



# ST MARY'S CHURCH

HIGHAM, KENT



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

LONDON

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THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO  
ST MARY'S CHURCH  
HIGHAM, KENT

*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 325 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 until 30 September 2002. We will be moving to new offices in the autumn of 2002, so please look out for announcements in our churches or visit our website [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk) for details of our new address.*

*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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**BURHAM, ST MARY**  
5 miles NW of Maidstone off A229

**PADDLESWORTH, ST BENEDICT**  
1 mile W of Snodland off A228

**COOLING, ST JAMES**  
6 miles N of Rochester off B2000

## ST MARY'S CHURCH

HIGHAM, KENT

by ROY TRICKER

The ancient church of St Mary Higham, from the Old English, meaning 'high village', has stood for at least 900 years overlooking the Thames marshes. Directly opposite is Abbey Farm, built on the site of a priory of Benedictine nuns. In 1148, Princess Mary, daughter of King Stephen, was given the manor of Lillechurch to finance its building and it was opened in 1151, either at Lillechurch, just over a mile (1.6 km) to the south-east, or here at Higham, where it certainly was situated from c.1300 until it was dissolved in 1521. By 1504, there were only five nuns in residence and their reputation was not enhanced by the arrival in 1508 of Higham's new vicar, Edward Steroper, who caused two of them to become pregnant. Indeed the notorious conduct of the Higham nuns was common knowledge in the district and resulted in their early dissolution and the transfer of the priory buildings and lands to St John's College, Cambridge.

The priory had close links with its neighbour, the parish church, and it may be that the new nave and chancel, built alongside the original Norman church c.1357, were used by the nuns, because in that year a Papal Indulgence was granted to raise money for building work on the church. The existence of two naves and chancels of equal length in a church serving what was then a sparsely populated parish is curious and this is the most likely explanation.

By the 1860s, most of the population had shifted away from the marshes to Upper Higham, where the main turnpike road was located, and St John's church was built there in 1862, to the designs of E Stephens of Maidstone, as a daughter church.

In 1987, St Mary's was vested in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust, to be preserved by and for the Church and the Nation as a sacred and beautiful building. The parish church is now St John's,

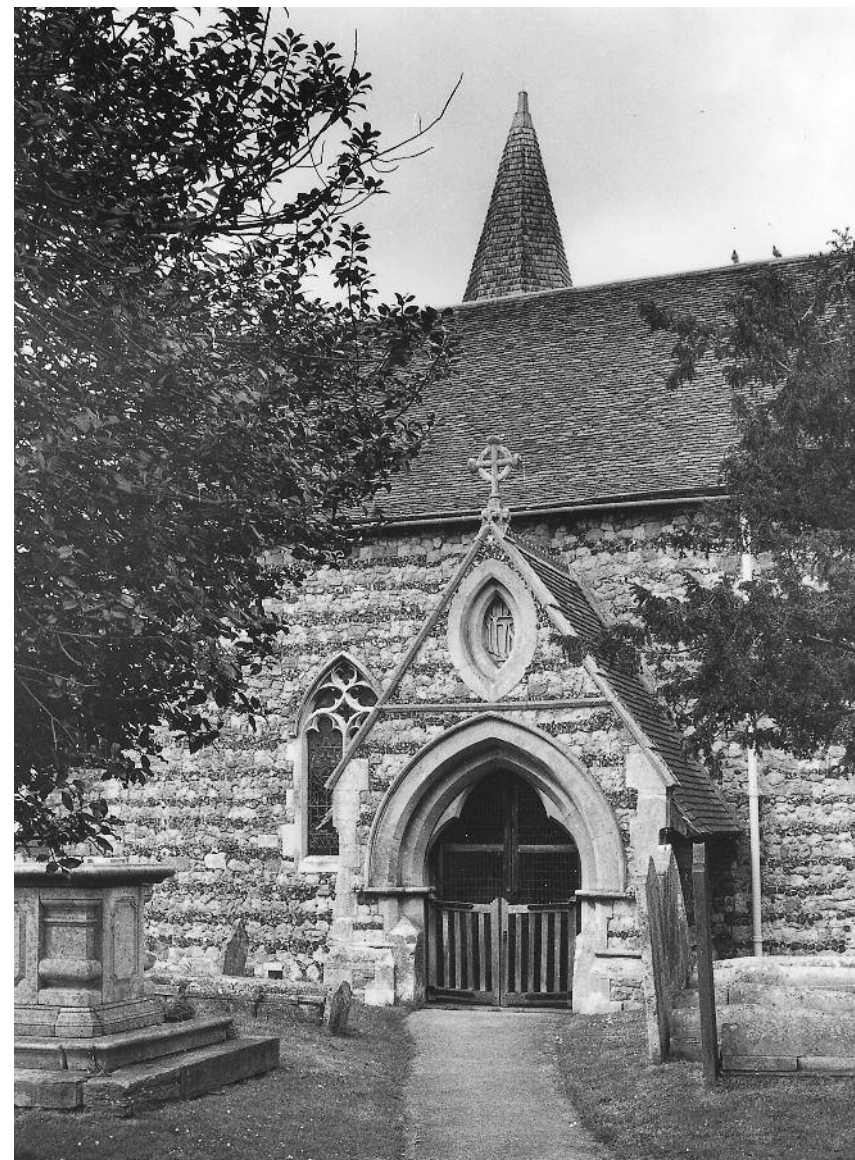
where the living Church meets for worship and where the Holy Eucharist is offered daily. St Mary's however is still a much-loved and cherished part of its community – a precious shrine, which welcomes pilgrims and visitors as it has done for 900 years – and is occasionally used for services and events.

## EXTERIOR

The remote **setting** of St Mary's is worth pausing to enjoy. The church stands at the end of a no-through road, about two miles (3.2 km) from the main centre of population, with views northwards across the Thames Marshes, towards Stanford-le-Hope, the oil refineries at Shell Haven and the slopes of Langdon Hills, over in Essex.

The large **churchyard**, which is entered through a lych-gate dedicated in 1918, contains some good chest tombs, and also some 18th-century headstones near the porch. The **church building** itself has an unusual plan. The original nave and chancel are on the north side, to which another southern nave and chancel were added c.1357. It seems that during this reordering most of the existing windows were renewed in the Decorated style of architecture. In 1863, the church underwent a thorough restoration when the northern vestry was added, the south porch rebuilt and the stonework of most of the windows renewed, but reproducing the mediaeval originals. This work was carried out to the designs of Robert Speechly, a little-known architect, who also restored St Michael's church, Long Stanton, Cambridgeshire – another church in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust.

An unforgettable feature of the exterior is the remarkable 'striped' **walls**, which are faced with flints and ragstone roughly set in bands horizontally – a feature also seen at the nearby church of St Helen, Cliffe. Most of the **windows** are in the late-Decorated style, which was fashionable in the mid-14th century. The west front, with its two gables, has matching three-light windows of this period. The south side has three two-light windows, all renewed in 1863 but with pleasing Decorated tracery designs. The two east windows (also renewed) have three lights, the southern one having reticulated (net-like) tracery.



*The 14th-century nave from the south and Robert Speechly's porch of 1863*  
(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

The north wall of the church incorporates the original Norman building which was recorded in the *Domesday Book* of 1086. It may even be that the core of part of the nave wall is Saxon. Certainly a blocked Norman window can be seen high up, near the west end. The two-light late-14th century window preserves much of its original stonework; beneath it are traces of a blocked north doorway. The chancel has on this side a renewed 15th-century square-headed window. The vestry of 1863 has small quatrefoil windows and a doorway with a trefoil-headed arch – all with a very Victorian flavour.

Squatting above the roof gable towards the west end of the original nave is the boarded **belfry**, which is crowned by a shingled spire. The Revd George Smith, who arrived in 1710, had it built – probably in 1713, when two bells were made for it.

The south porch was totally rebuilt by Speechly in 1863 and has a strongly Gothic Revival feel about it, with its trefoil-headed entrance arch and the 'IHS' monogram in a vesica above it, and also the seat recesses inside with little flowers in their borders. Above the inner entrance is a plaque to Elizabeth and William Slaughter (d.1803 and 1813 respectively) and members of their family. The late-14th or early-15th-century arch, by which the church is entered, retains its original **door**. This is a magnificent piece of mediaeval woodcarving with its elegant traceried panels, looking like a four-light window, and studded with flower designs, animals, a little Green Man with leaves sprouting from his mouth and a bird perching near the apex. There is also a closing-ring, set in a small iron boss.

## INTERIOR

The interior of St Mary's is broad and spacious. Here one is very much aware of the two naves and chancels, of approximately equal width and length. Over the years the Norman (north) nave and chancel have become the north aisle and Lady Chapel. The two naves are divided by a 14th-century **arcade** of three bays, with slender octagonal piers; a further bay, with semicircular responds, divides the two chancels. The southern chancel has a similar chancel arch, much renewed in 1863,



*The nave (now north aisle) and Lady Chapel, looking eastwards* (LEONARD HILL)

whilst the northern chancel has an ancient tie-beam, supporting a 19th-century boarded tympanum.

The leaning **walls**, especially the north wall, show the great age of the building. In the north wall is the splay of the blocked Norman window, whilst what may be the remains of another above the arch which divides the two chancels may be seen from the south side. It is possible that the **font** may also be Norman, although most authorities date it from the 1200s. Its square bowl stands on a central circular shaft, with four smaller shafts at the corners.

The **roofs** of the church were all renewed in 1925. Both naves have open arch-braced roofs, whilst those in the chancels are boarded with pine. Older tie-beams at the western end of the original nave support the bell turret above.



Two of the three **bells** were made for the new bell turret in 1713 by Isaac Hadley, who cast bells first at Leominster and later (after c.1710) was an itinerant bell-founder, travelling from London. His only other Kentish bell is at West Kingsdown, near Wrotham. The tenor bell was added and both the other bells were recast in 1914 by Alfred Bowell of Ipswich, who also rehung them stationary for chiming.

Near the south door are two **Benefaction Boards**, made in 1845 and lettered in gold on a black background. It is interesting to read here how income from land and property was used to buy bread for the poor and to help support the parish clerk.

There is much evidence of Robert Speechly's 1863 restoration. The pine **benches** date from this time, as do the **choirstalls** (the **clergy stalls** may be a little later), the **communion rails**, the **high altar** and the stone **reredos**, which has the 'IHS', 'XPC' and also the alpha and omega emblems of Our Lord around its stone cross. The Ten Commandments, framed in cinquefoil-headed arches, flank the east window, with the Lord's Prayer and Creed beneath them.

In the south wall of the sanctuary is the 14th-century **piscina**, with credence-shelf, set beneath a slender trefoil-headed recess, the upper part of which is rebated for a door and has one surviving hinge-hook. Its hood-mould rests on original corbel-heads, as does that which frames the arch of the east window.

The small **organ**, by the Positive Organ Co., has two manuals, pedals and seven speaking stops. The eagle **lectern** is a pleasing piece of wood-carving of 1913.

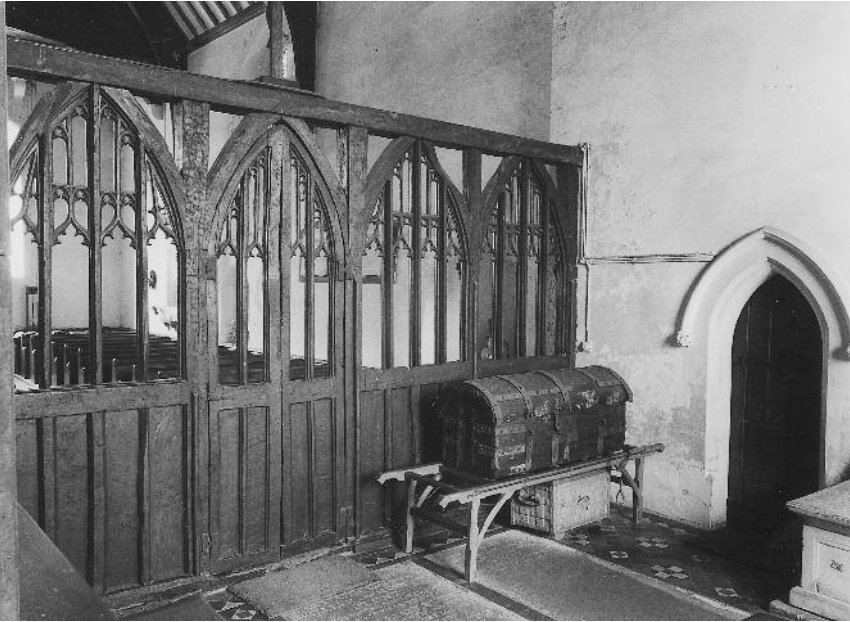
Towards the east end of the north nave wall is a **recess**, once a widely-splayed lancet window of early-13th-century date, but now containing a statue of Our Lady and her infant Son. The small stone **bracket** to the west of it would have supported a statue in mediaeval times. Nearby is a **Tortoise stove** – a rarity in parish churches nowadays (another may be seen at the west end). Its lid proudly proclaims in letters of cast iron, 'Slow but sure combustion'.

Two mediaeval treasures stand together at the entrance to the Lady Chapel (the original chancel). Higham's rare and beautiful **pulpit** was fashioned in the late-14th or early-15th century and may be by the



*The mediaeval pulpit – one of the treasures of Kent*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)



*A corner of the Lady Chapel, showing woodwork of different periods in the screen, chest and bier*  
(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

same hand that carved the south door. It has six traceried panels (of which the southern one has been renewed), between small buttresses, with a traceried door on the north side. There is a frieze of little flowers round the top.

The **rood-screen** is a fine woodcarving of the 15th century and, including its central doors, it comprises five bays, each filled with a graceful four-light Perpendicular 'window'. This screen should be imagined complete with its loft (or gallery) projecting above, towards which John Watts left money in 1496.

The Lady Chapel contains several items of interest. A 19th- or early-20th-century **bier** (for transporting coffins at funerals) now supports the fine old **parish chest**, which dates probably from the 1500s or earlier. Another **smaller chest** beneath it, of 17th century date, is completely bound with iron strapwork.



*The south nave and chancel, looking eastwards*  
(LEONARD HILL)



View looking north-west from the sanctuary

(LEONARD HILL)

In the south wall is a mediaeval **aumbry** (or cupboard, where the communion vessels were stored), which has preserved its original door, hinges and lock-plate. The **communion rails** here have been remade, using some of their original 17th- or 18th-century turned balusters.

From the north wall hangs a beautiful 20th-century **wrought-iron lamp**, which is clearly of the same vintage as the candlesticks beside Our Lady's statue. In the top slab of the eastern tomb are the five incised crosses (representing the Five Wounds of Christ) which identify it as the **mensa slab** of the mediaeval stone altar, discarded at the Reformation – when stone altars were replaced by wooden tables – and reused.

None of the medieval **stained glass** has survived, but five of the windows contain biblical scenes and characters, depicted in 19th- and 20th-century glass. The two chancel windows shed a dim, devotional light in this part of the church, but their glass is very good of its period. The **east window** (c.1860) shows Jesus the Good Shepherd, flanked by his Mother (with her emblem – a lily) and St John (with a pen, his gospel and an eagle – his emblem as an evangelist). It was given in memory of Christopher and Suzannah Hindle, who were children of the vicar. The **south chancel window**, in memory of George Lake (1863) shows Our Lord's Agony in the Garden, with ministering angels and sleeping apostles. The **central window in the nave**, in memory of Frances Cobb (1899) shows Jesus with Martha and Mary, whilst in the **south-west nave window**, are pictures of the Sower and of Ruth in glass by Maile & Son, in memory of Thomas Whitebread (1935) and his family. The **north nave window** commemorates Herbert Mansfield Cobb (1926) and shows the Parable of the Talents, with the Master saying, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant'.

There are several **memorials** in the church.

#### Lady Chapel

- A low tomb chest with a brass shield and inscription to Elizabeth Boteler, who died in 1615.
- A higher tomb chest of Purbeck marble, with a traceried front, upon which the mediaeval mensa slab has been placed.
- On the wall above it is a brass inscription to Robert Hylton (d.1523), who was one of King Henry VIII's Yeomen of the Guard, with an interesting rhyming verse.

#### North nave floor, east

Part of a mediaeval burial slab, with an incised cross and remains of lettering around the border, probably dating from the 14th century.

#### Chancel, south wall

A beautiful 14th-century tomb recess. Its wide cinquefoil-headed arch is flanked by corbel heads. It was built to contain the tomb of Abbess

Joan de Hadloe, who died in 1328, but it was reused for the later tomb of Ann Cordewell (d.1642), which has an epitaph verse. On the wall within the recess is a plaque to her barrister grandson, Samuel Levinge, who died in 1748.

A brass plaque on this wall commemorates the Revd Joseph Hindle, who was vicar here for 45 years until his death in 1874. It was during his time that this church was restored and St John's church erected. One of his curates here (from 1866–70) was the Revd Lewis Price – a fanatical Welsh Protestant hellfire preacher who had once been a member of the Agapemonite sect. He left here to become vicar of Pakefield, Suffolk, for 30 years, where he was known far and wide as an ultra-Protestant, although he was evidently quite content to use his priestly authority to excommunicate a member of his congregation for attending a 'Popish' service in a neighbouring parish!

In the floors of the church are several ledger slabs of 18th- and 19th-century date.

Nearby is the church of St James at Cooling, also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. It is roughly 3 miles (4.8 km) north-east as the crow flies and is a delightful building, with exquisite stonework of c.1260 in the chancel and a fine old door. Its little 19th-century vestry is completely lined with shells. A remarkable set of children's graves in the churchyard is believed to have inspired Charles Dickens to write *Great Expectations*.

A little further away is the tiny 11th century St Benedict's church at Paddlesworth, about 8 miles (12.9 km) SSW as the crow files, and just west of Snodland. On the other side of the Medway is St Mary's Burham, which is full of interest and character.

Each of these churches welcomes visitors, as do more than 320 others in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust.



*A view from the north – showing what was the original nave and chancel*  
(LEONARD HILL)

*Front cover: St Mary's from the north-west, showing its 'striped' walls and 18th-century bell turret* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

*Back cover: The mediaeval south door* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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