

Suffolk County Council
Archaeological Service

Ringshall Free Church, Ringshall, Suffolk

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Historic Building Record

OASIS Ref: suffolkc1-54092



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September 2008

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(TM 045 514)

An Archaeological Record

This report provides a written and photographic record at English Heritage (2006) Level 2 of a redundant church. The report has been prepared to a brief written by the Archaeological Service of Suffolk County Council (Dr Jess Tipper, 20 August 2008, Reference: /RingshallFreeChurch-Ringshall2008) and is intended to fulfil a condition of planning consent for demolition (Mid Suffolk District Council application 1907/08).

Introduction

The following report is accompanied by a CD containing a full photographic record in the form of 40 megapixel digital images (Appendix 1) but also includes printed photographs of key features (Appendix 2). Each digital image is separately described in the written report, and the CD includes the report in MS Word format. The site was inspected on 3 September 2008.

Summary

Ringshall Free Church was built in *circa* 1860 as a red-brick single-roomed Baptist chapel with a slate roof on the northern side of Lower Road. The site is shown as an empty and relatively isolated field on the tithe map of 1838, but the present building appears on the First Edition Ordnance Survey of 1886 along with a small group of adjacent cottages and is marked 'Baptist Chapel (General)'. The presence of a Baptist chapel is noted in a trade directory of 1869 but not in an earlier edition of 1855, and the first recorded baptism occurred in 1859. The church is believed to have become independent (i.e. a Free Church) in 1951 and to have become redundant in 2006. The original church extended to 9.5 m in length by 6.4 m in width (31 ft by 21) and was aligned at right-angles to the nearby road. Its single hall was lit by three large sash windows in each side elevation and was entered by a central door in its southern gable. The symmetrical exterior was embellished with moulded window sills in gault brick and a pedimented door case which is now obscured by a later porch. A small additional room of 2.75 m by 2.75 m (9 ft by 9) was added to the northern gable before 1886, and a number of further rear extensions were built piecemeal in the 20th century. The building is a good

example of its type, but its interior has been re-fitted and its windows replaced, although a rail of coat pegs with acorn terminals which spans the internal walls may be an original feature. Until its expansion to the east and north in the 20th century (to include the present car park and rear lawn) the building occupied a narrow plot of land and was closely bounded on three sides. An area of approximately 10 m by 10 between the southern gable and Lower Road may have operated for a short time as a private Baptist burial ground but there are no obvious records of interments at Ringshall and this is uncertain.

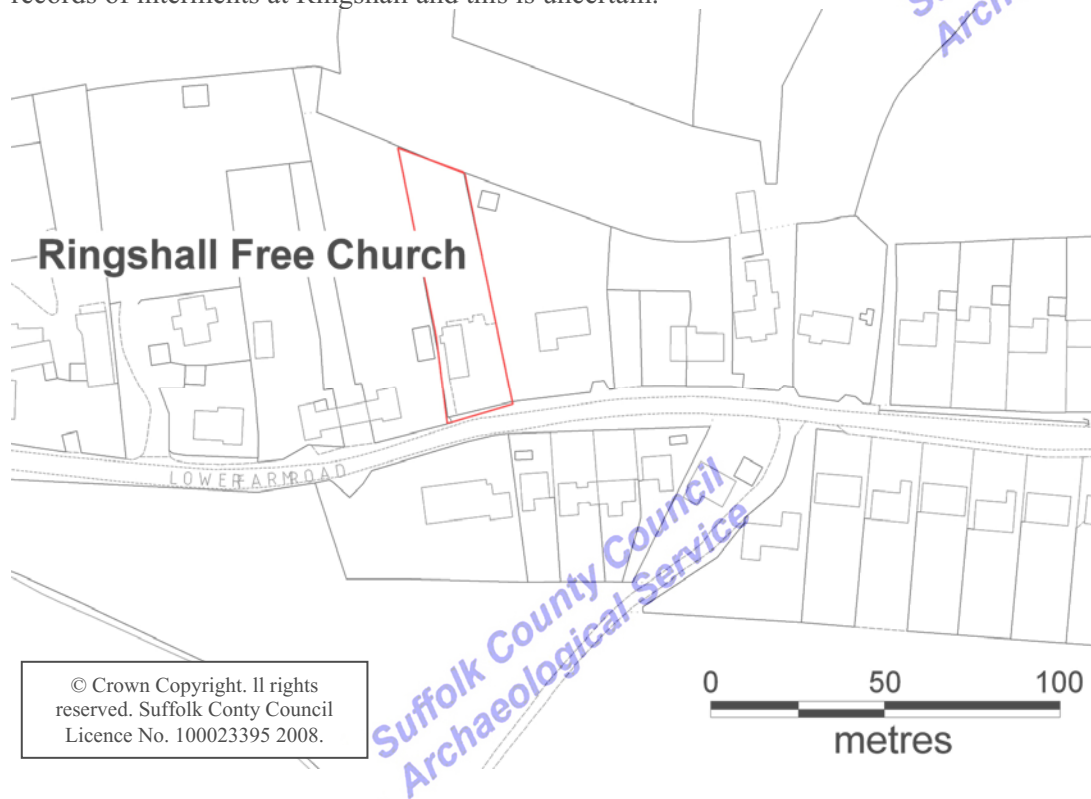


Figure 1
Modern Site Plan
Showing 20th and 21st century ribbon development and enlarged plot

Historic Context: Documentary & Cartographic Record

Ringshall Free Church lies on the northern side of Lower Farm Road at the southern edge of the parish, approximately 1.5 km south-east of the Norman church of St Katherine. Chapel Farm 150 m to the north-east lies beside an empty moat and marks the site of a medieval free chapel with 32 acres of land which belonged to the Prior of Norwich and was assigned to the Benedictine Priory at Hoxne (VCH Vol. 2 pp.76-77). This may be coincidental, but it is possible that knowledge of its presence had some bearing on the choice of an otherwise isolated site for the Free Church when it was built as a Baptist chapel in *circa* 1860.

The Church now forms part of a largely modern ribbon development extending from Ringshall Stocks in the direction of the 20th century conurbation at RAF Wattisham 1 km to the west. The site is shown as an empty field on the Ringshall tithe map of 1838, but the present building appears on the First and Second Edition Ordnance Surveys of 1886 and 1904 respectively. The First Edition was consulted on the internet but was not available for inclusion here, but the Second Edition, which shows an identical layout, is reproduced as figures 2 and 2a. A small group of cottages had also been built to the west of the Church, which is labelled 'Baptist Chapel General' in 1886 and simply 'Baptist Chapel' in 1904, but it remained relatively isolated in the landscape.

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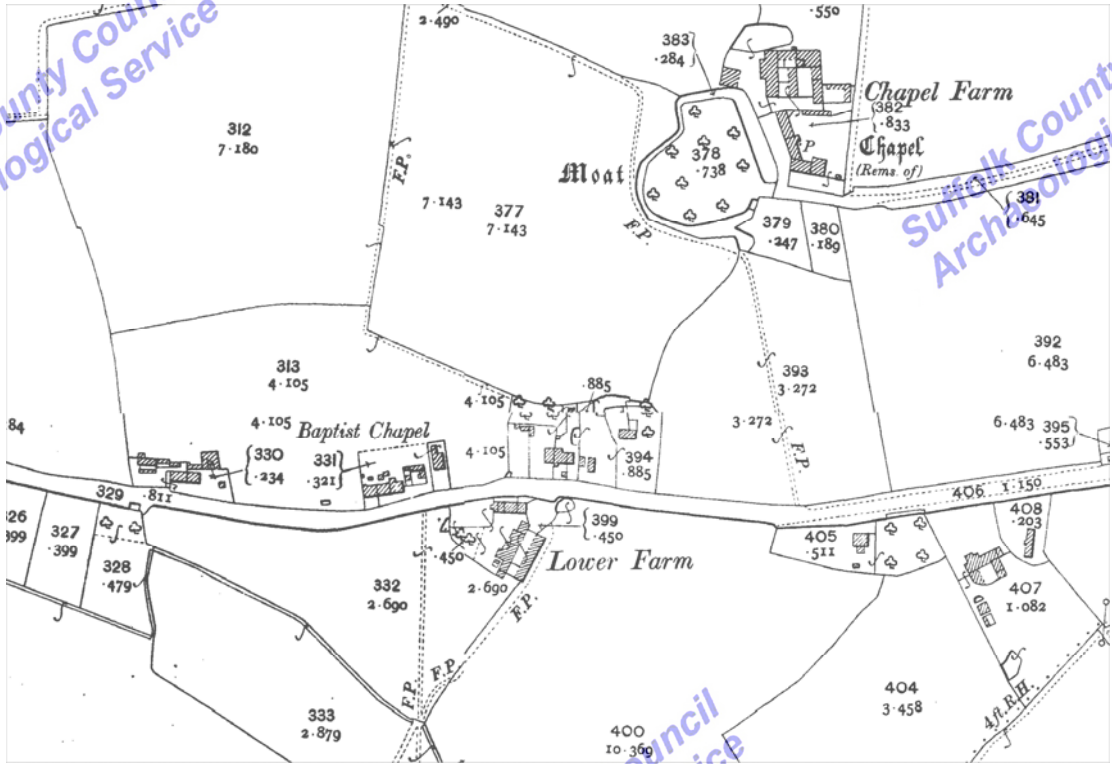


Figure 2

Second Edition 25 inch Ordnance Survey, 1905 (largely unaltered from 1885 First Edn)
Showing the relatively isolated location and the proximity of Chapel Farm to north-east

Baptist Chapel

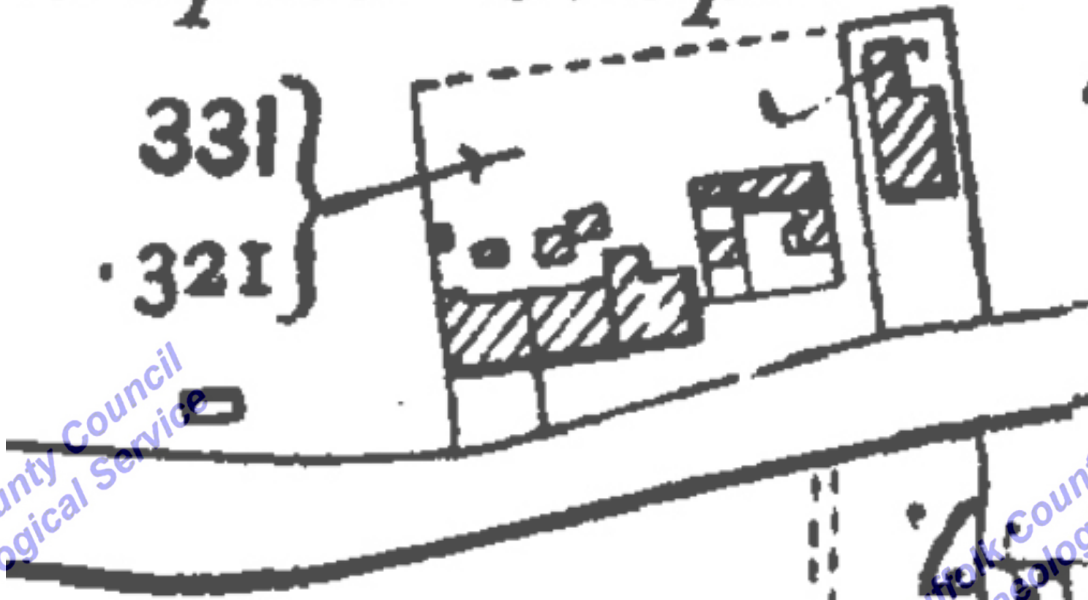


Figure 2a

Detail of 1904 Second Edition Ordnance Survey, showing small original plot and extension to north-western corner (as 1886)

The 1886 Ordnance Survey shows a distinctively asymmetrical outline and includes the small room which was clearly built as a later extension to the original hall and is now fitted as a kitchen (area 2 in figure 3). The date of the hall's construction is narrowed by the absence of any reference to a Baptist chapel here in the Ecclesiastical Census of 1851 (Historical Atlas of Suffolk) and the 1855 edition of White's Directory, but its inclusion in Kelly's Directory of 1869 and subsequent editions of both Kelly's and White's (where it is described as 'small'). No Directories between 1855 and 1869 were available for consultation. The first reference to a Baptist baptism in Ringshall occurs in 1859 (Suffolk Record Office) and it is likely that the present hall was erected in this year or shortly afterwards. There are no obvious records of burials in Ringshall, but 19th century Baptist burial grounds were private, often short-lived, and can be difficult to trace in the documentary record. Most members of the Ringshall Baptist congregation appear to have been interned in the Needham Market burial ground, but it is possible that the small area between Lower Road and the entrance in the chapel's southern gable (as shown in figure 2a) was designed for burials and may contain the remains of its founding members and first ministers. The grounds of the chapel were considerably enlarged in the 20th century to create the present parking area and a large tract of lawn to the rear, but in the absence of documentary records (which would be more likely to exist at this later date) it is improbable that burial occurred here. A note in the baptism registers at the Suffolk Record Office suggests that the Baptist chapel became a free church (gaining greater autonomy over its management) in or shortly before 1951, and an elderly resident of the area recalled its closure in (or about) 2006.

Building Analysis

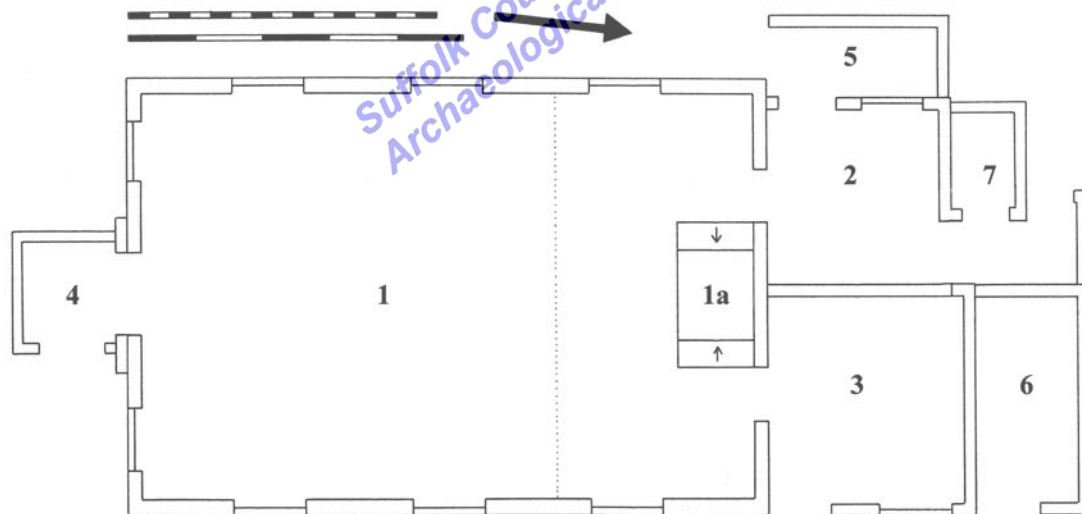


Figure 3

Schematic Block Plan of Church (Scale in feet (top) and metres)

Showing the various phases of construction discussed in the text and illustrated in the photographic record. The dotted line which spans the width of the original hall (1) indicates the position of the dais.

Key to Figure 3

1. Original chapel hall of *circa* 1860 with central entrance in southern gable. 1a marks the 20th century pulpit with steps rising from both sides, and the dotted line indicates the front edge of its 6 inch-high dais.
2. Later 19th century extension with original door frame and sash window, now fitted as a kitchen (shown on Ordnance Survey of 1886)

3. Early-20th century extension forming a second rear compartment now containing an organ.
4. Mid-20th century porch obscuring original pedimented door case.
5. Mid-20th century extension forming a side porch or shed.
6. Late-20th century extension forming a storage shed with external access.
7. Late-20th or early-21st century extension forming a WC.

Original Chapel (1)

The original structure, shown as area 1 in figure 3, consists of uniform red brickwork in Flemish bond and extends to 6.4 m in overall width by 9.5 m in length (21 ft by 31). Aligned approximately north-south it formed a single hall rising to 3.4 metres (11 ft) at its eaves beneath a low-pitched slate roof. The building was arranged symmetrically, containing three tall windows in each side elevation and two narrower windows flanking an original entrance in the centre of its southern gable. This entrance was approached from the road through a small yard of approximately 10 metres by 10, but the grounds have since been enlarged considerably to the east and north as shown in figures 1 and 2. The window apertures lie beneath segmental arches and almost certainly contained vertical sashes, but now possess modern PVC replacements.

The building was embellished with projecting moulded window sills in gault (white) brick and a projecting door case beneath a moulded pediment (now largely obscured by a 20th century porch). The original arrangement of the northern gable is unclear as its fabric is concealed. The roof purlins rest on three pre-fabricated principal trusses with raking queen struts and vertical iron rods which may be original, but the interior has otherwise been stripped of contemporary fittings. A row of coat hooks with acorn terminals on a wooden rail extends around the entire hall and may also be original (or a late-19th century addition) but the pulpit and the boarding of the walls (both painted with imitation grain) are 20th century insertions. The pulpit (or reading desk) opposite the entrance is raised on a dais of 15 cm (6 ins) in height which extends 3 m (10 ft) from the northern wall.

19th Century Extension (2)

A small additional room was built as a lean-to at the western end of the northern gable before the Ordnance Survey of 1886 (on which it appears). This is now fitted as a late-20th century kitchen but retains its original sash window, external door frame and moulded wainscot rail. Its window contains two panes in each sash and the upper sash lacks horns (i.e. the downward corner projections normally found on such windows during the final quarter of the 19th century and later, but not before). The brickwork is neither keyed into nor aligned with the main hall and is evidently an extension, but appears to have been a very recent afterthought which presumably served as a vestry with its own external entrance.

20th Century Extensions (3-7)

A number of brick extensions of no architectural merit were added to the northern gable at different periods during the 20th century and now lie beneath a uniform roof of corrugated tin. A new room of 11 feet in length (no.3 in figure 3) was added to the north-eastern corner created by the 19th century extension (2), thereby unifying the chapel's outline. This probably occurred in the 1920s or 30s, to judge by its internal entrance door, but its window and external door have been replaced. The room contained an organ at the time of inspection and may have served as a crèche or Sunday school room. Mid and late-20th century additions formed an external shed, side porch and WC. The addition of the porch to the southern gable

in the mid-20th century obscured the original door case, but its pediment and splayed feet can still be seen.

Historic Significance

The original building is a good and increasingly rare example of a small 1860s Baptist chapel. It probably remained an elegant and attractive architectural feature until the unfortunate addition of a brick porch and the replacement of its sash windows. The brick fabric survives in unusually original condition, having escaped the normal cement render and paint, and its moulded gault brick window sills are intact. The attractive pedimented door case also remains largely intact behind the porch and, with relatively little effort, this once handsome piece of mid-Victorian architecture could probably be restored to its original appearance.

Appendix 1 (on accompanying CD): Full Photographic Record

Description of Photographs in Appendix 1

Photograph no.

1. General view from south-east showing entrance to site from Lower Road.
2. General view of Lower Road to east showing Free Church to right.
3. General view from north-east showing Lower Road to left.
4. General view from north showing ground to rear of building.
5. Exterior of southern gable showing later porch (4).
6. Exterior from south-east showing later porch (4) to left.
7. Detail of original pedimented door case from south-east.
8. Exterior of southern gable showing apex of original door pediment above later porch (4).
9. External eastern elevation showing recent windows with extension (3) to right.
10. Detail of brickwork and bonding in eastern elevation.
11. Detail of modern window in original aperture of eastern elevation.
12. Detail of original moulded gault brick window sill in eastern elevation.
13. Detail of original segmental window arch.
14. Detail of iron S-tie in eastern elevation.
15. Eastern elevation of 20th century extensions (3) left and (6) right.
16. External elevation from north showing various 20th century lean-to additions.
17. External elevation from north-west showing extensions (6), (7) & (5) from left to right.
18. North-western corner of 19th century extension (2) between extensions (7) left & (5) right.
19. Entrance to extension (5) from south-west.
20. Exterior from south-west showing extension (5) to left.
21. Exterior from south-east showing eastern elevation to right.
22. Southern entrance door within 20th century porch (4).

23. Interior of Hall (1) from southern entrance showing dais and pulpit to north.
24. Interior of Hall (1) from dais towards southern entrance.
25. Interior of Hall (1) showing windows of eastern elevation.
26. Interior of Hall (1) showing south-western corner.
27. Interior of Hall (1) showing dais and pulpit.
28. Pulpit at northern end of Hall (1) from south-west.
29. Detail of pulpit showing pegged tenon between post and rail.
30. Interior of pulpit from west showing seat and book rest.
31. Pulpit at northern end of Hall (1) from south-east.
32. Roof structure of raking queen struts in Hall (1).
33. Detail of hook rail in Hall (1).
34. Interior of 19th century extension (2) from north showing external door to right.
35. Interior of 19th century extension (2) showing western door and window.
36. Interior of 19th century extension (2) from south.
37. Exterior of extension (2) showing original window from later extension (5).
38. Detail of original sash window to extension (2).
39. Interior of extension (3) from north.
40. Interior of extension (5) from north showing original door to extension (2) left.
41. Interior of extension (3) from south.
42. Detail of door lock to extension (3).

Appendix 2 (pp. 10-12): Selected Printed Photographs



A2.1 Exterior from south-east showing pedimented arch of original entrance in southern gable just visible above 20th century porch (4)



A2.2 General view from south-east showing entrance to site from Lower Road

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A2.3 Eastern external elevation showing recently replaced windows with 20th century extension (3) to right.



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A2.4 Detail of original moulded gault brick window sill in eastern elevation

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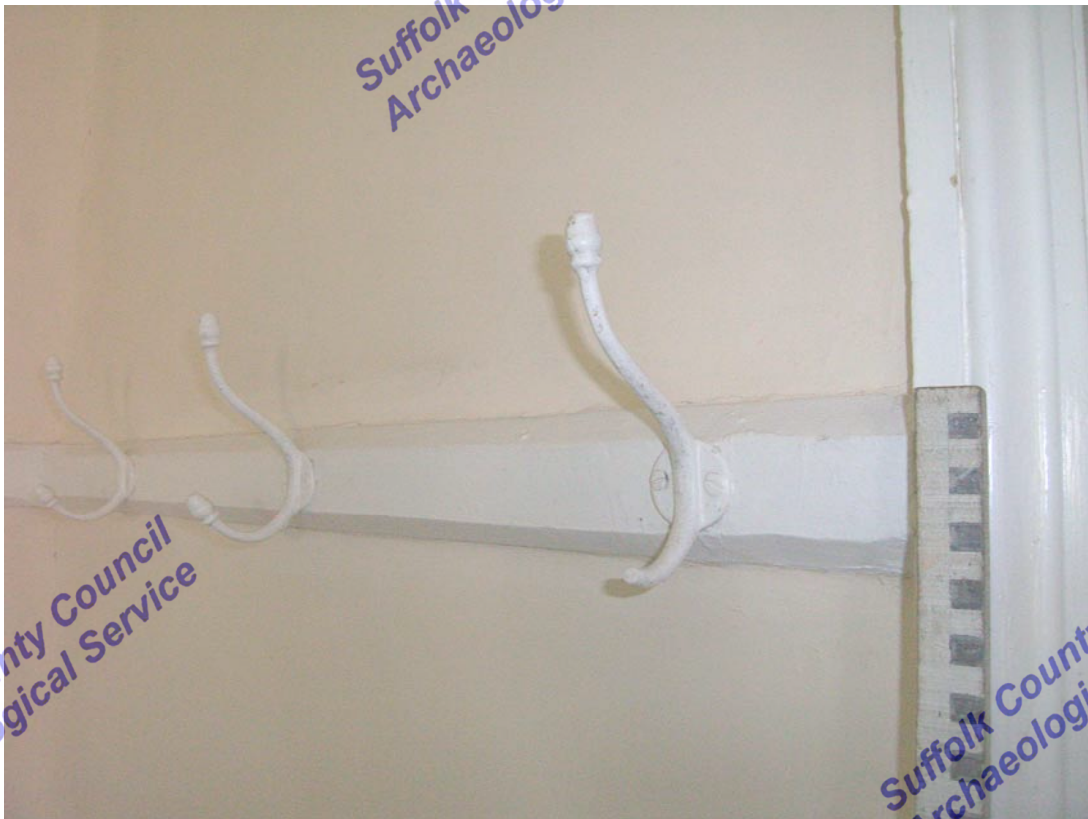
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A2.5 Interior of Hall (1) from southern entrance showing dais and pulpit to north

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A2.6 Detail of hook rail extending around interior of Hall (1)