

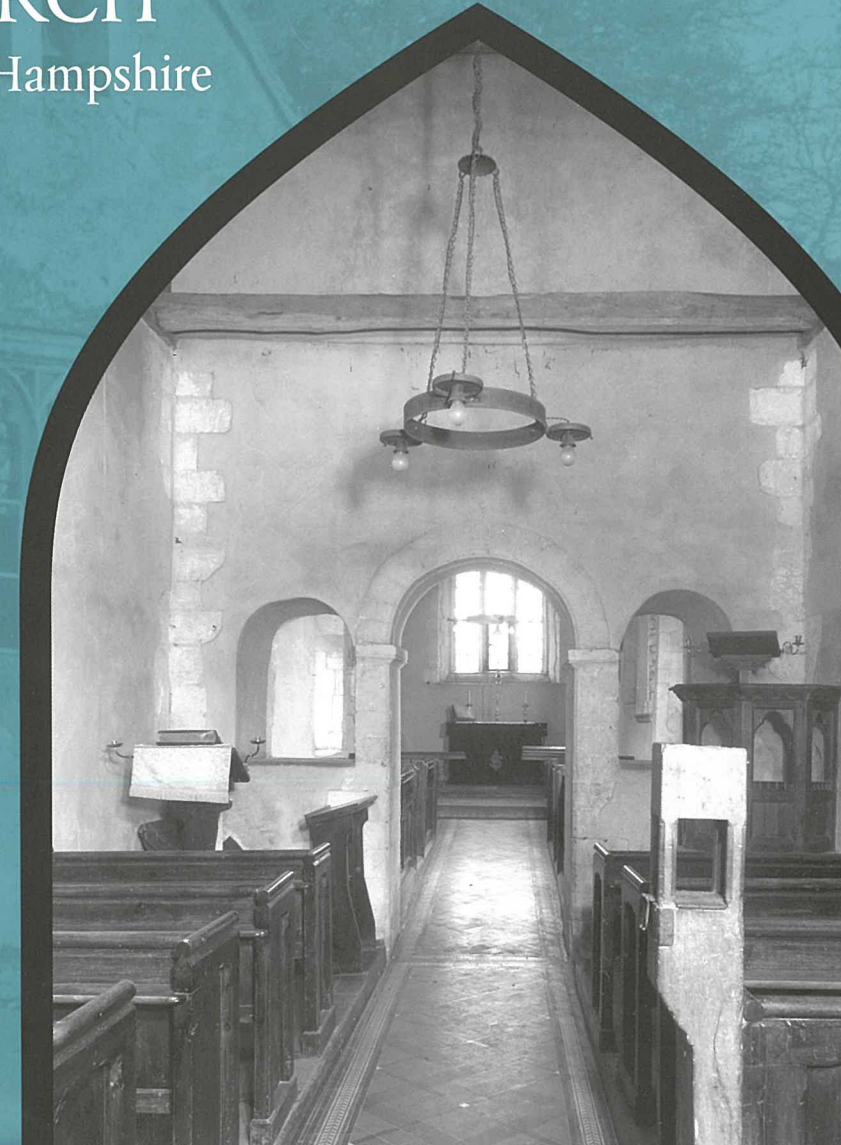


THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST



# ST MARY'S CHURCH

Ashley, Hampshire



THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST

1 West Smithfield London EC1A 9EE

Tel: 020 7213 0660 Fax: 020 7213 0678 Email: [central@tcct.org.uk](mailto:central@tcct.org.uk)

[www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk) Registered Charity No. 258612 Summer 2005

£1.50

# ST MARY'S CHURCH

by John E Vigar (Historian, author and broadcaster specialising in ecclesiastical architecture. Regional Development Manager, The Churches Conservation Trust)

## HISTORY

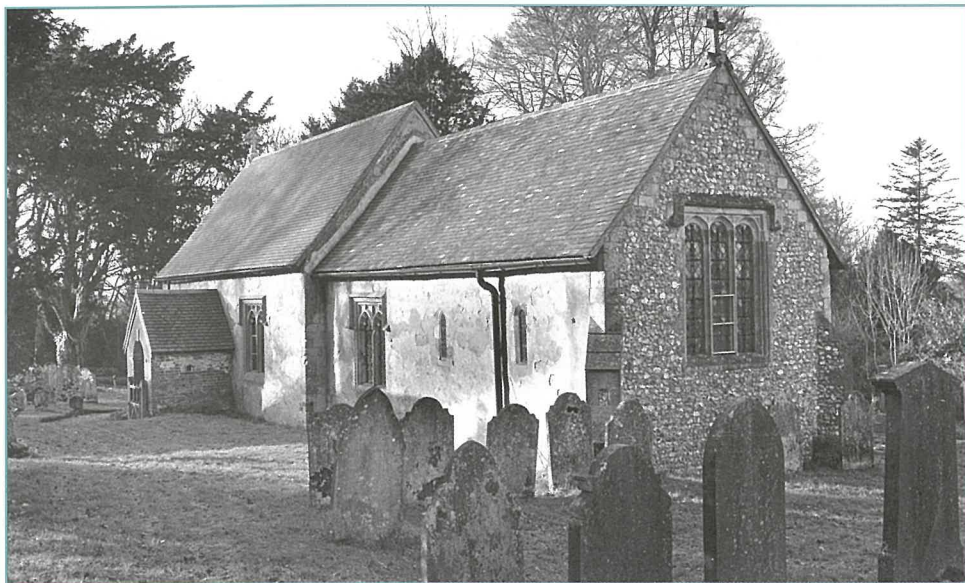
The name Ashley derives from the Old English meaning 'meadow by the ash wood', and trees of this species may still be found on the hillside around the church. As a settlement at Ashley is not mentioned in Domesday Book (1086), it is likely that the construction of the adjacent castle in AD 1200 first led to the establishment of a small community here and shortly afterwards to the building of the church. In that year William Briwere was granted a licence to crenellate (to build a fortified structure) on the hillside and the following year he gave the patronage of Ashley church to the newly founded Priory of Augustinian canons at Mottisfont, of which he was chief patron. He also gave them the patronage of Longstock church a few miles to the north west, whilst his brother John gave them the patronage of Little Somborne church (now also cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust).

From then until the Reformation the priests at Ashley were appointed by the Priory, although we know from several mediaeval inquiries that the Priory was taking more than its fair share of income, leaving the priest at Ashley somewhat underfunded. King Henry VII proposed closing Mottisfont and giving all its lands to St George's Chapel, Windsor, but even though he had the Pope's permission to do so his idea came to nothing. Ashley remained a property of the Priory until, following its closure in 1535, it was granted to the Sandys family, who subsequently lived as secular owners of Mottisfont and patrons of Ashley church. During the next few centuries the patronage passed through the hands of several families, most of whom were not resident in the parish.

*Front cover: Interior of the nave from the west (© Crown copyright. NMR)*

*Left: Interior viewed from the altar showing the Hobbs memorial (© Crown copyright. NMR)*





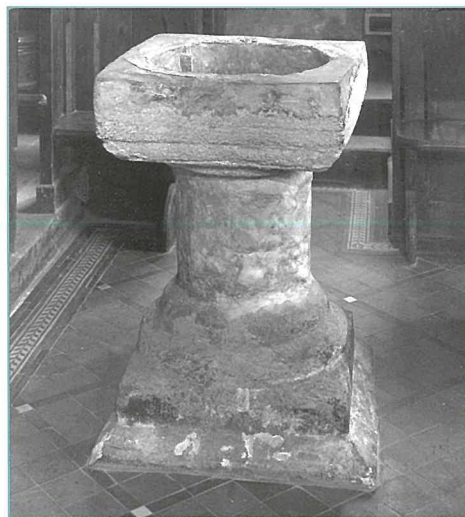
*Exterior from the south-west (Christopher Dalton)*

The population has never been large and in 2004 was less than 40. In 1976, when faced with a large repair programme to their church, the parish decided that this was beyond their means and after much deliberation the church was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) in 1980. Repairs were carried out by architect Penelope Adamson and subsequently by Louise Bainbridge, under whose supervision the exterior was limewashed in 2003. An active local group 'The Friends of St Mary's Ashley' encourages occasional use of the church and ensures that it remains at the centre of the small local community. Services are advertised locally.

St Mary's stands in the outer bailey of a Norman castle and comprises a chancel, nave and south porch. The church is extremely narrow for its length, although this was accentuated following the extension of the chancel by about six feet (0.8 metres) in the 13th century. Some early windows survive, although only one, in the south wall, is completely original in its stonework.

The 19th-century census of religious worship records that St Mary's had seating for 80, made

up of 60 free seats and rented pews that held 20. On Census Sunday in 1851 there were two services. In the morning there was an attendance of 66, whilst the afternoon service attracted 46. It is likely that most villagers attended both, although the minister at the time noted on the form that the church attracted worshippers from other parishes.



## EXTERIOR

The walls are built mainly of flint rubble with chalk block dressings and quoins, all rendered with lime mortar. The west wall has three headstones to John Smith and his family set into it, whilst the bell-cote set unusually within the apex of the wall, contains two bells cast by John Warner and Sons in 1860. From the churchwardens' account books it is known that there was an earlier bell but this appears to have been sold for £1 13s. 0d in 1833.

The large window in the west wall dates from the 14th century, like the other square-headed windows in the church. There is a mass dial on the south wall, to the right-hand side of the porch, used by the priest in the Middle Ages to determine the time of Mass. The roof is of clay tiles and in its present form dates from the 1950s. The brick porch carries the date 1701 and the initials of the churchwardens at the time, RC and LW, whilst the south façade has two square-headed 14th-century windows and two single-light openings. The easternmost of these, with a round head, is contemporary with the original church, but is not in its original position, as it is now in the wall built when the chancel was extended in the 13th century. The east wall, which is not mediaeval, does not have any rendering and the flint construction gives a pleasant contrast to the rest of the building.

The south porch retains its old plastered walls, covered with graffiti from the 18th and 19th centuries. The plain round-headed doorway is original, whilst the door itself cost 19 shillings in 1851.

## INTERIOR

The stone head wearing a close-fitting cap, let into the wall opposite the door, is probably 15th century.

The Norman font, a shallow square bowl on a single circular pedestal, is of Purbeck marble, and is probably contemporary with the founding of the church. To the east of the door is a damaged 14th-century holy water stoup. Behind the door is a fine wooden alms box dating from the 17th century, with four open sides. It probably once had an elaborate finial top. Each year it was opened in the presence of the rector and both churchwardens, but in 1911 it was found to have been tampered with and the church was kept locked for a while as a result.

The window over the reading desk was inserted in 1896, whilst the two small round windows in the south wall are 18th century and show that there must always have been tall trees on the castle mound, throwing a shadow onto the church and making it desperately dark. During the Victorian period these round windows were blocked in, but they were reopened in the 20th century and fitted with engraved memorial glass to the designs of David Peace.

The nave was resealed in 1858, although the present tiled floor was put down in 1901, a gift of the then patron. The only old parts of the roof are the massive tie beams in the nave. The church has always suffered from condensation and the windows are deliberately left open to create a flow of through air – a practice first suggested by the churchwardens in 1911.

The chancel arch is Norman and faint traces of mediaeval paintwork may be picked out on its dressed stones. Its north (left) jamb bears an incised Latin inscription at shoulder height, similar to the one to be seen at Clapton-on-the-Hill in Gloucestershire. On the right jamb is a collection of scratched geometric designs. The two round-headed arches either side of the chancel arch were cut through to give improved sight lines into the chancel in the 16th or 17th century, after seating had been introduced into

*Left: The Norman font (© Crown copyright. NMR)*

the church. It is interesting how the quoins (dressed cornerstones) of the nave may be seen in the chancel, giving the impression that the nave and chancel were built separately, although this cannot have been the case. In the sply of the single-light pointed south chancel window is a 14th-century wall painting of an unidentified figure. This window must originally have been Norman, but its top has been replaced – probably when the chancel was extended further east of this point in the 13th century. This extension, commonly found in early churches, made room for the increased ceremonial being introduced at that time.

The main east window is 14th century in date but its top was replaced 200 years later – the moulding that runs up the sides of the window stops abruptly where it meets the later work. The altar is Victorian, and there is a small recess in the south wall which may be the remains of a 13th-century piscina (for the priest to wash his fingers before Mass) that has had its original drain replaced by a plain slab. The chancel floor follows the slope of the ground outside and falls steeply away from the altar – an unusual and endearing feature.

On the south wall of the chancel is a large white marble monument to Thomas Hobbs. Hobbs was physician to three kings – Charles II, James II and William III, and died in 1698. His son, also commemorated on the monument, drowned in the Rhine in 1707 at the age of 17.

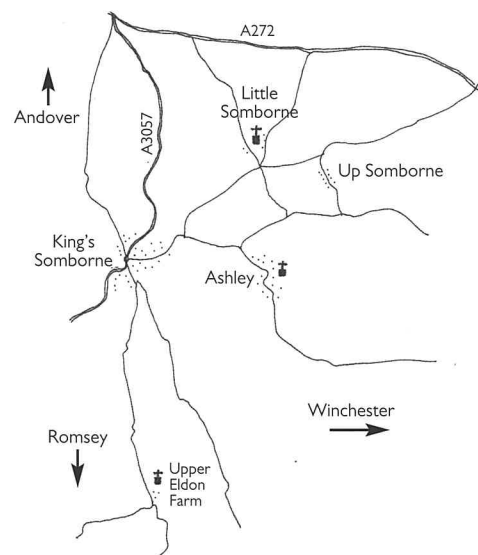
On the north wall is a white and yellow marble monument to Abraham Weekes, great-nephew of Thomas Hobbs, who died in 1755. It outdoes the earlier monument by having a broken pediment at its apex, and by its use of colour. William Taunton, commemorated nearby, was great-nephew of Abraham Weekes and a wealthy London solicitor, who moved here when he became lord of the manor and patron of the living which, incidentally, was held by his brother Robert.

On the south side of the chancel is a slate tablet to Helen Bromley (d. 1981) who played an important part in the preservation of St Mary's church when it was declared redundant;

her husband Toby Bromley, of the famous shoe firm Russell and Bromley, was also a great supporter of the church and of The Churches Conservation Trust until his death in 2003.

The church room, which stands on the south side of the church, was built as a vestry and working men's club in 1925. The land was donated partly by Herbert Johnson, the then lord of the manor, and helped by funds which were raised by the collection of Belladonna (deadly nightshade) on Farley Mount. The same donor also gave the south-eastern extension to the churchyard, which is still in use, the previous year. The portion of the churchyard nearest the road is maintained as a wild flower meadow.

In the locality are two other churches cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. All Saints' church at Little Somborne is an older, Saxon structure, whilst St John the Baptist at Upper Eldon is of similar date to Ashley and was also in the gift of Mottisfont Priory. Its collection of consecration crosses makes it unique in Hampshire. Both churches are open daily.



## 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.

**NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF**  
All Saints, Little Somborne  
4 miles SE of Stockbridge off A3057

St John the Baptist, Upper Eldon  
4 miles S of Stockbridge of A3057

© The Churches Conservation Trust 2005

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guide incorporates information kindly supplied by Anne McCay and Kevin Stubbs, and the author would also like to thank the staff at the Hampshire Record Office in Winchester.

Back cover: *The 17th-century poor box (Christopher Dalton)*