

## A WALK ROUND ST. MARY'S

### **The Church**

The church here at St. Mary's is a place of worship that has developed over the centuries. The features we see in the building today all at some time met the practical needs of the people who worshipped here, helping them to perform the rites and the practices of the Christian faith.

Christians have been worshipping here almost certainly since the seventh century and probably earlier.

The Celtic church was mission rather than building centred and worshippers probably gathered round a stone cross on this site.



Remains from the church's early life and history can be seen on the west wall just inside the church.

There are fragments from a Saxon cross, an ancient gravestone with

scissor markings, as well as remains from a Norman arch and some ancient stained glass from the mediaeval church. The roundel shows St. Catherine. She was the patron saint of linen weavers, an important trade in Tadcaster in the Middle Ages.



Over the generations the church grew and evolved to meet the needs of the community. At one time it would have been the only public building in Tadcaster and as such used for all the communal activities of the parish.

The present building is a Victorian rebuild. By 1875 the foundations were so badly damaged by frequent flooding that the building was in danger of collapse. The entire building, excluding the tower, was taken down and rebuilt in 1877 when the floor was raised by six feet.

### **The Porch**

The church was seen as a sacred space, where heaven and earth interacted and the porch marked entry into that space. It was here that marriages were once solemnised, part of the baptismal rite took place here, business was transacted, oaths sworn, bargains struck and disputes settled.

## The Font



Entry into the Christian life is through baptism. Water from the font is sprinkled on the person's head to symbolise cleansing from sin and entry into a new life in Christ. The font is usually sited near the door. A stone font is by the west door of St. Mary's. It is no longer used today. A portable wooden font is moved into the body of the church so the whole congregation are able to welcome a new worshipping member into the church.

## The Parish Chest

Today we think of the church as a building, but more importantly it refers to the body of people who believe in the Christian faith. A reminder of that community is to be seen in Parish Chest, which is under the tower and dated 1746. It held the registers, which recorded all the weddings, christenings and burials of the people who met here at St. Mary's for worship.



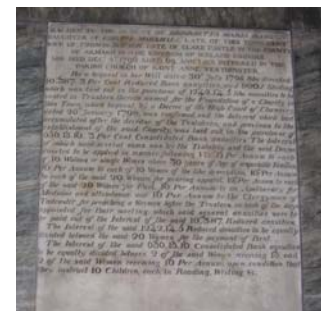
## Memorials

The church is a community of both the living and the dead and many people in the past were buried in the floor of the church itself. It is a place of collective memory and there are many memorials in the church to people who worshiped here.

The war memorial lists 140 names of those who died in the two World Wars.

In the floor of the north aisle is a memorial that includes two children who both died at the age of seven.

The memorial to Henrietta Dawson on the west wall is a reminder of the church's social concern. Henrietta's bequest still helps people today in Tadcaster.



## Pulpit and Lectern

During a church service the congregation is taught about the Christian faith. The preacher will often use the pulpit to deliver a sermon usually based on a passage from the Bible. The pulpit is beautifully carved with a figure of Jesus and images from the crucifixion.





The lectern is in the shape of an eagle. During the service the Bible is read, which rests on the outspread wings of the eagle. The eagle is the symbol of St. John the Apostle, one of the Gospel writers. The Eagle rests its feet on a globe, poised to spread the dramatic words of the opening chapter of St. John's Gospel around the world. These words describe Jesus as the 'Light and Life of the World'.

### **The High Altar and East Window**

The high altar stands in the chancel and is the focal point of the church. It is here that the death and resurrection of Jesus are remembered in Holy Communion, when bread and wine, the symbols of his body and blood, are shared.

The chancel has always been the most important part of the church and consequently a key focus for change.

It was once separated from the nave by a rood screen and loft. On the wooden screen was a carving of the crucified Christ, flanked by Mary and the disciple John. Behind the screen was a picture of the final judgement. The Archdeacon of York destroyed them in 1728.

The altar has not always been in its present position.

After the Reformation it was common practice for the altar to stand at the top of the nave. By the nineteenth century it stood in front of a painting of 'The Last Supper' at the east end of the chancel.

At the rebuild of 1877 the painting was removed and the East Window commissioned. The glass was designed and painted by Burne-Jones and William Morris and depicts the worship of Christ as King.

### **The Pews**

The church was once a large open space; a place of flickering lights, colourful wall paintings, processions, singing, animation and theatre. In this space only the wealthy were seated. Most stood during lengthy services. It was a cold in winter, hot and smelly in summer and there were quarrels over the limited seating.

By 1730 the colour and excitement had been replaced by a more cerebral form of worship. The three-decker pulpit dominated the nave. There were heavy wooden pews and seating was allocated according to a pew plan. Wooden galleries were built at the west end and on the south side. At the rebuild all this was considered unsightly and removed. The pews we use

today were installed. Parishioners paid to have their own pews made and the possessiveness they felt for their pews led to the extending of the north aisle in 1897 for the use of the poor, although the seats in the main church were unoccupied!

Today all are welcome to sit where they choose!

### **Chapels, Screens and Music**

Before the Reformation St. Mary's had three chantry chapels dedicated to St. John the Baptist, St. Catherine and St. Nicholas. They were run by local guilds, which enabled ordinary people to participate in the life of the church in practical ways and so lead a fuller spiritual life. Prayers were said for the dead, lights were maintained on the altars; and colourful statues filled the nooks and crannies.

In the pillar behind the pulpit is an ancient piscina from the chapel of St. Catherine. A piscina is a stone basin, built into a niche in a wall or pillar on the south side of an altar.

In Mediaeval Times it carried away the water that had been used for rinsing the chalice, the cup that held the wine at the Communion Service. The hole where the water drained can still be seen.

The piscina from the chantry chapel of St. Nicholas is in the north wall. The side chapel retains the dedication to St. Nicholas and the story of St. Nicholas is depicted in the carving.

Today the chapel is used for meetings, prayer, small services and a Mums and toddlers group.

Most of the carving in the church is twentieth century and the work of John Thornton and the Hedley family. The vestry screen depicts the Bible story of the 'Wise and Foolish Virgins' with their lanterns.

Hidden in the frieze are a camel and a needle. 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven'.



The vestry is a small room where robes, vestments and records are kept and where the choir and clergy robe.

The vestry screen also hides the organ pipes. The guilds that ran the chantry chapels were responsible for the music. When the chantries were disbanded the music was lost. The Methodists, John and Charles Wesley introduced hymn singing. It met with disapproval in many Anglican churches and a legal challenge was made to forbid the use of hymns. In 1820 the church court in York ruled in the favour of hymns. We still sing many of Wesley's hymns today accompanied by the organ or other instruments. The present organ was built in 1929.

### **The Windows**

On a bright day St. Mary's is filled with light and colour from the stained glass windows giving a sense of the vibrancy of colour that would have filled the Mediaeval church decorated with wall paintings, statues and lighted candles.

The windows depict stories from the Bible, commemorate virtues and act as memorials.

They proclaim the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as depicting the gospel writers themselves. The window by the war memorial struggles with loss through conflict and the window to its right celebrates a wife of noble character.

The light from the windows reminds us that the church is a place of life.

It is filled with a sense of the past but it is not a museum.

It is a place of continuity but also a place of change.

It is a place that has enriched the lives of ordinary men, women in Tadcaster for more than a thousand years and we trust will continue to do so.

*For a more detailed history of the church see;*

- *Guided Tour and Short History of St. Mary's Church*
- *A Spiritual Tourist Guide to The Windows of St. Mary's Church.*

*Both booklets are in the church.*

*For a very accessible general history: A Little History of the English Country Church by Roy Strong.*

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