

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

THE CHURCH TOWER WAS STRUCK BY LIGHTNING IN 1898

I knew from a copy of the Parish Magazine dated May 1898 that the church had been struck by lightning on Saturday, 16 April 1898, but I have only recently unearthed the following report, which appeared in the April 23 1898, edition of the *Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette*.

Swanton Morley Church Struck by lightning

On Saturday last, a sharp thunderstorm, accompanied by heavy rain, passed over this place. The Parish Church was struck by lightning, at five minutes past five p.m. The south-east corner of the parapet of the tower was injured, several stones being hurled a considerable distance, two crashing through the roof. The clock was injured, and the dial slightly scorched. The wire rope, which supported one set of weights, gave way, and they fell down onto the parish chest, smashing it and scattering its contents in all directions about the church. The eastern window of the belfry was badly damaged, pieces of the mullions and tracery being broken off. Two of the small clerestory windows were injured, and a buttress outside the north aisle appears to have been shaken and some of the flints at the base disturbed. The tower has also received damage just below the clock. Pieces of the woodwork of the door of the south porch have been splintered off.

The parish clerk and his wife were sitting in the porch when this happened, and received no bodily hurt, although they were very much upset by the occurrence. Mrs Fowler had just before been arranging some flowers in vases on the chest, and had only moved away a few minutes [before], otherwise she must have been badly injured or killed. The course taken by the lightning is not easy to understand; probably a great deal of the damage was caused by the tremendous jar. The parishioners have good reason for being thankful that no loss of life occurred and that no greater damage was done to the building. It seems almost miraculous that the woodwork near the clock did not catch fire.

The article in the Parish Magazine gave less detail, but it did note that “The south-east angle of the tower was shattered, and portions of masonry falling on to the nave and south aisle roofs did considerable damage.” You may also like to note the use of a rather lovely phrase when the article said that, “The clock was also struck, the electric fluid severing the steel-wire rope which carries the weights.” It also clarified the fact that there were three people in the church at the time: “Mr and Mrs Hickleton and Mrs Fowler, who happened to be in the church at the time, had narrow escapes.”

Now Mr Hickleton was the parish clerk. The parish registers show that James Hickleton married Harriet Canham on 21 January 1849, so they were they were a fairly elderly couple. Their golden wedding was reported in the Feb 1899 edition of the magazine. James Hickleton died in January 1900, aged 80, and the May 1900 edition of the magazine reported that Joseph Canham had been appointed clerk and sexton following his death. Harriet Hickleton died in May 1915, aged 88. Does anyone know about Mrs Fowler? Was she the Susan Fowler who was buried at Swanton Morley on 27 May 1944, aged 86?

If you look at the church today, there is no obvious damage to the south parapet of the tower, so this must have been neatly repaired. However, if you look at the top two stages of the buttress on the south-east corner, you will see evidence that these must have been at least partially rebuilt because there is much less expensive flint ‘flushwork’ here than on the other three corners.

Finally, it is perhaps a little ironical to note that, despite this near disaster, no lightning conductor was subsequently fitted. In fact, it is only in recent months that action has finally been taken to fit one. Hopefully the church will soon be safe from this danger.