



A short history of
the parish church of
ST. MARY, PRIOR'S NORTON





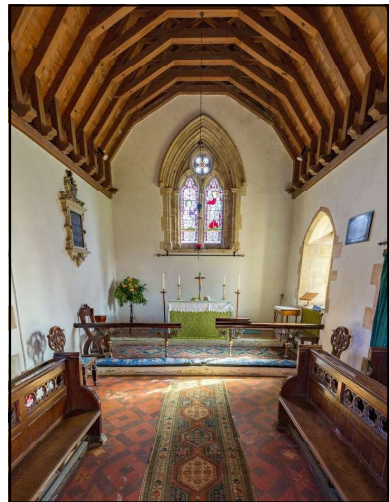
Welcome to our Church!

Please sign the Visitors' Book

You can see a record of the vicars of this church going back to 1511 on the north wall of the Nave.

Most old churches like St Mary's, built between 1200 and 1400 AD, have three parts – a bell-tower at the west end, a nave in the middle and a smaller chancel at the east end. On the side (usually the south, as here,) there is a porch, leading to the main door. You can see all of these in the picture opposite.

The Church of St. Mary has no work in it older than 1250, which is the date that the chancel is thought to have been built. The chancel is in the style of 'Early English' architecture, and the stonework of the window over the altar is a very good example, although the glass in it is more modern.



The nave of the Church probably dates 50 years later than the chancel and one curious feature is that the windows on the south side are of a later, perpendicular style. The reason for this is not certain but it may be that the original windows had to be replaced, or that the nave was possibly built with windows on the north side only and later, not being light enough, additional windows in the later style were added.

The tower is in the perpendicular style and came about 50 years after the



Looking down the nave from the chancel towards the tower



Looking down the nave from the tower towards the chancel



nave. This style of architecture was invented at Gloucester Cathedral in about 1330. It was gradually copied all over the country, and most English churches have at least some part of them built in this style. As no church on the Continent has any, it is considered as typical English architecture. On the outside of the tower, near the top, are gargoyles, which were put in nearly every old church as ornamentation to cover up water spouts from the roof. One of them (right) shows a man playing

bagpipes, and this design is very rare. It is not well known but bagpipes were once much played in the Cotswolds.

The tops of the doorways, inside the porch and on the opposite side of the Church, have some unusual and good decorative work, although the one in the porch has been restored. The door, known as the Priest's Door, on the south side of the chancel, is very small. It is said that these doors were deliberately made smaller so that the priest would have to bow his head as he entered the holy place, humbling himself before God.

Tucked away inside the bell tower is one of the most fascinating 'remnants' from former centuries in the present church. Set upright on the south wall of the tower is an ancient gravestone. The design, which has links with traditional Celtic Christian symbolism would suggest an early mediaeval dating. The cross is crowned by a sun motif, representing the resurrection, and this theme is strengthened by the symbolism in the barely-distinguishable steps which are carved onto the stone at the foot of the cross. It was clearly the gravestone of an important person, most probably a priest.

Some old church warden's accounts show that on 26th April 1826 the sum of £6 5s. 0d. was paid for Tables of the Lord's





Prayer and Ten Commandments, placed either side of the chancel east window (left). These vanished many years ago, presumably discarded, but it is thought they would have been similar to those still in situ at St. Catherine's, The Leigh, a short distance from here towards Tewkesbury.

The 1800's

In 1838, £10 was given for an oak communion table and chest.

The chest is most probably the one by the north now. Also, £2 18s. 0d. was paid for a crimson cloth, table cover and trimming. This crimson altar frontal is one of several still used in the Church.

In 1846 Rev. Marmaduke Cockin, Vicar of Norton, issued an appeal to build a vicarage, as there had never been one in the parish up till then. An estimate for £1,000 to build the vicarage plus £200 for expenses was made. The vicar gave £600 towards this and Miss Webb of Norton Court gave £100 and the site. In 1851 the vicar was paid £38 a year (about £4600 in today's money) for his work, so this was a sizeable contribution that he made. In any event, the vicarage was built, but nearly 30 years later the then vicar, F.J. Atwood, found it too small and so a second appeal was made for funds.

This appeal, in 1874, was for £1,100, to restore the Church (about £160,000 in today's money!), plus £800 to build a school and £900 to extend and alter the vicarage. Rev. Atwood declared 'The Church is in a most lamentable condition owing to the defective state of the roof of the nave, to be almost unfit for public worship. The chancel, porch and south wall of the nave had to be entirely rebuilt and reroofed. It is also

considered desirable, at the same time, to construct a vestry and organ chamber’.

In 1875 the repairs to St Mary’s were done and a new pulpit and font purchased, five bells re-hung and one recast, the tower repaired and a new floor laid.

The re-flooring was expensive, necessitating the lowering of the height of the churchyard. This was due to the fact that, over the centuries, graves had been put on top of earlier graves and in many places the level of the churchyard had got

so high that it was well up the sides of the church walls, especially on the south side. (Generally speaking, there are very few ancient graves on the north side of churches as people did not like to be buried on that side in the old days.)

By July 1876 the work was still not completed. The nave had already cost £695, the tower and bells £56, the new vestry £160, seats £48, church furniture £106 and works in the churchyard £65. It was reckoned that £152 was required to finish the work.

There had been a gallery at the back of the Church at one time but this had gone by the time the Church was restored.

A surplised choir was introduced in 1890 or 1891 when Rev. Marks was vicar. In those days it was considered a very High Church thing for a country church. £17 17s. 3d. was paid for cassocks and £1 16s. 0d. for choir desks.



The Font is inside the main door and is where new members of the church are baptized (often called ‘christened’).



The bible is a collection of 66 separate 'books' under one cover, and arranged in two sections. The first, the Old Testament, was written before the time of Jesus. It fore-tells his coming, death and resurrection. The New Testament describes the life and teaching of Jesus and explains how Christians should live.

The 1900's

Until 1908 the choir used the vestry but it became too small, so the base of the tower was adapted and match boarding was put in. The choir stalls were completed in 1916 at a cost of £24. Today the church does not have a choir, but we are blessed with skilled musicians and we greatly enjoy singing hymns and songs, both traditional and modern.

The lectern was presented to the Church at Christmas 1912 by Mr and Mrs Arbuthnot who lived at Norton Court for 23 years. It supports the bible, God's word to us. From here it is read aloud in our services, although we use a modern translation so that all can understand it clearly.

Up to 1935 six bells hung in the tower: the treble bell, 5 cwt., made in 1685, the second bell, 5.5 cwt., also 1685 and the third bell, 6 cwt., 1685, inscribed "I am third bell to ring many a day for our King" (this would have been James II), the fourth bell, 7.5 cwt., 1711, inscribed "William Fluck, William Welch, Church Wardens", the fifth bell, 9 cwt., 1735, inscribed "John Poole and William Mann, Church Wardens" and the sixth bell, 12 cwt., with no inscription.

In 1931 the bells were overhauled and the tower restored at a cost of

£600, paid by Captain G.N. Walker, and they were dedicated by Bishop Headlam, Bishop of Gloucester. A board on the wall records the event. About one year later, Miss Esther Hughes, daughter of a keen bell-ringing family, applied to the Parochial Church Council to present two extra bells in memory of her father and brother, both noted bell-ringers of their day. After much discussion, as they thought many other things were needed more by the Church (such as a new chalice), the bells were eventually cast by Mr. Bond of Burford and were hung and dedicated on 17th October 1935 by Mr. Hodson, the then Archdeacon of Gloucester. To thank the vicar and Parochial Church Council for hanging the bells, Miss Hughes later presented a chalice, which was rather large for everyday use but was for many years kept for use at festivals. Sadly, it mysteriously disappeared, presumed stolen.

Miss Hughes kept the village shop opposite the top of Wainlodes Lane, and a fortnight after the bells were dedicated her shop was burnt out, although, fortunately, she was rescued. The building was gutted and had to be demolished. After a couple of moves, Miss Hughes set up shop in West House and every Sunday she would walk up the hill to church, going backwards up the steep bits as she "found it less tiring"!

A survey of the sagging pews near the pulpit in 1936 revealed that the floor needed replacing, due to dry rot. An estimate of £60 6s. 0d. was given. The wooden part of the floor was replaced with wood blocks on concrete, except for the area behind the font, which had been renewed not long before.

Gas came to the village of Norton in 1934, but not to Prior's Norton, so the Church continued with oil lamps. A petrol lamp in the chancel, which burned petrol under pressure, had to be pumped in the vestry before it could be used each time. There were three oil lamps in the nave, which had to be reached by use of steps to be cleaned or adjusted. Two of the ornamental supports for these lamps still hang on the walls.

The Mother's Union banner, which was purchased in 1939 and has stood by the altar regularly since, and a crucifix, was given in memory of

Mrs. Walter Jordan. New tapestry curtains were also purchased in 1944, after fund-raising by the Mother's Union.

Electricity reached the Church in 1951 and after the wiring was installed the walls were limewashed. In 1952 an electric blower was fitted for the organ together with electric heating. But the walls seemed grey and gloomy by 1958 and were limewashed again. Also in 1958, the Methodist Chapel on the Green was sold to Canon Evans Prosser for the Parish of Norton, and became St. John the Evangelist. Canon Evans Prosser (Rector of Norton 1934-79), personally purchased and renovated it for the village in memory of his two aunts, who lived there. When this chapel was first built, Miss Webb of Norton Court was unwilling to pass a chapel on her way to church, so she had a new drive made across the meadows so she could go direct from the Court to the Church. (The vicarage and chapel are now private houses.)

In 1970 Mrs. Watson of Sandhurst gave the Church £400 in memory of her husband, originally for redecorating the Church. In the end it was decided by the Parochial Church Council that heating the back of the Church and the chancel was more urgent, and Mrs. Watson agreed to this. New curtains and two altar frontals were also bought and the ladies of the church made new covers for the kneelers. Mrs. Sparrow made the long kneeler in front of the altar rail.

A pair of brass candle sticks and alter vases, (which are still frequently used during services) were donated in memory of Alfred and Olive Phillips, by their daughter Betty Davies nee Phillips. Canon Evans-Prosser chose the items and had them approved by Mr and Mrs Davies who were caretakers of Norton Primary School at the time.

Recent developments

As with most churches, St. Mary was always difficult to heat and was draughty, so electric convector heaters were introduced in 1989 and the main source of draughts, the tower, was sealed off with a glass screen.

In 2003 the nave and chancel were re-roofed. In 2021 the rear of the church was re-ordered and a sink installed. The cupboards were made from the old pews that had to be removed. Other pews were placed against the nave wall and in the tower. These sympathetic changes have helped existing users of the church, but more importantly enabled us to better reach out to the community and to properly support Benefice services and other initiatives in the church, including monthly coffee mornings, village gatherings, festivals and other special events.

Our most recent project has been the restoration of the tower bells. Big events in the country and people's lives have been marked by the pealing of the Bells of St Mary's. and the restoration of the bells in 2023/24 ensured that they will ring out over our communities for decades to come.

The history of our bells goes back hundreds of years

- In 1685 a ring of 6 bells (cast by Abraham Rudhall I, down the road in Gloucester) was installed.
- Later in 1711 and 1735 some re-casts were installed (probably due to cracking).
- Then in 1930: Bond of Burford recast the (now) 5th bell and sub-contracted a further recast to Gillet and Johnson
- Also in 1930 the bells were re-hung on partly new fittings and new wooden frame
- In 1935 two other bells were added



One of the bells has the inscription: 'If you ask who gave me, Squire Butt of Hatherlee'

Since then, our rare peal of eight bells have rung out over our community

and attracted bell ringers nationwide. However, our bells, like all of us, can't escape the wear and tear of the years! In 2020 it became clear that major work was required. The bell frame was moving, there was corroding metalwork, decaying wood, and some bells were in urgent need of repair. Solving problems was our chance to make our mark in our time, to celebrate the commitment of our predecessors, to add to the life of the church today and prepare it for the future.

So, in 2022 we established our 'Ring out the Bells' appeal and the project began in earnest. The dedication service on October 27th 2024 was the culmination of an adventure of faith, a quest to restore our bells and bell frame and to upgrade the bell ringing chamber.



Of course, the project didn't happen without huge commitment, sacrifice and dedication by many people. We thank them all! In particular we acknowledge the support of the many volunteers who gave who gave their skills and time so generously – the equivalent of 135 days of work! There are too many people to mention, but we especially thank: Simon

Ridley (Leader) Rebecca Ridley, Mike Seagrave, Nick Hopkins, Phil Cotton, Malcolm Taylor, Kirsty Gifford, Jeremy Alford, Euan Thomas, Robert Howes, Hilda Ridley, Simon and Angela Dann, Mike and Emma Skidmore, Laura Finucane, James Mundy and Lucas Williams.

Their work, and that of Whites of Appleton, Bellhangers, who restored the bells and frame, was made possible by many people who contributed financially. We record our sincere thanks to Enover Community Trust, Gloucester and Bristol Diocesan Association of Church Bellringers, The Garfield Weston Foundation, the Gloucester Historic Churches Trust and the Benefact Trust. Also to the very many personal donors whose support was absolutely strategic – Mike Seagrave, Ivor Goulter, Hilda Ridley, Lark Briggs and many others who generously gave anonymously.



The restored bells return to Norton

A peal of 5152 Cambridge Surprise Major rung in 3 hours and 1 minute marked the culmination of the project. One of the original 1685 bells had to be replaced with a bell donated by the Keltek Trust, but it has been retained as a chiming bell, hung within the tower.

Now that the bells have been dedicated, we will be doing our very best to share the bells at Norton with as many people as we can. When you

hear the bells ring out, give thanks for the generosity of those who made this transformation possible. Think too of the individuals who, over the years, have given heart and soul to the life of this church. The bells are reminders of their love for this place and an inspiration for the generations to come. But most of all, the bells are reminders that God is good, loves us all, and is always the same yesterday, today and forever. That's a truth that resonated with us when, at the start of the works, the bells were taken out of the tower and someone, touching the bells, commented how the bells had lived through amazing times in history, in good times and bad. Yet they were still here, now restored, of course, to ring out for years to come.

To find out more about the life of our church,
including a fascinating presentation telling the
story of the restoration of the bells, please visit:
www.seventowers.org.uk/our-churches/norton



Our group of churches is known as a 'benefice'. The word *benefice* means to 'make blessed', and as such, we aim to be a lively community of faith, hope and love, a community that embraces the blessing of God's love, and shares that blessing with one another and those within our villages.

Our pattern of worship 'travels' each Sunday and includes a variety of styles, from traditional to informal gatherings for all ages. People from every parish are invited and anyone can come and see.

You can see the services this month on the notice board in the porch and on our website.

We love to welcome new people and make new friends. If you would like to join in or find out more, please just come or get in touch.



Norton church has a wonderful atmosphere, beloved by all who know it. Many know it as 'The Disappearing Church'. (We prefer to call it 'The Appearing Church'!) Next time you travel from Gloucester to Tewkesbury, watch the Church as you pass by. The position of the hill gives the optical illusion that the Church sinks into the ground as you go past. Even if it seemed to disappear when you last went past, it will be there when you pass again! Standing as it does on top of the hill, the Church is a prominent feature that has been a beacon of witness and a Christian gathering place for centuries.

With God's help we will do all we can to ensure it remains so for centuries to come.



St Mary's is one of six churches that make up the Seven Towers Benefice

**Find out more at:
www.seventowers.org.uk**

*You are welcome to take this away with you.
A donation of at least £2 would be appreciated if you are able.
As you go out, please put it in the box to the right of the main door.*

