

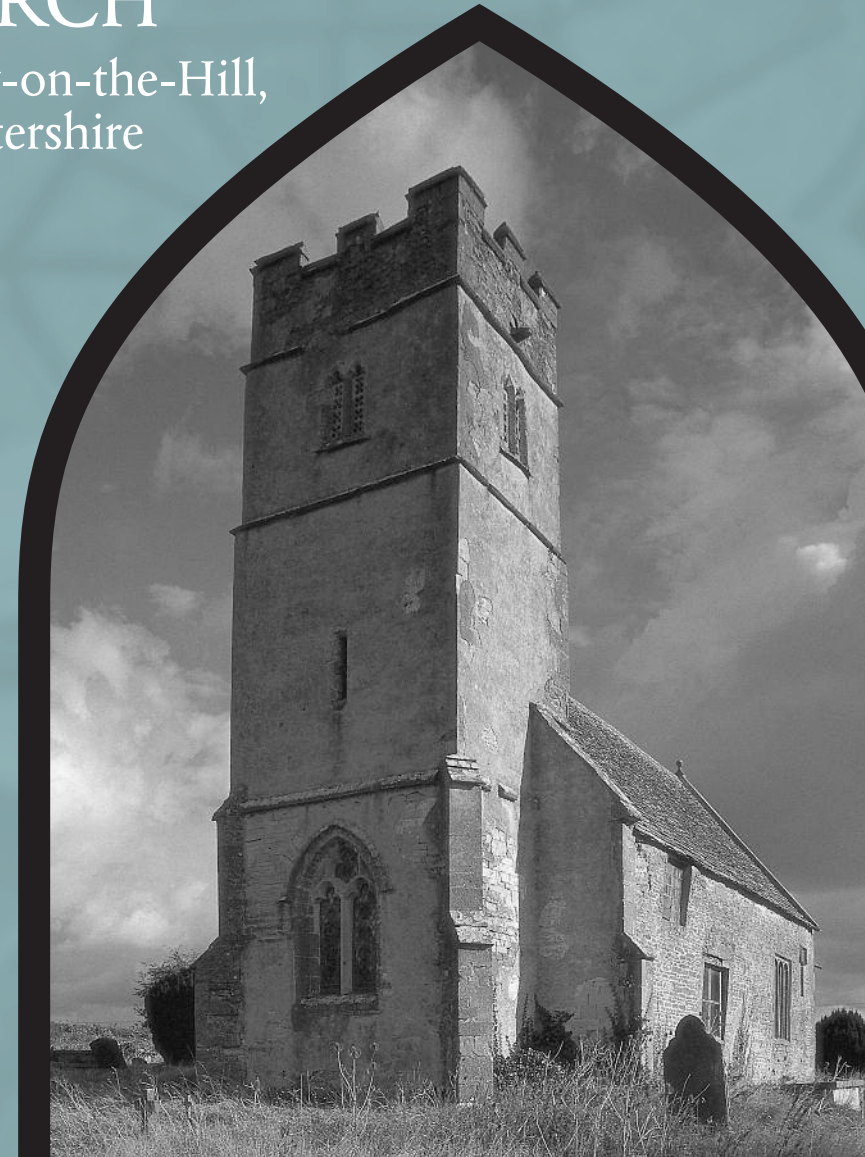


THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST



# ST ARILD'S CHURCH

Oldbury-on-the-Hill,  
Gloucestershire



THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST

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£1.50



CLARENCE HOUSE

I am delighted to have the pleasure of introducing you to St. Arild's Church, Oldbury-on-the-Hill. I hold a particular affection for this beautiful building as I attended the very first service after The Churches Conservation Trust took it into their care back in July 1995.

St. Arild's Church seems to epitomize everything the Trust does so well in caring for our historic churches. It is a typical, small country church where most of the population has long since moved away. The recent repairs, carried out by The Churches Conservation Trust, have been gentle and unobtrusive, ensuring that the Church's unique atmosphere remains intact. Most importantly, one or two services are still held here each year, ensuring that the Church continues to have a place in the local community.

I hope that people will come from all over the country, and further afield, to visit and enjoy this splendid Church and that they will continue to appreciate its timeless quality.

*Oldbury-on-the-Hill, Gloucestershire*

# ST ARILD'S CHURCH

*by Andrew Pike (Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Field Officer with The Churches Conservation Trust since 1994; currently Regional Development Manager. Previously an archaeologist with Buckinghamshire County Museum Service)*

## INTRODUCTION

Oldbury church stands in a prominent position on high ground, above the relatively flat terrain of South Gloucestershire. There is no village and the only houses in the neighbourhood are a few scattered farms, notably Manor Farm, a fine 17th-century building adjacent to the churchyard and probably on the site of the mediaeval manor house.

The name *Oldbury* implies an ancient fortified site and indeed the other Oldbury – Oldbury-on-Severn – which lies about 14 miles (23km) to the west contains an Iron Age hill fort, dating perhaps to the 1st or 2nd century BC. There is no evidence yet of a hill fort at Oldbury-on-the-Hill, but barrows or prehistoric burial mounds have been recorded and there have been various Roman finds.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south-west*

## History of

# OLDBURY PARISH

Oldbury-on-the-Hill is first referred to in a 10th-century charter as *On Ealdanbyri*. The shape and position of the parish boundary suggest that Oldbury parish, along with neighbouring Didmarton, was carved out of the large parish of Hawkesbury, probably some time in the 12th or 13th century. Hawkesbury was the mother church of a wide area and almost certainly a minster, serving a number of dependent chapels. Oldbury ('Aldeberie') in the hundred of Grumbald's Ash is described in Domesday Book, when it was tenanted by Arnulf of Hesdin and worth £10. Arnulf also possessed Great Badminton, 3½ miles (5.5 km) to the south of Oldbury and in 1291 the rector of Great

Badminton had a share, worth 8s. 6d (32½p) annually, of Oldbury Chapel. Later owners of Oldbury manor were the Burdon, Thorp, Clifford and Dennis families and the Dukes of Beaufort. In the 14th and 15th centuries it was sometimes known as Oldbury Burdones, from the name of the principal family. In 1712 there were 16 houses and about 80 inhabitants. By 1779 due, according to the Gloucestershire writer S Rudder, to the salubrity of the place, the population had risen to 232 and was larger than neighbouring Didmarton. Earthworks south and east of the church and Manor Farm suggest that the houses of the village once extended over this area.



## The CHURCH

The church is mentioned in 1273, when it is described as a free chapel to the manor held by Sir Nicholas Bordun, suggesting that it was beginning to acquire parochial status but without the rights of burial or baptism. From 1291 presentations to the living, originally made by the king, are listed in the Worcester Diocesan records, Oldbury being originally in that diocese. Robert of Wylmyndon was instituted in 1297 and was later described as 'rector'. By 1304 the chapel is described as 'the church' and in 1401 as 'the parish church'. In 1541 Oldbury, along with most of Gloucestershire, was transferred to the new Diocese of Gloucester.

The present building consists of a chancel, nave and gabled north porch and a west tower, and appears to date from the 13th century, the fine east (chancel) window of three lights and good quality tracery being of that period. The north nave window and west tower are of about 1400. The tower is of three stages with string courses (horizontal projections), buttresses on the lowest stage and decorative two-light belfry louvres on the top stage, which is embattled. The north doorway, through which one now enters, is of Tudor date together with one of the south nave windows. The latest feature is probably the 15th–16th-century north porch, which contains some ancient graffiti and the date '1631'. The usual entrance to a parish church was by a south door, as seems to have been the case at Oldbury. But probably because of the decline of the village, access to the manor house

from the north side of the church was considered desirable. So the old south door was blocked and a new north one with a porch substituted. Unusually many of the older gravestones lie to the north of the nave and chancel. The church is built of local Cotswold stone and the roofs are covered in Cotswold stone slates. The exterior walls of the tower are rendered. The interior walls and ceilings are plastered. Archaeological recording by Carolyn Heighway for The Churches Conservation Trust in 1994–96 showed that the porch roof is made up of timbers from a waggon roof; the porch roof also comprises reused timbers from another waggon roof, perhaps from a farm building.

Oldbury church has always been a small building without side aisles and with no division between nave and chancel. A tall pointed arch separates the nave from the ground floor of the tower. There was formerly a west gallery, mentioned in the churchwardens' accounts in 1748 and on subsequent occasions; in 1840 it was fitted with a 'desk and a shelf'. The outline of a former narrow north doorway between the north porch and the tower probably provided access via a stairway to the gallery. Alongside it is a window, now blocked, which would have provided light for the gallery. There is a similar window at gallery level on the south wall. A small window, probably to light the pulpit, was inserted at the east end of the south wall of the nave early in the 20th century. Immediately west of the blocked south door is a decidedly functional





*Left: Interior, looking west  
(Christopher Dalton)*

*Right: South side of interior, looking west  
(Christopher Dalton)*



window of late 19th or 20th century date, although the sill was shown, during recent repairs, to be of mediaeval origin. The hat-pegs along the nave walls also lend an air of no-nonsense practicality. A former south doorway, probably of Tudor date, has been blocked up at some time; a sundial on its east jamb is still visible. The tie beam in the chancel has been plastered over and the space between it and the ceiling filled in. Work by Ann Ballantyne for The Churches Conservation Trust in 1995–96 has revealed no less than five layers of wall paintings on parts of the south wall of the nave, the earliest of which may have depicted St Christopher and a later painting of a large royal coat of arms. St Christopher was often depicted near the main door to bless the people on their way: at Oldbury the original doorway was on this wall.

Archaeological investigation during the 1994–96 repairs showed that the chancel was entirely rebuilt during the late 18th century – the date ‘1761’ appears on the south-east angle of the chancel and the churchwardens’ accounts record payments in the later 18th century for plastering – but on the lines of the previous one. The east window and piscina were replaced in

the new chancel and even the timbers of the old waggon roof were reused. Further repairs were carried out in 1809–10 and 1818 (the date ‘1809’ can be seen at the apex of the east gable of the nave). However the church escaped major restoration in the Victorian period, which is what makes it such an interesting survival. About 1910 the church was re-roofed in Cotswold slates and work to strengthen the tower roof was carried out in 1925. Some time probably in the early 20th century the west gallery was removed.

A few fragments of mediaeval glass appear in the chancel and north nave windows. The west (tower) window of two lights contains striking stained glass of 1971 depicting the Virgin and Child and the Agnus Dei (The Lamb of God). This was made by James Atkinson Crombie ARCA of John Hall Studios in Bristol.

On the south wall of the chancel is a double piscina framed in a shouldered or Caernarvon-style arch (with rounded sides and a square head) and probably 13th century in date. One half of the piscina or basin was for washing the communion vessels, the other for the priest to wash his hands after administering the eucharist.

The floors are mostly paved with stone flags, except for the area on the north side of the nave where the pews were removed, which has a limeash surface.

There are various monuments on the walls – to members of the White, Long, Holborow and Haynes families, and also several stone ledgers on the floor, many now virtually illegible. John Haynes’ monument records that he was a smith and farrier by trade and served as parish clerk and sexton for 30 years. He died in 1866. There is a 17th-century oak communion table; the two-decker pulpit and reading desk are 18th century and emphasise the importance of the sermon in services at that time. The iron communion rails with their mahogany capping probably date from the 1809 repairs. The south side of the nave contains typical Georgian box pews, no longer with their doors; the north side obviously did as well, but these have disappeared – it is believed to St Lawrence’s Church, Didmarton, across the fields. Each box pew would have accommodated a family in reasonable comfort, who paid a pew rent for its use. The churchwardens’ accounts record payment to Thomas Bennet from 1765 to 1769 for ‘fitting

up sundry pews’. The font is of an unusual egg shape and probably dates from 1768 when 6s. (30p) was paid for it.

The tower formerly contained two early bells from the Bristol foundry. The surviving one was made about 1440, possibly by John Gosselin and hangs in an oak frame dating probably from the early 19th century (‘G Dando 1818’ is carved on a wall in the belfry). The bell wheel is mentioned in 1730. The second bell was recast in 1907 to provide a new bell for the church of St Michael and All Angels, Didmarton. The inscription on it reads:

*‘ST MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS,  
DIDMARTON/ THIS BELL WAS TAKEN/  
FROM THE TOWER OF THE CHURCH  
OF S.ARILD/OLDBURY ON THE HILL  
IN 1870/RECAST EASTER 1907/R.F.  
WILSON RECTOR/ J.C.HATHERELL/  
A.ASHBEE/CHURCHWARDENS./  
LLEWELLINS & JAMES LTD./ BRISTOL’.*

St Michael and All Angels’ church itself was closed in 1991 when the mediaeval St Lawrence’s

once more became the parish church: in 1996 the bell came back to Oldbury church.

The churchyard is large and contains several gravestones including some fine 18th-century chest tombs, indicating that Oldbury was once rather more populous.

The registers date from 1568; from 1764 they were included with Didmarton and are now deposited at the Diocesan Record Office, Gloucester.

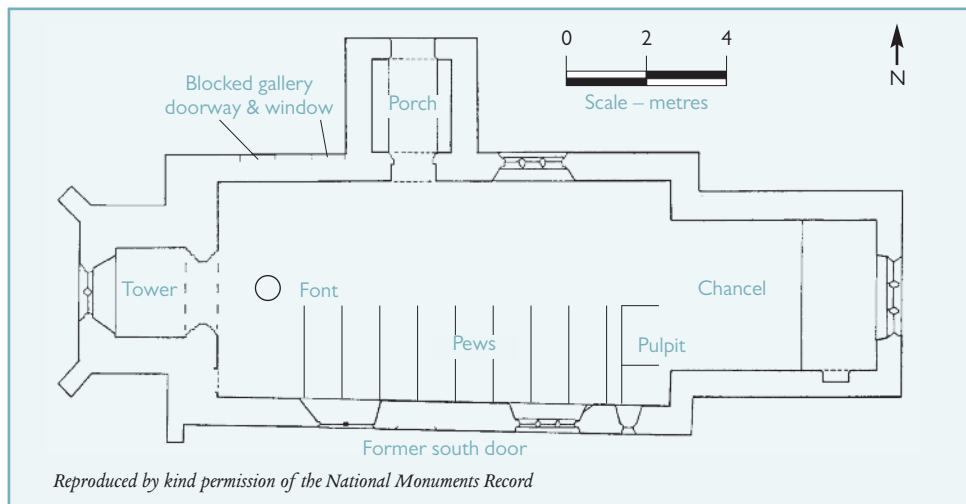
#### ST ARILD

Very little is known about St Arild, the patron saint of the church. She lived some time during

the Saxon period, perhaps in the 8th century AD, and died at Kington, about 1¼ miles (2 km) south of Oldbury-on-Severn and 1 mile (1.5 km) west of Thornbury. She was a virgin and died at the hands of one

*'Muncius a tiraunt, who cut off hir heade because she would not consent to lye withe hym'.*

Her relics were claimed to have miraculous powers and Ordnance Survey maps still mark 'St Arild's Well' at Kington, apparently a chalybeate spring with medicinal properties. Tradition has it that the stones in her well turn blood red in colour on her feast day (20 July).

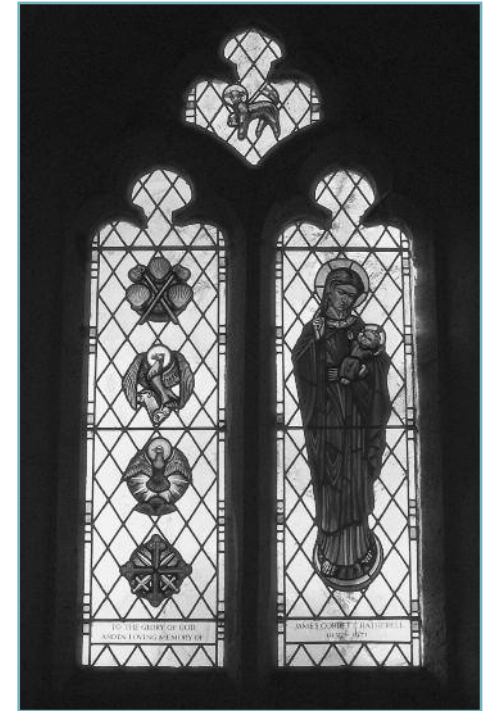


#### West tower window

Shortly after the Norman Conquest her remains were transferred to St Peter's Abbey, now Gloucester Cathedral, and a statue of her placed on the reredos in the Lady Chapel. Although this was destroyed at the Reformation, masons' marks on the surviving parts of the screen show where it was located. Two fragments of mediaeval glass in the Lady Chapel are believed to depict the saint (described as 'Aris' and 'Arild'). A service book from Gloucester, which was taken to Hereford Cathedral when St Peter's Abbey, Gloucester, was dissolved in 1540, contains a Latin poem *In Arildis memoria*; and in Robert of Gloucester's Chronicle is to be found the following verse:

*'This wondrefull workes wrought by power divine  
Be not hid nor palliat, but flourish daylie.  
Witness hereof is Arilde, that blessed Virgine,  
Which martyrized at Kinton, nigh Thornbury,  
Hiither was translated. and in this monastery  
Comprised, and did miracles many one,  
As who so list to looke may fin in her legion.'*

Interestingly the only churches in the country dedicated to Arild are Oldbury-on-Severn and Oldbury-on-the-Hill. What the link between these two churches and places was in late Saxon or early Norman times is probably something we shall never know. It appears, though, that the cult of St Arild was focussed around Thornbury and Oldbury-on-Severn.



#### OLDBURY FROM THE 16TH CENTURY

Oldbury-on-the-Hill seems always to have been a fairly poor village. In 1563 the parson was non-resident and the church was 'in decay both in tyle and glasse by the defaulte of William a Lige, personne [parson] there'. In 1570 the Gloucester Consistory Court reported that 'the chancel needs repairs of glass and other necessaries so that if repairs are not done the churchwardens fear the tower may fall or collapse'. In 1735 the living was combined with neighbouring Didmarton and in 1883 the civil parish became part of Didmarton. By 1914 the church was only being used for occasional services, notably at Rogationtide and was described as 'the deserted and time-honoured church ... forming an instance of a church reared by loving and devoted hands which has fully accomplished its purpose, and through untoward circumstances is no longer required for Divine worship'. Happily, the church has survived the vicissitudes of the years since then and has entered a new phase under The Churches Conservation Trust, in which the

church was vested in September 1995. The Trust instituted a programme of repairs, under the supervision of Philip Hughes, Chartered Building Surveyor, of Somerset. The 'decay of tyle and glasse' has been put right and the church is once again available for occasional Divine worship and other events to take place within its ancient walls.



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## 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 it 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 335 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](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk).

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

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