



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

Upper Eldon,
Hampshire



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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Upper Eldon, Hampshire

CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

by John E Vigar (Historian, author and broadcaster specialising in ecclesiastical architecture. Regional Development Manager, The Churches Conservation Trust)

Visitors are requested to respect the privacy of the owners of Eldon House by keeping to the path between the church and gate.

The church of St John the Baptist, Upper Eldon, King's Somborne, Hampshire, is a small, single-cell 12th-century structure, built of flint with stone dressings and a tiled roof. The rubble construction of the walls is rendered both internally and externally with a lime mortar. The church lies in a remote rural area in what was once described as a *decayed parish*, with few houses and no centre of population nearby. St John's church now stands in the garden of Eldon House, and the passer-by might easily mistake it for a barn. It is certainly one of the smallest churches in Hampshire.

In the 11th century Eldon was a royal manor and it was gifted by Queen Emma (widow of Canute) to Winchester Cathedral. She had fallen out with her son, Edward the Confessor, and was forced by him to give her lands away. The church at Eldon was originally served by priests from King's Somborne, but later, as a parish in its own right, the advowson, or the right to appoint its priests, was given to the Augustinian canons at Mottisfont Priory. It is now in the parish of Braishfield.

*Front cover: Interior from the west
(Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: The south door
(Christopher Dalton)*





Exterior from the north-west (Christopher Dalton)

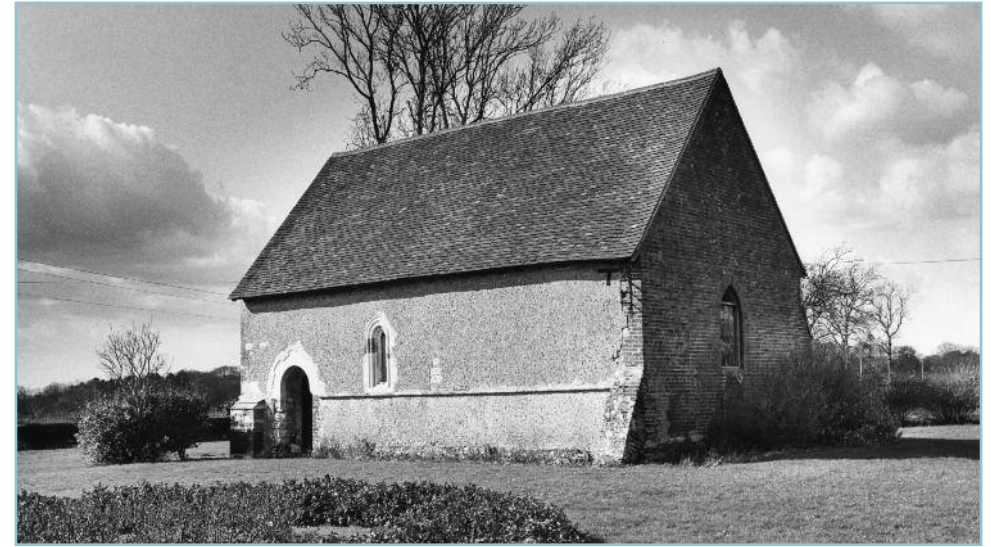
The church is 16 feet (4.9 metres) wide and 32 feet (9.7 metres) long, which is about two feet (0.6 metres) shorter than the original structure, the east wall having been rebuilt in the early 18th century within the bounds of the old church. In the north wall are two original windows and part of an easternmost one which was destroyed when the east wall was rebuilt in brick in 1729. There are also signs of a fourth window at the west end, but this is only visible internally. These original window openings are formed of single narrow lights about 15 inches (38.1 cm) wide and three feet (0.9 metres) tall. Externally they have a simple roll moulding and the top of each arch is almost rounded – a typically late Norman form for this part of England. Internally the windows are deeply splayed to allow the maximum amount of light to penetrate the thick walls and the tops of their internal arches are almost pointed – anticipating the Early English style of architecture which St John's church barely predates.

Only one window survives in the south wall, although there are traces that another once existed towards the east end. The main east window of the church, which dates from the 18th-century rebuilding of the east wall, is much wider than its mediaeval forbears.

The south door is an oddity. From the remains of the interior arch it would seem that it initially had a plain rounded arched top, similar to the original windows, but that this was replaced during the 1729 restoration by a wider square-headed door set under a wooden lintel. In the 1975 repairs this wooden lintel (which had all but rotted away) was removed and replaced by a stone arch – although the original stone jamb on the west side, together with the 18th-century brick one to the east, were deliberately retained to show the various changes that have taken place to this part of the church.

Externally, the wall is enlivened by a horizontal roll-moulding which runs just below the base of the windows. At one time the interior also boasted this feature, but only a small section remains just next to the door.

The most unusual aspect of this tiny church is the rare set of consecration crosses that survive. When mediaeval churches were first consecrated 24 of these crosses would have been anointed by the bishop using holy oil. In some churches the places to be touched were marked by painted crosses (for instance at the Trust church of Preston Candover), whilst more rarely, incised stone crosses would be used.



Exterior from the south-east (Christopher Dalton)

These would subsequently have remained as a permanent reminder of the initial consecration. Here at Eldon the incised crosses are even more unusual as they were originally designed to hold small inset metal crosses, the fixing holes of which may be clearly seen, especially so on the cross to the left of the altar. The crosses would have been fixed at a convenient height on the wall for the Bishop to anoint, so some have obviously been moved as today they are too high to have been of any practical use. Of the original 24 consecration crosses (12 each inside and out) that this building would once have had, a remarkable total of nine survive, five inside and four without – in most surviving mediaeval churches all have been destroyed or lost.

At the west end of the building there is a small square opening that pierces the wall. This is a hagioscope, or window, constructed to allow people outside to have a view of the altar when the church was locked. It probably shows that the quiet rural lane to the west of the church was once a busier thoroughfare, and local legend records that Henry V's archers prayed through the window on their way to Michelmarsh where they assembled before their journey to France to fight at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415.

At the Reformation in the 16th century, the patronage of Eldon passed from the canons of Mottisfont to the Sandys family, who had purchased Mottisfont to be converted into their private residence. An inventory of church goods taken from Eldon (as having belonged to Mottisfont) included:

*One vestment of white dornix with the awlbs;
Two awlter cloths of hynnen;
One bell hanging in the church;
One challes of Sylver and parcel gilt;
(Signed) Edmunde Curkus. Parson
John Blake, Churchman.*

Although there are records of rectors of Eldon since 1346, the use of the church after the Reformation seems to have been spasmodic and it would appear that by the 18th century the church was completely dilapidated, requiring the rebuilding of the east wall. The date, 1729, together with the initials WH are picked out in dark bricks on the outside of the east wall.

At the time of the National Census of Religious Attendance in 1851 – when all places of public religious worship were recorded – the population of the parish was stated as being 14, and it



appears that by then the church was no longer in use, the worshippers going down into King's Somborne for their services. A correspondent in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for 1864 wrote

'To this day the shamefully desecrated but little known parish church of Eldon, Hampshire, has its regularly appointed rectors, though it is used as a cowshed. The late rector compounded with his chief parishioner by making him a present of a volume of sermons'.

By 1973, after the lapse of another hundred years, the church was still in a dilapidated state and was thus described: 'The windows are broken, the floor is covered with filth and has every appearance of a farm building. Its sole occupant is a beautiful white owl'.

The church was formally declared redundant in 1971 and two years later vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust). Extensive repairs to the roof, including retiling, together with other repairs to the windows and stonework, were carried out in 1975. Inside the walls were replastered and the floor repaired. The work was executed by Moreton and Sons Ltd as main contractors with Messrs Blackwell and Moody as the stonemasons under the supervision of The Sawyer Partnership, of Winchester. Further repairs were carried out in 1984 by Reg Smith of Whitchurch under the supervision of architect Penelope Adamson. The church remains consecrated and a popular annual service is held here each summer.

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that it is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 335 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

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St Mary, Ashley
4 miles SE of Stockbridge off A3057

All Saints, Little Somborne
4 miles SE of Stockbridge off A3057

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author acknowledges the previous work of Mr R J R Sawyer, and the assistance of the staff at the Hampshire Record Office, Winchester.

*Left: View of the west wall showing the square bagioscope (Christopher Dalton)
Back cover: The fixing for a metal consecration cross (Christopher Dalton)*