

ST MARY'S CHURCH

LUDDENHAM
NEAR FAVERSHAM, KENT



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

LONDON

Registered Charity No. 258612

PRICE: £1.50



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO
ST MARY'S CHURCH, LUDDENHAM
NEAR FAVERSHAM, KENT

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 300 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 1 West Smithfield, London EC1A 9EE (Tel: 020 7213 0660). For further information about the Trust visit our website www.visitchurches.org.uk

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ST MARY'S CHURCH

LUDDENHAM, NEAR FAVERSHAM, KENT

by ARTHUR PERCIVAL

As so often, church and manor house (Luddenham Court) stand side by side. Overlooked on the south by a wooded ridge which rises to 150 ft (46 m), they lie on a spur of land which juts out onto Luddenham Marshes. These extend 1½ miles (2 km) north to The Swale, the seaway which separates the Kentish mainland from the Isle of Sheppey.

Four hundred yards (365 m) south rises a spring, one of several waters that feed streams which combine to join The Swale at Luddenham Gut. Between its source and Court and church the waters of the spring have formed a delightful micro-valley, now part of the Swale Heritage Trail. The availability of spring water doubtless led to early settlement of the site. One or other of the local streams is thought to have given its name to the parish ('Ludeham' in 1211, 'Ludenhām', with an intrusive 'n', in 1253). 'Lud' is an Anglo-Saxon river name.

Like some other East Kent parishes, Luddenham has never had a village as its nucleus. It consists simply of a number of farms, with their houses and cottages. The marshes make fine grazing. The rest of the land is mostly high-quality arable. While staying at Elverton, 1 km west of the church, in December 1821, William Cobbett wrote:

As far as soil goes, it is impossible to see a finer country than this. You frequently see a field of 50 acres, level as a die, clean as a garden and as rich. I am now sitting in a room, from the window of which I look, first, over a large and level field of rich land, in which the drilled wheat is finely come up, and which is surrounded by slipped quickset hedges with a row of apple trees running by the sides of them; next, over a long succession of rich meadows, which are here called 'marshes'; next, over a little branch of salt water which runs up to Faversham; beyond that, on the Isle of Sheppey.

The area of the parish has fluctuated more than most throughout recorded history. At the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086 it probably amounted to no more than 600 acres (240 hectares). Following reclamation of the

marshes in mediaeval times it had grown to nearly 1,000 acres (400 hectares). After further reclamation for high explosives factories in the 19th century, it reached a peak of 1,323 acres (535 hectares).

Now it is again less than 1,000 acres (400 hectares) because outlying, detached portions were transferred to other parishes in the 1930s. One large portion, a mile (1.6 km) east of the church, lay on the south side of Oare Creek and featured a windmill, the brick tower of which survives, and, between 1787 and 1934, a big gunpowder works. Here in 1846–47 was also the world's first high explosives factory. Other detached portions of the parish, several kilometres away, were near Perry Court, Faversham, and Goodnestone church (also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust).

The population has never been large. In 1557 there were 59 people living in Luddenham in 14 houses. A peak was reached in 1871, when there were 264 in 51 houses. In 1991, there were 109 in 42 houses. St Mary's was declared redundant in 1972 and the parish is now served by churches at Oare and Davington. It remains consecrated, and has been used for three funerals since 1972.

Against this background, the church is larger than might be expected. One possible explanation is that before the Black Death (1348–49) it needed to serve a population larger than in 1557. Another is the possibility that before marsh reclamation there was a small harbour, or wharf, in the nearby micro-valley and that the church met the needs of mariners as well as parishioners.

Overall the church is 92 ft 6 in (28.2 m) long. The nave, incorporating the tower, measures 57 ft 9 in × 24 ft 11 in (17.6 × 7.6 m) and the chancel 34 ft 9 in × 22 ft 11 in (10.6 × 7 m). These dimensions are similar to those of the Norman core of the church at Throwley, a few miles south of Faversham.

On the north side of the building was originally a substantial tower, with an unusual two-stage pyramidal cap and housing three bells; but this collapsed in 1807, bringing down part of the chancel and nave. The damage was soon repaired, and a modest new brick tower built at the north-west corner, within the footprint of the nave. Out of respect for the mediaeval character of the structure, William Moss, the architect for the repairs, gave the tower a crenellated parapet and simple lancet windows.

The church is dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary celebrated on 8 September. Before the Reformation in the mid-16th century the interior would doubtless have been colourful – a spectacle to contrast with the simple environment in which most people lived. Stained glass windows



The church in 1806, from a watercolour by H Petrie, showing the tower shortly before its collapse and the south porch which preceded the present one (KENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)

and mural paintings probably helped to tell the Bible story to those – the majority – who could not read. Candles or oil lamps shimmered in front of images of Our Lady and other saints, such as SS Christopher, John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, Katherine, Margaret and Michael. Between nave and chancel was a rood-loft, with an image of the Holy Cross, in front of which another light burned.

Bequests to the church were commonplace before the Reformation but afterwards they ceased. The chancel was reported to be 'in decay' in 1560 and again in 1562, 1571 and 1581; but successive rectors failed in their duty to repair it. Matters came to a head in 1594 when a storm damaged the whole building. Funds for the necessary repairs were raised by a special rate, but even then some wealthy local landowners who lived outside the parish refused to pay it.

For the next three centuries only basic maintenance was undertaken. The result was that by the later 19th century the building looked neglected, inside and out. With one exception, the nave windows were 'of the vilest description', mostly or all of wood. Entrance was by a 'very plain and poor'

wooden porch. There was a wooden floor throughout, but it was rotten. Above, there was an 'unsightly' plaster ceiling. On the walls there was more plaster, in a precarious condition.

The Victorian wave of church restoration which started in the 1840s finally reached Luddenham in the 1870s. A rector who was about to retire restored the chancel. In 1881 his successor promptly set about the restoration of almost all the rest. Whether he employed an architect is not known – perhaps not, as the internal work was rather heavy-handed, and resulted in an interior which is now more a Victorian than a mediaeval period piece.

It was certainly more comfortable and most of the work has lasted well. The wooden floor was replaced with concrete and paved with Staffordshire tiles. Boards, stained and varnished, were substituted for the crumbling plaster ceiling. Plaster was also removed from the walls, and replaced with cement, to a height of 4 ft 6 in (1.37 m) and stucco. Two more wooden windows were replaced with Early English-style lancets. A new pulpit, reading desk and lectern were installed, and a solid-fuel 'tortoise'-type stove placed in the middle of the nave to provide heating. With its unsightly pipe

running up through the roof, this proved something of a hazard. During early-morning Communion one Sunday in March 1912 the pipe became too hot and set fire to the roof. Fortunately a team from the farm at Luddenham Court was soon raised and put the blaze out with water from the stream nearby.

The run-down wooden south porch was replaced with a handsome one of flint and stone in 1889; and in 1905 a new window was inserted on the south side of the nave immediately east of the porch.

After 1905 no major changes took place till the church was declared redundant in 1972.



Tower and south porch (CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

It was then stripped of most of its furnishings, as it was leased to interested parties who intended it to become an agricultural museum. Their plans did not materialise and the building was formally vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in 2002. Prior to vesting the Trust commissioned Robert George RIBA, of Saltwood, near Hythe, to carry out the necessary repairs. The work was executed by Gransden's of Sittingbourne in 2000–01, and included re-roofing the nave and chancel, repairs to the interior of the tower and extensive work to the pointing and rendering of the outside walls. The large churchyard, which had become overgrown and inaccessible, was cleared of intrusive undergrowth and reseeded with meadow grass and wild flowers.

EXTERIOR

The church is in a secluded cul-de-sac, reached from the A2 or Faversham by a series of narrow winding country lanes with steep hills up and down to negotiate the Bysing Wood ridge. Its setting is workaday but picturesque – on one side of a busy working farmyard. Prominent opposite the church is an oasthouse complex dating from the 18th and early-19th century and listed Grade II. Other buildings are more recent but the farmhouse – Luddenham Court, also listed Grade II – is a 15th-century building refaced and refenestrated in Georgian style in the 18th century.

There is no lych-gate at the entrance to the churchyard. To the public highway this is bounded by a mellow red-brick wall, probably of early-19th-century date. Early photographs show it looking rather stark but in and around it are now several attractive lime trees.

In the churchyard among other interesting monuments are four listed Grade II in their own right. About 20 yards (20 m) south-west of the church is a pair of headstones over the graves of Henry Ovenden (d.1745) and his son John (d.1747). They are similar, but John's is of much cruder workmanship. The carved skulls are intended as reminders of human mortality. The family lived in the adjacent parish of Stone, which had been served by Luddenham church after its own church fell into ruin in the 16th century.

The other two listed monuments at Luddenham are chest-tombs, the inscriptions on both of which are now illegible. One, 66 ft (20 m) north-west of the church, is elaborately decorated; the other, 10 ft (3 m) north of the chancel, is square, with a moulded domed finial. Both are in Classical style and date from the early-19th century. More poignant, perhaps, is the simple Second World War headstone, north of the nave, marking the grave of Stoker HL Willis, RN, who died on 23 November 1944, aged 31.



North side of the church

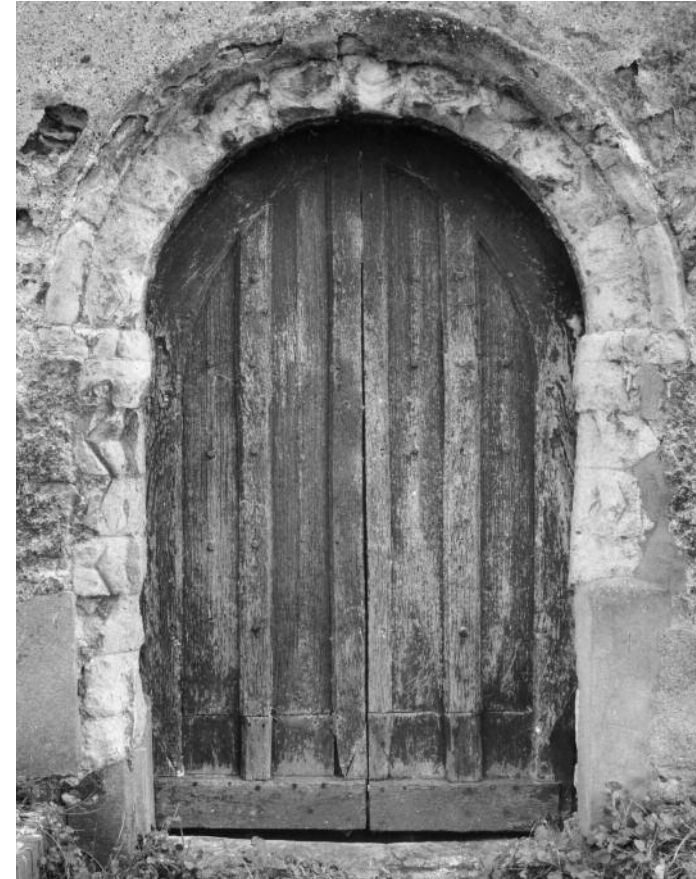
(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

For some years in the early 20th century part of the churchyard was reserved for the burial of smallpox victims from Poplar Hall nearby, then an isolation hospital. To minimise the spread of infection, they were buried *before* their funeral service took place.

What impresses many visitors to the church is its length. This impression is enhanced by the shortness of its late Georgian tower, its lack of aisles and the fact that, as the chancel is little narrower and lower than the nave, the roof over both appears almost continuous. Norman in origin, it was clearly designed to cater for a larger population than the nearby church at Goodnestone, which was built as, and remains, a simple two-cell church one-third the size.

The western entrance doors, probably late mediaeval and now seldom used, are framed by a typically Norman 12th-century round-headed arch with characteristic zigzag carving which extends down the jambs (sides). After 900 years of exposure to the weather, its Reigate (or similar) stone, doubtless imported by sea, is now much eroded.

Most of the quoins at the corners of the building on either side are formed of reused Roman bricks. Finds made in 1996 suggest that there was a Roman villa (farmstead) on the west bank of the nearby micro-valley, and there were several other villas within a few kilometres. In an area where



West doorway
(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

there is no local building stone except flint, a very hard material which can only be dressed (cut to shape) with difficulty, bricks salvaged from villa sites were ideal for creating neat, square corners.

The walls of the church are built mainly of flint, which came 'free' from fields and other nearby sources. Here and there more Roman bricks can be seen, and some dressed stone. Most of the walls are covered with lime rendering, some of it renewed in the recent repairs.

In the masonry on the north side of the chancel about halfway along there is slight vertical projection. This may indicate where the old north tower projected from the body of the building. Beyond this are a pair of lancet windows of late-12th-century date, the right-hand one with a round-

arched head which probably capped a smaller Norman window before the lancet was later inserted.

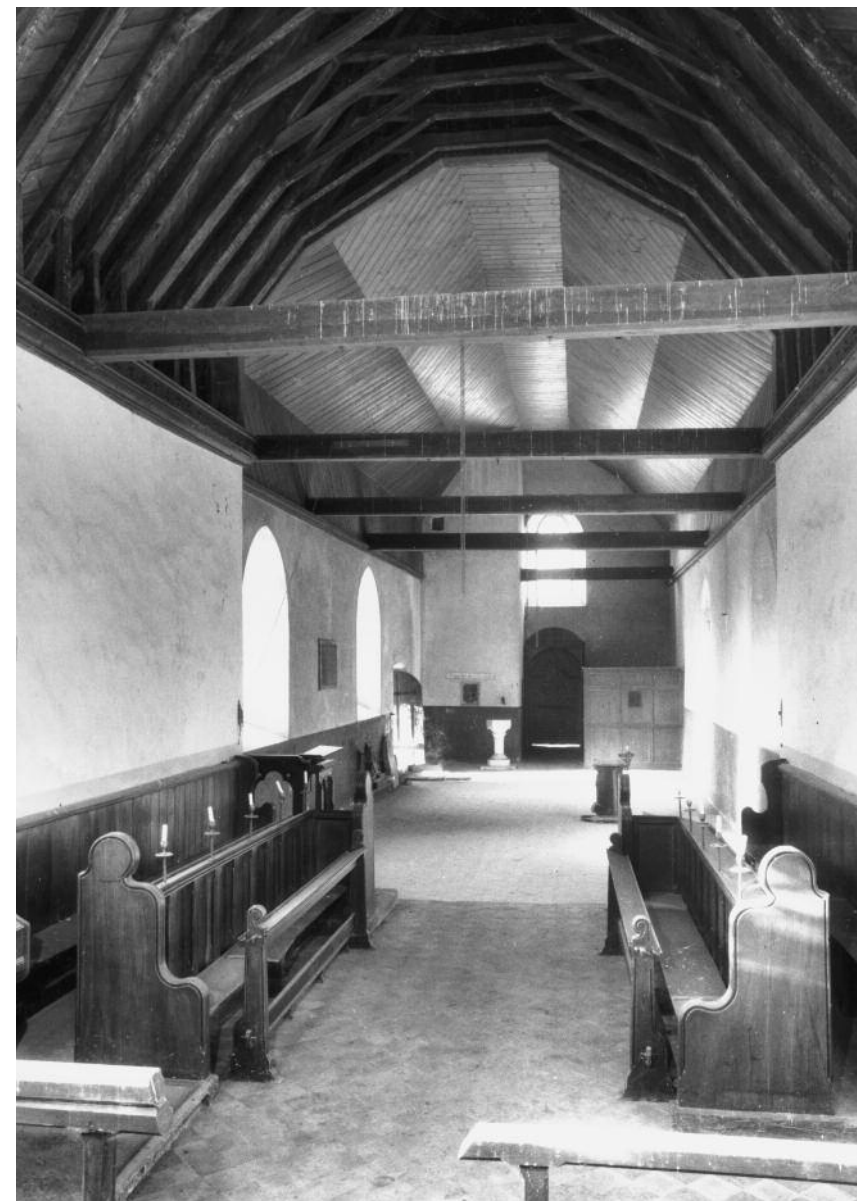
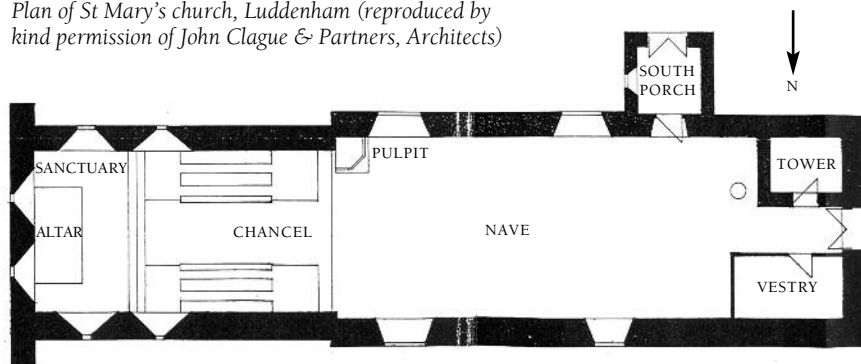
With its tall twin lancets and gable surmounted by a cross the east end is impressive. The two brick buttresses probably date from the early-19th century. As they rest on stone foundations, they may be replacements for mediaeval predecessors. The purpose of the open recess at the apex of the gable is not known. It may simply have provided ventilation. During the recent restoration it has been equipped with a small ledge to encourage barn owls to nest – as indeed a pair has already done. On both sides of the chancel may be seen some old lime render patterned in spirals, presumably with some kind of comb. This simple form of decoration gives the rendering a more lively look.

Except at the east end there are no buttresses. Stability of the structure, with its heavy roof covered with old Kent peg-tiles, is ensured by massive internal tie-beams which prevent the walls from spreading outwards.

INTERIOR

The church is entered through the south porch built in 1889. This reveals a simple 12th-century Norman doorway into the building, with a good plank door probably dating from the 17th century. The proportions of the church impress: it seems long, broad and lofty. The impression is enhanced by the absence of a chancel arch, the continuity of Victorian floor tiles through nave and chancel, and the fact that the chancel is better lit than the nave. It is likely that the chancel arch was destroyed when the northern tower collapsed in 1807. In mediaeval times the building probably had an earth floor, covered with rushes.

Plan of St Mary's church, Luddenham (reproduced by kind permission of John Clague & Partners, Architects)



Interior looking west

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

Close to the door is a modest Victorian font of 1863, though the wooden cover may be earlier. The octagonal bowl is supported by a stiff-leaf capital on a reeded column. Beside this on the floor, and broken into three parts, is a stone coffin lid, probably of 13th-century date, thought to have been brought here from the now ruined church of Stone. Carved on it in relief are a cross and a pair of hands clasping a heart. On the right of the door is an ogival-headed holy water stoup, probably from the 14th century. Worshippers entering the church would dampen the fingers of their right hand, with which they then crossed themselves. Fresh water, to which salt was added, was consecrated every Sunday.

On the left, behind the font, is the base of the brick tower. Opposite, enclosed by wooden panelling, is the vestry, within which a small cupboard, with a wooden door, has been built into the north wall. To the right of the vestry, almost facing the entrance to the church, is the only mediaeval window in the nave. Dating from the 15th century, this consists of a pair of trefoil-headed leaded lights. It gives more light than the narrow lancet window which it probably replaced. The other nave windows, with simple plate-tracery, date from 1881 and 1905.



Interior looking east in 1955

(© ENGLISH HERITAGE. NMR)



Floor tiles in the sanctuary

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

Some at least of the massive tie-beams which help the walls to take the weight of the roof may be mediaeval. Though they cannot be seen, some of the roof timbers themselves certainly are. Suspended from the roof are three elegant pairs of oil lamps – there is no electric light in the church.

In the nave the tortoise-stove remains, though now disconnected from its dangerous iron chimney. The black dado and oxblood-coloured lower walls have been redecorated as they were after the 1881 restoration. Till recently the upper walls were painted a dismal grey. To reflect more light they are now off-white.

The spacious chancel is the least altered part of the church and its most impressive feature. Though all but one of its windows are narrow Early English late-12th-century lancets, their rere-arches, springing from simple but neat corbels, are widely splayed to spread light as far as possible. In the 14th century, without much alteration to the splay, the south-east lancet, on the right nearest the east end, was displaced by a window with a pair of trefoil-headed lights. Below this has been inserted, rather crudely, a piscina. There is a tiny fragment of stained glass, believed to be mediaeval, in the south-west window. The dark green paintwork on the lower walls of the chancel dates from the 1881 restoration. Not all of it is in pristine condition, but it has been retained and conserved as an example of Victorian taste.

Forming a panel in the floor centrally in front of the sanctuary are 16 mediaeval tiles, now much worn. Set among the plain Staffordshire tiles in the sanctuary itself are fine decorative and figurative Victorian tiles,



Interior looking west in 1972

(© CROWN COPYRIGHT. NMR.)

including the symbols of the four Evangelists, dating from the 1881 restoration. The wooden altar, originally in the church of St Mary, Burham, near Rochester, is of stained deal. It is of open construction, with three arches along the front, and probably dates from 1881. The altar rail is of wood and simply designed. The only remaining furnishings are of later 19th-century date: choir stalls, with candleholders, pulpit and a harmonium.

In most mediaeval churches, even the smallest, there are usually at least a handful of mural and other monuments dating back two hundred years or more. Here there is none. Possibly there once were some, but they were swept away in the 1881 restoration. The only two mural memorials date from the 20th century. One commemorates Eliza Finch, the local schoolmistress from 1881 to 1920, who died in 1943, at the age of 85. The other records the names of the nine local men who lost their lives in the First World War. In days when farming was much more labour-intensive, more than half had been employed by Ashley Stevens.

Stevens (1864–1938) had bought the Luddenham Court farm in 1898. He was a noted sheep breeder who exhibited at shows in France and Italy as well as Great Britain. He also grew hops, fruit, wheat and root crops. The farm remains in his family.

The registers, from 1547 to 1553 and 1560 to 1971, are at Canterbury Cathedral Archives, with copies of most at Faversham Library and the Society of Genealogists in London. Vestry Minute Books from 1828 to 1935 are at Canterbury Cathedral Archives.

Front cover: Exterior from the south-east (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

Back cover: Interior looking east (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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