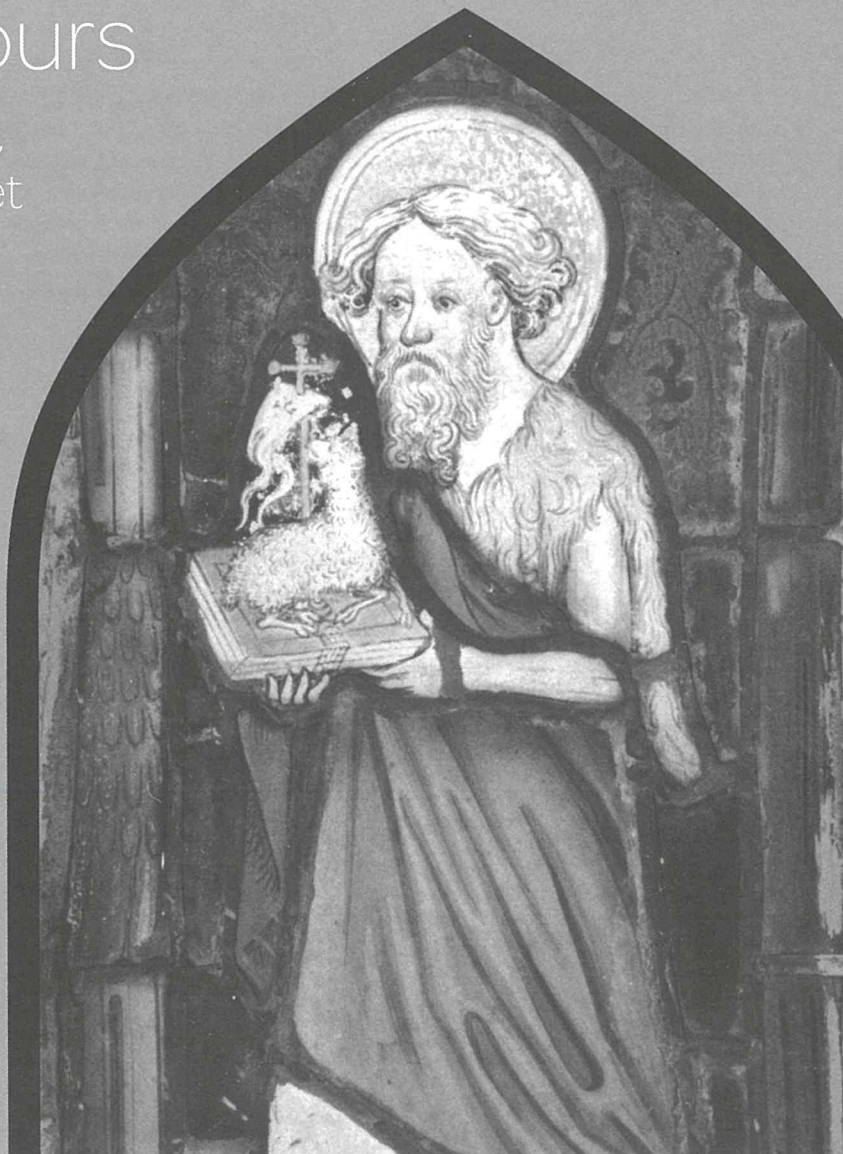




THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST

# Church of St Martin of Tours

Elworthy,  
Somerset



# Church of St Martin of Tours

by Robert Dunning and others

## History

Elworthy ('Ella's homestead'), a small parish on the eastern slopes of the Brendon Hills, was originally part of the great Saxon minster estate of Stogumber. The 13th-century expansion of population brought remote areas like this into cultivation and the growing settlement, dependent on pasture and woodland, acquired a church of its own. The present building dates from this time and first occurs in written records in 1233 when William Malet gave it to the Order of St John of Jerusalem. The western tower and two tiny lancet windows, one in the west wall of the tower and the other in the north-west corner of the nave, survive from that period.

Rectors were appointed by the Order of St John until 1540 when the advowson passed into lay hands. At this time the parish was probably at its most prosperous. The porch had recently been built, the nave roof renewed and at least one bell bought from the Exeter foundry. The money probably came through the fraternity of St Martin, a band of parishioners formed in honour of the church's patron saint to raise funds for the building. Other parishioners gave money to burn candles in honour of St Martin, St Mary and St Anthony and for departed souls.

The 17th century, when stock-raising was filling the pockets of local farmers (of whom

the most distinguished were the Laceys of nearby Hartrow, in Stogumber parish), was another time of prosperity in which the church shared. By about 1600 the chancel was so full of private pews for the Laceys and their like that the churchwardens complained that the other parishioners had no room to 'draw near' to receive Holy Communion. The Laceys are commemorated in the present screen: this was made in the 19th century but includes some 16th-century tracery, a frieze dated 1632 and the Lacey coat of arms and crest.

Like many parishes Elworthy suffered during the Civil War. The young rector, John Selleck, was a convinced royalist and lost his benefice in 1645, but he played an important part in helping Charles II to escape from England in 1652 and recovered this living and others at the Restoration. Indeed he retained Elworthy until his death in 1690. His successor, Richard Lane, rebuilt the chancel in 1695, and the communion table and rails installed about this time survive. The striking alabaster font is also 17th century.

Unusually, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, a succession of rectors actually lived in the parish, rather than appointing curates, and Elworthy was remarkably well cared for. The south side chapel, now accommodating the organ, was added c.1816 for a family pew by Major General Blommart

Exterior from the south-west

who, having inherited Willett House through marriage and recently had an heir, was building a new house and preparing to move to the village. The rectory house was rebuilt in 1838.

John Blommart, shortly after his father's death embarked on a considerable restoration programme in 1846, conservatively rebuilding the chancel and seeing a new arch 'thrown between' the nave and the chancel, suggesting that the previous arch had been much narrower. The 19th-century work bears the unmistakable marks of early Victorian enthusiasm and generosity, which have produced an interior of great charm.

This new work was for the benefit of an adult congregation usually amounting to 30 at the morning service and 60 in the afternoon, out of a total population in 1851 of 216 (higher than it had ever been before). During the agricultural depression of the 1890s the number of parishioners began to fall rapidly. The last resident rector left in 1919 and his successors lived at Monksilver. By 1961 the population of Elworthy was only 82 and in 1969 the parish became a chapelry of Monksilver. The census of 1971 found only 62 people in Elworthy and the maintenance of the church had become an impossible burden. It was therefore declared redundant



and in 1979 vested in the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust. Urgent repairs, especially to the tower, were carried out by Stansells of Taunton under the direction of Michael Torrens, architect. Further re-pointing, drainage and conservation work was carried out in early 2006.

## Exterior

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In the churchyard is a huge and ancient yew tree, the roots of which have all but swallowed the table tombs of, presumably, the Major General, his wife and two of their children, all of whom had funerals at Elworthy, but for whom no identifiable monuments exist. John Blommart and his sister lie beneath a large pink granite tombstone to the north of the chancel. All the other burials at the church were of labourers, servants, estate workers and a number of inmates from the nearby Williton workhouse.

The church is quite small, consisting of tower, nave, chancel, northern porch and the southern extension of 1846. The walls are built of local rubble and until recently the roofs were covered with local Treborough slates. These being no longer available,

the present covering is of Delabole slates from Cornwall.

Although of 13th-century origin, the tower only received its present squared belfry windows and battlements in the 18th century. The unusual flight of stone steps, leading to an older oak doorway and studded door in the upper floor of the tower, are of similar date. The nave is again 13th century but altered and given new windows probably in the late 14th, and much repaired since, especially in 1846. The buttressed porch is a late-medieval addition, with pretty Georgian outer gates and old oak door into the church.

## Interior

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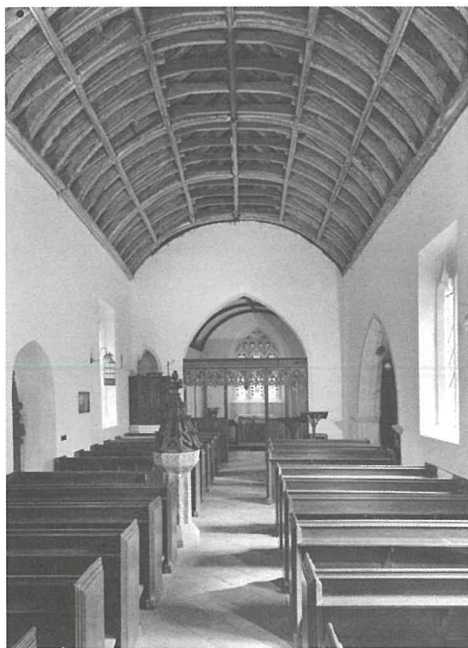
Over the nave is an attractive wagon roof of 16th-century date, now open but originally plastered between the ribs. The elegant 17th-century font, carved out of alabaster from Watchet, is very similar to that in Williton church which was bought in 1666. The traceried and crocketed cover is a sympathetic 19th-century addition. Near the font is an original 13th-century window containing 15th-century stained glass figures of St John the Evangelist (above) (cover) and St John the Baptist (below). The oak pews are good 19th-century work.

Interior looking east

What now forms the organ chamber and vestry on the south side was added c.1816 as a family pew. The one manual organ was built by H C Sims of Southampton.

Separating the chancel from the nave is a coloured wooden screen, assembled in the 19th century but incorporating late-medieval tracery and the delightful inscription:

*O: LORD: PREPARE: OVR: ARTS: TO:  
PRAYE: AN:NO: 1632*



It is possible that 'ARTS' lost an 'H' and an 'E' prior to reassembly rather than being an example of rustic spelling. Likewise 19th century in its present form, the pulpit contains some good 17th-century carved panels. The steps and archway now giving access to it were adapted from the stairway to the former rood loft which would have existed over the original screen.

In the chancel the communion table and rails, both with elaborately turned balusters, are fine 17th-century examples although the rails have evidently been altered. The choir stalls incorporate some 16th-century carved oak work, including bench-ends and probably parts of the former screen. The east window contains sacred emblems and patterns in brightly coloured glass of 1846.

In the tower is an interesting ring of four bells:

Treble by Roger Semson of Ash Priors, c.1550.  
Second by Thomas Wroth of Wellington, 1699.

Third by Thomas Pennington of Exeter, 1624.  
Tenor from the Exeter foundry, 15th century.

The bells were rehung in a new oak frame by Sully of Stogumber in 1921 and are in good ringing order.

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