

# St Mary's Church, Bruton



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*Bruton Abbey Seal dedicated to St Mary*

## **PART 1 - Historical Background**

Bruton is a town in the east of Somerset, situated on the River Brue.

### ***The Saxon Period***

Christianity came to Wessex in Saxon times. It was started with the work of a priest called Aldhelm, who set up missions in the area. He was known as the Apostle of Selwood, and in 688 he founded a church in Bruton, which he dedicated to St Peter and St Paul. He later became the first Bishop of Sherborne.

Bruton was originally part of a royal estate of the Saxon Kings, and the Saxon King of Wessex, King Ine, founded a further church in Bruton, which he dedicated to St Mary. In the 690s Aldhelm went on a pilgrimage to Rome and brought back a marble altar on the back of a camel. He gave the altar to King Ine for the church of St Mary. The chancel altar of today is made of wood, but a small piece of marble remains, inset into the top, and it may well be part of the original marble altar.

In approximately 1005, Aethelmar the Earl of Cornwall founded a religious house in Bruton for Benedictine monks and they used the smaller church of St Mary for their worship.

There is not much historical record until around 1130, when William of Malmesbury, the Chronicler, recorded that the St Peter's Church founded by St Aldhelm had undergone changes at the east end. The

crypt, in which sacred relics were kept, was enlarged and the chancel above it was extended.

### ***The Augustinian Priory***

In about 1127, the remains of the ruined Benedictine house and the side of the church nearest to it passed to the de Mohun family from France, and later, in 1142, William de Mohun II refounded the house as a priory for Black Canons. At this time it was recorded that there was only one church, the Church of St Aldhelm and St Mary. It is uncertain whether the two earlier Saxon churches had been joined together as one, or whether they were destroyed and replaced by a Norman un-aisled church on the same site. The church was divided for use as a convent for the canons, who entered through the south door, and a parochial church for the parishioners, entering through a door on the north side. The parish church became a dependent chapel to the convent, and the priory took it over on the understanding that the canons would look after the pastoral care of the parish church. By the late Middle Ages, there were two more chapels in the parish at Wyke and Redlynch. In 1311, the chapel at Bruton had its own graveyard and was described as a parish church, but in 1374 it was again considered a chapel annexed to the convent, and returned to being regarded as a parish church during the 1400s.

Bruton was dominated for 400 years by the Augustinian Priory, and during the medieval and post-medieval period the town became prosperous, famous for its production of woollen cloth.

## ***Rebuilding***

In the 1300s, rebuilding of the church was undertaken on the north side, the side which belonged to the parish. The north aisle and the north tower and porch were built possibly around 1350 to 1370, and a rood screen and loft was erected across the width of the church, with steps in the north wall to access the rood loft. There is some evidence of major work to the crypt at this time. Many of the parish churches were being rebuilt during this period.

There was further rebuilding in the church in the mid 1400s and early 1500s. Between 1449 and 1456, the great west tower was built and an entrance porch and west door constructed. Its completion was supposedly not later than 1460, although some records state it was as late as 1490.

At the east end of the north aisle a chapel was built, dedicated to St Catherine of Alexandria, patron saint of spinners. A south aisle was built around 1517, and steps were included in the south wall to access the rood loft. The nave was rebuilt after the west tower, and extended eastwards into the chancel. The western portion of the chancel was pulled down to make room for the eastern bay of the nave. The nave was also heightened to allow for the unusually wide clerestory windows, which were built before 1522, when the roofs and parapets were also built. An arch for the chancel was constructed. Later, steps and a door above for a new rood loft were built in the

corner of the east end of the north aisle, near the pulpit.

In 200 years the people of Bruton had gradually transformed the small earlier structure of their ancestors into one of the noblest churches with the most splendid west tower of East Somerset.

The priory had not always been well run, and in 1448 John Henton had been appointed prior, to restore order amongst the canons. He built a guest house in the High Street, known as Priory House, which bears the two coats of arms of the de Mohun family. John Henton's family were wealthy and gave money towards the fabric of the church and the purchase of a church bell in 1459.

The next prior, William Gilbert (1495-1532), spent much effort and money rebuilding the monastery. Over the north entrance to the church, there was a shield with a chevron and three roses between the initials WG. Further evidence of heraldry was the shield of Abbot Richard Bere of Glastonbury, and the shield and mitre of Richard Fitzjames from Redlynch, who was Bishop of London and joint founder of the King's School. These shields were placed on the crenellations of the north clerestory.

In 1510 William Gilbert went to Rome to elevate the status of the priory to an abbey, which he achieved the following year in 1511.

### ***The Berkeleys of Bruton***

Its existence as an abbey was cut short with the dissolution of the monasteries. The abbey was seized by Henry VIII in 1539 and later passed to Sir Maurice Berkeley, who was Standard Bearer to the King. A manor house was built on the field in place of the abbey. It was named Abbey House and became the Berkeley family home for the next 200 years.

Further changes in the church took place after 1539. The existing rood loft across the church was removed, and in 1620, a smaller Jacobean screen, which incorporated medieval panels in the lower section, was constructed to enclose the chancel. It was not the custom at that time to build rood lofts.

During the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, stone altars were changed to communion tables of carved wood. They were covered with several linen cloths and richly embroidered coverings with back and side hangings known as dorsals and riddles.

The Berkeleys used the south door as their entrance to the church, and a private chapel was created in the south-east corner for the family. The coffins of the de Mohuns in the crypt were transferred to a burial mound in the churchyard, leaving the area free for the Berkeleys to be buried in the crypt under the chancel. An entrance with steps down to the crypt was placed in front of the chancel. Members of the family were buried at midnight, with the church lit by lanterns and a sermon given by the vicar.

In 1743 the chancel was rebuilt by Sir Charles Berkeley as a memorial to his father, Rt. Hon. William Berkeley, the 4<sup>th</sup> Baron Berkeley of Stratton. The architect and builder was Nathaniel Ireson of Wincanton. The original altar rails and box pews were kept, and the tomb of Sir Maurice Berkeley, which was originally in the south aisle, was placed in the chancel. The chancel was decorated in a classical style, popular at the time. A plaster reredos covers the east wall, with the letters IHS placed centrally with rays of glory, a cornucopia of corn and grapes below and the side panels showing the instruments of the Passion. The round-headed windows in the chancel follow the Gothic tradition of tracery.



*The Chancel*



### ***New Patrons***

A fire in Abbey House occurred in 1763. The manor was repaired, but in 1773 the last of the Berkeley titles became extinct upon the death of the 5<sup>th</sup> Lord Berkeley of Stratton. In 1777, the manor was sold to Sir Henry Hoare II, a wealthy banker, who passed it on to his grandson, Sir Richard Colt Hoare. The Hoares, who lived at Stourhead, had no need for the Bruton manor and eventually it fell into disrepair and was pulled down in 1786. All that remains today is the precinct wall which extended just beyond the west gate of the churchyard and had fronted the stables for the manor. In 1822 a Georgian rectory was built behind the great wall where the stables had been.

### ***Further Changes***

The Jacobean screen from the chancel could have been moved to the west tower arch at the time when the new chancel was built, and in 1783 it was incorporated into a gallery containing a small organ where singers and local musicians played at festivals.

The steps to the crypt were covered in by slightly raising the aisle floor.

A vestry for the clergy was built on the north side of the chancel in about 1770 or the early 1800s. In 1842 the church seating was redesigned, incorporating the Jacobean pew ends, and Victorian copies of these were later added.

### ***The Victorian Restoration***

The mid Victorian era was a great period of restoration in churches. Between 1866 to 1870 and 1872 to 1877, the church was extensively restored by Slater and Carpenter. The north wall and clerestory were renovated, and major work was carried out on the nave and roofs. The south vestry was extended eastwards to form an organ chamber, and the organ was removed from the west tower gallery. Additional seating was made for the choir in the chancel. The pulpit may have been repositioned and repaired at this time. Ceramic Victorian floor tiles were placed throughout the church. Figures in the clerestory niches in the nave, representing the twelve Apostles, were added, where they had once been.

The Victorians were all for preserving the loftiness of Gothic architecture, and considered restoring the Georgian chancel to its early fourteenth century style, but this idea was dismissed.

### ***The Great West Window***

The stained glass in the great west window was designed by Messrs Clayton & Bell to commemorate the successful completion of the Victorian restoration. The screen was removed from the west tower arch and placed closer to the west door, in order to open up the tower and give the full view of the west window. Side doors were incorporated into the screen, which were designed by a specialist craftsman of the day.

The fan vaulting was added in the west tower (*see photograph below*).



*Ceiling of the West Tower*

## **PART 2 - Things to Note in St Mary's**

**St Mary's Church** is 129 feet long and 55 feet wide. It is unusual in that it has two towers; the small earlier north tower and the western tower, regarded as one of the most elegant towers in Somerset.

The **North Tower** rises from one side of the north aisle, and there is a staircase turret attached. The battlement is a simple design.

The **West Tower** belongs to the East Mendip Group, with a more florid style than the earlier West Mendip Group, and it is a direct derivation of the Shepton Mallet design. The tower is 102.5 feet high and is about twelfth in height among Somerset towers. It is a fine example of a Somerset tower, built of grey local stone, finished in the elaborate style of Gothic architecture, with shallow buttresses and elegant pinnacles. The top stage is triple-windowed, with tall windows divided by a transom and all three are perforated. The parapet is battlemented and perforated, resembling Quantock towers. There are five niches on the front west side, but no statues. There is a large west window to light the nave. The tower contains a clock, which was renewed in 1866.

The **West Door** is of advanced perpendicular design with a pointed arch and a square head, and carved foliage spandrels.

**Six Bells** are contained in the west tower. The fourth bell is the oldest, dated 1528. The heaviest bell weighs 25¾ cwt.

There is a **Sanctus Bell**, the purpose for which was to be rung to maintain silence for the consecration of the bread and wine.

The **Nave** was originally medieval and was rebuilt after the west tower. The triple moulding on the west tower arch on the nave side is unique. The beauty of the arch can be fully appreciated when standing in the nave facing towards the west tower, and it perfectly frames the west window behind it.

The **Roofs** in the church are carved in wood, and the main roof is a good example of a Somerset king-post roof. Tie beams of low pitch hold the short king-posts and are supported by wall posts between the clerestory windows. The roof is detailed and there are the remains of some colour on the eastern-most beam and in the eastern bay of the north aisle.



*Nave Roof*



*Carvings on the Roof*

The **Crypt** extends horizontally from the north wall of the chancel to just short of the south wall, and vertically a few feet from the altar rails to beneath the first bay of the nave.

The **Rood Screen** on the steps to the chancel was designed by Randall Blacking and built in 1938 in memory of Mr R Hughes, who was a local solicitor and the choirmaster. The screen is divided into five bays of arches, supported on columns. Seven angels are between the arches, holding shields representing the Blessed Virgin Mary, Province of Canterbury, Bath & Wells Diocese, The Passion, the de Mohuns, King's School, and the Hughes of Bodrwyn. The rood shows the central figure of Christ on the cross, with the Virgin Mary and St John, the blessed disciple, on either side.





*Rood Screen and Chancel*

In the **North Aisle** above the door leading to the North Tower is the Royal Coat of Arms of Charles II. Some churches, particularly in Somerset, displayed Coats of Arms as recognition of Royal Supremacy. Charles I came to worship in St Mary's in 1625, and in 1644 both Charles I and Charles II stayed in Bruton.



*Royal Coat of Arms of King Charles II*

**St Catherine's Altar** The chapel altar in this aisle has become a memorial to boys of King's School who lost their lives in the two World Wars and more recent conflicts. The reredos behind the altar was installed in 1920 to commemorate King's School pupils who died in the First World War. The figures on the reredos are St George, Bishop Aldhelm, Abbot Fitzjames (joint founder of King's School) and King Edward VI (re-founder of the school in 1547).



The **Aumbry** is the small recess in the wall by the altar, with a white light which indicates the presence of the Blessed Sacrament put aside for communion to the sick.

### **Monuments in the Chancel**

In the north side of the chancel is the stone tomb of Sir Maurice Berkeley (died 1581), a Renaissance monument with recumbent effigies of himself, with his head and feet resting on lions, and his first and second wives, dressed in Elizabethan clothes.

On the north chancel wall there is a memorial tablet of marble by Peter Scheemakers, a Flemish sculptor. It is in memory of Captain William Berkeley, who died aboard his warship HMS Tiger in 1733 aged 33. The monument was erected by his brother, John Lord Berkeley of Stratton in 1749. The mural monument of white and grey marble next to it, with a pediment and inscriptions in Latin and Greek, commemorates their father, the Hon William Berkeley, 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Berkeley of Stratton, who died in 1741.

On the south wall of the chancel is one of the most notable memorial tablets, a gilt bronze bust and arms in a black touchstone tabernacle frame and with a Latin inscription dedicated to young William Godolphin (died 1636). The memorial is attributed to Herbert Le Sueur, a notable French sculptor. There is another mural monument on the south wall, which is in memory of John Donne, Esq, who died in 1782, aged 72, and is buried in Batcombe church.

The **Heraldic Glass** in the chancel is from the 1500s to 1700s and consists of the Berkeley arms and the arms of their family connections.

Two **Chained Books**, the Paraphrase of Erasmus and Jewel's Apology, were customarily left in the chancel but these are now kept in the church office.

**Choir Stall Lights** The sconces for the lights came from King's College Chapel, Cambridge and were purchased for St Mary's in 1970.

**Organ** Some of the organ's pipework dates from 1760. When the organ was moved from the west tower, it was placed into the organ chamber, but was later built further out into the choir stalls and, at the same time, it was enlarged by Percy Daniel of Clevedon and an arch was constructed over the organ. The pipe organ is currently not used, as a digital organ was recently purchased.

The **Clerestory Windows** These windows are fine examples and the second largest in Somerset, after those of St Cuthbert's, Wells. There are fragments of medieval glass from the 1400s in the two eastern clerestory windows on the north side. The most eastern window of the south clerestory is a memorial to the Michells of Wyke Champflower, including their son, Rev Richard Michell, who was a pupil at King's School and was the first principal of the new foundation of Hertford College, Oxford.

In the **South Aisle**, there is a piscina in the south wall, which indicates the earlier presence of an altar, where the Berkeley chapel had been. The Berkeley

arms were located in a central boss above the south door, and wall plates painted with Sir Maurice Berkeley's initials also existed here.

### **Memorial Stained Glass Windows**

The great west window by Messrs Clayton & Bell is a memorial to Thomas Oatley Bennett (died 1877) and his wife, Mary Besant (died 1878). There is a brass plaque on the wall in the west tower which gives a description of the figures depicted in the window.

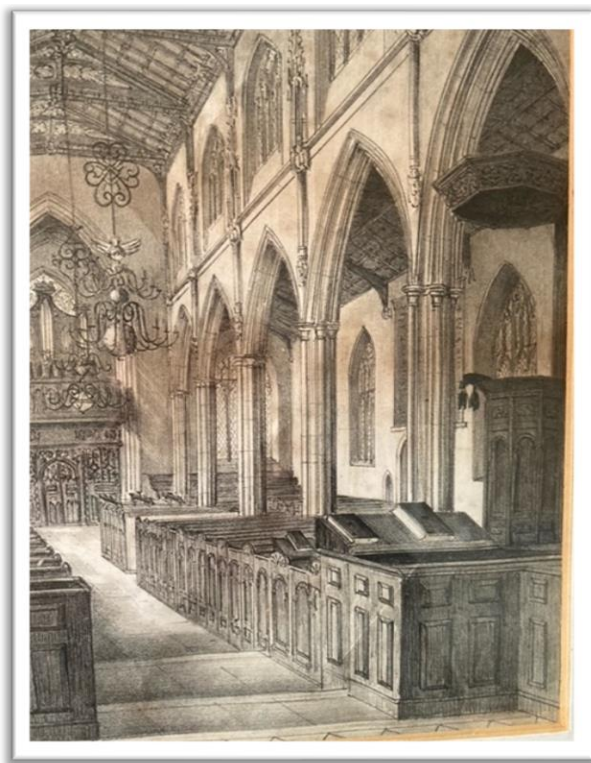
The window in the north aisle at the western end is of the Good Shepherd and was given by the parishioners in memory of Rev Henry Thomas Ridley, who was vicar of St Mary's Church from 1868 until his death in 1898, aged 71.

The window at the west end of the south aisle is a memorial to two brothers from Wyke Champflower, John and William Ames, former parishioners who moved to America in the mid 1600s. The window was given in 1888 by Frederick Ames, a descendent from America.

In the south aisle there are two memorial windows to the Dyne family, namely Edward Dyne (died 1850), Fanny his wife (died 1854), and Henry Dyne (died 1890). One window is a much earlier style than the other. To the west of the south door, there is the family window of the Longmans, dating from the early 1900s. To the right of it is a memorial window to James Hopkins Pearce (died 1905), organist of St Mary's, and to his wife, Lydia (died 1891).

At the east end of the north aisle there is the King's School memorial window. It was designed by W F Dixon, who had trained with Messrs Clayton & Bell.

The **Pulpit** is Jacobean. It originally had a sounding board above and a wooden pedestal. The print below shows the pulpit as it used to be. The pulpit was probably repaired and moved to its existing site during the Victorian restoration. The print also shows the chandeliers that existed at that time, and the gallery and screen at the west tower arch.



*Print showing original pulpit*

The **Lectern** is a wooden eagle made from oak.

The **St Mary Banner** at the front of the church was created by Sarah Bailey, wife of Rev Justin Bailey, a former rector.

A large **Tomb** at the southwest end of the nave dates from the mid 1400s. It was situated in the northwest end of the church and then removed to the churchyard, but reinstated in the church to its present position in 1909.

There is some uncertainty about whose tomb it is, whether that of Richard Bruton, Chancellor of Wells, or that of Sir John Luttrell whose family had succeeded the de Mohuns at Dunster. But most historians now believe it to be the tomb of Abbot William Gilbert.

At the west end of the nave there is a large oak **Church Chest** with a divided lid. It dates from the 1200s and was probably used for storage of valuable church items and documents.

The **Font** is Victorian and was built in 1847. Two sections of an earlier rectangular Norman font remain in the church, dating from around the late 1100s and made of Purbeck stone.

On the north side of the west tower arch there is a photograph of **Bruton Church in Williamsburg, USA**. Sir William Berkeley went out to be Governor of Virginia in 1639 and, with another Bruton resident, Thomas Ludwell, helped to establish one of the earlier Episcopal churches in the area.

The **Parish Registers** date from 1554 and are complete.

The **Communion Plate** is from the 1700s and is no longer kept in the church. Amongst the silverware, are items produced by Gabriel Felling around 1706, who was the Royal Goldsmith and a resident of Bruton.

The wooden sculpture **Crucifix II by Ernst Blensdorf** was purchased for St Mary's Church by some Bruton residents. Blensdorf was born in North Germany and came to Scotland as a refugee in the Second World War. He moved to Somerset and taught sculpture and ceramics in various local schools. The Crucifix II sculpture was made out of a sycamore tree from his garden at his home near Bruton.

**Kneelers** These are a recent addition to the church and are the work of two ladies in Bruton who, through their handiwork, have created a record of the clergy and Bruton people, past and present.

**Altar Frontals and Clergy Vestments** have recently been replaced, through the work of a team of local volunteers, and these rich and colourful textiles reflect the cycles of the Christian year. An altar frontal of crimson velvet cloth with bullion fringe, and a crimson cloth to cover the table, were brought in 1831 for £17 4s 6d and would cost a lot more at today's prices, especially without the assistance of willing volunteers.



*We hope you have enjoyed your tour of St Mary's. If you would like to make a donation towards the upkeep of our historic church, this would be greatly appreciated and would enable the church to continue to be an asset to the community and to provide the spiritual needs of future generations in Bruton.*



*Compiled by Jane Bennett*

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