

St. Mary's Buckden Church Guide, 2008

Welcome to St. Mary's, the Parish Church of Buckden..

While maintaining a sense of serenity and peace, St. Mary's warm character reflects the spirit and care of parishioners over many hundreds of years to the present day.



A Brief History

Buckden Church is recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086, within the jurisdiction of the Bishops of Lincoln, whose palace stands a few metres to the north; and from Saxon until Georgian times, the church was well endowed by them. No traces of the Saxon church survive, although there are a few remnants from late Norman times.

The structure of the church as you see it today is almost unchanged from when it was rebuilt between 1435 and 1440 by Bishops Gray and Alnwick of Lincoln; only the pews would be unfamiliar to them.

The porch was added around 1485 and the vestry and organ were replaced in the 1880s. The last major work, involving the stripping of the interior and exterior plaster and the installation of new pews, was completed in 1909.

The Porch



While the main body of the porch dates to 1485, including the ceiling boss of the Assumption of St. Mary and a very early example of a Tudor rose, it also contains the oldest part of the church, the doorway. The two stone columns on either side of the doorway are from the original 1215 entrance, and were relocated here in 1435 when the church was extended. And as the fine oak door has welcomed parishioners and visitors for over 570 years it can be

forgiven for creaking a little!

Buckden's earliest school, starting around 1600, was held in this porch. Notice the schoolboys' initials on the wood and stone, scratched no doubt when the teacher was not looking. At the top of the door can be seen the outline of its original decorative wooden tracery, now long gone.

Outside, beneath the porch parapet, is a string of carved animals including geese being chased by a fox, a muzzled bear, a pig, dogs and a horizontal owl; and ten squirrels climb the main arch.

The Font

This font was carved at the beginning of the 15th century and its now blank side shields would once have been brightly painted with the coats of arms of benefactors and patron saints. The base and cover are Victorian. Although records show that it has been moved at least four times, to and from the tower room, it is now back in its historically correct place by the door, symbolising entry into the church via baptism.



The Parvis Chamber Door

This lovely old door, next to the font, has given access to the small parvis chamber, above the porch, since 1485. Especially notable is the original handle crafted by a blacksmith 520 years ago. Behind the door is a narrow circular staircase up to the chamber, primarily built to store church goods, but occasionally used to house travelling priests. In Buckden's case it also safely housed, for several centuries, a precious medieval library belonging to the Bishops of Lincoln.



The Nave

The nave was rebuilt during Bishop Gray's time, starting in 1435 using the plan of the Norman nave, then adding the south aisle. The north aisle was built about 50 years later. The clerestory (the upper part of the nave) was completed by Bishop Alnwick around 1440, as witnessed by his shield of arms, a cross moline, being held by the stone angel corbels supporting the wooden roof.

Notice how the nave is offset against the pre-existing tower. The intention was probably to match the north and south aisles, but perhaps the presence of the palace moat, a few metres to the north, obliged the builders to squeeze the north arcade and aisle further than planned into the nave. This moat section was drained and filled in 1788.

On the south arcade are carved stone grotesques, as a warning to potentially erring parishioners, while on the north arcade are carvings of ladies' heads wearing hairstyles that well pre-date the arcade itself, possibly reused from the previous nave.



High in the wooden roof, opposite the main door, is an inscription inserted by the then churchwardens, John Jackson and Cadwalader Powell (II & CP), commemorating the restoration of the roof in 1649, possibly following damage caused during the Commonwealth period

The Stained Glass



In the south aisle, at the top of the east and west windows, are what little remains of the original 1440 stained glass, probably crafted by the school of Norwich glaziers. The eastern scene shows the Coronation of the Virgin, and the western scene depicts the Annunciation of the Virgin. They may

have avoided the fate of their destroyed sister windows by being plastered over at the time; although at a later date, most were defaced.

The Bell Tower

The lowest courses of the tower are 13th century, but most of it including the spire is 15th century work. It still contains the oak bell frame constructed in 1637 and our 'Catholic' bell cast in 1510, which survived the confiscation of its five neighbours at the time of the Reformation. The current six bells, including that cast for the second millennium, are joyfully rung for services.

The Hidden Face



Only recently discovered, there is inserted among the building rubble high up at the western end of the north aisle wall, the carved face of a bearded man. It would appear to be of Norman origin and reused as fill when the church was reconstructed in the 1430s. As the walls were then covered in plaster, this face did not see the light of day for another 500

years; but now 'Norm' smiles benignly over our shoulders, keeping watch over his church.

Bishop Pelham's Memorial

A grieving widow with her Bible mourns the loss of Bishop Pelham in 1827 on this memorial. The monument was originally erected, despite the congregation's objection (he apparently never visited Buckden), where the organ keyboard is now; thus the widow would have originally faced the altar. It was moved to its present position in 1884 when the present organ was installed.

The Pulpit



The Puritan pulpit has been moved and reduced in size several times in its 360-year life. It would have been built standing against one of the columns in the south arcade, later moving to the south side of the chancel arch before finally coming to rest in 1909, where we see it today.

The panels, newel post and handrail retain the fine, simple geometric carving of the Commonwealth days.

The Chancel

In 1437, while retaining the original wall structure of the Norman chancel, Prebend John Depyng inserted the larger windows and raised the height of the walls. Originally, there was some stained glass in the windows, including a proud dedication by Depyng himself.



Note the carved wooden angel choir, holding tablets and psalters, high above your head; they too date to the late 1430s. Like much of the church this choir would formerly have been brightly painted and gilded.

The Vestry (or Vicar's) Door

This entrance is unchanged from c1270 when it was the entrance for the officiating clergy, out of sight of the congregation. Before the 1560s, the congregation were not permitted beyond the chancel step, and for a hundred years prior to that a rood screen partitioned the chancel and nave.

The two unrelated Bishops Barlow, and Dr. Sanderson

Bishop Thomas Barlow's fine, large 1692 memorial is on the north wall of the chancel, incorporating the remains of Bishop William Barlow's 1613 monument on the same site. The Latin inscription refers to the puritan 'rabid fanatics' who destroyed Bishop William's tomb.

Beneath the altar lies a memorial slab to Bishop Robert Sanderson, the favourite preacher of King Charles II, and author of the Preface to the 1662 Prayer Book. His dying wish was that he 'be buried beneath the altar of Buckden church without pomp or ceremony', and his wishes were carried out.



The Piscina and Sedilia c1270



The 13th century piscina or washbasin is located close to the high altar and was used to cleanse the holy vessels after communion, the holy water draining into consecrated ground. Adjacent to it, is a simple, yet stylish sedilia (three seats) clearly showing the pecking order for presiding clergy, the highest seat being for the priest, the

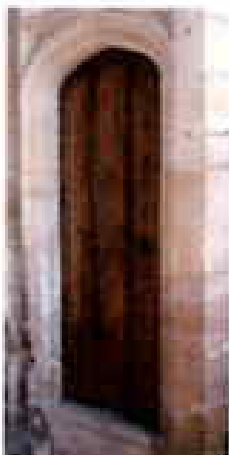
middle for the deacon and the lowest for the sub-deacon. The bishop would have had a separate throne.

The Brass Lectern

The Victorians had a great penchant for eagle-headed, ornate brass lecterns. The eagle, the largest and most glorious of birds, was represented as flying out to the world with the word of God. Buckden's eagle was donated in memory of Canon Henry Linton of Stirtloe House, and was used for the first time on Easter Sunday, 1st April 1888.



The Rood Loft Door



To promote worship of the holy cross or 'rood' in the 15th century, a gallery was inserted in the chancel arch above the rood screen. The recesses where the gallery's support beam rested on the arch columns may still be seen. The choir, the musicians, and those dressing the cross, gained access to the gallery via a spiral staircase within the south side of the arch. The rood loft door here in the south aisle is original and was made about the time of the battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. The rood screen and loft were removed about 1560.

The King Charles II Altar

At the east end of the south aisle is an ancient altar, rediscovered in the old vicarage in 1921 and refurbished in memory of George Page, churchwarden, in 1929. Records show that it had been the church's altar from the time of the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The oak top, legs and base are original.



The Angel Orchestra



The winged musicians in the roof of the south aisle have provided the accompaniment for their angel cousins in the chancel choir for 570 years. Although their instruments are unfamiliar today, they are playing (left to right) the lute, viol, tabor, dulcimer and the hurdy-gurdy; and it is believed that they were modelled on those played by the Buckden church band at the time.

The Churchyard

The churchyard contains 383 gravestones, and their inscriptions have been recorded by surname, and by location, in a reference book on the cabinet by the font.

In a medieval table top tomb, fifteen metres south east of the porch, lie the probable remains of the young Dukes of Suffolk. On 10th July 1551, Henry Brandon, the 15-year-old Duke of Suffolk arrived at the Bishop's Palace with his 14-year-old brother, Charles. By the next day he had succumbed to the 'English Sweat' (a virulent and highly contagious hantavirus) and within twenty minutes his younger brother had also died. Thus poor Charles became the shortest-lived peer on record.



We hope that you have enjoyed this short tour around St. Mary's. You may also appreciate the St. Mary's Pilgrimage and Prayer Guide, a spiritual guide for this blessed site and for life.