



Welcome to

**St. Mary's
Church**

Offwell

The parish church of Offwell is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Architectural evidence dates the core of the building to around 1200, characterised by the chamfered semi-circular chancel arch and the little window in the south wall of the chancel. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a great wave of church building in England, part of a larger pattern of religious revival in western Europe; Devon, with its plentiful supply of good local stone, provides many fine examples from this period.

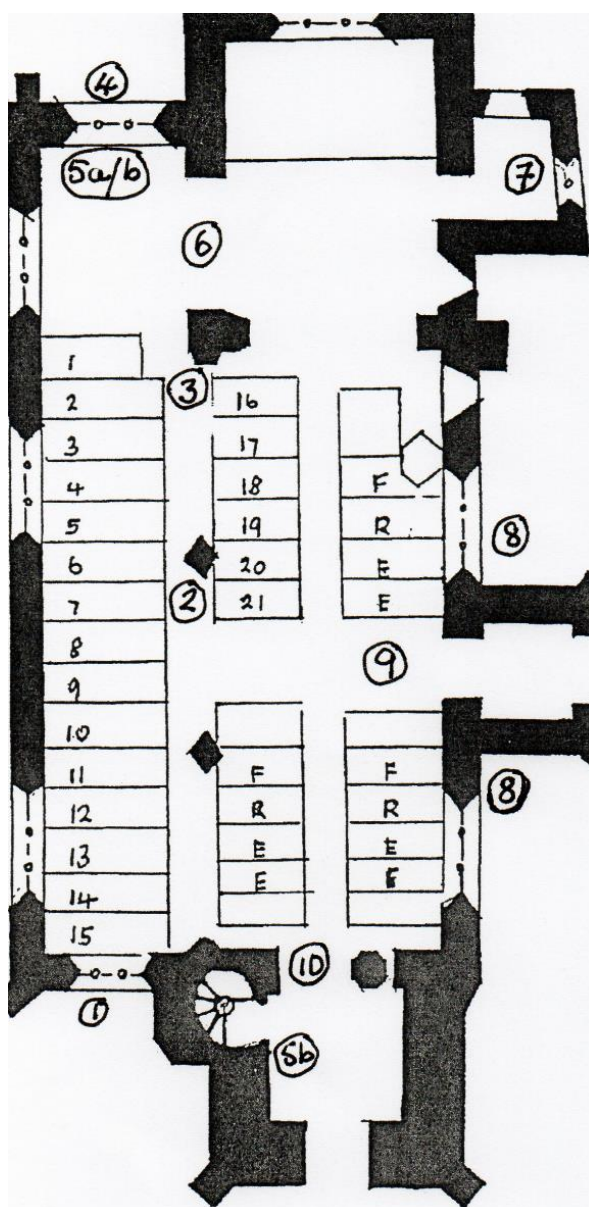
In its original form the church would have consisted simply of the chancel and nave; the tower and north aisle were added centuries later. The church was built from local materials – flint and chert, dressed with Beer stone – and Lias limestone was used for the floors. Local stone was used for the many additions and repairs that were made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The arrival of the wealthy Copleston family in the late eighteenth century as Rectors and patrons raised the parish to a new level. The Coplestons provided a continuous succession of Rectors from 1772 until 1954, including the distinguished Edward Copleston, Bishop of Llandaff, whose eccentric 'Bishop's Tower' is just one of many architectural legacies in Offwell.

This document features eleven of St. Mary's historic features.

As you walk around the church please use the following guide to learn more about eleven of St. Mary's historic interior features:

- (1) Copleston stained glass & Remembrance Day poppies
- (2) St. Mary's Graffiti
- (3) The medieval church and its naughty past
- (4) Medieval stained glass – Christ with thorns and Flemish roundels (Apex of North Aisle)
- (5a) Wooden screen in North Aisle and 15th century Font
- (5b) Lectern - 17th century The Last Supper (in the Vestry)
- (6) Scudamore Organ
- (7) Medieval glass in South Window of Chancel
- (8) Biblical texts on South Wall
- (9) Heating System installed in 1898
- (10) 16th century Tower Screen



(1) COPLESTON STAINED GLASS AND REMEMBRANCE DAY POPPIES



The arrival of the wealthy Copleston family in the late 18th century as Rectors and patrons raised Offwell parish to a new level. The Coplestons provided a continuous succession of Rectors from 1772 until 1954, including the distinguished Edward Copleston, Bishop of Llandaff. His eccentric 'Bishop's Tower' is just one of many architectural legacies in Offwell. (A document about Bishop Copleston: '*The Life & Times of Bishop Edward Copleston*' can be found on www.offwell.org).

At St. Mary's most of the stained glass is 19th century. The West window of the north aisle (where you are standing) was installed during John Henry Copleston's incumbency (1880-1918) and was dedicated to his older sister, Catherine Anne, who died unmarried on 10th March 1887 at the age of 52.



The ceramic poppies you can see resting on the window ledge, along with the silent soldier, were made by the children of Oak Class at Offwell School. They formed part of a 1918 commemorative exhibition that took place in St. Mary's during November 2018.

(2) ST. MARY'S GRAFFITI

In 2019 the Devon Archaeological Society conducted a county-wide survey of church graffiti and they visited St Mary's to check what we had. The conclusion was that although we don't have much what we do have is very interesting.

These days when graffiti is mentioned we probably think of unwanted spray painting but graffiti goes back a very long way. Graffiti is anything scratched into a surface. In the case of churches this can be on stone, plaster, wood, lead and even glass.

Much church graffiti may have been lost after the Reformation when paint and other decoration was removed from churches and may now only be visible as very feint marks. What does survive comes in the form of symbols thought to be associated with warding off evil spirits, which may seem odd in a Christian building. Their meaning and use may also have changed over time but retained some significance into the 19th century.



One of the more common graffiti symbols found in churches takes the form of a shoe outline and St. Mary's has a number. The first is on lead rescued from a previous roofing of the tower. It is displayed on the ringing floor of the tower. Next, there are four shoes carved into the stone seats of the porch and, randomly, there is even a shoe carved on the east end of the village pump wall! The best, and most interesting, graffiti is all on just one aisle pier. It includes two crazy stick figures with big hands, a hand or glove, as well as dot patterns and the usual initials.



For more information about Devon church graffiti go to:
www.devonhistoricgraffiti.org.uk

(3) THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH AND ITS NAUGHTY PAST

Hidden messages and tongue-in-cheek depictions were widespread throughout medieval churches and St. Mary's has a classic example of 'moon carvings' on one of the pillar capitals near the chancel.



Mooning means '*the exposure of one's buttocks to someone in order to insult or amuse them*' so was the medieval world rife with satire or did these etchings and carvings hold deeper meanings?

Animal imagery was popular with monkeys depicted as doctors, pall bearers and bell ringers. They were seen as thoughtless and compulsive parodies of humanity, displaying gluttony, vanity and foolishness – powerful reminders of the potential within all medieval men and women to engage in depraved acts and sin.

A 12th century parish church in Northamptonshire has a 'mooning man' stone gargoyle perched on the side of the tower. Local legend has it that his proud posterior is pointing in the direction of the stonemason of Peterborough Cathedral, in protest at not being paid.

'Moon' carvings can be found adorning the exterior of churches across the country in the form of gargoyles or grotesques and also as ornamental frieze fixtures. Explaining the general purpose of these impish figures is a rather tricky task. There is certainly ample evidence that people mooned each other during the Middle Ages as a sign of insult. Many believe these carvings to be ultimately protective or apotropaic – to reflect the contrast between the world outside the church, beset by the devil and sin, as opposed to the sanctity contained within its walls. One idea is that they were placed to deflect the evil spirits by drawing their attention to these insulting characters. They may equally be intended just to shock, amuse, or act as a counter and balance to the religious. At St. Mary's we'll never really know.

(4) MEDIEVAL CHRIST WITH THORNS AND FLEMISH ROUNDELS

The term 'Stained Glass' is a general term and includes the artistic skill of medieval artists painting on glass as can be seen in the fragment of glass, representing the head of Christ with Thorns, at the very apex of the East Window of the North Aisle. When Offwell School acquired a powerful new camera in 2023 it enabled everyone to see in close up, for the very first time, a stunning example of the emotional talent of medieval glass painters.



Below it are four fine Flemish roundels probably from the 17th century. They are noted in historical church documents as: “...of *unusually high quality for a parish church.*”



Top left shows the Resurrection of Jairus's daughter. In the background is the daughter with flies around her, representing death, and in the foreground the mourners, including a very sad dog



The bottom left roundel depicts heavy hearted disciples meeting the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, conversing with him but not recognising him.



In the top right the disciples have invited Christ to stay with them, and recognise Christ as he breaks bread.



St. John the Evangelist

These scenes are shown as part of normal life in the 1600's (note the contemporary glass of wine); no grand reveal and no choir of angels.

(5a) WOODEN SCREEN IN NORTH AISLE



In 1754 an important change was made to the church furniture at St. Mary's, this being the creation of a Singers Gallery which appears to have been the gift of John Ford, the Younger. Then, as now, any

major change to the church structure required a licence (or faculty) from the diocesan court, and for these formalities the parish paid a total of around £10.

The labour costs relating to the construction of the gallery appear to have been taken care of by John Ford himself, but the parish paid him the modest sum of £1 8s 8d for 395 feet of timber.

The wooden panel which now stands under the east window of the north aisle is said to have originally decorated the singers' gallery (others believe it was part of the altar back (reredos) of the main altar). It is, however, of a date earlier than 1754, and has been restored at various times. It incorporates five sections, depicting Christ as the Saviour of the World (*Salvator Mundi*); St. Peter; St. Paul; St. John, and, in the centre, Christ carrying his cross.

Probably carved in Exeter around 1600 it reflects Renaissance (the decoration) and Flemish (the figures) influence but is Devon through and through. The date of the panel's arrival at Offwell is unknown but it is one of several fine pieces of wood carving imported into the church, perhaps by the wealthy Copleston family who provided a continuous succession of Rectors from 1772 until 1954, including the distinguished Edward Copleston, Bishop of Llandaff.

(5b) LECTERN - 17th CENTURY LAST SUPPER



Now residing behind the Tower Screen is a wooden church lectern made by W.H. Farmer, the church warden, in 1936. It incorporates an ornate Flemish carved panel depicting The Last Supper. Made in the second half of the 17th century it has been described as:

'...Franco-Flemish. The wonderful framing effect provided by the angels with the flowing and Baroque style ornamentation appears typically French. However the figures both in terms of the hair and the features could well be argued to be Flemish...'

We can almost hear the hubbub of the disciples chattering away amongst themselves, turning to each other or having a word in an ear. And then there's the table laid with bread and fishes, the stocky disciples, bodies built from manual labour, fishermen's bodies, peasant lads, the ignored and the lowly, just the kind of folk a traditional Jewish Rabbi would not choose to follow him.'

This panel could well have been carved in Devon as there were many foreign craftsmen around at this time.

(6) SCUDAMORE ORGAN



In 1853 the Singers Gallery was removed from the west end of the north aisle and the gallery musicians, with their viols, flute and clarinet, ceased to be part of church life. At the same time it was proposed that an organ loft be constructed at the west end but this never happened.

When the organ finally arrived in 1859 it was of a high quality, being an early work of 'Father' Henry Willis (1821-1901), who built organs for several prestigious buildings, including the Royal Albert Hall, the Great Exhibition of 1851 and Bishop Copleston's Cathedral in Llandaff.

The Offwell instrument is a 'Scudamore' organ, an invention of the Revd John

Baron, Vicar of Upton Scudamore in Wiltshire. Faced by the problem of providing a small but effective instrument for his own village church, Baron designed a compact organ, with bellows sited below the seat, 49 exposed pipes and a single stop that could be sited in the chancel, rather than in a loft or chamber.

Henry Willis embraced Baron's ideas with enthusiasm and the organ at Offwell was just one of some 200 models produced by Willis within the space of four years (1858-1862). Offwell thus acquired a modest but state-of-the-art instrument, which remains in use today after renovations in 1978 (extending it to eight stops) and in 1995. Its original position is unknown, but in the 1940s it stood in front of the east window of the north aisle. It now stands in the arch between the chancel and the north aisle.

(7) MEDIEVAL STAINED GLASS IN SOUTH WINDOW OF CHANCEL



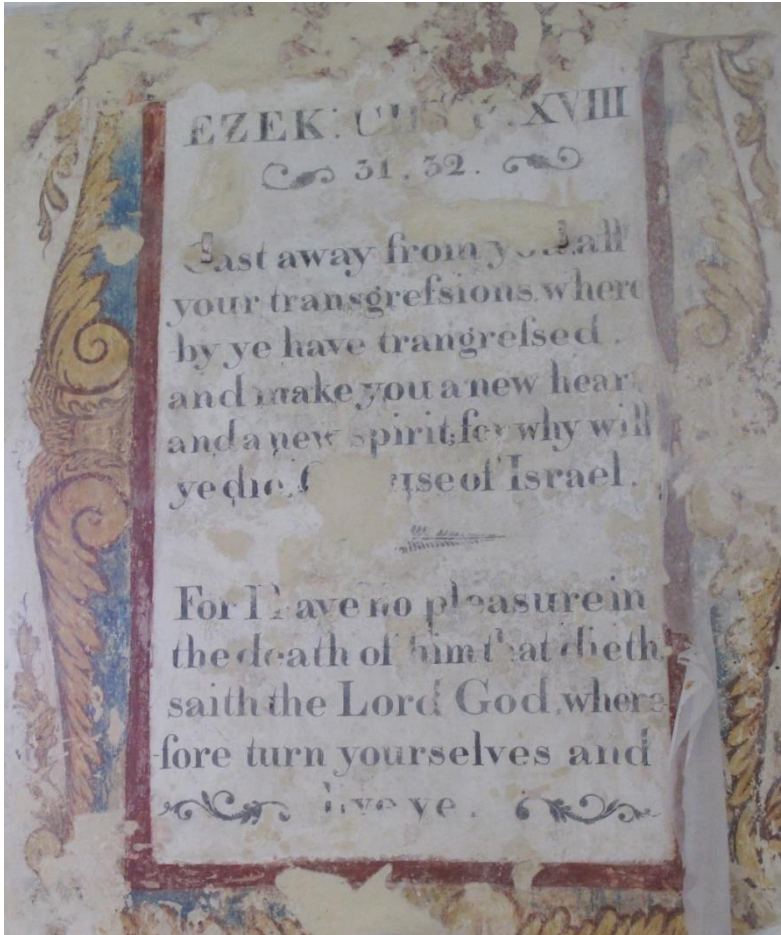
The medieval glass in the south window is likely to date from the 14th century, although it may have been imported from another church at a later date.

Between the 12th and early 16th centuries a vast amount of stained glass was produced for churches. The bright, jewel like colours depicted images relating to Christian doctrine for both the clergy and laity to 'read' and make their own spiritual connection. In our modern society we are so used to reading words. In the medieval world, where only the privileged few were literate as we understand it, the majority were educated in the literacy of images. The figures, colours, designs, scenes, symbols, and spiritual truths contained within stained glass were meaningful in a way that is remote to current society.

The church of the medieval world was full of colour and reflecting light. Along with the colours of the stained glass, illuminated with external natural light, there was gilding and candlelight, wall paintings, painted wood, coloured statues and cloth. There could be decorative marble, such as polished limestone or decorated tiles.

This was a time when the belief in the divine could be experienced through the senses. The images could be instruction for laity, devotional or part of the liturgy.

(8) BIBLICAL TEXTS ON SOUTH WALL



At the end of the 17th century there was a flurry of church repairs and improvements at St. Mary's, inspired perhaps by the coming of a new century. In the summary of repairs carried out in the year 1699, among the usual costs of work on the bells and glazing the Church windows, there was a more significant outlay:

'Paid Mr. Pyke for setting up the sentences in ye Church - £5 For beer and making a scaffold for Mr. Pike – 1s 8d'

The large sum paid to Mr. Pike indicates a major work. The term 'sentences' here means passages from scripture, and it is clear from his need of scaffolding that Mr. Pike was painting them directly onto the church wall. This is undoubtedly a reference to the painting of two large Biblical texts on the south wall, which were discovered beneath whitewash in the 1950s. Restoration work to fully expose the texts took place in 2007 and 2008.

Both texts are from the King James Bible: 1 John, Chapter 3, verses 10-11 and Ezekiel, Chapter 8, verses 31-32. The Old Testament text has survived in better condition and was probably whitewashed at an earlier date than its New Testament partner. Two smaller Biblical texts, also restored, appear on the north aisle wall. These are Matthew, 7:21 and Ecclesiastes, 5:1.

It may be significant that the sterner Biblical texts were positioned in the south part of the church as the upper echelons of Offwell's society still sat in the north aisle.

(9) HEATING SYSTEM INSTALLED IN 1898

For the very wealthiest of Offwell society family members were buried in vaults beneath the church itself. The Copleston family vault was constructed near the great Yew tree and entered through an arched doorway via the church steps. The entrance to the Collins family vault lies beneath the arch where the organ now stands. In the early 17th century the family used the east end of the north aisle effectively as a private chapel.



In 1898 heating was installed for the first time and this meant cutting into the vaults beneath the church. (You can see the grille above the fire hole just inside the South Porch entrance.) In 1950, one of the men employed to dig the trench,



Mr. W. Northam, told Colonel Ramsden, the churchwarden, that he had helped to dig the trench for the new heating system in 1898. This consisted of under floor pipes and a boiler running from the North Wall to the South Porch. (The photograph on the left, taken in the early 1900's, clearly shows the stove chimney on the North Wall).

During this work Mr. Northam said that many skeletons were found and he concluded that these must have been from a very early date, as the pews were altered in 1798.

There is reference to the Collins' family in Offwell during the late 16th and early 17th centuries; a Collins' memorial, dated 1610, survives in a floor slab beneath the organ.

(10) 16th CENTURY TOWER SCREEN



It was during the incumbency of Revd Bill Wright (1969-1985) that St. Mary's acquired what is now one of the most striking features of the church interior: the early 16th century tower screen which originally stood in the old church of St. Mary Major in Exeter, in which it served as two bays in the rood screen. St Mary Major was demolished in 1865 and the salvaged screen was divided between its Victorian replacement and the church of St. Mary, Exeter. Offwell acquired its portion of the screen in 1970, prior to the demolition of the Victorian St. Mary Major. The screen was sensitively restored by Ann Hulbert, who removed a thick coating of dark varnish.

On the right hand side of the screen (originally the central panel) are the figures of four saints; the left hand panel was undecorated and may have originally been sited behind a piece of furniture. The screen is richly crested with a cornice of angels and foliage. This was not part of the original screen and is believed to be of earlier date, possibly 15th century. The angel cornice was restored by Gerald Barton, assisted by Miss Jane Wardle of Offwell, who added the words: '*O ye angels of the lord, bless ye the lord; O ye heavens, bless ye the Lord.*'





We hope you have enjoyed your visit to St. Mary's today.

If you would like to make a donation to help with our ongoing renovations you can scan the QR code with your mobile 'phone or go to our website to find out how you can make a gift.

Thank you



www.offwell.org www.parish-church.com