

CHELTENHAM PARISH CHURCH (St Mary's)

Although Christian worship on this site dates back to the 8th century the oldest parts of the present building - the west wall of the nave and the piers supporting the tower arches - date from Norman times. Starting in the late 13th century the building was enlarged: north and south aisles were added, the chancel extended, the upper part of the tower modified and a spire added. It is believed the extension took place to enable people from the outlying parts of the area normally served by local chapels to come to take communion at St Mary's at religious festivals. In 1547 Edward VI's Chantry Commission reported that a grammar school was operating here in St Catherine's Chantry (probably the north aisle). This later moved into a purpose built school financed by Richard Pate, who may have attended the chantry school. In the 1860s and 1870s the church underwent much needed renovation: the crypt was filled in, the 18th century galleries removed, oak pews installed, a sacristy and south porch added.

The building is open to visitors from 11-3 Mondays to Fridays and 10-12 Saturdays. Services are held on Sunday afternoons at 3.45 and at other times.

Among its notable features are

The Windows

The tracery of the windows dates from the 13th and 14th centuries and represents a range of styles including early geometrical, late geometrical, curvilinear and perpendicular. The stained glass is Victorian (1875-90) and is the subject of a book published by the Friends of St Mary's, Cheltenham.

The Memorials

There are a number of interesting memorial tablets around the church dating from the late sixteenth century onwards. One of the oldest (to the right of the porch door) is to John English, a curate of the church who was imprisoned by the Puritans. The largest is the memorial to Captain Henry Skillicorne (next to the pulpit) who developed Cheltenham's first spa and so laid the foundations for Cheltenham's subsequent development. The visit of King George III and his family to Cheltenham is recorded on this tablet. The 20th century reredos (wooden screen) behind the altar is in memory of Alderman William Nash Skillicorne, Henry's great-grandson, who was the first mayor of Cheltenham.

The Baptistry

Formerly the north porch, the baptistry has a room above it reached by a spiral staircase. It is believed the room was originally used to provide overnight accommodation for visiting clergy. (Until the Reformation the monks of Cirencester Abbey were responsible for the church). From 1729 to 1847 it housed the Old Cheltenham Charity, or Blue Coat, School originally established in the High Street in 1683 after George Townsend left £4 annually "for teaching poor children to read and write". The school eventually moved to Devonshire Street.

The Tower

The tower boasts a peal of 12 bells which are rung on Sundays and Thursday evenings. The octagonal spire rises 167 feet above the floor of the church.

Bibliography

Guide to St Mary's by Geoffrey Hart. Price: £1. Available in the church.

The Stained Glass Windows of the Parish Church of St Mary, Cheltenham: A Devotional Tour by Guy Fothergill and David Walker. Price £3.75. Available in the church.

Cheltenham Parish Church: Its Architecture and History, John Sawyer (Norman, Sawyer & Co, Cheltenham, 1903). Available from local libraries.

This free leaflet has been prepared by the Friends of St Mary's Parish Church Cheltenham, an organisation which helps with the preservation of this historic building and provides financial support for its requirements other than regular maintenance and running costs. For further information please take the coloured leaflet describing the activities of the Friends, telephone 01242 513896 or look at their website at <http://www.stmaryscheltfriends.org.uk/>, email: secretary@stmaryscheltfriends.org.uk.