



THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST



# ST JOHN'S CHURCH

Duxford,  
Cambridgeshire



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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*Duxford, Cambridgeshire*

# ST JOHN'S CHURCH

*by Roy Tricker (Field Officer with The Churches Conservation Trust 1991–2002, church enthusiast, historian and lay canon)*

## HISTORY

The village of Duxford, with its two ancient churches less than a quarter of a mile (0.4 km) apart, has grown up around what is now the B1379, near where the River Cam forms the eastern border of its parish, which extends some 3½ miles (5.6 km) to the south-west. A third mediaeval church building, the Free Chapel of St John the Baptist, stands about a mile (1.6 km) to the north-east, near Whittlesford railway station, but in Duxford parish. Both St Peter's and St John's churches possess Norman craftsmanship dating from the 11th century or earlier. St Peter's became the parish church in 1874, when the two livings were amalgamated. Since that date St John's has not been in regular parochial use and, as the 'poor relation', has escaped restoration and possible transformation by the Victorians. It has survived as a rare and refreshing example of a rustic and unspoilt country church.

Although St John's has not been in use since the 1870s, it has not been neglected. Considerable repairs were carried out in 1949 with a grant from the Pilgrim Trust. Later the Friends of Friendless Churches facilitated further work and, since the church was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in 1979, a continuing programme of repairs has been taking place. The wall paintings are being carefully conserved over a long-term period.

*Front cover: Porch and south side  
(Boris Baggs)*

*Left: Interior looking eastwards  
(Boris Baggs)*

## EXTERIOR

St John's has a delightful village setting, with an attractive green and several picturesque houses nearby. The road bends round the churchyard, above which, in the words of Arthur Mee, St John's rises 'enthroned like a ship at high tide'.

The building materials which make up the fabric display a variety of mellow colours and textures. There are brown Cambridgeshire cobbles, soft chalky clunch, flints, slender Tudor and Stuart bricks, larger and later bricks, and also buff-coloured Northamptonshire limestone.

This building incorporates work of every mediaeval architectural period and is therefore a textbook of architectural styles. Its structural development is approximately as follows:

**1100** Core of the nave, tower and chancel, with maybe some earlier work in the south doorway.

**1200** New windows in the chancel, in the Early English style.

**1280** The belfry stage of the tower added.

**1340 onwards** The north chapel, with its fine Decorated architecture.

**1440 onwards** The north aisle, porch and new windows in the nave.

The west wall of the **nave** has a three-light Perpendicular window, above which are ancient timbers built into the masonry beneath the roof gable. The south-west buttress of brick was

added in the late 18th or early 19th century, as were two others which support the south side of the tower.

The 15th-century **north aisle** is lit by three three-light Perpendicular windows and has a blocked north doorway. Its western window, which is later and rather more crude, was possibly added in the 18th century.

Eastward is the taller **north chapel**, added in the 14th century. Its stonecarving indicates that no expense was spared. The three-light east window has beautiful tracery patterns and the pair of two-light northern windows are set beneath hood moulds with ogee curves, resting upon carved corbel heads – all typifying Decorated architecture at its zenith. A projecting course of foliage and ball-flowers embellishes the top of the north wall and the base of the eastern parapet. This is punctuated by two large gargoyles and two smaller carved figures.

The east wall of the **chancel** was partly renewed with brick during the 17th or early 18th century and its four-light east window replaced three 13th-century single-lancet windows. Remains of the former northern lancet may be seen, and also traces of the original northern roof ridge. The south side has a two-light 14th-century window, and also a 13th-century lancet window, its lower division forming a 'low-side' window, through which a sanctus bell may have been rung to announce the climax of the Mass to the people unable to



*The north aisle and chapel (© Crown copyright. NMR)*

be present in church. The nearby priest's doorway has an arch of late-15th- or early-16th-century Tudor bricks.

The **tower** is placed between the nave and chancel, possibly indicating that the church was originally cruciform. It received its lower window in the 15th century; but in the stage above, on three sides, are Norman windows of c.1100. The belfry stage, added about 1280, has two-light windows which have been largely renewed in recent years. The tower has an embattled parapet and is crowned by a lead-covered 'spike', which is a feature to be found at many churches in south Cambridgeshire and throughout Hertfordshire. Its top was twisted in 1897, when a flagpole tied to it to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was disturbed by a gale.

Much of the timber framework of the **porch** is 15th century, although it has been extensively repaired using later brickwork. Original carved bargeboards survive beneath the gable and the

timber entrance arch has 15th-century carved leaves in its spandrels. The porch shelters a noble Norman south doorway, with zigzag moulding round its arch and a tympanum, upon which is carved a stepped cross with a central rosette design. Some experts believe that this cross, which is of a design known to have been used in early-7th- and 8th-century sculpture, could possibly be much earlier than the doorway.

## INTERIOR

The atmosphere of this largely unspoilt church interior is unforgettable, with striking vistas from many angles and a variety of craftsmanship from carving of great sophistication in the north chapel to humble and rustic work in the benches of the nave. The floors, mostly of bricks and pammments, punctuated by old and worn burial slabs, further enhance the church's charm.

### STRUCTURE AND STONEMWORK

Two **Norman arches** support the tower. The western arch has triple shafts on its western sides, whilst its eastern counterpart has single shafts with carved bases (the northern base is carved with two intriguing animals), and also imposts which are adorned with billet moulding.

A two-bay **arcade** separates the north aisle from the nave, with a further arch beneath



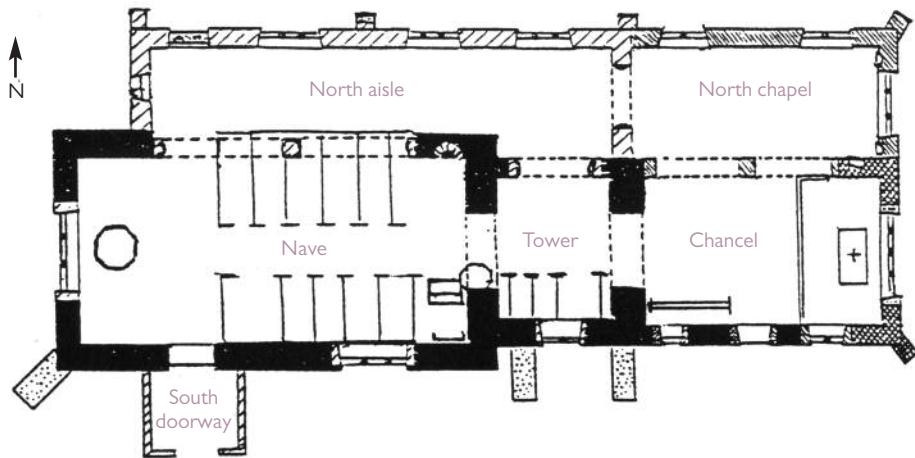
the tower. The **north chapel arcade** comprises two further bays. Of note are carved corbels on both the chancel and chapel sides of this arcade, including several human heads and creatures biting their tails.

Beside the western tower arch is the **rood loft staircase**, once leading to the rood loft jutting out into the nave above it. In the sides of this western tower arch are **notches** where the rood complex fitted. Similar notches in the

eastern tower arch may have been for an earlier screen, or for the hanging of the Lenten Veil across the sanctuary. The shallow **recess** in the wall to the south of the western tower arch probably contained the reredos for one of the two side altars which flanked the rood screen in mediaeval times.

The plain octagonal **font** is probably 14th century and its wooden lid 17th or 18th century.





The **north chapel** has many important features – the window tracery, carved finials above its northern windows, and the male and female corbel heads supporting the hood mould of the east window. There are two handsome canopied **niches** in the east wall: these differ in design and both are but shadows of their former glory. The southern niche has a carved and vaulted ceiling, also carved faces and a mythological ‘Green Man’ at its base. The northern niche has much of its canopy remaining. In the south wall is what was once a **piscina** niche. Into its drain was poured the disposable water used at masses celebrated in the chapel.

In the **chancel**, the south-east window sill has been lowered to form **sedilia**, which provided seating for the clergy at the Sung Mass at the High Altar. There may well be another piscina blocked up behind the plaster in the wall to the east of this. There is a stone **image bracket**, supported by a carved angel, in the wall to the south of the east window.

Carved and scratched into the stonework of the arcades and the northern tower arch are many **graffiti**. Several of these random patterns, signatures and other writings, are of considerable age; some are in Latin, others are dated. The rather **strange incisions** near the base of the eastern respond of the nave arcade and elsewhere in the church mark the places where people used to sharpen their arrows in the Middle Ages.

#### WOODWORK

The **roofs** of St John’s retain much of their mediaeval timber work. The nave has a simple scissor beam roof, probably 14th century or earlier, and the lean-to roof of the aisle comprises mostly 15th-century work. The craftsmanship of the 15th-century roof is of high quality and in an excellent state of preservation. It is an arch-braced, cambered tie beam roof, with carved central bosses, showing leaves and foliage.

*The nave roof and west window (Boris Baggs)*

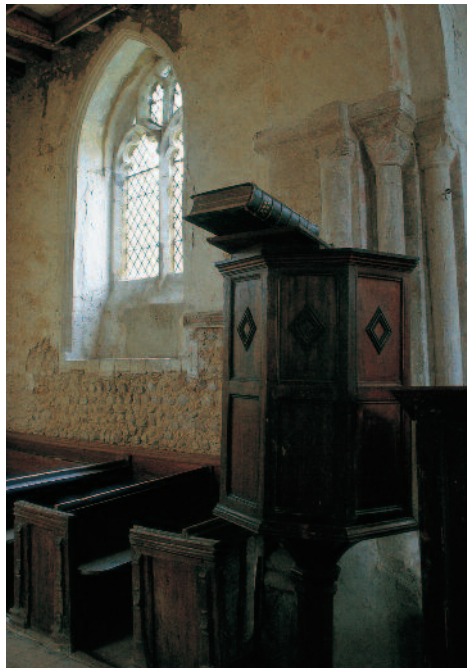




The nave is furnished with sets of mediaeval **benches**. A few have been restored, but all are set in their original sole-plates. The majority have plain, straight-topped ends and probably date back to the 14th century. A 15th-century set, with buttressed ends, possibly originally in the north aisle, now stand beneath the tower. A piece of timber from elsewhere in the church, carved with a vine-trail design, has been incorporated into the sole-plate here, directly beneath the south window. On the wall in the south-west corner of the tower are a few remaining 18th-century **hat pegs**.

One rather decayed **stall** remains in the chancel. Its bookrest is covered with mostly 18th-century graffiti.

The **pulpit**, which is decorated with simple lozenge shapes, and the adjacent reading desk are 17th century. These have clearly both been modified at some time and were originally part of a two- or three-decker arrangement.



The **communion rails** have late-17th- or early-18th-century twisted balusters, although the short rail along the north side has turned balusters and dates probably from the first half of the 17th century. Rails such as this were ordered by William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1634 to protect the altar, especially from dogs who might otherwise defile the sanctuary.

The **communion table** is 17th century.

Above the western tower arch, facing the nave, are three 18th century boards, inscribed with the **Ten Commandments**, flanked by the **Lord's Prayer** and the **Apostles' Creed**. The rare feature here is that the Lord's Prayer is headed by its biblical reference, St Luke 11, verse 2 and, above the Creed, is the exhortation to 'Remember the Articles of thy Belief'.

*Top left: The sanctuary, with the north chapel piscina to the left (Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: The 17th-century pulpit (Boris Baggs)*

#### MEMORIALS

Beneath the eastern arch to the north chapel is a stone **coffin lid**, with the remains of its foliated cross, dating from the early 14th century, almost certainly over the burial of a priest.

In the floors of the nave and chancel are some **burial slabs**, with the indents for former brasses which once adorned them, and also some inscribed, but now rather worn, **ledger slabs**.

#### BELLS

The six bells were removed in 1947 and were installed in St Peter's in 1949. However the partly mediaeval bell-frame remains *in situ*.

*Above: Commandment boards flanked by the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed (Boris Baggs)*

*Below: 13th-century wall paintings around the central tower arch (Tina Cockett)*

*Right: Two bishops on the north aisle wall (Boris Baggs)*

## WALL PAINTINGS

St John's contains a very important collection of wall paintings which date from the 12th century onwards. Gradually these fascinating images are being uncovered and conserved; many still await discovery and protection.

In the Middle Ages the walls of most churches were decorated with paintings such as these. They depict Christian iconography: biblical scenes, and episodes from the lives and deaths

of the saints, together with various religious symbols and motifs. These images were a means for their creators to exhibit their talents in an expression of their faith. They also functioned on a more pragmatic level as visual aids which taught the Faith to ordinary, mostly illiterate, worshippers.

At the apex of the **eastern tower arch** is a central roundel containing the Lamb of God, flanked by hovering angels. Interesting lozenge patterns decorate its borders, together with the soffit of the **western tower arch**. This imagery probably dates to the early 12th century.

Yet to be fully uncovered, the **south wall of the chancel** contains two tiers of subjects; probably a series of scenes from the life of Christ. For example, there is part of a scene depicting the angel announcing the birth of Jesus to the Shepherds.

On this wall and in the spandrel areas of the **arches leading to the north chapel**, 14th-century painters also added curtains hanging from rails.

There appear to be four tiers of 13th-century paintings on the **west wall of the chancel**. In the first tier at the top are two devils with a wheel. Beneath are scenes of the Crucifixion: a soldier piercing Jesus' side; Joseph of Arimathea asking Pilate for the Body of Christ; the removal of Christ's body from the Cross; and the Tomb with sleeping soldiers. On the north side of the third tier down, there is a female saint, possibly



St Catherine, who is strung up by her hair whilst her breasts are brutally pierced by swords. Finally, in the lowest tier is a row of heads being subjugated by figures wielding forks or sticks. This may be another scene from St Catherine's story illustrating her dispute with 50 philosophers.

In the **north aisle** a series of 15th-century paintings once decorated the north wall. Three of these are now visible. The westernmost image shows two bishop saints; one holding a staff, the other carrying what looks like a rod attached to a circle. Their symbols are as yet unidentified: the staff may belong to a pilgrim saint; the other accoutrement could be St Leonard's manacles or St Eligius' blacksmith's equipment.

Further east is a male figure wearing a strange garment around his waist and holding a staff with a cross at its apex. He is blessing a crowned female figure. It is possible that the male figure is Jesus and that this painting thus depicts the Coronation of the Virgin.

Finally, the easternmost painting shows a wheel, a griddle and other mediaeval implements. This could be part of a painting of 'Christ of the Trades' and thus suggests that there was an altar dedicated to a Trades Guild nearby. It could also be a 'Warning to Sabbath Breakers', which told people that the use of tools on the Lord's Day inflicted wounds on Christ's body.

Throughout the church many other interesting fragments of paintings are visible. These include 13th-century patterns and the remains of the frame of a 17th-century text on the **east wall of the nave**.

# 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 the church 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 330 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](http://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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All Saints, Cambridge  
Jesus Lane opposite Jesus College Gates

St Peter, Cambridge  
Off Castle Street beside Kettle's Yard

The Trust has also published a free Educational Booklet for teachers' use on school visits, with ideas for educational and community approaches linked to the National Curriculum. For further details and to obtain the Booklet contact the Education Officer by email: [central@tcct.org.uk](mailto:central@tcct.org.uk)

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*Right: Rood loft staircase (Boris Baggs)*

*Back cover: Two little devils from the painting on the chancel west wall*