

St John the Baptist Church, Frome

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

St John the Baptist Church
Church Steps
Frome BA11 1PL

Grid reference ST 7770000 47931

Parish of Frome Selwood

Diocese of Bath & Wells

Local planning authority: Mendip District Council

Statutory listing: Grade II*; external Via Crucis listed Grade II in its own right

Conservation Area: Frome Town Centre

Section 1: Brief history and description of the church building(s), contents, churchyard and setting

See also location plan, interior ground plan, exterior and interior photos at the end of this statement.

St John the Baptist Church sits at the heart of Frome within the Frome Conservation Area between Bath Street and Vicarage Street and is located on the edge of the present retail and commercial town centre.

There are multiple accesses to the site: The main forecourt entrance via Bath Street to the west (pedestrian and vehicle) or stepped access from Church Street alongside the separately listed and unique external 'Via Crucis', a level path from Vicarage Street to the east, or via the parallel cobbled lanes of Blindhouse Lane and Gentle Street to the south. The churchyard surrounds the church with the principal section located to the south set out in terraced form on the hillside. The large forecourt facing Bath Street has an impressive five arched Tudor Gothic stone screen by Jeffry Wyatt, added in 1814 soon after Bath Street was cut as a new road. A location diagram is attached.

The church is constructed of coursed rubble with Bath ashlar dressings and the main roofs are dressed in lead. The Chancel and Ken Chapel have stone slates and the vestry and organ loft roofs are finished in Welsh Slates. The church consists of a large Nave, North Aisle, South Aisle, Chancel, Lady Chapel, Ken Chapel, Vestries, Lavatory, Baptistry, Tower (with spire) and South Porch.

The significant Saxon church founded by St Aldhelm that stood on the site from about 685 was replaced in the late C12 with a Norman building with the Early English south side tower being built in C13. The addition of side and chantry chapels continued through the C14 culminating in a major extension of the nave and addition of the upper tower and spire in the early C15.

Many medieval details were removed at the time of the English Civil War when all non-heraldic glass was smashed out and much of the church plastered. However significant vestiges from the C12 to C15 work still survive as well as ex-situ examples of C9/C11 carved stones set in a former hagioscope under the tower. Following much neglect of the fabric during the C18 the chancel was much improved in the 1840s through the generosity of Longleat, the then patrons.

The main body of the church was substantially restored and further changes to the chancel made in 1852-1866 by C E Giles for the Rev W J E Bennett, with the addition of High Anglican fittings. The external 'Via Crucis' approach from the North East to the church was added in 1866, the work of James Forsyth. The Rood Screen by Kempe was reinstated in 1892.

Outside the East wall of the chancel lies the much engrossed tomb of Bishop Thomas Ken buried in 1711 after his death at Longleat House.

References:

The Buildings of England, Somerset: North & Bristol. Andrew Foyle and Nikolaus Pevsner 2011 – Frome: St John's, Bath Street - Pg 506-509

Historic England Listing Description: Parish Church of St John the Baptist, List Entry Number: 1345441

Somerset Historic Environment Record 26309

Section 2: The significance of the church (including its contents and churchyard) in terms of:

i) Its special architectural and historical interest

ii) Any significant features of artistic or archaeological interest

i) Our 2012 Quinquennial survey described St John's as a very fine and large church, restored almost entirely between 1852 and 1866, at the hands of the incumbent WJE Bennett. The church is of particular importance because of Bennett's adherence to the doctrines of the Oxford Movement, whose Tractarian principles he embraced on the reconstruction of St John's, so that **the church now stands as a fine example of the teachings of high Victorian Anglo-Catholicism**. Bennett made it both a place of worship and also a teaching aid, its furnishings and decoration giving a summary of the Christian Gospel and in particular stressing the supremacy of the Eucharist.

Having become a dark pulpit centred, box-pewed church much neglected by its vicars, **the church saw a massive restoration and transformation by Revd W J E Bennett in the 19th century**. The Anglo-Catholic enrichment of the building and its worship includes work by the O'Connor's, Clayton & Bell, Kempe/Tower, Forsyth, Wailes and others.

Perhaps the greatest historical association is with Bishop Ken – Bishop of Bath & Wells from 1684 to 1691. On his death in 1711 Bishop Ken was laid to rest in the churchyard here against the Chancel wall. The medieval chapel of St Andrew was restored in his honour in 1844 and is now dedicated in his name.

ii) The external Via Crucis was added to form a processional approach on the south side of the church.

In the churchyard is the grave of Bishop Thomas Ken.

In the forecourt, the Wyattville Screen was erected in 1814.

Some of the special architectural features of the church's interior are:

- The stone medallions in the nave depicting the parables and miracles of Jesus
- Kempe stained glass windows illustrating the story of St John the Baptist around the nave and the nativity in the Lady Chapel
- The seven virtues and vices in marble on the floor of the baptistery
- Saxon stones set into the base of the tower
- Norman arches, windows and piscinas
- Rood screen believed to have been made by Holzmeister Zwink from Oberammergau
- 19th century wrought iron screen which incorporates a gas lamp feature

The Bishop's Palace Treasures exhibition in 2012/13 included two significant items from St John's inventory:

- Bishop Ken's portable chalice and leather case
- Chalice by Pugin

Section 3: Assessment of the impact of the proposals on the significance defined in Section 2

We do not think our proposal to replace the current wooden inner doors with fully glazed inner doors will have any adverse impact on the significance defined in Section 2.

The main impact will be - during daylight hours - to let in more daylight when the outer doors are open and - during evening and overcast hours - to let the inner light from the church shine out to the forecourt in welcome, one of the main benefits that we see of this proposal.

It is intended that the existing framework to the inner door leaves will be retained and reused. That, of course, must be subject to final review once the doors are removed and the frame fully checked for condition, security of fitting, etc.

Our plan for the two Victorian wooden doors that will be replaced is to repurpose them in the south porch of the church.

St John the Baptist Frome - exterior views



St John the Baptist Frome - interior



St John the Baptist Frome - floor plan

Parish Church of St John the Baptist, Frome c. 1980
 Since this plan was drawn, a toilet has been added in the North Porch and a refreshment area in the north aisle near the North Porch. There has also been some repositioning of pews.

