

CHURCH OF  
ST MARY  
MAGDALENE

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TORTINGTON, SUSSEX



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

LONDON

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THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO THE  
CHURCH OF ST MARY MAGDALENE  
TORTINGTON, SUSSEX

*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 325 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 until 30 September 2002. We will be moving to new offices in the autumn of 2002, so please look out for announcements in our churches or visit our website [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk) for details of our new address.*

*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.*

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## CHURCH OF ST MARY MAGDALENE

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### TORTINGTON, SUSSEX

by JOYCE MELHUISE

### HISTORY

There is no mention of this church in the Domesday survey of 1086 so it is presumed from its architectural style that it was built c.1140, to serve the small lay community of tenants of Tortington Priory. The priory of Augustinian (or Black) canons lay about half a mile (0.8 km) away. Nothing now remains of it except for a length of the priory church wall, built into a barn. The priory was founded in the middle of the 12th century by Alice de Corbet, possibly the mistress of Henry I. Originally a dependency of the Abbey of Sées in Normandy, it survived the dissolution of 'alien priories' under Henry V, only to be closed down by Henry VIII in 1536, along with all the smaller religious houses with an income of less than £200 a year.

There has been little change in the outward appearance of the church since it was first built. The most important alteration was in the 13th century when the south wall was taken down to allow a narrow side aisle to be built. At a later date this fell into disrepair and was abandoned and the south wall was taken back to its original line. A restoration by G C Coote c.1860 replaced the mediaeval aisle and provided a small vestry on the north side. The church was extensively repaired by Philip Johnston in 1904. Mrs Penelope Adamson supervised further repairs after the church came into the care of the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) in 1980. In 1983 the interior was lime-washed under her supervision by local volunteers.

Because of the general decline of rural populations in the 20th century as a result of the mechanisation of agriculture, together with the existence of another parish church only a mile (1.6 km) away at Ford, regular services declined at Tortington, leading to the church being declared pastorally redundant in 1978.

## EXTERIOR

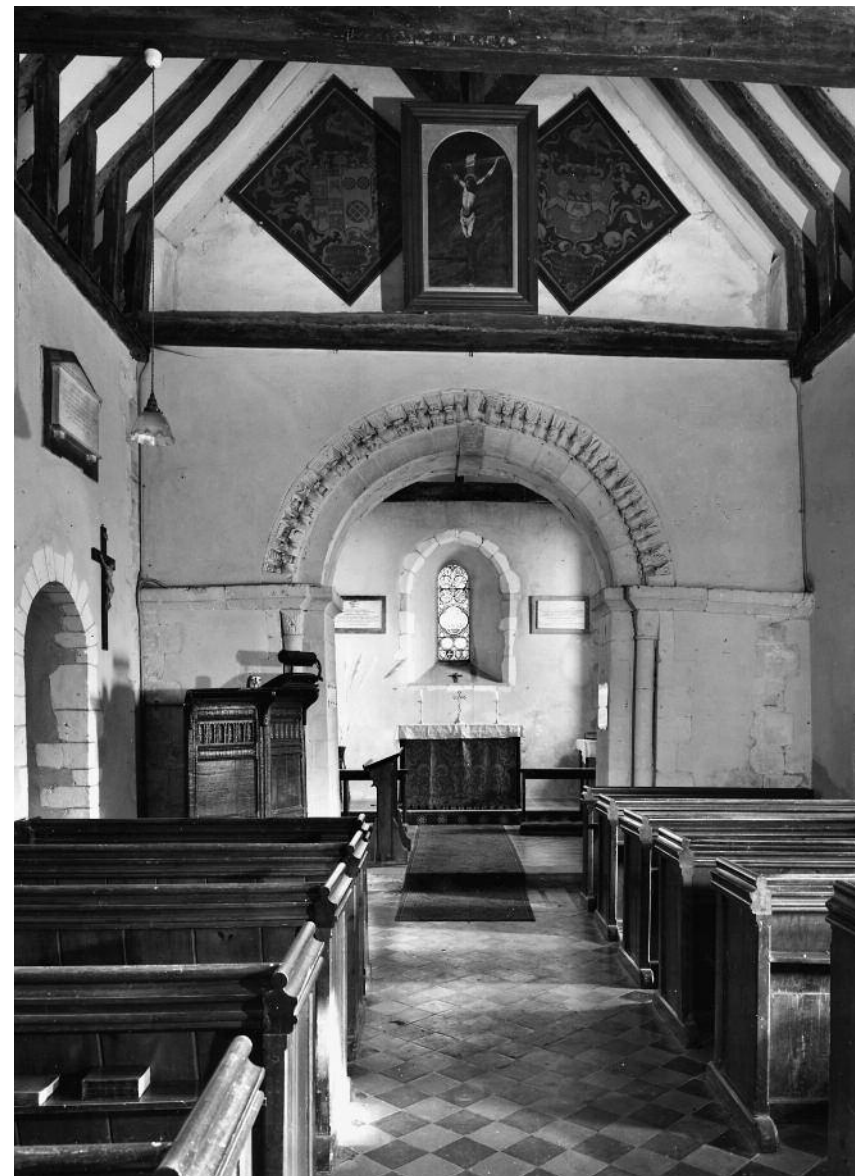
This small church, consisting of nave, chancel, south aisle and north vestry, is built of typical Sussex **materials**. The walls, since stone was expensive and not available close by, are faced in grey and white flint – here and there patched with red brick. The only stone used externally is Caen stone from Normandy and this has been reserved for the angles of the building, the window surrounds and the arch of the south door. The walls are 2 ft 9 in (0.8 m) thick, the core being of flint and chalk rubble.

The roofs are of red clay tiles typical of this area, probably dating from the Victorian restoration, and they have pretty fleur-de-lys patterned cresting. The nave roof extends to cover the south aisle in a Sussex ‘cat-slide’.

At the west end is a small white-painted weatherboarded **bell-cote**, dating from 1904 but similar in design to its predecessor, which had become dilapidated. Inside hang two **bells**, one mediaeval with the inscription S. THOMAS TREHERNE, the other by Mears and Stainbank 1873. The splendidly carved **south doorway** under its small cross gable has the distinctive semicircular Norman arch of the mid-11th to late-12th century. Due to the various alterations that the nave has undergone this doorway must have been taken down and reassembled three times since it was originally built but its four orders have survived this treatment in surprisingly good condition and the stones have been correctly reset. The wooden **door** has good 19th-century iron scroll-type hinges.

The **windows** are small, plain and round-headed. Those on the south side may be of Norman material which has been reused. The east and north windows were refaced and widened in the 19th-century restoration. There is a blocked window opening on to the south side of the chancel, usually called a ‘low side window’. Its purpose is not known for certain but it may have been to permit people excluded from the church to see the altar, or so that a small bell could be rung through it at the climax of the Mass, for the benefit of anybody with earshot outside the church.

The small Victorian **vestry** on the north side has neo-Norman windows and a doorway with a flat-topped arch (known as a Caernarvon arch) which was used in the 13th century. On the north-west corner of the nave is a piece of Norman carving with cone-type ornamentation, incorporated during one of the restorations.



*The interior, looking eastwards*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

## INTERIOR

The principal feature of the interior is the great Norman **chancel arch** of pale-coloured Caen stone, of the same period as the south doorway but by a less inhibited craftsman. The design of its axe-cut decoration is unique in Sussex – two bands of masonry, the inner of plain squared blocks, the outer of grotesque, rather sinister, round-eyed faces, sprouting leaves or feathers, and alternating with strange long-beaked birds' heads. These motifs are thought to be Scandinavian in origin. Traces of black paint in the eye-holes of the masks suggest that the whole composition was originally



*Part of the great Norman chancel arch*  
(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

picked out in colour. A keystone inserted into the arch bears the date 1750 and the name and arms of WF Leeves who bought the priory estate in 1706.

The **font** at the west end of the church is Norman, of the same date as the chancel arch and of similar stone. It has a very unusual cup shape, the rim decorated with cable moulding. The sides have miniature Norman arches and attached columns. Between each pair of columns there is a formal ornament like a bunch of honeysuckle flowers or a shell (cf. The Tournai marble tomb slab of Gundreda, Countess of Warenne, daughter of William the Conqueror, in Southover church near Lewes). This pattern is reversed under alternate arches. The circular base is 19th century. There is a similar font at Bishop's Teignton in Devon but there are no others in Sussex.



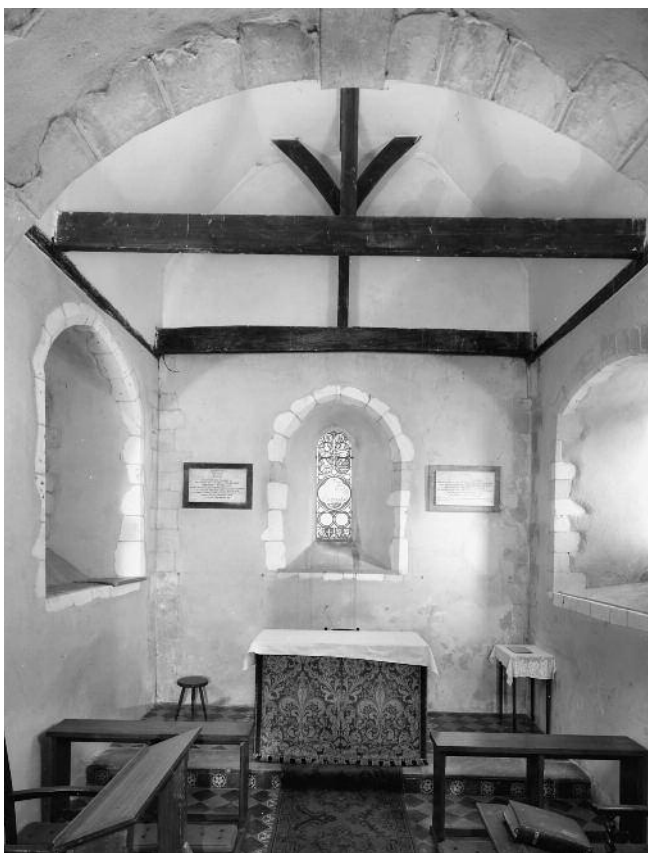
*The Norman font*  
(ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND)

Mr Philip Johnston, writing of the church in 1904, considered that the almost black **roof timbers** were probably contemporary with the walls. The nave has a crown-post roof of two bays with an extra half bay at the west end under the bell-cote. The chancel roof is also of crown-post construction but appears to be of a later date.

The unusually short – 5 ft (1.5 m) – central pillar of the **south arcade** is of Caen stone, with sandstone of contrasting colour for its base and capital, and for the respond corbels which support the east and west ends of the two arches. The column may be a Victorian restoration but the rest is original.

### Stained glass

It has been claimed that the east window contains some ancient stained glass but, in their present form, the symbols of the Lamb of God, the Holy Trinity and the Four Evangelists appear to be rather crudely bright 19th-century work, perhaps by Thomas Willement. The other windows of importance are the late-19th-century pair in the north wall by Charles Kempe, whose trademark, a wheatsheaf, is in the lower left-hand border of the westernmost light. The subjects are St Richard, Bishop of Chichester 1244–53, and St Mary Magdalene.

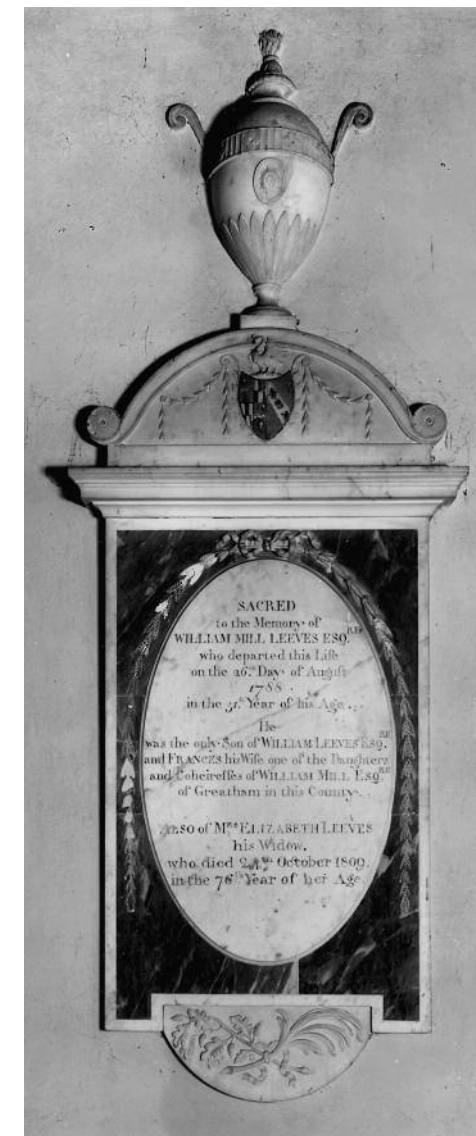


*The tiny chancel (RCHME)*

### Memorials

The small brass plate beneath the Kempe windows recalls that **George Cosens Coote** (d.1892), churchwarden for 50 years, was responsible for rebuilding the south aisle and installing the windows. On the north side of the chancel arch a brass plate commemorates **Roger Gratwyk**, lord of the manor and patron of the living, who died in July 1596. He built Tortington Place which was constructed largely with materials from the dissolved priory.

On the north wall of the nave is a graceful 19th-century memorial to the **Leeves** family. It has a black marble surround with a white marble inscription panel, decorated with the impaled arms of husband and wife, ribbons and thin trails of leaves outlining its sides. In a further play on the family name, crossed sprays of oak and palm lie at the foot of the panel. In the north spandrel of the nave arcade a tablet commemorates **Edward Harvey de la Feld**, Count of the Holy Roman Empire, who died in 1837 'cut off in the prime of life and in the flower of his age'.



*The Leeves memorial on the north nave wall (RCHME)*





*The 17th-century pulpit (RCHME)*

### **Furnishings**

The 15th-century oak **pew** in the south aisle has ends with carved panels of tracery, the upper part with trefoil arches, the lower with quatrefoil.

The oak **pulpit** is a good example of local joinery of the 17th century reduced in size in the 19th century, with panelled sides and decorated carving on top. It is unusual in having feet instead of a pedestal but this may be a later alteration.

Over the chancel arch are two **hatchments** to William Leeves d.1781 and Richard Leeves d.1787. On the south wall by the font is a list of vicars since 1389.

The **flooring** in the nave has plain Victorian red and black tiles, some around the font with elaboration. There are patterned tiles of similar date in the chancel.

*Front cover: The exterior from the south-east (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).*

*Back cover: The Norman south doorway (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).*

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