



Iken, Suffolk

Ican ea

Church of St Botolph

Church fabric and foundations

Cross shaft

Grid ref TM 412 567

Notes

This promontory overlooking the River Alde is one of the county's earliest Christian sites, for we believe that St Botolph himself first brought the Faith to Iken. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records for the year 654 – "in this year Anna (the Christian King of the East Angles) was slain and Botwulf (Botolph) began to build the minster at Icanhoh". Although Boston (Lincs.), Hadstock (Essex) and other places have been suggested as possible sites for Botolph's minster, "Icanhoh" is now generally believed to be this promontory here at Iken.

A Saxon Minster was a nucleus of Christian worship, witness and learning for a whole area. It was staffed either by a community of monks or a group of priests and from it missionaries travelled to spread the Faith and to establish satellite churches. Botolph remained at Icanhoh as its Abbot until his death c. 680. It is recorded that he was buried by his disciples on 17 June and this has remained his annual Feast Day. Abbot Ceolfriht of Wearmouth and Jarrow, who nurtured the young (though later to become the Venerable) Bede, paid a visit to Icanhoh in 670 to observe the type of monastic life in operation here, and it is recorded that he was greatly impressed by what he saw.

From Icanhoh the monks made missionary journeys into East Anglia and beyond and it may be that the 75 or so English churches which bear (or have once borne) St Botolph's name may give some clue to the extent of their work. They include 16 in Norfolk, 4 in Essex and 6 in Suffolk, of which the church at Burgh (near Woodbridge) appears to have enshrined the Saint's remains for a time. King Cnut authorised the removal of some of St Botolph's bones to the Abbey Church at Bury St Edmunds, which he had founded in 1020. These precious relics had clearly at some time been transferred from Icanhoh to the relative safety of Burgh, which was also a fort and a defensive site.

In 870 the invading Danes destroyed the monastery, and we think that either shortly afterwards, or maybe later in the 900s, the faithful marked its site with a stone memorial cross, part of which may be seen in the church. It was probably also in the 900s that the wooden church was rebuilt and was re-dedicated to the Saint who had "begun to build his minster" here some 300 years before.

654 St Botolph began to build his minster here.

c. 870-1000 Following the destruction of Botolph's church by the Danes in 870, the Saxon cross shaft was erected and later a Saxon timber church was built. Its clay foundations were discovered by archaeologists in 1977, revealing that it did not quite follow the lines of the present church, its north wall being oriented a few degrees northwards of the present church nave wall. The excavation also revealed several pre-Conquest graves beneath the nave.



One of the allegedly Norman slit windows

The style is Anglo-Saxon, so the window is probably overlap period

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c. 1070-1110 The early Norman flint-rubble nave was built, also a chancel and a Norman chancel arch, the foundations of which were discovered in 1977 beneath the present one.

The idyllic and dramatic situation of St Botolph's is unforgettable. It stands on a wooded promontory, at the end of a *cul-de-sac* lane, with only the former Rectory for company and near the northern border of its parish. Its fine old tower, rising out of the trees, may be seen for miles across land and water. It is well worth standing back and admiring the church as a whole in its setting. It stands at the northern end of its large and picturesque churchyard and from this elevated spot, as we enjoy the delightful views across the sweep of the river Alde to the north, west and southwest, we can well appreciate why St Botolph selected this site for his minster.

The church itself displays a variety of mellow colours and textures in its building materials. The cream coloured nave render has worn away to expose the rubble walls beneath (patched in places with bricks and tiles). These comprise flints from the fields, grey-brown septaria from the marshes (which crumbles easily and has caused the downfall of several East Suffolk towers) and a little yellow-brown coralline crag – a very localised material, seen in the church towers at Chillesford (where it was quarried) and Wantisden and in small amounts elsewhere in the immediate area. The chancel is faced with blocks of ragstone from

Kent and has a tiled roof, which forms a contrast with the thatched roof of the nave, made new in 1988.

The earliest part of the church is the Norman Nave and in its north wall is a tiny slender original slit window. Its arched head is fashioned out of a single piece of stone, indicating work of the 1000s, and the remains of tiny holes in the stonework of its sides indicates that it was not originally glazed, but may have been barred by a shutter, or even twigs, when necessary. These original windows were gradually replaced by larger ones, to let in more light.

In the north-west corner of the nave has been placed the church's most ancient treasure – the Saxon cross-shaft, which was fashioned in the late 800s or early 900s, maybe to mark this site as a holy place and to commemorate St Botolph and his minster after its destruction by the Danes. The shaft was originally at least 9 feet high, of which the surviving section is about 4½' long, with an additional 5½' of broken tenon at one end. Although very worn, its four surfaces have remarkable carvings, including a creature with an open mouth, a long tongue and a coiled body, a wealth of interlaced patterns and a fine cross in a circle. Further details about the shaft and of the excavations at the church may be found in the *Proceedings* of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History, Vol 25, Part 4 (1984).

Extracts taken from an anonymous leaflet on sale in the church

A drawing of the Anglo-Saxon cross shaft, taken from the same source.

The tenon makes it unlikely that the cross was a free-standing memorial cross, and suggests some connection with an architectural feature, such as a tie beam.

