

St Nicholas, King's Lynn, Norfolk

OPPOSITE PAGE:

A spectacular arch-braced tie beam roof, with hammer beam angels between the tie beams that are positioned at the apex of the clerestory windows to maximize illumination on the sculptures.

The current building is believed to date from c. 1405-10, which makes this the earliest dateable angel roof in East Anglia.

Vast and exploding with light, St Nicholas is a spectacular statement of the wealth and confidence of King's Lynn's merchant class in the early fifteenth century. Construction was funded by donations from several rich merchants, rather than by a single wealthy donor. The district in which the building stands – the “New Land” – was fashionable with merchants at the time; many chose to build their own flashily timbered houses there.

Medieval bench ends from St Nicholas, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, carry detailed depictions of the merchant ships on which the town's success was based. In the early fifteenth century, King's Lynn's merchants traded with Scandinavia, Northern Europe, Gascony, Spain and

even Iceland, and grand new halls for the town's leading merchant guilds were built in this period.

Despite its magnificence, St Nicholas did not have the full status of a church, but was a chapel of ease (erected for the convenience of worshippers who could not reach the parish church easily) and so lacked the right to celebrate all the sacraments. The actual church for the parish is St Margaret, about half a mile away. There would seem to have been bitter rivalry between the two sets of parishioners, because in 1378 a papal bull that gave St Nicholas full rights to celebrate the sacraments was rescinded after protests from St Margaret. Bequests indicate that fundraising for the new building of St Nicholas was underway in the 1390s. The scale and quality of the building – and its angel roof – are a magnificent riposte to the obstructive parishioners of St Margaret.



ABOVE:

An angel plays a tambourine-like instrument.

This angel, and several others at St Nicholas, appear to be the work of the same carver who made the roof angels at Methwold. The figure plays a timbre,

a tambourine-like instrument. The rendering of the hair as crisp, springy ringlets and the “blind”, pupil-less eyes are characteristics of this man's work.





A close-up of one of the roof angels at St Nicholas, bearing the hammer and nails of the Crucifixion.

Other angels at St Nicholas play a variety of musical instruments. The symbols of the Passion and musical instruments are both recurrent themes in angel roofs. Originally the angels would have

visually interacted with the rood – the sculptured group of Christ crucified, flanked by Mary and St John. These spanned the chancel arch in churches until the Reformation led to their destruction.



A roof angel at St Nicholas plays a lute.

The roof angels at St Nicholas are the work of at least three different carvers, each with very different styles. Here, an angel plays a lute. This carver renders hair very distinctively, in deeply recessed, undulating hanks, which to my mind look

rather like intestines, while his eyes have heavily incised pupils and iris rings. The hand of the same “Intestinal Hair Carver” can be seen in some of the angels at St Mary, Mildenhall, in Suffolk, a roof that probably dates from the 1420s.