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CHURCH OF ST MARY

Tarrant Crawford, Dorset

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Tarrant Crawford, Dorset

CHURCH OF ST MARY

by Christopher Dalton (Church and architectural historian, writer on buildings and bells, architectural photographer and lay canon of Hereford Cathedral)

INTRODUCTION

Tarrant Crawford is the lowest of the eight villages or hamlets, seven of them still with churches, on the little river Tarrant. It lies in a gentle valley, close to the confluence of the Tarrant with the much larger river Stour. This remains an utterly unspoilt pastoral landscape which could be a hundred miles from the Bournemouth–Poole conurbation rather than the 10–12 miles (16–19km) that it actually is. The name 'Tarrant' seems to be identical with 'Trent', an ancient British river-name used of a river liable to flood, and 'Crawford' to mean 'crows' ford'. The ford in question was probably over the Stour where the splendid Crawford Bridge was built in the late Middle Ages, although this is now actually in the adjoining parish of Spetisbury.

Front cover: Interior looking west (Boris Baggs)

Left: Priest's stall and pews (Boris Baggs)

HISTORY

With only an old farmhouse and its buildings standing anywhere near the church, Crawford is now a tiny place. But the name of the house – Tarrant Abbey – and a barn and another farm building nearby which are clearly of medieval origin, are clues to its former greatness. A small monastery is believed to have been founded here in the 12th century by Ralph de Kahaines, who was lord of the manor of the neighbouring parish of Tarrant Keyneston and gave it his name. About 1228 this monastery was re-endowed as a Cistercian nunnery by Bishop Richard Poore, Tarrant Crawford's most famous son. He was successively bishop of Chichester (1215), Salisbury (1217) and Durham (1228); and during his time at Salisbury the building of the present cathedral – on its new site – was begun in 1220. Poore returned to his native parish to die and was buried in the abbey here in 1237. Also buried here was Joan, Queen of Alexander II of Scotland and sister of Henry III, who died in 1238. Tarrant Abbey is said to have become one of the richest Cistercian nunneries in England. At the time of its dissolution in 1539, in the reign of Henry VIII, Margaret Russell was abbess and there were 19 other nuns.

Of the abbey church, recorded as having been built (or more probably rebuilt) in 1240–46, nothing now remains above ground. Even its exact site is uncertain. No doubt stones and flints from its walls found their way into various other buildings in the locality. The aforementioned barn, and the other farm building with its ancient roof and heavy buttresses, are thought to have belonged to the abbey; and the earliest part of the present farmhouse is said to have been the abbey guesthouse. If this is so, these three 15th-century buildings are all that has survived of this once great abbey.

The present village, or rather hamlet, of Tarrant Crawford lies about half a mile (0.8 km) away from the church, to the south. There is evidence that it was already there by the 15th century and that it was once considerably larger. It is perfectly possible that it was deliberately moved away from the proximity of the abbey at some time in the Middle Ages.

Exterior from the north (Christopher Dalton)

The CHURCH

The present church was quite separate from the abbey and evidently served the village and parish of Tarrant Crawford. Consisting only of nave, chancel, slim west tower and north porch, it is relatively small and gives no hint that there was once an important monastery close by. However, the fact that the main entrance is on the north side with only a small blocked doorway opposite, and the almost windowless south wall of the nave, suggest that there were once other buildings immediately south of the church and it certainly seems likely that these would have been associated with the abbey. The series of wall paintings dating mostly from the 14th century, which are the outstanding feature of Tarrant Crawford church, take full advantage of the largely unbroken expanse of wall. They were rediscovered in 1910–11 but not fully revealed until 1948–49.

The walls of the church are built of flint and a variety of different types of local stone, chiefly dark brown Heath-stone and green sandstone. They are still largely lime-rendered outside and were originally entirely so. The roofs are tiled, with the attractive local feature of several courses of stone slates at the bottom. The earliest part of the building is the chancel, which was evidently built in the 12th century, probably in the time of Ralph de Kahaines. No windows of that date now remain: all were enlarged later, when glass became more readily available, no doubt to make the chancel lighter. However, the inner part of the priest's doorway (now blocked) in the south wall is still 12th century, as is the pilaster buttress at the north-east corner outside. There is no chancel arch.

In the late 13th century the nave was rebuilt and perhaps lengthened. The porch, the tower and the nave roof all date from late in the 15th century or early in the 16th. Nothing substantial has been done to the fabric of the church since. Clearly it remained large enough for the small population of the parish after the abbey had gone; but while there was thus no need to enlarge it, the building was, on the whole, kept in good condition over the centuries.

Apart from the nave roof, no medieval woodwork survives; but there is a good deal of 17th-century woodwork incorporated into the present pulpit, pews and other furnishings.

Unlike Tarrant Keyneston church nearby, which was mostly rebuilt in 1852, Crawford escaped

Victorian restoration until the very end of the 19th century when the chancel was renovated. This work, mooted in 1893 but evidently not carried out until 1895–96, was relatively conservative for its date but seems rather heavy-handed by present-day standards. It involved among other things much stripping of lime plaster and rendering, and the complete renewal of the chancel roof to a different design. By the time it came to restoring the nave, porch and tower (which was underpinned with concrete) in 1910–11, a more gentle but still not entirely 'conservationist' approach was adopted. The architect for both campaigns was CE Ponting, of Lockeridge near Marlborough, who did much good – and often distinctive – work on churches in Dorset and Wiltshire. At Tarrant Crawford in 1910–11 he respected the antiquity of the walls, windows and doorways but did not jib at cutting up and rearranging the woodwork, nor at stripping all the ancient plaster from the walls of the porch and tower, from the window reveals and from the nave roof. So the interior of the church as seen today is as much a testimony to the taste of 1911 as it is to the medieval styles of the different periods when it was built.

By the 1980s all the parishes in the Tarrant valley had come under the care of one priest, Rawston church had been closed (but is preserved), and Crawford church was used only occasionally in the summer months. It was therefore declared formally redundant and came into the care of The Churches Conservation Trust in July 1988. Repairs have been carried out for the Trust under the supervision of Mrs Penelope Adamson and Mr Philip Hughes.

Left: Exterior from the north-west (Boris Baggs)

Below: Exterior from the south-east (Christopher Dalton)

EXTERIOR

There are three approaches to Crawford church, which is not on any road. One is from the north, along the bridleway which follows the Tarrant from Keyneston church less than half a mile (0.8km) away; and the other two are from the south-west, passing near the house and farm buildings of the present-day Tarrant Abbey. From that direction the church appears on a slight rise and the 16th-century west tower is prominent. Although remarkably thin, this tower is stylish with its striped walls of green sandstone and knapped flint, square-headed belfry windows and two little quatrefoil openings. Behind the battlements rises a pitched roof – an unusual feature, the reason for which seems to have been the need to accommodate the smallest of the three bells. When the tower was built a two-light window of the late 13th century, evidently displaced from the nave or possibly from an earlier tower, was reset in its west wall.

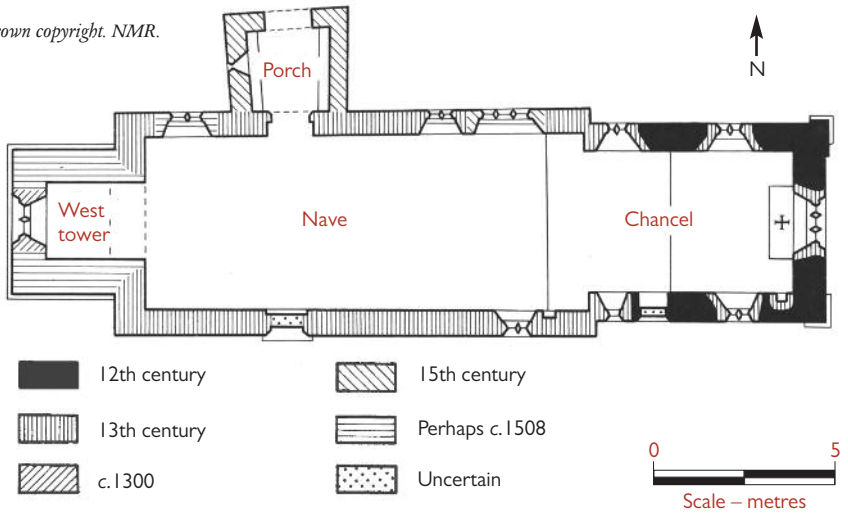
The north side of the church has five windows of different dates and engagingly set at different levels. The earliest are the narrow two-light windows, two in the chancel and one in the nave, which date from the late 13th century when the nave was rebuilt. The remaining two windows in the nave are larger and were evidently inserted in the late 15th or early 16th century. The chancel has in its east wall a simple but beautiful three-light window, again of the late 13th century, and on the south side coeval windows of one and two lights. The solitary window in the south wall of the nave is again of similar date.

Interior looking east (Boris Baggs)

INTERIOR

Over the nave is a typical early-16th-century wagon roof. Its rafters show signs of the former lath-and-plaster ceiling shown in an old photograph preserved in the archives of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. This ceiling was removed in 1911 to expose the whole of the roof structure. The north door is of 1911 but the ancient hinges and lock-box were transferred to it from the previous door. All the wooden furnishings in the church (apart from the reed organ) are of oak. The present open pews and the panelling in the chancel are made up of 17th- and 18th-century material from the former box pews. The pulpit and priest's stall, with some carving, are of early 17th century – Jacobean or Carolean – origin; and the communion rails belong to later in the same century.

All the windows are clear-glazed and retain their old ironwork or 'ferramenta'; a little stained glass of *c.*1500 survives in the top of the large north-east window of the nave. Until they were stolen in 1997, the hanging oil lamps were a reminder that electricity has never reached Crawford church. Mounted in the blocked south doorway is a glass case containing some ancient pottery and other 'finds' arising from the work



carried out on the tower in 1910–11. There is also a small late-15th-century brass inscription to John Karrant, said to have been discovered in 1862. A few medieval tiles are reset in the chancel floor, one with the arms of the Clare family, Earls of Gloucester. The floors are generally stone-paved and have a noticeable slope upwards towards the east.

In the chancel are a 12th-century piscina, reset in a later opening, and an aumbry, both uncovered in the 1890s. A later piscina in the south-east corner of the nave indicates the position of a former altar here, no doubt dedicated to St Mary. The simple font is 16th century and its cover partly 17th. Reset by the north door is the head of an apparently Saxon window, on its side: this suggests that there might have been a pre-Norman church at Tarrant Crawford.

On the chancel floor and elsewhere in the church are several 13th- and 14th-century coffin-lids, mostly of Purbeck marble with carved crosses. Two of them are said to have been found in 1857 in a ruinous building supposed to have been on the site of the abbey church or chapel. However, the claim that these relate to the burials of Bishop Poore and Queen Joan is pure conjecture. They are more likely to have belonged to abbesses or nuns from the abbey. Two other coffin-lids were found much more recently, in 1995, when new drainage trenches were being dug round the church under archaeological supervision. Others are built into the fabric of the church: one for instance forms a window sill in the nave.

Of the three bells in the tower two are medieval and one is Elizabethan. The tenor, weighing about 7cwt (355.6kg), is inscribed in capitals 'SANCTE PETRE' and was cast at the Salisbury foundry *c.*1400. The treble, inscribed in black-letter *regina celi letare* ('Rejoice, O Queen of Heaven' – a quotation from the first line of an ancient Latin hymn to St Mary the Virgin), is a 15th-century bell of a local type and was possibly cast in Shaftesbury. The second bell, inscribed 'GOD BE OVR GVYD', was the work of John Wallis of Salisbury in 1589. The present bell-frame and fittings, with the treble hung in the roof above the other two bells, were installed by the builders in 1911. Although the bells are hung for full-circle ringing, the treble having the probably unique feature of a stay upside down and engaging with a slider fixed to the roof, they are scarcely ringable: it is quite evident that the workmen who hung them were not expert bell-hangers.

Below: Paintings on east part of the south wall (Christopher Dalton)

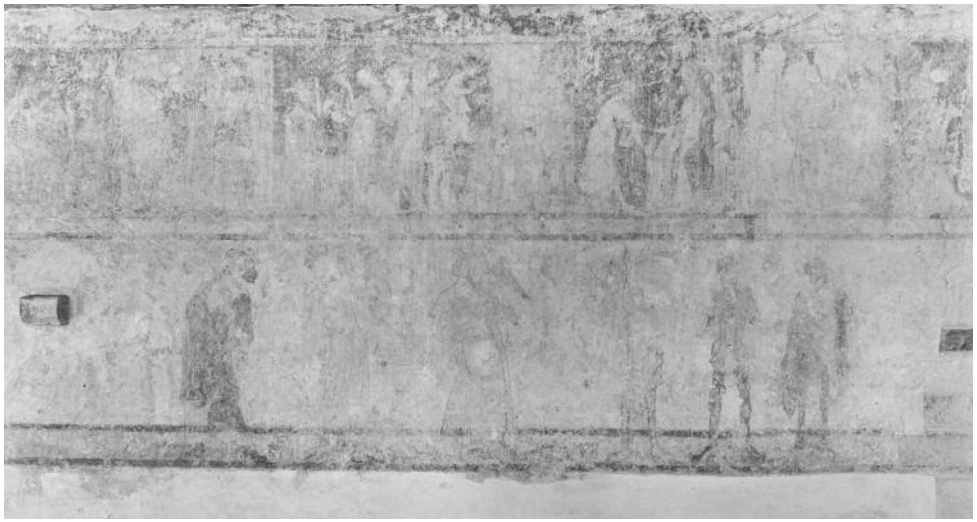
Right: Detail of painting on east part of the south wall (Boris Baggs)

WALL PAINTINGS

Although, sadly, now somewhat faded the wall paintings at Tarrant Crawford are still very impressive. Unusually many have survived and cover most of the wall surfaces of the nave. The earliest scheme of painting, however, is best seen in the chancel: this consists of a simple masonry pattern with five-petalled roses, and dates from the late 13th century.

Above the piscina in the south-east corner of the nave, to the left of the window, is a 14th-century painting of the Annunciation of St Mary. The figures stand under an architectural canopy: St Gabriel on the left with lance and scroll, with a lily-pot between them.

The rest of the south wall of the nave, interrupted only by the doorway (now blocked), is divided into two tiers. On the upper tier is the life of St Margaret of Antioch. She was one of the most popular saints in the later Middle Ages, although there is no evidence that she actually existed. Her life, whether real or fictional, is portrayed in no less than 14 scenes and was considered by Clive Rouse to be the most extensive and complete such portrayal in England. It dates from the first half of the 14th century and it seems possible that its presence here had something to do with the nearby abbey.



Interior looking west (Christopher Dalton)

The scenes, from left to right, have been identified by Clive Rouse and Ann Ballantyne as follows:

1. St Margaret, spinning from a distaff, is being taught by her nurse.

2. She is observed by the Provost Olybrius and his attendant and approached in marriage.

3. St Margaret before the provost.

4. Uncertain: it was thought that this scene showed the saint being cast into prison, but the presence of a number of small figures makes this unlikely.

5. Uncertain: Clive Rouse suggested that a messenger was bringing news of St Margaret's refusal of marriage to the provost; but Ann Ballantyne considers that the figure is pushing her into prison.

6. She is scourged.

7. Again before the provost.

8. Hung up by her hair and tortured.

9. Put into a great vessel of water.

10. Pushed into a fire and burnt with brands.

11. Swallowed by the Devil in the form of a dragon, St Margaret emerges unharmed, making the sign of the cross. The provost is behind; and an angel appears from Heaven (top right).

12. She birches devils.

13. Destroyed, but probably the execution of the saint.

14. Also destroyed, but probably her burial or arrival in Paradise.

On the lower tier are paintings, also from the first half of the 14th century, illustrating the morality of the three living and the three dead: three kings or princes, out hawking, come upon three skeletons who warn them of the emptiness of earthly rank and riches.

To the right of the blocked doorway is a Crucifixion scene, painted over an earlier subject – probably the Visitation – in the late 14th century.

On the north wall of the nave the paintings are much more fragmentary. From left to right:

1. (To the left of the doorway) A 15th-century subject now too fragmentary to identify. Within a frame is a figure, holding a book with an ornamental clasp, standing on black-and-white chequered pavement.

2. (Above the doorway) The remains of a post-Reformation (16th- or 17th-century) text in a circular frame.

3. (To the right of the doorway) St Michael weighing souls.

4. St Christopher carrying the Holy Child.

5. Possibly St Margaret of Antioch and the dragon.

6. (Behind the pulpit) A priest standing behind a draped altar or table.

The paintings were fully uncovered and treated in 1948–49 by E Clive Rouse, at the instigation of Lt Col Edward Seymour (1897–1979) and his wife Barbara Judith Seymour. They lived for many years at Tarrant Abbey and are commemorated by a plaque in the base of the tower. Further conservation work on the paintings was carried out in the late 1990s by Ann Ballantyne and Andrea Kirkham.

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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 it 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.

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Right: Interior looking east in 1969 (Christopher Dalton)