

Shipden

Norfolk's Own Atlantis



Medieval Shipden

Shipden is a forgotten parish from the Norfolk coast that was swallowed by the sea, the county's own Atlantis, just a stone's throw from the famous Cromer Pier.

As you stand on the cliff top at Cromer, or indeed to the North towards the Runtons and south towards the 'Strands, on the high point of the coast, imagine those cliffs as part of a slope that extends seaward. As you roll back time you eventually come to a different coastline: one where there probably wasn't really much of a cliff, and there sits a series of villages in what is now the North Sea. Foulness, Clare, and the most famous, Shipden, all just off the modern coast.

The Domesday Book of 1086 records that Shipden had 117 residents, three acres of meadow, 36 swine, four-and-a-half plough teams, a harbour, several manor houses and two churches. We know that the church serving the village was St Peter's Church, whilst the other church served Shipden-Juxta-Felbrigg (the site of Cromer today). St Peter's Church was located about 150 yards east of the end of where Cromer Pier stands today and 400 metres north of the Bath House (the yellow building) on the Esplanade.

The Paston family, members of the Norfolk gentry known for the Paston Letters that are held in the British Library, owned one of the manor houses. The Abbot of St Benet's Abbey owned another, and records show that the bishop held jurisdiction over Shipden. Records also

showed the value of the land falling between 1066 and 1086 against local trend, possibly suggesting loss of land to the sea.

In the 13th Century, church records show the rector, Philip, had a manse and 12 acres of land, and his chaplain had half a share of 12d worth of land within these grounds.

In 1334, a license was granted to John Broun, the patron, and John de Lodbrook, the rector, to buy an acre of land further inland. It was to be used as a burial ground, and to accommodate a new church, as 'a great deal of the present cemetery (in Shipden) has been washed away by the sea'.

A study by Durham University into Weather, Climate, Sea Level & Floods in Medieval Times showed that sea levels rose to a peak in 1380, said to be 1 metre higher than they had been in 1000. They also noted that the years 1250 -1500 were years with high levels of storm activity, and made reference to the year 1334, among others, as a year in which the North Sea basin surged, leading to flooding and erosion.

In 1337, 36 people paid a tax so the town had the means to build the new church. The records show that these were mainly fishermen, and that they had built a jetty in the village and were travelling across the North Sea looking for fish and trade.

By 1350 the church was no longer in use. There is some dispute over when it was claimed by the sea. The Bolingbroke Papers claim it was underwater from 1350, but church records show that land around it was still being used and bought. By 1400, however, it was definitely underwater, although the church tower was still visible at low tides well into the 1800s. By 1400 the locals had started calling it Church Rock.

The best estimate is that the sea had reached the church in 1351, and the first sea defences in Cromer were built in 1836, showing that the sea had claimed 400 metres in 485 years by erosion, approximately 0.8 metres per year.

It is thought that the site of the church in Shipden was approximately half a kilometre inland when it was first established under the Anglo-Danes.

The Wreck of the *Victoria*

Cromer became a resort in the early 19th Century, with the rich making it their summer home. Guidebooks referred to Church Rock still being visible at low tide, and local legends referred to being able to hear the church bells in stormy weather.

The *Victoria* was a small paddle tug boat that carried passengers from Yarmouth to Lowestoft and to Cromer in summer months. On the 9th of August 1888, the *Victoria* brought 100 passengers from Great Yarmouth's Britannia Pier to Cromer, as it did regularly. It would anchor offshore, and visitors would be ferried to the beach by local rowing boats.

On this day those local rowing boats would be called into more urgent action, as the *Victoria* ran into, or rather onto, Church Rock. The vessel was ruptured and taking on water, but due to its position on the top of the tower, it didn't sink, and the rowboats were able to collect everyone and deliver them safely to Cromer, where they were able to get a train back to Great Yarmouth later that day. Efforts to remove the ship from the rock were ultimately unsuccessful. After a short while, a decision was taken to blow up the ship and the top of the tower with dynamite to make the shipping lane safer for boats and seamen.

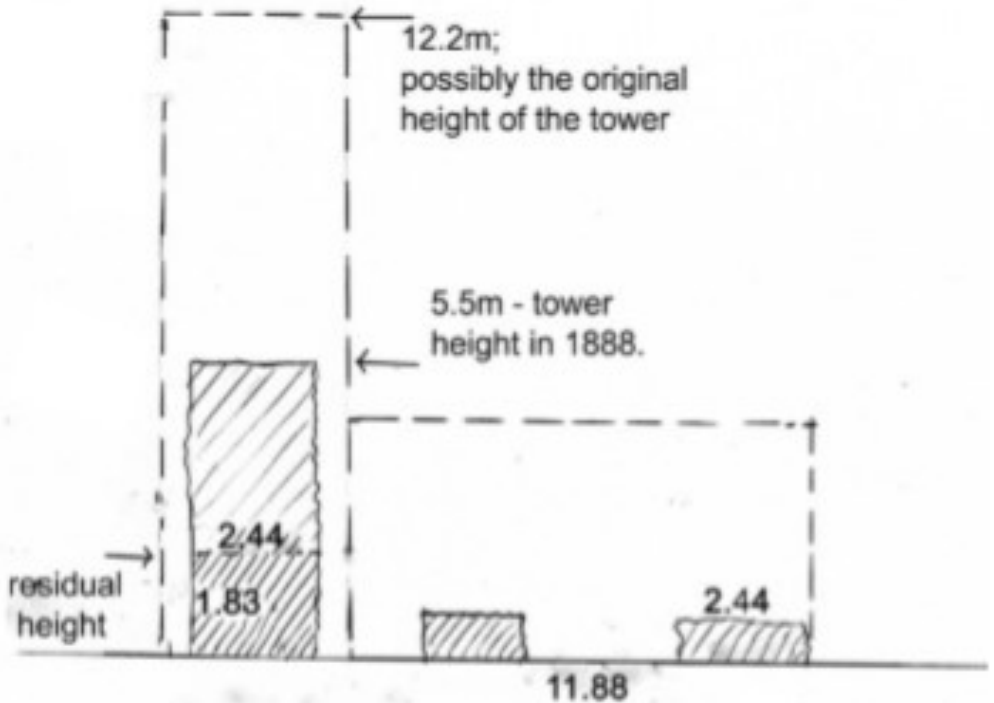
Scuba Dives to Shipden

In 1982 a dive was organised by Great Yarmouth Museum to retrieve parts of the *Victoria*. The diver noted seeing the walls and door of the church, as well as the ruins of houses along a road.

In 1985, Martin Warren and David Pope took a dive 400 metres offshore. They descended seven metres into water so dark that visibility was poor. They saw the ruins of buildings in an east-west line, parallel with the beach, including what looked like it was probably the remains of the church. They noted that the floor was covered in flint and chalk and littered with broken pieces of the *Victoria*. They brought back some artefacts, which are on display at Cromer Museum.

In 1988, Yarmouth Sub Aqua Club members dived the site, salvaging a hinge from the *Victoria's* rudder, among other artefacts. They recalled

'being fascinated by swimming along a street in Shipden 40 feet below the sea where people had once walked'.



Profile of St Peter's Church, Shipden, Norfolk

From notes taken of Martin Warren & David Pope's dive in 1985

Resources Used

Church Times

North Norfolk News

East Anglian Archaeology/
Norfolk Museums Service

Round Towers

Great Yarmouth Mercury

Weird Norfolk

Norfolk Heritage Explorer

Wikipedia

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Information correct at time of printing. This guide is not exhaustive and inclusion should not be taken as a recommendation. Please contact us to contribute updates and additions.

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