



ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

LANGPORT, SOMERSET



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

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PRICE: £1.50



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO
ALL SAINTS' CHURCH
LANGPORT, SOMERSET

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.

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ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

LANGPORT, SOMERSET

by MARK McDERMOTT

INTRODUCTION

In the 10th century Langport was a fortified 'burh' commanding an ancient crossing point on the river Parrett, the earthwork defences encircling the hill on which All Saints' church now stands. The place-name, meaning 'long market town', suggests that settlement also extended along what is now Bow Street towards the river, although a planned layout may have been imposed upon this part of the town in the mediaeval period. In 1645, during the Civil War, part of the town was burned by retreating royalist troops after the battle of Langport, fought outside the town to the east

The low-lying 'moors' of the Parrett valley provided common pasture when winter flood waters receded and there was some arable on drier ground, but the economy of Langport remained primarily commercial. In 1086 (*Domesday Book*), when Langport was part of the royal manor of Somerton, there were 39 burgesses in the town; there was formerly a market place immediately to the north-west of the church and another below the hill in Cheapside; and river-borne commerce, although affected by the arrival of the railway in 1853, survived into the 20th century. The Stuckeys (of Stuckey's Bank) and Bagehots dominated business life in the 18th and 19th centuries. The glass of the west window in All Saints' commemorates Walter Bagehot, the economist and constitutional expert (d.1877), whose grave is in the churchyard, and there are Stuckey memorial windows and wall monuments in various parts of the church. Hill House, opposite the church, was a Stuckey property but was given to a Roman Catholic order of nuns in 1902 and is now the St Gildas Christian Centre.

From the churchyard an extensive view over the moors includes the 'great island' of Muchelney with its prominent church tower, and on the south-east horizon is Ham Hill, source of the golden Hamstone used for much of the moulded stonework in All Saints' church. Most of the dressings

on the tower, however, are in Doulling stone and the walls of the entire building, with the exception of part of the west face of the tower, are built of local lias.

THE MEDIAEVAL CHAPELRY

The earliest identifiable feature of the church is a late 12th century Romanesque stone carving, reset over the south door, showing the Lamb bearing a cross within a circle or aureole flanked by angels and two other figures, which may have come from an earlier church on this site. The building is first referred to in 1202, but from at least 1381, and perhaps from its foundation, it was merely a chapelry of Huish Episcopi.

The church (or, more strictly, chapel) was therefore dependent for its services upon the vicar of Huish (who was appointed by the rector, the archdeacon of Wells), or the chaplains or curates who served in Langport from at least the 15th century. Anti-clerical Lollards also preached in the chapel: the interdict imposed as a punishment for this was lifted in 1412, but Lollardy persisted and in 1447 the bishop complained that some of the inhabitants had prevented the curate from taking services and were burying their own dead. In 1415 the churchyard was reconsecrated after being defiled by bloodshed.

There were several chantries in the church. The chantry of the High Cross is mentioned in 1349 and another, dedicated to St Catherine, in 1463. In 1499 Sir John Heron (d.1501) willed that a chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary be set up, with detailed instructions for the conduct of masses and other services for his own and his relatives' souls, but it was only established after his son's death in 1507. The Heron chantry priest was provided with a house in Langport, and John Benet, who held the post in 1548 (when chantries were suppressed), was a former monk of the dissolved abbey of Glastonbury. There were also two 'fraternity' priests (presumably to conduct masses for deceased members of a religious guild) who were paid by the corporation of Langport; and there was a chantry in the 'Hanging Chapel' above the gateway on the eastern approach to the town.

Heron's request to be buried in the 'new Ile of Langport' and his son's request in 1507 to be buried in 'my own chapel' may both refer to the south chapel, for a writer in 1791 stated that the south chapel was reputed to have been built by the Heron family and he noted heraldic arms, including

herons, in its windows, and also a defaced Heron tomb. A tomb was removed from the south aisle (a term which may have included the chapel) shortly before 1823 and the polished stone slab now forms a table top in the vestry.

LATE MEDIAEVAL REBUILDING

The church consists of a west tower, nave with side aisles, south porch, north transept, south chapel, chancel and eastern vestry or sacristy. The building was largely reconstructed in the 15th and early 16th centuries but part of a 13th century window may survive at the west end of the north aisle. This window was unblocked in the 19th century and apparently showed signs of having formerly been fitted with sliding shutters, but it was not restored to its original form. The north wall of the aisle clearly predates the west wall of the transept which butts against it and the window openings are thought to be 14th century (with inserted 15th century Perpendicular tracery). Elsewhere all the datable mediaeval features, including window tracery and the mouldings on the panelled tower arch and the nave arcades, are Perpendicular in style, although not all of one build. The window tracery in the south aisle is more elaborate ('subreticulated') than that in the north aisle.

The south chapel (the Heron chantry) was not built until c.1500. The tracery of its four-light windows is more elaborate than the window tracery in the aisles, and the arcade differs from the nave arcades in having four-centred arches and more ornate capitals. The chapel shares a distinct moulded external plinth with the chancel, vestry and north transept, and similar tracery to that in the chapel occurs in the north window of the transept and in the north and south windows in the chancel, although these chancel windows also have a transom with quatrefoils in the spandrels below (a late Gothic feature). The east window has five lights but no transom, and the tracery is not subarcuated (divided into subsidiary arches), but in other respects the tracery is similar. A dripstone, which was visible before the chancel arch was restored in the 19th century, apparently indicated that the chancel had been rebuilt with a higher roof than its predecessor, presumably to accommodate these late mediaeval windows, which Pevsner has described as 'uncommonly tall and sumptuous'. A writer in 1633 stated that Heron himself had evidently rebuilt most of the church,

for his arms could be seen on many of the piers, but if this description is accurate the arms (whether carved or painted) have subsequently been removed.

The north transept, now the organ chamber, was probably a chapel in the mediaeval period. A squint indicates that there was also a chapel at the east end of the north aisle (which may also explain the carved head, now restored, on the eastern pier), and a piscina and two statue niches are evidence of another chapel towards the east end of the south aisle. A vertical joint in the pier to which the piscina is attached hints at structural alterations in this part of the building.

The late mediaeval tower is plainer than that of Huish Episcopi church and lacks the contrast between Hamstone dressings and lias walls, but it is nevertheless an impressive structure, similar in design to that at Long Sutton which may date from c.1490. It has three stages, angle buttresses on the corners, an internal fan vault, and a five-light west window with late Perpendicular tracery. The openings of the windows of the upper stages are filled with 'Somerset tracery' and these windows are flanked by empty niches or (in the case of the belfry) by 'blind' windows. Grotesque carvings project from below the corner pinnacles; and carved portcullises on the battlements may indicate a connection with Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509). She was lady of the manor (which the Beauforts had acquired in 1397) and used the portcullis as an emblem, as did her son and grandson, Henry VII and Henry VIII, and also the borough itself at one time.

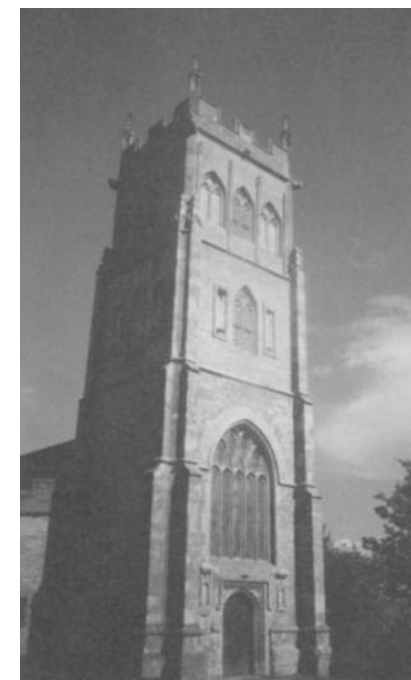
Other surviving late mediaeval features in the church include the blocked priest's doorway on the south side of the chancel, the similar doorway from the chancel into the vestry, the stairway in the north aisle to the former rood-loft, and the panelled wooden ceilings, with their moulded intersecting beams and ornately carved bosses and other decorations, in the chancel, north transept and south chapel. The woodwork of the south door combines Perpendicular panelling with carved foliage. The late mediaeval octagonal font, which presumably ousted the 'vawnte [font] stone' which the churchwardens sold in 1589 after it had been 'lying waste' in the churchyard, has been moved several times during its history, the last occasion being in 1920 when seats were removed to create a baptistry in the north aisle.

POST-MEDIAEVAL HISTORY

Langport's status as a chapelry of Huish Episcopi continued in the post-mediaeval period, but at various times during the 16th to 18th centuries the borough authorities tried to improve the quality of church services by employing organ players and singers or by paying preachers to give lectures or sermons; and in 1670 the corporation decided to encourage church attendance by going to the church in procession every Sunday. The pulpit dates from the late 17th or early 18th century and until 1826 stood on the south side of the nave, grouped with the reading desk and clerk's desk in typical Georgian fashion. In the early 19th century a choir performed in a gallery and the accompaniment included a violoncello, although there was also an organ which was replaced in 1828.

During the 19th century the church underwent considerable restoration. In 1822 the vestry (which was 'in ruins' in 1785) was repaired, and in 1825 it was decided to reseal the nave, to build a new gallery across the width of the church at the west end, and to erect an upper gallery for the singers and the charity schools. These changes, carried out in 1826, provided free sittings in the western half of the nave, but the seats to the east of these were privately occupied. The corporation continued to sit at the front of the nave (a tradition presumably represented by later pews, surviving today, which have a portcullis carved on the ends). Older private box pews still occupied the side aisles, and the master and pupils of the grammar school continued to sit along the south side of the south chapel.

In 1833 it was decided to rebuild the top of the tower 'as it is at present' down to the arches of the



Tower from the north-west
(NIMBUS CONSERVATION LTD)



Illustration of the church from the north-east by J Buckler, 1830. Courtesy of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

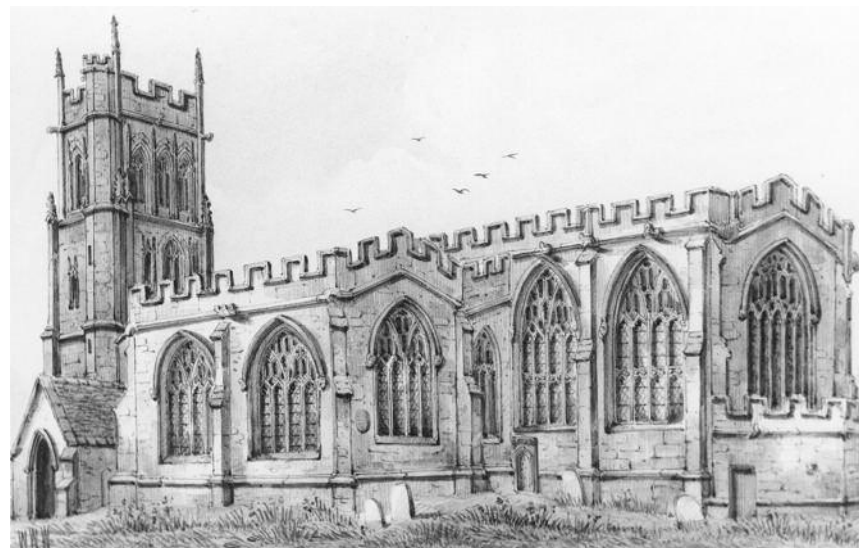
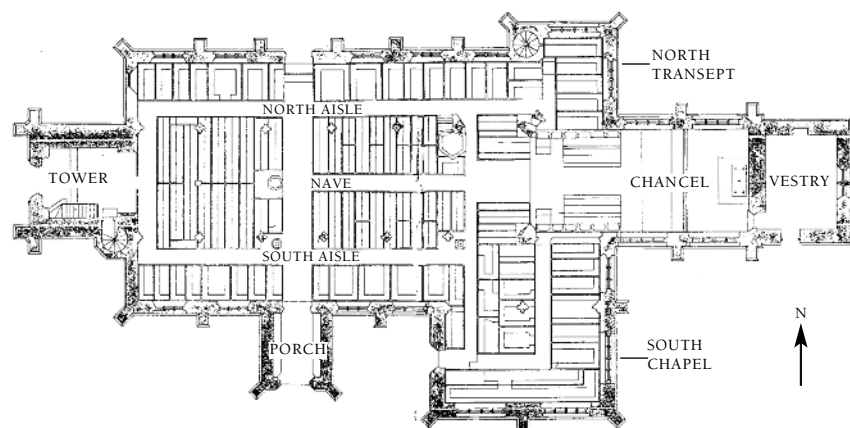


Illustration of the church from the south-east by WW Wheatley, 1850. Courtesy of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

belfry windows, and in 1845 a fire made it necessary to renew the nave roof and rebuild the chancel arch. The fire probably affected the nave seating and the gallery or galleries, and may also explain costly repairs to the organ in 1845. In 1862 the tower was restored and the west door lowered by six inches (15 cm). For many years there was a protracted debate over who was responsible for repairing the dilapidated chancel, but in 1867 WB Paul, a member of the corporation, paid out of his own pocket for new stalls and seats, repairs to the chancel floor and the restoration of the east window. This window had been described in 1825 as 'entirely filled with very rich painted glass in a very perfect state, representing saints, etc', but during its restoration, by Clayton & Bell, mediaeval glass from several windows seems to have been incorporated into it (heraldic glass in the south chapel and figures of saints in the east window of the north transept and the north windows of the chancel are mentioned in 1791). Highly regarded Victorian stained glass in the church includes that in the west window (the Walter Bagehot memorial window) designed by HA Kennedy who was influenced, it is believed, by Burne Jones. The glass of the memorial window to Vincent Stuckey (d.1902) at the east end of the north aisle is by James Powell & Sons.

In 1877 the body of the church was restored according to plans by the architectural firm of Foster & Wood. This work included removing the gallery; blocking the north doorway; placing a screen under the tower; replacing missing window tracery; restoring the north transept roof; inserting a wagon ceiling of pitch pine inside the existing nave roof (of 1845); and reroofing the aisles in pitch pine 'after the original models', although 'old oak' (presumably from the earlier roof) was to be used in the eastern bay of the north aisle. The church was also resealed in pitch pine, but the present seats do not match a pew design proposed by the architects. Various items were also presented to the church on this occasion, including the brass eagle lectern given by Mr Louch in memory of Edward Quekett (d.1875) and a 'Glastonbury chair' given by A Lockett. A new organ (installed in the transept) was provided by public subscription.

In 1886 a faculty was granted for alterations to the chancel, according to plans by JD Sedding, which included the present sedilia, with a credence shelf for the bread and wine, made by C Trask of Norton-sub-Hamdon and paid for by V Stuckey and the Revd A C Ainslie, and the rere-

Langport Faculty Plan

Faculty plan showing the layout of the church prior to restoration in 1877. Note the west gallery, the box pews in the side aisles, transept and south chapel, and the position of the font. Courtesy of the Somerset Archive and Record Service.

dos which was sculptured by Mr Seale of Brixton in London and paid for by public contributions. A painting of 'The Entombment of Christ' had been painted and presented by Reuben Sayers as an altarpiece in 1863, but had been moved to its present position in the south aisle in 1877.

The 1886 scheme was also to include a low stone screen and iron gates at the entrance to the chancel, which the chancellor of the diocese believed might have controversial liturgical implications, although there was no evidence of opposition within the parish. He insisted that the applicants must obtain the written consent of the bishop, which was duly given. However, neither these features, nor wooden screens which were intended for the north and south sides of the chancel, seem to have been installed: vestry minutes only record the dedication of the newly installed reredos and sedilia in 1887, and the proposed screens and gates are absent from an early photograph which shows the reredos, the sedilia and also the metal standards which replaced the panelled fronts of the choir boys' seats

in 1887. The photograph also shows the east wall of the chancel covered with painted decoration and inscriptions.

The restorations of 1877 and 1886–87 may reflect a change in the status of All Saints' church. By an Order-in-Council in 1876 Langport became a separate ecclesiastical parish, although this did not come into effect until the death of the current vicar of Huish in 1882. Langport's first vicar was instituted in 1883 and a house used as a vicarage from 1920 stands a short distance to the north-east of the church.



Early photograph of the church interior after the restoration of the chancel in 1887. From the FA Wood Collection. Courtesy of the North Somerset Library and Information Service.

The present organ by Gray and Davison of Liverpool was bought second-hand in 1914 to replace the 1877 organ which, amongst various shortcomings, was pitched so high it was thought that it might strain the choir boys' voices. Music and ritual continued to play an important part in the life of All Saints' church and in 1951 the bishop consecrated the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament in the former Heron chantry.

BELLS AND PLATE

Although a bell was cast by Robert Wiseman of Montacute in 1589, neither this nor other early bells have survived. Five of the present six bells were cast by Thomas Bayley of Bridgwater in 1772, and the inscription on each includes the names of Charles Randolph, Gent., and Mr Faithful Ash, churchwardens, and a motto such as MY TREBLE VOICE MAKES HEARTS REJOICE and GOOD RINGING YEILD GREAT DELIGHT. These bells were rehung in an iron frame by Taylor of Loughborough in 1897 and a sixth bell, forming the treble, was added, with an inscription commemorating Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee and recording the names of the vicar, the Revd DM Ross, and the churchwardens, V Stuckey and W Rowe. By 1912 vibrations from the iron bell-frame were said to be cracking the stonework of the tower. The frame was replaced by an oak frame, made by J Sully of Stogumber, with spaces for eight bells, the tower was restored and a small window was inserted in the east wall of the ringing chamber to improve ventilation.

The church plate included a communion cup and cover made by R Orange (or Oreng) of Sherborne and dated 1574, a sacramental service consisting of a cup, paten, dish and flagon presented by V Stuckey in 1839, and an undated pewter flagon.

CLOSURE

In 1970 the benefices of Langport and Aller were united and by 1979 a team ministry had been organised in the Langport area which included the united parish of Huish Episcopi cum Langport: the ancient link between the two places had been restored. In 1548 an official had noted that 'the churches of Huyshe and Lamporte are all one benefice' and had stated prophetically that 'One of theis ij [two] churches maye well be

spared [made redundant] and taken downe, for they stande within a burdebolte shote together'. In the event it was Langport church which became redundant in 1995, but instead of demolition, All Saints' was transferred to the care of the Churches Conservation Trust which instigated a programme of extensive renovation under the direction of Philip Hughes. This programme began, in 1995–96, with the repair of the late-15th century chancel roof which had been extensively repaired in the past. On close inspection the roof was found to be in very poor structural condition and, to save it from collapse, a system of stainless steel plates was introduced to transfer the weight of the timbers to the side walls. The timbers themselves were repaired using mostly traditional carpentry skills. In 1996 the tower was fully scaffolded and major repairs were undertaken. These included conserving the beautiful carved features, repointing the general walling, rebuilding the parapets and replacing the dangerously decayed north-west gargoyle. The original has been conserved and placed inside the church. Most recently the stonework and the mediaeval and later glass of the chancel has been renewed; also the reslating of the nave roof, and the repair of the mediaeval roofs of the north and south transepts. This building of major architectural and historical interest has thus been saved and it remains consecrated for occasional religious use.



Mediaeval boss on chancel roof

(REBECCA HARRISON)

SELECT LIST OF SOURCES

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Council for the Care of Churches, report on Langport church, July 1991.

Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society, Vols. 26 and 27 (articles by J.H. Harvey on 'The Church Towers of Somerset' and 'Somerset Perpendicular: The Dating Evidence'). In the latter article a transomed window similar to those in the chancel is incorrectly identified with the 'north aisle' of Langport church and with Heron's will of 1499.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer is grateful for the assistance of Philip Hughes, Rebecca Harrison, David Bromwich and the staff of Nimbus Conservation Ltd of Mells.

Front cover: Exterior of chancel, north transept and vestry from the north-east
(CHURCH COMMISSIONERS)

Back cover: Interior looking west (CHURCH COMMISSIONERS)

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Series 4 no. 80
February 1997