



About St Mary's

The church stands isolated, the village of South Cowton having long disappeared. The settlement is mentioned in Domesday Book as 'Cudton', probably translating as 'Cuthbert's settlement'. A church dedicated to St Cuthbert (d. 687) may have existed here at that time.

Any trace of an earlier building has disappeared and the present structure was built during the 1450s. The heraldry and inscriptions carved onto the exterior walls of the tower and chancel indicate that the Boynton and Conyers families were instrumental in the church's construction. Christopher Conyers inherited the manor of South Cowton from Joan Beaufort, wife of Ralph Neville, first Earl of Westmoreland and grandmother to King Edward IV, Richard III and Warwick 'the Kingmaker'. Conyers' son Richard built the nearby castle and probably paid for much of the building of St Mary's. Above the porch door, the Latin inscription around the shield reads, 'Pray for the soul of Richard Conyers and Alice his wife'. The heraldry over the chancel door includes the inscription 'Christopher Boynton'.

The architecture reflects the turmoil of the period, having been built during the Wars of the Roses. The tower is fortress-like and the nave, chancel and tall porch, with few decorative features except for heraldry, have the appearance of solidity and defence.

St Mary's was placed in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust in 1988.

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Access

Due to their age, historic church floors can be uneven and worn and lighting can be low level. Please take care, especially in wet weather when floors can be slippery.

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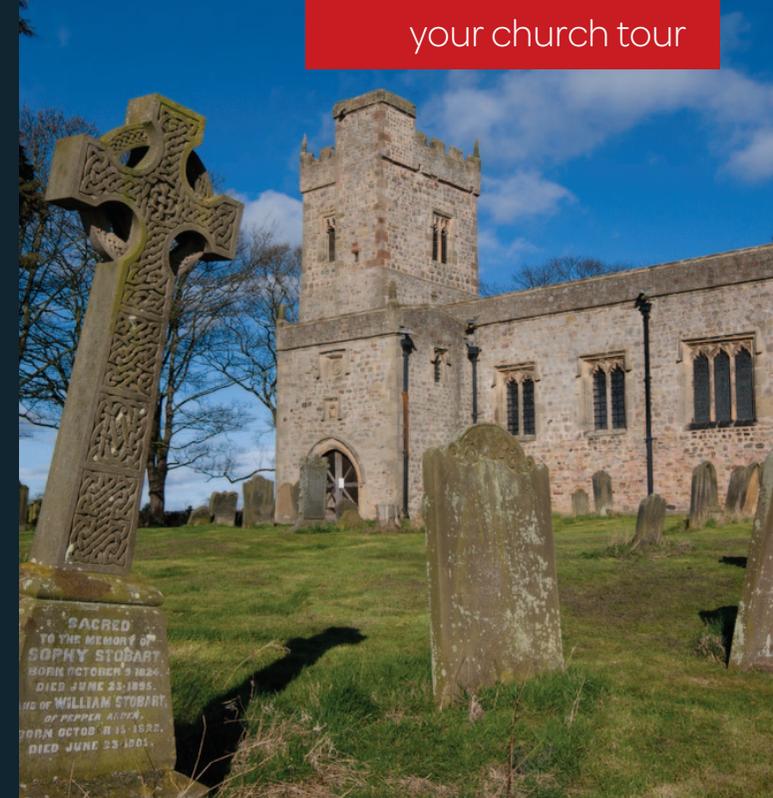
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Church of
St Mary

South Cowton



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The historic church of St Mary

10 things to see before you leave...

- 1 The **three alabaster effigies** depict a knight and two ladies. The knight is thought to be either Sir Richard Boynton (d. before 1485) or Sir Richard Conyers (d. 1502). The latter is more probable given the style of the figure. One of the women may be his wife, Alice Wycliffe, but the other is unidentified.
- 2 A **piscina**, a small basin built into the wall of the chancel which was used by medieval priests to wash the sacred vessels after Mass.
- 3 The windows of the medieval church would have been filled with **stained glass** containing images of saints, biblical scenes and the heraldry of local patrons. Most of the medieval glass has disappeared but some remains in the east window, including the face of the Virgin Mary and an inscription to Christopher Conyers.
- 4 The **funerary helmet and gauntlet** date to the 18th century. The helmet is surmounted by a mythical bird. The set is carved from wood and would originally have hung over the tomb of the deceased.
- 5 Twelve **crosses** would have been painted on the interior walls during the Middle Ages to be used in the consecration ceremony. They have been repainted at a much later date.
- 6 Remarkably, much of the **medieval woodwork** survives in the church. The screen incorporates many 15th-century timbers, as does the roof in both the nave and chancel. The chancel has elements of 15th-century woodwork including two bench-end finials.
- 7 The decorative geometric patterns painted on the **chancel arch** appear to be medieval in date, although the written inscription is later.
- 8 The plainly-decorated, octagonal **font** probably dates to the 17th century. The conical cover, decorated with crocketed ribs, is probably 19th century.
- 9 The **stairway** leads to the parvis, the upper storey of the porch. Rooms above medieval porches were sometimes used as chapels or often as schoolrooms.
- 10 Etched into the door jamb is a **mason's mark**. During construction of the church, stonemasons would incise their personal mark into each piece of stone they cut to ensure that they received the correct amount of pay.

