



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY

Torbryan, Devon



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY

by Lella Raymond and Others

HISTORY

People have inhabited what is now Torbryan and its surrounding area since ancient times. To the north is Denbury camp, an Iron Age hill fort enclosing two earlier Bronze Age burial mounds, as well as the elevation for a 16th-century beacon which acted as part of an early warning system.

Torra (meaning a hill) appears in Domesday Book of 1086; the de Bryans were Lords of the Manor here and by 1238 their name was added and the village was known as Tor Briane. This family may have come over with William the Conqueror from France – from Brionne, in the Department of Eure, south of the Lower Seine. There are frequent mentions of Guy de Brian in manorial records and the most distinguished member of this family was Sir Guy de Brian (1318–90), who was standard-bearer to King Edward III at the Battle of Crecy in 1346, commanded the fleet at the fall of Calais in 1347 and in 1348 was one of the first to be made a Knight of the Order of the Garter. He founded a collegiate chantry at Slapton church in 1373, although his own tomb is in the Chapel of St Margaret at Tewkesbury Abbey.

*Front cover: Interior looking east
(Boris Baggs)*

Left: Pulpit (Boris Baggs)



EXTERIOR

Although an earlier church stood on the site, the present building is almost entirely from the mid-15th century – an outstanding example of a Devonshire church of this period, reflecting the beauty of the Perpendicular style of architecture and dominating the few surrounding houses of this little community, including the early-16th-century Church House, now an inn. The churchyard is encompassed by a low drystone wall and

to the east a lane gives access to the farm, the land falling away to an apple orchard and a stream with the hills in the distance. On the south side the broad lychgate, built in the mid-16th century, has stone side walls, a slated roof and the head of its original Tudor-arched gateway. A 200-year-old yew dominates the western end of the churchyard, overshadowing a curving flight of old stone steps which ascend



the steeply rising hillside. In the south-eastern part of the churchyard, near the chancel, is a curious box-tomb, somewhat dilapidated, but a fine reused 17th-century slate ledger bearing the name of *CARLL*. The mediaeval preaching cross has a renewed top to its ancient shaft.

Holy Trinity is a typical South Devon church, comprising a tall west tower, its height accentuated by the comparatively low nave and chancel, with embattled north and south aisles and a sturdy embattled two-storeyed porch with its own staircase turret. There is a small north vestry of the early 19th century. The fabric is constructed of rendered carboniferous limestone rubble from a nearby quarry, cream-coloured chalk-rock stone from Beer and red sandstone caps to the battlements crowning the aisles. The tower, which was re-rendered with traditional lime roughcast and limewashed in 1988, has three stages divided by string courses at which the buttresses are set back to give a rising and slender outline. The two south-facing buttresses have image niches, one of which has been repaired recently. This is one of a group of similar Devon towers, known as the 'South Hams' type. In the middle of its south wall, and conceived as a dramatic feature, is a semi-octagonal staircase turret with 91 steps rising to (and included in) the tower's embattled and pinnacled parapet. The west doorway has a roll-moulded arch framed by a hood mould, all of old red sandstone. As in many Devon towers, the belfry windows are small, simple and set high.

It appears that the tower was the first part of the present church to take shape, as traces of an earlier nave roof abutment were found during recent repairs. It dates from c.1450 and the presence of the de Bryan arms on the east face of the south-east pinnacle base suggests that this family may have been the tower's donor. Shortly afterwards the present nave and aisles, with their large and beautiful windows, were built, followed by the chancel and its flanking chapels. The final section of this c.1450–70 rebuilding was probably the south porch, which is entered beneath a beautifully-moulded arch and an exquisite fan-vaulted ceiling, executed in Beer stone and rare in porches hereabouts. Four small and rather shattered angels with spreading wings support the central ribs of each fan. The floor is stone-flagged and there are stone benches along the side walls. The oak south door has vertical and horizontal bars and dates probably from the 17th century.

Below: Interior looking east (Boris Baggs)

Right: The chancel east window (Boris Baggs)

INTERIOR

Holy Trinity has a delightful mediaeval interior, punctuated by handsome **arcades** with clustered columns of Beer stone and capitals carved with rich foliage. Typical of Devon is a long wagon **roof**, a 19th-century (possibly 1861) replacement of the original, which runs uninterrupted for the entire length of the building. Moulded ribs divide the plastered panels and there are no bosses. The roofs of the aisles are massively beamed, though likewise panelled.

The absence of a chancel arch is compensated by one of the county's special glories – the splendid **rood screen**, spanning the entire width of the church from wall to wall, original in its structure and design and dating from c. 1470–80. At one time this wonderful piece of mediaeval woodcarving was surmounted by a rood loft, supported on wooden vaults and jutting out above it. Still surviving in the north chapel wall are the upper and lower **entrances to the rood-loft staircase**, which enabled





people to walk along the loft to tend the many candles which burned in honour of the great Rood which stood above it and was the focal point of the nave – carved figures of the crucified Christ, flanked by his Mother and St John. The removal of all roods and their lofts, was ordered by Law in the mid-16th century, when the Reformers dispensed with such visual aids. Fortunately the screens were allowed to remain and the glory of those which have is encapsulated in this one – its graceful four-light openings allowing maximum visibility into the chancel, its frieze of carved vine-leaf pattern, 40 out of its 44 painted panels surviving and even its three pairs of entrance gates intact. Panels 9–11 were stolen in 2003.

Of the series of painted figures of saints, apostles, angels, etc. which adorn the lower part of the screen, F Bligh Bond and Dom Bede Camm in *Rood Screens and Rood Lofts* (1909, Vol. II, p.244)

have written – ‘One of the most interesting and curious series of saintly figures to be found in all Devon. In this extremely remote parish the people had evidently a passion for out-of-the-way saints, unless it were that some monk from a neighbouring abbey chose the subjects for them’. Some of the figures are now very difficult to identify and it is only possible to guess, but the following identification is agreed by most authorities, working along the screen from left to right:

North aisle

1. A Bishop.
2. A female Saint.
3. St Victor of Marseilles, an officer of the Roman Army, holding a windmill.
4. St Margaret, holding a cross.

North aisle gate

- 5, 6, 7, 8. Lost.

North aisle continued

9. St Laurence, with a gridiron on which he was broiled alive.
- 10, 11. Two Archbishops, identical, facing one another.
12. St Francis of Assisi, holding a painting of a crucifix.

Nave

13. St Paul, with a sword (?).
14. St Jude, with a boat (?).
15. St Bartholomew, with a knife.
16. St Philip, with three loaves.
17. St James the Great, with a staff.
18. St Peter, with keys.
19. St Mark, Evangelist, with a lion.
20. St John, Evangelist, with an eagle.

Nave gate

21. An Angel.
22. The Blessed Virgin Mary, being crowned
23. by God the Father.
24. An Angel.

Nave continued

25. St Luke, Evangelist, with an ox.
26. St Matthew, Evangelist, with an angel.
27. St Andrew, with an ‘X’ cross, on which he was martyred.
28. Figure with a tall cross, possibly St Philip
29. St James the Less, with a club.
30. A figure with a book and carpenter’s square, possibly St Matthew or St Thomas.
31. St Simon the Zealot, with a saw.
32. A figure with a spear, possibly St Matthias

South aisle

33. A monk in white habit, possibly St Bernard.
34. St Barbara, with a tower.
35. A figure with a crown in her hands, possibly St Elizabeth of Hungary or St Anne.
36. St Catherine of Siena, wearing a crown of thorns.

South aisle gate

37. St Dorothy, with a basket of roses and apples.
38. St Vincent, with a napkin and a book.
39. St Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, with a cross.
40. St Sitha, with book, bag and keys, a serving maid of Lucca, patron of housewives and domestic servants.

South aisle continued

41. St Alexis, with a ladder, who lived and died under his father’s staircase in Rome.
42. St Apollonia, with pincers and a tooth, elderly deaconess of the 3rd century, martyred by her teeth being burned out, hence patron of dentists and sufferers from toothache.
43. St Ursula, British virgin, stripped to the waist with arrows in her breast, martyred near Cologne.
44. St Armel, monk of Brittany, leading a dragon by a chain. King Henry VII (1457–1509), exiled in Brittany, believed the saint’s intercession saved him from shipwreck and enabled him to win the crown of England.



Vaulted ceiling in the south porch (Boris Baggs)

Originally the woodwork of the screen was continued round the two arcade piers which it crosses. These pier casings have been taken down and used to form the present **pulpit**, which was framed with new panel work and mounted on a new base in the first half of the 19th century.

Presumably it was at this time that the mediaeval pulpit was broken up and reconstructed as the present **altar**, with new painted panels and decorative scheme.

Mediaeval stained glass survives in the tracery lights of many of the windows, although some was carefully restored or replaced in the 19th century, which also appears to be the date of the rather brightly-coloured panes. Like the screen paintings, these windows provide visual aids to teach the Faith to the people. In the tracery lights of the **east**

window are 15th-century figures of:

1. St Apollonia, 2. St Bridget, 3. St Martha,
4. St Catherine, 5. St Margaret, 6. St Anastasia,
7. St Dorothy, 8. St Sidwell (with a scythe).

Below are the arms of the de Bryan family and the Wolston family, Lords of the Manor in the 18th and 19th centuries, who provided two rectors. The glass in the five main lights was made in 1931 by Archibald K Nicholson. It shows Christ in Majesty with attendant angels, also a Scout in the lower left-hand corner. This modern glass was the gift of the widow of Major-General AJ Kelly, a Scout Commissioner and churchwarden here for many years. He died in 1920.

The figures in the **south chancel window** probably depict the Four Latin Doctors of the Church – St Gregory, St Jerome, St Augustine and St Ambrose.



Altar and reredos (Boris Baggs)

The tracery design of the **east windows of the aisles** shows how designers working in the mid-15th century, when the Perpendicular style was fashionable, nevertheless occasionally made use of the early-14th-century Decorated style of architecture in their designs.

Parclose screens of good Perpendicular design divide the side chapels from the chancel. Each chapel retains its **piscina**, into which the water from the washing of the priest's hands at the Eucharist was poured. The north chapel is now occupied by the **organ**, a single-manual instrument by Hawkin & Son of London. The chancel has a small **priest's door** on the south side with a fine 15th-century ogee-cinquefoiled **piscina** alongside. On the north side a door leads into the small vestry.

The stone **reredos** on the east wall, of c. 1840, has two panels displaying the Ten Commandments

and contrasting somewhat with the fine mediaeval work by which it is surrounded. The altar table is made up of very good carved woodwork from the mediaeval pulpit.

In the floor, westwards of the present altar, is the top-slab, or **mensa, of the pre-Reformation stone altar**, inscribed with five crosses, symbolising the Five Wounds of Christ. It now serves as a **ledger slab**, commemorating two former rectors – Isaac Goswell (1630) and Edward Goswell (1662). There is a tradition that the church owes the preservation of its principal splendours to Edward Goswell: as the Puritan Army approached, he whitewashed the figure paintings on the screen and removed the stained glass from the windows.

The original 15th-century oak **benches** survive, but are encased within the fielded 18th-century oak panelling forming **box pews**. Throughout

the nave the old bench ends are visible within the box pews.

The 15th-century **font** is of Beer stone and has a plain bowl, with a stem of cusped, blind panels on each face. The **font cover** dates from the 17th or early 18th century.

On the north wall of the chancel is a **monument to William Peter** (or Peters), who was buried below in 1614. His family succeeded the de Bryans as Lords of the Manor in 1390. His uncle was Sir William Petre, who was principal Secretary of State in 1544 and who accumulated considerable property through his friendship with Thomas



Cromwell, the suppressor of the monasteries. He died and was buried in Essex in 1572.

The **base of the tower** is divided from the nave by a plain arch resting on moulded imposts. Here the floor is paved with white-veined black marble slabs. The oak west door has a massive lock and strap hinge, although it is of no great age. The small door on the south side opens into the tower stairway which leads to the belfry above. Two colonies of rare bats – Greater Horseshoe and Lesser Horseshoe – inhabit the upper stages of the tower.

In the belfry hang four mediaeval **bells**, cast at the Exeter Foundry. It is thought that the third bell was cast first, about 1450. It is inscribed '+ ME MELIOR VERE NON EST CAMPANA SUB ERE' (In truth beneath the sky/There is no better bell than I). The treble and tenor bells, the latter weighing 14½ cwt (737 kg) were cast after 1500 and the vintage of the second bell is a mystery. It possibly replaced an earlier one; its style and inscription are certainly Pre-Reformation – asking '+ MATER DEI MEMTO (*sic memento*) MEI' (Mother of God, remember me) in Roman capitals set backwards and upside down! Possibly it was cast during the reign of Queen Mary (1553–58) – the brief period when the English Church was returned into the care of Rome. These bells were silent for many years until 1972, when they were retuned and rehung in a new frame of cast iron and steel by Taylor's of Loughborough.

By the mid-1980s the increasing cost of repairing and maintaining Torbryan church was beyond the means of its small but loyal congregation and group of Friends. It was decided therefore that the building should be made pastorally redundant. It was considered worthy of preservation by and for the Church and the nation and was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) on 1 July 1987. Since then repairs have been carried out under the supervision of John Schofield of Architecton, Bristol. Services are held at Christmas, Easter and the Patronal Festival each year, and it continues its daily ministry with a welcome to its many visitors and pilgrims.

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.

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Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

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West Oghwell
3 miles SW of Newton Abbot off A351

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