

The Ruined Church of St Martin

The ruin is all that remains of an early medieval Church that is thought might have been constructed towards the end of the 11th century, or at the latest, the beginning of the 12th Century.

The Church is consecrated to St Martin – (c.316 – 397), Bishop of Tours, missionary to Gaul and one of the fathers of Western monasticism. He is thought to have come from Pannonia in present day Hungary and the 11th of November is his feast day.

St Martin is one of four Medieval Churches in the current parish of Shotesham and may be the oldest foundation. All Saints' and St Mary's are complete, but only a small fragment of masonry survives of St Botolph's on the corner of Hollow Lane.

The Church belonged to the Abbot of St Benet's who was given it around 1050 by Edward the Confessor. During the reign of Henry VIII it is reported that the Church was partly destroyed as part of his programme to dissolve the monastery of St Benet's; even so in 1603, when the parish, which also included the hamlet of Grenville, was served by St Mary's, there were 70 communicants in the parish. During the English Civil War it is said that an attempt was made to completely eradicate the Church. Whatever actually took place it was certainly abandoned and described as ruinous when Bloomfield carried out his survey and commentary about many of the county's fine heritage of medieval Churches around 1806. Even so, the tower still stands virtually complete, together with some remaining walls to the nave and chancel. The whole site is still consecrated and is in the care of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) of Shotesham.



Figure 1 A view of the ruins in 1959 (Jimmy Hazel)

Since the 1950's ivy took hold of the masonry and elm suckers and scrub began to take root in the churchyard as well as the nave. This hid just how much of the ruin remained and how much damage was taking place beneath the undergrowth. The large tree you see in *figure 1* fell through into the Chancel demolishing whole sections of the flint wall



Figure 2 View of overgrown ruin in 2009 (Photo Mike Fenn).

Work started on the consolidation of these ruins in 2009 by which time the whole structure was covered with ivy and almost impenetrable brambles, nettles and scrub. Some trees had taken hold within the walls of the nave.

It is hard to visualise just how hidden the ruins were only 18 months ago. Left untended and neglected for many years, they surely would have collapsed as the saplings became larger and the tangled ivy sent roots into the loose core behind the facing flints. In time these roots would have loosened the wall itself and as individual flints fall away, rainwater washes away the “fill” and the whole structure becomes unstable and dangerous.

The first task for the volunteers, working on behalf of the PCC, was to tackle this undergrowth. It was very hard work and took several months to complete, but finally, as autumn arrived, the ruins were exposed and the debris cleared away.



Fig 3 Volunteers clear away scrub and ivy (Mike Fenn)



Fig 4 Volunteers clear away debris and roots from the remaining walls. (Mike Fenn)

In order to safeguard the now exposed wall tops from the ravages of winter, which could have resulted in further collapse of the walls themselves, the PCC organised for a local builder to cap the walls using hydraulic lime mortar designed to shed water away from the core work within the walls themselves. As the window at the east end had collapsed, he also carried out some remedial work to safeguard the masonry arch above.

The recent exposure of the ruin has allowed experts to examine the structure and see for the first time in many years evidence of two single double splayed windows in the nave, the remains of a holy water stoup in the south wall by the south door, as well as the recess for a banner staff cupboard within the tower.

Double splayed windows (sometimes round) are the earliest pattern of window opening in the county and were first used when timber churches were reconstructed in flint and stone.

It was also noticed that the walls of the chancel project beyond the line of the nave and at this point too are the remains of a recess in the wall which likely contained the Piscina (a basin for washing the communion or mass vessels). This would indicate that originally the altar was here and was only later moved to the east end under the newer large east window, when the chancel was extended. The existence of these features leads us to believe that the original building was probably constructed in the latter part of the 11th century. It may also have had a semi circular apse at the east end and

possibly a small round tower at the west end and a very narrow short nave. Only archaeological excavation can establish whether or not that was the case and no programme of excavation is planned at this stage.



Fig 5 Village volunteers after a hard morning's work.

Conservation work on the ruin and on landscaping will continue (part funded by the Norfolk Monuments Management Project with funds from English Heritage). The Churchyard is seeded with a mixture of grasses and wild flowers to improve the biodiversity of the site. We hope you enjoy your visit to both Churches.

Text by Michael Knights

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