

The Medieval Church

There has probably been a church on this site since Saxon times. Early in the 12th century a bishop of Winchester built a palace just east of the site and probably rebuilt the church. As part of a programme of creating six new towns, a later bishop laid out Church Green, Market Square, and the High Street, with the church and his palace at the head of the axis. Around this time the church was enlarged by a north aisle and the porch through which you entered. From this Norman core the majestic cathedral-like church we see today evolved. Its development illustrates changing attitudes to Christian worship over the centuries. The Witney Feast each September marks the re-dedication of St Mary the Virgin in 1243.

From this Norman core the focus of worship would have been close to the congregation. As the doctrine of transubstantiation (bread and wine literally becoming the body and blood of Christ) became more universally adopted there was a need to move the altar, where the sacred mysteries took place, to the east end of a specially built chancel. At the climax of the Mass, the elevation of the host and chalice, the celebrant priest would now be far from the congregation, facing east with his back to them.

The practice of paying priests to say Mass for the repose of a soul increased the number of east-facing altars and even whole chapels around the main worshipping area. St Mary's once had at least 10 chantry altars, laid out like jewels around the necklace of the nave and aisles.

The Reformation

With the Reformation in England (1530s), the focus of the liturgy moved to the nave. The altar was reduced to a portable Holy Table, brought close to the congregation when needed. The emphasis of worship was now on God's word, in English instead of Latin, and its interpretation. Pulpits were erected as sermons became a regular part of the service and enclosed box pews could be rented for more comfortable seating. Holy images were destroyed, walls inside the church whitewashed, and clear glass replaced coloured.

The Victorian Era

In the 18th century the growth of local non-conformist churches meant St Mary's faced neglect. However, the arrival of Revd Francis Cunningham in the mid-19th century sparked a revival. He enlisted architect G E Street to revitalise the church building. Street, aligned with the Oxford Movement, re-introduced pre-Reformation features including a sedilia (clergy seating), a piscina (used for water dispersal during Mass) and a new stone altar adorned with alabaster statues

The large east window gave way to three stepped Early English lancets and magnificent stained glass was installed in the west window. The floor level was raised toward the high altar. Raked pews vanished from the transepts, and the west gallery was dismantled. Later, pew rents were abolished, so seating became accessible to all.

Today

On this Victorian canvas new items of beauty have since arrived, such as the statue of St George, flanked by two icons in St George's Chapel; a carved wall-mounted figure of Our Lady, and one fashioned of broken glass in the Chapel of the Annunciation; a chancel ceiling, and an altar crafted from a felled Cedar of Lebanon in the churchyard. Bringing the story full circle, the new altar stands just feet away from its Norman predecessor.

We Welcome You

We extend a warm invitation to everyone to come and join us irrespective of race, sexuality, background, or age.

We hope that everyone visiting the church will experience a deeper sense of God through the peace and beauty of the building.

St George's Chapel is used daily for prayer: why not stay a little while longer here, in this sacred space?

Services

10:45 Sunday Sung Eucharist (contemporary with choir)

11:00 Wednesday Eucharist

09:00 Daily Morning Prayer (Mon to Fri)

17:30 Daily Evening Prayer (except Sat)

Contact Details

Address Church Green, Witney OX28 4AW

Website witneyparish.org.uk

Phone 01993 779492

Email office@witneyparish.org.uk

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[X](#) and [YouTube](#) @WitneyBenefice

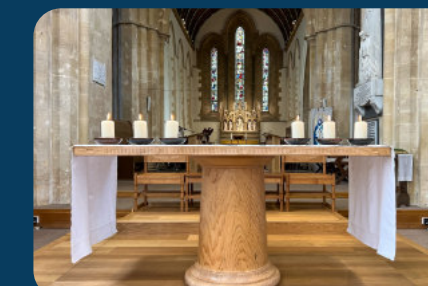
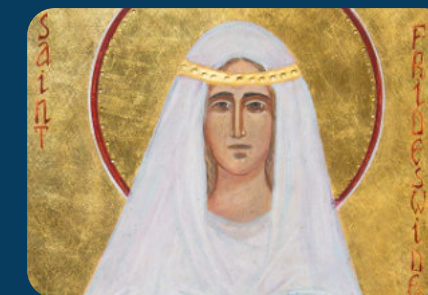
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Called to be a community of mercy and kindness

FREE Visitor Guide

St Mary the Virgin Witney



Font

1

Located symbolically in the centre of St Mary's is the font, where people of all ages are baptised and enter the family of the church. The font was designed in 1866 by architect G E Street as part of his restoration of the church. Note the Romanesque-style columns supporting the decorated bowl.



Cedar Altar

2

This altar was crafted by Luke Hughes in 2023 from a Cedar of Lebanon felled in the churchyard. Carved on it are 5 crosses, symbols of the wounds of Jesus, and weaving machine shuttles recalling Witney's former wool and blanket industry. The bobbin-shaped pedestal continues the theme.



Suspended Tombs

3

These effigies commemorate local lawyer John de Croxford and his wife. Croxford, shown in legal dress with his feet on a woollack, financed the extension of this transept, creating a raised chapel with crypt below. The chapel floor was later lowered, leaving the tombs apparently suspended.



New Chancel Ceiling

4

Shows the sky above Witney on 2 September 1942, when an RAF aircraft crashed into the spire. Gold-leaf stars include dots marking the lights of that aircraft, and of a Hurricane and Spitfire repaired in Witney. The constellation Pegasus commemorates local glider pilots who landed at Pegasus Bridge in 1944.



Batt Wall Memorial

5

The Batt family settled in Witney in the 1730s and practised medicine for 170 years. Edward Augustine set up a mental asylum. His family later provided land to found the Batt primary school. His marble monument illustrating the Good Samaritan is by Thomas Grimsley.



Explanation of Terms

- **Altar:** a sacred table used for Holy Communion
- **Chalice:** cup used for wine at Eucharist
- **Chasuble:** a sleeveless outer garment worn by a priest
- **Chancel:** extension of nave beyond the crossing
- **Holy Communion, Mass or Eucharist:** when people recall Christ's Last Supper by sharing bread (the host) and wine
- **Host:** bread in wafer form used in Eucharist
- **Icon:** a painting of a holy person, usually on wood
- **Lancet:** slender pointed-arch window
- **Nave:** main body of church accommodating congregation
- **Oxford Movement:** C19 Anglo-Catholic movement
- **Reformation:** C16 shift from Catholic to Protestant ideas
- **Transepts:** parts of a church that extend sideways from the nave, forming the arms of a cross

The Legend of the Monkey

At one of the early Witney Feasts a monkey belonging to a stall holder broke free and quickly climbed the 156 ft church spire trying to escape. Alas, frightened by the noise of the crowd the brave pet slipped near the top and fell to its death.

Some say that builders decided to add a stone monkey to the church spire to remember this sad event and that if you look hard enough the worn statue can still be seen!

6

Glass Statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary



Of broken mirrored glass, this striking sculpture is aptly entitled 'Reflecting Virgin'. The iridescent blue of Mary's chasuble follows the tradition of representing her in that colour, historically so precious. The statue was fashioned in 1993 by Witney-born artist Andrew Logan.

7

West Window



The glass in this window was installed in 1869, a gift from Miss Rosa Raine in memory of her father, the Duke of Marlborough's steward at Blenheim Palace. Crafted by William Wailes of Newcastle, it illustrates Joseph, the Pharaoh's faithful steward. Look out for the camels.

8

Wenman Tomb



This commemorates the wool trader Richard Wenman, who died in 1534. He is represented in brass wearing a fur-lined gown, his purse suspended from his girdle. On either side are his two wives, and his five daughters below on smaller brasses. The family lived at nearby Caswell House.

9

The Henry Box Memorial



Henry Box, born in Witney and educated at Oriel College, Oxford, made his fortune in London as a member of the Grocers' Company. In 1660 he, along with his wife Mary, founded a grammar school in Witney, now known as The Henry Box School.

10

Icons of St Luke & St Frideswide



Written by Irene Bradley in 2022, the left shows St Luke with his attribute above him, the winged ox. The other is St Frideswide, Oxford's patron saint who lived for a time in nearby Eynsham. The stripes on her girdle allude to the Witney 'point' blanket. An image of St Mary's church is above her.