

ST MARY'S UNWRAPPED

Without doubt the most fascinating and historically important building in Chesham, St Mary's Church stands as a bold testimony to the faith that has helped shape the town and the people who live and work in it for hundreds of years.

Unwrapping the history of this beautiful building is to peel back centuries of service, hope and courage, as well as dark moments of tragedy and failure, which have combined to make this far more than an historic monument, but an inspirational home for a growing community of 21st century Christians.

Even from the outside, the shape and structure of St Mary's reminds the people of Chesham of central Christian beliefs. The spire, reaching higher than any other local building, urges everyone to look above themselves and their daily

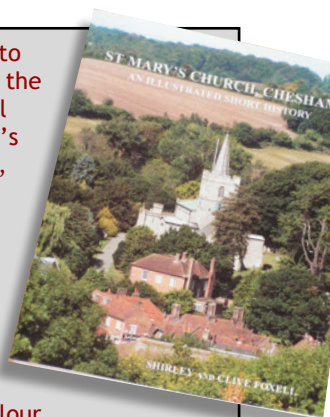
struggles to an all-powerful God. The entire building is oriented toward the east, encouraging believers to reflect on Calvary near Jerusalem - the place where the entire history of humankind was redefined. And the transepts to the north and the south stand as reminders of the Church's God-given commission to reach out to the world with the Gospel.

Mention is made of "the church in Chesham" as early as 1153 in a register belonging to the diocese of Lincoln, but there is strong evidence that a much earlier place of pagan worship existed on the same site. Part of an ancient circle of

If you would like to know more about the long and colourful history of St Mary's Church, Chesham, please ask about two helpful publications now available.

Both were written by Shirley and Clive Foxell. A full colour "Illustrated Short History" can be purchased from the book stall for £7.99.

Alternatively, please ask for a complimentary copy of "A Short History", containing all the vital information but without the photographs.



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“puddingstones” can be seen today forming part of the foundations of St Mary’s.

HIDDEN GEMS

Today, St Mary’s is a church which seeks to welcome everyone - the young and old, people with huge faith and those with massive doubts, those of all ethnic and social backgrounds, the happy and the sad. But unfortunately, it was not always so! To the right of the South Door is a smaller door to a narrow flight of stone steps leading to a parvise, also called a “priest room”, or “spirit loft”, believed to have been used to confine Thomas Harding, Chesham’s Lollard martyr before he was executed in 1532. His crime - reading the Bible in English!

In Medieval times, local outcasts were not welcome inside the Church, but religion was considered good for their souls so two small windows, traditionally known as “Leper Windows” (located on either side of the chancel just beyond the tower) were used to allow them to observe the priest without entering the church.

Music has, for centuries, played a vital part in the worship of the St Mary’s

congregation. The fine organ, built by William Hill in 1852, is now located adjacent to the gallery at the west end of the church, having previously been positioned in the north transept, and today, combines with many other orchestral instruments to provide what was described by the Bishop of Oxford as “some of the best music in the diocese”.

Baptism is central to Christian belief, symbolising the believer’s death to sin and new life in Jesus Christ. The font situated towards the front of the south aisle was a gift from the Lowndes family in 1869, and bears the inscription “One



The remains of a Norman “romanesque” window in the wall of the north transept in the north aisle, is one of the earliest features of the current church, predating the construction of the north aisle in the early 12th century.





Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All - XPC”.

One of the most striking features in St Mary’s is the mural over the chancel arch, with a number of dramatic scenes depicting important events during Holy Week, including Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem, his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and the empty tomb after the resurrection. At first glance, it appears to be an ancient wall painting, but surprisingly, characters are wearing more modern clothing. The mural was in fact painted by John Ward RA and presented to the church in 1970 by the Edwin Austen Abbey Memorial Trust.

Throughout its history, St Mary’s has undergone constant

modification in order to serve the changing needs of the worshipping community. At the east of the north aisle, the remains of a rare Norman “Romanesque” window has been preserved, a feature that significantly pre-dates the early 13th century addition of the aisle itself. On several occasions the church has seen major reordering, most recently in 1999, when Victorian pews were replaced by comfortable, moveable seating, the west gallery was added, along with a kitchen and toilet, and efficient under floor heating was provided.

And, underscoring its primary purpose as a place of worship for today’s community, in 2008, a state-of-the-art audio visual system was installed to ensure that everyone, including those sitting behind the gothic arches, can see and hear everything that happens during packed services.

