



*Butley parish church in 1992 when the thatched nave had a new straw ridge.*

**The parish church**

In the Sandlings there are parishes with isolated churches. Examples are Butley, Blaxhall, Iken, Sudbourne, Wantisden, Rendlesham and Ramsholt. Invariably local tradition has it that houses once clustered round the church, only to be abandoned after the Black Death. This is certainly not true of Butley which has always consisted of scattered settlements. No church is mentioned in Domesday, but within 100 years of 1086 there were two churches in this tiny village. The first was the parish church with a nave 43ft long endowed with land by the Norman knight, Theobald de Valoines. Its priest was Ernard. Of that first church four tiny windows and two doorways survive. Soon afterwards the church and its glebe were granted by Theobald's daughter, Bertha, and her husband, Ranuph de Glanville, to a college of priests, known as Augustinian or Black Canons.

This little church was inadequate for their needs and they constructed a huge church a short distance away. Every day for the next 369 years a priest, dressed in his black habit, will have walked from the Priory and up the sandy track to say mass in Butley church. He was the villagers' comforter, tending the sick, walking in procession with a chalice and the host, and carrying it to anyone on the point of death. He will have stooped to enter the little chancel door, having checked the sun's shadow on the Mass dial. Other Priory priests served the nearby small churches of Wantisden, Capel



*One of the original slit Norman windows, now blocked up.*

and Gedgrave. The two latter have been demolished, but the interior of Wantisden church preserves a tiny chancel arch and very early pews which once held rush lights.

The interior of Butley church will have looked very different in the past. It will have been extremely dark, lit only by its slit windows and the gleam of candles kept burning day and night on the rood beam, also called the candle-beam. Candles were made of beeswax, but poor people had for light a smelly taper made of reed dipped in animal fat. From the 13th century onwards larger windows were inserted – only the chancel and porch windows match. No doubt the rest were 'cast-offs' from the Priory during rebuilding works. Large wooden images of the Crucified Christ flanked by the Virgin Mary and St John on the rood beam separated the congregation from the chancel where the priest performed the Mass. Parish churches had colourful interiors showing saints, angels and prophets on walls, screen and windows. For villagers lacking a single book or picture, it was an amazing, awe-inspiring place, full of hope for a better life and warnings of damnation.



A sundial by which the priest knew the time of day was scratched beside the little doorway through which he entered the chancel. There is also a faint trace of another, much cruder, dial.

Only by chance are the names of any of Butley or Capel's priests recorded, for instance, Alexander 'capellano de Buttell' witnessed a charter a few years after the Priory was founded. In 1485 William Potoke, parish priest of Butley, witnessed a will, while John Nedham, parish priest of Capel, received payment to intercede for the soul of the deceased in 1501.