

# WHADDON FACT SHEET

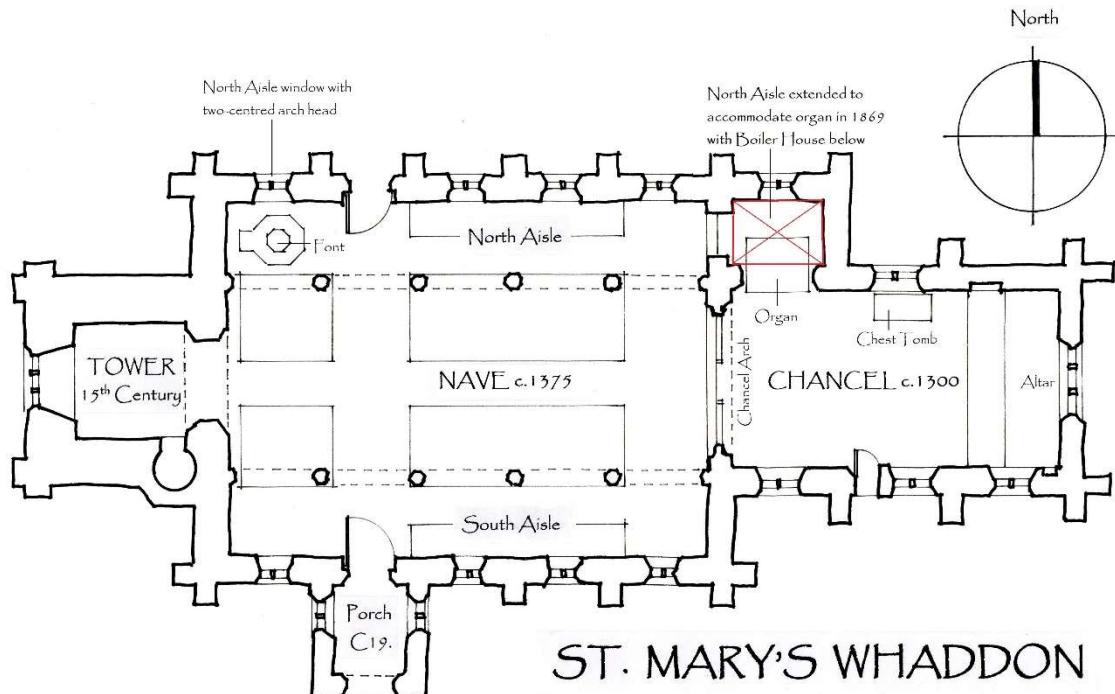
## No.3 – ST MARY'S CHURCH

### Early Church

The Doomsday Survey of 1068 recorded a priest, named Ralph, in residence and holding land in Whaddon, so we can assume a church existed in the village at that time, and most probably on the site of the current church. Nothing of that early church survives, but it would have been much smaller than the current church, and possibly no more than a single ‘cell’ chapel similar in size to the current Chancel. It is also likely to have been built of timber with a thatched roof. Today there is only one timber church from before the Norman Conquest still surviving in England, at Greensted in Essex, though at one time they must have been quite common. Some 400 other stone churches still exist across England that incorporate significant Saxon remains.

In about 1140 Hugh, the son of Hardwin de Scalers who had been granted the Manor of Whaddon by William the Conqueror, gave Whaddon church to Lewes Priory in Sussex, when he became a monk there. The Priory then retained the right to appoint the parish priest in Whaddon until 1351, when the Church was granted to the King in return for the *denization* of the priory, in other words the right of a foreigner to hold the priory and its lands (though who that foreigner was is not recorded). Soon after the King passed on the rights of *Patronage* for the appointment of the priest at Whaddon to St George’s Chapel Windsor, and they still retain those rights to this day.

### The Current Church



Replacement of the early church with the current stone church began in about 1300, and the first element to be rebuilt was the Chancel, or the eastern section of the church. This rebuilding has been dated through the architectural detailing in the Chancel and, in particular, of the dogtooth moulding on the east side of the chancel arch. Dogtooth moulding was a decorative device widely used in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, but as the Gothic period

progressed it largely disappeared from use, and was replaced with stylised leaves and similar decoration. At Whaddon the use of dogtooth moulding on a Gothic two centred (or pointed) arch has enabled a fairly precise dating for the rebuilding of this Chancel.



*Detail of the Chancel Arch*



*Arch-headed window*



*Square-headed window*

Following completion of the Chancel, there was then a pause in the rebuilding of the church before the nave and side aisles were constructed in about 1375. As noted in Fact Sheet No.1, this coincided with the outbreak of plague, known as the Black Death, which raged across England in 1348-49. Due to the lack of modern medicines and a proper understanding of disease control, the impact of the Black Death on the population of England was devastating, and far greater than we are currently experiencing with the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been estimated that somewhere between 40%-60% of the population of England may have died as a result of this outbreak of plague. No doubt it would have taken the local population sometime to get back on their feet, and for the economy of the area to recover sufficiently to allow the re-building project to resume. In all likelihood the majority of the funding for rebuilding the church would have come from the de Scaler family who lived at the Manor house south east of the church, and their finances would also have been severely tested by the Black Death.

Once the rebuilding programme resumed, I believe they started at the north-west corner of the church. I base that assumption on a comparison of the windows in the aisles. All the windows are square headed in what we now call '*Perpendicular Gothic*' style, but the one window at the west end of the north aisle has a two-centred arch to its head, suggesting it was built at a time of transition to the new *Perpendicular* architectural style (see photos).

Aside from this one different window, the design of the nave and aisles are very consistent and suggests they were completed in a relatively short timescale. The tall arcades between the nave and side aisles is very characteristic of the *Perpendicular* architecture of the period, along with the 'Quatrefoil' windows (square windows made up of four interlocking circles) in the clerestory above the arcades. When completed, the nave and aisles would have been empty of furniture; there were no pews or seats in early churches and everyone was

expected to stand for the service. This is the origin of the phrase '*Let the weak go to the wall*' – meaning let the weak stand where they could lean against the wall for support.



The 'Quatrefoil' windows to the clerestory above the arcades

Over the square-headed windows on the side aisles are 'label moulds' which terminate with carved heads. The heads to the windows in the south aisle are quite different from those on the north aisle; the headwear suggest those in the south aisle are from the upper class, with one figure even having a coronet, whereas those on the north side are more humble. Do the south side figures represent family members of the de Scaler family, while those on the north side represent other, less affluent parishioners? We shall probably never know.



Carved heads from the label moulds to the aisle windows (south aisle left, north aisle right)

The nave roof also merits closer examination. It is supported on a series of carved stone corbels, many in the form of mythical beasts or grotesque heads. Within the timber roof structure are a series of carved wooded bosses, some in the form of a rose, while others appear to be of a lion's head, and one is of a *Green Man*, a mythical figure of medieval folklore interpreted as a symbol of rebirth, representing the cycle of new growth that occurs every spring. Superficially the Green Man may appear to be pagan, perhaps a fertility figure or a nature spirit, but he frequently appears in carved wood and stonework of churches, abbeys and cathedrals right across Europe. Perhaps this is evidence of the early Christian religion absorbing components of local pagan religions in much the same way as the feast of Christmas was aligned with the festival of mid-winter, where the lengthening of the days heralded the coming of the new spring and, for Christians, signalled the coming of Christ into the world.



*Carved stone corbel brackets supporting the nave roof*



*Carved bosses to the nave roof, with Green Man on the right.*



The tower at the west end of the church was added in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, sometime after the completion of the nave and aisles. In their book on West Cambridgeshire, the *Royal Commission on Historic Monuments* comment on the large number of later stone towers added to churches in this area, and go on to speculate that at one time wooden towers, or at least bell turrets, may have been usual, though there is no evidence to suggest that there had been an earlier wooden tower at Whaddon.

The tower at St Mary's has suffered structural problems on at least two occasions. In about 1886 the top stage of the tower had to be taken down due to its poor condition, and it was not rebuilt until 1894. Then in 2011 further repairs were needed to overcome a series of cracks that had opened up at high level in the tower.

The exterior walls of St Mary's are made of flint and field stones, while internally clunch from the chalk deposits of the area was used to construct the columns on the arcade and to line the internal face of the walls. Because it is soft and easy to work, clunch was also used for the tracery on the windows and other detailed architectural elements in the church. However, this softness of the clunch also makes it vulnerable to weathering, and by 1850 the tracery on the windows was starting to fail, and the west window on the tower (which faces the prevailing weather) had had to be boarded up. The church eventually underwent a programme of major repairs and refurbishment in 1868-69 and, as part of that work, the tracery to the windows was replaced in harder wearing limestone.



*The Rood Screen*



*Blocked doorway leading to spiral staircase*

At about the same time that the tower was built a timber *Rood Screen* was installed within the chancel arch, separating the nave from the aisle. At that time the congregation would have been confined to the nave and aisles, and only the priest, and others officiating at the service, would have been allowed into the chancel, where the altar is located. The original *Rood Screen* would have been more substantial than what remains today, and included a gallery at high level, known as the *Rood Loft*, accessed via a narrow spiral staircase contained within the south-side of the chancel arch. A blocked doorway can still be seen that would have given access to this staircase, and a second blocked doorway is visible at high level, where the *Rood Loft* would once have linked to the top of the staircase. This gallery would have contained a large cross and statues depicting the Crucifixion ('rood' is the Anglo-Saxon word for cross), and the staircase would have been used each Lent, when these statues would be covered by purple cloth. A choir may also have sung from the gallery.

### **Symbolism**

There is a significant amount of Christian symbolism embodied in the church. As with most Christian churches St Mary's is orientated to face east, so that the altar is at the east end where the rising sun – symbolising the risen Christ – can shine through the east window behind the altar. The floor levels in the church also reflect the relative importance of the

different parts of the building, with the nave and aisles at the lowest level, then stepping up into the chancel, and finally stepping up again to the altar.

The font, where babies and converts to Christianity are baptised, is located immediately adjacent to the north door into the church, and its location adjacent to a door is symbolic of baptism marking the entry of the baptised into the family of the church; and so passing the font as you physically enter the church is to recall your baptism when you spiritually entered the church.

Externally St Mary's, along with a large number of churches, has castellations to the top of its walls and tower, somewhat similar to those on a castle, or the defensive wall around a city. But this church was never built to be defended, so why the castellations? Again the answer is that they are symbolic, and represent the city walls of the *New Jerusalem*, or God's Kingdom. A built manifestation of the well-known hymn that ends with the words:

*.....I will not cease from mental fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
‘Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England’s green and pleasant land.*



*Exterior view of the church showing the symbolic castellations to the walls and tower*

There is also a degree of symbolism in the height of the tower. At a practical level the tower contains the church bells, and the taller the tower in which the bells are hung, so the greater the distance over which they might be heard. And in days before widespread ownership of clocks or watches, it was important that the church bells could be heard in order to summon parishioners to services. But in medieval times a church tower was also the tallest structure in the vicinity and, therefore, was also able to serve as a symbolic link between heaven and earth. This symbolic 'reaching for the heavens' was, of course, even more pronounced on church towers that incorporated a spire. However by the early years of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century spires had fallen from fashion and there were very few built on Perpendicular west towers such as that at Whaddon.



*The church tower, as the tallest structure in the vicinity, served as a symbolic link between heaven and earth.*

### **The Reformation**

Around 1530 Henry VIII started to petition the Pope in Rome to dissolve his marriage with Catharine of Aragon so that he would be free to marry Anne Boleyn. The Pope eventually refused Henry's request and, as a result, Henry chose to break with Rome and appointed himself head of the Church in England, thereby setting in place the English Reformation.

The Reformation in England was relatively gentle by comparison to what took place in some Continental countries, but nevertheless it had major implications for English parish churches. The sculptured Crucifixion groups on Rood Screens were taken down and wall paintings, depicting scenes from the bible, were painted over and replaced with biblical texts. Much early stained glass was also lost.



*Damaged carved stone corbel block supporting the nave roof*

Further losses of Medieval Art took place during the Civil War of the 1640s, and the journals of the zealous William Dowsing during this period give a detailed account of his team of deputies' progress through East Anglia, hunting down and 'cleansing' anything suggestive of Catholic beliefs or practices. In 1644 his journals record the removal of some '*20 superstitious pictures and two brass inscriptions*' from St Mary's Whaddon. It was probably also at that time that that two of the carved figures that form the grotesque corbel blocks supporting the nave roof were damaged by having their heads removed, but what else was lost is not recorded. Are there medieval wall paintings hidden behind the limewash on the nave and aisle walls? And what did the sculptures on the rood screen look like?

## **Fixtures and Fittings**

### **Bells**

An inventory of 1552 recorded that Whaddon had three large bells and one small bell (presumably a service bell). Later this was increased to five bells. In 1822 two bells were stolen from the base of the tower. The bells were apparently damaged and had been lowered from the tower and stored at ground level for a number years prior to their theft.

The stolen bells are understood to have been cast by Michael Derby in 1671. A third damaged bell was sold in 1951 and today St Mary's has two working bells hung in the tower.



### Font

The font is contemporary with the building of the tower, and dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The font at Whaddon is relatively simple, with a 'chalice-like' shape comprising an octagonal bowl set on an octagonal shaft. The bowl is decorated with *Perpendicular Gothic* motifs incorporating pointed quatrefoil panels that also include the coat of arms of the de Scaler family in the panel facing east (strongly suggesting that the family paid for this font). Unlike some church decorations, fonts survived the Reformation, as Protestantism retained the rite of Baptism.

*Left; The font in the North Aisle*



### Hatchment

A *hatchment* is a painted display of heraldry on a square ground set diamond-wise. These boards were displayed on the front gates of great houses when the owner died, before being transferred to a church. The hatchment at Whaddon, which is hung on the west wall of the south aisle, is of Philip Yorke KG, Third Earl of Hardwicke and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (1801-06), who died in 1834. Its presence in the church at Whaddon (as opposed to Wimpole) is indicative of the extent of the Wimpole estate into the Parish of Whaddon at that time.

*Left; The hatchment in the South Aisle*



*The Chest Tomb in the Chancel*

### Chest Tomb

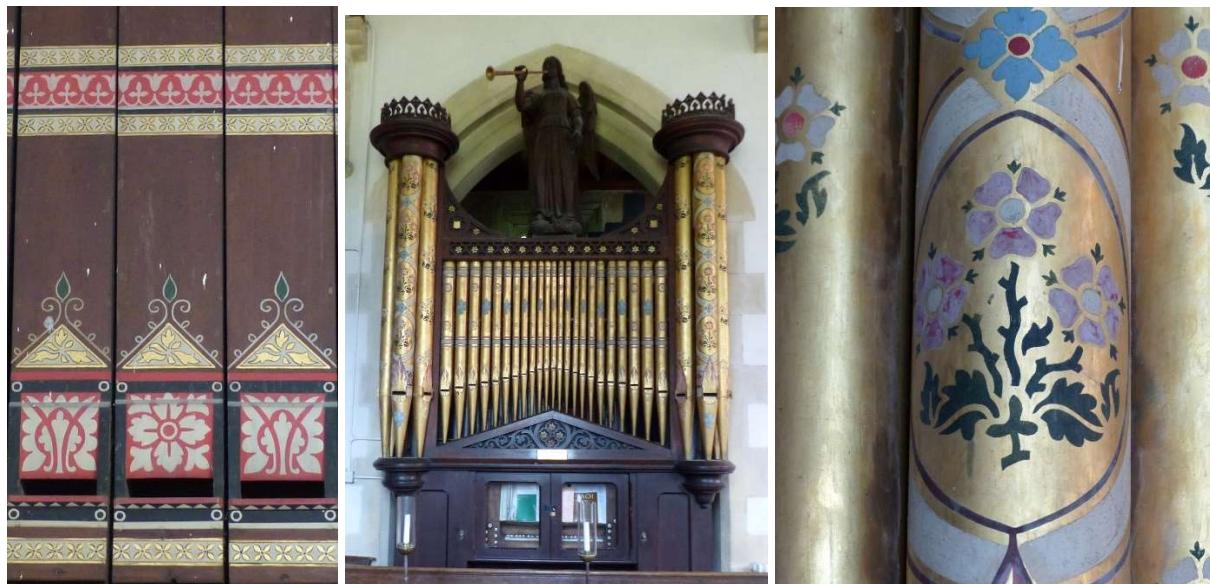
There is a large chest tomb up against the north wall in the chancel. This is the tomb of John de Scaler, who died in 1467. It is made from the local clunch, with a top of black Purbeck marble, which would have had to be brought all the way from the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. It probably would have been transported by sea to King's Lynn, then up the River Cam to Cambridge, before finally arriving by horse and cart. This chest tomb was relocated to its current location in 1869 to make room for the enlarged organ.

## Organ

The organ, located on the north side of the Chancel, is also of some interest. The list description for the church records that it is said to be built by John Snetzler and was enlarged and remodelled in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by J.W. Walker of London. More recent investigations undertaken in 2008 by Martin Goetz and Dominic Gwynn concluded that the organ is indeed based around a large 18th century chamber organ, but it is not a Snetzler. They write:

*'This is a precious instrument. It is historically interesting, as it has hardly been altered since 1869. It is musically beguiling, and is well suited to the church. Despite the variety of parts and dates, it has the character of a single builder, J.W. Walker, in the antiquarian style which he employed occasionally, accentuating the historic nature of the organ on which he based his work.'*

The organ was first placed in the church in 1857, expanded in 1863 and the decorative front pipes added in 1869.



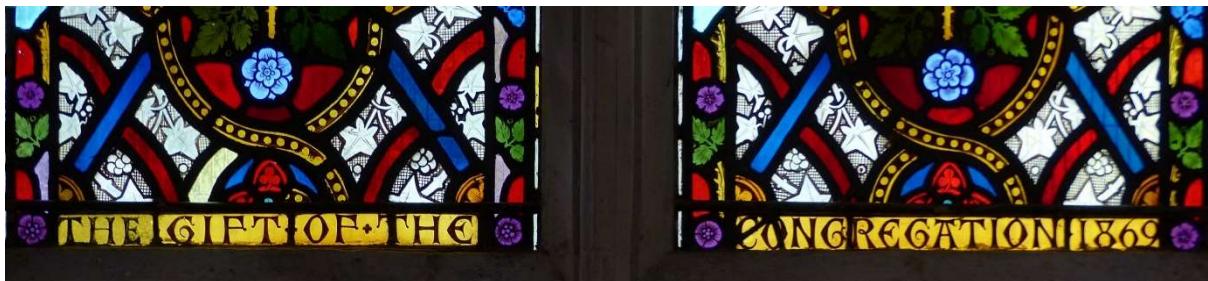
*The organ with its front pipes and stencilled decoration of 1869*

## Stained Glass

There is no surviving original medieval stained glass in the church. The two stained glass windows at the east end of the chancel both date from the restoration of 1869. The east window was paid for by John Felix Beaumont, a prominent local farmer, as a memorial to members of his family, while the adjacent window in the south wall was a gift from the congregation -maybe a case of '*anything you can do, we can do better*', with the general congregation not wishing to be outdone by one of the wealthy local landowners!

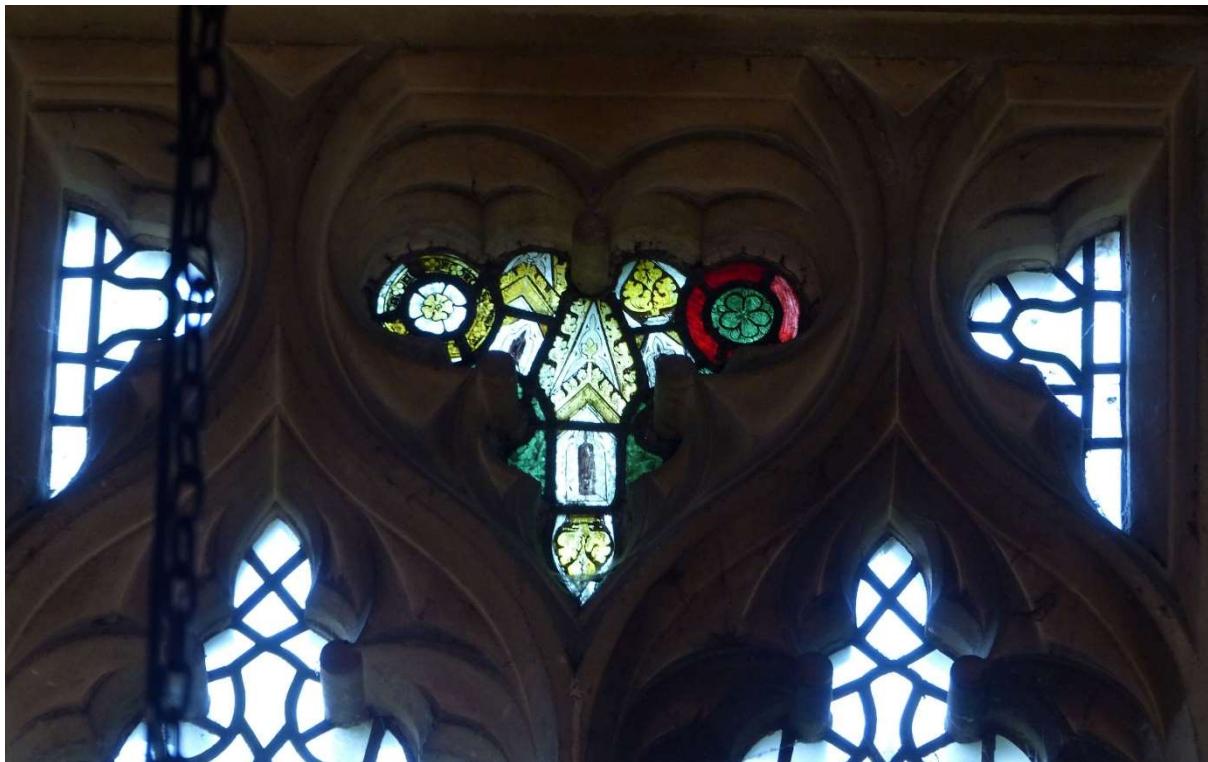


*The memorial to the members of the Beaumont family incorporated into the base of the east window.*



*The dedication at the base of the window in the south wall of the chancel*

There is, in fact, a small collection of fragments of medieval stained glass which have been gathered together and installed within the central trifoiled element to one of the north aisle windows. These fragments of glass did not originate in Whaddon, but were collected by Captain Mervyn Edmund Parnell from amongst the ruins of Ypres Cathedral during the First World War, and were subsequently incorporated into this window in 1948 by Constables of Cambridge.



*The medieval stained glass that originally came from the ruins of Ypres Cathedral*

### **Bats**

The church is also home to two species of bat, pipistrelle bats and brown long eared bats. The bats roost in small gaps between the roof timbers in the nave and south aisle, as well as in the porch. It is likely that the church is used as a summer maternity roost where groups of female bats gather together during the summer months to give birth and rear their young.

The church is currently closed and locked on the instructions from Ely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, once restrictions are eased to the point that we can again re-open the church, then villagers will be welcome to visit, and to see for yourselves the different parts of the church described in this Fact Sheet.

David Grech, May 2020