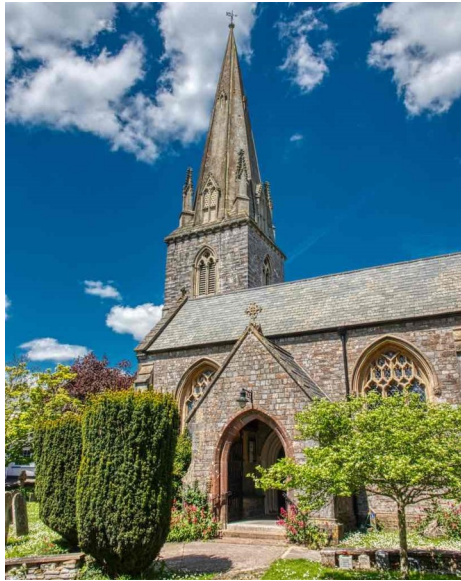


Members of Honiton u3a are  
DISCOVERING....

# Devon's Historic Churches



Church of St Mary the Virgin  
Uffculme

11<sup>th</sup> April 2024

**u3a** learn,  
laugh,  
live

## Church of St Mary the Virgin



The **Church of St Mary the Virgin** is first mentioned in a charter dating back to 1136, the present church has a mixture of medieval and Victorian architecture and is a Grade II\* listed building. It is believed the original church was possibly founded by the monks of Glastonbury Abbey. No traces of this early building survive, The church was slowly rebuilt from the early 14th century into the Gothic style, beginning with the north nave aisle, chancel and tower. In the early 15th century, rebuilding continued, with an eastern extension on the north nave aisle, the south nave aisle and the rood screen. From 1846-1847, the south nave aisle was duplicated by **John Hayward**, creating a rare instance of double aisles. Hayward continued with a programme of rebuilding in 1849, with the renewal or replacement of many of the church windows, including the large four-light east window and those in the south aisle and porch. The most significant alteration in 1849, however, was the rebuilding of the **broach tower and spire**, (see *Glossary*) again by Hayward, at a cost of some £3,400 (equivalent in 2021 to some £375,000<sup>[5]</sup>)



The tower is formed of three stages, with corner buttresses. It mainly dates to the 1849 rebuild by Hayward, but does feature some medieval material. The lower stage has a centred west doorway with hood mould, and small lancet windows to all but the eastern face. The middle stage has a clock in its western face, contained within a recessed stone roundel, the centre of which has some clear glass to light the chamber inside. The belfry stage has two-light Decorated Gothic-style bell openings with slate louvres. A corbel table above the belfry openings supports the spire above. The spire has large corner pinnacles and two light pierced stone openings in its lower stage. The spire is surmounted by a weathercock.



In November 1998, a nearby fireworks factory in the village suffered a severe fire, culminating in a powerful explosion, damaging many buildings in the village and shattering windows some distance from the factory. More than £300,000 of damage was caused to the church by the explosion, including to the tower pinnacles, church roofs, windows and organ.

*BBC News Wednesday, November 18, 1998 Published at 06:12 GMT*

Once inside the Church the first surprise is that the building is more or less square. This is the result of the addition of extra aisles designed by Hayward.



The chancel is a Victorian Gothic creation, with a large four-light window and wagon roof. The roof is painted a vibrant red, with stone braces to the wagon vault. Where these braces meet, there are decorative, gilded stone bosses. There is a highly decorated stone reredos below the east window, featuring carvings designed by Hayward, as well as a piscina



**The Rood Screen** is the oldest and largest in Devon. It has 17 bays mainly dating from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century but the three at the northern end were added in 1828. Such is the quality of the work that they are barely distinguishable from the originals. In medieval times funding for church improvements were often funded by selling ale (beer without hops which gives it a short shelf life) on holy days and festivals. The profits were high as the barley was either given or grown on church land.

The screen still has its original vaulting and colouring of green and red. Compared to later screens, it had much thicker uprights and vaulting ribs, deeper carvings and more angular tracery. Possibly it was meant to imitate stone. The thick-ribbed deep-carved vaulting would once have supported the rood loft.





The three other features are, first the octagonal **font** of Caen stone, designed by Samuel Knight, which was given in 1843 and moved from the centre of the nave to its present position in 1927.

Carved round the font are the words "*Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not*"



Second, the brass **Eagle Lectern** is a particularly fine example and one of only a few in Devon, and third the **Pulpit** which dates from 1715 and has an unusually finely carved front panel.



The **Walrond family** has played a large part in the Church with the North Chapel being dedicated to them in 1922. The monument above the tomb is in memory of William Walrond (d 1689) while the large models on top of the tomb are on the left, Henry Walrond (d 1650), in the centre, another Henry Walrond (d 1638) and on the right Penelope Walrond nee Sydnham who gave William a total of 13 children!



John's mother Francis Walrond was eldest daughter and sole heiress of William Henry Walrond of Bradfield. The Walrond family seat was at Bradfield from the reign of Henry III until the early 20thC.

John was MP for Tiverton 1865 and stood for the seat for 12 years unsuccessfully but was finally made Sheriff in 1874–1875 and became 1st Baronet in 1876. He married Francis Caroline Hood, the daughter of Samuel Hood of Cricket St. Thomas, in 1845. They had 5 children: 2 sons and 3 daughters apparently 1 illegitimate daughter.

Sir John, who died at Cannes, was buried on 30th May 1889 at Bradfield. The internment was in the burial ground attached to the Chapel endowed by the deceased. The Devon and Exeter Gazette, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1922, reported that The Hon. Mrs Adams, widow of the late Hon. Lionel Walrond M.P. for Tiverton, had been *granted a "faculty" to convert the North Chapel of St Mary's, into a private chapel dedicated to the memory of her first husband.* It was reported that ancient oak from the Manor at Bradfield was to be used for panelling in the chapel and an altar window of stained glass would be installed.



The newspaper reports do not mention the installation of an altar in the Walrond Chapel. However, the reredos and altar carvings are original and of very fine quality which suggests they could have come from Bradfield. The reredos carvings are late 1500s renaissance style, the colouring is more recent, they have been collected together and formed into composites in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the altar, there are carvings of three saints, on the left is St Maurice, one of the very few black

saints acknowledged in Western Europe. Maurice was a Roman soldier and, as he is here, is generally depicted wearing armour. Maurice was recognised by the Roman Catholic church as



the patron saint of dyers and cloth makers and very relevant to 16<sup>th</sup> century Uffculme where these trades were of great importance to the local economy.



The **Tower Screen** dates from the late 16th century and seems to have no religious significance, probably because of the reformation. It has been adapted from the old west gallery which was dismantled in 1928 and used to screen the tower entrance. I look at the carvings and wonder, as it was a time when the exploration of Africa and the New World was taking place, if the inspiration was from the art and culture of these lands. One is obviously a mermaid and some seem to be growing out of foliage like green men but the attire and hair look far from Devonian! The carver certainly let his imagination run riot. There are also coats of arms suggesting that it was paid for by local well off families.

## What is the future for our Churches

Place of worship, museum or community hub? Or all three?

With dwindling numbers attending church (although 40 on Sundays seems a lot), the ageing population and fewer priests, Uffculme is in a Mission Community with 4 other churches, a churchless parish and a “festival church”. Like all churches, it faces challenges. In an attempt to widen the use of the building the pews were “released” and can be moved for events. On Tuesdays and Thursdays there are well attended mother and baby/toddler clubs in the church. One of the aims of the parish is to attract younger people. The local schools still have activities or services at major festivals. There is also a children’s corner in the church with comfortable seating and religious books.

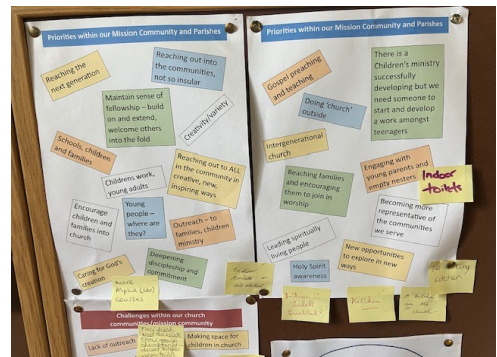
The church also employs a children’s worker. As you go in there is an I-spy quiz to do with things to spot around the church.

Another aim is to involve the wider non church going community. How to attract younger families is a big challenge and as the villages in this area become more and more dormitory villages for the larger towns people are often too busy to join in local events.

There are some musical events which are well attended. The bellringing team is very active and the tower is affiliated to the Guild of Devonshire Ringers



Twice a week there is a coffee and chat meeting in the “Square Corner”, a café and church run meeting place in the nearby square. There are also basic coffee and tea making facilities in the church. Perhaps a more comfortable coffee area/ prayer circle is needed.



A film club also takes place in the church.

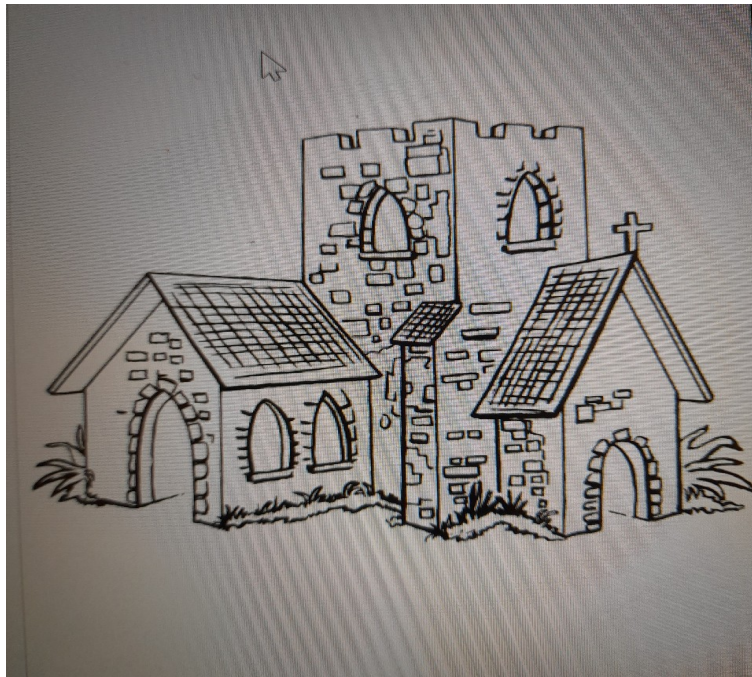
Regarding the expectations and comfort of a modern visitor there were several comments on the noticeboard about indoor /disabled toilets and also several suggestions for a proper kitchen.

There was also a food bank.

Another challenge for today in the absence of local rich families such as the Walronds to finance projects is money. The warden talked of a period of serious financial pressure. There is a leaking vestry, general everyday upkeep, heating, etc.

The phrase: "It's a community not a monument" was used and indeed will some churches end up as museums and not used either for the religious or non religious community?

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