



# ST MARY'S CHURCH

SEAVINGTON, SOMERSET



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

*Registered Charity No. 258612*

PRICE: £1.00



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO  
ST MARY'S CHURCH  
SEAVINGTON, SOMERSET

*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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14 miles E of Taunton off A378

**STOCKLINCH OTTERSEY, ST MARY**  
3 miles NE of Ilminster

**NORTHOVER, ST ANDREW**  
On Foss Way just north of Ilchester

**THURLBEAR, ST THOMAS**  
3½ miles SE of Taunton off B3170

## ST MARY'S CHURCH

SEAVINGTON, SOMERSET

by MARK McDERMOTT

### INTRODUCTION

The place-name 'Seavington' originally referred to a group of seven settlements in a district which, in the mediaeval period, was divided into the parishes of Seavington St Mary and Seavington St Michael. The area which became Seavington St Mary was occupied by two Domesday Book estates: 'Sevenhantune', held by Mauger de Cartrai from the Count of Mortain and later known as the manor of Seavington Vaux (after another landholding family), and 'Seovenamentone', a property of Athelney abbey subsequently called Seavington Abbots. Seavington Vaux was held by a varied succession



Exterior from the south-east – drawing by John Buckler, 1832

(SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)

of owners until it was acquired by the owner of Dillington House, near Ilminster, in the 19th century. The abbey manor went to the Crown when the abbey was dissolved in 1539 and later passed through several hands until it, too, became part of the Dillington estate.

The line of the Roman Foss Way passes through the south-east corner of the (former) parish, close to the site of a Roman villa. Roads also had a great influence on the parish boundaries: part of the northern boundary, for instance, followed the line of a once-important road from Ilchester to Taunton. The former A303 London-Exeter road, which passes close to the church itself, is the 'New Road' built in 1829 to bypass the village but now superseded by the modern Ilminster bypass.

The local geology includes limestone, sandstone and alluvium. Agriculture has traditionally been the basis of the local economy, particularly grain crops and livestock farming (although hemp and flax, for example, were also grown in the 18th century), but glove-making was a cottage industry in the 19th century. Traces of mediaeval open-field strips survived into the 19th century but enclosure had already begun by the 16th century.

## THE MEDIAEVAL CHAPELRY

Although the font suggests that there was already a church here in Norman times, records date only from the 13th century and the Vaux family were early benefactors, if not founders, of St Mary's. The church was a dependent chapelry of South Petherton church which belonged to Bruton priory: the priory was thus entitled to the great tithes and some property in Seavington St Mary but had to appoint a chaplain to serve in the church. Despite its dependent status the church was granted burial rights in 1389.

## THE REFORMATION

Bruton priory was dissolved in 1539. Its rights over South Petherton church and its chapelries were granted to the chapter of Bristol cathedral who leased them to members of the Poulett family, who in their turn appointed curates to the living of Seavington St Mary. In 1802 Earl Poulett became lay rector by outright purchase from the chapter but in 1888 the chapter regained the right of appointment. It then shared the patronage, after the union of the livings of the two Seavingtons in 1913, until the Diocesan Board of Patronage took responsibility in 1955. Even before 1913 the two livings had been held in plurality for 50 years and before that St Mary's had been held with other livings in the area, the incumbent being non-resident.



*Exterior from the south-east*

(ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND)

In 1538 Henry VIII ordered every parish church to obtain an English Bible but Seavington St Mary still had not acquired one in 1547. The parish also dragged its heels over acquiring a pyx (for the reservation of the Host) during the return to Romanism in Mary Tudor's reign. There were repeated complaints about the disrepair of the chancel and in 1577 the congregation was disturbed in church by the behaviour of a woman suspected of being a witch.

## THE CHURCH

The Hamstone building consists of chancel, nave, south porch and west tower. It was formerly roofed with Hamstone tiles (3½ tons of 'Ham Tyle' were purchased for the roof in 1794), some of which remain. The stripping of internal plaster from the building in 1985 revealed evidence of a succession of building phases and alterations, beginning in the 13th century, most of which has now been concealed.

The double-lancet windows in the chancel and the two-light window with reticulated tracery in the nave south wall represent 13th century Early English and 14th century Decorated styles respectively. These windows appear in Buckler's illustration of 1832, but the western double-lancet (which differs slightly from the eastern one) may have been created from reused stonework in the earlier part of the 19th century. Other windows are in late-mediaeval Perpendicular style, but the north windows in the nave seem to date from a restoration of the church in 1880–82. This may also be when the window to the west of the porch, which was square-headed in 1832, was transformed to match the three-light arched window to the east.

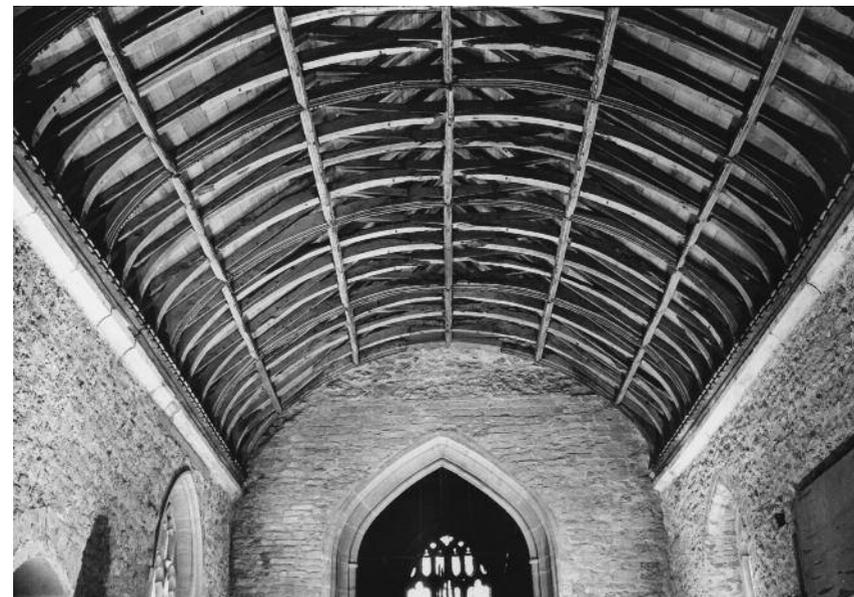
By Somerset standards the tower is rather plain. It has three stages, short diagonal buttresses and a battlemented top. It was probably built in the 15th century, but the top stage (with plain four-centred heads to the lights of the belfry windows) is thought to have been rebuilt or added in the 16th century, which may explain the reconsecration of the church in 1543.

The churchyard contains a number of Hamstone chest tombs and headstones of various dates from 1587.

## INTERIOR

The south doorway (within a later mediaeval porch) has a roll-moulded hood, but only the blocked rere-arch of the north door survives. The chancel arch is double-chamfered, with a roll-moulding on the west face, and an arched recess to the left (north) of the arch has a similar moulding, but another roll-moulded recess to the right has been almost obliterated: these features and the south doorway date from the 13th century and are perhaps the most interesting architectural features in the church. The recesses would have been associated with side altars (the probable remains of a stone base survive in the north recess). A round-headed hagioscope (squint) was later cut through the back of the north recess and a rectangular one through the rebuilt wall to the south.

On the east side of the chancel arch are corbels for a former screen or rood-beam. In the chancel north wall is a trefoil-headed aumbry, perhaps formed from the remains of a mediaeval piscina. The spandrels of the east window have carved pomegranates (symbol of Catherine of Aragon), and below the window is an 18th century mural monument to members of the Bullen family: it has a segmental head and fluted pilasters, but the inscription has been reset in the nave floor. Both chancel and porch have 19th century rib-and-board ceilings.



*Wagon roof in nave uncovered during repairs*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

The nave has a 15th century wagon roof with moulded ribs and crenelated cornice, although there is external evidence for an earlier roof with steeper pitch and lower eaves. There is a gap between the east side of the tower, which has a four-centred Perpendicular arch to the nave, and the west end of the nave roof, indicating that the tower must be of slightly later date. The jamb of a blocked window is visible in the north wall of the nave, and traces of painted decoration survive above and to the right of the chancel arch, around the south doorway and on the north door rere-arch, and possibly on the stone wall-plates.

## FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS

The oldest feature is the 12th or 13th century font which has a plain circular bowl. The earliest piece of wooden furniture is a funeral bier, inscribed 1694, which lost its folding handles when converted into a seat in 1894. Other woodwork, such as the pews, altar and reconstructed pulpit, dates from the 19th and 20th centuries. The Ten Commandments paid for in 1817/18 are probably a reference to the inscribed boards under the tower.



The Lord's Prayer, Creed and royal arms which were also acquired have disappeared, as has a gallery which is mentioned in 1781 and 1816. This probably stood at the west end of the nave to house the singers and village band – for which a new hautboy (oboe) was bought in 1797. In 1903/04 a harmonium was replaced by an organ. The instrument which survives today is presumably the 'American organ' which was moved to the back of the nave in 1966.

The memorials include a wall monument to a midshipman who died in 1824 during a conflict in West Africa; the Revd H Naish presented the altar cross and stained-glass east window in the 1930s; the 'Glastonbury chair' in the nave commemorating the Revd J P Billing and his wife was stolen in 1995.

Before 1906 there were three bells, each inscribed with the date 1621 and the initials G P standing for the bell founder George Purdue of Taunton. Taylor of Loughborough then recast one of the old bells and added three new ones. The six bells were hung with new frame and fittings by Thomas Doble of Taunton.

The church plate consists of a communion cup inscribed 'Joseph and Giles Hutchens, church wardens of Sevington Mary, Anno Domini 1715' and a paten dated 1851.

## CLOSURE

In the 1970s there was concern at the cost of maintaining the two churches of St Mary and St Michael, served by the same incumbent and a joint PCC, for a total population of under 400. Local opinion eventually selected St Mary's for redundancy: this was carried through in 1983 and the church was taken into the care of the Redundant Churches Fund (now renamed The Churches Conservation Trust) in 1984. Substantial repairs to the building, including the exposure of the nave roof, were subsequently carried out under the supervision of Mr John Schofield.

*The Norman font (RCHME)*



*Exterior from the east*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)



*Exterior from the north-west*

(RCHME)

## SOURCES

The Victoria History of Somerset, Vol. IV.

The Bruton and Athelney Cartularies (Somerset Record Society), Vols. VIII and XIV.

Kelly's Directory of Somerset, 1861–97.

HB Walters, Somerset Church Bells (MS in Somerset Record Office).

Proceedings of Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, Vol. XXV (Roman villa near Crimbleford Knap) & XLV (inventory of church plate).

Churchwardens' accounts, faculties and PCC records (Somerset Record Office).

English Heritage list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

Report on St Mary's by J Schofield 1985.

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

*Back cover: Interior of chancel looking east* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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