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Front cover: The rose window at the west end
Photographs by Geoff Brandwood



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Church of St Mary

Itchen Stoke, Hampshire



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Church of St Mary

by Geoff Brandwood, architectural historian who has written widely on Victorian and Edwardian churches, and former chairman of the Victorian Society



History

St Mary's is a remarkable, mid-Victorian church of 1866–67, impressive architecturally and with fixtures and fittings of much interest. The major part of the cost was met by the vicar, the Revd Charles Conybeare, whose brother Henry supplied the designs. It lies in a village with a very long history, beside the gentle River Itchen. The settlement grew up at a fording point on the river and its first mentioned in 960, when King Edgar granted his kinsman Britelm, bishop of Winchester, lands at 'Ytinstoce'. By the time of Domesday (1086) 'Stoche' belonged to Romsey Abbey which held it until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. It then passed into secular hands in 1539, and eventually, in 1818, much of the land was sold to Alexander Baring, who became lord of the manor and lived in the adjacent parish of Northington. He was created Baron Ashburton in 1835 and was a key figure in the life of St Mary's.

Two rebuildings

In the medieval period the village was served by a church near the river which included features dating back to Norman times. By the early 19th century this building was cold, damp and in need of repair. To improve matters, Alexander Baring, as patron of the living, gave the present site, conveniently situated in the middle of the village, on which a new church was built in 1830–31. It was in a plain Early English style but graced by a spire and tower with two bells. In 1831 he also built Itchen Stoke House, on the south side of the road, for his brother Frederick, the then rector. However, 30 years later ideas about Anglican church-building had changed radically and something more distinguished was regarded as fitting for the House of God. The 1840s had seen the adoption of Gothic architecture, based on the best English medieval models, as the right way to build. From the 1850s there were attempts to develop the Gothic style in new directions and there arose an interest in introducing architectural ideas from the Continent. The results were sometimes quite exotic but they also produced churches of much beauty. One such is St Mary's, whose general plan and style derives from the noble architecture of medieval northern France.

The east end as illustrated in *The Builder*, 22 February 1868, 34. The tiled labyrinth can be seen on the floor of the circular sanctuary

The founder, the benefactors and the architect

The Revd Charles Ranken Conybearre was appointed to the living in 1857, but it would be a few years before he set about the task of rebuilding his now-outmoded Georgian church. He had previously served, from 1852, as vicar of Pyrton in Oxfordshire where the church was also rebuilt, in that case under the London architect, J C Buckler.

Conybearre's wife, Elizabeth, was the daughter of the then well-known antiquary and writer on church architecture, James Heywood Markland, whose death in 1864 may have been an added stimulus to the

rebuilding at Ikenhen Stoke. As a tablet behind the altar records, the chancel was built in his memory: his wife, Charlotte, also gave the western porch. Another benefactor was Louisa, the second wife (from 1858) of the 2nd Lord Ashburton, who gave the stained glass west window as a memorial to her husband (d. 1864). The parishioners gave £50 towards the windows on the south of the nave as a token of appreciation for their vicar.

Charles Conybearre had a brother, Henry, who was an architect and civil engineer. He went out to India and became the town engineer in Bombay where he designed the municipal waterworks. He also designed the church of St John at Colaba, built from 1847 to commemorate those who fell in the First Afghan War in 1839–42. He seems to have returned to London in the later 1850s where he ran an office as a civil engineer before emigrating again, this time to Caracas, Venezuela, in 1878 where he, reputedly, died six years later.



The church from the south-west as illustrated in *The Builder*, 22 February 1868, 35

The large sanctuary windows and their gabled heads are the most striking feature of St Mary's when seen from the south-east

Exterior

St Mary's is an impressive sight, especially when approached along the road from Alresford to the east. The inspiration is French Gothic of the 13th century and specifically the Sainte Chapelle in Paris and its successor, the Sainte Chapelle attached to the east end of the abbey church of St Germer-de-Fly in Picardy (although St Mary's is not an literal copy of either).

The immediate source of inspiration may actually have come from closer to home – the new chapel at Exeter College, Oxford, built between 1856 (when C R Conybearre was still at nearby Pyrton) and 1859 to designs by George Gilbert Scott, who had evidently found his inspiration in the French examples. The most distinctive feature is the polygonal east end where each bay is filled with a tall Geometrical-style window rising up into a gable. This beautiful arrangement is decidedly continental, although a rare, much less elegant English precedent from the 14th century can be found at Bluntisham church in Huntingdonshire. The church is constructed of brick, faced with dark, rock-faced ragstone from Godalming, with light-coloured Portland stone for the dressings. The nave is much plainer with three tall lancet windows of equal height in each of the four bays. A rather lovely feature is the lozenge patterning of the roof formed by two-tone, green and grey slates. The east



gable of the nave is crowned by an elongated bell-cote which houses a pair of bells, one above the other. The head of its arch, with its green and brown tiles, gives a hint of the varied and colourful materials used in the embellishment of the church inside: the shafts to the bell-cote have been removed but were originally of polished red serpentine. The west end of the church has a fine rose window, filled with Lady Ashburton's glass, and below it is the entry to the church through a stone-roofed porch (or narthex) across the west end. At the entrance are pink shafts of red Mansfield stone and the interior is divided into three stone-vaulted compartments, the side portions of which have seats round three sides and walls which

are richly decorated with diaper patterning which follows work in the nave of Westminster Abbey. In addition, the porch is embellished with colourful shafts in pink granite, serpentine and veined green marble. The mid-Victorian age gloried in the use of such colourful materials which had become available as never before through increased geological knowledge, industrial mechanisation, and new means of transport to move materials long distances at a cost which had previously been unthinkable. Here at St Mary's it may or may not be a coincidence that the Conybeares' clergyman-father, William Daniel Conybeare (1787-1857), who rose to be dean of Llandaff, was himself a distinguished geologist who did much to advance the science in Britain. Geology, and the resulting knowledge of the stones of the Earth, carried with them a spiritual dimension for mid-Victorian churchmen, revealing, as they were considered to do, something of the manifold riches of God's creation.

It is worth drawing attention to the foundation stone at the east end. It dedicates the building 'To the Glory of God and for the use of his children that they, upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets,



The ornate capitals and variegated stone shafts in the porch



A detail of the stained glass in the nave

Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone, may be built up unto Him.' This is interesting and unusual wording which suggests Low Church leanings on the part of the founder. This is perhaps supported by the lack of figurative stained glass (see below), and the fact the rebuilt nave at the vicar's earlier church in Oxfordshire has a wide, unaisled nave, suggestive of Evangelical inclinations.

Interior

The church, although not very large, has a tall, stately interior, lined with Bath stone. The eye is drawn to the grandeur of the stone-vaulted apse at the east end where, like all the others, the windows are filled with superb, patterned stained glass. Looking in the other direction, the focus is the eight-petal rose window, stretching up beyond the springing of the roof. A long article about the church appeared in *The Builder* magazine in February 1868, shortly after the consecration, and was almost certainly based upon material provided by the architect himself. It explained various medieval Continental sources for the work, such as the capitals of the vaulting shafts at the east end which derived from Beauvais and Trier cathedrals. It drew attention to various design features used at the church,



The interior looking east, showing the cast-iron decoration of the bench ends and the decoration of the roof



A detail of the stained glass in the sanctuary

Fixtures and fittings

Stained glass

The windows are all filled with a glorious display of richly coloured, patterned glass, which, in the chancel, is copied from medieval work at Le Mans and Auxerre. The lack of pictorial work is somewhat curious as extensive schemes in Victorian churches usually depicted at least some saints, biblical scenes or historical figures. It may be linked to Low Church leanings referred to earlier in connection with the foundation stone. The *Buildings of England* volume for Hampshire (2010) credits the maker as 'Gibbs' although the author has been unable to provide a source for the purposes of the present guide. Nonetheless, Alexander Gibbs (1832–86), the most prolific and famous of three brothers who manufactured stained glass, is a likely candidate, although other firms were responsible for similar work in the mid-Victorian period.

Although the principal effect of the church derives from its overall lines and proportions, it also has considerable decorative embellishment. Lining the nave are rectangular panels of diapering with detail like that in the porch, but in this case with the panels framed by brown tile borders with orange frettes. The floor is covered with red, black and buff tiling made by the prolific Victorian firm Maw's of Broseley in Shropshire. The ceiling too is decorated with stylised five-leaved flowers. Perhaps the most remarkable decoration is the use of rows of balls on the arch-braces and which may be unique in a church. *The Builder* article explains that these 'pellets', as it calls them, 'are formed of spheres of pale yellow glass (blown with cylindrical shanks for fastening into the ribs), with metallic silver precipitated in their interior.'

Prominently placed in front of the west entrance, the font repays close inspection, since it is a *tour de force* of exotic materials. As the coloured inscription on the lower step records, it was given by the architect as a memorial to his daughter Edith May who had died in 1861 aged 10. The bowl carries a later memorial to his wife Annie who died in 1871. Polished black marble is used for the steps

Font

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Right: The pulpit, with its highly unusual cast-iron tracery panels, is entered through a passage in the wall, reached through the opening to the right

Below: The black, polished marble font and its amber-coloured shafts

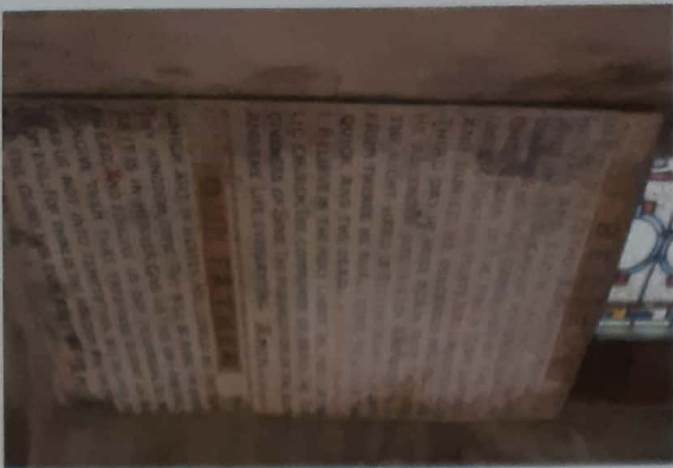
and bowl, and also the main stem which is surrounded by shafts of Californian marble. *The Builder* article noted this was 'a new and beautiful material, diaphanous, and resembling the so-called Algerian agate'. It is used in shafts at the east end too. On the panels of the bowl are set gilt bronze rosettes which originally had jewelled ornament, and this idea of mixed materials for the font was said to have come from the tomb of Mary of Burgundy in the church of Our Lady at Bourges.



There is a second, rather curious font in the porch. It is of uncertain age but the smallness of the bowl suggests it cannot be medieval, when baptism of infants was carried out by immersion.

Seating and pulpit

These incorporate another most unusual feature. The panels are decorated with rich tracery, carved not out of wood as is usual, but made of cast iron. Three different designs are used in the bench ends.



Chancel labyrinth

At the east end is a dark red and green tiled labyrinth modelled on those in medieval French cathedrals- this one closely resembles that at Chartres, the most famous of all and dating from the early 13th century. Such labyrinths form symbolic representations of life's tortuous pilgrimage towards the goal of salvation.

Brasses

Mounted on the west wall are two brasses that came from the medieval church. The larger is to Joan Batmanson (d.1518) and shows her standing figure with hands clasped in prayer and dressed in a gown with fur-trimmed cuffs and a girdle round the waist. Beneath is an inscription:

Of yo charite pray for the soule of Johan Batmanson late the wyffe of master John Batmanson docto' of Sevell which Johan decessed the xviiiij day of may the yer of mdcxviii on whose soule Jhu have mercy

The other brass is of a lady of about 1500 kneeling at a desk and attired similarly to Joan Batmanson.

War memorials

A brass tablet on the north side near the pulpit records the five men lost in the 1914-18 conflict. On the south a highly-coloured tiled tablet is a memorial to Major R J P Cox who died at the Battle of Loos in 1915.

Corona lucis

In the chancel hangs an ornate Victorian brass corona, made by Hardman of Birmingham, that would originally have held candles.

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Acknowledgement

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I am grateful to Alan Brooks for his advice on the attribution of the stained glass.

Left: The Creed and Lord's Prayer board, reused from the previous church

Right: The kneeling figure of an unknown lady, c 1500

