# St. Mary the Virgin, Silverton



# A Brief Guide to the Church

Suggested donation **£1**

# A Brief Introduction to St Mary's Church, Silverton

A very warm welcome to St Mary's Church.

## The Building

Silverton was an Anglo-Saxon settlement and royal manor and was already a substantial settlement by the time of the Domesday survey.

The present church dates from the late 15th and mid-16th centuries, with substantial additions in 1862/3. It is a Grade I Listed building. There was an earlier building on the site of which nothing remains. The list of rectors goes back to 1273.

The tower and walls are largely built of local volcanic trap stone, probably taken from one of a number of quarries in the area. John Suyffmore, rector from 1445-1479, left money in his will of June 16, 1478 to build an ambulatory and provide for a chantry in the north aisle. This would suggest a building of the present church in the last years of the 15th century. This appears to be borne out by dendrochronological dating of the aisle timber ceilings.

The nave has north and south aisles of four bays. There are large four-light windows to each aisle in an

early perpendicular style. Further rebuilding appears to have taken place in the mid-16th century by the insertion of the arcades in the nave which are constructed of Beer stone and are of standard section with well carved capitals. These can be dated from the rebus of Lawrence Dobell, rector on the front column on the north side to between 1519 and 1531, when he was the rector.

The church was extended and re-ordered in 1862/3 under the supervision of the well-known architect, Edward Ashworth.

Entry to the church is through a stone porch with a vaulted ceiling. The base plate of the door handle of the oak door to the porch bears the date 1713 and the initials of the churchwardens at the time. The door may well be the original door of the church, and this must have been the date of a repair rather than its original construction, possibly when it was moved from the inner doorway to the outer entry to the porch. By the inner door is a hole formerly occupied by the stoop.

On entering the church, you will see that there is a good mediaeval plastered and ribbed wagon roof to the nave with 36 roof bosses. These bosses were restored, and some replaced in 1957 by local craftsman, Jack Perrin. There is a plan of the ceiling on page 11.

The aisle ceilings are currently supported on scaffolding. They are the original aisle ceilings of the church built in the last years of the 15th century.



Dendrochronology dating shows that both aisles were erected from trees felled at the same time, but it is evident that two different carpenters were working on them and they show an interesting transition in jointing techniques. They were discovered six years ago in the course of decorating the church, having been hidden behind lath and plaster for over 200 years. The ceilings escaped 'restoration' in the Victorian rebuilding of the church as it is clear that they did not know that the ceilings existed! They have been described by leading experts as unique, remarkable and of national significance. The church has recently received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to cover the first stage in repairing and conserving them.

Standing at the back looking towards the altar (north to the left and south to the right)

On the second pair of columns, the Angel Gabriel on the left is greeting St Mary on the right. These are

believed to have been made by Jack Perin in 1957.The column on the right above St Mary has an elaborately carved capital with angels holding a banner.



This is a Trinity Column, and at the top between the wings of the angels are three small bearded heads: The Father, Son and Holy Ghost.



The front column on the left bears the rebus of Lawrence Dobell who was rector of the church between 1519 and 1531. St Lawrence is said to have been martyred on a gridiron and here there are two gridirons which are therefore double. In case the pun wasn't apparent, the name 'dobell' is written. This would seem to indicate that the arcades in the nave were inserted during his incumbency or shortly afterwards.

The rood screen originally went across the church between these two columns, so what is now the front

bay of the nave was formerly the chancel. There is a small oak door set into the wall of the south aisle opening onto a spiral staircase that once gave access to the top of the rood screen: the stone door jambs of the door onto the rood screen can be seen higher up the wall. It was in the course of the 1862/3 reordering that the rood screen was removed and destroyed, though a portion of it may still be seen at the end of the north aisle across the arch to what is now St Anne's chapel.

The windows to the north aisle are all in clear glass. On the south side three windows are made of good quality stained glass by Warrington (1857)



During the recent decoration of the church, fragments of Biblical wall texts from the post-reformation period were discovered all over the walls of the nave. They probably date from the mid-16th century at the height of Protestantism and were later covered over. They are of considerable interest to the history of the church and more widely and reflect the religious influences

after the Reformation and their impact on the Silverton worshiping community. The body of text recovered on the east end of the north aisle is believed to come from the Geneva Bible, Mathew 15, vv. 1-5.

The chancel was rebuilt in 1862/3 and replaced the east end of the church. The rood screen was removed and what had previously been the chancel became the first bay of the nave. The pine pews to a design by Ashworth were introduced into the nave at the same time. The best pews are numbered to be rented, and the back pews are labelled as being 'Free'.

The east-end window is by Ward and Hughes (1880), one of the country's leading producers of stained glass.

The chapel to the north of the chancel was built by public subscription in 1880, originally it seems to house the organ, though the elaborate carved ceiling would suggest that it may originally have been intended to have a less mundane use. After the removal of the organ to the west gallery in 1972, this chamber has been used as a chapel and was dedicated to St Anne, the mother of Mary, on 26th July 1973. The carved and painted figure, cross and candlesticks are again the work of Jack Perrin.

The oak nave platform in front of the chancel arch was erected in 2015.

At the west end of the church there is a fine balustraded wooden gallery on columns installed probably in first half of the 17th century.

The gallery was moved forward in 1734 to give extra space and a second gallery constructed to house the choir and the church band. The churchwardens' accounts for 1818/19 show that that there was a substantial choir and that the band comprised at least a bass viol, a flute and two clarinets. It must have sounded very strange!



The balustrades are hidden behind ten panels attached to the front of the gallery that record the numerous charitable benefactions to the parish. It is believed that there are no other examples of such panels in the area.

**The Furniture**

The High Altar is a good Jacobean table. It would appear that this was filled in with panels by the Victorians, possibly from an oak coffer.

Standing against the wall in the north aisle is the 'hudd'. Looking like a sentry box, its purpose was very similar. When it was raining at the time of a burial, it would be carried to grave-side so the minister could conduct the service without getting his wig wet.

The nave altar was made in 2015 by Alan Grandfield, a local cabinet maker.

The pulpit and font are made of Beer stone and were placed in the church in 1863.

At the back of the church is a fine oak chest dating from the 16th century. Every parish was required to by the Poor Law Directive of 1552 and the Royal Injunctions of 1559 to possess a secure chest in which to store the registers and other documents of the church and parish as well as church valuables and alms collected for the poor. There are three locks: one for the incumbent, and the other two for each of the churchwardens. A 17th century collecting box marked 'Remember the poor' is attached to one of the gallery pillars

## The Organ

The organ is on the gallery at the west end of the church. An organ was erected on the gallery as a part of the 1863/4 re-ordering by R Mortimer of Taunton. It was removed from the gallery in 1880 to the organ chamber built to the north of the chancel, and extensively rebuilt by Messrs J.W. Walker and Sons. The effect of the organ having been shoe-horned into such a restricted space must have been disappointing, and the organ was moved back to the gallery in 1970 by Messrs Eustice and Aldridge. The action was electrified and a detached console provided behind the Dobell pillar. A major overhaul was undertaken in 2014 by Warren Marsh of Clevedon Pipe Organ Services. and the reeds were revoiced. The organ has two manuals and pedals and has 21 speaking stops

## The Bells

The church has a peal of 8 bells. It is known to have had 4 bells in 1553 and these were replaced in 1743 by 5 bells cast by William Evans of Chepstow. A sixth bell was added in 1845. In 1937 the wooden frame was replaced and the opportunity was taken to add 2 more bells by John Taylor of Loughborough. The bells were rededicated by the Bshop of Exeter on 3rd July.

## The Churchyard

The church is surrounded by a sizeable churchyard enclosed by a stone wall. By the south porch there is a Yew tree said to be in the region of 1000 years old. It may well have been planted in the Anglo-Saxon churchyard. Nearby are the remains of a preaching cross of which only the stump remains. This was a large crucifix and the bottom of Christ's feet can just be made out. It was most likely destroyed by the iconoclasts in the 16th century.

To the south of the church beyond the South gate of the churchyard, there is a grassy area known as 'The Berry'. It may once have been at the centre of the village. The Lime trees are said to have been planted to commemorate the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

## Social History

Like many churches along the Exe Valley, the church suffered considerable ill-treatment at the hands of the iconoclasts. It was probably by their hands that the preaching cross in the churchyard with the image of Christ was broken down. The rood was taken down and set up in hedge and abused in 1553. It is probably around this time that anything vaguely 'Catholic' in the church was smashed out and destroyed.

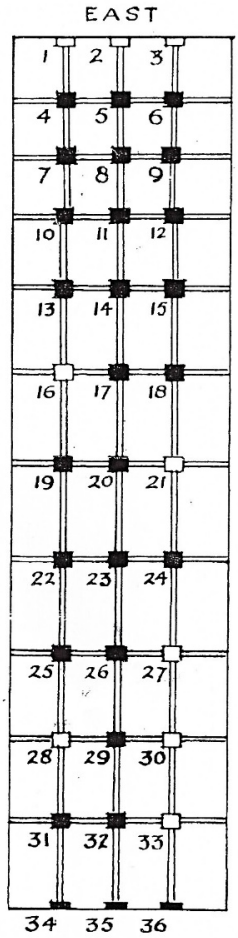
Local tradition also attributes additional damage caused to the church by German Calvinist mercenaries billeted in the village in March 1646 as a part of General Fairfax's New Model Army during the siege of Exeter

.

Bishop Gilbert Bourne of Bath and Wells, who had been chaplain to Queen Mary and President of the Council of Wales, having refused to subscribe to the Oath of Supremacy on the accession of Elizabeth, was removed from his see and eventually placed in the 'gentle custody' of Dr George Carew, then Rector of Silverton and Dean of Windsor, and he lived in the rectory until his death in 1569. He is buried in the church.

The Rectory of Silverton was in past times regarded as one of the most valuable in the county. Many of the rectors were very well connected and came from leading landed families. Dr William Cotton, Bishop of Exeter, was Rector from 1599 and lived for much of his time in the mansion that was Silverton rectory, preferring it to his palace in Exeter. It is said that he ordained his clergy in the stables! He died in Silverton on Sunday 26th August 1621.

## PLAN OF THE ROOF BOSSES




NEW BOSSES

1 Dove
2 Leaf Design
3 Abstract Design
4 Eagle - St. John
5 Lion - St. Mark
6 Ox - St. Luke
7 Blessed Virgin Mary
8 Angel - St. Matthew
9 Bishop
10 Abstract Design
11 Madonna Lilies
12 Air Force Crest
13 Grapes
14 Hands & Carving Tools
15 Fishes
16 Acanthus Leaves
17 Irises
18 Three Birds

OLD BOSSES

19 Scouts & Brownies
20 Green Finch
21 Acanthus Leaves
22 Tudor Rose
23 Tudor Rose
24 Alder
25 Crest of Donor
26 Apples
27 Tudor Rose
28 Abstract Design
29 Acanthus Leaves
30 Abstract Design
31 ,, ,,
32 ,, ,,
33 ,, ,,
34 ,, ,,
35 ,, ,,
36 ,, ,,

## Rectors of Silverton

1273 Roger de Leycester
1309 Roger de Sancto Condantino
1322 Nicholas de Atton
1328 Walter de Wyne
1330 Thomas de Leybourne
1363 John de Wythornwik
. . . . Hugh de Marleburgh
1382 John Prust
1394 William Okehampton
1415 Richard Hooper
1435 Major Parys
1438 William Browne
1444 John Coke
1445 John Suyffmore
1479 William Somaster
. . . . John Wadham
1505 John Fulford
1519 Lawrence Dobell
1531 Robert Dobell
1549 William Williams
1553 Walter Wright
. . . . George Carew
1583 John Kennell
1592 William Marston
1599 Dr William Cotton, Bishop of Exeter
1613 William Cotton. . . turned out by the Commonwealth and succeeded by
. . . . Nathan Byfield
. . . . Richard Bryan who gave way at the Restoration to Edward Cotton and succeeded again on Cotton's death

1693 Richard Troyte
1689 Edward Cary
1733 Peter Beavis
1750 George Lacy
1761 John Briggs
1762 William Browne
1784 Jonathan Rashleigh
1806 William Barker
1835 Charles Tripp
1862 William Cookesley Thompson
1866 H. Fox Strangways
1894 J. Heald Ward
1909 Ernest Edward Egremont Heathcote
1936 Thomas Collins WaIters
1943 Thomas Greatorex Shelmerdine
1954 Wilfrid Guy Sanderson
1959 Colin Marr
1966 George Hodgshon
1972 Thomas Anthony Watson
1991 Michael George Smith
1995 Alan Hendry MacDonald
2020 Paul Anthony Kingdom
2026 Timothy Robin Astin

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