

*This is the twentieth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church*

## THE MYSTERY OF THE PORCH

### Introduction

Every time that you enter the church you go in through the porch, and I expect that from time to time you stop to admire the splendid south door, or to smile at the funny faces on the two wooden corbels above the windows, but I suspect that few people look at the construction of the porch and wonder why it is so primitive compared to the rest of the building. If you do so, you will soon realise that the porch and the neighbouring parts of the south wall have been badly damaged at some stage in their lives. Indeed, the present porch does give the impression of having been rebuilt from what could be salvaged. Closer inspection of this area leads to the suggestion that there was at some time a major event which badly damaged this area of the wall and almost completely destroyed the original porch.

### When did the damage occur?

I have now started to take a detailed look at the damage, and it was certainly extensive, but when it occurred I cannot yet say. The tower was struck by lightning in April 1898 and this did considerable damage to the roofs of the nave and the south aisle, but the present porch was already there at this date.

A possible clue can be found in the notes made by the antiquarian Tom Martin who visited the church at Christmas 1731. He was mainly concerned with the memorial inscriptions but he did note that “There were upon the steeple 4 pinacles (sic) but one falling into ye churchyard, and two dropping upon ye church and doing great damage, the fourth was taken down to prevent further mischief.” However, falling pinnacles could not account for such extensive damage.

Now, had the repair of major damage been a recent event, it would seem likely that he would have noted it. So, we are left with the conclusion that it either occurred some time well before his visit or later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At present I tend to favour the former. It seems likely that the southwest corner of the church collapsed either because of subsidence or of neglect – or maybe both. If you look at the bases of the two buttresses at the southwest corner of the church you will see that the one on the west side is tilting downwards, whilst that on the south side has lost its frieze of decorative flintwork and has probably been completely replaced.



### Did the porch once have two storeys?

One of the things which strikes every visitor to the church is how light the interior is. There are large windows throughout, and the builders (or possibly their successors) even managed to squeeze in a little clerestory above the arches in the nave. Now, there is a large window above the north door, yet there is no window above the south door. Why is this? For some time I have been wondering whether the original porch had a second storey. On some days, with the light in the right direction I have even managed to convince myself that there is a very faint outline of a gable end where an upper storey would

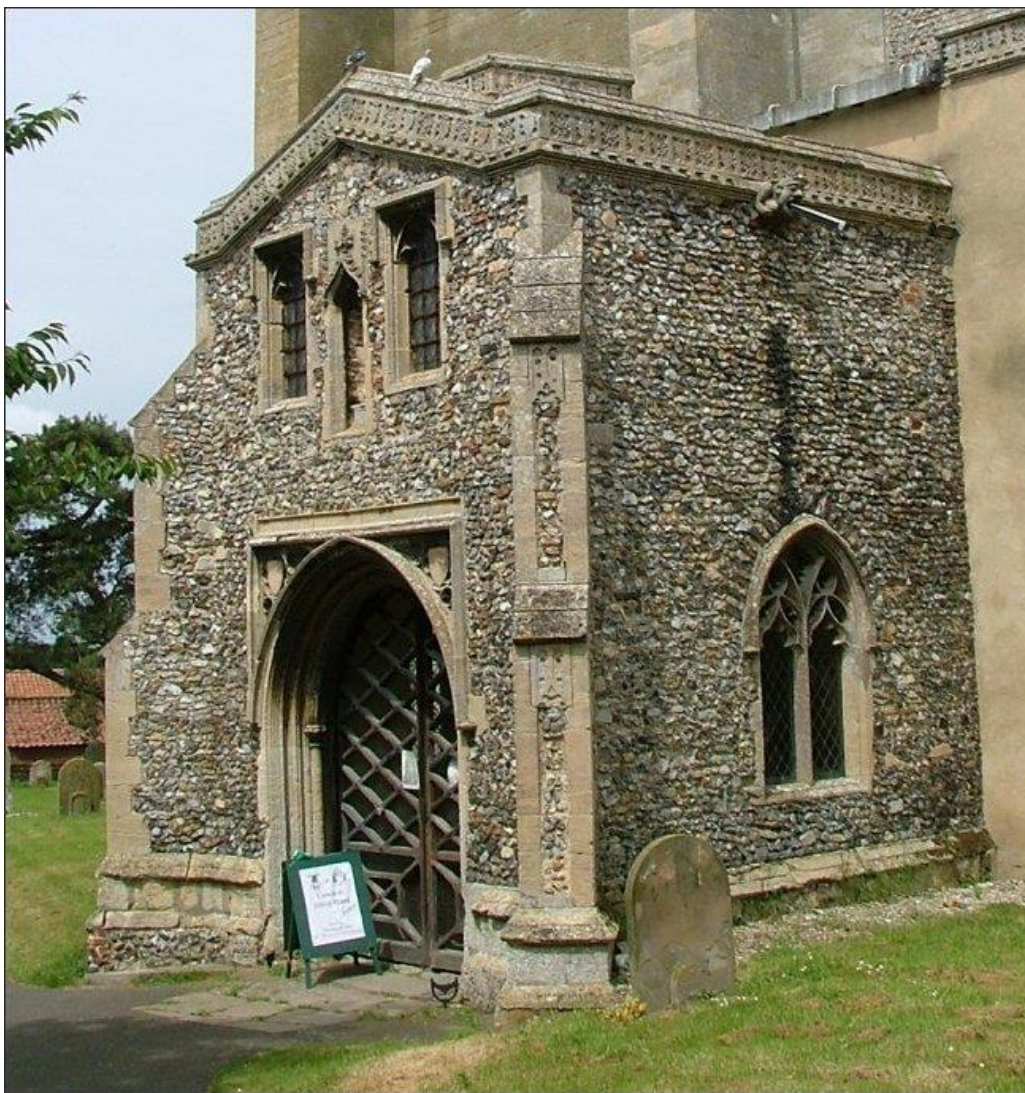
have been. From inside the church there is no evidence of an upper storey, or of an access staircase, but the plaster is in poor condition and the royal coat-of-arms covers much of the relevant area.

However, a recent discovery has given support to this hypothesis. In May and June 2009 there were major excavations in the churchyard associated with the installation of new surface water drains, and all these excavations required archaeological monitoring. The archaeologists' report noted that during the excavations they had found the following foundations abutting the porch. However, these were not explored beyond the area of the trenches that had been dug for the drains.

- (i) One abutting the west wall of the porch, oriented east-to-west
- (ii) Another at the south-east corner of the porch, oriented northwest to southeast

They also said that it was possible that there was a further buttress at the diagonal to the porch at the southwest corner, but, because of the presence of a live electricity supply, this was not investigated. Their conclusion was that "The fairly substantial nature of the existing porch buttresses and the absence of a window over the porch may indicate that an earlier porch may have had a higher elevation than the present one, and possibly supported an upper level or loft space." I wonder if the foundation abutting the west wall could have been associated with a staircase tower?

It is interesting to note that two churches that are not far away, namely Cawston and Salle, do have porches with an upper storey and both have diagonal buttresses at the front corners (see picture of Cawston, below).



### **The north porch at Cawston Church**

(The top of the staircase tower can just be seen above the porch roof)

*Courtesy of Simon Knott*