



THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST MARY
BRIDGWATER
A Brief Guide



www.stmarysbw.org.uk

Welcome to Saint Mary's Church Bridgwater.

Introduction

There is no trace of the early church built by Merleswain, the Saxon lord of Bridgwater. His successor, Walter de Douai, the Norman lord, also built and enlarged a church on this site of which, only faint traces of foundations were found during the 2016 re-ordering.

Foundations between first and second column North side



In 1180 the manor of Bridgwater was transferred to the Baron William Briwere, who almost totally demolished the Norman church and rebuilt it in the early English style soon after 1200. This church was in turn almost completely rebuilt in the Perpendicular style in the 14th century.

In the 15th century two side chapels were built. The impressive hammer-beam roof and carved stone angels flanking the Nave date from the Victorian Re-ordering c1850.



The Victorian Re-Ordering

Research shows that post 1846 various parts of the church were falling into disrepair and a lot of work was needed. A fund was set up to rebuild the delapidated organ.

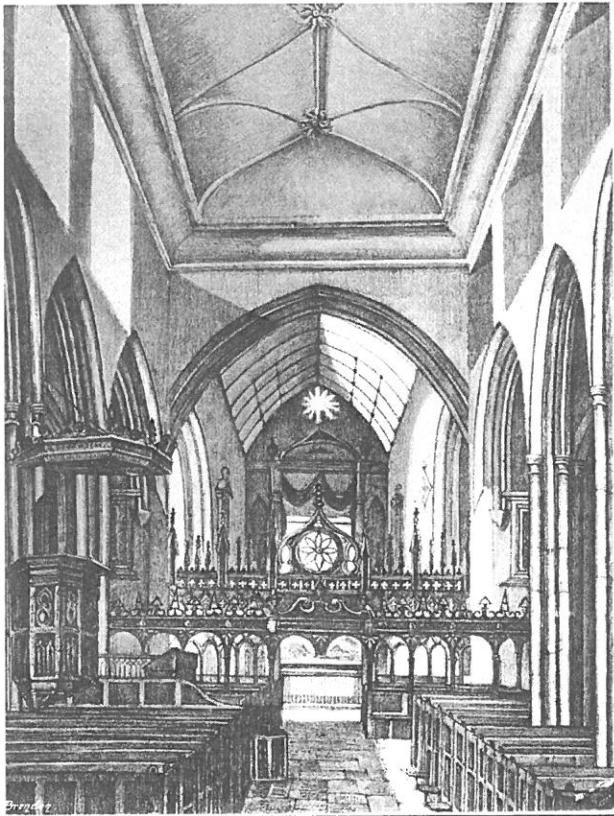


Photo by Mrs. W. H. Ketch

INTERIOR OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH, 1834

Facing page 216

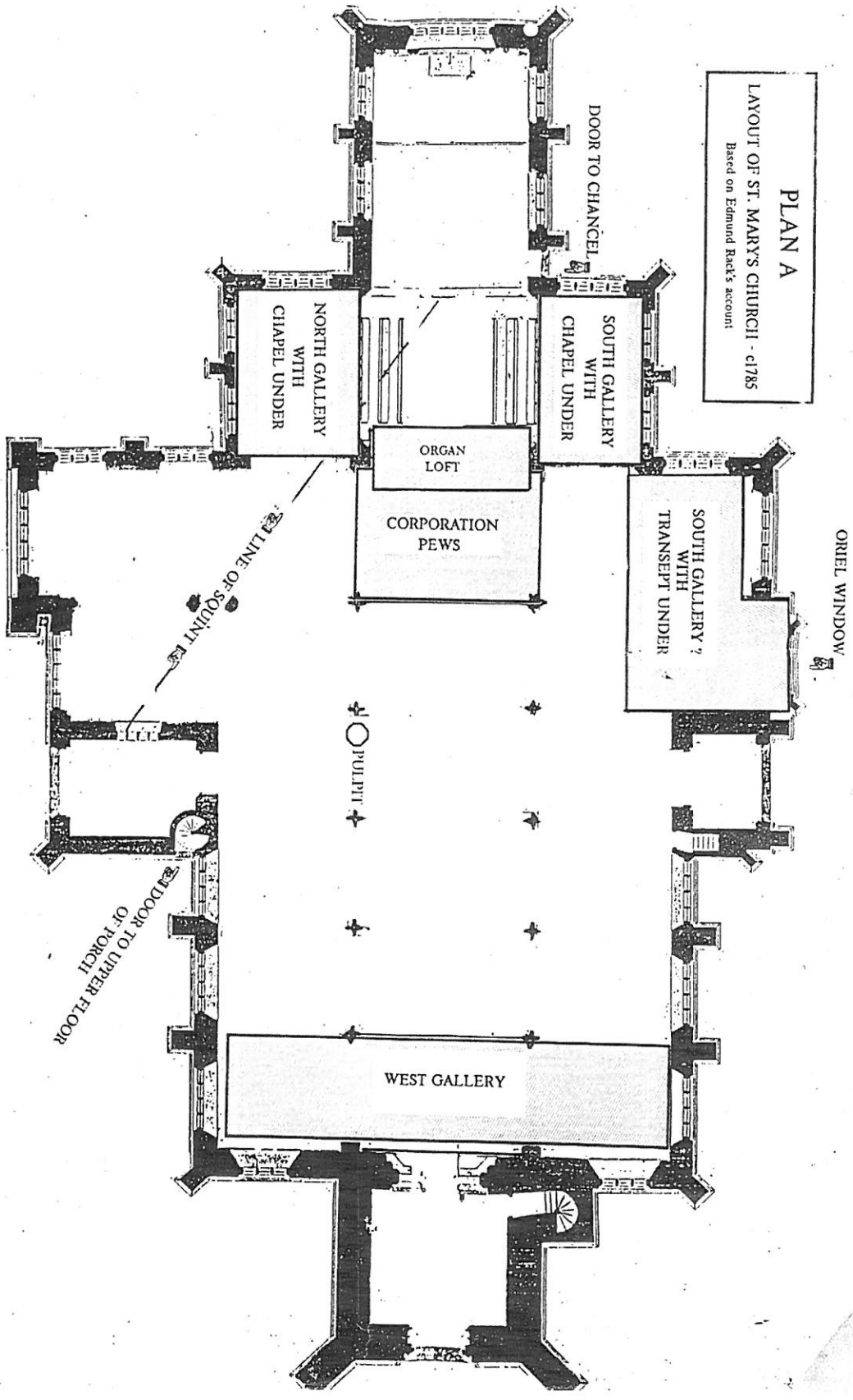
In 1849 designs for improvements to the church were advertised for, and W.H.Brakespear, a colleague of the famous architect Pugin, had his drawings accepted. It may be of interest to note that Brakespear's floor plan of 1853 indicated seating for a total of 1463 persons including 231 children .

In April 1850 an inspection of the building found that the structure of the church was unsafe and the weight of the roof pushing out the walls. You might be able to see slight lean in the pillars on the

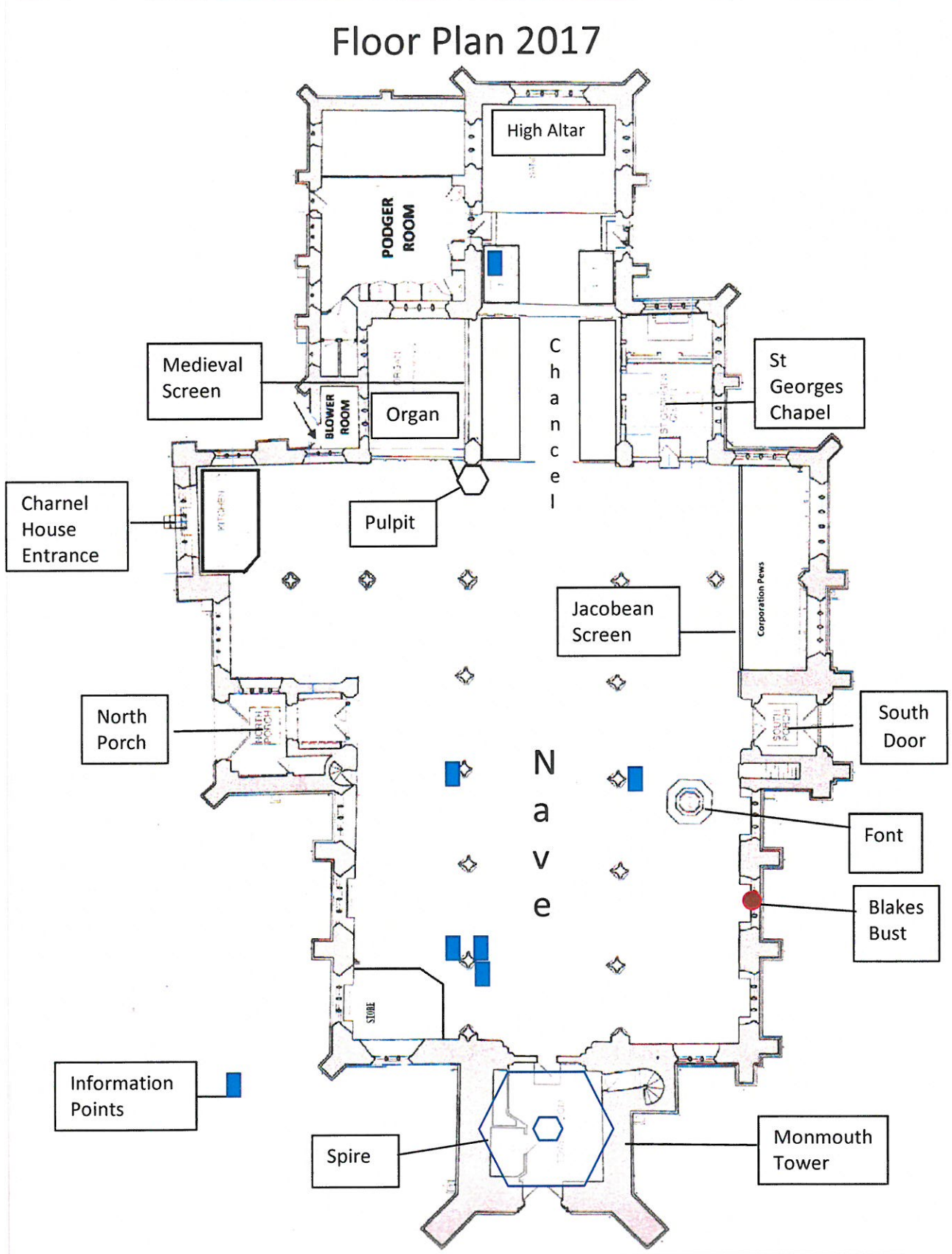
South side. The floors in the tower were dangerous, and there were also issues with the structure of the tower and spire.

The whole Victorian restoration occurred in two phases, with much controversy throughout, finally ending around 1860. On the next page is a drawing from 1785 showing how the church was laid out before all the Victorian work took place.

PLAN A
LAYOUT OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH - 1785
Based on Edmund Rack's account



In 2016/17 the inside of the church was extensively improved and repaired to help make it into a fully utilised community space as well as a place of worship, much as it was in the Middle Ages.



Work Clockwise around the church...

Herein lies a brief guide to help visitors find points of interest contained in our beautiful church. Beginning at the South door.

The Font:

The font as we see it now has moved at least twice in its time in Saint Mary's, it was last moved from the West end of the church in 2017 during the reordering work. The font dates from around 1460. Admiral Robert Blake, founder of the modern British navy was baptised here in this font in 1598. Close by on the window sill is a plaster bust of Admiral Blake and on the pillar adjacent to the font is a brief account of his life and work as founder of the modern British Navy.



Also, in the wall recess near the font is a hand painted memorial board with a translation, noting the charitable legacies left by Robert Blake and his grandson William.

Twelve Angels

If you continue to the West end of the church and stand near the doorway to the tower, turn Westward facing the High altar. As you look up to admire the fine roof trusses you will see stone carved and painted angels.



There are twelve in all and on each one there is a text to guide the pilgrim from their entry into the church (which used to be from the West End) to communion devotions at the Nave Altar.

The legends read as follows: "Repent Ye" (picture left), "God is Love" / "Be Patient" / "Eat all" / "Drink All" / "Of one Mind" / "Christ is All" / "Be Sober" / "Pray Always" / "Have Faith" / "Hear Him" / "Be Obedient".

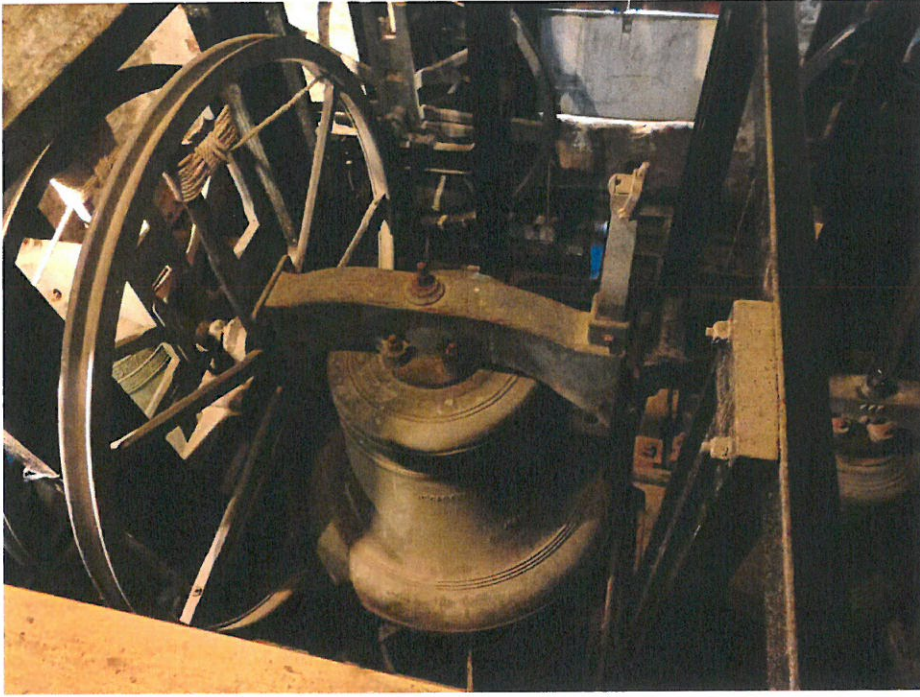
Monmouth Tower

The tower is of Norman origin and is 60ft high and built mainly of red Wembdon sandstone.

Enter the bottom of the tower through the door at the West end. On your left there is a C15 doorway where legend has it that the Duke of Monmouth and Lord Gray entered the tower to go and look for the Royalist troops just before the Battle of Sedgemoor in 1685.

Note: if you look up just before entering the bottom of the tower there is a Queen Anne royal hatchment from 1712 hanging high on the West wall.

The Bells



Saint Mary's has a fine ring of eight bells, the oldest being the 4th which dates from 1617. The bells used to be rung from the ground floor but in 1981 another floor was added with a dedicated ringing

chamber with a large glass wall through which the ringers can be viewed from within the nave.

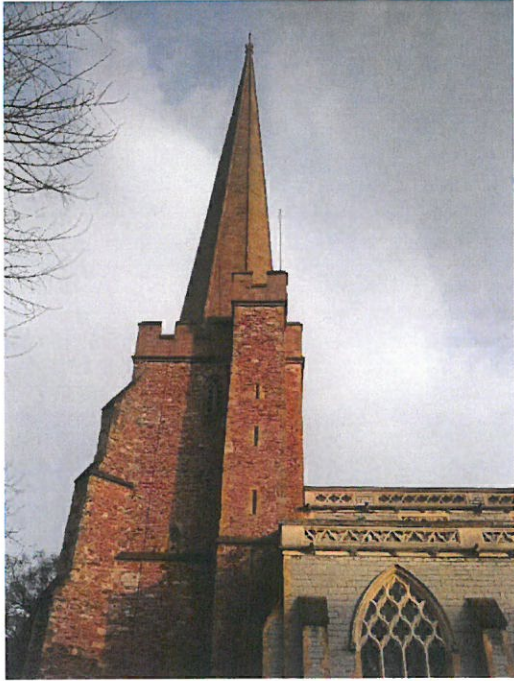
In the picture to the right the nave is clearly reflected in the glass and the small window in the ringing chamber appears to be at the East end of the church.



To Find out more about Saint Mary's Bells

www.stmarysbells.org.uk

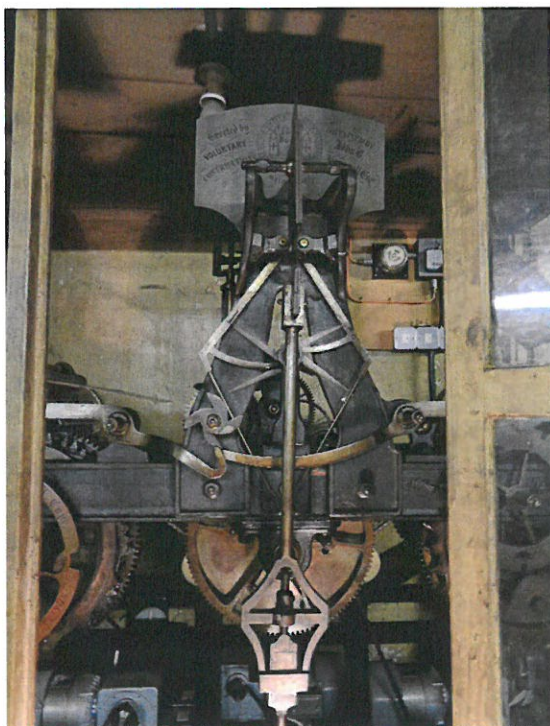
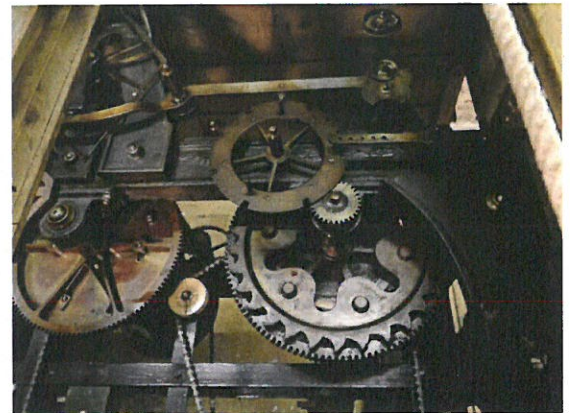
The Spire



This is still a major landmark in the town despite all the modern buildings around it. The spire was added in 1367 at a cost of £143,13s, 5½d. It is 114ft high. There is more information on the construction of the spire and stonework on the Pillar to the right of the tower door.

The Clock

There is evidence that there has been a clock in the church since as early as 1391. The present clock was installed in 1869 by S&W Cope of Nottingham and sits at around 45 feet from the ground in its own room. It is



now wound by electric motor but would originally have been wound by hand. It has a fine escapement similar to the one invented for use by the Houses of Parliament. There is a long iron spindle which takes the movement of the clock up to the clock face at the top of the tower.

The WeatherCock

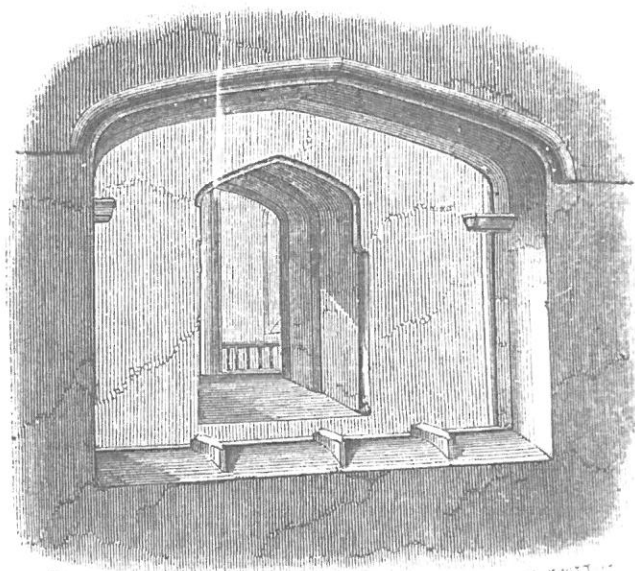
The weathercock is 2ft 3in high and dates from around 1770

The North Porch

Some of the oldest work is visible in this area of the church. In the corner of the porch is the remains of an ancient font which appears to have been built into the wall during the Victorian Re-ordering 1849-1860.

There is also a hatch with a window where 31 loaves of bread were given to the poor on Sundays. This opening in the wall used to be part of the "squint". (This is an opening cut through a wall to allow people in a side chapel to view the raising of the Host at the high altar. See floor plan p3)

Below is an artists impression of how it would have looked.



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G. J. H. ST. J.

ST. MARY'S, BRIDGEWATER, SOMERSETSHIRE



Above the porch is the North Parvis where priests would watch over the altar lights when there were several chapels in use within the church. There is also a Parvis on the South side which is now used as an office and library.

Running under the floor of the Swan transept (Now the café floor) lies the remains of the Charnel House where bones from the overcrowded graveyard were housed. The crypt dating from Norman times was also accessed from this area but was long ago filled with concrete for sanitation purposes.

Outside the North Porch if you look carefully at the carving over the door you will find a “Green Man” at either side of the arch. Similar faces appear in two other carvings around the inside if you can find them...



Pulpit



The pulpit is intricately carved 15th century in origin. It was originally sited on one of the pillars nearer the centre of the church.

The Organ

This organ was built by the renowned organ builder Henry Willis in 1870. It has been extensively overhauled and rebuilt in its lifetime. The brass plaques to the left of the keyboard record this. The earliest mention of an organ here was 1448.



Medieval Screen

The screen in front of the organ is Medieval in origin (C1400-1500) and was originally placed across the church at the front of the Chancel step. In the apex of the great arch which separates the Nave from the Chancel is a large iron hook which was used to support the Rood Screen*.

*A screen, typically of richly carved wood or stone, separating the nave from the chancel of a church. Rood screens are found throughout western Europe and date chiefly from the 14th–16th centuries.

Kingsmill Memorial

A spectacular monument of marble and alabaster erected in memory of Francis Kingsmill in 1640. Below and to the right you will find more information about this monument.



The High Altar

The High Altar is dominated by the famous picture “Descent from the Cross”. A gift to the town in 1775 by Lord Anne Poulett (He was named in honour of Queen Anne)

There is still mystery regarding the artist, Spanish, Italian, or French?

Legend has it that it was taken from a French or Spanish Ship by a British privateer.*



*an armed ship owned and crewed by private individuals holding a government commission and authorized for use in war, especially in the capture of merchant shipping.

The Credence Table



The Credence Table was rescued from Wembdon road Cemetary Chapel where it had been used as a desk. It is thought to be possibly fourteenth century. The eight sides are carved tracery of the Decorated style. What the original use of this lantern-shaped piece of church furniture was is a moot question. It may have been suspended

from the roof with the pyx* tabernacle, or it may have formed the lower portion of a lectern.

*Pyx: A small round container used in the Catholic, Old Catholic and Anglican Churches to carry the consecrated host (Eucharist), to the sick or those otherwise unable to come to a church in order to receive Holy Communion

The Aumbry (C1420)

In the wall to the right of the Sanctuary step is the Aumbry it is a recessed cabinet in the wall of a Christian church for storing sacred vessels. Beneath it is a stone basin or piscina for draining water used in the mass. This Aumbry is still in its traditional use today. If you look carefully you will be able to spot two similar recesses in the walls of the chancel and South Transept which served these spaces when they were still in use as Chapels before earlier church re-ordering.



Past Vicars

As you exit the chancel by the step high on the left there is a board listing the vicars of Saint Mary's from the year 1170 to the present day.



Saint Georges Chapel

The completion and dedication of St Georges Chapel took place in 1920 to commemorate those who died in the First

world War. On the walls are the names of the men of the borough who gave their lives in the “Great War”. There is also a roll of honour for WWII

You may notice that the legend to the left of the altar reads 1914-19 war.

Apparently, this is because the final signing of cessation of war did not occur until 1919.



Corporation Pews

Here on the South side are the “corporation Pews” installed to accommodate the mayor and town councillors. Note the grand central seat reserved for the mayor. These pews once backed onto the Chancel step and faced Westward towards the congregation.

Jacobean* Screen

The screen in front of the corporation pews once laid between the first pair of pillars in the Nave separating them from the rest of the congregation (See illustration p3). If you look closely there are different faces carved into each pillar.



*The **Jacobean era** refers to the period in English and Scottish history that coincides with the reign of James VI of Scotland (1567–1625),

Resources:

This booklet has been created using information published by “Bridgwater Heritage Group” and three earlier guide books C1970 onward. All of the photographs were taken between 2016 & 2019 by Kelvin Millis, Verger of Saint Mary’s.

Credits to:

Tony Woolrich

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Saint Mary's

More Than Just a Church !

When our church is not being used for worship it is our mission to make it a place full of life, opportunity, and memorable experiences.

In 2018 we went from strength to strength hosting many successful events including:

The Nelson Trust Dan Snow Battle of Sedgemoor Lecture

The Singing Children of Africa

The National Dementia Alliance Conference

Bridgwater & Taunton College Graduation Day

BBC Radio Somerset Christmas Celebration

Bridgwater & Taunton College Performing Arts Christmas Celebration

Somerset County Youth Choir Christmas Concert

Somerset County Youth Orchestra Christmas Concert

If you would like to discuss any ideas you may have to make use of this amazing building and its facilities please contact us via the website www.stmarysbw.org.uk, or in person. Thank-you *Kelvin.*



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