

# ALL SAINTS' CHURCH HARSTON



## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



There has been a church in Harston for nearly 1000 years. The present building is more than 500 years old. It was probably built in 1540s, before the Wars of the Roses.

We must imagine a time when few people could read or write and when symbols, pictures and sculptures were used to tell the Christian Story. Once we put ourselves in this position we begin to see how even the names of the parts of the building are significant and understand why preaching was so important. Christian churches in the West usually consist of two parts: the chancel which was for the ordained clergy and the nave for the rest of the people, the laity. At All Saints the upkeep of the chancel is the responsibility of Jesus College and that of the nave is the responsibility of the Parochial Church Council – the local congregation.

## Churchyard and entrance

Our exploration of the church begins with the churchyard, the consecrated burial ground that surrounds the church on all sides and sits well above the floodplain of the river. The graves are marked with headstones and all the burials lie in the same direction with the feet to the east, towards the sunrise in anticipation of the resurrection. The path from the gate leads to the porch and entrance to the church at the north west corner.



## Font

The font stands in front of you as you enter the church. Properly called the baptismal font, it is usually found near the entrance to signal that for a Christian, life begins with baptism, the pouring of water over the head in a symbolic rite. The priest puts the water in the font and blesses it, reenacting Jesus' baptism by John in the river Jordan. At All Saints, babies are usually brought to be baptized and their parents and godparents make promises to guide them as they grow up. Baptism is witnessed by the church congregation who also make promises to help the parents and sponsors in bringing up the child in the church.

The word 'Font' comes from the Latin word for spring / source. The font is near the door because it is about beginnings. It is octagonal, signaling that people come from all points of the compass to be baptised. It is raised on a small platform to give it prominence.

At All Saints' the octagonal basin of the font is one of the oldest remaining parts of the church, probably dating back to the fifteenth century. Covers for fonts became compulsory in 1263 to prevent any of the water being stolen as it was considered by some to have magical powers. The cover here is no more than 150 years old.



We know that the font was moved to this position in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Nave



The church plan is rectangular oriented east-west. The main body of the church is called the nave – from the Latin for ship - the roof in particular looks like an upside-down wooden boat. The nave, extending from the font to the steps that mark out the chancel, is where the congregation sits.

Originally the congregation would have stood - there were only a few seats against the outer walls. After the Reformation, when preaching became more important and services became longer, pews were inserted. The fixed pews in All Saints nave were removed in 2020 to make way for the more flexible seating on chairs. This change means that the church is now available for other uses besides worship.

The nave is conveniently divided by the central aisle leading to the chancel steps and has two other aisles, separated from the nave by pillars, one on the north and a narrower one on the south.

Look up at the roof and see the **corbels** – crouching figures supporting the beams. These are probably remnants from the earliest building and may be Norman, even pagan in origin.



The arches of the nave are an unusual feature of All Saints' architecture. You will see that the wall above is flush with the opening and right down to the base of the column, a style that is only seen in a few churches in Northamptonshire. The plain walls add to the calm of this building and lend an impression of length to the nave.

Above the arches, on both sides of the nave, are rows of windows, the **clerestory**, that helped to increase light for the congregation in the days before electricity was introduced.

On the outer side of the pillars are the **aisles** (from Latin *ala* a wing). The **north aisle** is wider than the **south aisle** by some feet and is wider still at its east end where it ends in a former chapel. Close to the small door is a **piscina** or basin for washing the vessels used in the communion service.

The **little door** opens to a spiral staircase within a turret that leads to the chancel roof. **Another small door** above the pulpit opened to the top of the screen where once there was a platform or **rood loft** spanning the entrance to the chancel.



The large bell in the north aisle is the last remaining one of a peel of four made by Austen Bracker in 1560. The other three were recast at least twice and replaced in 1937.



## Chancel and screen



The **Chancel** is the area of the church containing the altar. In earlier days it was reserved for the clergy and choir.



The **altar** is the focal point of the church and is raised on a shallow platform and behind a rail at which the people kneel to receive the sacraments of bread and wine in the service of Holy Communion (the Eucharist or Mass). This commemorates the Last Supper at which Jesus asked his disciples to remember Him by sharing bread and wine representing his sacrifice of his body and blood in His crucifixion. His commandment was “Do this in remembrance of me”.

This chancel was already decaying in 1550s. It had lost most of its glass by 1601 and needed repairs in 1689 and again in 1793. In 1805 Jesus College obtained permission to demolish it and to build a shorter chancel in 1853-4 in style and materials to match the 15th century nave. In 1869 The completion of the church restoration was celebrated: the new pews were installed facing east towards the altar and the pulpit was moved to its present position.

The chancel is separated from the nave by a **screen** which was necessary in medieval times - to separate the sanctuary from the people and animals that may have used the nave - and often removed in the Reformation but here recorded in disrepair in 1778. This screen was inserted in 1860s. An earlier screen may have had a superstructure and a rood (crucifix) above it. We reserve this part of the church on weekdays for private prayer.

Confirmation and Marriage are conducted here at the entrance to the Chancel. The carvings on the reredos – the panels behind the altar, also of 1860s – show a sheaf of wheat representing bread and bunches of grapes for wine, with the IHS monogram formed by abbreviating the Greek word for Jesus.

The altar is covered by a coloured frontal – different colours for different seasons of the church year – and white linen cloths.

The door on the north side of the chancel leads to the **vestry**, a secure small room where the vestments, church vessels and records are kept. This is also where the clergy robe for services and the collection is counted. In some churches there is space for signing the marriage register.

The royal arms on the wall above the screen are those of Queen Victoria. It is said that they are painted over an earlier coat of arms.

## Pulpit



The hexagonal oak pulpit just outside the chancel is c. 1450, like the font, and much older than the screen. The pulpit here is raised above the nave by four steps and stands, like a wineglass, on a narrow stem. From Elizabethan times the people came to church to hear God's words explained by the minister in sermons preached from the pulpit. Pulpits often had figures of the four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – carved on the panels. Our pulpit is plain but its tracery was copied on the screen in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.



The ends of the choir stalls have fine 19<sup>th</sup> century carvings of fruit and leaves.

### **Desk**

The clergy conduct the service nowadays from the desk opposite the pulpit and this one is of the same date as the screen.

### **South aisle**

We do not know why this aisle is so narrow but suppose that when the church was rebuilt in the 1540s and the nave was widened, it was kept within its original footprint.



At the east end of the aisle you can see this relief of the Flight into Egypt – Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus escaping King Herod's soldiers. It was made in 1933 by Lilian Edmunds, after a design by John Flaxman RA (1755 – 1826).

## Tower and belfry



The tower with its battlements gives the church exterior a substantial presence. This is probably the oldest part of the church, dating to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the part that has been least altered although it was probably raised in height when the nave was rebuilt in 15<sup>th</sup> century. It has been strengthened and restored on several occasions since, most recently in 2010. The small door in the corner leads to stairs to the belfry. (In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century this area served as the vestry when the chancel was in ruins.) There are bats in the belfry – 24 bats were recorded by English Heritage when they visited to inspect the tower in 2010.

## The Bells

The bells in the belfry summon people to worship and sing out celebrations of marriage or Jubilees. It is believed that there were three bells to which a fourth was added in 1560. This is the one standing in the north aisle made by the itinerant bell maker Austen Bracker. It is historically important but no longer usable. Over the next hundred years the bells were recast and continued to ring until an accident occurred in 1859 when a bell ringer climbed up a bell rope which broke and he fell to his death. A fund-raising campaign led to six bells being installed in 1937, three recast from the existing ones and three new, now hanging from a steel frame inserted below the existing wooden frame.

## The Organ



The organ used to stand on a platform at the west end of the nave, filling the arch to the tower. It was moved in 1930 to its present position when a vault was filled in. Part of it came from the former organ of Peterborough Cathedral and the case is mainly Victorian. The organ was completely rebuilt and extended in 1966/67 with a new console, pedal boards and manuals by E F Johnson & Son of Cambridge.

The newest addition to the church is the Annexe at the south entrance which was built to provide a servery and accessible WC. This makes the church an excellent place for the community to use for a variety of activities.