

The Village Visits Group

The inaugural visit of the Village Visits Group took place on 30 July when 10 members visited Isleham on a nice sunny day. One of our members guided us around the village and started by explaining that the area had been inhabited for several thousand years; more than 6500 pieces of bronze, including both manufactured articles and fragments of sheet bronze, all dating from the late Bronze Age had been found in the vicinity, and in 1907 18 Romano-British pewter vessels had been dug up.

But our visit started at the Priory of St Margaret of Antioch - a small Benedictine priory church founded in the village in 1090. The Prior was an alien priory, which meant that it was run directly from France. As a result Henry V seized the priory in 1414, during the Hundred Years War, as the estate was thought to be contributing to the French war chest. In due course the Priory was granted to Pembroke College, Cambridge and it is now looked after by English Heritage

From there we moved onto St Andrew's Church where we were fortunate in having a church warden guide us around. Construction of the church started in the late 1280s. Built of flint and pebble rubble it was faced with Barnack stone, a quarry exploited since Roman times.

Saint Andrew's today has six bells, the oldest being "Gabriel", given by Thomas Peyton in 1484. It was the custom to toll this bell to mark the death of a parishioner - two rings of three for a woman, three rings of three for a man. Until around 1910, one bell was rung at 9.00 a.m. to indicate that parishioners could begin 'gleaning' - collecting any ears or loose corn remaining on the fields after harvest.

Our guide explained that the lych gate, reputed to be the oldest in eastern England, is a good five hundred years and still has its original Tudor tile roof. He also pointed out that above the south porch entrance was an elliptical sundial which dated from the early 15th Century, and is virtually unknown elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The church has a magnificent late 15th Century hammer beam roof. Constructed from local timber each beam carries small angel figures facing east & west with outstretched hands and projecting wings. Ten years ago one of the angels fell to the floor and it was discovered that it was so finely carved that it even had eyebrows and lips! A mould was taken at the time and copies of the "Isleham Angel" sold as a fund raising project for repairs to the church roof.

From the church we moved on past the old fire station house to a row of pretty alms houses, endowed by Lady Frances Peyton in about the year 1575 for a master, six brothers and six sisters.

Our tour then took in the "industrial" history of the village. Before 1850 Isleham's only effective road connection with the outside world was by a few fieldways over the arable to the south. Important for communications until the late 19th century was the river Lark. In the Middle Ages a navigable channel connecting the village with the river led to loading basins at the north end of lanes of the village.

In the 19th century a channel cut from the river to East End carried barge traffic. Barges brought in coal and took out clunch. We found that there had been a sizable chalk quarry at the south of the village, in an area called the Pits, which lay some 20 ft. below street level. The poor labourers who worked there had also lived there in closely set, gardenless, chalk-built cottages. By 1834 there were 78 cottages, said to house 400 people. They suffered from recurring epidemics, such as cholera, and what with the opening of a railway connection to the village resulted in a dramatic decline in barge traffic and a decline in the affluence of the village. Despite the railway it wasn't until the mid 20th century that the village grew into something like what we can see today. Until then most inhabitants

were native to the parish and intermarried with other native villagers, producing a community described as inward-looking, suspicious of strangers, and slow to change. However, our group didn't find them suspicious of us, and indeed after our walk we were able to find a very hospitable pub with excellent food in which we were able to put the world to right.

The Group decided that this inaugural visit had been a big success and wanted to hold similar walks in other villages every two months. For those who wish to join the Village Visits group our next visit will be to Witcham on Thursday 15 October. If you wish to take part please contact Ron Parker on 01223 811227, or by email at ronparker903@gmail.com.

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