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Historic churches, due to their age, often have uneven and worn floors. Please take care, especially in wet weather when floors and steps can be slippery.

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# Church of St John the Baptist

Strensham,  
Worcestershire



# Church of St John the Baptist

by John Comins who has been engaged for many years with the National Trust and other landscape and architectural conservation groups, and is a keen researcher in local history

## Introduction

The church of St John the Baptist stands on a ridge looking eastwards over the River Avon towards the great mass of Bredon Hill and westwards to the Malvern Hills. It is now alone, except for the former rectory and two modern houses, one of which is converted from the old school room. The present village lies some distance away, wholly separate and much disturbed by the nearby motorway. It was not always so. Until its destruction in the civil wars of the 17th century, Strensham Castle lay only 500 yards (460m) to the west, and archaeological excavations have shown that the land between it and the church was filled with buildings up to the end of the 14th century, when the settlement seems to have been abandoned.

Strensham was the seat of the Russell family from the late 13th century up to the death of the last direct descendant some five hundred years later. The Russells, as befitted their position as one of Worcestershire's leading families, left notable memorials which lift Strensham out of the common run of parish churches.

## The village of Strensham

The name Strensham is derived from the Old English *Streongham* meaning 'strong village' – 'ham' being a common word for a village.

The manor of Strensham was owned, according to the *Victoria County History*, by Pershore Abbey in the 9th century, being granted in the 11th century to Westminster Abbey. This manor became known as Nether (Lower) Strensham. Later it passed through various lay hands until in 1298 it was sold to James Russell. A second manor – Over (Upper) Strensham – was also owned in medieval times by Westminster Abbey. After several changes in ownership it was acquired by the Russells in the early 17th century, thus uniting the two manors. The last male Russell died in 1705 after which the manors passed to other members of the family before being sold in 1817 to John Taylor, a Birmingham banker.

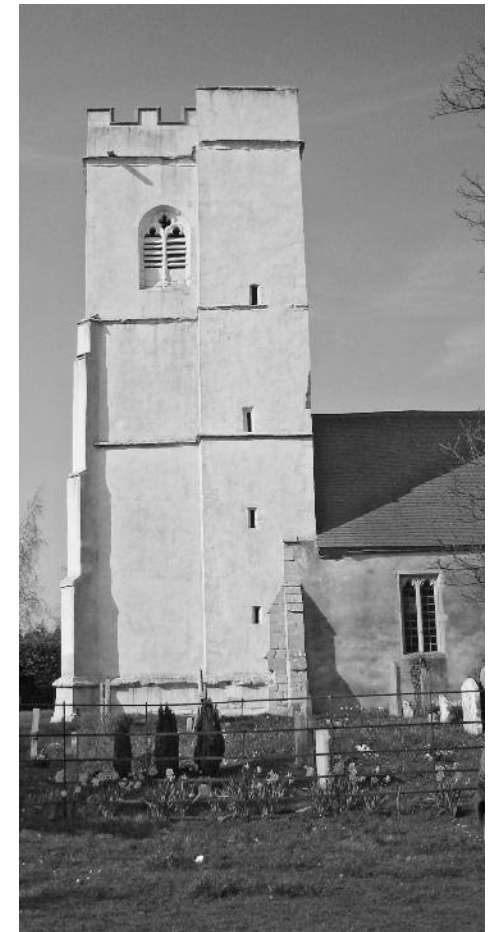
The Russells' occupation of Strensham was centred around their castle or fortified manor house, for which a licence to crenellate or fortify was granted in 1388.

A print published in Nash's *Worcestershire* shows the manor house of Upper Strensham to have been a Jacobean building with Georgian additions; it may have become the Russells' principal seat in the village before

the destruction of the castle. This house was demolished in 1824 to make way for the classical villa built to the design of George Maddox for the Taylor family and stood in a well-wooded park with fine views over the lake to the Malvern Hills. After the Second World War Strensham Court became derelict; its demolition following a fire in November 1974 is much to be regretted. However, some good domestic buildings remain, principally the 18th-century Moat Farm in the style of William III, and the almshouses founded by Sir Francis Russell in 1697.

By 1795 the Worcestershire historian Dr Treadway Nash, author of *Collections for a History of Worcestershire* published in 1781, had acquired the manors of Upper and Lower Strensham partly through purchase and partly through the marriage of his brother Dr Richard Nash, to Frances Ravenhill, granddaughter of Sir Francis Russell.

A decline in the size of congregations and the impossibility of funding the necessary repairs led to the church being declared redundant, followed by its vesting in The Churches Conservation Trust in August 1991. Since then the Trust has initiated an extensive programme of repairs, including re-rendering and limewashing the exterior walls of the church, retiling the roofs, repairs to the panelling and pews and conservation of the monuments and cleaning of the hatchments.



The tower from the south

A team of local bell-ringers carries out maintenance work on the bells, which are used regularly to train people in the art of change ringing.

## The Russells

Although their influence rarely extended to the national stage, the Russells' long years of ownership of Strensham and much other property gave them lasting status in the county.

James Russell is recorded as having purchased the manor of (Nether) Strensham in 1298, presumably the same James Russell who was, according to Nash, given licence to build an oratory in 1272. The first tangible record of the family is the brass memorial in the church to Sir Robert Russell, who died in 1390. His son, Sir John, was Master of the Horse to Richard II.

There followed a succession of Russell knights and baronets, prominent in local affairs during the 16th and 17th centuries. Most notable was Sir William, created a baronet in 1634 and a prominent supporter of Charles I. As Royalist governor of Worcester he attracted severe treatment from his opponents and was one time sentenced to death. Though pardoned, he suffered a

heavy fine and his castle was razed, 'notwithstanding which' (comments Nash) 'when the Order of the Royal Oak was intended to be instituted his estate was valued at £3000 per annum'. The last male Russell, Sir Francis, died in 1705 leaving three daughters. With the death of his granddaughter in 1774 the connection of the family with Strensham was finally broken.

## The church

### Exterior

The church consists of a west tower, nave without aisles, chancel and a small early-19th-century vestry on the north.

The earliest parts of the building, the nave and the chancel, appear to date from the 14th century, with the tower being added later in the same century. There is evidence of much rebuilding over the years, affecting the chancel in particular. New windows were inserted in the nave in the 15th century.

The east wall of the chancel is supported by no less than three buttresses, doubtless a strengthening required by the proximity of the steep river bank.

The main material used was grey lias rubble stone, characteristic of so much ecclesiastical

and secular building in the district. The recent programme of conservation has retained, where this has been possible, or replaced a large proportion of the original lime rendering which has always protected this soft stone, but a full record of the structural elements has been made.

On the south side of the churchyard may be seen the base and socket of a medieval stone cross.

### Interior

The interior, well lit by the six windows, is handsomely proportioned with its broad nave set off by the whitewashed barrel roof and massive tie beams, one of which has an angel poised to fly and carrying a shield of arms of Russell and Lytton. The eye is immediately

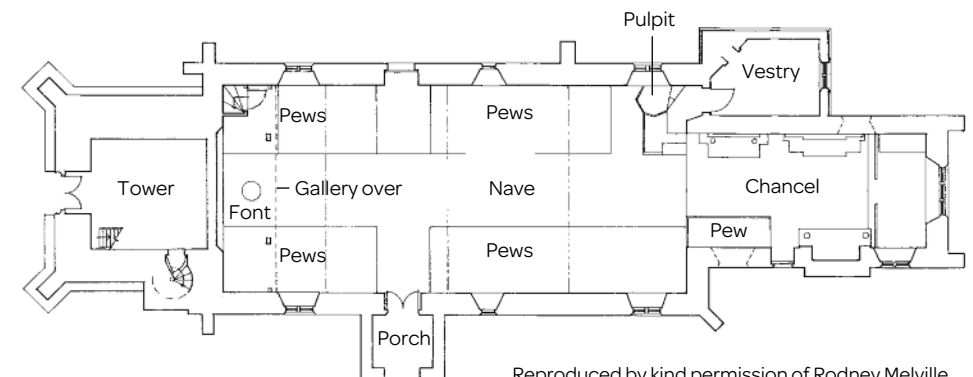
struck by the coloured floor tiles, the range of 16th-century pews, the painted panels of the gallery and the chancel packed almost to overflowing with monuments and brasses.

### Furnishings

The pews on both sides are of linenfold design, about 1540, and appear to be unaltered with the exception of a large family pew on the south side of the nave, most likely the Russell pew erected in the early 17th century.

Prominent on the chancel wall are a large royal coat of arms of George III (early 19th century) and two mid-19th century funeral hatchments commemorating John and James Taylor.

The stained glass is mainly late 19th century and early 20th century with some Georgian



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Interior looking west showing the gallery and painted gallery screen

painted glass in the west (tower) window including the Dove Descending and the Taylor shield of arms. The east window is particularly beautiful. Given in memory of James Arthur Taylor, it depicts the Good Shepherd (Cox, Son and Buckley, 1890). The south chancel window is a delightfully colourful representation of The Good Samaritan. Made by Florence Camm for Thomas William Camm of Smethwick, it was given in memory of Arthur James Taylor, 1917. The easternmost nave window on the south side is by Curtis, Ward and Hughes (1903). Depicting the Ascension, it was given in memory of Maria Theresa Taylor (d.1893).

During conservation work in 1994, which involved the temporary removal of several of the wall monuments in the chancel and nave, remains of three, possibly four, layers of wall paintings were revealed. The earliest were medieval in date: those in the chancel included a framed picture of buildings and part of an inscription. The paintings were carefully consolidated before being hidden again when the monuments were replaced. Further discoveries made in 2009, when the walls were being prepared for redecoration, suggest that much of the interior of the church was once covered with wall paintings.

The plain communion table, pulpit and attached reading table date from the late 17th century.

The font, now placed almost under the gallery, is a stone basin on a circular support. The design is Norman although the stone looks scraped and recut. A circular cut in the stone floor in front of the north door indicates that the font was once placed there.

### The bells

The ring is of six bells. Five came from the famous Gloucester foundry of Abraham Rudhall in 1704–05, the tenor being inscribed SR FRAN RUSSELL KT & BART, & HIS HOND LADY BENEFACTORS AR 1705. Two of the bells were recast and a sixth bell added by John Taylor of Loughborough in 1911. The oak bell-frame dates largely from the 17th century and incorporates medieval timbers. An interesting note on the role of the patron and parishioners is provided by an inventory of 1552:

*'There was abowte x yeres passed iij smale belles hangyng in the steple solde with the whole assent of the parocheners and the money therof implowyd to make seattes and pues in the churche and to repara the churche. Therbe iij bells hangyng in the stepull wyche Sir John Russell knyght of late bowght to his owne use of the Kyngs maiestie decessd wiche were perteynyng to the late dessolvyd Abbey of Borseley wiche bells ye same Sir John Russell ys yet indetted for and be the goods of the same Sir John Russell.'*



### Floor tiles

The red and yellow floor tiles date from the 15th century, and the patterns include birds, shields, flowers, crests and foliage. Amongst the arms identified are those of Berkeley, Beauchamp, Edward the Confessor, Gloucester Abbey, St John and John Carpenter Bishop of Worcester.

### The gallery

The destruction of so much of the furnishing and decoration of the late medieval church at the time of the Reformation makes it difficult now to recognise the colour and richness that has been lost.

The west gallery, however, affords a small insight into this vanished world. Incorporated into the gallery are the remains of a

15th-century rood screen which may have originally separated the nave from the chancel and sanctuary. Outside East Anglia and the West Country, examples of painted rood screens are hard to find and the panels of the Strensham screen are unique in Worcestershire. It is, of course, possible that the screen did not originate in Strensham but was imported from elsewhere. Certainly it is hard to reconcile its present dimensions with those of the chancel.

At the centre of the screen is a representation of Christ flanked by apostles and sundry prelates and saints. The emblems accompanying the saints, no doubt familiar to medieval congregations, are often the best means of identification.

Reading from south to north, the panels represent:

An archbishop with pallium and cross;  
 St John the Baptist with lamb, book and knobbed cross;  
 St Blaise (patron saint of woolcombers) with wool, comb and staff;  
 St Edmund with arrow. (The 9th-century Saxon king was martyred by Vikings);  
 An archbishop;  
 A saint, possibly St James the Less or St Simon;  
 St Philip with tall cross;  
 St Thomas with carpenter's square;  
 St Andrew with cross;  
 St John the Evangelist with quill and chalice from which a small devil is emerging;  
 St Peter with keys;  
 Christ;  
 St Paul with sword;  
 St James the Great with pilgrim's staff, hat and badge;  
 St Bartholomew (patron saint of tanners) with flaying knife;  
 St Jude with oar;  
 A saint with book, possibly St Matthew;  
 St Mathias with halberd;  
 An archbishop;  
 St Erasmus (patron saint of sailors) with spit or windlass;

St Laurence with gridiron;  
 St Stephen with stones;  
 St Antony with pig.

The report of the Birmingham Archaeological Society for 1875 contains a reference to a visit here:

*'The visitors had fondly imagined that they were about to see a church which had entirely escaped restoration and if the visit had been paid but a few weeks sooner they would not have been disappointed, for then one of the greatest attractions of the church consisted of a long row of paintings of the apostles and saints which filled the oak panels of the gallery, but to the great disgust of everyone it was found that an artist, who had been painting a portrait in the neighbourhood, had been so much interested in the unique series of well preserved paintings, that he volunteered to touch them up generally and restore them. This had been done and the pictures as works of the fifteenth century rendered absolutely useless. If the zealous artist had been present, and his absence was very much regretted, he would have had a very bad half an hour.'*

The gallery itself is set upon two stout wooden piers carved extensively with vine leaves and flowers, possibly again deriving

Detail of the painted gallery screen

from the old rood screen. The two further oak posts were introduced during repair work in 1995 to provide additional support for the gallery. Steps at the northern end lead to the narrow upper floor, with benches for the congregation and musicians, complete with candleholders. The single manual 'positive' pipe organ was built by Thomas Casson in the late 19th century. It was originally blown by two foot pedals like a harmonium, subsequently replaced by an electric blower. The west wall at the back is decorated with large 18th-century panels containing the Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments.

### Monuments

Although there were times during their long period of prosperity and influence when the Russells owned larger properties, it was here that the most distinguished of them were returned for burial.

The memorials present a remarkable example of the changes in style and fashion over four centuries, each reflecting accurately, if unconsciously, the sentiments of their time.

- Sir Robert Russell, d.1390: the first of the two fine brasses on the chancel floor. A knight in armour with the conventional design of the feet resting on a lion. The inscription refers to Robert being the son of Thomas, sometime lord of the manor of Strensham.



- Sir John Russell, d.1405: the second large chancel brass in similar style. The Gothic arch surrounding the figure, although mutilated, is richly carved. Both brasses lie on slabs of Purbeck stone.

After a gap of almost a century the fashion changes to smaller figures, with wives and children included.

- Robert Russell, d.1502 and his wife Elizabeth Baynham: a small brass on the north wall of the chancel to the west of the tomb chest. In his will of June 1502 he asked to be buried 'besids the bodis of my fader and moder'. The coats of arms and effigies of his five daughters, which once accompanied the brass, have long since disappeared.
- Sir John Russell, d.1556 and his wife Dame Edith Unton, d.1562: a small brass plate mounted on the east wall within a canopy of stone. On it are the kneeling figures of Sir John in tabard and armour, together with his wife and only son Thomas, also armoured. Above them are three shields, the middle one with a fully detailed coat of arms. The inscription records his death in the third and fourth years of King Phillip and Queen Mary.
- Sir Thomas Russell, d.1632 and Elizabeth Spencer his wife, d.1618: on the south wall of the chancel. The contrast between Sir John's memorial of the mid-16th

century and that of his son, Sir Thomas, is breathtaking. The small scale and stylistic restraint are swept away and replaced by a fine flamboyant example of Jacobean baroque. The modelling of the recumbent figures is of a very high quality. In a reference to the earlier tombs Sir Thomas' feet rest on a richly carved lion. Even after 300 years enough paint and gilt remain to show how brightly the monument must originally have glittered. Indeed the state of repair is excellent and the accompanying carvings of globes, floral columns, coats of arms and skulls repay the closest inspection. The inscription tells little of Sir Thomas and his wife but gives full details of the connections of his two sons, and his three daughters married to sons of the local squirearchy.

- Sir William Russell, Bart, d.1669 and Frances his wife: on the north chancel wall above the tomb chest. A plain roundel and short inscription form the surprisingly modest memorial to one of the most famous Russells. The cost of his father's tomb and the exactions of the Civil War may have influenced the design. An innovation is the laudatory sentiments expressed about the deceased, a feature which was greatly expanded in later memorials.
- Sir Francis Russell, Bart, d.1705: a return to the large-scale memorial and a superb example of the late restoration style



Brass of Robert (d.1502) and Elizabeth Russell on north wall of chancel

Lady Guise, whose eminent piety, extensive charity and true Conjugal Affection and Fidelity with many other Excellent Endowments Shewed how well she inherited ye Virtues of her Ancestors and how much She adorned them; Her generous Mind inspiring her still with Desires of doing good as her plentiful fortune gave her great Opportunities of doing it'.

- Sir Charles Trubshaw Withers, d.1804: a small richly-coloured plaque of Sienna marble which owes its place in the 'Russell' chancel to the fact that his wife, Frances, was the last lineal descendant of the family.

with life-size, fully modelled figures of Sir Francis and his wife Anne, by Edward Stanton. The free form and general urbanity of the design signal the age of enlightenment. Perhaps reflecting the fact that there were no male heirs, the inscription refers to the 400 years of association between the Russells and Strensham. Sir Francis' virtues are rehearsed in no less than 13 lines of text.

- Anne Lady Guise, d.1734: The largest of the chancel tombs, requiring part of the ceiling to be removed for its insertion. The scale was perhaps not ill-fitting for the eldest daughter of the last male Russell. The baroque complexities have been replaced by a more classical design, the effect of which emanates from its clear cool lines and the contrast between the two colours of marble. The eulogistic inscription reads 'To Anne Russell,

There are no less than 11 other memorials in the nave, three of them to members of the Taylor family, who owned the village for much of the 19th century. In such a royalist ambience, it is entirely appropriate that a tablet commemorating Samuel Butler, the satirist of puritan attitudes, should have been erected. Butler, author of *Hudibras*, was born in Strensham in 1612, the son of a prosperous farmer in the village.

*The Registers* date from 1569 and are now kept in the County Record Office, Worcester.