

THE CHURCH IN ITS VILLAGE ENVIRONMENT

Baschurch is in the rural part of North Shropshire. Over the last twenty years or so the village has expanded and now has a population of about 2,000. The church is situated on the corner of Church Road and Nobold.

It is a Listed Building Grade II* and is the principal building in the Baschurch Conservation Area designated by North Shropshire District Council (now part of Shropshire Council) in 2008.

It is also a local landmark with the tower clearly visible up to a mile from the village



The church from the north east

GENERAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

The earliest reference to the "Churches of Bassa" is in Saxon times. There is no evidence of a Saxon church on the site and it may have been at the Berth (an earthwork to the northeast of the village) or it may have been demolished when the Norman church was built.

The original Norman church dates back to late C12, early C13, early C14 and early C15. It now consisted of a chancel, nave, south aisle, west tower and a meeting room in the south west corner. Walls are local red sandstone that has been used at all times of building. The main roof is now covered with welsh slates, the tower roof in limestone tiles and the meeting room flat roof in lead.

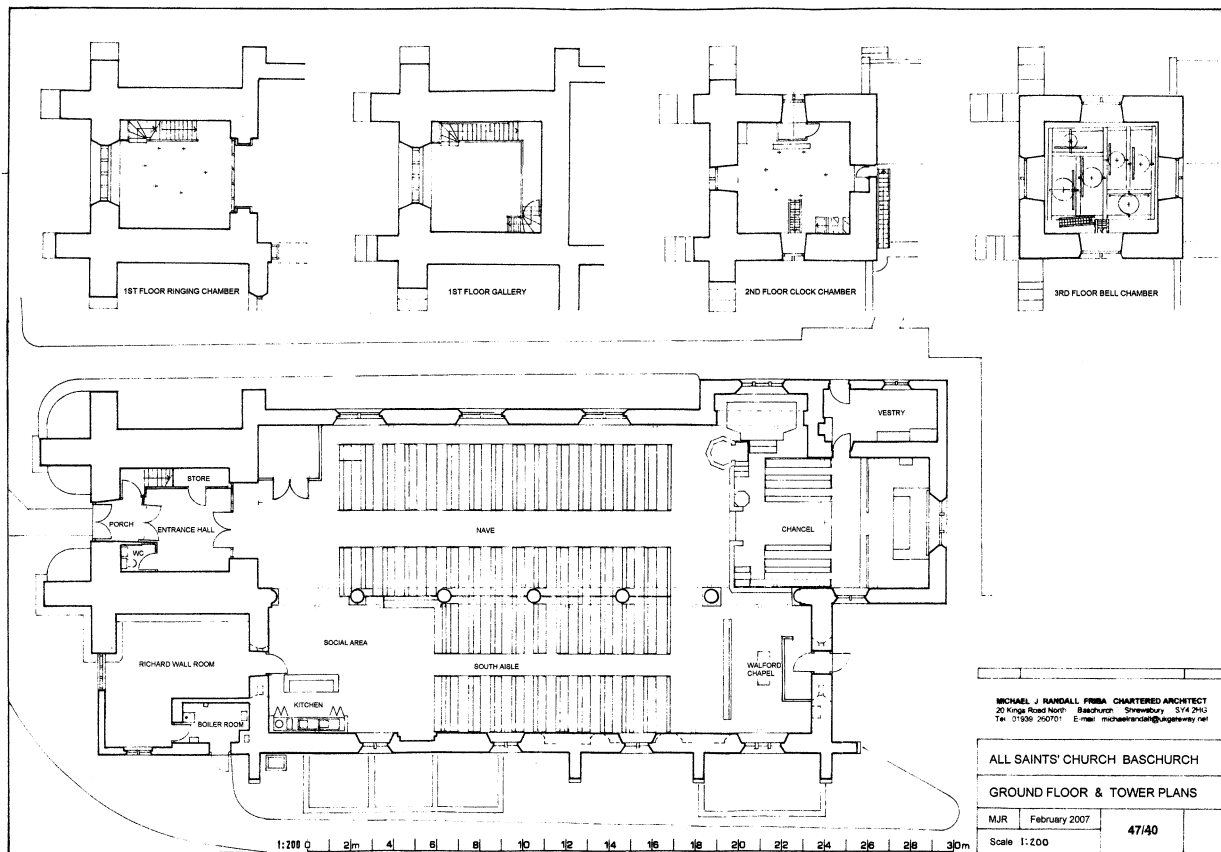
Around C13 the south aisle was rebuilt in its present form, but with the roof raised in C18 and the present windows inserted in late C19. An upper storey was added to the tower about C14. In 1404 a fire thought to have occurred during a Welsh invasion which may have done considerable damage.

Prior to 1790 there was a north aisle, south porch and a chamber north of the tower. In 1789 the condition of the church was described as "so ruinous that the parishioners cannot assemble therein for divine worship without great danger to their lives". Thomas Telford directed the removal of the north aisle, the building of a new north wall, which widened the nave, and the rebuilding of the chancel for a total cost of £1,229 18s 2d (the original bill is in the church records). In 1843 the interior was coloured or recoloured in accordance with Telford's colour scheme; walls, stone: pillars and ceiling, white.

Thomas Telford was the first President of the Institute of Civil Engineers, County Surveyor of Shropshire and he is recognised as the real father of civil engineering as a profession in Britain. The church is therefore an important example of early work in his career.

Further restoration was carried out between 1885 and 1903. In 1894 proposals by George H Birch FSA Arch were implemented. The north wall was stripped of its plaster and the three windows renewed and the organ alcove and adjacent vestry were added. The galleries at the west end of the church were removed in 1903. The ringing chamber was opened out to the nave and infilled with the present oak screen and cathedral glass. The roof of the original choir vestry, at the south west corner, was lowered to enable the large window to be inserted in the west wall of the south aisle to give more light.

In 2000 pews were removed from the west end of the south aisle to create a social area with a kitchen concealed behind oak panelled doors and with a matching counter. In 2002 the choir vestry was enlarged to form a meeting room known as the Richard Wall Room. In 2011 oak panelled screens were installed to provide a storage room at the rear of the nave and as an altar screen to the south aisle.



THE NAVE

The pews on the north side of the nave are longer than those on the right, because the north wall built in 1790 was built further out than the original line of pillars that were removed. On the north wall there is a Royal Coat of Arms given by the Hunt family in thanksgiving for the 1803 Peace with France, also other monuments to the Hunt family and a large Rococo monument and three hatchments.

THE CHANCEL

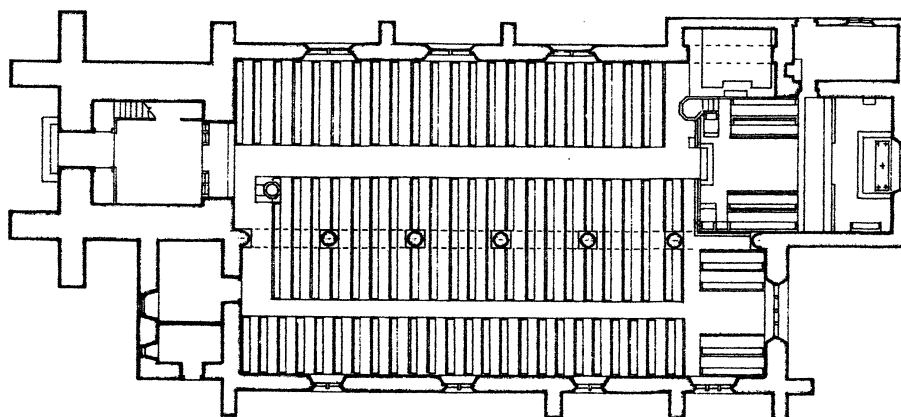
Birch's work included encasing the roof trusses with decorative tracery, the low wall at the front, new choir stalls and pulpit. The font is inscribed JWWS 1681. On the south wall by the choir pews is the remains of a segmental arch with bold roll moulding, which may date from the C12. It was possibly part of a sedile (seat in a niche for officiating clergy) or piscine (basin and drain for water used to wash sacred vessels). The window in the east wall is of decorated design and contains stained glass by Charles Kempe in 1886 and was dedicated to the Rev. W Jones who died in 1883 after 46 years' service as vicar.



The Chancel

EVOLUTION OF THE CHANCEL AND THE FRONT OF THE CHURCH

This plan is a copy of the original proposal drawing by George Birch FSA Arch in 1890. The work involved building a new vestry and recess for the organ. The chancel was reformed with terrazzo flooring incorporating stone steps and a low sandstone front wall with inset glazed tiles and a marble capping. It was then furnished with a new pulpit, oak clergy pews and oak choir stalls



Since then the following changes have been made to the chancel and the fronts of the nave and south aisles:

- 1906 Removal of the gallery and the 1712 Renatus Harris organ at the west end of the church and installing the new organ in the recess. The Renatus Harris organ was one of ten originally built for various churches in the City of London.
- C1970s In the chancel the second clergy pew was removed, the pulpit moved closer to the organ and the font moved from the west end of the nave into the chancel. Later the chancel flooring was carpeted. The second clergy pew is retained behind the altar rail on the left-hand side.
- C1980s The front row of pews in the nave and south aisle were removed and replaced with a timber board floor, to create a wide cross aisle. A chapel was also formed in the south aisle by removing the pews facing the chancel and replacing them with a timber board floor. The altar was provided with a curtain screen to conceal the door in the east wall and a removable altar rail. The floor has been substantially carpeted to unify the mix of timber and stone flooring.
- 2009 New lighting in the church with the chancel more brightly lit and with uplighting to the decorative timbers to the roof.
- 2011 A new panelled altar screen to replace the curtain screen and to conceal the altar frontal chest in the Walford Chapel.

These changes reflect the changing requirements of the clergy and congregation over 120 years and have made the front of the church now with a cross aisle looking very much more spacious, rather than being hemmed in by all the pews when Birch's proposals were first implemented.

THE SOUTH AISLE AND WALFORD (LADY) CHAPEL

The south aisle was rebuilt in the early decorative period, late C13 or early C14. The roof was raised in the C18 and is similar to the roof in the nave. The east window is an excellent example of four lights. The floor by the altar may have been lower in Norman times as the arches for the aumbry (recess for church vessels) and piscina are close to the floor. The arches in the south wall are all that remains of tomb monuments. There was a door and porch to the south aisle, but it is now blocked in and can be seen as a recess in the social area. Externally the main wall shows where the pitched roof of the porch would have abutted. On the walls are further monuments and hatchments.

THE CENTRAL PILLARS

The pillars and arches dividing the south aisle from the nave are Norman. They are the earliest surviving part of the church and date from the late C12. It is suggested that they have possibly been subsequently altered.

The western half pillar has two carved areas on the capital and the nail head detail can be seen again on the next pillar. Above the pillars are four clerestory windows that were built about the same time when they would have let light into the nave before the roof of the south aisle was raised in C18. The bulge in the wall below the clerestory windows probably indicates the line of the original roof.

THE TOWER

The bottom four levels of the tower are C13 with chamfered plinth, string courses and stepped angle buttresses. The entrance doorway is C14. The tower was raised in C14 to finish with a castellated parapet. Oval iron discs and tie bars were inserted in 1834. The old plasterwork to the lower levels probably dates from Telford's restoration.

The ground floor is the main entrance hall to the church and the first floor is the ringing chamber. A steep flight of stairs and gallery leads to the second floor clock chamber. The clock, which strikes every hour, was made by J B Joyce & Co. of Whitchurch in 1935 and had electric winding added in 2003. A stepladder leads to the third floor bell chamber.

There have been four bells for at least the last 400 years. One is mentioned in the 1549 Inventory and was probably cast in 1447 by Jan Van Venlo, a Flemish bell-founder. Tradition states that this bell was brought from Vale Crusis Abbey near Llangollen during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Two more of the bells were cast in 1662 by Thomas Clibury of Wellington. In 1998 two new bells were installed through National Lottery funding for the new Millennium. The ancient oak frame in which the bells are hung has a timber marked 1662 IA TG WARD. It appears the frame was reworked from an earlier one as there are mortices for earlier bell bearings.



The Tower from North West

The octagonal roof behind the parapet is an oak cruck frame with the centre-post extended up as a lead clad finial with a C19 weathervane. The frame is clad with Harnage limestone tiles and round the base are small areas of lead lined flat roof and parapet gutter. From the bell chamber below a stepladder leads up to a low door in a dormer opening out onto the parapet gutter.

CHURCHYARD

On the south wall of the church are 18th century mass sundials. In the northeast corner there is the village war memorial and the lych gate erected in 1934. The churchyard has a large number of graves, but is no longer used, as there is now a cemetery in Baschurch. The yew tree in the southeast corner is said to date from C6, before the first church.

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April 2016

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