oak tie beams and crown posts we see today are fifteenth-century; as is the striking niche in the corner of the north aisle. Traces of colour on the arcade and elsewhere throughout the building give clues to the extent of the wall-paintings which covered the interior in mediaeval times, illustrating the stories from the Bible - principally warnings - for the largely illiterate congregation.

The fourteenth century saw completion of the building more or less as we see it today. The distinctive chancel with its elegant gothic features was constructed at this time and it remains largely unspoiled to this day. The sedilia - seating for the clergy during the long services - places this part of the church firmly in the early part of the century, before the Black Death swept the land in 1348, decimating the population and suspending most building work throughout the country for the best part of a generation. Among the carved heads here can be found the Abbot of Bermondsey, patron of the living and St Nicholas. More carvings decorate the moulding over the east window and no two of these are alike. The faces of men and women, probably acquaintances of the mason who carved them, are to be found down the south side while animals ranging from a rabbit to a falcon can be seen on the other side, complete with a huntsman with his horn. Porches to the north and south doors were also built at this time, although only the north one survives.

The church has a peal of six bells, five of which were recast in the seventeenth and, again, in the nineteenth-centuries, indicating that the metal in them is very ancient. There is a small but particularly fine organ by Eustace Ingram, installed at the expense of the rector a century ago.

Notable among the people buried at Fyfield is Henry, Lord Scrope, whose treachery to Henry V cost him his head just before Agincourt in 1415 and earned him a scathing mention by Shakespeare. Later, his body was returned to Fyfield, where it is buried under a fifteenth-century ledger stone, but his head was last recorded on a spike above Micklegate Bar in York. Today children still thrill to the story of the headless body beneath the organ!

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