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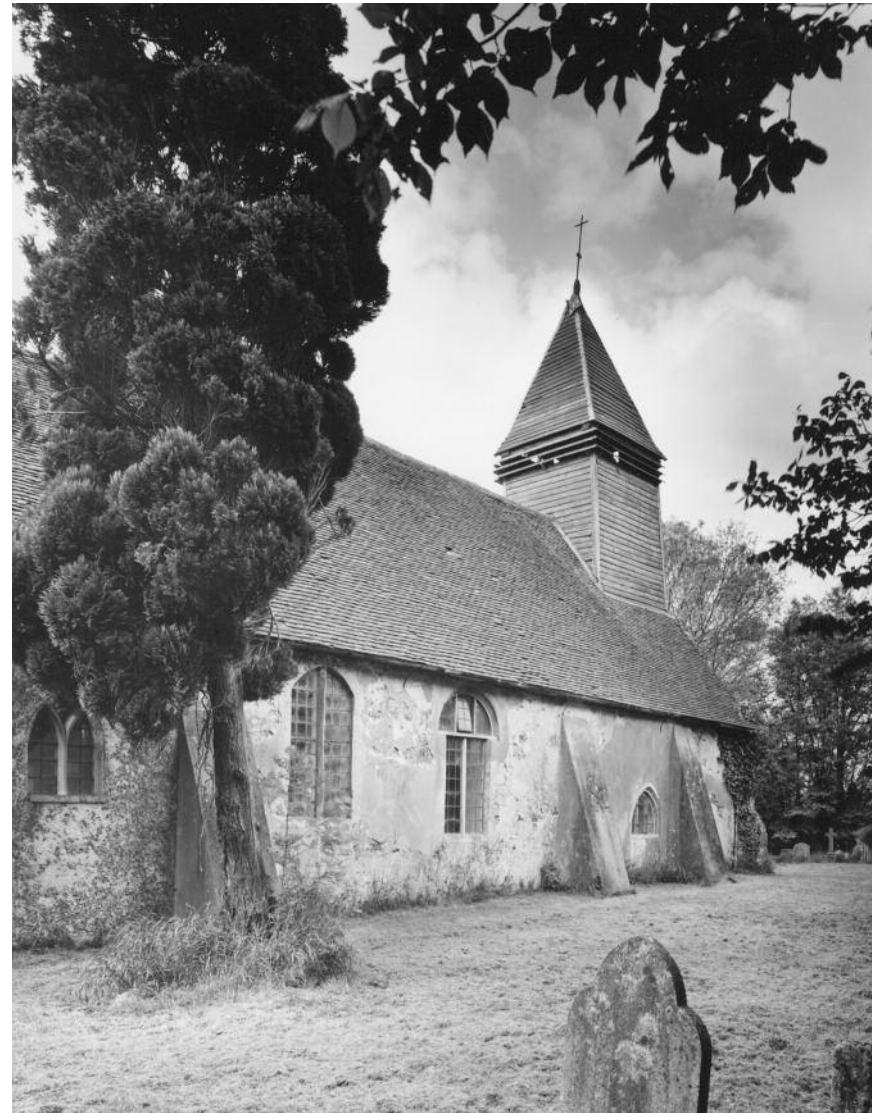
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ST MARY'S OLD  
CHURCH

WEST BERGHOLT, ESSEX





THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO  
ST MARY'S OLD CHURCH  
WEST BERGHOLT, ESSEX

*Many years ago Christians built and set apart this place for prayer. They made their church beautiful with their skill and craftsmanship. Here they have met for worship, for children to be baptised, for couples to be married and for the dead to be brought for burial. If you have time, enjoy the history, the peace and the holiness here. Please use the prayer card and, if you like it, you are welcome to take a folded copy with you.*

*Although services are no longer regularly held here, this church remains consecrated; inspiring, teaching and ministering through its beauty and atmosphere. It is one of more than 300 churches throughout England cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust was created in 1969 and was, until 1994, known as the Redundant Churches Fund. Its object is to ensure that all these churches are kept in repair and cared for, in the interests of the Church and Nation, for present and future generations.*

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*We hope that you will enjoy your visit and be encouraged to see our other churches. Some are in towns; some in remote country districts. Some are easy and others hard to find but all are worth the effort.*

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*About 2 miles to the S of Colchester, off Berechurch Hall Road, between the B1025 and B1026*

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THE HYPHE**

*On Hythe Hill, about 1 mile E of the town centre*

**COLCHESTER, ST MARTIN**

*West Stockwell Street, near the Town Hall*

**HALSTEAD, HOLY TRINITY**

*On the A131, about ½ mile west of the town centre*

**LITTLE BROMLEY, ST MARY**

*3 miles SW of Manningtree, between the A137 and A604*

## ST MARY'S OLD CHURCH

WEST BERGHOLT, ESSEX

by ROY TRICKER

The old church at West Bergholt stands approximately at the centre of the parish which it was to serve. However, by the latter half of the 19th century most of the population were living in the south-eastern area of the parish, nearer to Colchester, to the Bures Road and also to Daniell's brewery, which was founded c.1820, by 1886 owned 113 inns and closed in 1959. In 1904 the new church was built nearer the main centre of population and the old church and the hall now stand in isolation, at the end of a country lane which leads nowhere else.

Bergholt (or 'Bercolt') means the wood on the hill. The parish was once known as Bergholt Sackville, after the Anglo-Norman family whose descendants held the manor here from c.1100 until 1559.

After the dedication of the new church in 1904 the use of its mediaeval predecessor gradually decreased. By 1946 it was used only for marriages and for Sunday morning services during summer months. In 1975 it was declared redundant and in 1976 it was vested in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust. Extensive repairs have since taken place under the supervision of architects Mr John Burton and, more recently, of Mr Simon Marks.

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHURCH

Like many English parish churches, St Mary's has gradually evolved and grown over the years, containing craftsmanship from several periods. Some of the landmarks in its long history are as follows:

**The 11th century.** Much of the north wall of the nave, with its blocked Saxon doorway, formed the north wall of an 11th century church which was a single-celled building with a rounded eastern apse. This Saxo-Norman church almost certainly replaced an even earlier building, of wood. Excavations have revealed evidence of post-holes which may have

been part of this timber structure. There was once a Norman south doorway, some carved stones from which were reused by the 14th century masons in the south aisle walls.

**c.1280–1400.** The chancel was extended eastwards and given a square east end, the Saxon north doorway was replaced by a wider gothic doorway further westwards and new windows were placed in the north wall of the nave. This was followed in the early 14th century by the addition of the south aisle and porch, and the westward extension of the nave, apparently about 1400. Part of the timber framework supporting the belfry dates from the 14th century and the rest from the 15th century, when it seems to have been completed.

**c.1600–1800.** In these centuries the church suffered considerable decay and efforts to repair were somewhat makeshift. In 1607, it was described as 'ruinous, wanting tiling, paving and glazing', in 1633 tiling was again needed and the pews had to be mended. In 1684 and 1705 the north wall and the belfry needed attention. New pewing was installed in the chancel and nave. The story, however, is not one of total neglect, for between 1603 and 1625 the royal arms of King James I were painted on the tympanum at the division of the nave and chancel, and in the 18th century, the west gallery was erected and dormer windows inserted in the roof to admit more light.

**c.1865–1904.** Because Old St Mary's had by this time become remote from where its people were living, two acres of land on Bergholt Heath were set aside in 1865 so that a new church could be built nearer to the village, but it was to be nearly 40 years before this building became a reality.

A sum of money was bequeathed by the churchwarden and farmer, Robert Bradbrook, who died in 1877, to restore and possibly enlarge the old church. It may have been shortly after this that the church was reseated, partly using salvageable woodwork from the box-pews. In 1882–83 the bell-turret was repaired, the cracked mediaeval bell recast and a second bell, now in use at the new church, was added.

At a meeting in May 1886, the parishioners decided to apply for a faculty to enlarge the old church by the addition of a north aisle and organ chamber, using money from Mr Bradbrook's bequest and also to carry out as much restoration to the remainder of the building as money raising allowed. The plans produced by the architect, whose identity is as yet unknown, show a new bell-turret and north aisle, with a lower gable than



*West Bergholt Church – restoration & additions. This is how the west elevation of the church would have looked had the plans proposed in 1886 been carried out.*

that on the south aisle and a rood screen beneath the chancel arch. For some reason this scheme was abandoned, probably in favour of building a new church.

**1904.** The new church was opened and dedicated by the Bishop of St Albans, in whose diocese West Bergholt then was, on 12 August 1904. The contractor was Mr Deaves of Nayland and the architects were Sir Arthur Blomfield & Sons. Sir Arthur, who had designed the churches of St John at Colchester, Ipswich and Felixstowe, and many other new churches throughout England, had died in 1899 and the work was therefore probably under the supervision of his son, Charles. Only part of the proposed church was built and the building is still incomplete.

**1928.** New east window tracery and stained glass.

**1975–76.** The old church, after years of very little use, was declared redundant and was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) to be conserved with Church and State money as a sacred and beautiful building.

## EXTERIOR

Here at the end of the lane, West Bergholt Hall, with its 18th century front and St Mary's Church make an attractive picture in their idyllic peaceful setting. Here also is a typical English country **churchyard**, partly bounded by a prehistoric earthwork, containing a variety of graves and tombs, some still surrounded by their iron railings.

The church comprises nave, chancel, south aisle, south porch and a timber bell-turret rising out of the west end of the nave. The fabric is a pleasing mixture of building styles and its walls contain a variety of **building materials**, including flints from the fields, brown septaria from the



*The church and churchyard from the south-east*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

marshes, dressed stonework, reused Roman tiles, bricks of varying vintages, chunks of brown conglomerate, timber, and warm red clay tiles on the roofs.

The styles of different periods are reflected in the design of the **windows and doorways**. The two north nave windows, having long lost their original tracery and mullions, were patched up in the 18th century rather roughly, using brick and timber, as was often the practice before the Gothic Revival introduced restoration using 'correct' Gothic architecture. An example of the latter is to be seen in the east window of the chancel, which received new and elegant 14th century style tracery in 1928, unlike its rustic counterpart in the south aisle. The 'Y' tracery of the two-light chancel windows is mostly renewed, although original stonework of c.1300 frames them and also the priest's doorway. The western chancel windows were once lower, perhaps forming low-side windows, for the ringing of a hand-bell to announce the climax of the daily Eucharist. The south aisle windows have pleasing curvilinear tracery of c.1320–30, whilst the west window of the nave is square-headed, of c.1400.

The earliest visible craftsmanship survives in the north wall of the nave. This incorporates chunks of dark brown conglomerate and contains traces of its former 11th century north doorway. The simple rounded arch is framed by reused Roman bricks. This doorway was replaced about 1300 by that to the west of it, which was in turn blocked and partly glazed in the late 18th century.

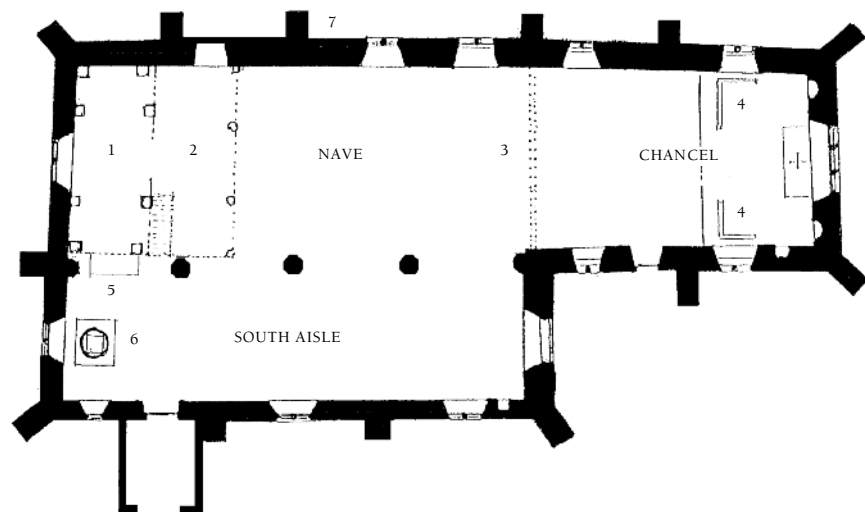
The timber **bell-turret**, typical of many in Essex, has a simple four-sided spire. Its weatherboarded cladding hides an intricate timber framework which is visible inside the church.

The **south aisle** was added in the early 14th century. Incorporated into the masonry of its east wall (and in the south wall, to the right of the window east of the porch) are reused pieces of stone with Norman Romanesque carving. These probably came from a Norman south doorway which was taken down when the aisle was built. Its 14th century successor is sheltered by a brick and timber **porch**, which preserves a few mediaeval timbers, although it was mostly renewed in the 1880s. The graffiti visible in the sides of the south doorway are of considerable age, and include several mediaeval pilgrims' crosses, writing and other designs. The door itself is 17th century.

## INTERIOR

The charm of the church lies in its rustic and homely atmosphere, little alteration having taken place here during the past hundred years. The clear glass in the windows fills the building with light, falling upon floors of gault bricks, ceilings of plaster and furnishings which are mostly very simple and functional. Yet there is much of beauty and interest here and the leaning walls betray the great age of the building.

The south aisle is divided from the nave by a simple early 14th century **arcade** of four bays, resting upon octagonal piers. The western bay encloses the 18th century **gallery**, supported upon Doric pillars of cast iron, encased in wood. The gallery front is handsomely panelled, but those who ascend the rather domestic-looking staircase will discover that it is furnished with the most utilitarian tiered seating. The **dormer windows** are probably contemporary with the gallery and were made to provide



*Plan of St Mary's Old Church, West Bergholt*

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1 Vestry area beneath belfry                   | 5 Parish chest                       |
| 2 Gallery, with George III royal arms on front | 6 Font                               |
| 3 James I royal arms                           | 7 External position of Saxon doorway |
| 4 Communion Rails                              |                                      |



*The interior looking east, before the royal arms was revealed above the embattled rood-beam (ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND)*

extra light, especially for the village choir and musicians who would have occupied the gallery. The **hat pegs** are worthy of note, both here and elsewhere in the church.

In the vestry area, behind the gallery, can be seen the fascinating timber framework of the **bell-turret**. Much of the structure dates from the 15th century, but parts are a century earlier and it is thought that some of the timbers high up in the belfry floor are reused from an earlier structure, possibly of the mid-13th century. There is now one **bell**, cast by John Warner & Sons in 1883 and replacing a 15th century bell by William Chamberlain of London, the **inscription band** from which has been preserved and is fixed to one of the beams in the vestry area below.

At the west end of the south aisle, near the entrance, stands the **font**. Its plain circular bowl is difficult to date, but is probably 13th century. The stem is later and the lid possibly 17th or 18th century. A little ancient **glass** remains at the top of the west window nearby.

A section of **lath and plaster**, from elsewhere in the church, has been preserved above the massive iron-bound **parish chest**, which was fashioned in oak about 1400 for the storage of parish valuables and documents. Its timbers are studded with many nails, but the chest now lacks its original locks and some of the original timbers in its back and base.

Many of the simple **benches**, made c.1877 (especially those beneath the gallery) incorporate in their backs reused panelling from the 17th or 18th century box-pews which they replaced.

The nave, chancel and aisle all have plaster **ceilings**, erected in the 18th century to conserve heat in the church. These hide the 14th century timbers of the roofs above, although the mediaeval **cornices** are visible at the tops of the walls. Recent work on the south aisle roof exposed for a short time its mediaeval timber construction which incorporates, towards its east end, the timber supports for a sacring bell at the level of the eaves. Straddling the nave, chancel and aisle at strategic places are sturdy **tie-beams**. The beam where the nave and chancel join is in the position of the pre-Reformation rood beam and filling the space above it is a lath and plaster tympanum, upon which was painted the **Royal Arms of King James I** between 1603 and 1625, revealed beneath several layers of limewash and conserved in 1986. The arms, with their two supporters, cover most of the area of the tympanum and the painting extends a little above the line of

the later plaster ceiling. The motto, 'Exurgat Deus Dissipenter Inimici' is the opening verse of Psalm 68 – 'Let God arise and let his enemies be scattered'. Perhaps these arms were limewashed over when the church acquired a new set of **Hanoverian Arms** c.1816. These are of cast iron and are fixed to the front of the gallery. They are almost certainly the work of the enterprising Joseph Wallis Jr, who opened a foundry at the west end of Colchester High Street in 1792. When, in 1816, Hanover became a kingdom and the English royal arms were altered, replacing the electoral bonnet of Hanover with a crown, Mr Wallis cast the new-style arms and sold them to churches which required them. Twenty-three of these castings have been traced and all except two are in Essex and Suffolk.

There was a side altar at the east end of the south aisle in mediaeval times and its 14th century trefoil-headed **piscina** recess may be seen in the south wall nearby; also the window sill here has been lowered to form **sedilia** (seating). The **high altar piscina** in the chancel has a plainer arch and a well-preserved octofoil drain, into which the disposable water used



*King James I royal arms, conserved in 1986, having been hidden for many years*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

at the Eucharist was poured. The **sedilia** in the windowsill nearby provided seating for the sacred ministers during certain parts of the Eucharist.

The east window is flanked by simple **niches** for statues. It contains **stained glass** of 1928 by F C Eden, in memory of Thomas Brett Daniell (d.1925), whose family owned the brewery. The name of his sister, Sarah, who unveiled the window at its dedication by the Bishop of Colchester, was added in 1932. The window shows the risen Christ, with bemused Roman guards and angels with scrolls. The stonework was executed by Messrs Norman & Burt, of Sussex. The lower part of the east wall beneath it is lined with early 17th century **panelling**, forming a reredos. Of the same period is the turned stem and base of the **lectern**, which has been given a later bookrest.

The three-sided **communion rails** date from the late 17th or early 18th century. At some later period they were moved outwards to make the sanctuary area larger, but originally they enclosed the altar more closely, with their ends against the east wall and with a much narrower entrance gap, so that communicants could kneel in comfort round all three sides.

The small **organ**, by Bevington, was given in 1877.

## MEMORIALS

On the walls and in the floors of the church are memorials to people who have been part of this community in the past. In the south aisle floor is a mediaeval **coffin-shaped stone**. The two holes piercing it suggest that this may even be the base of a 13th or 14th century stone coffin.

A few of the **ledger slabs** have worn away so much as to be illegible, but others commemorate:

### Sanctuary

- Thomas Scarlet (1705).
- Louis Daniell (1987) and his wife, Mavis Pendlebury (1963).
- John G. Daniell (1954) and Edith his wife (1968).

### West of altar rails

- Mary, widow of Francis Pollard (1676).
- Rebecka Sadler (1676).

- Peter Sadler, husband of Rebecka, (1670).

### Partly hidden by the stalls on the north side of the chancel

- The Revd Nathaniel Seaman, Rector 1658–79.

### Nave west

- A lady who was the wife of a Mr Parker (1700).
- Dorothy, wife of James Fox (1718).

The following people are commemorated by **plaques** on the walls:

- Thomas Fisher of Boxted (1789) and Mary (1808). This plaque, behind the organ, has an urn at the top and a flattering inscription which is worth reading.
- The Revd Joseph Fisher, Rector here for 32 years (1816), and William Fisher of Boxted Lodge (1844). [Behind the organ]
- Robert Bradbrook, Churchwarden for 46 years (1877). This Gothic tablet, by Watts, is on the south chancel wall.
- John Thompson Argent, Churchwarden (1858) and Amy his wife (1870). Plaque over the pulpit, by Henry Lufkin, of East Hill, Colchester.
- John Thompson Argent II (1894) and Emma his wife (1880). Brass cross in the nave, by Quilter of Colchester, on the north wall.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In compiling this new and updated guide to Old St Mary's I pay tribute to the research of Christopher Starr, which formed the basis for the earlier guide, and also to the work of Robin Turner and of the West Bergholt Local History Group. I am grateful to the staff of the Essex County Record Offices at Colchester and Chelmsford and of the Colchester Library for the use of material in their care.



*West end from north west, showing the belfry before its repair by the Trust (RCHME)*

*Front cover: Exterior from the north-east (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).  
Back cover: Interior, looking westward (RCHME).*

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