



THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST



# CHURCH OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Old Dilton,  
Wiltshire



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*Old Dilton, Wiltshire*

# CHURCH OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

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

## HISTORY

This ancient church, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, formerly served the once flourishing wool producing community of Dilton. The place-name is probably derived from the Old English *Dyllan-tun* which means 'Dylla's or Dulla's farmstead'. Due to the general decline of the woollen industry in the 17th century the village became eclipsed in size and importance by the expanding settlement of Dilton Marsh, a short distance to the north-west. The few remaining cottages situated by the little River Biss or Biss Brook, the mill (since demolished) and the church became known as Old Dilton.

Services were held here regularly until 1844 when a new church, designed by Thomas H Wyatt, was built at Dilton Marsh. Since that time worship has been conducted occasionally, notably the Advent Service of Light and the Harvest Thanksgiving, both held annually. During the earlier years of the 20th century the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings became closely involved with the repair and maintenance of the church. The Society carried out extensive structural repairs in 1933 and was involved with a further programme of work during 1952–53.

In 1956 the unsafe state of some of the pews led to the church being closed for congregational use. After the completion of repairs in 1958 the church was reopened and occasional services resumed. The church remained in the care of the parish until 1973 when it was declared pastorally redundant, and in 1974 vested in the care of the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust), since when further repair work, including the relaying of the stone-tiled roofs, has been put into effect under the supervision of Mr Kenneth Wiltshire.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south  
(Chris Cole)*

*Left: Interior looking south-east  
(Clifford Knowles)*



## EXTERIOR

The church now nestles beneath the embankment which carries the railway from Westbury to Salisbury. The north side is immediately by the road and presents an unexpected sight to the visitor who approaches it from under the railway arch. The churchyard surrounds the church on the other three sides and contains a number of headstones. On the south side there is a fine 18th-century tomb-chest commemorating members of the Hill family.

The early history of the building of the church is obscure but most of the external features date

from the early part of the 15th century. The south porch appears to be about a hundred years earlier and is perhaps the survivor of a previous church on this site. The windows at the western end of the nave are much later – probably 18th century and related to the construction of the west gallery. The plan is simple and comprises a nave with north aisle, a chancel, vestry and south porch. The western bell turret with its almost flute-like sound openings is surmounted by a small stone spire.



## INTERIOR

On account of its declining role within the local community, the church was fortunate in being ignored by the Victorian restorers, who did little more than cover the external random stonework with a roughcast rendering. This rendering was removed during repairs carried out in 1975. The south-east window in the chancel was unblocked at the same time. The entrance to the north aisle has been blocked for many years but its unusual trefoiled head is still visible on the outside. The main door made of heavy oak is mediaeval.

The nicely crowded interior with its galleries, three-decker pulpit and box pews is a good example of the 18th-century liturgical arrangement and has changed little since. Just to the north of the font are two mediaeval benches. Other benches of the same period have been incorporated within some of the box pews which also contain parts of a mediaeval screen. The uncommonly long communion table is 17th century.

The north gallery, which juts out over the chancel was, at one time, used as a schoolroom and has its own fireplace similar to that in the





vestry beneath. This gallery is approached through a separate door on the outside of the church. Although 15th century in character the octagonal stone font is a good copy dating from the 19th century.

All of the windows now contain clear modern glass but there are three small fragments of mediaeval coloured glass in the centre tracery light of the window just to the east of the pulpit. It is probable that similar coloured glass would have filled most of the windows in the church during the 15th century.

On the south wall of the nave is a rustic but pleasant memorial to William Budd who died in 1766. There are two further memorials: one to William Grant who died in 1769 and the other to Edward Line who died in 1744. Although there is no division between the nave and chancel the ceilings are at different levels. The tympanum over the entrance to the chancel bears the arms of King George III painted on a framed wooden panel.

On the south wall of the nave a board records the benefaction of John Wilkins who set up a charity to provide woollen cloth to make coats

for the poor of the parish. Beneath are the remains of a wall painting, probably post-Reformation, and a row of coat pegs for use of the occupants of the pew below. On the north wall of the nave aisle there is a painting of the Lord's Prayer dating probably from the 18th century and coeval with the existing furnishing arrangement.

On the front of the west gallery is a handsome octagonal clock dial. Many years ago the clock works and hands were removed for repair but, for reasons unknown, were not brought back to the church. The clock was made by Cockey, the distinguished Warminster clockmaker.

There is now just one bell in the western turret cast by James Wells of Aldbourne, Wiltshire in 1813. A second bell, attributed to the 13th century, has been moved to Westbury parish church where it is now in use as a sanctus bell. The communion plate belonging to this church was sold during the 19th century to pay for a new set for the church at Dilton Marsh.

# 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.

**NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF**  
St Nicholas, Fisherton Delamere  
11 miles NW of Salisbury off A36

St Leonard Old Church, Sutton Veny  
3 miles SE of Warminster off B3095

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