



ST MARY'S
CHURCH

CHICKNEY, ESSEX



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

Registered Charity No. 258612

PRICE: £1.50



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO
ST MARY'S CHURCH
CHICKNEY, 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.

Please help us to care for this church. There is a box for donations or, if you prefer to send a gift, it will be gratefully received at the Trust's headquarters at 89 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH (Registered Charity No. 258612).

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ST MARY'S CHURCH

CHICKNEY, ESSEX

by ROY TRICKER

This small Saxon shrine, hidden in a remote corner of the undulating North Essex countryside, is one of the oldest of the 350 or so ancient churches in Essex. It is not one of the easiest to find; it stands along a track, about one-third of a mile (0.5 km) north-eastwards from the B1051 Thaxted to Stansted road, near the entrance to New Chickney Hall. The living was united with St Mary's Broxton in 1889 and the two parishes were merged in 1972.

The small parish of Chickney (called Cicchenai in *Domesday Book* and Chickenyne in 1230 – probably Old English for 'Chicca's island', or even 'chicken island') comprised some 713 acres (288.5 ha), stretching about 1½ miles (2.4 km) northwards from the B1051 road, which formed part of its southern boundary. It once had its own station, called Sibleys, on the LNER branch line which ran from Elsenham to Thaxted. The church and hall stand in the south-east corner of the former parish, near its border with Broxton and only ½ mile (0.8 km), as the crow flies, from Broxton church, which is now the parish church for Broxton and Chickney.

Chickney's population of 42 in 1881 dropped to only 20 in 1901, rose to 37 in 1931 and has not increased much since. Services ceased here during the First World War and were not resumed until after the church was restored in 1930, when they took place only during the month of June each year. St Mary's closed officially in 1972 and was vested in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust in 1974. In the Trust's care it remains a holy place and, as an historic and beautiful building, it continues to serve the purpose for which it was built – a ministry which it has exercised for a thousand years or more.

The main landmarks in its long history are as follows:

c.1000, or earlier – Saxon builders fashioned Chickney's pre-Conquest church, consisting of a nave and short chancel, maybe (although not necessarily) with a rounded eastern apse. Its nave and the western part of its

chancel still stand. Although many authorities date it at c.1000, some have suggested that it may be as old as c.850.

c.1200–1220 – The chancel was extended eastwards and received its present east wall, and also new Early English 'lancet' windows in its north and south walls.

c.1300–1330 – In the opening years of the 14th century the chancel received its present east window; also the tower was begun and its west window fashioned. Both windows are identical in style (although not in size) and show early Decorated architecture. The upper windows in the tower are a little later in this period, indicating that it was completed c.1330. From the early 14th century are also the two nave doorways and the chancel arch.

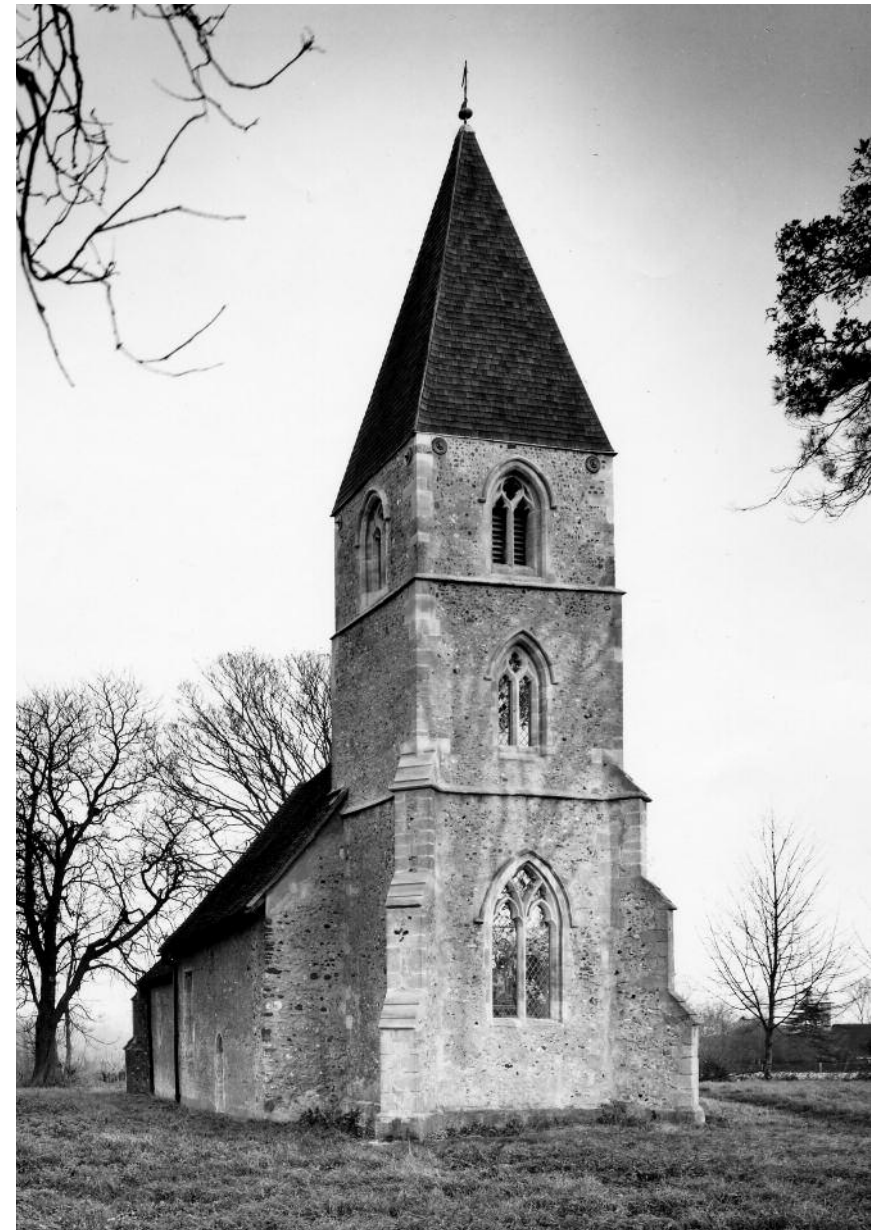
c.1400 – New and larger windows were inserted each side of the nave to let in more light than was possible through the small Saxon openings. It may have been about this time that the present font was made. Later in the 15th century the south porch was added, but this was subsequently modified.

1858–59 – The church underwent restoration, when the chancel and the south-east corner of the nave were buttressed, the east end was restored, the chancel arch rebuilt and the squint to the north of it repaired. The present seating, priest's stall and font cover were made; the mediaeval altar-slab was found embedded in the floor and was restored to its rightful purpose. Much of this work was paid for by the Rector.

The 20th century – Lightning struck the church in 1902, and £329 was spent on repairs to the tower. In 1930, after a period of neglect, the church was again restored. In 1974–75, after the church was vested in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust, to be preserved and conserved by and for the Church and the Nation, major repairs were carried out under the supervision of the late Laurence King. Further repairs took place in 1996, under the direction of Henry Freeland of Cambridge.

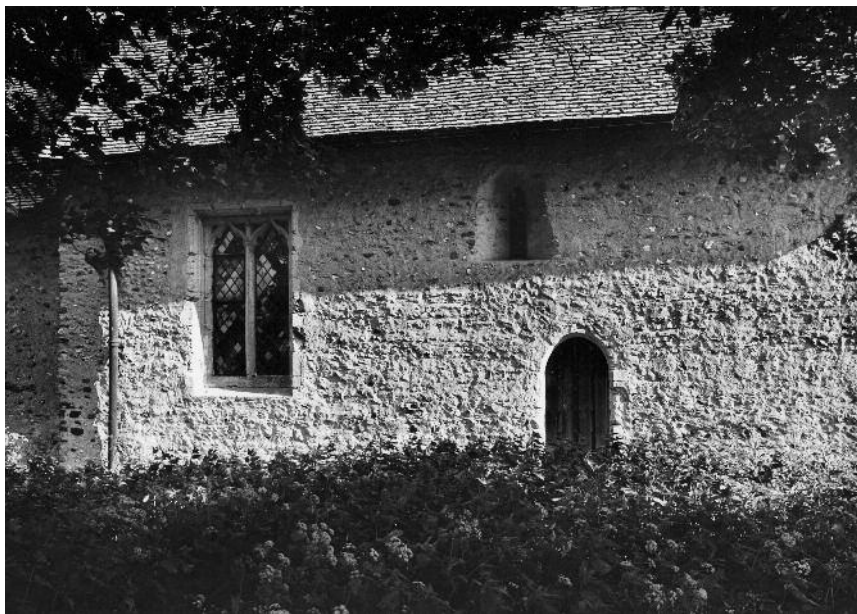
EXTERIOR

The rural **setting** of St Mary's is delightful, the perky pyramid spire almost dwarfed by the trees which surround and shade its small **churchyard**, which is oval in shape, indicating a pre-Conquest date and maybe even very early use for pre-Christian worship.



The tower with its array of western windows

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)



Pre-Conquest window and 14th century doorway and window in north wall of nave
(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

The **walls** of the church are built of flint and pebble rubble, much of which may have been collected from the surrounding fields. Imported limestone from the East Midlands and soft chalky clunch from the Chilterns has been used in the windows and doorways.

The early 14th century **tower** is strengthened at its western corners by short diagonal buttresses, which terminate just above its lower stage. The three two-light windows, one above the other, which adorn the western face of the tower, form an unusual feature. The tower gradually grew in height between c.1300 and 1330, as the style of window design evolved and developed, culminating in the elegant belfry windows, with their curved 'ogee' tracery. The tower is capped by a four-sided spire, faced with wooden shingles, which have recently received the unwelcome attention of woodpeckers.

A look at the plan of the church reveals that the Saxon **nave** is by no means rectangular, has no right-angles and roughly resembles a parallel-

ogram, although the east end is a little wider than the west. The tower was built some 300 years later, at right angles to the west wall, placing it totally out of line with the chancel. The nave was built without buttresses to strengthen its corners; its south-eastern buttress was added in 1858. Also there are no dressed stones to form firm and durable quoins (corner-stones) at the corners, which are simply made up of flint rubble, but often using larger stones.

High in the south wall, east of the porch, is an original crudely shaped double-splayed window – a clear indication of pre-Conquest work and seen in several flint churches in East Anglia. Its narrowest part is not on the external face of the wall, with a widening splay opening inwards, but is in the centre of the wall, with splays opening out from it on both sides. These openings were originally unglazed and admitted not only light, but also much-needed ventilation. It is thought that the wooden jambs at the sides of this window may be original. A corresponding window, which was formerly blocked, may be seen in the north wall, above the very worn early 14th century north doorway. Eastwards of these are larger, square-headed, two-light windows, which were inserted 400 years later to admit more light to the east end of the nave, where the rood-screen and side altars had been introduced. Of these, the southern window is a little more elaborately designed, with pleasing tracery. At one time it was possible to see nine mass-dials scratched into the soft stonework of this window. These have largely worn away, but it is just possible to detect traces of two in the large stone in the eastern side. They enabled people to calculate the starting time of a service before the days of clocks.

Saxon masonry can be detected in the western part of the **chancel** walls and, with the help of the plan, it can be seen where the builders in the early 1200s extended it eastwards. In the north and south walls they placed single 'lancet' windows to light their larger chancel. There was probably a set of three lancet windows in its east wall, but these were replaced c.1300 by the present three-light window, which admitted more light and gave greater scope for artists in stained glass.

The humble **porch**, with its lean-to roof, has a rustic charm but looks like a somewhat jerry-built 18th or early 19th century addition. Inside, however, are 15th century timbers in the framework and it is clearly a modified mediaeval timber porch. It shelters the early 14th century south

doorway, which has a deeply-moulded arch, with the remains of the western carved corbel head supporting its hood-mould. Much graffiti may be seen in its soft clunch stonework, but not in the harder limestone lower down; the initials carved in the stonework inside the doorway are later and less welcome.

INTERIOR

Many visitors to Chickney are impressed by the atmosphere of simplicity and antiquity in this bright, uncluttered interior, with its floors of bricks and tiles, and its many features of interest, all flooded with light from the clear glass in the windows.

The stonework in the upper parts of the 14th century **tower arch** has been worn away on the tower side by former bellropes which operated the two mediaeval **bells** in the bell-chamber. These were cast at the London bellfoundry of John Kebyll around 1470. The larger bell is 36 inches (0.9 m) in diameter and is inscribed 'Ad Celi Syna Perducat Nos Caterina' (To heaven from Sinai lead us Katherine' – a prayer to St Catherine, who was buried on Mount Sinai). The smaller uninscribed bell has a diameter of 32 inches (0.8 m). The west window in the tower contains the only **stained glass** in the church. This may well date from the 1858 restoration and shows St Luke, writing his gospel.

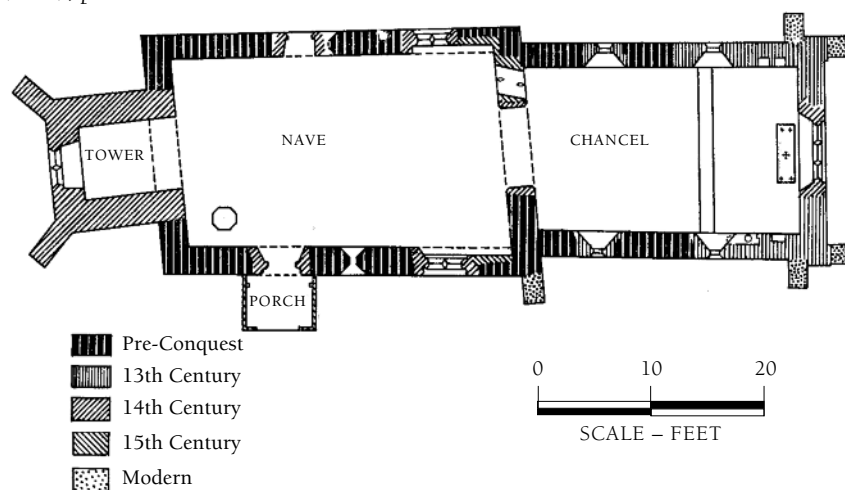
Four tie-beams span the nave, of which the two eastern ones may be 14th century. These support vertical king-posts which, together with the vertical beams rising from the tops of the walls, support the timbers of the **roof**, which are hidden above the plaster ceiling. It is a simple single-framed and braced roof, like that which is exposed in the chancel. Here the mediaeval collar-beams and braces, in lighter-coloured wood, have survived; these are riddled with nail-marks where another plaster ceiling was once fixed.

The octagonal **font** is considered to be one of the finest of its period in Essex and is an exquisite piece of stonecarving of c.1400 or just before. Its base-stone is embellished with four pieces of carved foliage and its bowl rests upon a partly octagonal central pillar and four smaller buttressed shafts at the corners. Around the bowl are four ogee-shaped canopies, lavishly carved with leaf-croquets, beneath which are four small human faces. Above are eight shields, five of which are blank and three with family



Rich stone carving of c.1400 in the font and wood carving of 1858 in its cover
(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

Plan of Chickney, St Mary – reproduced by kind permission of HM Stationery Office from the Inventory of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Essex, Vol. 1 (1916), p.62.



coats of arms – those of Braybrook (east), Fitz Walter (south-east) and a hitherto unidentified coat of arms (south). At four of the corners are little panelled buttresses and around the top is a band of tiny fleurons (flower designs). The font is crowned by a handsome **cover** of 1858 which, in true mediaeval fashion, is shaped like a crocketed spire, with fleurs-de-lys and roses in its panels. The font stands near the entrance to symbolise a Christian's entry, by Holy Baptism, into the family of the Church.

The **hatchment** on the north nave wall bears the arms of a member of the Cranmer family, who were descended from Archbishop Cranmer's brother John and were patrons here for many years. Hatchments were displayed outside the house of a deceased person for a period of time before being placed permanently in the parish church.

The nave is furnished with straight-ended **benches** of 1858, which would have easily accommodated Chickney's tiny population. The eastern sections of its north and south walls have been cut away to accommodate the former rood-loft, which projected into the nave and spanned its east end. This has long disappeared, as has also the rood-screen beneath the chancel arch and the side altars that flanked it to the north and south. The



Interior looking eastwards

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

squint on the north side gave a priest celebrating at the side altar here a view directly to the high altar so that he could synchronise his actions on occasions when a simultaneous Mass was taking place there. The remains of a moulded **corbel** in the wall above may have supported part of the structure of the rood-loft. In the stonework of the western splay of the south-east window are some **graffiti** of considerable age, including a pattern formed by two crossed and interlaced 'S's and the name of Philemon Whale, who was rector here from 1578–1620. In the south-east corner is the **pulpit**, which may date from the late 18th century and is believed to have been brought here from Terling church, near Chelmsford, about 1850.

The **chancel arch** is early 14th century and is proportionally rather small. The arch rests upon horizontal imposts, possibly from its predecessor, which are supported by corbels with simple decorations. Unusually,

there is a step down into the chancel, although this was often the case before the Reformation. A look at the chancel step shows how much the orientation of the chancel is out of alignment with the east wall of the nave.

The **north and south walls** of the chancel lean outwards and their 13th century windows have wide internal splays to admit the maximum amount of light. The hood-mould of the early 14th century east window rests upon delightful male and female **corbel** heads, with interesting hair-styles. A horizontal **string-course** extends around the sanctuary walls, beneath the windows and ends in carved foliage terminations each side. The **reading desk** on the south side of the chancel is an elaborate Gothic Revival *tour-de-force* of 1858. Its seat has a tall crocketed back and the desk is a mass of Gothic woodcarving. Of similar date are the glazed and patterned **tiles** in the floor nearby.

In the south wall of the sanctuary is an early 13th century **piscina**, beneath a simple trefoil-headed recess. Into its drain was poured the water from the washing of the priest's hands at the Eucharist and also (before c.1310) the water from the cleansing of the communion vessels at the end of the service. To the east of it is a rectangular **recess** which probably contained the cruets for use at the Eucharist. In the north wall opposite are two more rectangular recesses, which were **aumbries**, or cupboards. These may have been used for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, for the keeping of the Holy Oils, or for storing valuables.

A rare treasure of this church is the **mensa**, or **altar-slab** – a massive single slab of stone, measuring 5 ft 10 in long, 3 ft 2½ in wide and 5 in deep (1.7 m x 0.98 m x 0.1 m), upon which the Mass was celebrated daily in the Middle Ages. It may well be the original, installed when the chancel was extended in the early 1200s. At the Reformation in the mid-1500s, it was ordered that all stone altars should be removed, destroyed and replaced by 'decent' wooden communion tables. Clearly the people of Chickney would not have their altar desecrated and broken up, so they quietly buried it in the ground, where it lay hidden until it was discovered by the restorers in 1858, who mounted it upon a wooden framework with arches in the front, painted to look like stone, and restored it to its rightful use once more. The Rector (the Revd Robert Burdett Burgess, who was here from 1857–1893) took a considerable risk in allowing this, because stone altars were then considered to be illegal in Anglican churches and the so-called



The priest's stall – Gothic woodwork of 1858

(ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND)

'Romanising' clergy who allowed them often had to stand trial before the Consistory Courts. Mr Burgess, a graduate of Queen's College Cambridge, was clearly one of the early supporters of the Cambridge Camden Society, who restored this church according to its principles. The altar **cross** and **candlesticks** are a memorial to the Revd William G L Armstrong, who died in 1946, and was parish priest of Broxted and Chickney from 1933–1942.

The few memorials in the church to past Chickney worthies are as follows:

- A small wooden **plaque** beside the tower arch, recording the restoration of the belfry in memory of Charles Herbert Barton of Chickney Hall, who died in 1956.
- A **ledger slab** in the chancel floor to Stephen John Aldrich, rector here for 47 years, who died in 1843.
- Of the three **burial slabs** in the nave, only the easternmost has a legible inscription. It commemorates Joseph Collin 'late of Billericay', who died in 1794.

In the churchyard, to the east of the chancel, is buried the Revd John Van Dorp (1887–1949), who was Minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, Austin Friars, in the City of London from 1929–46. He saw his church gutted by German bombs and retired to Chickney after the war.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The writer acknowledges with gratitude the earlier research of the late Professor Francis W Steer.



A thousand years of history in the south nave wall with its Saxon window and the larger window which was inserted 400 years later (CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

Front cover: The exterior from the south (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

Back cover: Interior looking westward from the chancel (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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