

# THE CHAPEL AND WELL OF OUR LADY OF WOOLPIT

by CLIVE PAINE

MEMBERS OF THE Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History were the guests of the Woolpit History Group during a day visit to the village in July 1991. The programme included a visit to the church, the site of the chapel of Our Lady of Woolpit, Our Lady's Well, the famous brickworks, the excellent museum and various houses in the village. There has been much confusion concerning both the Chapel and the Well, which this article attempts to unravel.

The Chapel of Our Lady of Woolpit was a popular place of pilgrimage in medieval times, and many people from Woolpit and further afield gave money and valuable items to enrich both the statue or image of the Virgin and the chapel. The earliest reference to pilgrims at Woolpit occurs in a mandate of the Bishop of Norwich issued between 1211 and 1214 directing, *inter alia*, that the monks of Bury Abbey should have the pilgrims' offerings (*oblaciones peregrinorum*) (*E.E.A.*, VI, 268). This could refer to pilgrims passing through Woolpit on their way to shrines such as Bury and Walsingham, but seems more likely to refer to pilgrims' donations to the image at Woolpit. Woolpit fair, first mentioned in 1286 (Hervey 1925, 151), was held on 8 September, the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, and no doubt grew up to serve and profit from the pilgrims.

## THE IMAGE AND THE CHAPEL

The image of the Blessed Virgin Mary was probably similar to the present one at the Anglican Shrine at Walsingham. It would have been dressed in rich clothes, decorated with brooches, jewels and strings of rosary beads given by pilgrims; in front would have been banks of burning candles representing the pilgrims' prayers, and the chapel would probably have been lit by coloured lights. Priests and wealthy inhabitants seem to have been able to claim the privilege of burial within the chapel.

Numerous bequests were made to the 'image of the Blessed Virgin Mary'. John Petyt, Rector of Woolpit, in 1443 bequeathed 'a sceptre to be put in the hand of the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Chapel, all the jewels, complete, that have come to me in my time, in the custody of the rector and the parish . . .'. Geoffrey Colcy of Woolpit gave 'a torch of wax weighing ½lb' in 1469 and William Hert of Elmswell in 1471 'a silver girdle'. In 1473 Dame Elizabeth Andrews, widow of Sir John Andrews of Baylham, bequeathed ' . . . two rings with diamonds, the one to be sent to Our Lady of Walsingham, and the other to Our Lady of Woolpit'. In 1481 Lord John Howard of Stoke-by-Nayland, later Duke of Norfolk, made an offering of £7 9s. to 'Our Lady of Woolpit', and in 1483 he and his wife offered '5 grottes and an ymage of silvere and gylte, and 5d in money to bey candell, wex candell' [*sic*]. John Bawde of Woolpit gave 'a corse girdle of black harnesssed with silver' in 1501, and Robert Reydon of Creeting St Peter in 1505, 'a pair of beads of thrice sixty, gawdied with silver, and three gold rings set thereto, with a cross and a heart of silver, to be offered to our Lady of Woolpit on condition that the parson of the said town let them abide about Our ladys neck continually'. John Calabour of Thurston gave 'a gold ring' in 1507 and Stephen Hanyngton of Woolpit 'an altar cloth and a psalter book' in 1509. Margaret Jarvis of Woolpit gave '2lb of wax' in 1511 and in 1515 Robert Kebyll of Woolpit gave '20d to go to the use of a stained cloth in the chapel'.<sup>1</sup>

The chapel and the image became the object of popular pilgrimage. Local wills between 1454 and 1526 specify pilgrimages to be made on behalf of the deceased from Thorndon, Thurston, Otley, Gislingham, Wetheringsett, Kelsale and Fornham St Genevieve.<sup>2</sup> In 1501 Queen

Elizabeth, wife of Henry VII, ordered a pilgrimage to be undertaken for her to 'Oure Lady of Wolpitte' (Nicolas 1830, 3).

The image should have been destroyed or removed after 1538 when Henry VIII ordered the clergy to 'forthwith take down all feigned images abused with Pilgrimages or Offerings'. Some images obviously remained, however, since the injunctions of Edward VI in 1547 ordered the removal of 'all shrines . . . and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatory and superstition' (Cardwell 1839, I, 17, 38).

But where were the chapel and the image? The two earliest references in local wills in 1390 and 1443 describe the chapel as being 'in the churchyard of Woolpit'. Peter Northeast has proved conclusively, from many examples in Suffolk, that this description does not necessarily indicate a free standing chapel in the churchyard, but can often mean an addition to the church, built on ground that was formerly part of the churchyard. It may be significant that local references to the chapel after 1467 are simply to the 'chapel of Our Lady', as if the former description 'in the churchyard' was, with the passage of time, unnecessary.

In June 1499 Marion Clerk and her parents Agnes and John, all of Great Ashfield, were convicted of 'heretical pravity', for claiming to have the power to foretell the future and locate buried treasure. The three were ordered to perform penance at Norwich Cathedral, Great Ashfield church, Bury market place and Abbey, and ' . . . to go before the procession of Wulpett and offer the candles to the image of St Mary in a chapel within the site of the churchyard there (*infra scitu cimiterii*: Jenkins 1924, 74; Northeast 1993, 43–46).

Antiquarians and authors of guide books and directories have added confusion to the question of the location. Richard Gough in his 1789 edition of Camden's *Britannia* was non-committal and stated that 'there was a shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the church, to which pilgrims resorted' (Gough 1789, 84); this was repeated in various publications throughout the 19th century. William Dutt, in his *Little Guide to Suffolk* (1904, 337) placed the image 'in a chapel at the end of the south aisle, where it stood under a rich canopy'. Arthur Mee in his *King's England: Suffolk* (1941, 437) stated that 'one of the two niches on the outer wall [of the chancel] is said to have contained a famous Madonna, by which pilgrims prayed before passing to the well'.

The east end of the south aisle, the traditional Lady Chapel position, would have been a likely site for the statue. The wooden mullion in the east window has, in local folklore, been seen as evidence for the position of the image! However, the aisles at Woolpit are less than nine feet wide, and are reduced to less than half that width by the 15th-century benches which were made to extend into them. The result is to reduce the aisles to narrow processional routes around the nave. The south aisle would certainly not make a grand entrance leading to the image. The niches outside the chancel would have exposed the statue and its jewels both to the elements and to thieves. The documentary evidence shows that the image was always referred to as being 'in the chapel'.

It now seems almost certain that the chapel containing the image stood on the north side of the chancel, where there are signs of an earlier building on the site of the present vestry, which was built sometime between 1811 and 1848. To the east of the vestry there is the stump of a wall, at right angles to the chancel, and to the west of the vestry is a distinct vertical joint, where a wall has been taken down. The area round the vestry is a raised platform measuring 16ft by 18ft, which may partly be the result of making a 19th-century family vault, but probably indicates the size of the former chapel.

Although the image was most probably removed in 1538, the chapel remained standing until 1551. The Court of Augmentations issued a warrant on 9 March 1551 for the chapel to be valued, demolished and sold. John Eyer Esq., Receiver for the county of Suffolk, George Hynd, the King's Sergeant Plumber and Humphrey Colwich, Gent., who were also responsible for removing the lead from Bury Abbey, were instructed to ' . . . make repayre to the chappell within the said county called Our Lady of Wulpitt and the leade therof in semblable wise to take down,

cast, way, and cary in forme afforesaid, and to make sale of all the tymber, stones iron and glasse cuming of the said chappell to the Kings said highnes most advantage'.<sup>3</sup>

### OUR LADY'S WELL

In a field to the north-east of the church is a moated site with a spring, marked on the Ordnance Survey maps as 'Our Lady's Well'. The field containing the moat was called Palgraves Meadow in the Tithe Survey of 1845, and the two adjoining fields were called Little Palgraves and Lady's Well Field.<sup>4</sup> These fields were most certainly part of the thirty acres held of the Abbot of Bury St Edmunds by the Chapel of St John the Baptist at Palgrave, near Diss, until its closure in 1548. The chaplain of Palgrave was recorded as holding land in 1286 (Hervey 1925, II, 151), and Richard de Palgrave, chaplain, was listed in the 1327 Lay Subsidy (Hervey 1906, 176). All this has led to the tradition that there was a chapel near or over the spring, although there is no contemporary evidence for it whatsoever.

The earliest manuscript reference to a chapel occurs in Sir John Cullum's Church Notes, c. 1778: 'In a close near the east end of the Church is a spring still bricked up called Our Lady's Spring. "Parish tradition" says there was a chapel near the spring'. The earliest printed reference is in Gough's 1789 *Britannia* 'a spring which is called Our Lady's Spring, the inhabitants have traditional report . . . that there was a chapel near the spring, but there are no remains of it. The spring is square and bricked and supplies a large moat with very clear water.'<sup>5</sup>

Living near, or holding land near the well often led to the adoption of the location as a surname. For example, Petronella de Fonte was mentioned in the land rental of 1286; Walter atte Welle and Sewello ad Fontem were listed in the 1327 Lay Subsidy; and John of the Welle was tried for trespass in 1345 (*C.P.R.*, 1343-45, 592).

The earliest mention of the well itself occurs in a survey of the manor of Woolpit in 1573-76, which refers back to a manorial court of 1557-58. A piece of land was described as ' . . . lying alongside the way which led to the spring called Our Ladys Well'.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the land abutted south on to a piece of land called 'Sewalls and Pirrye', which recalled the christian name of Sewello ad Fontem mentioned in 1327.

The belief in the healing properties of the water of the well was first referred to in November 1826, when the Revd John Cobbold of Woolpit wrote to the Suffolk antiquarian David Elisha Davy that 'Our Lady's Well is in great request with antiquated females of the parish for its numerous virtues. Tradition says that a Pilgrimage of Holy Nuns came from Ireland to visit it; and an old lady remembers this fact, but she is drawing on apace to 90, and you will make what allowance you please for her dotage' (*E.A.M.* 1955, 16). The author of *Bury St Edmunds and its Environs* published the same details in 1827, and added that the 'far-famed well . . . is a perpetual spring about two feet deep of beautifully clear water, and so cold that a hand immersed in it is very soon benumbed. It is used occasionally for the immersion of weakly children, and much resorted to by persons of weak eyes'.<sup>7</sup> The 'Holy Nuns' may have been Augustinian nuns from the English Convent at Bruges who, from 1794 until 1802, took up residence at Hengrave Hall, as a result of the French revolution. It is possible that the twenty-five nuns, who were granted permission by the Archbishop of Canterbury to wear religious habit from Easter 1795, and who had their own chapel at Hengrave from 1796, would have visited local holy sites including Woolpit.<sup>8</sup>

William Dutt, in 1904, called it 'Lady's Well or Holy Well, formerly a resort of pilgrims', and added that 'its water is said to benefit weak eyes'. Arthur Mee in 1941 mentioned the moat containing the well and pilgrims' chapel, and stated that Abbot Samson travelled to Rome in 1173 to secure the income of the well for Bury Abbey. In fact Samson went to claim the income from the church, and no mention was made of the well at all. When the *Little Guide* was revised in 1957 the well had become the 'Holy Well, a favourite resort of pilgrims during the Middle Ages'

(Dickinson 1957, 380). Most printed sources since 1789 repeat the statement about a chapel being near or over the well, and since 1827 repeat the curative properties of the water for weak eyes.

There is no evidence, however, that the well was a place of pilgrimage in the pre-Reformation period, that the water had healing properties, or that there was a chapel in the vicinity of the well. John Brame, a monk at Thetford Priory in the late 14th century, recorded that

. . . a woman of Thetford, who became dumb by a disease in her throat, upon whose account many gave her money to enable her to go and make her offering to the image of the Holy Virgin at Wulpit in Suffolk, and to pray for her recovery, but the woman made signs that she would go to the image in the new chapel of the monks which being consented to, she was restored (Blomefield 1805, II, 118).

Although this account was no doubt recorded in order to give credibility and status to the Thetford image, it must infer that the Woolpit image was well known in the locality for its curative powers. But it was clearly the statue of Our Lady and not the well that was believed to have had the power.

It is possible, however, that the water may have been effective in bathing infected eyes, as recorded in 1827. Tests by the Anglian Water Authority in 1978 revealed that the water had a high sulphate content, and was 'more mineralised than the drinking water supply abstraction around Bury St Edmunds'. Most 'spa' waters have a high mineral content similar to that at Woolpit. The use of sulphates in a medical treatment was common before the discovery of antiseptics, and so it is possible that infections of the eye such as trachoma may have been relieved, or cured, by water from the well, which thus became associated with the Chapel of Our Lady of Woolpit.

The site of the well became an Ancient Monument in 1978, and was transformed into a nature reserve between 1989 and 1991. The work was co-ordinated by the Woolpit History Group, and supported by members of the community, the Parish Council, Mid Suffolk District Council, the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, English Heritage and the brewers Ruddles.

## NOTES

- 1 John Petyt: N.C.C., 207 Doke; Geoffrey Colcy, S.R.O.B., Baldwyne 422; William Hert, S.R.O.B., Baldwyne 479; Elizabeth Andrews, P.C.C., 11 Wattys; John Howard, Collicr 1844, 57, 464; John Bawde, S.R.O.B., Boner 136; Robert Reydon, N.C.C., 243 Ryxe; John Calabour, S.R.O.B., Boner 197; Stephen Hanyngton, N.C.C., 250 Spyltymber; Margaret Jarvis, S.R.O.B., Boner 201; Robert Kebyll, S.R.O.B., Fuller 90.
- 2 1424 and 1469, S.R.O.B., Baldwyne 219 and 440; 1474, N.C.C., 63 Hubert; 1493, S.R.O.B., Hervyc 442; 1520, S.R.O.B., Johnson 161; 1524, S.R.O.I., IC/AA2/8/425; 1526, S.R.O.B., Brydon 202.
- 3 P.R.O., LR12/35/1280.
- 4 S.R.O.B., T119/1,2.
- 5 S.R.O.B., E2/33/17.1, p. 127.
- 6 S.R.O.B., E7/16/2, f. 120v.
- 7 *Environs* 1827, 360. Could this reference perhaps indicate that David Elisha Davy was the author, or that a member of the Cobbold family was involved?
- 8 S.R.O.B., 412/15.
- 9 A.W.A., DJ/abc/R775/1.

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*Abbreviations*

- A.W.A. Anglian Water Authority.  
 C.P.R. *Calendars of Patent Rolls*.  
 E.A.M. *East Anglian Miscellany*.  
 E.E.A. *English Episcopal Acta*.  
 N.C.C. Norwich Consistory Court.  
 P.C.C. Prerogative Court of Canterbury.  
 S.R.O.B. Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch.  
 S.R.O.I. Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.