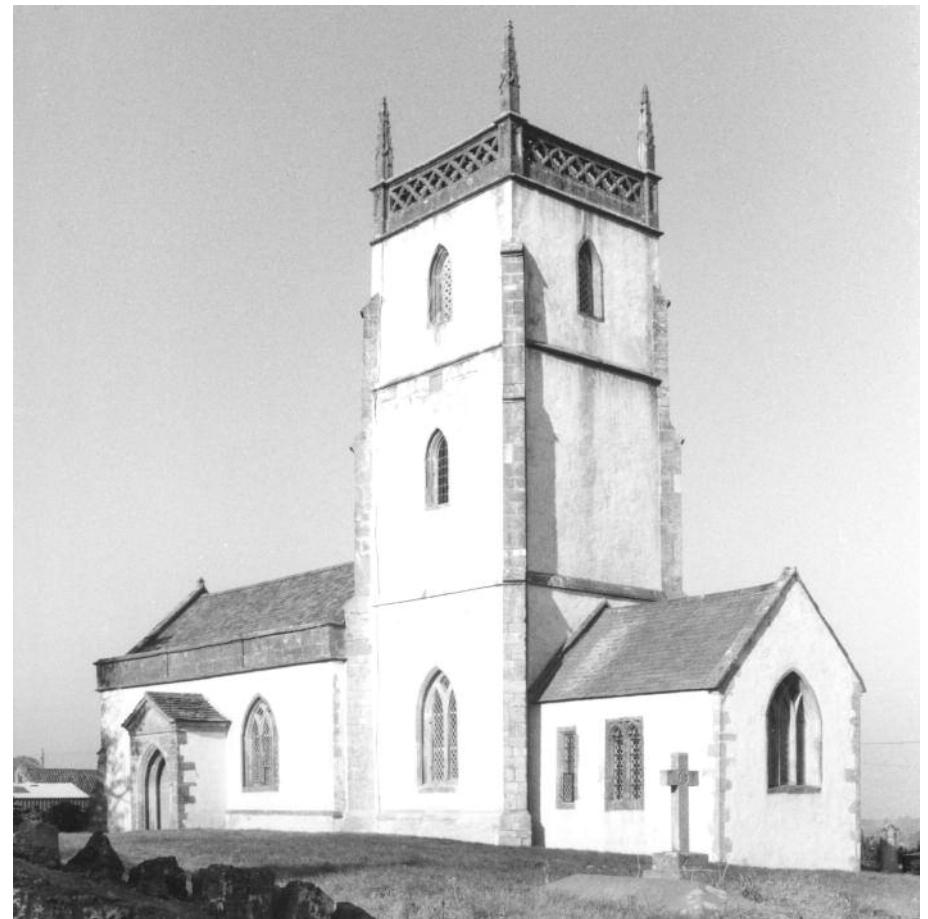




CHURCH OF  
ST MARY  
THE VIRGIN

EMBOROUGH, SOMERSET



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## CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

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### EMBOROUGH, SOMERSET

by MARK McDERMOTT

The place name Emborough, from Old English 'emn-beorg', means 'smooth hill', and the church occupies an exposed position almost 700 ft (213.4m) above sea level on the Mendip plateau, with far-reaching views which include Ston Easton Park to the north and the tower of Chewton Mendip church to the north-west. The settlement pattern is scattered and the church's only immediate neighbour is Manor Farm. This former manor house dates from the mediaeval period, but prehistoric burial mounds are evidence of much earlier human activity in the area, and the south-western boundary of the parish follows the line of a former Roman road from the Charterhouse lead mines. The B3139 road through Emborough was formerly a turnpike road from Bath to Wells on a mail-coach route between London and Exeter, but the south-eastern boundary of the parish follows Portway Lane, almost certainly an earlier route to Wells. Another road, from the west, skirts the northern edge of the churchyard and turns abruptly to the south at what was formerly a T-junction.

Lechmere Water (or Emborough Pond), formerly a monastic fish pond, lies in a picturesque wooded valley which was laid out with walks by one of the Hippisley Coxe family who were landowners in the 18th century; but most of the landscape of Emborough has historically been associated with farming and industry, including mining, brickmaking and quarrying. The disused trackbed of the former Somerset and Dorset railway, on which the 'Pines Express' carried holidaymakers to the south coast until the 1960s, passes through the parish.

### THE MANOR

In the mediaeval period Chewton Mendip was the mother church for a group of chapelries which included Emborough. This may suggest that Emborough was once part of the royal estate of Chewton referred to in the 9th century, but *Domesday Book* records that a distinct manor of Emborough ('Amelberge') was held by two Saxon thanes in 1066 and by a landholder named Robert (a subtenant of the bishop of Coutances) in 1086.

Later owners included members of the Butler family (in the 15th and 16th centuries) and, from 1570, the Hippisleys. St Mary's church contains several Hippisley memorials, and a fireback in Manor Farm has the Hippisley arms and the date 1659.

## THE CHURCH

The history of the church (or chapel) dates from at least the 12th century, but in its present form the building appears to date from the 13th century, with alterations in the later Middle Ages and at various times in the post-mediaeval period. It is constructed of local limestone with Doultling stone dressings, and consists of a chancel, central tower, nave, north aisle and south porch. There has been piecemeal external rendering of the walls in the past, but the entire building has recently been rendered to combat the problem of damp in this exposed situation.

Chewton Mendip church was granted to the abbey of Jumieges in Normandy by William I, and a list of the church's six chapelries in c.1174 includes 'Anneleberga'. Norman stonework, presumably from the 12th century chapel, has been reused inside the tower at Emborough, but the earliest *in situ* features are slightly later: the east window in the aisle, for example, has 13th century geometrical tracery, although the window was later blocked up and underwent renovation when it was reopened during a restoration of the building in the 1920s by the architect Robert Marchant. In 1316 the abbot of Jumieges, as rector of Chewton, was ordered to re-roof Emborough chapel and bell tower, which confirms that the chapel, complete with tower, had been built well before that date.

Several windows have intersecting tracery, and the tower has a window with Y-tracery in the bottom stage and single pointed lights in the two upper stages, but these features are probably the result of 18th or early 19th century 'Gothick' restoration: Pevsner's view is that the church 'looks essentially of c.1800'. Some of these windows were illustrated in 1834 but that to the east of the porch seems to have replaced a late-mediaeval Perpendicular window after 1834, although the latter may first have been blocked up: an 1846 illustration shows a blank wall in that position. The two-light window in the chancel is of Perpendicular type, but this and the plain rectangular window next to it were blocked when two internal mural tablets were erected, supposedly in the 18th century. The windows appear to be blocked in the 1846 illustration but not in that of 1834, however. The 'totally illegible' tablets were moved and the windows unblocked in the 1920s.



*SE view of Emborough Church, 1834, by John Buckler*  
(SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY, TAUNTON CASTLE)



*Emborough, 1846, by WW Wheatley*  
(SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY, TAUNTON CASTLE)

The central tower, which is an unusual survival in Somerset, has diagonal buttresses and a parapet with pierced cusped lozenges and tall corner pinnacles. The collection of a rate 'towards the tower' in c.1580 suggests major repair or rebuilding at that time, but the parapet and pinnacles may, like the windows, be a product of later restoration. Unfortunately, no inscription is discernible on a stone plaque high on the south wall and documentation is very limited before the 1840s. A description of the tower in 1791 as 'small' may suggest that it was heightened between 1791 and the 1834 illustration, although the term is imprecise. Humphrey Repton landscaped Ston Easton Park for Henry Hippisley Coxe in 1793 and it is conceivable that the tower of Emborough church was 'improved' at about the same time to form a feature in the view from the house. A perspective view of Emborough church in a c.1600 map of the Mendips, which depicts a battlemented tower *at one end*, may be a notional representation of the building.

The shallow south porch, which incorporates a reused 17th century gravestone, seems to have been built during the 18th/19th century restoration, although the inner doorway may be mediaeval and the outer doorway may include reused moulded stonework. The porch was re-roofed with stone tiles in 1953.

## INTERIOR

The nave arcade, which according to F C Eeles may be 13th century or a little later, has simple double-chamfered mouldings without capitals and has been buttressed by transverse arches in the north aisle. The nave roof was reconstructed and decorative plasterwork applied to the segmental ceiling in the 1920s, although a moon in the south-east corner was replaced by a duplicate of the sun in 1953.

The plain circular tub font is believed to be Norman or 13th century, indicating early baptismal rights in the chapel (if this font is in its original setting). The pulpit and west gallery, which have fielded panels, date from the 18th century, although the base of the pulpit is later. The gallery was probably erected for the singers and an accompanying band, but a harmonium was in use by 1866, when a choir is also referred to. A converted early 19th century barrel organ, reconditioned by Osmond of Taunton, was installed in the gallery in 1961, but was transferred to Chewton Mendip church in 1991.

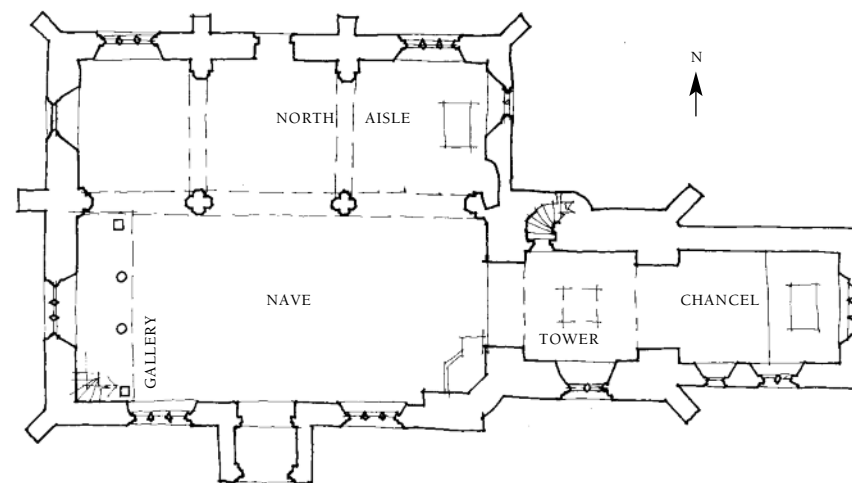
The seating, of various types, may date partly from a restoration of the church in 1885–86 by J D Sedding (financed by Miss S Hippisley), when the fielded panels of the ousted Georgian pews were reused to form dados.

The earlier pews were presumably private box pews, and a reused panel under the gallery retains its painted number. New seating was proposed in 1912 as part of an intended restoration which failed to materialise (perhaps because of the First World War). Instead, additional pews and movable seats were acquired in c.1918 from the demolished Zion chapel at Kilmersdon and adapted for use in St Mary's.

The aisle may have served as a mediaeval chantry chapel, but there is no surviving piscina. At the east end is a communion table with lunette carving of Jacobean type, and in the south-east corner is an upper doorway to a former rood loft which would have spanned the east end of the nave. A recess in an internal buttress beside the pulpit has been interpreted as a socket for the rood beam.

The tower arches may date from the 13th century, but the vaulting between them is constructed of timber. The encaustic floor tiles in the eastern half of the church date from 1885 and the clergy seats are modern. The sanctuary has a mediaeval piscina in the south wall, an 18th century altar rail and a 19th century roof.

The arms of George III, painted by Emery of Wells in 1817, and boards inscribed with the Decalogue, Creed and Lord's Prayer (the latter followed by the names John Bath and Thomas Chard, churchwardens, and the date 1817 – perhaps also painted by Emery) were conserved in 1997.



Emborough, St Mary the Virgin – reproduced by kind permission of P.F. Bird RIBA, Caroe & Partners chartered architects

## EARLY CHURCH LIFE

In 1351 the vicar of Chewton (who was appointed by the rector) was permitted to celebrate Mass twice a day in 'Emneburgh' chapel. This was conceivably because Emborough had lost its own chaplain in the Black Death, for in 1241 there is a reference to the vicar serving in person in the mother church of Chewton and chaplains serving in the chapelries 'as of old time', and two of Emborough's chaplains are mentioned by name in the 15th century. Examples of gifts made by the laity are provided by the wills of William Hyspley of Midsomer Norton, who left a cow to Emborough church in 1524, and William Pury of Emborough, who wished to be buried in the churchyard and left 4d to the high altar in 1545.

In the 16th century the vicar of Chewton continued to appoint chaplains to minister to the dependent chapelries, but in 1548, during the Reformation, an official survey recommended the closure of the chapel of Easton Minor (in Ston Easton). It also recorded that the inhabitants of Emborough were 'content' that the king, Edward VI, should have the lead from the roof of their chapel, which was to be tiled instead. This apparent generosity may have obtained royal favour, but the building probably suffered as a result (although it may already have been in a poor state). For when the churchwardens failed to replace the rood (crucifix) during the return to Romanism in Mary Tudor's reign in the 1550s, they excused themselves by claiming that they had spent their money on timber for their partly completed church, they were owed £7.6s.8d. by a parishioner and had had to suspend the rebuilding work. As seen above, the tower required heavy expenditure in c.1580.

## MEMORIALS, BELLS AND PLATE

The earliest legible monument in the churchyard seems to be a headstone to Nicholas Perry (d.1637) and his wife Rose (d.1634). The Hippisley memorials inside the church, including a ledger stone near the altar to two 'pretty babes' who died in 1700, cover the period 1685–1769 (where legible); there are also inscriptions to the related Walter family; and there is a mural monument over the nave arcade to Robert Bath (d.1822).

There are two bells (as in 1791) in an 18th century 3-pit bell frame. The smaller bell, without inscription, is believed to date from the first half of the 14th century; and the larger bell, cast by the Bristol foundry in c.1450 but now cracked, is inscribed AVE MARIA GRACIA PLENA (Hail Mary, full of grace).

The registers dating from 1569 are in the County Record Office at Taunton.

## CLOSURE

After the Second World War the vicar of Chewton was still responsible for Emborough church, although students from Wells theological college took some of the services. The building continued to suffer from the costly effects of damp and at one point the small congregation (in a parish whose population had been below 200 since the mid-19th century) even considered demolishing the tower!

St Mary's became redundant in 1978 and was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) in 1979 and subsequently repaired under the supervision of Peter Bird of Caroe and Martin. This Mendip landmark, with its interesting and sometimes problematical mixture of mediaeval and later features, has thus been safeguarded for the future.



*Decorative plasterwork applied to ceiling of nave in 1920s*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

## SELECT LIST OF SOURCES

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The writer is grateful for the assistance of David Bromwich, Mary Siraut and Neil Skelton.



*Nave looking west*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

*Front cover: Exterior of Emborough church from the south-east* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

*Back cover: Interior of tower and sanctuary from the west* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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