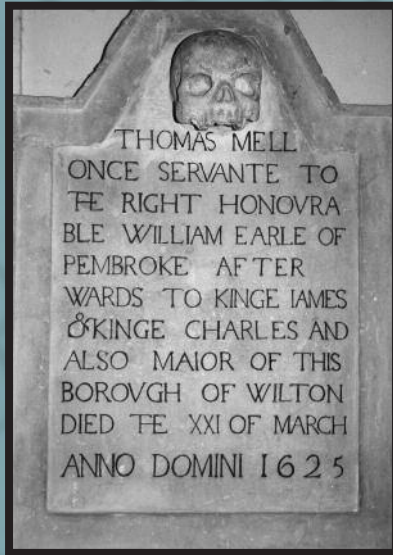




THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST



# ST MARY'S OLD CHURCH

Wilton, Wiltshire



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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*Wilton, Wiltshire*

# ST MARY'S OLD CHURCH

*by Tim Tatton-Brown (Archaeologist and architectural historian, and consultant to Salisbury Cathedral. Former member of the Council for the Care of Churches)*

## HISTORY

In the later Anglo-Saxon period Wilton was one of the most important towns in Wessex; it was the town or *burh* on the river Wylfe which gave its name to the then new county of Wiltshire. This town was strategically placed on a tongue of higher ground just above the confluence of the rivers Wylfe and Nadder, and surrounded on the north, south and east by the marshy ground and the rivers. Only on the north-west was it unprotected, and here a defensive bank and ditch, with a west gate within them, were constructed. In the 12th century the still-surviving hospital of St John (now almshouses) was built immediately outside this gate.

Within the fortified area of the town were two main streets which intersected at the town centre (still a busy crossroads), and immediately to the east of the crossroads was a large open area for a market place. On the north side of the market place, which still contains the base of a stone market cross, was the church of St Mary. This was almost certainly the original Anglo-Saxon church in Wilton, and from the 9th century it had attached to it one of the most important nunneries in southern England. After the Norman conquest, when the Nunnery was the richest female Benedictine house in England, a new monastic church, cloister and conventual buildings seem to have been built on a new site just outside the town on the east. This monastery was finally dissolved in 1539, and replaced by the magnificent Wilton House, which since 1541 has been the home of the Herbert family (Earls of Pembroke).

*Front cover: Exterior of St Mary's from the west (© Crown copyright. NMR)*

*Left: Detail of carved capital on nave north arcade (Neil Skelton)*



*Exterior of Wilton Old Church from the south-west,  
by John Buckler (The Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural  
History Society)*

At the time that the new monastery was under construction on the Wilton House site, the population of the town was expanding greatly, and between the later 11th century and the early 13th century many more parish churches were built in Wilton. In the 1530s the historian John Leland stated that there were 12 or more parish churches in the town, but documentary evidence suggests that there were only about eight or nine. With the building of the new city of Salisbury in the 13th century, Wilton was eclipsed, and by the 16th century all the other

churches had disappeared, leaving only the original church of St Mary in the market place. In 1841–45 a completely new 'Italian Romanesque' parish church was built for the Herberts in West Street, at great cost, and soon afterwards the old church of St Mary was reduced to a picturesque ruin with only the chancel still keeping its roof.



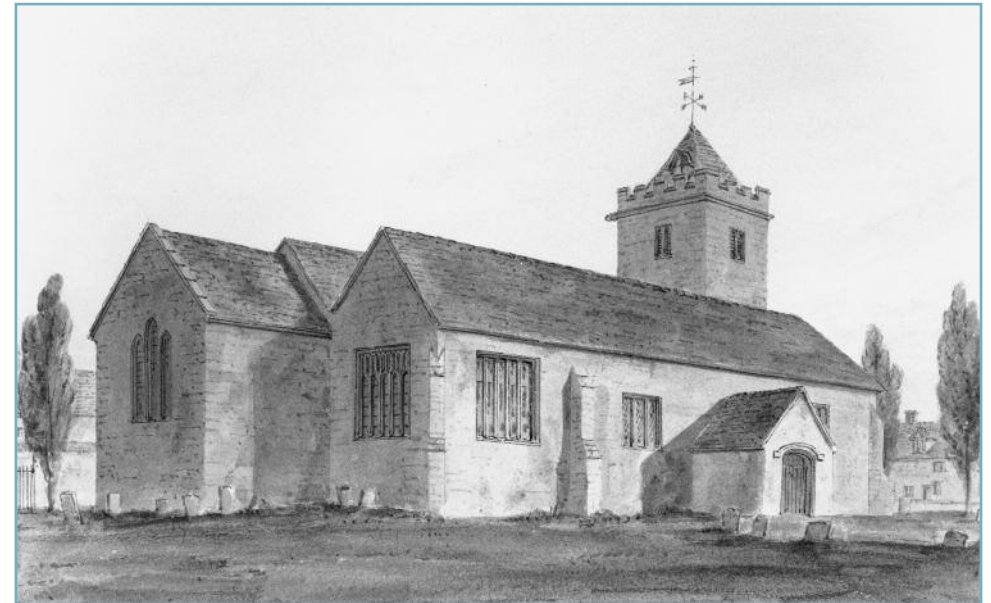
*Exterior of Wilton Old Church from the north-east,  
by John Buckler (The Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural  
History Society)*

## EXTERIOR

The remains of the old church of St Mary lie within a large rectangular graveyard on the northern side of the old market place at Wilton. Immediately to the east of the churchyard is the large 18th-century rectory (now the old rectory) in its walled garden. A paved path runs across the churchyard from north to south, and just outside the southern gate is the base of the late mediaeval market cross. The churchyard contains a good collection of old gravestones, as well as some fine trees including a large western red cedar on the north. There are also

hollies, white lilac and cherries, which may have been planted when the churchyard was turned into a 'Garden of Peace' in 1938–39, by the then mayor, Edith Olivier.

Oddly, the church faces north-east, rather than following the conventional east-west orientation, and this may well be because it was first built in the later Anglo-Saxon period, though no signs of the Anglo-Saxon fabric remain above ground. For convenience the conventional east-west ritual notation is used throughout. The ruins of





Left: North-west view showing the chancel with the ruined nave and south arcade (© Crown copyright. NMR)

Below: The chancel from the north-east (© Crown copyright. NMR)

the church, and early drawings, show that before 1845 the church consisted of a short chancel with a large nave and two aisles (a typical late mediaeval urban form). There was also a tower on the west, and there were north and south porches. The ruined arcades show that the church was last rebuilt in the 15th century, but the aisles themselves may have dated from the 14th century. Only on the south does a full four-bay arcade survive intact with four-centred arches and quadruple-shafted piers. The capitals on the south were moulded while those remaining on the north are carved. This does not necessarily indicate different dates.

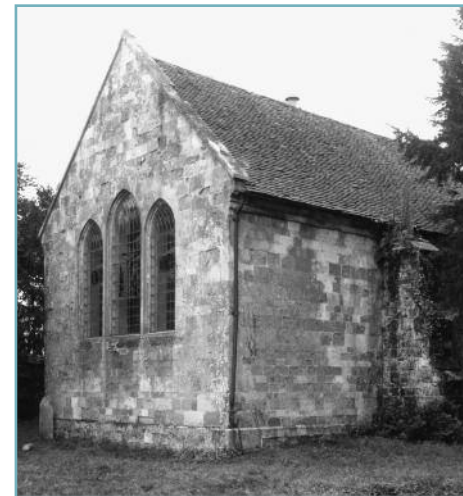
At the west end of the ruins are the remains of the north-west and south-west corners of the original nave. Inside this is rubble masonry, but outside, the large blocks of stone suggest a 12th-century date for the masonry. A tower was added outside this wall in the 15th century, and the scars for its north and south walls can just be made out on the west side. Tracery fragments of a five-light late mediaeval window are visible in the upper west wall of the nave, but this was probably salvaged and placed here in c. 1845. Earlier there

would have been a large tower arch in this position. The holy water stoup on the south side of this arch may be *in situ*. On the outer side of the north and south return walls at the end of the nave, scars (and repairs) can also be seen where the west walls of the aisles abutted the nave. The ruins were last repaired in 1938–39.

The surviving roofed part of the church is just the shallow chancel and the first bay of the nave. The blocked arches into the east ends of the aisles, where chapels were situated, can also be made out. The large buttresses on the north and south sides of the chancel also incorporate fragments of the east walls of the aisles where they abutted the chancel.

The outside of the eastern part of the chancel has uniform masonry and a plinth and all of this was rebuilt in 1751 as a mortuary chapel for the Earls of Pembroke, though the three wide eastern bay lancets may date from a later restoration. The earlier chancel was probably much larger.

The west wall of the present church was newly built in c. 1845, and incorporates a doorway and two two-light Perpendicular windows (with square



hood moulds) salvaged from the earlier church. In a niche above the doorway is a statue of Robert Bingham (Bishop of Salisbury 1229–46), whose Purbeck marble effigy lies in Salisbury Cathedral. Bishop Bingham was consecrated in this church on 29 May 1229, ironically at exactly the time when the prosperous town of Wilton was about to be eclipsed by the modern city of Salisbury (New Sarum). A plaque on the wall records that the restoration was carried out in memory of a namesake of the bishop, Robert Bingham, who was the United States ambassador to Britain from 1933 until his death in 1937. On the north-west and south-west corners of the present church the 15th-century piers can still be seen.

## INTERIOR

The present very small church was created in 1845 using only the eastern bay of the nave and the small 1751 chancel. There are no windows in the north and south walls, and the church is divided into two halves with a step and a moulded arch that was rebuilt in the mid-18th century. There is also an 18th-century plaster ceiling, which in the eastern half is in the form of a gracefully decorated groin-vault. The church contains a series of memorial tablets on the walls which mostly commemorate notable Wilton citizens of the 17th and 18th centuries, including Thomas Mell (d. 1625), a servant to the 3rd Earl of Pembroke, and later to Kings James I and Charles I. He was also Mayor of Wilton. Another monument commemorates Edmund Philips (d. 1678), 'sweeper of Burbridge' (a suburb of Wilton) and 'farer' (i.e. farrier) to the Earl of Pembroke. There is also a tablet to John Thomas (d. 1798) 'an eminent Manufacturer of this borough', a local clothier and philanthropist. Three benefaction boards, formerly on the front of the nave west gallery, and now on the tiny nave walls, record other gifts to the parish. The chancel also once contained the burial vault and some very fine monuments to various Earls of Pembroke. These were all moved to the new church in 1845 as were the six bells recast in 1831 and 1832.

In the south-west corner of the nave is a model of the church, as it was before 1845. It was made by a local watchmaker, Mr Sainsbury, one of whose watches is used as the clock in the



Interior from the south-west, with the chancel arch (© Crown copyright. NMR)

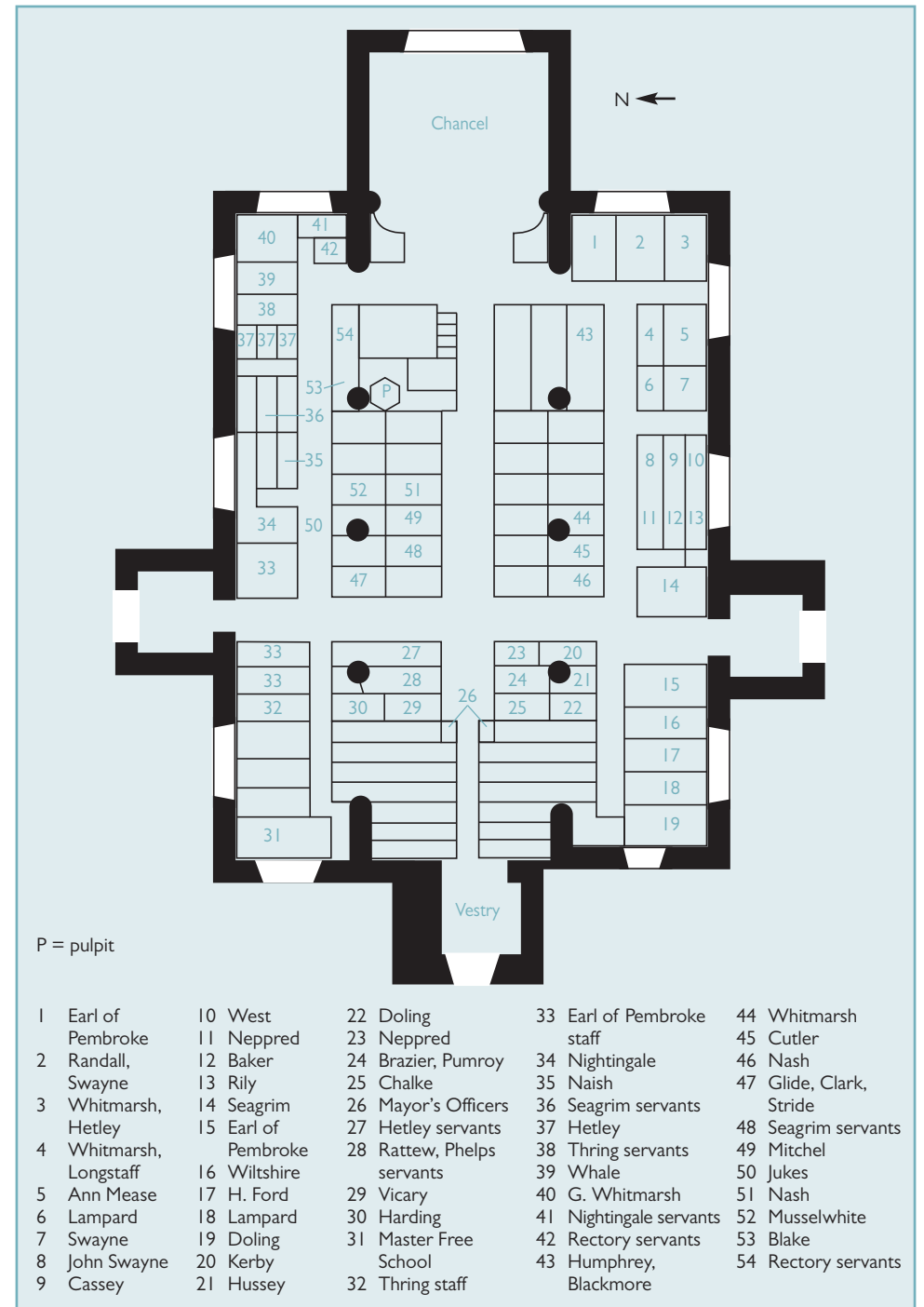
tower. It is not a very accurate model, but can be lit up inside to show the old pulpit and pews. The pews are also shown in a pew plan of 1839, a copy of which can be seen in the church. There is also a list of rectors.

The northern two-light window in the west wall contains 20th-century stained glass, depicting saints Monica and Edith. This was made by a York glazier, H J Stammers, in 1952. There is also a fine oak altar table with six turned baluster shafts for legs, but other former fittings in the church have been moved elsewhere: the richly carved 1678 pulpit and sounding board, and altar rails, and an 1814 brass candelabrum

to Wylde church, and the decorated tracery of the south aisle east window to Netherhampton church. In return this church now contains the font from the redundant church at Farrington in Dorset, moved here in 1980. The statue of St Edith is one of a pair made to embellish an

altar for the Roman Catholic chapel of Midford Castle near Bath. In 1902 the altar and statues were moved to the Pro Cathedral at Clifton where they remained until 1973. The altar was loaned to the St Nicholas Museum in Bristol, the statue of St Richard given to the Roman Catholic church in Midsomer Norton, Somerset and the statue of St Edith presented to the Roman Catholic church of St Edith, Wilton. Upon closure of St Edith's in 2005 the statue was moved here.

The church was declared redundant in 1972 and transferred to the care of The Churches Conservation Trust in November 1977. Since vesting minor repairs have been carried out, initially under the supervision of Kenneth Wiltshire, and latterly Christopher Romain of Fordingbridge. Recently the interior has been limewashed and the monuments have been cleaned.



Ground plan of 1839 showing names of those to whom pews were rented

# 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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11 miles NW of Salisbury off A36  
1 mile N of Wylde

St Mary & St Lawrence, Stratford Tony  
4 miles W of Salisbury off A354

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