

WELCOME TO ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, WOOTTON COURTENAY

When you entered the churchyard, the yew tree you passed is believed to date from the time of the Black Death or plague in 1350. Opposite is the stone cross (originally outside the churchyard) that was a meeting place for the villagers and where wandering preachers would address their congregation.

The oldest part of the church dates from about 1250. The Norman owner of the manor gave the church to a French priory being founded at Stogursey, a village some 13 miles away. King Henry VI who came to the throne in 1422 dissolved this priory and used the proceeds to found Eton College. The early rectors of the parish of Wootton Courtenay church had to be chosen by Eton College.

To help you orientate yourself, you have entered the church on the South side, the altar being at the East end, as is traditional with Christian churches. The oldest parts of the church are at the East end of the chancel (this is the area which includes the altar and the choir stalls) and the lower part of the tower. These date from about 1250 and are thought to have been part of an even earlier Norman church.

The West doorway (which can be seen from outside the church at the base of the tower) and the lower tower windows are also 13th century.

The building was completed in about 1450 when the nave (that is the area where the congregation sit) was rebuilt and the North nave added. The roofs of both are very fine examples of a typical West Country "Wagon" roof. Both have five large purlins – the lengthwise beams – with remarkable large and richly carved bosses. Each boss has a unique design: these would have been brightly painted but were "stained" in Victorian times.

The pillars and arches also date from about 1450. Note the niches in the pillars – these are rare and at one time may have contained a statue.

In the third major building phase (1530-1540) the north aisle East window and the two big windows in the nave on the South side were installed. All are of local design and were probably made by Dunster masons.

Until about 1850 congregations took very little active part in the actual services, merely witnessing or listening to the activities of the clergy. It was important that the congregation could see the main altar and for this reason a "squint" was built in the wall at the East end of the North nave. The remains of this squint can still be seen, now blocked off as services also take place in the North nave.

Sometime during the 19th century the original low square tower with battlements was raised and replaced by the present "saddleback" design. In the 19th century the chancel was almost entirely rebuilt and the porch was added but some interesting old features including the original pulpit with a big sounding board were lost.

In 1905 the vestry and organ were added. In the 1930's a travelling craftsman named Pennington was asked by the Rector to teach him and the locals to wood carve. The fine wooden screen in front of the chancel is the result of their efforts.

Other points of interest are the 15th century font and the Holy Water stoup in the porch that has been hewn from a single block of stone.

The tower has six bells, the heaviest weighing 10cwt (508 Kg) dating from 1629: the most modern bell was installed in 1903.

This church has served countless generations of West Country worshippers and such buildings are a vital part of our heritage. It costs our small congregation over £20,000 a year to keep our church functioning. Any offering you can make will be gratefully received.