

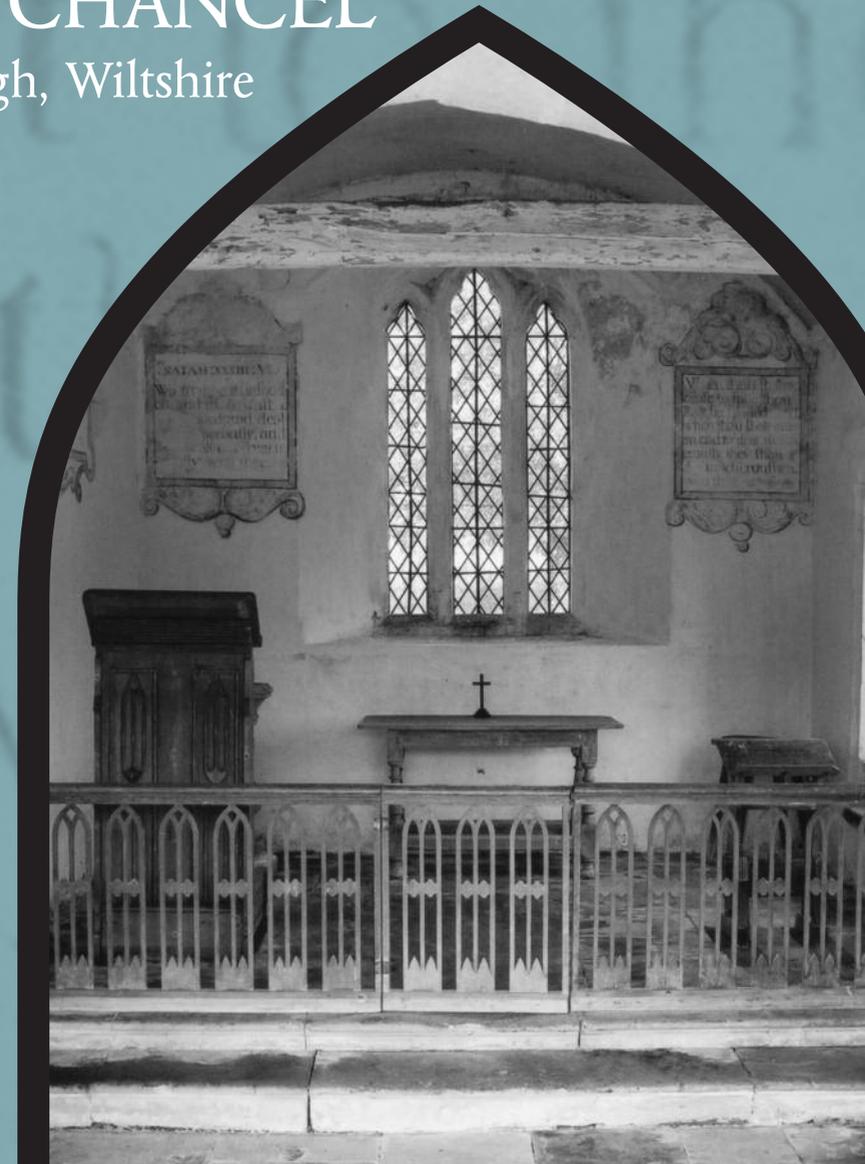


THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



ALL SAINTS' OLD CHANCEL

The Leigh, Wiltshire



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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ALL SAINTS' OLD CHANCEL

by Neil Skelton (Field Officer with The Churches Conservation Trust since 1980; currently Regional Development Manager. Also adviser on bells in Trust churches)

INTRODUCTION

The name Leigh is a derivation of the Anglo-Saxon *leigan* 'clearing in a wood or forest'. At one time the village stood in a clearing of Braydon Forest, a large area of woodland, covering much of north Wiltshire, reaching south to Bradford-on-Avon and eastwards to the Vale of the White Horse. During the 13th century it ranked second in size in England. By whom the forest was constituted is not known, however, it is recorded as being existence during the early 15th century. Much disafforestation took place under the order of Charles II. Braydon Wood, three miles (4.8 km) south-west of Minety is all that survives of this once great forest. Leigh was recorded as *lia* in 1242, *la Lege* in 1249 and *Lighe* in 1561. The present day spelling is locally pronounced as 'lie'.

The mediaeval church, built a little to the south of the infant Thames, stood on this site in its entirety until 1896. A plan to restore this much-dilapidated building was abandoned in favour of moving all but the chancel to a new site in Swan Lane, nearer to the parish which it served and adjacent to the village school. The main reason given for this decision was the difficult access to the old site, prone to flooding in winter as, indeed, it is to this day.

*Front cover: Interior looking east
(Neil Skelton)*

*Left: Exterior from the south-east
(Christopher Dalton)*





Opposite: The mediaeval church from the south-east in the 19th century, by John Buckler (Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society)

Right: Piscina in splay of south window (Neil Skelton)

Below left: Text, south wall (Neil Skelton)

Below right: Text, north wall (Neil Skelton)

So it was in 1896 that preparations were put in place to carefully take down the 13th-century nave with its 17th-century roof, the 15th-century timber tower and 14th-century south porch with its original door. These were re-erected in Swan Lane in almost exactly the same relationships as existed on the old site; however, the porch was placed on the north side to face the road. To the nave was added a new and larger chancel. The architect responsible for this ambitious and, for the period, unusual project, was the Wiltshire antiquarian Charles E Ponting. The work was undertaken by the firm of Messrs Light and Smith of Chippenham.

Many of the furnishings and fittings of the old church were taken to the new site, including the three bells, font, pulpit and sounding board. The western gallery and the dormers either side to light it were destroyed. All but two of the old benches were used in the making of seating for the 'new' church.

THE CHANCEL

The residual chancel and the east wall of the nave, including the chancel arch, are all that remain of the mediaeval church on this site. Reconstruction in the late 14th and mid-15th centuries preserved much earlier work. The western buttresses are formed from the remains of the old nave south and north walls. Connecting the two walls is a tiled pentice providing shelter above the west doorway. The roof structure, now plastered, dates from c. 1800. Photographs of the church still standing show fragments of wall paintings on the west side of the nave wall above the chancel arch. These were lost during the dismantling of the nave. The chancel arch is very low; however, it would appear to have always been so. The western doors date from 1896.

In the nave east gable is a small bell-cote, at one time housing an earlier Sanctus bell. The small 19th-century replacement is by an unknown founder. At the apex of the gable is a mediaeval cross. The late-13th-century east window is of three stepped lancets under a single arch. The priest's doorway of the same date has a hood mould with a label stop of a human head and a beast's head, both now much weathered.

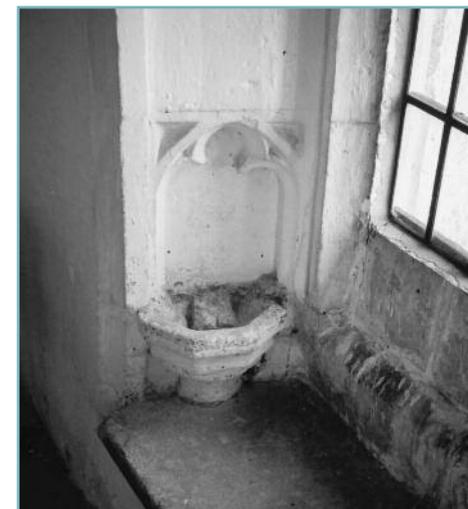
Left: Chancel arch, east side (Neil Skelton)

INTERIOR

The simplicity of the interior is punctuated by a series of 18th-century texts painted on the walls. These record biblical extracts from Genesis, Isaiah and St Matthew. Above the west door is a partially obscured text from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The faded inscription above the south door records the 18th-century refurbishment of the church. Each text is contained within a decorated cartouche of 'rural' Baroque. These were cleaned and conserved in 1983 by Diane Gibbs. Further work was undertaken in 1995 by John Burbidge and Lisa Shekede. On the north and south sides are the remains of a decorated plaster frieze.

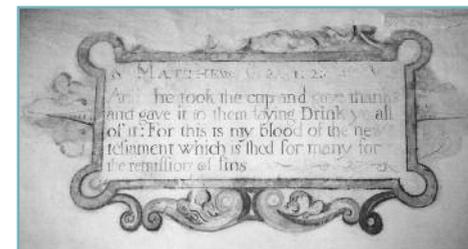
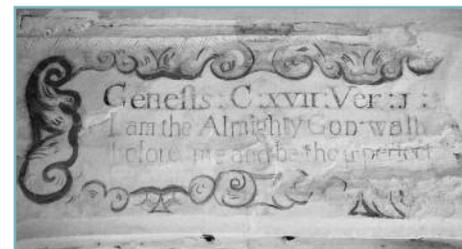
The large south window has a deep reveal for use as a sedilia. This use necessitated the reduction of the glazed area in the lower part of each of the three lights. In the eastern jamb is a well-preserved 13th-century trefoil-headed piscina.

Although most of the fittings were moved to the new church a number of items were allowed to remain. The simple communion table, with a later top, dates from the early 18th century.



The Gothick communion rails and the iron scroll support by the central gate date from c. 1800. The reading desk is made up of reworked fragments from old panelling discarded during the dismantling of the main church. It is possible that the desk front came from the lower deck of the three-decker pulpit in the old church. The two benches are all that remain of the seating in the nave of the church before dismantling.

The small 18th-century font, recently returned from Ashton Keynes church, replaced the 13th-century font. This had disappeared from the original church during the early 16th century. The bowl was discovered in 1897 by the rector, the Revd M J Milling. It had been in use as a cheese press in one of the village inns. The stem and base of the font were found beneath one of the timber supports of the tower on being dismantled prior to transfer to the new site. The reunited elements of the font are now in use in the parish church.



Recent HISTORY

After many years of irregular use the chancel was declared redundant. It was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in 1978. Essential repairs were carried out under the supervision of Oswald Brakspear of Corsham. Later repairs have been carried out under the supervision of Andrew Townsend of Farringdon. Two services are held here each year, usually on the last Sunday of July.

The CHURCHYARD

The low-lying position of the churchyard and its close proximity to the Thames provides ideal conditions for flora found in abundance on wetlands. Among the 66 recorded wild flowers found here are Early Purple Orchid, Salad Burnet and Ragged Robin. In turn these attract several species of butterfly, insects and birds. The churchyard remains the responsibility of the Parochial Church Council of The Leigh.



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that the church is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 330 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF

All Saints, Alton Priors
8 miles SW of Marlborough off A345

St Nicholas, Berwick Bassett
8 miles NW of Marlborough off A4361

St James, Draycot Cerne
4 miles N of Chippenham and 2 miles SE of
Junction 17 of M4 off B4069

St Margaret, Leigh Delamere
5 miles NE of Chippenham and 2 miles W of
Junction 17 and N of M4

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