



ST MARY'S CHURCH

LOWER GRAVENHURST
BEDFORDSHIRE



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

Registered Charity No. 258612

PRICE: £1.00



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO
ST MARY'S CHURCH
LOWER GRAVENHURST
BEDFORDSHIRE

Many years ago Christians built and set apart this place for prayer. They made their church beautiful with their skill and craftsmanship. Here they have met for worship, for children to be baptised, for couples to be married and for the dead to be brought for burial. If you have time, enjoy the history, the peace and the holiness here. Please use the prayer card and, if you like it, you are welcome to take a folded copy with you.

Although services are no longer regularly held here, this church remains consecrated; inspiring, teaching and ministering through its beauty and atmosphere. It is one of more than 300 churches throughout England cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust was created in 1969 and was, until 1994, known as the Redundant Churches Fund. Its object is to ensure that all these churches are kept in repair and cared for, in the interests of the Church and Nation, for present and future generations.

Please help us to care for this church. There is a box for donations or, if you prefer to send a gift, it will be gratefully received at the Trust's headquarters at 89 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH (Registered Charity No. 258612).

We hope that you will enjoy your visit and be encouraged to see our other churches. Some are in towns; some in remote country districts. Some are easy and others hard to find but all are worth the effort.

Nearby are the Trust churches of:

BUCKLAND, ST ANDREW

4 miles S of Royston off A10

POTTESGROVE, ST MARY

5 miles NE of Leighton Buzzard off A5

EDWORTH, ST GEORGE

3 miles SE of Biggleswade off A1

Revd Thomas and Mrs Florence Collisson. Thomas was Rector here from 1896–1916, and was responsible for the restoration of both Upper and Lower Gravenhurst churches, to the designs of Sir Arthur Blomfield. His daughter Miss Mercy Collisson for many years helped to preserve the church, promoting concerts after it was declared pastorally redundant in 1972.

St Mary's was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) in 1974. Repairs were carried out under the direction of John Burnett of The Levitt Partnership – Architects of Biggleswade. In 1995 Henry Freeland of Freeland Rees Roberts of Cambridge succeeded Mr Burnett as the Trust's architect.

Front cover: Exterior from the south-west (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

Back cover: Interior looking east (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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In front of the south side of the screen is the simple 17th century **communion table** (with a later top) which served for 300 years as the main altar of the church. A 14th century **piscina recess** nearby shows that there was an altar here in mediaeval times. In the quatrefoil at the top of the north-east window is a fragment of **mediaeval glass**, showing the head of Our Lord, surrounded by a decorated border.

On the north side of the chancel is a fine 17th century **chair**. Also of this period are the **communion rails**, with their picturesque iron hinges.

In the south wall are a 14th century **piscina** and a pair of **sedilia** (seats), beneath cinquefoil-headed arches. From the level of the seats and the piscina drain, it can be seen that the sanctuary floor has been heightened since mediaeval times. In the wall to the east is an embattled **cresset stone** with a defaced human head. In its top are four holes, where wicks floated in oil were lit to provide light.

The **south chancel window** contains glass, by John Hall & Sons of Bristol and London, showing the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, and nearby is a plaque to Lieut Evelyn Collisson, who was killed in 1916.

The **altar** itself incorporates the massive mediaeval mensa (top-slab), which was discarded at the reformation and set in the floor beneath, where it remained until 1935 when it was raised and restored to its rightful use. This was part of a sensitive restoration of the church by Professor Albert E Richardson. The ancient mensa has five small crosses incised into it (one at each corner and one at the centre), symbolising the five wounds received by Our Lord at his crucifixion.

The **earliest memorial**, already referred to, is fixed to the south chancel wall. It is in Old French 'Robert de Bilhemore chivaler qe fist faire ceste eglise de nouvele gist icy dieu de salme eit merci Amen'. Beneath it was once a shield, with helm and mantling, which was still here in 1812 but has since disappeared.

The fine **monument** on the north side of the sanctuary commemorates Benjamin Pigott, who died in 1606, and his three wives, Mary, Anne and Bridget. Above the panelled tomb-chest is a canopied recess (this part was probably remodelled c.1650), containing a long inscription and brasses. Portrayed here in brass are Benjamin and his wives, each accompanied by the children that she bore him – a total of five sons and nine daughters. At the very top are the Pigott arms made up of three picks.

A plaque on the east wall commemorates Benjamin's youngest son, John Pigott, who died in 1662.

Reference has already been made to Lieut Evelyn Collisson, son of the

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by ROY TRICKER

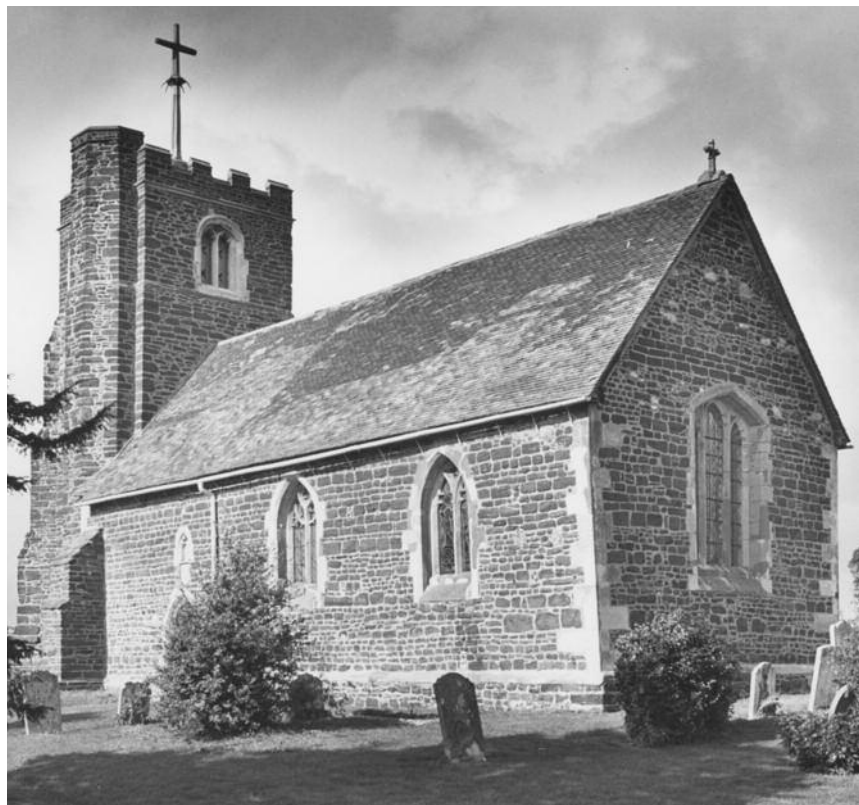
An inscription in the chancel states that the church was built by Robert de Bilhemore, who died in 1361 or just before. It is rare for a mediaeval church to be so precisely dated. There was an earlier church on this site, which takes its name from the nearby 'hill with a grove or brushwood', and some of its materials may have been reused. The work continued after Robert's death. The nave and chancel date from c.1320–60. The east window and west tower were added later – maybe c.1400 – in the Perpendicular style. The materials used are ironstone with limestone dressings. This small and compact wayside church is set in the undulating countryside of South Bedfordshire. It occupies an interesting position, standing prominently upon its ridge when viewed from the south, yet from the north appearing to be low-lying. Upper Gravenhurst is located half a mile to the north-west and St Giles is now the parish church of Gravenhurst. St Mary's former parish has few residents and the little church has a rather lonely setting, with its former rectory across the road to the south-east.

EXTERIOR

The **nave and chancel**, together only 48½ feet long and 19 feet wide (14.8 × 5.8m), have no structural division and share one continuous tiled roof. Their north and south walls have deeply-set double windows, which have cusped Y-tracery of the early 14th century, although the window east of the entrance has particularly beautiful flowing tracery of c.1330–40. By contrast, the three-light east window, with its depressed arch, is Perpendicular, of c.1400.

About four feet (1.2m) from the ground, in the stonework of the south-east corner of the chancel, facing south, has been carved a mass dial. This was used before the days of clocks to calculate the time when a service should begin.

The porch which sheltered the south doorway has long disappeared, but above the entrance is a small cinquefoil-headed niche, which once contained a statue – probably of Our Lady, who is the patron saint of the church. Beneath the niche was a stone shield with Robert de Bilhemore's



Exterior from the south-east

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

arms, which was still in place in the 1830s. The doorway, like its blocked northern counterpart, is 14th century and the sturdy mediaeval door may very well be the original.

The embattled and well-proportioned western tower is typical of several early 15th century towers in Bedfordshire. It is strengthened by western diagonal buttresses and has a south-east staircase vice which rises just above the parapet, behind which the tower has a tiled pyramidal roof. This is crowned by a lead-covered shaft (an embryo 'Hertfordshire Spike'), which terminates in a large cross. There is a three-light Perpendicular west window and of the simple two-light belfry windows, only that on the east side has its original cusping inside the head of the arch.

INTERIOR

The floor of the nave is paved with pammments of considerable age and there are black and white tiles in the chancel floor. Above is a largely 14th century roof. It is lined with whitened plaster and is strengthened by horizontal tie-beams, from which rise king posts with braces.

Beneath the early 15th century tower arch, some 18th century rails give access to what is now the vestry. The small Bevington organ was moved here from the chancel in 1935. There is one bell, cast by Lester & Pack in 1758 but hanging in an interesting frame of much earlier date.

The nave is furnished with a set of 15th century benches, which have flat-topped and buttressed ends. These were restored and the two north-eastern benches added to match them, in 1901 to designs by Sir Arthur Blomfield.

In the wall to the west of the entrance is a 14th century stone corbel, from which a human head peers out. This probably supported a statue, or a light, although it may have later been used to support a western gallery. On the north wall hangs a list of rectors of this parish from the year 1247. St Mary's had originally been a chapel of ease to Newnham Priory in Bedford.

The plain octagonal font, possibly 14th century, has been restored. Its base is original and a section of the stem has been removed in order to form a step for the priest. The font cover has also been greatly renewed, although its central stem and finial appear to be original 17th century work.

Beside the blocked north doorway has been placed a piece of late 19th century traceried woodwork – possibly intended as a reredos. It is in triptych form, with ogee panels, a memorial to the Revd Charles Wade (rector here from 1842–1896) and his wife Maria. In a glass case nearby are remains of two tussocks of peat, which were used as hassocks and are of considerable age.

The pulpit is early 17th century and is equipped with a sounding board, or tester. It was moved to its present position from the south side in 1935. Originally it was part of a two-decker arrangement and matching woodwork from the disused parts has been made into a cupboard, now in the south-west corner of the nave. The 17th century wrought-iron hourglass stand (once containing the hourglass, to time sermons) is now fixed to the screen. This simple but fine 15th century rood screen has three trefoil-headed openings on each side and a wider ogee-headed opening in the middle. The remains of stencilled patterns in red remain on the dado (lower section) The lectern of some 450 years later is also attractively carved.