Anglo-Saxon Churches in Lincolnshire

by Timothy Ambrose

INTRODUCTION

Lincolnshire is particularly fortunate in having one of the largest groups of surviving Anglo-Saxon churches in England. Many of these churches survive only in part, but taken together they provide us with a remarkable picture of the early development of church architecture in this area of the country. Their presence bears striking witness to the length of time many of our village and urban communities have been in existence and also serves to remind us how long Christian worship has been taking place in the one location.

Much, however, still remains to be discovered. Later building and restoration have clearly often destroyed or obscured earlier work in churches, and the absence of visible structural remains of the late Saxon period is no indication that a Saxon church never stood on or near the site of a present church. Detailed structural analysis and the applications of modern archaeological techniques are beginning to demonstrate with startling clarity how many of our churches were built much earlier than their present appearance would have us believe. In Lincolnshire the survival in later church buildings of many carved stones which can be dated on stylistic grounds to before the Norman Conquest in 1066, lends further support to the suggestion that many of our village churches originated before this date.

This guide has been designed as a brief introduction to the Anglo-Saxon churches of Lincolnshire. It consists of a number of case studies, chosen to demonstrate various aspects of Anglo-Saxon church architecture and a list of Anglo-Saxon churches and stone-carvings in the county. It also provides a short list of relevant books and articles for those who are interested in studying the subject further, and three guided tours for visitors.

FURTHER READING

N. Pevsner and J. Harris — *Lincolnshire* (The Buildings of England, Penguin 1964)

H.M. Taylor and J. Taylor — *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* 3 vols. (Cambridge 1965, 1978).

D.M. Owen — *Church and Society in Mediaeval Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1971).

Ordnance Survey — *Britain before the Norman Conquest* (Southampton, 1973).

P.V. Addyman and R.K. Morris — *The Archaeological Study of Churches* (C.B.A. Research Report, 1976).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Front Cover — Late Saxon cross design from a grave slab found during excavations at St. Mark's Church, Lincoln

1

THE ANGLO-SAXON CHURCH

Information about the Anglo-Saxon Church in England from the seventh century to the Norman Conquest in 1066 comes from three main complementary sources — documentary, architectural and archaeological.

Our understanding of the organization of the Anglo-Saxon Church comes mostly from literary sources. We know that from the seventh century onwards, an ecclesiastical organization developed based on a series of important churches known as *'head minsters'*, usually the seat of a bishop, with an area dependent on them called a diocese. By the end of the seventh century Lincolnshire was split into two dioceses — based on the kingdoms of Lindsey in the north of the county, and of the Middle Angles in the south. By 1066, this picture had altered — Lincolnshire having become part of the large diocese of the Bishop of Dorchester, which covered seven counties. Within each of the earlier dioceses was a second series of churches, the *'old minsters'* acting as pastoral centres for wide areas and served by a group of clergy. In Lincolnshire 'old minsters' are known or suspected at Lincoln, Louth, Caistor, Stow, Horncastle and Grantham.

The dependent area of these churches gradually became split up into *'parishes'* within which local landowners had been encouraged in various ways to build churches with burial grounds attached to them. In Lincolnshire this gradual process is likely to have been arrested or modified during the ninth and tenth centuries by the devastation caused by the pagan Danes. It was only during the late tenth century after the Danish had been converted to Christianity that church building seems to have picked up again. By 1086, Domesday Book could record over 200 churches built in the historic county.

These parish churches, and their priests, were supported by gifts and produce given by or exacted by law from the local community which they served. The churches themselves were built under the encouragement of bishops and kings by one or more landowners who owned the *'profits'* of the church, that is to say the surplus revenue from tithes left over after the priest had been paid. There was therefore a strong economic incentive as well as a religious motive to found churches.

Evidence of these Anglo-Saxon churches still survives today, over a thousand years later, above ground and below ground. Evidence of the architectural changes which a church has gone through is often to be seen in the fabric — alterations and renovations, additions and subtractions, to walls, windows, floors, roofs, towers etc. Study of these structural changes can help to tell the story of a church's long architectural history.

Coupled with this type of structural analysis which can often only go some way in explaining a church's development, archaeology i.e. structural analysis below ground, can prove an invaluable approach in filling in the story. The early stages of a church's history are often hidden below ground. For example, an Anglo-Saxon church built of stone in the tenth or eleventh century may well have replaced an earlier church built of timber, all trace of which has long since vanished above ground, but evidence for which is preserved below ground. Examples of this kind are common, and when we come to look at Anglo-Saxon churches in the county, we must remember that we are looking at only part of a story, much of which we may never be able to tell.

2

MARTON

The church of St. Margaret at Marton, near Gainsborough is one of the best examples of Anglo-Saxon church architecture in the county. In all, some twenty-five Anglo-Saxon church towers survive in whole or in part in Lincolnshire, mostly dating from the late Anglo-Saxon period. The tower at Marton is built in two *'stages'* or storeys, with thin stones laid at 45°' in 'herringbone' fashion, a building technique continuing into the Norman period. In each side of the upper or *'belfry'* stage is a double window, with a central shaft set back in the middle of the wall supporting a stone slab running through the whole width of the wall. This type of window is characteristic of the late Anglo-Saxon period and found in many of our church towers. On the east face of the tower above the modern roof, the original steeper Anglo-Saxon roof-line is clearly visible, and within it a blocked doorway giving access from the roof space to the upper floor of the tower. On the west face is a narrow Anglo-Saxon window at first floor level.

Marton Church from the south-east. Note the earlier roof-line on the tower

On the west and east walls of the nave, the line of the original aisleless Anglo-Saxon nave can be plainly seen, where it forms a straight joint with the later walling of the aisles. It was a common practice in the Norman and later periods to simply pierce the north and south walls of an earlier aisleless church with arcades and add aisles to create more space. Herringbone masonry like that of the tower can be seen on the western part of the south wall of the chancel — the eastern part is a later addition. Note the *'plinth'* on which the herringbone stonework sits — it turns north halfway along the south chancel wall and marks the original east end of the Anglo-Saxon church.

Inside the church, the arch leading from the nave into the tower is Norman, but the fine chancel arch is of late Anglo-Saxon type. It is of a design peculiar to the period in that the shaft on either side is not positioned below the *'roll moulding'* which is carried around the arch proper, as technically it should be. Instead the shafts effectively support nothing — the original structural function being of less importance than the decorative role. The *'capitals'* of the shafts are decorated with spirals and ovals, although the south capital is a nineteenth-century replacement.

Two other points are of note — the small Anglo-Saxon stone carving depicting the Crucifixion, now built into the north wall of the chancel was discovered during nineteenth-century restoration work, and in the external south-west wall of the nave are several fragments of a decorated Anglo-Saxon *'cross-shaft'* which have been reused as building stone.

3

ST. MARY LE WIGFORD, LINCOLN

The church of St. Mary le Wigford, Lincoln is well-known for its tall tower of late Anglo-Saxon date. But it is equally well-known for its building inscription built into the west external wall of the tower. Cut into the upper triangular part of a reused Roman tomb-stone (see illustration) is an Anglo-Saxon inscription which records the name of the church's founder, and probable owner. Inscriptions recording a church's dedication are extremely rare in Anglo-Saxon contexts and this is the only example known in Lincolnshire. The inscription has been rather badly weathered, and is only just legible.
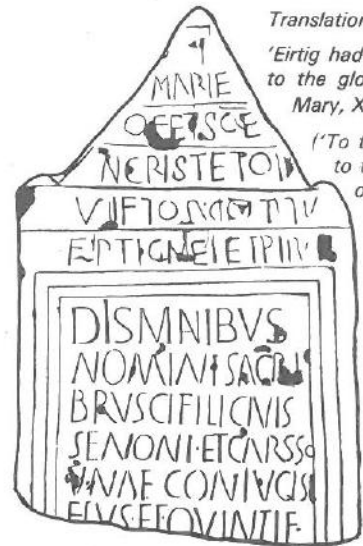
Translation

'Eirtig had me built and endowed to the glory of Christ and Saint Mary, XP'

('To the departed spirits and to the name of Sacer, son of Bruscus, a citizen of the Senones, and of Carssouna, his wife and of Quintus, his son . . .')

Roman and Anglo-Saxon inscription on west side of tower of St. Mary le Wigford, Lincoln

The tower itself is built of stone rubble and is in two stages. The belfry-stage has four double-belfry windows with decorated mid-wall shafts — the south window has been heavily restored in more recent times. The circular mid-wall shaft of the western window is elaborately decorated with the two arches above carrying zig-zag ornament. All the windows are elaborate, and all have subtle differences of construction and decoration. In the south and west walls of the lower stage is a single, tall round-headed window in Anglo-Saxon style. The west doorway although heavily restored externally in modern times is of late Anglo-Saxon date. The *'quoins'* or corner stones of the original west wall of the Anglo-Saxon nave are visible on either side of the tower incorporated into the west walls of the later aisles, like those at Marton. The distance between them gives us a good idea of the original width of the nave, before the two aisles which are of different date, were built. Inside the church the tall tower arch with its decorated details is of Anglo-Saxon date. Above it and now visible is a blocked round-headed doorway, as at Marton, which would have given access from the tower into the roof-space. The last point of interest is an Anglo-Saxon carved stone, with interlace ornament and a stylized animal face built into the north face of the south *'jamb'* or corner of the tower arch.

HOLTON LE CLAY

It was long thought that sufficient of the original Anglo-Saxon church of St. Peter at Holton le Clay survived to show that the square west tower, rectangular aisleless nave and squarish chancel were all of late Anglo-Saxon date and of contemporary build. The *'quoins'* or corner stones of the tower, nave and chancel are built in *'side-alternate'* technique, commonly seen in Anglo-Saxon church architecture, with large dressed stone blocks set on their sides with alternating long and short faces, while a double plinth runs around the tower and can also be seen under the north wall of the nave, and the south and east chancel wall. Limited archaeological excavation here in 1973 and 1975, however, showed that the foundations of the present nave had in fact been laid at a later date than those of the tower (built in about 1060), and that the chancel foundations are later than those of the nave. The plan of the church today is nevertheless likely to closely reflect the late Anglo-Saxon layout.
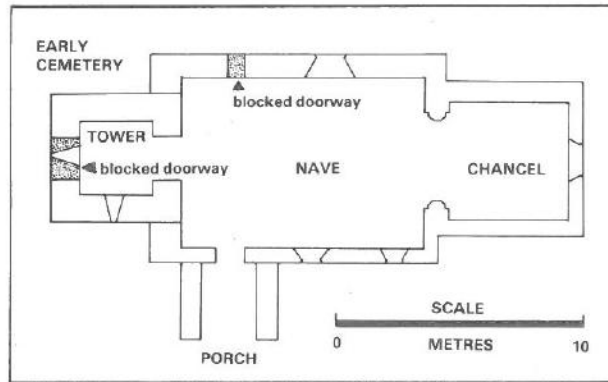
Plan of Holton le Clay church

The tower (only the lower stage is Anglo-Saxon) has a blocked west doorway with a window above. On its east face traces of the original steeper roof-line can still be seen. Documentary records tell us that the tall, narrow tower arch was until nineteenth-century rebuilding matched by a chancel arch of similar proportions. Immediately north of the tower part of a late Saxon cemetery was found in the archaeological excavations, which had been disturbed when the tower was originally constructed, showing that the cemetery was in use at an earlier date. Any traces of an early timber church which the cemetery may have served probably lie below the later stone building. Many of our earliest Saxon churches were built of timber, and were only later rebuilt in stone.
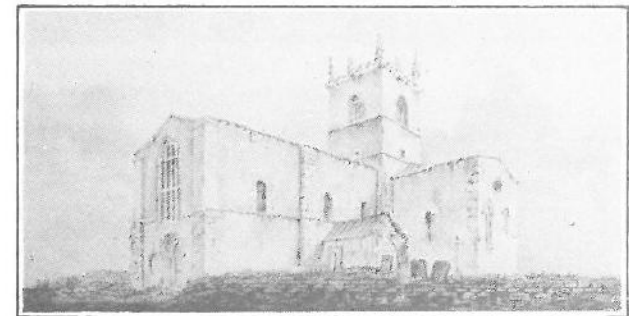
STOW

Of all the Anglo-Saxon churches in Lincolnshire, the church of St. Mary at Stow is the most impressive. The church as we see it today is of *'cruciform'* or cross-shaped plan with a central tower, aisleless nave and chancel, and a north and south *transept* or arm. The Anglo-Saxon remains consist of the central crossing with its four massive arches (all of the same height), and the north and south transepts. Within the Anglo-Saxon crossing four great piers were built during the fourteenth century to strengthen and support the tower, the upper stage of which is of this date. The nave and very elaborate chancel, heavily restored in the mid-nineteenth century, are both of Norman date — the nave probably built by the first Norman Bishop of Lincoln, Remigius, sometime after 1071. That the nave and chancel are later than the crossing is shown by their walls which butt up against the crossing rather than being bonded into it and by the presence of buttresses not evident on the transepts.

The date at which the first Anglo-Saxon church was built on this spot is something of a problem. We know from documentary sources that the church was rebuilt in the first half of the eleventh century, and some architectural historians believe that traces of this rebuilding are to be seen in the external walls of the transepts, where the upper levels of the walls and *'quoins'* or corner stones are in marked contrast to the lower levels, which are badly worn and show signs of having been burnt. These lower levels may, therefore, represent an earlier church built perhaps during the tenth century, and refurbished in the early eleventh century.

Descriptions of the restoration work in the nineteenth century are an important if tantalizing source of information about early plans of the church. It seems fairly certain that the nave was in fact originally aisled, for traces of the foundations of nave walls were found where they joined the transepts. This would make sense of the Anglo-Saxon doorway which survives in the west wall of the north transept, and the doorway (now blocked) in a similar position in the south transept. The presence of a former aisle on the south side of the chancel was also noted.

Controlled archaeological excavation would help further our understanding of the development of the Anglo-Saxon church. Two other features which are of interest are the narrow Anglo-Saxon window in the south wall of the south transept with its decorated arched head, and part of a window in a similar position in the north wall of the north transept.


Sketch of Stow Church, 1793

| Parish location of church	Significant Anglo-Saxon architectural details	Carved stones present* absent—
Asgarby & *Howell*	No architectural details	*
Aunsby & Dembleby	No architectural details	*
Barholme & Stowe	Blocked S. doorway, S. wall of nave	
Barrowby	No architectural details	*
Bicker	No architectural details	*
Blyborough	No architectural details	*
Bracebridge	W. tower, nave, tower and chancel arches, reused N. doorway	—
Branston & Mere	West tower, west wall of nave	—
Brant Broughton & *Stragglethorpe*	Nave walls and N.W. quoin, W. doorway and window	—
Brattleby	No architectural details	*
Burton Pedwardine	No architectural details	*
Cabourne	W. tower with details, tower arch	—
Caistor	W. tower with details, nave walls	—
Cammeringham	No architectural details	*
Castle Bytham	No architectural details	*
Coleby	West tower with details, tower arch, W. nave quoins	*
Colsterworth	N. nave wall	*
Conisholme	No architectural details	*
Corringham	West tower, nave quoins and walls, tower arch and blocked doorway above	*
Counthorpe & *Creeton*	No architectural details	*
Cowbit	No architectural details	?*
Cranwell & Byard's Leap	N.E. nave quoin	*
Cuxwold (parish of Swallow)	West tower, W. nave wall, tower arch	—
Eagle, *Dowsby* & Swinethorpe	No architectural details	*
Edenham	S. nave wall, carved roundels	*
Ewerby & Evedon	No architectural details	*
Glentworth	West tower with details, blocked doorway above tower arch	*
Grasby	No architectural details	?*
Great Hale	West tower with details, circular stairway, W. nave wall	*
Greetwell	S.E. nave quoin, blocked window in S. nave wall	—
Hackthorn	No architectural details	*
Hainton	West tower with details, N.W. nave quoin	—
Harmston	West tower with details	*
Harpswell	West tower with details	—
Heapham	West tower with details, nave walls, S. doorway, tower arch	—
Holton le Clay	West tower with details, tower arch, plan	*
Hough on the Hill	West tower with details, W. stair turret, W. nave quoins, nave walls, roof line	*
Hougham	No architectural details	*
Kirkby la Thorpe	No architectural details	*
Lenton, Keisby & Osgodby	No architectural details	*
Lincoln: St. Benedict	West tower (rebuilt c. 1670)	—
Lincoln: St. Mary le Wigford	West tower with details, W. nave wall, tower arch, with blocked doorway above	*
Lincoln: St. Peter at Gowts	West tower with details, W. nave walls, tower arch with doorway above	*
Little Bytham	S. nave quoins	—
Lusby	Nave and chancel walls, chancel arch, blocked S. doorway, ?S. window, plinth	?*
Market Deeping	No architectural details	*
Marton	West tower with details, W. nave wall, tower and chancel arches, nave walls, blocked doorway within roofline	*
Mavis Enderby	No architectural details	*
Miningsby	No architectural details	*
Moulton	No architectural details	*
Nettleton	W. tower with details, tower arch	—
North Thoresby	No architectural details	*
North Witham	No architectural details	*
Osbournby	No architectural details	*
Owersby	No architectural details	*
Pointon & *Sempringham*	No architectural details	*
Ropsley & Humby	Nave walls and quoins	—
Rothwell	West tower with details, nave walls and quoins, tower arch	—
Rowston	No architectural details	—
Saxilby with Ingleby	No architectural details	*
Skillington	Nave walls and E. quoins	—
Sleaford	No architectural details	*
South Kyme	No architectural details	*
Springthorpe	Restored W. tower with details	—
Stow	Crossing and transepts	*
Swallow	West tower with details, tower arch W. nave wall	—
Syston	S. nave wall and quoins, N. wall, ?tower walls	*
Tathwell	No architectural details	*
Theddlethorpe St. Helens	No architectural details	*
Thoresway	No architectural details	*
Thurlby	West tower, nave walls, tower arch with blocked doorway above	?*
Toft Newton	No architectural details	*
Waithe	West tower with details	—
Whaplode	No architectural details	*
Wilsford	N. nave wall and N.E. quoin S. chancel wall	—
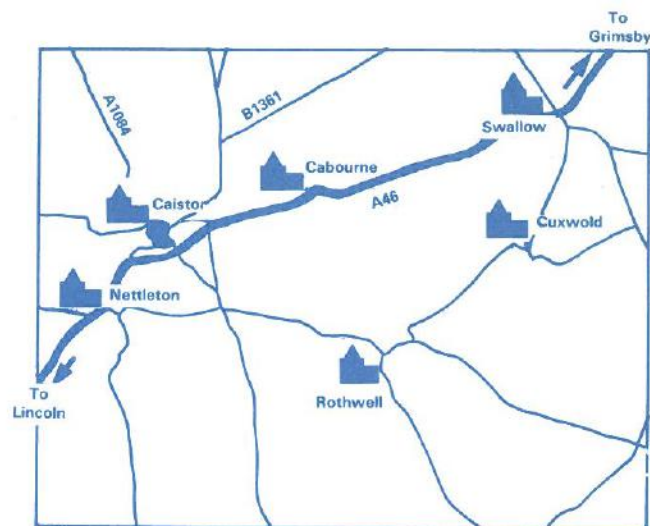
GUIDE ROUTE 1 (Lincoln - Nettleton - Caistor - Cabourne - Swallow - Cuxwold - Rothwell - Lincoln)

Follow the A46 Grimsby road from Lincoln bypassing Market Rasen, for 35 km to Nettleton. Take first right in village for 100 m. — church of St. John the Baptist is on your left. A/S w. tower of two stages with original doorway. Small window in w. and s. faces. Tower arch. No other A/S work. ■ Return to A46, turn right for Caistor. Take first left off A46, and then first left again. The church of SS. Peter and Paul is ahead. Lower stage of tower A/S with Norman insertions. Note side-alternate quoins on angles of original aisleless nave, w. door of tower cut into blocked round-headed arch. Another blocked round-headed arch on s. face. Two more, one above the other on n. face with window above. Tower arch could be Norman. Parts of original nave walls at ends of inserted aisles. ■ Back to A46 and left for Cabourne 2 km away. The church of St. Nicholas is by the roadside. W. tower is main A/S feature. Lower stage A/S, upper stage 19th-century restoration. Note w. doorway with window above, and tower arch. ■ Continue along A46 for 4 km to Swallow. The Church of the Holy Trinity is by the side of the road. The lower stage of the tower and nave walls are A/S — note the side-alternate quoins. The w. face of the tower has a round-headed door with small window above. Tower arch intact. ■ Cross A46 now and take the minor road s.-e. for Cuxwold bearing right at fork 100 m. ahead. 2 km and the church is on your right. W. tower and possibly parts of the nave are late A/S or early Norman. Note the side-alternate quoins and the small round-headed tower arch. ■ Turn right at T-junction now for Rothwell, 2 km further on. Follow the road into the village — the church of St. Mary Magdalene has a late A/S w. tower of two stages and nave walls with Norman arcades. Double belfry windows in tower, small round-headed windows on n., s. and w. faces. Another window on s. face below. Round-headed doorway in w. face and round-headed tower arch. Note quoins in w. nave wall. ■ Turn left at head of church lane and follow road for 4 km to Nettleton, and A46 to Lincoln.

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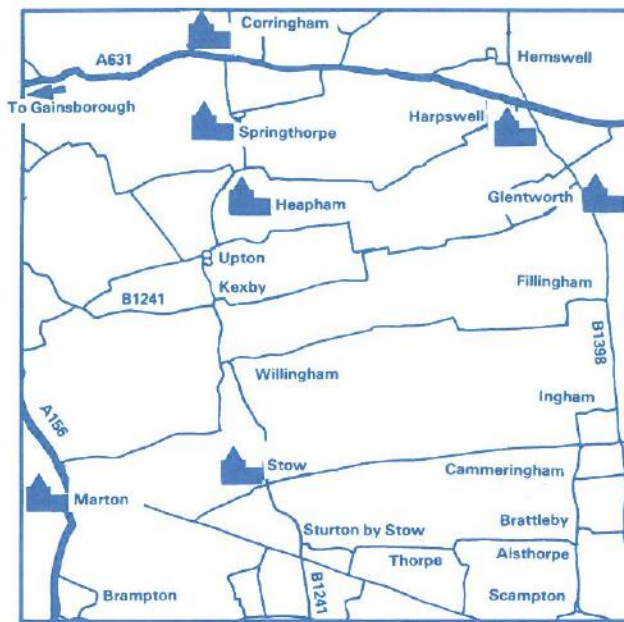
GUIDE ROUTE 2 (Lincoln - Glentworth - Harpswell - Corringham - Springthorpe - Heapham - Marton - Stow - Lincoln)
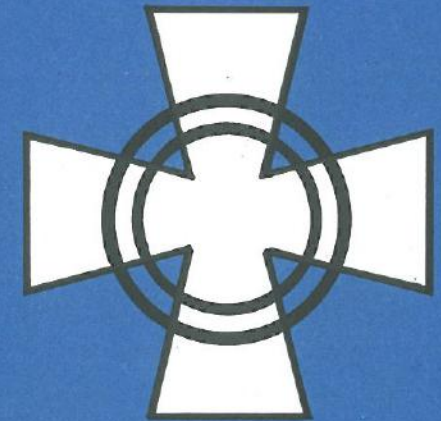
Take the B1398 north from Lincoln for 16 km to Glentworth. Turn first left into the village, second right. The church of St. Michael is on your left. The tower is of late A/S work with two windows in the upper stage and four double belfry windows. Note the side-alternate quoins, and the blocked doorway above the tower arch inside the church. ■   Return to B1398 and turn left for Harpswell, 2 km. Turn left at A631, and the church of St. Chad is 100 m. on your left. The tower is of late A/S date with quoins in the s. face and a blocked window in w. face. The tower originally had four double belfry windows; the w. side is blocked by a clock face. No other A/S features survive. ■   Continue west along A631 for 7 km, turn right for Corringham at signpost. The church of St. Lawrence is opposite the T-junction 500 m. ahead. The w. tower is Anglo-Saxon; two stages with side-alternate quoins. The upper stage has restored double belfry windows with mid-wall shafts. The original s.w. external quoin, and the n.-e. and s.-e. internal quoins of the nave are visible, showing that the nave walls are still on the A/S alignment. ■   Return to A631, turn left and immediately right for Springthorpe 1 km ahead. Follow the road into village — the church of St. Lawrence and St. George on your left has A/S tower with side-alternate quoins heavily restored in mid-19th. century; recent belfry with pseudo-Saxon double windows. Note blocked w. doorway and window in s. face. ■ Continue along road to Heapham 1 km on. All Saints' Church is opposite the T.-junction. W. tower on plinth, side-alternate quoins. Blocked doorway in w. face, with window above. Double belfry windows. S. door of nave and tall tower arch A/S. S. and n. walls probably A/S. Take the Gainsborough road from Heapham to A156., turn left for Marton 5 km (see p. 3). ■   Turn back along A156 for 300 m.; right turn for Stow 4 km (see p: 6). ■ Follow B1241 south to Saxilby and A57 for Lincoln.
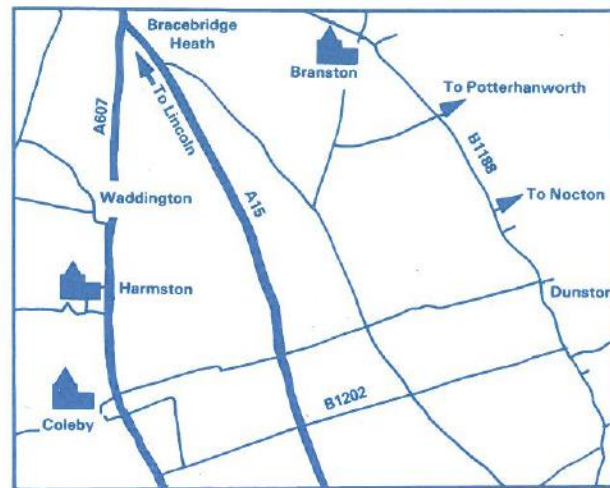
GUIDE ROUTE 3 (Lincoln - Harmston - Coleby - Branston - Lincoln)

The route begins at St. Benedict's Church on w. side of Lincoln High Street below the Stonebow. The tower of St. Benedict's Church was restored and rebuilt after the Civil War against the west end of the old chancel, the nave having been destroyed. The belfry-stage has four double windows with mid-wall shafts, and a blocked doorway above the blocked west wall of the chancel may be A/S. ■   Continue down High Street to the cross-roads. Opposite on the left is St. Mary le Wigford's Church (see p. 4). ■ Continue along High Street for about 550 m., and the important church of St. Peter at Gowts is on your left. Tall A/S w. tower with side-alternate quoins, and four double-belfry windows with ornate capitals. A/S windows on s. and w. faces, with A/S carved stone above the restored w. door. The nave is A/S with long-and-short w. quoins. Note the tower plinth overlying the nave plinth and providing a relative date for each. The tall A/S tower arch has a blocked triangular-headed doorway above. ■

The second half of the route is by car or bicycle. Leave Lincoln by the A607 heading south. 6 km and turn right for Harmston. Follow the road to a T-junction. All Saints' Church on your left has a tall late A/S tower with side-alternate quoins and four windows with mid-wall shafts at belfry stage. The tower arch is Norman, but note the fragment of A/S cross-shaft next to it. ■   Turn left to main road, and right for Coleby. 2 km and turn right. The Church of All Saints is 400 m. ahead. Another A/S tower with a tall window in its south face, with a smaller window above this. The A/S tower arch is cut through by the later 15th-century arch. The nave quoins on s-w and n-w corners may be A/S. ■   Return to and cross main road towards Dunston. 8 km and turn left at the B1188. 5 km and take second left in Branston. All Saints' Church is on your right. A fine A/S tower with two stages and double belfry windows with mid-wall shafts on all faces. ■   Return to B1188 and turn left for Lincoln.