

St Werburgh's – Wembury's Grade I Listed Church



These notes are based chiefly on a much fuller account, *The Romantic History of Wembury Church*, published by the PCC. It covers the building's history, the historical contexts in which it developed over the centuries, the incumbents since the early 17th century, and much more. More details of this booklet are given on the publications page of Wembury Local History Society (www.wemburyhistory.org.uk). It can be bought in the church for £1.50.

The church itself

The church has a typically exposed Saxon location, and it is almost certain that the earliest religious foundation was a Celtic or Saxon oratory built early in the ninth century. In the second half of the tenth century King Edgar gave land in the Wembury area to Plympton Priory, which then assumed control of St Werburgh's. The consequences of this remained important centuries later.

A larger Norman church, establishing the nave and north aisle, replaced the initial building early in the twelfth century. There were then no additions or alterations until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Architectural features suggest that this was probably in the reigns of Edward III and Edward IV (1327 – 1483). The pillars and arches of the nave are fourteenth century, while the chancel and south aisle followed soon after 1400. The tower, long a landmark for navigators because of its prominent position, is often held to be early fifteenth century, although the English Heritage assessment of the building suggests an earlier date. As a result of the medieval remodelling the few remains of the Norman church are now confined to parts of the north aisle.

After the Dissolution, control of the church was transferred from Plympton Priory to the Deans and Canons of Windsor. It was to them that tithes were paid, and it seems likely that the church fabric deteriorated due to their failure to invest in return. In 1863 the Ecclesiastical Commissioners took over responsibility for the building, and in 1883 acted to halt the slide by restoring the chancel. Shortly afterwards this work was continued by Richard Cory, the owner of Wembury's large Langdon Estate. With a fortune derived from a thriving business selling Welsh coal in London, Cory funded a

major renovation in 1886. (While this no doubt brought significant improvements, the losses included the ancient pews and a three-decker pulpit.)

The most recent major change was the installation of the Millenium Window in 2004. Designed by a Wembury artist, this depicts the local coast, Wembury Bay and the Mewstone.

The monuments

There are numerous features of interest in the church, but there are two outstanding monuments. That to the left of the altar is to Sir John Hele, who died in 1608. The owner of Wembury House, Hele was Sargeant-at-Arms to Elizabeth I and James I, and his contribution to the community included building the Hele Almshouses. Corinthian in design, his monument rises the full height of the chancel and has effigies of Sir John, his wife and their children. At the west end (the rear) of the church, railings surround the Narborough Monument. This commemorates Elizabeth Narborough, wife of Sir John Narborough, who died aged 20 in 1678. Elizabeth came from the Calmady family, who were extremely wealthy landowners in the south west and at the time owned the local Langdon Estate.

The bells

There has been a peel of bells at least since 1552. Until 1909 there were only three, but they were then recast and augmented to give five. In 1948 a sixth was added as a memorial to parishioners killed in WWII.

Who was St Werburgh?

Daughter of the king of Mercia, Wulfhere, Werburgh was a devout Christian with a strong wish to enter a convent. This she was able to do once her father had converted to Christianity towards the end of his life, in 673. Her uncle, Ethelred, ascended the throne on her father's death in 675 and gave Werburgh control of all Mercia's convents. In this capacity she instituted important reforms. After she died in c. AD 700 her remains suffered a peripatetic existence, during which she became an object of veneration because of her body's lack of decay. During the Dissolution of the Monasteries her elaborate tomb in Chester was destroyed and her remains were scattered. Those that could be saved are now on display in the Lady Chapel of Chester Cathedral.

There are only 14 parish churches dedicated to St Werburgh, and there is no recorded evidence that she had any connection with Devon. How this church came to be dedicated to her is, therefore, unknown.

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