

# History of St Mary's Church



It is widely accepted that there has been a place of worship on the site of the Parish Church of St Mary's at Eastling since Anglo-Saxon times.

The oldest surviving parts of the present building are the base of the south-west Tower, the Nave and the western part of the Chancel. All are thought to have been built by the 11th century, possibly on the foundations of an earlier church. The remainder of the Tower and the central part of the Chancel are Norman.

The North and South Aisles and the Arcades between the Aisles and the Nave were built in the 13th century. In the 14th century, the Chancel was extended eastwards to create a Sanctuary. Also in that century, the St Katherine Chapel and an Arcade was added to the south-east corner of the building.

In 1855-56, the Nave, North Aisle and the South Arcade were substantially rebuilt, the West Porch added and the Nave re-roofed.

[Inside the building.....](#)

## **The Nave**

The Nave - or central area of the church - dates from the 12th century and is notable for its unusually narrow original walls (later, the Arcade walls). Fractionally over 2ft thick, they are considered to be attributable to Saxon workmanship which favoured relatively "*thin*" solid walls against the Norman style of "*thicker*" walls comprising two leaves with a filled cavity.

The western end of the Nave is thought to be a late 12th-century extension.

The South Aisle was constructed in the early part of the 13th century and substantially rebuilt by Victorian architect R. C. Hussey in 1855. Some original 13th-century material was re-used, and the eastern respond located against the Chancel remains substantially untouched.

The North Aisle was also created in the 13th century and completely rebuilt by Hussey as part of his major "*modernisation*" of the building. The South Aisle incorporates a 14th-century window.

The Victorians' enthusiasm for remodelling churches also extended to the Nave which was rebuilt by Hussey in 1855-56. He also added the West Porch, constructed a Vestry and re-built the Chancel arch. It's worth comparing the ceilings of the South Aisle which is said to have escaped Hussey's attentions and that of the Nave where he left only the tie beams and principal trusses visible.

The box pews, pulpit, lectern, rector's stall and choir stalls all date from the Victorian era. The wooden wall benches pre-date the pews.

### **The Chancel**

The alignment of the Tower and Chancel is considered attributable to Saxon, rather than Norman, workmanship. If you stand in front of the east window and look back to the west door you will see that the Nave and Chancel are out of alignment, and this suggests that the Chancel pre-dates the Nave.

Examples of Norman workmanship to be seen in St Mary today are:

- the upper part of the Tower;
- perhaps the belfry stage with its pairs of round-headed openings;
- the re-styling of the western part of the Chancel; and
- the west end of the Nave (possibly a late 12th century extension).

Early in the 13th century, the Chancel was re-styled and given Early English lancet windows.

A further period of rebuilding-took place during the 14th century. The Chancel was extended eastwards by a further 22ft, so creating the Sanctuary.

The stained glass in the Chancel windows are memorials to the Birch Reynardson family. The east window contains picture panels, the work of famous church glass artist Thomas Willement of Davington.

### **Aumbry**

On the north wall of the Sanctuary at Eastling Church is a double Aumbry.

Built as a cupboard in the wall - usually with a wooden door - this would have been used to house the Church Plate.

### **Easter sepulchre**

The impressive Easter Sepulchre, alongside the Aumbry in the Sanctuary of Eastling Church, features an ogee-worked canopy with an altar tomb underneath.

It was once the custom for the sacred elements of the resurrection to be placed on the altar tomb on Good Friday morning. There they remained until Easter Sunday, when they were moved to the high altar.

## **Piscina**

A piscina is, in effect, a medieval stone bowl near the altar where a priest carried out ceremonial cleaning tasks.

The piscina in Eastling Church dates from the late 13th century and takes the form of a stone cill incorporating twin bowls - one for hand washing, the other for cleaning the chalice and other sacred vessels.

It was originally located in the Chancel. When this part of the building was extended during the 14th century, the piscina was moved to its present position on the south wall of the Sanctuary.

## **Sedilia**

The sedilia at Eastling Church comprise three recessed stone seats with trefoiled canopies. By convention, sedilia were placed south of the altar and used by the priest, deacon and sub-deacon.

Created late in the 13th century, Eastling's sedilia were moved, during the 14th century, from the Chancel to their present position in the (then) new Sanctuary.

## **Stalls**

The Stone Stalls, on the north side of the Chancel, would have once served as choir stalls. These recessed seats have unusual carved stone canopies in the form of four trefoiled arches carried on caryatids (columns sculpted as female figures).

In his "*Notes on the Church*", Eastling Church historian Richard Hugh Perks says that a 19th century ecclesiologist, Francis Grayling, theorised that they were mural recesses. Mr Perks considers the church might once have been decorated extensively with murals - born out by the traces of wall paintings found in the 1960s when the Chancel was re-decorated. However, the paintings were in such very poor condition that they were covered over. Mr Perks also draws attention to the fragment of the former Chancel east wall which can be seen at the east end of the Stone Stalls.

## **The Chapel**

The St Katherine Chapel was built around 1350. As part of the scheme, an arcade was formed on the south side of the Chancel. The fluted (concave-sided) pillars are an unusual design, also found in Faversham Parish Church and at Eastchurch, Sheppey. It is thought that the workmanship might be by masons from either Leeds Priory or Faversham Abbey.

The Chapel houses a 19th century organ, the Martin James monument and a fine oak chest with an inscription of "1664 H" carved inside. The "H" is the mark of a Michael Shilling, who was churchwarden at the time.

## **The Rood**

There is evidence that Eastling Church once had a Rood Screen, possibly extending across both the Chapel and the Chancel. On this would have stood a Cross with a carving representing a

crucified Jesus. The Reformation saw the destruction of the Rood and no trace remains, apart from the base of a stairs turret at the south-east corner of the South Aisle.

### **The Porch**

The West Porch was built in 1855, by Victorian architect R.C. Hussey as part of his major alterations to the church.

However, the fine Norman west doorcase is much older, possibly dating from 1180. It is carved from chalk blocks; some of the internal wall faces are also chalk, a common feature of many Downland churches. It was partly restored by the Victorians.

### [Outside the Church.....](#)

### **The Churchyard**

The churchyard owes much to a generous bequest for its maintenance by Dorothy Long (d. 1968). It used to be part of the 'Gods Acre Project' setup by the Vicar of Eastling Parish Caroline Pinchbeck (who departed the parish in 2012) but from 2013 has been returned to previous landscaping regimes.

When the churchyard was being managed with wildlife in mind, it preserved the diversity of nature alongside well kempt areas. This means parts of the old graveyard were left to grow from springtime onwards and were cut in September. Many species of wild flowers grew in a spring meadow and were followed by grasses. This encouraged wildlife into the graveyard, owls, field mice, voles, multiple species of insects and birds. The uncut areas were managed, which means to say they were not left to grow out of control. Brambles, the majority of stinging nettles and other unwanted plants were removed by hand and the graves were always tended so that the vegetation did not disturb them.

Areas of the churchyard that were mown were done so with a petrol mower but the grass was not collected, It was left on the ground as a mulch. No pesticides were used, they damaged the graves, leaving contaminated black rings around them and killed any wild flowers or grass in the affected areas. The emphasis of the gods acre project management process, started in 2008, was balance. By maintaining the churchyard in this way it was both cost effective and beneficial to local wildlife and preservation. (N. Perkins/ Grounds man Eastling Church 2007-2012)

The original graveyard has a modern extension with spaces still available for burials and close to the entry gate is an area dedicated to the burial of ashes.

Several graves date from the 17th and 18th centuries and include memorial stones to Mary Tanner who was born in the year of the Battle of Naseby; to Christopher Giles born in 1674 and his wife Susannah born in 1691; and to Thomas Lake of Eastling Gent died February the 19th 1717.

Close to the West Porch is a 13th century stone coffin slab, in the form of a cross with a sword, a style sometimes referred to as a "*Crusader Tomb*".(original text) This is infact incorrect, an archaeologist has confirmed that the stone is a medieval headstone most likely from the back of the church which was once standing that has been moved and placed by the entrance for asthetic qualities. There is another stone to the left of the entrance from a sarcophagus which again has been moved and placed by the entrance.

## The Yew tree

There is a Yew Tree by the West Door and It is said to be an ancient which would put it's minimum age at 2000 years, predating the church. However dating methods for Yew Trees are inconclusive.. It is hard to reliably scientifically date a Yew Tree due to several factors.. Information on the dating process can be found here. (source: ancient-yew.org) Also Yew trees can grow fast and ages can be exaggerated, a large Yew is most likely the age of the Church but unlikely to be older than it's Anglo-Saxon predecessor. There is no firm evidence to link Yew trees to pagan religions or the theory that Church's were built on Pagan Ritual Sites. (source: Illustrated History of the Countryside, Oliver Rackham)

The circle of yews which continue around the church have been said to have sprouted from the ancient Yew Tree, however archeologists and Yew Tree Specialists have put forward that actually the Yew Trees have been landscaped to look like that. In the past Yew Trees were planted to ward off witches and evil spirits. It is clear if you measure out the trees and use dimensions for aging that the trees have been landscaped.

## The Tower

Work carried out on the tower in 2010 to install a compostable toilet has radically changed the dimensions and structure of the lower and middle of the tower.

The base of the south-west Tower is said to date from the early 11th century, possibly earlier. Much of the remainder of the Tower is Norman.

The Tower - five feet thick at its base - is of flint and chippings, with ragstone quoins, and is heavily buttressed. The external brick buttress to the tower is 18th century. Brick was also used in rebuilding sections of the north-west angle of the Tower, the belfry openings and the Tower doorcase. Today's slated spire would once have been clad with wooden shingles.

The door to the Tower is set in a large arch with "*Articles*" of the Ringing Chamber, on wooden boards above it.

## The Bells

Eastling has six bells, four of them made by Richard Phelps during the time he occupied the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. Unfortunately, the present condition of the timber bell frame with its elm headstocks (constructed around 1700) and the upper part of the Tower do not allow the bells to be rung safely.

Bell	Weight (approx)	Diameter	Cast	Founder	Inscriptions	Key
1	3½ cwt	25¾in	1793	Thomas Mears I	THOs MEARS OF LONDON FECIT 1793	Sharp of F#
2	4¼ cwt	27in	1717	Richard Phelps	R: PHELPS FECIT 1717	F
3	5 cwt	29in	1717	Richard Phelps	R: PHELPS FECIT 1717	Sharp of D
4	5½ cwt	30in	1717	Richard Phelps	R: PHELPS FECIT 1717	-
5	7¼ cwt	32½in	1717	Richard Phelps	R: PHELPS FECIT 1717	B
6	8 cwt	36in	1717	Richard Phelps	THE REVEREND Dr : Wm : WILKINS SEN : RECT : Wm WILKINS IUN : CURAT DAN : KEMP CH : WARDEN R : PHELPS FECIT 1717	A