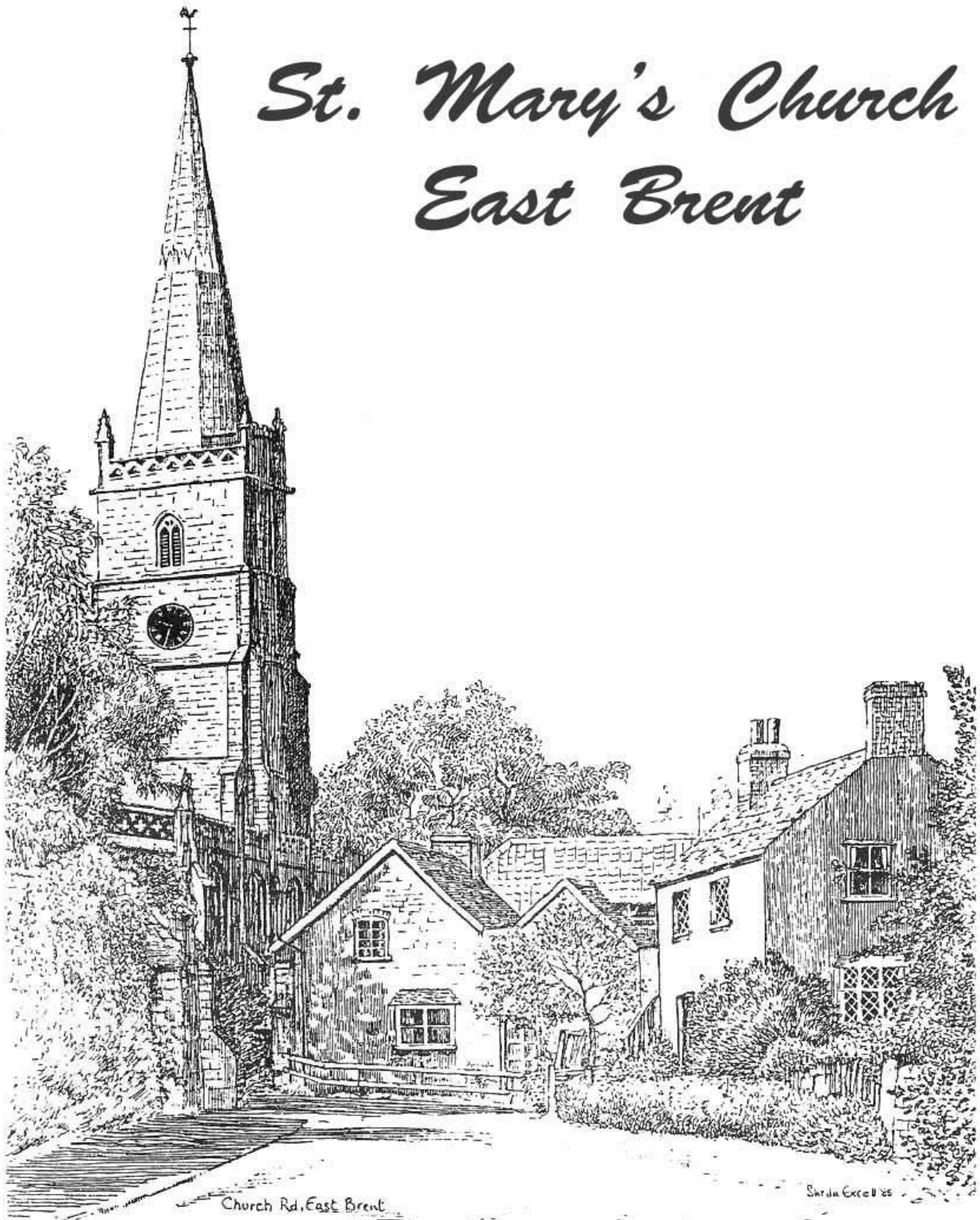


*St. Mary's Church
East Brent*



Church Rd. East Brent

S. J. G. 25

*St. Mary's Church
East Brent*

*A Short History
by
Penelope Harris*

Front Cover Illustration by local artist Sheila Excell

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THE CHURCH OF St. MARY'S, EAST BRENT

The Village of East Brent lies on the northeast side of Brent Knoll. Records in the Domesday Book say there has been a village here since the Norman invasion of 1066, and the earliest record of a Rector in this parish was 1190. The Domesday Book also records that 'Brentmarse', as East Brent was then called, was held by Alnod the Abbot, and that there was a total of 46 houses in the parish.

Once the Normans had invaded, many tiny parish churches were demolished and replaced by bigger, more elaborate buildings. East Brent was no exception. Our church of St. Mary the Virgin dates from 1300. No traces of the former church can be found. The tower and spire were added about a century later.

The first known mention of East Brent states that in AD 663, Ine, King of the West Saxons, gave 'Brentmarse' to the Abbot of Glastonbury and it was held in perpetuity until the dissolution in the 16th century.

Of the various clergymen who have presided over the present church little is known until after 1200 when, in 1203, Martin de Summa was parson, he was followed by Gilbert of Sarum who was vicar in 1262 and was given a pension by the Abbot in return for land on the Knoll. By 1298 when Rogerus became the vicar most of the nave had been built.

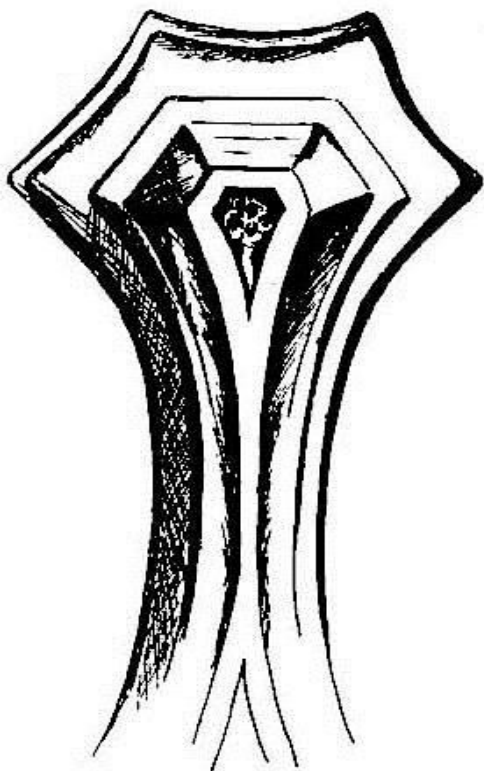
Abbot John Selwood was vicar from 1467 to 1493; he built himself a manor house on the north side of the church, which together with its garden, covered an acre of land and was enclosed by sawn palings eight feet high. Unfortunately the house was demolished in 1708; the cottage now seen at the church gate stands on part of its foundations. There was also an orchard covering three acres, 1½ perches planted with the best kinds of apple and pear trees. Round this domain were forest trees of 'Elms and oak, which grew to wondrous height and bulk, where herons built and bred'.

From 1558 to 1612 registers were kept, recording both marriages and burials and some of the baptisms. However, during the Commonwealth nothing was recorded, although they have been practically continuous since.

Little changed with the church until the reign of Charles I, then came a wave of activity, much during the incumbency of Philip Malet, 1622-1661. In 1634 the church acquired a new pulpit and the following year a gallery was erected. In 1637 the nave had a new ceiling of lath and plaster with a blackberry motif.

1840-45 saw the short incumbency of William Towry Law and the rebuilding of the chancel. It is likely that he was also responsible for obtaining the tower clock, which appears to be second hand. In 1841 the first school was built.

One person who must be mentioned when relating the history of St. Mary's is George Anthony Denison, vicar of this parish for 51 years (1845 to 1896). Following an epidemic of diphtheria he was responsible for damming the stream on the Knoll and so provided the village with its first supply of clean drinking water. His greatest claim to fame, together with churchwarden John Higgs, was the foundation in 1837 of the famous East Brent Harvest Home, which is still carried on today in much the same tradition.



POPPY HEAD PEW END



INITIALS OF JOHN SELWOOD

Once inside our church there are numerous features that are of particular interest. Going round in a clockwise direction (see plan inside back cover) these are: -

1. THE FONT: Which, moved to its present position from one by the pillar facing the church door, is a copy of the ancient damaged font at Rowberrow, reputed to have originally come from East Brent.

The inscription on its wooden cover reads “one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism”.

2. WOODEN PLAQUES: To the right of the church door, lists the various incumbents assigned to this parish from 1261 to the present.

3. THE WEST GALLERY, 1635: Made entirely of wood, it originally formed part of the rood screen across the chancel arch. In 1824 it was moved to its present position, but, as it was not wide enough, the village carpenter cut it in half and inserted a middle piece, explaining why the decoration of the central part differs from that of the sides. The whole is supported on four wooden pillars of elm, cut from the bottom of the middle section of the gallery. Above the aisle are the names of the churchwardens for 1635, William Morris and Nicholas Isgars.

4. THE WEST WINDOW: Seen through the glass panelled door at the back of the church. It portrays Christ and the crucifixion. The glass itself comes from the south window of the former Lady Chapel now the fellowship area.

5. TOWER STEPS: These lead to the base of the spire and the belfry with its ring of six bells. The clock is also reached by these steps.

6. NORTH AISLE: Features neatly carved Victorian pews representing the annunciation.

7. 1ST WINDOW, NORTH AISLE: In the west wall depicts the prophets.

8. BEIR: An ancient piece of woodwork bearing the initials “HW”.

9. 2ND WINDOW, NORTH AISLE: In the north wall, is thought to be Victorian, although dissimilar to the three next to it in both design and colour, which are definitely Victorian reproductions.

10. EFFIGY: Half way along the north aisle this recumbent figure, one of two in the church, is thought to be a 14th century priest or possibly that of Martin de Summa, who in 1160-70 fought for the local monks against a very unscrupulous Bishop ‘Severac’.

11. MEMORIAL TO GEORGE DENISON: Erected by parishioners and incorporating the remains of the Abbot's canopy.

12. 6TH WINDOW, NORTH AISLE: This three-light window still possesses its original 15th century glass. The figure of St. James is portrayed and about his clothing are several scallop shells, the emblem of the pilgrim, St. James being their patron saint.

13. 7TH WINDOW, NORTH AISLE: In the east wall is the only other stained glass window in the church from the 15th century. Its strip cartoon tells the story of our Lord's arrest, crucifixion and ascension, as well as the crowning of the Virgin Mary. However, in 1852 this window was extensively restored and repaired.

14. CEILING OF NORTH AISLE: Made of fine timber this was erected in the second half of the 19th century, in the time of Archdeacon Denison.

15. LECTERN: A 15th century sculpture of an eagle made entirely of wood.

16. 1ST WINDOW, CHANCEL: A memorial to Prebendary Archdale Palmer Wickham, vicar of East Brent from 1911 to 1935.

A keen cricketer and naturalist. After his death in 1935 his extensive collection of butterflies and moths was given to the British Museum.

17. THE CHANCEL: Rebuilt 1840-45, whilst William Towry Law was vicar, when arched two-light windows replaced square-framed windows.

18. PRE-REFORMATION STONE ALTAR SLAB: Laid in the middle of the chancel floor, at present covered by the carpet, was used as a tombstone for John Aubury who died in 1667. (see illustration on page 7)

19. NORTH WINDOW BY ALTAR: Broken since the rebuilding of the chancel, its glass has been replaced but in a disorderly fashion so there is no recognisable picture.

20. ALTAR WINDOW: A memorial to Sarah Reed, daughter of the Lord of the Manor of East Brent, who died on 1st August 1857.

21. 'SEDILIA': Two stone seats for priests, thought to be the only relics from the previous chancel.

22. THE CROSS: Standing in the choir stalls, it was given to the church by Mr. & Mrs. Comer in memory of their son, Sam, killed in the Korean War.

23. THE PULPIT, 1634: A Jacobean construction of beautifully carved oak with short blank arches in two tiers, typical of that era.

24. THE ORGAN: Erected in 1898 during the incumbency of Charles Fane de Salis.

25. PEWS: Those in the nave with poppy heads are 15th century oak brought from Glastonbury after John Selwood had refurbished the Abbey. Their journey probably took them along the waterways, by flat-bottomed barge, across the moors to the south end of the parish.

The initials of John Selwood can be seen on several of the pews near the pulpit. These pews were carved and decorated in the finest tradition, some even have the arms of Glastonbury inscribed on them. Another pew shows the 'Pelican in her Piety', she is piercing her breast so that her blood may save her fledglings in the nest.

26. EFFIGY: Like the one in the North Aisle the true identity of this recumbent figure remains a mystery.

27. WOODEN CHEST: Situated in the Fellowship Area (formerly the Lady Chapel), this was missing from the church for 100 years but was safely returned in 1955 after being in the possession of a Mr. Tiarks of Webbington House for 40 years.

28. GOTHIC TABLET MEMORIAL: Erected in 1869 to the Reed family (a memorial of similar design can be seen in St. Andrew's Church, Burnham-on-Sea).

29. NAVE CEILING, 1637: A piece of early Gothic revival, using the blackberry thorn as a motif, with ribs connecting panels that are arranged in diamond shapes and in turn connected by three pendants. This fine plasterwork was done by the same Italian craftsman who had earlier decorated the ceiling of St. John's Church, Axbridge.

30. CHURCH DOOR: 15th century with tracery. The knocker is also believed to be of this era although some accounts say it comes from the earlier church. Above the door is the Coat of Arms of King George IV.

31. PORCH: The walls were once painted with murals done by Prebendary Henry Denison, nephew and curate to Archdeacon Denison, in 1873. They represented the Virgin seated with angels, the Crucifixion and the Pieta.

32. SCULPTURES ON WEST WALL OF TOWER: Three weather beaten sculptured figures depicting the Virgin and Child, the Trinity and Christ crowning the blessed Virgin.

33. EXTERIOR OF NORTH WALL: Probably the most decorative, consisting of five bays, each having a three-light window, separated by large buttresses with pinnacles.

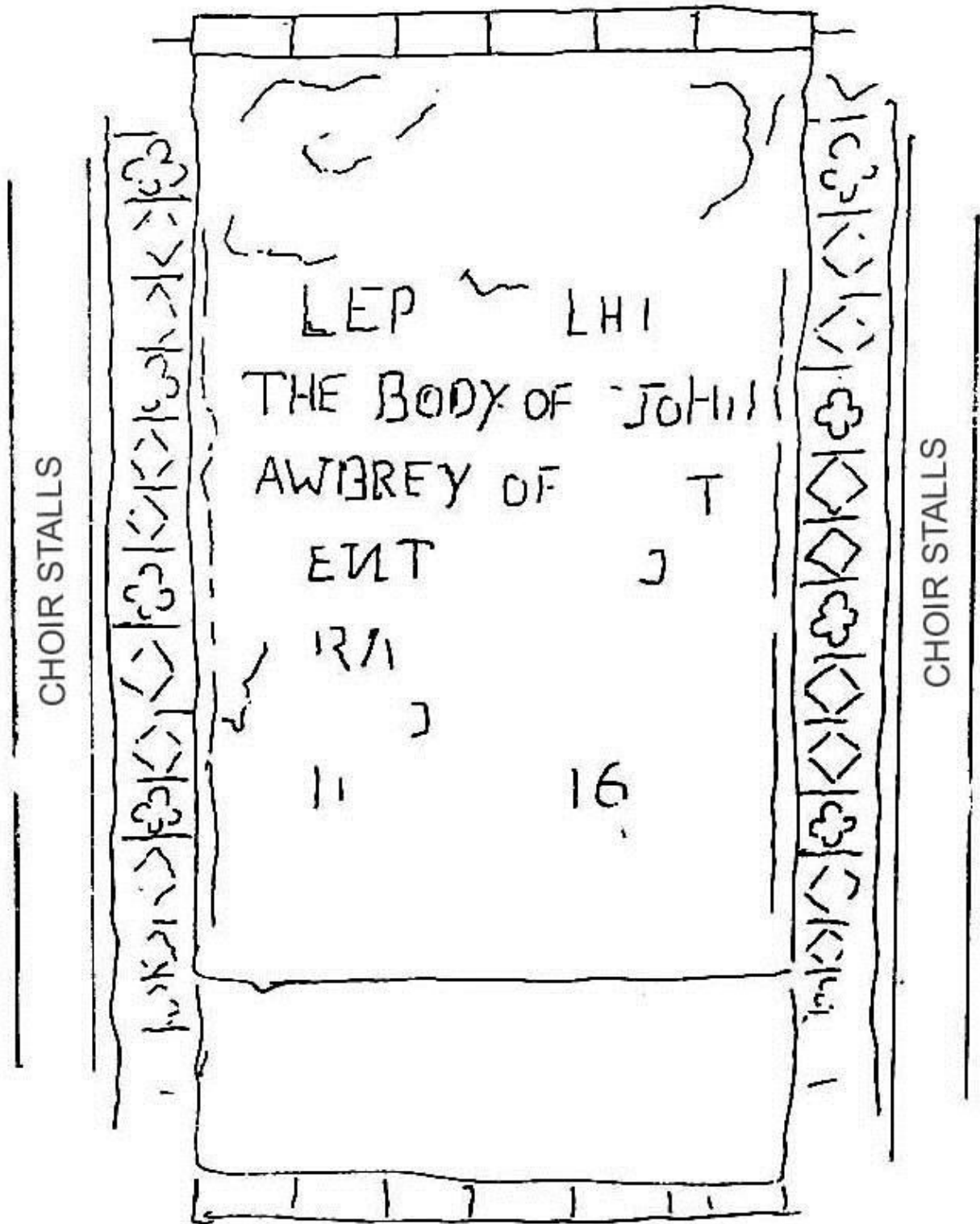
34. SCRATCH DIAL: Found on the buttress, is a relic from the previous church.

35. TOMB OF PREBENDARY WICKHAM: Lies close to the church he loved and cared for.

36. STONE CRUCIFIX: Erected to commemorate Archdeacon Denison.

37. GRAVE OF ARCHDEACON DENISON: Lying close to the school he built and loved and where, in his own words, he can 'Lie within the sounds of his children's feet'.

38. CHURCH GATES: A memorial to Prebendary Wickham erected by his loyal parishioners with the inscription '1911 A.P.W. 1935'

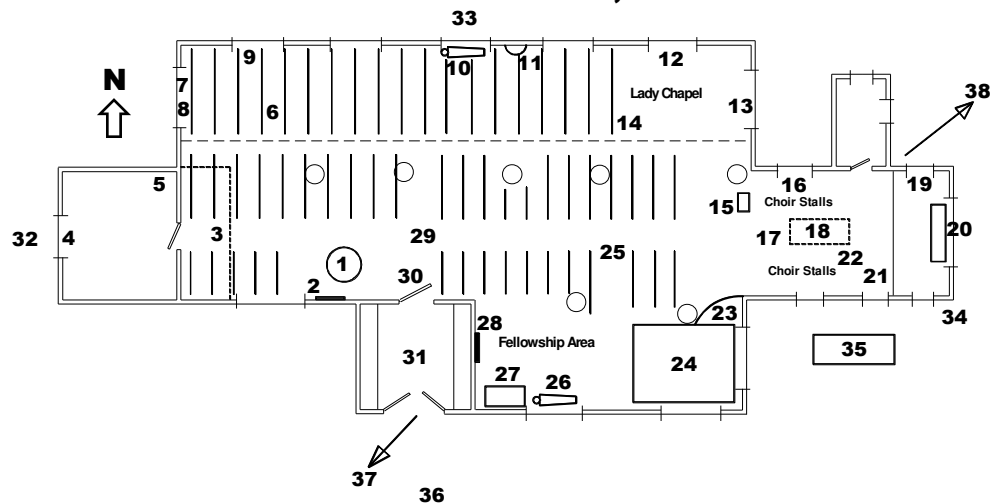


PRE- REFORMATION STONE ALTAR SLAB - CHANCEL

KEY

- 1 THE FONT
- 2 WOODEN PLAQUES
- 3 THE WEST GALLERY
- 4 WEST WINDOW
- 5 TOWER STEPS
- 6 NORTH AISLE
- 7 1ST WINDOW, NORTH AISLE
- 8 BEIR
- 9 2ND WINDOW, NORTH AISLE
- 10 EFFIGY
- 11 MEMORIAL TO GEORGE DENISON
- 12 6TH WINDOW, NORTH AISLE
- 13 7TH WINDOW, NORTH AISLE
- 14 CEILING OF NORTH AISLE
- 15 LECTERN
- 16 1ST CHANCEL WINDOW
- 17 THE CHANCEL
- 18 PRE-REFORMATION STONE
- 19 NORTH WINDOW BY ALTAR
- 20 ALTAR WINDOW

PLAN OF St. MARY'S CHURCH, EAST BRENT



- 21 'SEDILIA'
- 22 THE CROSS
- 23 THE PULPIT (1635)
- 24 THE ORGAN
- 25 PEWS
- 26 EFFIGY
- 27 WOODEN CHEST
- 28 GOTHIC TABLET MEMORIAL
- 29 NAVE CEILING (1637)
- 30 CHURCH DOOR
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- 32 SCULPTURES ON WEST WALL
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- 36 STONE CRUCIFIX
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