



## The Church of Saint Mary The Virgin Cheriton Bishop

**Welcome** to our beautiful and historic parish church of St. Mary, a place of Christian worship for virtually a thousand years.

The 1200s and late 1400s saw a great burst of church-building in England. The 1800s saw a surge of restoration and re-furnishing; St Mary's reflects them all.

People lived here in "Ceritona" long before the Norman conquest in 1066, and perhaps built a wooden church on this site. In Norman times some craftsmen carved our sturdy **font** in the fashion of a corn-sheaf. Over 900 years, countless numbers of Cheriton people have been received into membership of Christ's Church at this font.

Looking forward from the font you can see the massive **sloping wall** of the 1200s building when the earlier church was extended using local Posbury stone. A document of the time records that "Elyanora, domina of Melehiwish, granted an acre of land hi her manor of Melehiwish, together with the right to appoint rectors of Cheriton, to Bishop Branescombe and his successors". Walter Branescombe became Bishop of Exeter in 1257. Hence the name of Cheriton Bishop.

When the passion for greater and grander churches swept through the country in the 1400s, Cheriton people chose granite. The magnificent tower and the exterior of the building have remained almost the same ever since. What effort was needed to transport so much granite, including the massive **single-stone pillars**, across a countryside without roads and to raise it into place with craftsmen and villagers risking life and limb on rickety wooden scaffolding!

The Tower houses six bells, four of which were made by John Pennington and Company in 1770, another by the same firm in 1803 and the sixth bell was made by W. Blews and Sons in 1873. The treble bell has the inscription "I call on ye to follow me. God preserve the Church".

### **Details of our legacy in the interior:**

On the back wall hangs a massive **coat of arms of George II** dated 1735. Neither the painter (whose bill was £6.10s) nor the churchwardens or rector noted the mistake in the French inscription (DORIT for DROIT).

Can you spot the mistake in the **Commandment Boards** on the North Wall ? (in Commandment 5). The Commandments, painted on metal and dating from the 1800s would originally have flanked the Communion Table.

The rough (and uncomfortable!) pews along this wall have suffered from perhaps 500 years of boys' penknives.

Not only did the villagers of the 1400s provide themselves with a magnificent building; the interior would have been a delight to their eyes - stained glass in the windows, the walls probably covered with garish paintings of angels and saints, lively carvings in the roof- opposite Commandments 5-10 look up to see the three rabbits sharing three ears between them - and shrines and candles everywhere.

The whole church would have been dominated by the beautiful **screen** part of which remains to this day, restored to its original colours. Eight saints are depicted, from left to right, the first four being St. Blaise with a wool-carding comb, St. Denys, carrying his head in his hands, possibly St. Bernard and possibly St. Eligius. The figures on the doors possibly represent Old Testament prophets; they do not qualify for haloes. The second four are St. Francis of Assisi, St. Erasmus, with his entrails wrapped around a windlass, possibly St. Leodegar or St. Boniface (who was born in Crediton) and St. Edward the Confessor.

Originally the **screen** would have stretched right across the church and would have been surmounted by a Rood - carvings of Christ on the cross flanked by Mary and John. The rood played an important part in medieval devotion; the "great candle" would have been constantly maintained in front of it; part of the **stairway** up to it can be seen beside the pulpit.

The side chapel displays a **stained glass window** (1966) depicting Christ in glory, designed by the well known Sir Ninian Comper. The chapel has been recently beautified by a new **curtain and pelmet**, the work of local needlewomen.

After the Reformation of the 1500s, statues, candles, pictures and even colour were regarded with suspicion. For 200 years or more, St. Mary's, like most other churches, would probably have been filled with box-pews into which the preacher could look down from a tall pulpit. The congregation would have been subjected to long sermons and services without ceremony, read monotonously by parson and clerk, enlivened only by music from the village band in a gallery beneath the tower. Above the commandment boards are traces of some of the **Scriptural texts** which would have supplanted the wall paintings.

But in the 1800s a craze for all things medieval led to most churches being re-furnished with **choir-stalls**, pews **and a draped altar**. The interior of St. Mary's was altered then and has remained much the same ever since.

**The stained glass** of the **two East windows** dates from around 1860; the **choir-stalls** are dated 1869 and **the metal-work of grapes and vine-leaves** there and at the **altar** and **lectern** were the work of Arthur Davy, one in a long line of village blacksmiths, whose descendents still worship at St. Mary's today.

To the left of the altar two very different **memorials** commemorate two very different priests from two very different ages, though only 36 years separate the death of one to the birth of the other.

Mr. Fothergill, unlike many of our rectors in those centuries, actually lived in the parish and performed his duties for most of his 45 years, but this was the age when the Church of England was for the most part stale and lifeless. The Rev Richard Polwhele, visiting just before Mr. Fothergill's death, reported "The inside of the church is not strikingly handsome; the altar-table is mean".

Richard Pennell however belonged to a local family who were fired with enthusiasm for church-life. His brother Edward founded a mission-church at Crockernwell and paid for the restoration of the South wall of the nave and for the construction of the church porch. Richard, noted already for his intense devotion, at the age of 40 went out to Zanzibar, served four years, was about to return for his first leave when a hurricane destroyed his mission station; he caught a chill and died. His brass shows the Bishop attending his death-bed and his body being ferried away for burial.

At our **altar**, bread and wine are hallowed most Sundays, following Jesus' instruction at the Last Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me".

**The altar curtains** are enlivened by the **colourful stoles** which village people, churchgoers and others, combined to create in 1995.

It seems that the villagers hid some treasures rather than see them destroyed at the Reformation: in the small glass case is a damaged **alabaster carving** (of Christ carrying the cross between possible Roman soldiers). This was unearthed in the churchyard.

Back in the nave, the **pulpit** presents us with a problem: bare-breasted mermaids and harpies and other mythological creatures do not fit well with the Christian message proclaimed from the pulpit! Who carved them and when and why? And who decided they were fitting to be made up into the present structure?

Further along the South wall hangs a rather sad **remnant** of the gaily coloured **screen** which once stretched across the nave.

Beside the door a more lively relic: the parish constable's handcuffs and staffs, used until about 1856.

Over the door hangs yet another of Cheriton Bishop's treasures: a rare example of the **coat of arms of Elizabeth I**. The fleurs de lis show that she still claimed to be queen of France. "Save and preserve ovr nobell queene" reads the inscription.

In the **ringing chamber (photograph on display)**, hangs a massive board listing charitable bequests made in trust to the Churchwardens and Overseers. Two of these trusts were subsequently transferred to the Parish Council when it came into being and were for gifts to be distributed to the poor of the parish.

Much of the church's elegant silver, some dating back to 1576, is lodged in the Royal Albert Museum in Exeter, where it is sometimes on display.

Memorial floor tablets, their carving ranging from rustic to the finest, lie under the church's carpeting. A folder cataloguing and illustrating them is to be found in the bookcase.

The parish's registers from 1538 (Henry VIII's reign) are held in the Exeter Record Office and are readily available. Real people (and often their personal tragedies) underlie all the names recorded under baptisms, banns, marriages and burials and in the churchwardens' accounts of bastard children apprenticed and of doles to homeless, sick and dying paupers. Their remains lie around us now in the **churchyard**: countless generations of village folk who have come through the church's massive ancient **door** - picture the changes of clothing as the centuries passed - to find quiet and beauty, to offer their devotion to the God they found here and to receive from Him strength and support in their daily lives.

We trust that your visit to St. Mary's has helped you to find the same, and we wish you safety and blessing as you journey on.