

A Brief History and Description of St Mary the Virgin, Bampton



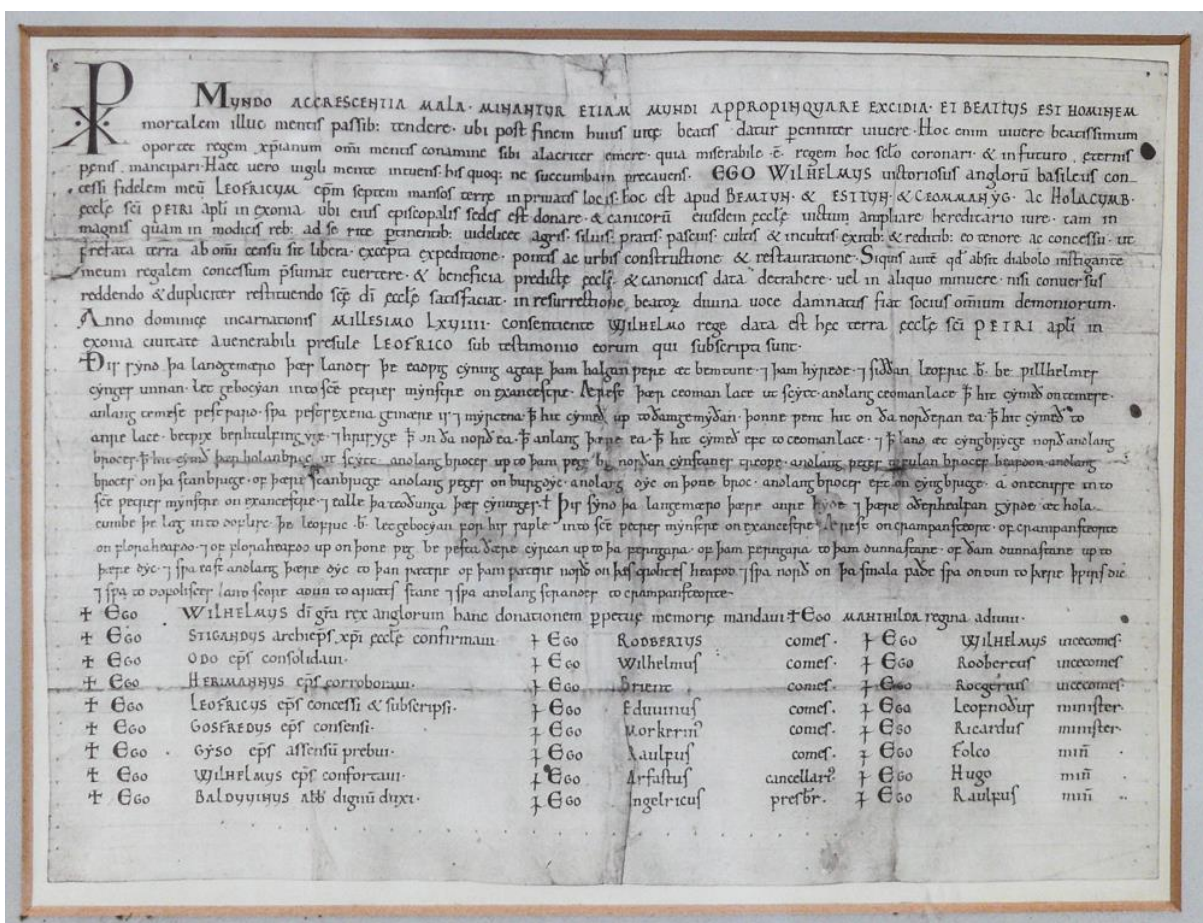
South West aspect of St Mary's

Like so many English parish churches, Saint Mary's, Bampton, has evolved over many centuries to become the building it is today. The original church would probably have been a wooden building with a thatched roof. In the 8th or 9th century, it was served by a religious community whose leader was a man called Beornwald. We know nothing about him, except that he was venerated locally as a saint, and eventually had a shrine within the later stone church.

It is possible that the niche to the north of the altar in the Lady Chapel was created from the remains of that shrine, which apparently contained a relic of Beornwald's head, and was much visited in pre-Reformation days, especially on St. Beornwald's Day, 21st December. His feast is remembered nowadays with an annual concert held on or close to that day.



A fascinating document, in Latin and Old English, of which a facsimile and translation can be seen in the church, refers to certain gifts having been made by King Eadwig (or Edwy) ‘to the holy man at Bampton and the community’. Eadwig’s gift seems to have been confirmed by the last Saxon ruler of England, Edward the Confessor, who granted a substantial portion of this Bampton land to his chaplain, Leofric, when he became the first Bishop of the new diocese of Exeter. Leofric used this as an endowment for the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral, who then inherited the right to appoint priests to serve the parish of Bampton.

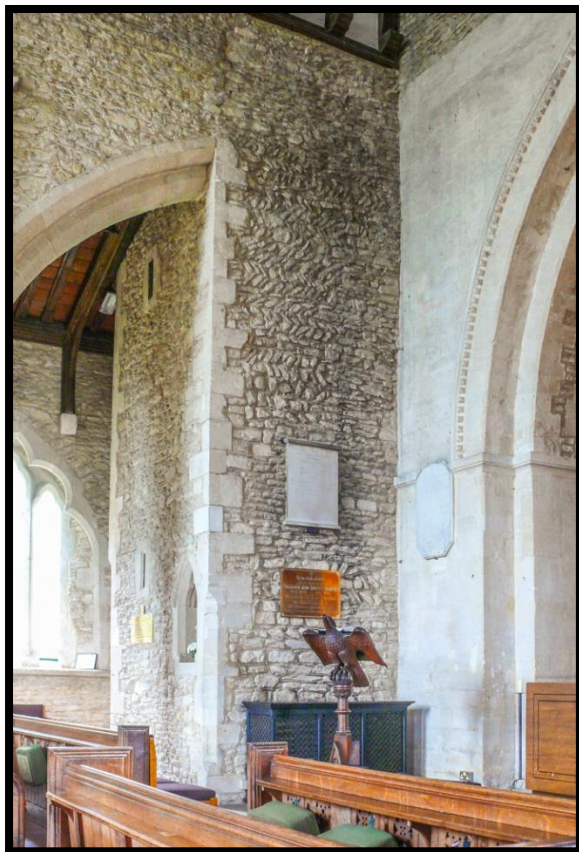


The document, sealed by the first Norman King of England, William the Conqueror, confirms both Edward the Confessor’s gift and Leofric’s position as bishop, even though William generally preferred to replace senior Saxon clergy with Normans.

Some of the stonework in the church may possibly come from a late Saxon building – look for stones laid in a ‘herring-bone’ pattern – although they could equally well come from the second_half of the 11th century, after the Norman Conquest of 1066.



Herringbone stonework over chancel arch



Stair turret

Herringbone pattern seen in the stair turret. Before the west wall was opened up and the archway created that is just visible on the right in this picture, the turret was part of the outside of the building. On the north side of the turret is a small window, probably the oldest in the church.



Window in N wall of stair turret

This 11th and 12th century church was much smaller than today's imposing building.

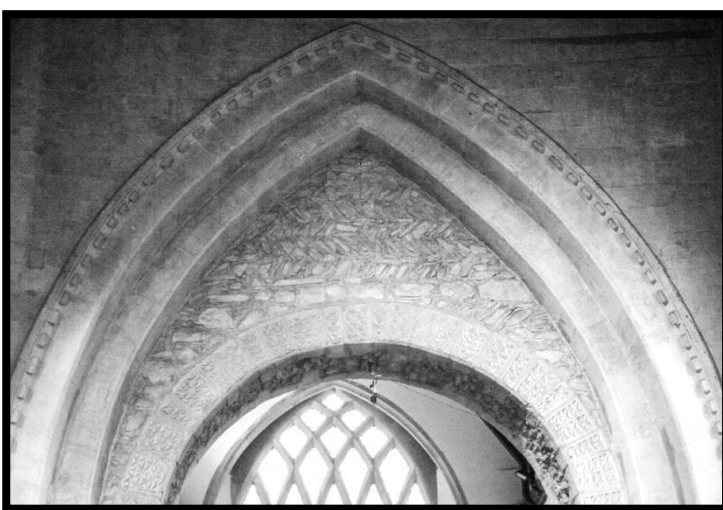
Inside the church - a walk through time



If you stand near the small nave altar, facing east towards the high altar and large stained-glass window, you are effectively standing in the entrance to the original church.



Wooden ceiling, the floor of ringing chamber



Romanesque rounded arch

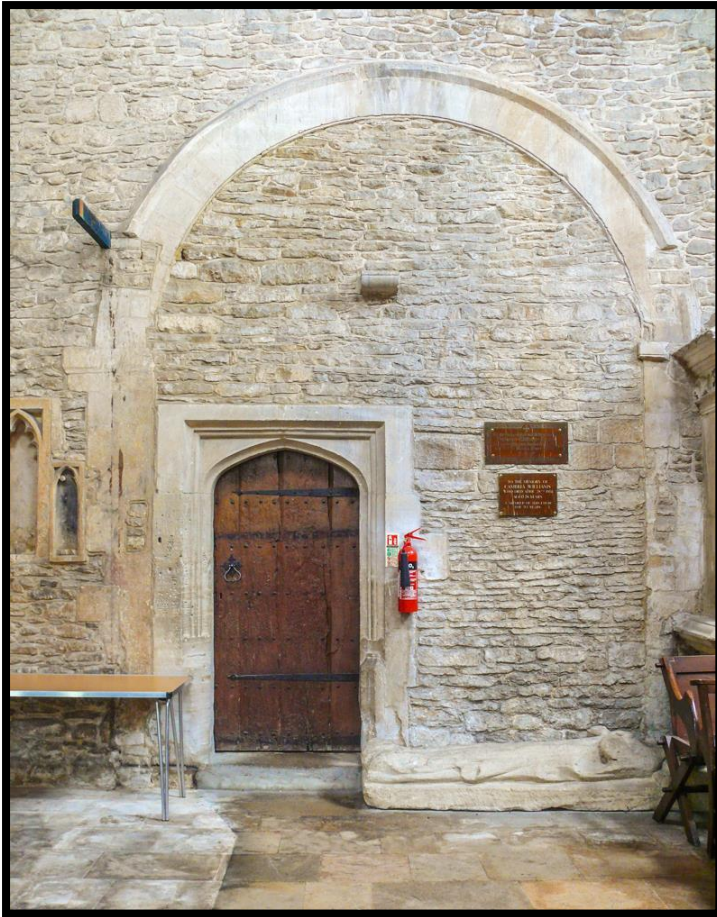
The massive tower, with its wooden ceiling above you, was originally supported on four Norman (Romanesque) rounded arches, of which only the easternmost one remains, incorporated later into the pointed Gothic arches, introduced when the tower was raised.

Ahead of you, in what is now the chancel, was the main body or nave of the original church, which probably had a semi-circular apse at the east end where the altar was situated. The stair turret, just behind you to the left, was on the outside of this building, and it has a small window on the north wall which is probably late Saxon in date.



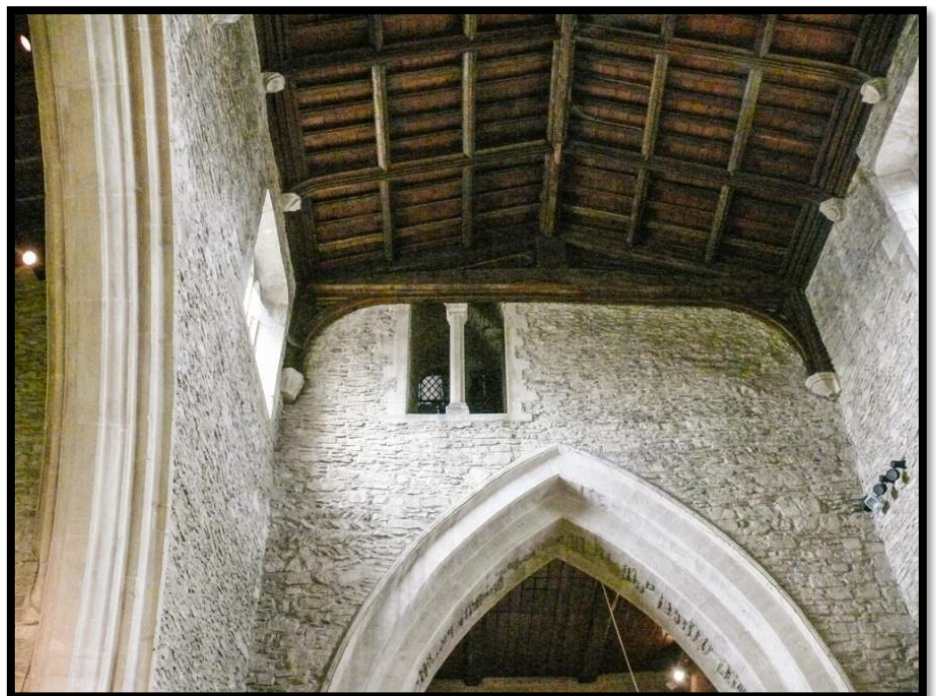
East wall and altar in the Lady Chapel

In the mid-12th century the building was extended and remodelled. The apse was replaced by a flat east wall and two transepts were built to the north and south of the tower, each of them having a chapel on the east wall.



The outline of the wide Norman arch leading to the south transept chapel can still be traced in the wall to the south of the organ.

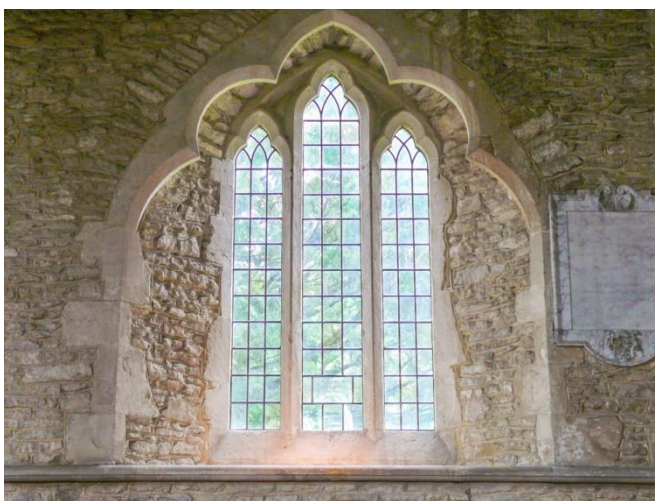
To the west of the old entrance a new nave was built, and the tower was raised. Some of the Norman windows in this new tower storey can be seen if you stand in the north transept, face south and look up.





North aisle

Move into the centre of the nave and look around to see some of the work done in the mid-13th century. The nave walls were partly demolished and replaced by the present arrangement of columns and pointed arches, leading into the two new aisles to north and south.



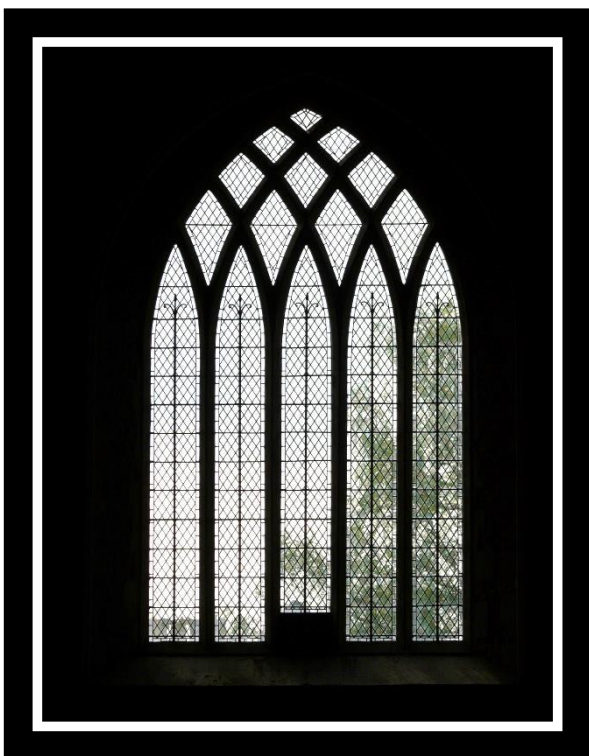
According to Sherwood and Pevsner in *The Buildings of Oxfordshire* (1974, page 430) the aisle windows with their ‘triplets of graduated trefoil lancets set in cusped rere-arches follow a local pattern, ‘but in no other church is it used so extensively and effectively’.



During the 13th century also, around the year 1270, the tower was again raised and the elegant spire was added, with four figures of saints set around its base.



You can see one of these original statues in the north aisle. St John the Baptist fell down during a gale on January 25th 1990 and a replacement now stands on the tower. Another statue, of St Andrew, had been replaced in the 19th century, but the remaining two 13th century statues are still in place although their identities are uncertain.



At the west end of the nave we move into the 14th century, with the great west window, its simple intersecting tracery a mirror image of the east window at the opposite end of the building, now filled with 19th century stained glass.



The base of the font is also 14th century, but it supports a 19th century bowl.



More 14th century work can be seen when you move into the chancel. Behind the altar is a late 14th century reredos showing Christ and 12 Apostles, with St Paul in place of Matthias. Matthias was Judas Iscariot's successor as the twelfth apostle. Traces of paint can still be seen on the figures, reminding us that a medieval church was full of vivid colour and ornament.

The chancel underwent a major remodelling in the mid 19th century, along with the rest of the building, but much earlier work remains. The 13th century piscina and sedilia (three seats for use by clergy during Mass) to the south of the altar face the magnificent double Easter Sepulchre on the north wall. This is 15th century, and was used for various liturgical ceremonies during Holy Week. As with the reredos, traces of colour can be seen on the stonework.



Double Easter Sepulchre



13th century piscina and sedilia



The choir stalls take us on into the 16th century and contain four misericords with carvings on the underside of these tip-up seats: a 'green man', a dragon or serpent, foliage and a bull.

Misericord with carving of a bull

This part of the church was used by the clergy and, until the Reformation it functioned quite separately from the nave, which was where the lay people worshipped.

In medieval times and right on up to the 19th century Bampton had three Vicars, each of whom looked after a particular ‘portion’ of what was a very large rural parish. They all lived around the church and would have prayed the daily offices and celebrated mass together in the chancel.

Three of the houses that have been vicarages



Churchgate House



Cobb House



Kilmore House



Tomb of George Tompson

The 16th century continues as you pass the rather crude tomb of George Tompson on your way into the Horde Chapel with its 17th and 18th century family monuments, crowded with cherubs and scrolls and other baroque devices.



Inside the Horde Chapel

As this is now a vestry, filled with the impedimenta and accoutrements of a working church, the atmosphere of a mortuary chapel has long been lost, but those parts of the monuments open to view are still worth a look.

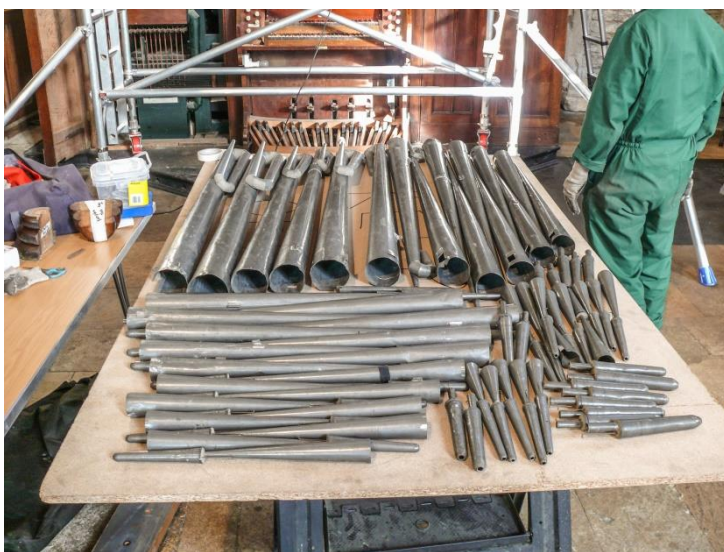




To your right as you come out of the Horde Chapel was the 19th century organ, built by William Gray in 1812, whose fine Georgian organ case remains and was modified by Gray and Davison in 1870. Work was also done in the early 1990s, after the statue of St John fell from the tower in a gale and crashed into the roof above the organ sending debris into the pipes.

A major restoration and enhancement at the time of writing this – early 2016 - is being undertaken by Peter Collins Organs to increase both the range and the volume of the instrument.

The organ being dismantled and a few of the organ pipes

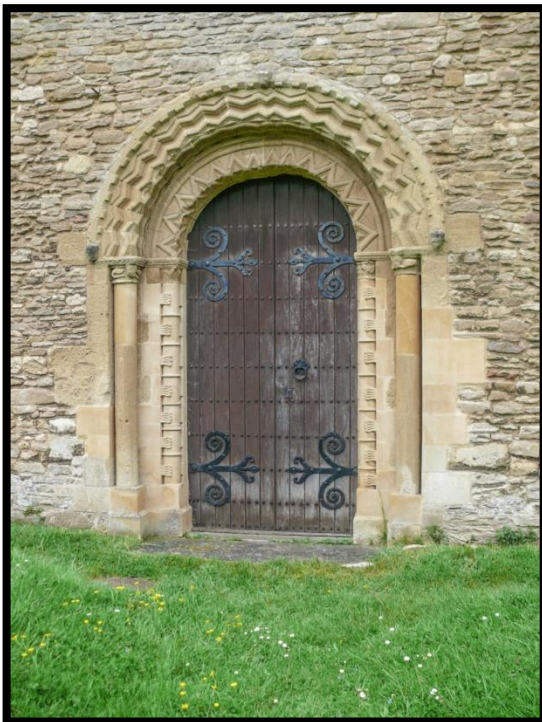


There are between 1,500 and 2,000 pipes in the organ.

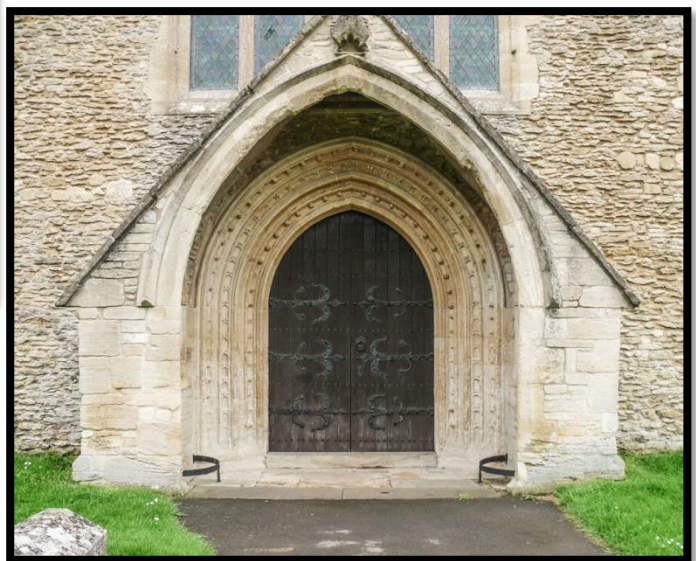


Into the 21st century, and still in the area of the organ and Horde Chapel, modern conveniences and a small kitchen were added as a millennium project, enabling the building to be used more effectively for both worship and social activities.

Outside the church – some things to note



The tower and spire with its statues all built around 1270; the Norman door leading into the south transept; the 14th century west porch with its ballflower decoration; the 15th century porch; various gargoyles and carved heads.

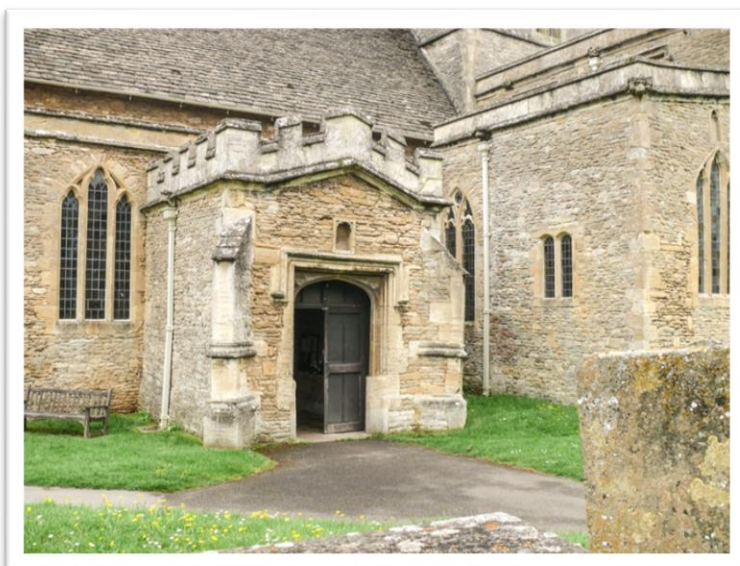


Above: the Norman door
Opposite: the west porch



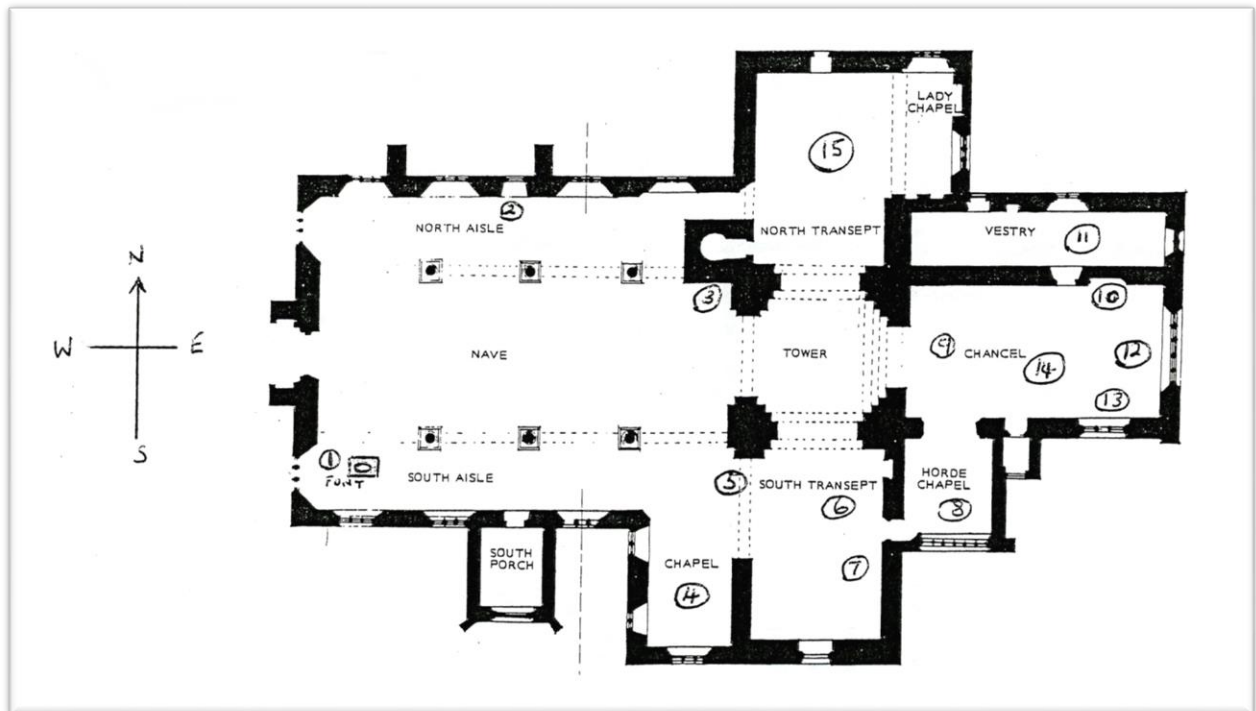
**Ballflower decoration
round the west porch**

One of many gargoyles



The South porch

Notes to various items of interest inside St Mary's, Bampton



Nave

1. **Font** – 14th century base, 19th century bowl. Corbel in SW corner above crude carvings, sometimes referred to as ‘instruments of the Passion’ but more like farrier’s tools
2. **John The Baptist** – from the base of the spire. Other statues are: St Andrew (replaced in the 19th century.) possibly St Peter (given the Exeter connection) and (highly debateable) St James.
3. **Stair turret** – with herringbone brickwork.

South Chapel

4. Architect’s drawings of church before the 1860s restoration. External view of church before the clerestory was removed (Skelton & Willis 1827)
5. Facsimile and translation of the grant of land by William I to Leofric.
6. **The Organ** - by Gray 1812 remodelled in 1840 and renovated and remodelled in 2016 (not original to the building.) Behind

the organ and usually inaccessible is a piscina and reredos, indicating the position of an altar here in the Middle Ages.

7. The rather uninspiring **tomb of George Tompson**, next to which is a worn effigy, possibly related to the knight's effigy in the Lady Chapel. **South doorway**, 12th century; the exterior has good Norman mouldings.
8. **The Horde Chapel**, formerly a mortuary chapel, now a vestry, erected in its present form in 1702 and lined with monuments relating the Horde Family of Cote.
9. **Choir stalls** with linenfold panelling c. early 16th century. TH and horn/shell – Thomas Hoye: JS – John Southwode. Four **Misericords** – 'Green Man', Dragon/Serpent and Foliage: Bull.
10. **'Double' Easter Sepulchre** – late 15th/early 16th century. Vestry door next to it has plain round-headed arch and old wooden door with 14th century ironwork.
11. The current **Vestry** appears to have been a chapel at one time – piscina in NW corner.
12. **Late 14th century reredos** with traces of colouring. L-R Matthew, Philip, Bartholomew, James The Great, Andrew, John, Jesus Christ, Paul, Peter, James, Simon, Thomas, Jude. Aumbry cupboard behind the altar
13. Late 13th century **piscina and sedilia** (raising the floor late 19th century has altered proportions as with the choir stalls.)
14. **Brasses** (not precisely where first set:) Thomas Plymmyswode and Robert Holcot – both vicars in the 15th century – and Frances Horde.
15. **The Lady Chapel** – Canopied recess (14th century) with heads of king and queen. Possibly Easter Sepulchre of (who knows?) part of the shrine of St Beornwald. Note stone bed for a brass of mitred and croziered figure below.