

All Saints' Church

East Meon



Background

WHEN William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066 East Meon was already an ancient and important settlement. A church had probably been here since the early days of Christianity in this part of the country. By the 10th century the church was sufficiently important for a Saxon king to grant lands to it. Sadly nothing of the Saxon church remains. Even its position is uncertain although it was probably on the site of the present building. The Normans built widely and often magnificently as a means of proclaiming their new won supremacy. In the century following the Conquest many new castles, cathedrals and parish churches were built including All Saints', East Meon. This church was built by the bishops of Winchester, the lords of the manor. The main builder was probably Bishop Walkelin who was also responsible for the rebuilding of Winchester Cathedral. From the beginning the church was conceived on a grand scale. The increasingly elaborate decoration, from the simplicity of the west door to the intricacies of the tower, suggests it may have been built over a considerable period, from roughly 1080 to 1150.

The original church was cross-shaped, consisting of a nave, chancel, and transepts; the total length being 110 feet and the width at the transepts 62 feet. The original work is clearly identifiable by the round-topped arches typical of the Norman or Romanesque style. The only major addition to the church came around 1230 when the south aisle and the Lady Chapel were added. By then the new Early English style, with its pointed arches and the ability to create larger windows had arrived. The spire also dates from around this period. After this time most alterations were largely to the detail of the church. Windows were modernised, particularly in the 15th century when a large east window was added. In the 18th century the church was filled with high pews and galleries and these were not removed until a major restoration in 1869/70. Further restoration was done early this century by the famous Church architect Sir Ninian Comper.

The Exterior

The situation of the church under the lee of the steeply rising Park Hill is dramatic. Raised above the level of the village it is a dominating presence. The massive tower and lead-covered broach spire can be seen for miles when approaching the village from the south. The walls are largely of flint and mortar with windows, doorways etc in dressed stone. The tower is entirely of stone. A walk around the church reveals very clearly the phases of building. The west front still has its original Norman door and the join where the later south aisle was added can be clearly seen. The south doorway is also Norman although it was moved to its present position when the church was extended. All around the church stack pipes dated 1869 bear witness to the major restoration of that time. That restoration also saw the roofs returned to their original medieval height. At the east end of the church, set high on the wall, are the arms of Prior Hinton and Bishop Langton of Winchester who were responsible for the restoration and remodelling of the chancel and Lady Chapel in

the late 15th century. Walking around the church the eye is constantly drawn to the tower and spire. The elaborate decoration in the Norman style is reminiscent of the tower at Winchester Cathedral. Looking across the road you can see the 14th Century Court House of the Bishops of Winchester. This building and the church together must have been a constant and powerful reminder of the authority of East Meon's episcopal overlord.



Tour of the Interior

Entering by the **Norman south door** it is best to start at the west end of the **nave** facing eastwards. Behind you then is the original **Norman west door** still used on special occasions. By contrast, immediately to your left, stands the newest major addition to the church, an **organ** built by Peter Wells and completed in 1983. Looking east you see the original Norman nave and the heavy arches of the crossing. The first window on the left wall is Norman and just a trace of a similar window can be seen above the arches to the right, indicating clearly how the original south wall was pierced in order to create the aisle.

Moving up the nave you will see on the left a strangely shaped window with two carved heads dating from the 14th century. By the window is a fine **pulpit** of the early 18th century. It was brought by a former vicar from the now demolished church of Holy Trinity Minories that once stood near the Tower of London. The **crossing** which lies ahead of you is the heart of the original church. Its massive quality suggests that a large tower was planned from the start. Standing under the crossing the scale of the church can be readily appreciated. Transepts of such size are rare in a village church.

The **north transept** has been used for many purposes over the centuries. In the middle ages it probably contained a side chapel. In the 18th century and much of the 19th century it had a temporary raised floor and housed a Sunday and day school catering for up to 160 children. The school moved to its own premises in 1845. More recently the transept housed the organ. On the pillar to the east of the transept entrance can be seen traces of a head with a halo. This with a similar head on the south side of the crossing and traces of paint elsewhere are all that now remain of extensive medieval wall paintings. A former vicar writing in 1912 recorded that older villagers could remember a great painting of the Last Judgement above the chancel arch.

Passing from the crossing into the **chancel** we come to the part of the church which has seen most alteration. The large north window dates from the 19th century while the present east window in the perpendicular style is a 20th century copy of the original executed by Sir Ninian Comper. Comper's work is much in evidence here and in the Lady Chapel. The east window glass is of particular interest, being a First World War war memorial depicting the patron saints and coats of arms of all the allied powers. It brings together an extraordinary range of saints and heraldry. The arms of imperial Russia

and the American Stars and Stripes can both be seen and the saints include such rare figures for an English church as St. Sergius, St. Methodius and St. Quentin. Other work in the chancel by Comper includes the altar and its furnishings and the screen which divides the chancel from the **Lady Chapel** which we now enter. This dates from 1230 and is divided from the chancel by a fine pair of Early English arches. The floor consists of old tombstones brought from various places in the church. Again Comper's work is prominent. He provided the glass of the east window and the fine alabaster and wood reredos behind the altar which depicts scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary. The chapel also contains some fine 18th century wall plaques, whose fulsome praise of the departed seems strange to the modern reader.

The arch from the Lady Chapel to the **south transept** pierces the original outer wall of the church and is four feet thick. This transept contains a number of interesting features. The two round-headed windows which are now entirely within the building survive from the original plan of the church. In the east wall there is a curious stone with the words, 'Amens Plenty' written upon it. When this stone was taken up from the nearby floor in 1869 it was found to be covering the remains of four men all buried vertically. A local legend grew up that these were four parliamentary soldiers of General Waller killed in a skirmish in the village just a few days before the battle of Cheriton on 29th March 1644. There is no evidence to support this but the burial is curious nonetheless. Also mounted on the wall are two medieval floor tiles which probably came originally from the area around the high altar. Beside them is a copy of a watercolour which shows the church as it must have appeared around 1800. Notice the lower roof levels and the cottage in what is now part of the churchyard to the east of the church. On the south wall are lists of the vicars of East Meon from 1283 and a framed copy of a description of the church given in the Gentleman's Magazine of October

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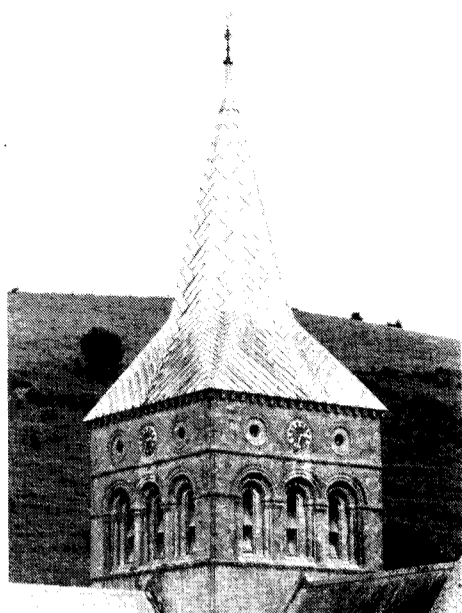
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1819. Finally in the north west corner there is a stone seat which is almost certainly part of the original stone altar broken up, on government orders, at the Reformation in the 16th century.



We move finally into the **south aisle**. The odd half arch that leads from the transept is a clear indication of how the original structure had to be altered when the aisle was added. Today the aisle is dominated by two fonts. The first is a very plain stone drum on a later base. It is of unknown date and came from the ruined chapel of St. Nicholas near Westbury House. The ruins can still be seen 2½ miles west of the village to the left of the road to West Meon. The other font is undoubtedly the greatest treasure of the church,

being one of the seven fonts made from black Tournai marble and brought from Belgium around 1150. It was almost certainly a gift of the then Bishop of Winchester, Henry of Blois, brother of King Stephen and Chancellor of England. The carvings include depictions of the earth (flat of course!) and the story of Adam and Eve all executed in a vigorous Romanesque style. There is still an iron ring embedded in the top where a lid would have been padlocked down in medieval times. This was to stop the water from being stolen for black magic purposes. A fuller description of the font will be found in the special leaflet.

Returning to the South door you will see above it the arms of James I dated 1613. For many years all churches were required to display the royal arms and those of James 1 are relatively rare. Close by is a

strange, rather primitive painting of the entombment of Christ which came originally from the Crimea.

The Church Today

We hope you have enjoyed your tour of the church. It is easy to see such buildings merely as historical monuments but this church is still the centre of a vigorous and lively Christian community, and worship continues here weekly as it has done for around 900 years. Each generation has added something to the beauty of the church and has maintained it for its successors. Now it is our turn and the burden is a heavy one for a small village. Any donation you feel able to make will help to ensure that this beautiful church and all it represents, will survive for future generations to enjoy and admire.

MAY GOD GO WITH YOU ON YOUR WAY

Photographs by Stan Smith, East Meon.

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