



# THE CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

WORMSLEY  
HEREFORDSHIRE



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

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THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO THE  
CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN  
WORMSLEY, HEREFORDSHIRE

*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.*

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## THE CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

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WORMSLEY, HEREFORDSHIRE

by COLIN FLOOD PAGE

The name of this parish, Wormsley, recalls the time when the surrounding area was woodland: here there was a 'clearing in the wood, occupied by reptiles' (probably snakes). There is likely to have been a church here since Saxon times, though its existence has been a muted one. The present building dates from the 12th century. A priest is listed amongst the inhabitants of 'Wermeslai' in *Domesday Book* (1086) when most of Wormsley was owned by the Bishop of Hereford and Roger de Lacy. During the Middle Ages the dominant religious centre of the neighbourhood was the priory of Augustinian canons which, though often short of money, had for a long time a high repute for 'honesty in religion' and provided several priors for other houses of the order. Wormsley Priory was founded about 1200 some three quarters of a mile (1.2km) north east of the church and near the present Wormsley Grange, which was largely built out of its remains. The status of the canons was intermediate between ordinary parish priests and regular monks. Many came from the surrounding countryside: men such as John de Clehonger, John Madley, William Monkland and Richard de Winforton. They undertook parish duties while living a community life under rule.

The Priory's cartulary refers to a 'villa Wallensica' – a Welsh community living in or near Wormsley, perhaps in some sort of enclosed settlement but existing in near isolation from the rest of the parish.

The Priory of St Mary and St Leonard was a small one, with eight canons, and it had several other local churches under its wing. The advowson and revenues of Wormsley church were given to it in 1262 and it continued to be responsible for parochial duties until its dissolution in 1539. The first of the lay patrons was Lord Clinton and, as the congregation appears always to have been small, the upkeep of the building depended much on him and his successors. The last major work of restoration followed this pattern in 1866–67 and was paid for by the Boughton-Knights, some of whose monuments adorn the chancel. Despite the tiny numbers, parish activities continued until 1970 but, in that year, the church was closed and in 1974 it was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust.

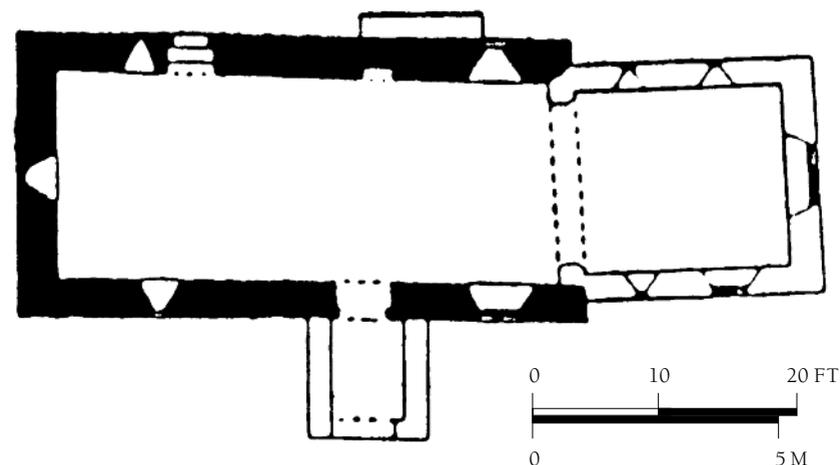
The nave, of local sandstone, was built in the 12th century. In the next century it was lengthened, the small stone bell turret superimposed and the chancel added. All the windows in this early period were probably of the narrow lancet type, such as still exist in the north wall of the chancel, but some have been altered and enlarged at various times since. The Victorian restoration involved the provision of a new roof, the rebuilding of the chancel (largely using the old stone) and the installation of new glass, especially in the east window. Also the plaster was stripped from the internal walls. The font, with its tapering cylindrical bowl is coeval with the nave (12th century), although the base has been altered at some time. The pulpit and lectern have been reconstituted using Jacobean carved panels. Other woodwork is modern, as is the south porch.



12th century font (CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

The south doorway is also 12th century and may have been the only one in the original church. The two doorways in the north wall are blocked; the eastern one presents problems. Running diagonally right through the wall to the outside is a line of thin masonry above the door. It is generally thought that this door gave entrance to the staircase of a rood loft, built in the 15th century and since demolished. The staircase would probably have been constructed outside the church and not within the wall thickness: the diagonal line may be connected with this work. In the north-east wall of the nave can be seen the sawn-off end of a beam, quite possibly the remains of the rood-beam. Another idea is that there may have been a small hermitage attached to the exterior of the wall in the later Middle Ages and that the door led into it. Foundations of a small building adjacent to this door were apparently found in the early 20th century. It is suggested that the small bracket with ball-flower ornament on the wall nearby and the

*Plan of Wormsley Church – reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England*



enlarged window may have something to do with the hermit – both these features date from the 14th century. The cartulary of the Priory mentions a hermit in the 13th century.

Before the rebuilding of the chancel in the 19th century, a 14th century coffin slab on the chancel floor was recorded, possibly that now to be seen in the floor at the west end of the nave.

In the western turret hang two bells. The smaller is uninscribed and, judging by its archaic shape, is very ancient and was probably cast locally about 1200. The other bell is of more regular shape and is inscribed with the date 1671: it too was cast by a Herefordshire, or possibly a Shropshire, founder. An inventory of 1552 lists two bells 'whereof the least is xvi ynches di[iameter] and the other xix ynches brode over in the mowthes'.

In the churchyard, not far from the south porch, is the base of a vanished stone cross of mediaeval date. The foundations of a building have been recorded in the south-east side of the churchyard, perhaps the remains of an early priest's house. To the north-east of the church stand the tombs of the Knight family, local landowners in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and patrons of the living from 1745. Ursula and Barbara, two ladies who died young in the 1770s have a distinctive three-sided monument. Their

brothers, both quite celebrated in their day, have plain altar tombs in limestone. Richard Payne Knight built Downton Castle, near Ludlow, and his book *Landscape* (1794) was a manifesto of the Romantic movement's turning to wild and rugged scenery in reaction against the studied vistas of Capability Brown and Humphry Repton. The elder Thomas Andrew Knight, quite rightly for a Herefordshire man, was a fruit expert, wrote several books including *Pomona Herefordensis* (1809), and developed new varieties of fruit. His son, also Thomas Andrew, suffered an untimely death in a shooting accident at Downton Castle in 1827. The local stone cutter has made a little free with the christian names, but only enough to add interest. Of the two well known brothers Pevsner remarks 'They both had lived in greater worlds, but wanted to go home at the end'.

The registers date from 1749 and are deposited in the Diocesan Record Office in Hereford.

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Front cover: Exterior from the south-east (ANDREW PIKE).

Back cover: Interior looking east (ANDREW PIKE).

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Mediaeval bell

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)