

An introduction to the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Westham

This is the text of our history guide: it is too large a file to upload with images, but copies are available in church for £1. Since the Normans invaded and perhaps even before then there has been a worshipping community in the village. Its people have lived through plague, famine, revolution and war. Throughout all this, the church has stood at the centre of the community as a living witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and King.

The Church of St. Mary the Virgin lies in the shadow of the West Gate of Pevensey Castle, hence the name of the village Westham, which is a Saxon name meaning West Home. The original settlement began within the walls of Anderida, a fortified naval base built by the Romans around 290 AD to defend the South coast against raids by Saxon pirates.

On 27th September 1066 William, Duke of Normandy sailed from St. Valery in Normandy with a fleet of 700 ships carrying 5000 soldiers, and their horses, provisions and three ready to assemble wooden castles. Their ships were similar to the Viking long ships (the Normans were of Viking descent) and were 80 feet long. The fleet made an unopposed landing at Pevensey Bay near to the castle on 28th September 1066. The invasion and subsequent Battle of Hastings are depicted in great detail on the Bayeux Tapestry as can be seen from the scenes from the tapestry on the notice board by the font. William erected one of his wooden castles within the walls. He spent his first night on English soil in Pevensey Castle, which stood on a peninsular jutting out into the bay. Pevensey Castle was one of the first of many castles built by the Normans throughout England to deter uprisings by the local inhabitants. Pevensey Castle was to be used throughout the Middle Ages to secure this coast from another invasion. William's army of 5,000 men comprised his elite 2000 mounted knights in chain mail armed with lances and swords, 2000 war horses, 2000 infantry and 1000 archers. He marched his army inland to Senlac Hill, where he faced an English army of a similar size led by King Harold. The English had no cavalry and only a few archers.

Their army was almost entirely composed of infantry including the elite Saxon infantry the housecarls with their fearsome two handed battle axes. The English army, which probably stretched for about half a mile along the hilltop formed a wall of shields held by soldiers standing close together. The shield wall provided a good defence against cavalry, but allowed little room for manoeuvre. The Normans made frequent attacks from the valley below with the archers in front followed by the infantry and then the mounted knights. The archers firing bows and crossbows inflicted significant casualties amongst the closely packed English. After nine hours combat the Norman mounted knights finally broke through the shield wall and King Harold was probably hacked to death by four Norman knights rather than being killed by an arrow through the eye. On his death the English army fled and were pursued by the victorious Normans.

The Church of St. Mary dates from about 1070 and is one of the first churches built by the Normans soon after landing. It was cruciform in shape and more substantial than any Saxon Church would have been. Its large size suggests patronage from the Norman lords of Pevensey Castle. The Church witnessed many significant events at the castle. In 1088 Bishop Odo of Bayeux defended Pevensey Castle against the besieging army of King William II "Rufus" and was forced by starvation to surrender. In 1264 Simon de Montfort's army besieged supporters of Henry the Third in the castle and his soldiers caused damage to the church. Denise de Norton a local wine merchant funded repairs to the damage done by the besiegers to the churches of St Mary Westham and St Nicholas, Pevensey. During the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 a mob attacked the castle and burnt the court rolls.

Around 1300 AD the eleventh century church was enlarged by demolishing the North Wall of the nave and the transept, which were replaced with five perpendicular bay arcades. The Nave was built around 1300 and has a roof of old ship's timbers. The roof over the font has the King posts and the rest of the nave has Queen posts. The North Aisle, North Porch and Tower were built in the fifteenth century. The South wall of the nave with its three original small Norman windows and part of the transept, now the Lady Chapel or Priesthawes Chapel are now all that remain of the original Norman Church. The chapel was originally linked to the monastery near Hailsham, whose monks had drained the Pevensey marshes. The squat, broad proportions and big diagonal buttresses of the Tower were designed to provide the stability needed on marshy ground. The Tower has a peal of six bells cast in 1921 from the metal of the six earlier bells cast in 1789. The earliest record of the church bells is the 20 shillings left in the will of William Chester in 1724 for the repair of the bells.

The early fifteenth century octagonal font was made from green sand stone mined from a quarry near Holywell Eastbourne. The Seven sides represent the days of the week and the eighth side the day of Christ's Resurrection from the dead. There are three piscina in the walls for washing the chalice, one behind the pulpit, one in the Priesthawes Chapel and one in the North Transept. The present chancel seem to have been added during the reign of Henry V at the beginning of the fifteenth century.

The stained glass in the upper part of the East Window in the Chancel is also early fifteenth century. This medieval stained glass has 13 figures representing the glorious company of the Apostles praising God led by St. Paul. The stained glass in the lower part of the East Window was donated by the Welby family as a memorial to their son Captain Montagu Sinclair Welby, 18th Hussars, killed in the Boer War.

The St Mary's Rood screen is a wooden partition of richly carved open tracery, which separates the church nave, where the congregation worshipped, from the chancel, the part of the church reserved for the priests. Rood screens mainly date from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. The Saxon word rood or rode means cross. The Rood screen was surmounted by the great rood a large sculpture of Christ crucified on the cross, which rose up above the rood loft. The rood loft was used as a platform for candles to light up the cross. There is a narrow staircase in the wall to the left of the rood screen which used to provide access to the original medieval rood loft. St. Mary's did not escape the effects of the English Reformation, when the rood screen was dismantled and stored in the church tower.

In 1923 the rood screen was put back in the church and it was visited by Queen Mary, the wife of George V, in 1935. The replacement reproduction loft was donated in the early twentieth century by the Welby family. The last twentieth century addition was the creation of a meeting room below the bell tower. This involved installing a new floor above the meeting room to serve as a platform for the bell ringers, which is accessed by a new staircase. Access to the bell loft itself is still by the original narrow fifteenth century stone staircase.

During the English Reformation stone altars were replaced by wooden communion tables. The old altar stones were either broken up or degraded by being placed on the church floor as paving stones for people to walk on. In 1602 the Vicar of St. Mary, the Rev Miles Hodgson, inserted part of the altar stone into the floor for use as a gravestone for his wife. Part of the stone with two crosses was cut off to shorten it. P.H. stands for his wife Phillis Hodgson. Miles Hodgson, was vicar from 1593 to 1625. The brass panels with the names of past vicars of St. Mary hang on the walls of the Chancel. The contrasting fortunes of Richard Borde, Vicar of Westham, and his brother, the royal physician Andrew Borde, reflect the differing impact of the Henrician English Reformation, which was prompted by the Pope's refusal to grant Henry a divorce from Catherine of Aragon to enable him to marry Ann Boleyn.

All prominent citizens had to swear the Oath of Supremacy acknowledging Henry as Head of the Church in place of the Pope or risk a traitor's death. Richard Borde opposed the religious changes, which included the displaying of Bibles in English in every church, the Ten Commandments in English and the break with Rome. He fled into exile on the Continent. However, Andrew Borde prospered serving Henry as court jester and then court physician. He renovated the Mint House in Pevensey in 1542 and arranged for Henry's son, the boy king Edward VI, to stay at the Mint House to improve his health by breathing the sea air.

Brian Duppa, Vicar of Westham in 1623, was subsequently appointed Chancellor of Oxford University by King Charles I and also tutor to the future Charles II. He served as chaplain to Charles I during his imprisonment by Cromwell and attended Charles on the scaffold at his execution. After the Restoration Charles the II appointed his former tutor Bishop of Winchester.

William Leeke, the Curate in 1829 was a standard bearer of the 52nd Oxfordshire Regiment of Foot at the Battle of Waterloo, where his regiment played a crucial role in defeating the final assault by Napoleon's Imperial Guard. When curate at St. Mary Leeke held services for the coastguards and excisemen stationed in the Martello Towers. The services were held at irregular hours, so that the smugglers were not made aware that no watch was being kept.

In the spring of 1860 the vicar, Howard Hopley, was in Jerusalem when the foundations of Solomon's Temple, upon which the later structure of Herod was built, were being excavated. He chipped off a small splinter from a stone probably part of King Solomon's stables, which were sited under the temple. He had it set in onyx and marble and fixed under the South window of the chancel.

There are also interesting things to see outside the Church, including a stone stoup cut in the masonry outside the West door. This was for holding holy water into which worshippers might dip their finger when coming into church. A scratch mass dial is built into the jamb of the little South door of the Norman wall. The deep line in the dial shows the time of the mass or communion, the lesser lines indicate other services.

Twelve yards to the south of the scratch dial can be seen four stones in the form of a cross, which mark the site of the communal grave of plague victims in 1665. In the reign of Charles II, the Great Plague killed 100,000 in London and then spread to other parts of the country. In the North wall there is a turret with a winding stair inside, which is possibly a stairway to the rood loft or a leper's tower. The Consecration Cross of flint set in Caen stone is contemporaneous with the construction of the fifteenth century chancel and is to be found in the East wall below the window. The Consecration cross marks where the bishop anointed the church with holy water in order to consecrate it.

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