



A Short Guide to the PARISH CHURCH of St. MARY THE VIRGIN, DENBY

A Christian church has stood here for a thousand years. Stand at the back of the church, looking towards the front. You are facing east. The area from here to the steps is called the **nave**. The windows high on the right (south) wall of the nave are called **clerestories**. Up the steps, to the very front of the church is the **chancel**. To your left, under the gallery, is the **north aisle**. To your right is the **south aisle**.



The Mediaeval Church

The present church stands on the site of an earlier Saxon building. The north aisle is part of this earlier building which was included in the beginnings of the present church, probably during the twelfth century. Before 1838, when the gallery was built, a Saxon pillar and arches corresponded to the present Norman pillar and arches in the south aisle. Notice the chevron marks on the stone at the foot of the pier below the pulpit. These indicate the Saxon period.

Stand in the middle of the nave, turn round and face the back (west) wall. Look to the top of the wall to see the line of an earlier pitched roof. This roof would have been thatched. When the roof was raised to its present height the clerestory windows would have been included.

The **chancel**, **tower** and **porch** were added during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. So, by 1450, the church's appearance on the outside was much the same as it is today. Inside, it was very different.

The **chancel** was built as a private area for the priest to celebrate Holy Communion (to say Mass). Notice the small door in the south wall of the chancel, giving the priest his own access. A similar door used to exist in the north wall - the outline can still be seen on the outside. Notice also the little wash-basin (**piscina**) for the priest to wash his hands, and seats for priests (**sedilia**) built into the south wall of the chancel.

Originally, the chancel was separated from the nave by a large wooden rood-screen, suspended from stone capitals which can still be seen high near the chancel arch. The priest said Mass, on his own, while the people watched him through a door in the screen. At Christmas, Easter and Pentecost the people were admitted into the chancel to receive the bread, but not the wine, in Communion.

The walls of the chancel and nave were plastered and covered with pictures (**frescoes**) depicting scenes from the life of Jesus, Bible characters and Christian saints. These pictures enabled the priest to give Christian instruction when few people could read or write. Traces of these pictures survived early into the present century. There would have been few, if any, seats in church during the mediaeval period.

Other *piscinae* can be seen at the front of both aisles showing that communion tables, or altars, stood here from early times. These were probably shielded from the rest of the nave by stone walls, and were places where the priest could hear confessions before saying Mass and dispensing forgiveness.

When the **tower** was built a bell was hung to summon worshippers to church. This original bell, dating from the fourteenth century, has never been recast and is still in regular use. A second bell was added in the fifteenth century and two more in 1604. Two further bells were installed in 1907 on a new cast-iron frame. The bells were rehung on ball-bearings in the 1950s, giving us one of the best 'peals of six' in the county. An extra floor has recently been built into the tower giving us a separate bell-ringing chamber.

Half way up the outside of the west wall of the tower is a seemingly stoned-up window. This is a **niche**, surprisingly ornate for such a small church. Originally it housed a statue of the Virgin Mary, to whom the church is dedicated.

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries

The Reformation in the sixteenth century revolutionised English church life and Christian worship. The Church of England separated from the Church of Rome. Worship, from being conducted by the priest while the people watched, was opened up to everyone. So the rood screen was removed and demolished, along with the statue of Mary from the tower niche.

New emphases on Bible teaching required people to sit and listen - by the end of the nineteenth century the nave, aisles and half the chancel were full of box pews for which the rich paid rents. One or two pews at the back and those in the gallery were free, for the poor.

In former times the cost of building and maintaining churches was laid on the local squires who, in turn, gained the right, as patrons, to appoint the priests. The Lowe family have been squires of Denby since the fifteenth century. The **monument** in the north wall of the chancel commemorates Patrick Lowe (died 1616) and his wife Jane (died 1594). Behind their kneeling figures are figures of their children. Two have their heads covered, indicating that they died before their parents. The monument is made of Derbyshire alabaster.

For centuries, St Mary's Church was a chapel of Horsley parish, but became a separate parish in 1728, with the Lowe family becoming patrons. Church Farm was their ancestral seat before they became the Drury-Lowes and moved to Locko Park at Spondon towards the end of the eighteenth century. The present patron is Mrs David Palmer, elder daughter of Captain Patrick Drury-Lowe who died in 1994.

During the early nineteenth century the church faced population explosion and religious revival. The Archdeacon of Lichfield, in whose diocese we then stood, declared, "We will not pull down our existing churches and rebuild them, but enlarge the ones we have." So the Saxon pillar and arches were demolished and the **gallery** was installed. Originally, it ran along the back of the nave as well, and housed an organ. We think that part of the pillar was made into the present **font** which stands near the church door.

St Mary's Church in the twentieth century

In 1901, Canon Frederick Boissier became Vicar of Denby, succeeding Revd James Mockler, who had been Vicar since 1845! He immediately commenced a major restoration and reordering of the church, which was completed by 1904. All the box pews were removed, along with the west gallery. Chancel and altar steps were built. A new communion table and choir stalls were included. Matching pews to the choir stalls were intended but never completed. A new Harrison and Harrison organ was installed in 1914. The present pews and pulpit-lectern were completed during the 1950s.

The communion table in the south aisle is a First World War memorial and is known as the St George's Altar. The communion table in the north aisle and stained glass window above is a memorial to Nicky Wright who died, aged 12, in 1959.

So this beautiful and ancient building has only assumed its present internal appearance during the last forty years. It has only survived over the centuries because, time and again during its long history, it has been radically changed, inside and out, to meet the needs of those who sustained its life as they came to worship here. Without worshippers there would be no church.

We currently meet, each Sunday, at 10.00 am, to worship Jesus Christ. We share together in many other activities. We invite you to join us, whenever you can, that you, with us, might find in Jesus the Light of Life.