

# The Conesford Trail

## Anchoresses in Medieval Norwich

A self-guided trail of  
Norwich's medieval churches  
to celebrate the city's cultural heritage



All Saints  
St John Timberhill  
St John de Sepulchre  
St Julian  
St Etheldreda

Includes two of the lost  
medieval churches of Norwich



## Medieval Norwich and its Churches

For the first time in its history, and under a new initiative led by the Norwich Historic Churches Trust working closely with its heritage partners, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Norwich is presented as a significant medieval city through its churches.

Norwich is a City of Churches. It has a collection of thirty-one medieval churches, more than any other European city north of the Alps, memorials in flint and stone to its rich heritage and former position as the second city in the kingdom. In the High Middle Ages (from about 1200 to 1550) Norwich was also described as Europe's most religious city, with a tradition of anchorites and hermits and a number of informal (and fairly transient) groups of women living together in chastity, but also which were in all likelihood influenced by the béguinages (establishments housing members of a lay sisterhood) of the Low Countries.

### Anchoresses in Medieval Norwich (13th -16th centuries)

**What was an anchoress?** She was a woman following a religious vow of solitude, stability and permanent enclosure in a room or possibly two rooms, in order to devote all her attention to God in meditation and prayer, 'anchored' in one place for the rest of her life. Such a vocation was highly valued as a parish or community amenity.

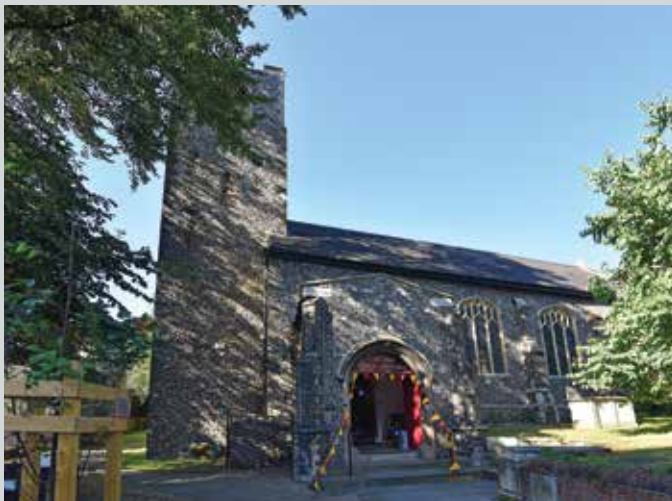


Image: St Mary Coslany

With thanks to the Dean and Chapter of Norwich Cathedral



Image: Julian of Norwich by David Holgate.

**Origins.** The solitary life of the anchoress was rooted in the ancient desert experience of the early Christian Church. From the end of the thirteenth century (1290s) until the Reformation (1540s), records show Norwich regularly attracting women (and some men) to this vocation more than other cities, including London. Possibly this was a result of Norwich's international trading success, which itself was a conduit for cutting-edge expressions of religious faith.

### Why was this vocation growing in value to Norwich citizens?

And why in such a busy industrial city? Like everyone else in an urban economy women and men following this calling had to be funded. Women had to satisfy the bishop not only of their true vocation and mental stability, but also that there were funds to support them so they were not a drain on their host church. After 1348, waves of plague and other endemic disease hit hard in Norwich and anxieties increased about going to judgement before God unconfessed and un-absolved from sin. For recluses and their benefactors heaven and hell were realities to be addressed.

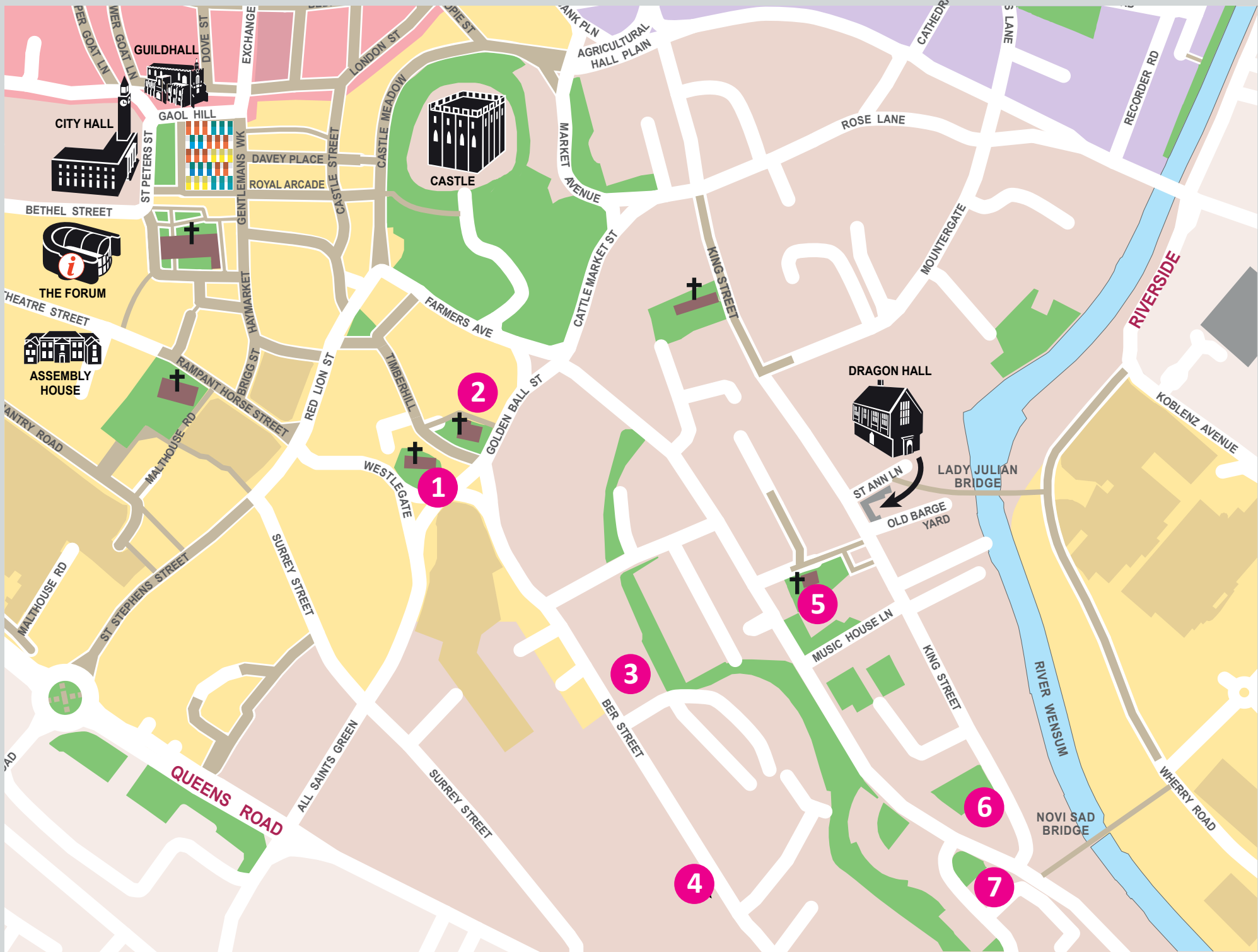
**Funding and Relationship.** Some anchoresses were supported by widespread local giving, some by a particular patron or sponsoring family and some were self-supporting. A city could provide the population and the necessary cash to invest. In return anchoresses supported individuals and the community with their prayers and, when asked for, counsel and spiritual guidance. There is some evidence that they were involved in other tasks, such as charitable administration.

**Who?** Many have heard of Norwich's famous anchoress, the author and mystic, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416?). But she appeared as part of a long-established tradition in the city and had neighbouring solitaries during her enclosure and long after. Julian is known because of her amazing surviving book, "Revelations of Divine Love", but others we know only by name, or from an anonymous bequest. Rarely do we have hints of their identity or background, but where they occur they were not without means.

**Evidence.** Most Norwich anchoresses seem not to have been nuns, but ordinary women seeking to live a holy life apart, sworn to chastity and obedience. Judging by surviving wills a large section (over 20%) of Norwich citizens gave money to either specific anchoresses or to every city anchoress in town in expectation of her continued prayers for their soul. Anchoresses' intercession and dedicated presence continued to be prized and invested in throughout the politically turbulent, violent and plague-infested fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.



Image: St Julian



## The Conesford Trail: Anchoresses in Medieval Norwich

Medieval churches throughout Norwich accommodated anchoresses, but among these there appear to be two clear clusters: one in Conesford in the King Street area and its close neighbourhood, and another, 'Over-the-Water', in the oldest and poorest part of the city between Coslany (Oak Street area) and Magdalen Street.

**This trail through Conesford begins opposite John Lewis by All Saints Green.**

### 1 All Saints

- Sometimes known as All Saints-by-Timber-Hill (site of the timber market), sometimes All Saints-in-the-old-Swyne-Market, because the green on the south side of the church was used to slaughter pigs and later other livestock.
- Currently a centre for antiques and collectables with café, finding traces of its medieval origins and its many memorials to its rich merchants and civic elite is difficult, but the body of the church structure and its churchyard remain.
- There was an anchorhold here. City records show that in 1287/8 the servants of the anchoress were charged that they had 'stopped up the Cockey (blocked up the common drain) 'so that no one can pass by there'. This suggests she or her servants may have been engaged in trade of some kind, possibly for the means to subsist. Trade of any kind was forbidden to anchoresses.

**As you come out, turn left and walk around the corner to Timber Hill and enter the church of:**

### 2 St John the Baptist (St John Timberhill)

- One of three city churches with this dedication, Francis Blomefield writing in the 1740s recorded that 'anciently . . . a recluse dwelt in a little cell adjoining the north side of the steeple.' This had fallen into disuse by the Reformation and in 1641 was rebuilt and lived in by Thomas and Anne Hinderby until they died. Then 'the parish pulled it down, finding it made the churchyard public' and doing away with a footpath which had been 'a common passage'. Clearly, it was attracting undesirable behaviour!
- This is a living church attracting worshippers of the Anglo-Catholic tradition.

**Turning back, cross the road from John Lewis into Ber Street, originally Burgh Street, as it led to the castle and town. Walk along to Horns Lane, opposite Trinity Stained Glass.**

### 3 St Bartholomew (lost)

- The church is gone but its tower remains are marked by a plaque.
- In 1306, an anchoress, Katherine, lived here. After 1549 this parish was united with another church to be found further along Ber Street:

### 4 St John at Holy Sepulchre (St John de Sepulchre)

- A pre-Conquest foundation, it was sometimes called St John-at-the-Gates, being close to an entrance in the city wall. Many gifts of land or property were invested by wealthy merchants of this parish for the benefit of the parish poor. Gifts of coal are frequently mentioned, for cooking over as well as heating, and gifts of warm clothing.
- This church had a shrine in the nave dedicated to St Anne with her image. Here it could be accessible to women with concerns about conception and childbirth. Women were not allowed in the chancel or sanctuary.
- 'In the time of Henry III (1216-72), a recluse lived in the churchyard'.
- 1455, Thomas the Hermit lived at Ber Street Gates. Hermits also sought a holy solitary life but unlike anchors and anchoresses were not vowed to enclosure or stability in one place. Hermits were commissioned to mend roads, collect tolls and clear ditches - filthy, smelly work. Thomas was a friend of Richard Fernys (d.1464), priest and hermit, who lived in several church locations in the city over a long period. Hermits, anchorites and anchoresses attracted bequests to and from each other as well as from the mercantile community.

**Walk back towards John Lewis, then down Thorn Lane, into Rouen Road, turn right and cross by the car-park to:**

### 5 St Julian

Another pre-Conquest church, destroyed in the Baedeker air-raids of April, 1942, it was rebuilt in the early 1950s on roughly the same footprint.

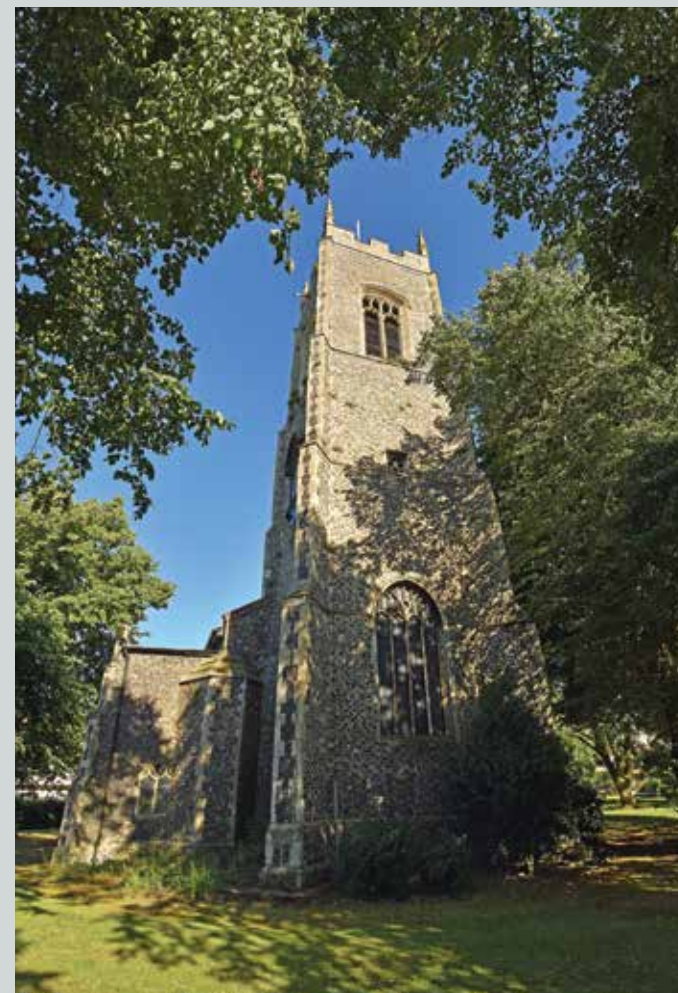


Image: St John de Sepulchre

- Note the beautiful Romanesque doorway into the cell on the south side, salvaged from St Michael at Thorn, also bombed in 1942, demolished about ten years later and used in the rebuilding of St Julian's.
- Famous for its re-imagined cell of Julian of Norwich (1342-?1416), mystic and author, who lived here probably from 1394 until she died, though the dates of her enclosure are uncertain. Anchoresses were often buried in their cell.
- Her book, written and re-drafted most likely while enclosed, was based on visions she experienced some twenty years earlier in 1373 when she was thirty. The first surviving reference to her as an anchoress was a bequest of Roger Reed, priest at St Michael Coslany, in 1394, but he gives no

location. The fourth and last reference was a bequest in 1416 left by the dowager countess of Suffolk, Isabel Ufford, herself a vowess of thirty-two years commitment.

- Julian is commemorated at Norwich Cathedral. Her image, commissioned from local sculptor, David Holgate, appears in a niche on the cathedral's west front. There are also two stained glass windows in private chapels.

The names of Julian's immediate successors are unknown, sometimes wrongly linked to Julian Lampet, a nun who was enclosed at Carrow Priory for over fifty-three years until her death in 1481. Names of those recorded include:

- 1472, Agnes
- 1481, 1505, 1506, Elizabeth Scott
- 1510, Elizabeth (possibly the same woman).
- 1524, Agnes Eldrigge
- 1537/8, 1547, unnamed anchoresses.

More often than not, anchoresses were not named in wills, but indicated by location.

**On leaving the church turn right into St Julian's Alley and walk down into King Street and turn right opposite Dragon Hall. Continue along King Street until you arrive at another church.**

## 6 St Etheldreda

- Dedicated to the Anglo-Saxon princess and abbess of her monastic foundation at Ely, this was another pre-Conquest foundation.
- Blomefield records that an anchorhold was 'anciently' here, which was rebuilt in 1305 and continued in occupation until the Reformation, 'when it was demolished and the tithe barn at Bracondale was built with its old timbers'.
- Its patrons were women as well as men, including Lady Katherine Felbrigge (1459), widow of Sir Simon, who had a house in the parish and Hawise Balygate (1479).
- 1472-1518 anonymous references to the anchoresses continue.
- In 1611, Anne Johnson, second wife and widow of Alderman William Johnson, founded an alms-house in the north-west corner of the churchyard for five widows.
- This church is now the base for a thriving group of artists.

## 7 St Edward-the-Martyr (lost)

- With a long history of anchoresses, this church is lost but was near St Etheldreda's church, linked in the 13th century by a churchyard path which led to the hospital at St Edward's. Records are patchy, but mention a priest-anchor, Robert in 1470 but also:
  - 13th century, Margaret
  - 1428, Lady Joan. Alderman Walter Setman left her 20s and 40d to her servants (a princely sum worth thousands in today's money).
  - 1458, Agnes Kyte
  - 1516, an unnamed anchoress here was left a bequest by Margaret Norman.
- Next to the anchorhold in the churchyard was a two-storey hospital with out-buildings called Hildebrond's - founded by a prosperous merchant of that name in the 1260s. Hildebrond also founded a chapel at the west end, possibly for the patients.
- By the end of the century this parish was united with that of St Julian, both in the gift of Carrow Priory.

**This is the end of this trail but do look out for our other self-guided trails of the city's medieval churches.**

## The Conesford Trail: Anchoresses in Medieval Norwich

This tour takes about 45 minutes to an hour, and will lead you through Conesford and its environs. In the Middle Ages this area was comprised of staithes and quays, industrial plant (lime works/quarry), an area for the slaughter of livestock in nearby Ber Street, aspirational merchants' houses, as well as an Augustinian friary, Carrow Priory (Norwich's only convent outside the city wall) and a hospital (Hildebrond's or Ivy Hall), in St Edward's churchyard, King Street.

With this brief introduction to these churches it is hoped that you will want to return and spend more time enjoying them and the other medieval churches which grace our city. There is a wealth of information about the city's medieval churches and the treasures they contain in 'The Medieval Churches of Norwich' by Nicholas Groves, 'Medieval Norwich', edited by Carole Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson, and 'Women and Religion in Late Medieval Norwich' by Carole Hill.

These self-guided trails are published by the Norwich Historic Churches Trust. They are part of a special citywide cultural celebration and are designed to enable you to enjoy the city's medieval churches at your leisure.



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The Dean and Chapter of Norwich Cathedral; the Diocese of Norwich; The Medieval Parish Churches of Norwich Research Project (University of East Anglia) including The Leverhulme Trust and Norwich Research Park; Norwich City Council; Norfolk County Council; The Churches Conservation Trust; Norfolk Museums Service; The Norwich Society; Gildencraft Stone Masonry, the Friends of Norwich Historic Churches Trust and the tenants of all the churches in their care.

# Norwich Historic Churches Trust

The Norwich Historic Churches Trust (NHCT) cares for eighteen Grade I listed medieval churches in the city that are no longer used for worship and have been deconsecrated. Established in 1973 it has found new uses for them and ensured their protection and maintenance. The churches managed by the NHCT are home to a number of major cultural activities including the Norwich Arts Centre, the Norwich Puppet Theatre, the Thalia Theatre Company and The Wharf Academy. If not open regularly for business, these churches are largely accessible during Heritage Open Days in September each year.

If you would like to know more about the churches managed by the Norwich Historic Churches Trust, whether it be taking on a tenancy of a church, gaining access to one or just finding out more about our buildings please contact the Administrator Stella Eglinton:  
stella.eglington@norwich-churches.org  
Tel: (01603) 611530

For further information about the history of our churches, the people associated with them and the monuments they contain visit: [www.norwich-churches.org](http://www.norwich-churches.org). To learn more about the activities of the Friends of Norwich Historic Churches go to: [www.fnhct.org.uk](http://www.fnhct.org.uk)



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