

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST MARY'S CHURCH WEDMORE



In the Benefice of the Isle of Wedmore

Diocese of Bath & Wells, Archdeaconry of Wells, Rural Deanery of Axbridge

Grid reference: ST434479

Postcode: BS28 4AA

What3words: elated.romantics.bespoke (Outer South Porch Door)

The church is listed by DCMS as **Grade 1** under reference 1262159.

The Church of England Church Heritage Record number is 601016.

The church is in the civil district of Sedgemoor and the County of Somerset.

This document was completed in June 2022.

AIM

This document will describe the church and plot how it has developed. It will be background material to inform any decisions about its future.

THE SETTING OF THE CHURCH

The Church is in a prominent elevated position in the village, and since at least Saxon times has been the focal point for Church and secular village events. The church has frequently been referred to locally and in guide books as the 'Cathedral of the Levels'.

SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

In medieval times there was no record of seating in the nave and other records show that in addition to religious use the building was used by villagers for settling disputes, as a market and for social events. Similarly in the C21 it is now regularly used for concerts by local and visiting musicians and singers.

The PCC is aware of a significant set of local people who although not active churchgoers are extremely keen on preserving the fabric of the church as they remember it. Perversely many of this group would like to see the sort of facilities the PCC wants the church to provide for community events through their current re-ordering proposal.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

St Mary's church Wedmore is mainly C15 Perpendicular, with some surviving C13 features and C19 restoration. The graveyard was in use since at least medieval times but was closed in the late C20.

Many details of the church are strikingly similar to features at Wells cathedral – a reminder of the close links between Wedmore and Wells. Between the late 1300s and early 1500s the church was almost totally rebuilt in Perpendicular style. The Chancel and nave were lengthened, and the upper part of the tower rebuilt.

Aisles, a guild chapel and a porch were added to the nave, and two more chapels at the east end. A vestry built on the southeast corner in 1828, was removed during the extensive restoration of 1880 -81. The outside walls, built of local Wedmore stone, were formerly rendered.

The oldest part of the church, probably early 1200s, is the lower section of the central tower. In the south transept high in the southwest angle with the tower, are the remains of a primitive arch now blocked. This may be very early, possibly even dating back to the Saxon church of the 1000s.

The chancel lies beyond the tower crossing. It was lengthened in the 1400s. High on the walls traces of pre 1200 English Lancet windows can be seen. In the north

wall are the remains of a steep flight of steps discovered in 1880-81, above them against the east face of the tower is a blocked doorway. This suggests the presence of a rood beam or screen east of the tower.

At the Vestry (Chapel of St Anne) services were said three times a week for the souls of Dean Cosyn and his successors. It has a handsome carved roof. The Lady Chapel on the south side of the Chancel is another 1400s chapel. The stone altar is medieval on 19th century legs. It was found in 1880 buried under the Chancel floor and may have been there since the Counter Reformation.

The Nave contains many carved corbels, some of which may have been reused from the earlier church. The font originally stood inside the west door. The octagonal bowl may be earlier than the 1400s stem. The guild chapel was the last addition to the church in 1449. The small door leading into the chapel was sealed up in 1547 and reopened in 1880-81.

A fresh examination of the architectural history of the parish church for a new church guide brought out the close architectural connections between Wedmore and Wells. The Dean of Wells owned Wedmore and was patron of the parish church, and it would seem that much of the workmanship of the sophisticated 13th Century church which preceded the present 15th Century building was probably carried out by Wells masons.

The well-known south doorway at Wedmore church - reset in a 15th-century wall – is flanked by compound shafts with stiff-leaf capitals exactly like those in the part of Wells Cathedral nave that was built in the early 1200s.

The present nave and aisles at Wedmore were built in the 1400s; but among the varied stone corbels supporting the roof are two at the west end of the south aisle which, unlike all the rest, are of blue lias carved with naturalistic foliage. One has long, oak-type leaves and the other has ivy leaves with conspicuous long stems. Both, on examination, prove to be former pillar capitals later reused as corbels. The collar around the pillar top is still visible, and surplus carving has been crudely hacked away where the stone has been reset as a corbel. Both foliage carvings can be very closely matched with the blue lias capitals on the upper part of the Chapter House stairs and in the Chapter House entry at Wells, which were built c.1270-1290. Not only do these reused fragments of the previous Wedmore church reinforce the close connection between Wedmore and Wells in the 13th century, but they also serve to suggest definite dates at both the beginning and the end of the 1200s when Wedmore church was being improved to the highest standards.

It is strongly suspected that Wedmore had a church by the late 9th century, since it is the place where the chrism was loosened for Guthrum in 878. This was a religious ceremony, and so probably took place in a church.

TECHNICAL DETAIL

The technical details of the building is at Annex A.

BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

Catalogues and commentaries give more detail of when parts of the church were added or changed. These are compiled into a Timeline shown at Annex B. There is a schedule of the bells in St Mary's tower at Annex C. For sources see Acknowledgments at the end of the main document.

PEWS

It is almost certain that the church contained no pews in the Nave when it was rebuilt in the 15C.

There is no record of the date of the installation of benches or pews from the 15C to 19C. The only record of the pews before the restoration work in 1880-81 is a photograph presumably taken from the then Organ Loft above the West Door which shows the configuration of the pews, all of which were taken out during the restoration. Judging by the quality of the image and allowing that the science of photography only began in the 1840s the photograph was probably taken in the early 1850s before the second and third candelabra were hung in 1854.

The box pews were probably installed when other major reordering was done in either 1754 when a gallery was constructed on the west wall of the Nave, or in 1810 when the roof was renewed. It is possible that they were put in as late as the 1856 alterations, but that would give them a life of only 25 years. This seems unlikely.



The redesign of the interior of the church in 1880 was undertaken by E B Ferrey and records suggest he designed the pews, but there is no indication that he possessed any specialism in furniture design or ergonomics.

Edmund Benjamin Ferrey was an architect apprenticed under the tutelage of his father Benjamin Ferrey, and later worked for a short period for Sir George Gilbert Scott both of whom remain highly esteemed architects of that period with many noteworthy projects registered to their names.

By contrast Edmund has very few significant projects ascribed to him in the Dictionary of Scottish Architects and work on St Marys is not listed although he was nominated as an FRIBA and is mentioned in the Directory of British Architects.

The structure of all the pews is identical but 6 pews at the front of the Nave had carving added to their inner end in the mid 1990's – these pew-ends are worth retaining in some way. As the remainder of the pews are identical, a full professional survey would appear to be an unwarranted expense.

Current users of the church, particularly after sitting through long services, performances or concerts complain that the pews are uncomfortable. Cushions have been tried but the inevitable reduction in the height of the back of the pews causes further distress.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Church of England Church Heritage Record

Somerset Historic Environment Record

Pevsner, N. *The Buildings of England: South and West Somerset*

Hazel Hudson and Frances Neale, *Various published and unpublished material*

ANNEXES:

- A.** St Mary's Wedmore – Building Technical Specification.
- B.** St Mary's Wedmore – Building and Development Timeline.
- C.** St Mary's Wedmore – Schedule of Bells.

**ANNEX A TO
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE
DATED 28 May 2022**

ST MARY'S WEDMORE – BUILDING TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Coursed and squared rubble, dressed stone, lead roofs. Nave, North and South aisles, South aisle chapel, South tower porch, crossing tower, chancel, transepts, North and South chancel chapels.

Tower has set back buttresses, triple 2-light bell chamber windows, those to centre louvred, those to each side blank, stair turret, arcaded parapet. There are similar blank parapet to South side, lesser parapet to North side.

Earliest feature the South porch doorway of c1200 with 2 orders of detached shafts with leaf capitals; door dated 1677.

The Chancel and South East chapel is C1300; the latter with a 2-light window with a cusped head. The remainder of the church is Perpendicular; single bay transepts, 2-bay South aisle chapel, 5-bay aisles; 4 and 5-light windows with renewed tracery. Inside aisles have tall thin piers of 4-hollow section. South aisle chapel latest of all, entered through a 2 bay arcade formed from 2 earlier windows.

**ANNEX B TO
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DATED 28 May 2022**

ST MARY'S WEDMORE – BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

Serial	Date	Item or Event	Remarks
1	1066 and before	Wedmore church first mentioned in documents in 1066	Alfred and Guthrum's visit indicate the existence of a Saxon church in 878 AD
2	c.1200	Crossing and Arches, Chancel walls	Possibly South doorway as well
3	13C	South doorway (see Serial 2 above)	Rebuilt when the South Aisle was built - see Serial 10
4	13C	Chancel	c.1200
5	c.1280	Windows	Of 2 lights with a cinquefoiled inner arch now astride the door between Guild Chapel and South Porch
6	13C	First stage of Tower	
7	15C	High Nave	Serials 7 to 11 indicate a major rebuild of the whole church
8	15C	Aisles	North Aisle slightly later than South Aisle
9	Pre 1450	West end windows	
10	15C	South Porch and Parvis	South door rebuilt to accommodate South Aisle
11	15C	Tower rebuilt and raised	Three stages, belfry windows (2 blank), a simple open parapet
12	16C	Both Chapels added	Chapels early C16. The Guild Chapel to the east of the porch was originally separate from the church and was joined up in the C16 when the tracery was transferred to the chapel windows and the spaces were continued to the ground to make arches.

13	1705	Bell reordering	Two new/recast bells. 4 th and 6 th , both probably recast and then subsequently recast again in 1936
14	1754	Gallery on West wall	Maybe replaced gallery above tower arch on east wall of the nave. Removed in 1881 reordering
15	1769	Candelabrum	
16	1772	Bell reordering	Two new/recast bells from Abraham Bilbie
17	1775	Bell reordering	New/recast bell from William Bilbie
18	1801	Bell reordering	New/recast bell from James Bilbie
19	1810	Nave and Roofs	All the roofs renewed, except for one over an aisle with painted angels. The nave roof has a tie beam inscribed 'Jn Woolen and Jno Norman, CW's [Church Wardens]'. W. N. Parker & Son, Carpenters, 1810.
20	1828	Vestry	Built on southeast corner but taken down in 1880-81 reordering
21	19C	Installation of boiler house and heating system	Pit for this beneath path just outside west wall on south side. Date uncertain but could be part of Hervey's reordering.
22	1854	Two Candelabra	
23	1855 -66	Chancel alterations	Report by J H Christian on the chancel dated 31 October 1855, est £192: 16:0. George Oxley of Wedmore, plaster to do work for £94: George H. Watts of Wedmore, builder, £91. Certificate of completion 24th November 1856.
24	1862	Willis Organ installed	
25	27 May 1880 to 1 June 1881	The Rev Sydenham Hervey's major re-ordering under the architect Edmund Ferrey	The restoration started 27th May 1880 as the chancel had been previously restored in an unsatisfactory manner. J. H. Christian had reported (5 November)

			<p>that it was 'highly desirable' that something should be done. A new roof would cost £355: extra lead covering £130: cleaning masonry, replastering, tiles & steps, £169: rail £20.. It was decided that everything except the roof would be restored. On 7th December they received a tender from Merrick & Sons, who were engaged on the church - £170. The 1st instalment paid 12 March 1881 and the last 14 June. The church was reopened on 1 June 1881.</p> <p>There was other serious expenditure as Serials 25 to 29 (possibly up to 31) show the extent of the re-ordering</p>
26	25 Mar 1881	Tower clock	Supplied and fitted by Gillett & Bland of Croydon for a total (including the return of the packing cases) of £194:10s:04d
27	1881	Pews	Box pews replaced by present oak pews
28	1881	West wall gallery	Removed in re-ordering
29	1881	Bell reordering	Treble and 2nd bells new/recast by John Taylor & Co. (Treble recast again by Mears & Stainbank in 1964)
30	Late 19C	Railings, Piers and Gates at east and west end of churchyard	Probably included in Hervey's reordering
31	Victorian /Pre WW1	Stained glass in east and west windows	By Clayton and Bell. Maybe included in Hervey's reordering
32	Victorian /Pre WW1	Stained glass in north Chancel window	By Franz Mayer & Co. Likely to have been included in the Chancel and other changes of 1910-12
32	1910	Two oak Screens to Chapels from North and South Aisles	
	1912	Willis organ enlarged	Work done by Bishop & Son

33	1912	Carved oak Reredos	
34	1912	Carved oak Altar	
35	1936	Bell reordering	Two bells recast by Mears & Stainbank. The 4 th and 6 th had previously been recast by Bilbie in 1705
36	1949	Organ further enlarged	Percy Daniel installed electro-pneumatic action
37	Mid 1950s	Replacement of boiler fired heating system with all electric system	
38	1950s	Tower clock installation of first auto winding system	Three endless chain Huygens type automatic winding units for going, chiming and striking barrels. Replaced in 2007
39	1964	Bell reordering	Treble recast again, by Mears & Stainbank
40	1980s	Installation of sound system	
41	1980s	Building of toilet block and construction of kitchenette in Lady Chapel	
42	1996	Handrail outside South Porch door	
43	1997	Installation of dais at east end of Nave	This makes a level floor from the dais, under the tower right up to the sanctuary steps
44	2001	Outer South Porch door installed	
45	2007	Tower clock auto-wind mechanism replaced	Smith of Derby Ltd installed three new auto-wind systems for £4,449+VAT
46	2010	Small extension to Cupboards in Lady Chapel	Local craftsman
47	2013	Oak screen between Nave and Guild Chapel	Ellis & Co

48	2014	Organ refurbishment	Further embellishment work done by Michael Farley
49	2014	Tower parapets – significant repairs and repointing	Ellis & Co
50	2017	Replacement of carpet & underlay in Lady Chapel – photographic record made of many historic memorial flagstones hidden below carpet	Living Homes – carpet Michael Blandford – photographic record
51	2020	Extensive repointing of external stonework, repairs to mullion windows and internal flagstones & mullions	Corbel & Co.

St Mary's Wedmore – Statement of Significance

48	2019	Audio-visual system installed in Nave	
49	2020	Installation of 'theatre' lighting above dais	

**ANNEX C TO
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DATED 28 May 2022**

ST MARY'S WEDMORE - SCHEDULE OF BELLS

Bell Number	On Preservation List	Weight (Cwt)	Note	Date	Founder
1 of 8	No	8.0.8	C	1964	Mears & Stainbank
2 of 8	No	8.1.9	B	1881	John Taylor & Co
3 of 8	No	10.0.4	A	1772	Abraham Bilbie
4 of 8	No	10.3.16	G	1936	Mears & Stainbank
5 of 8	No	12.1.15	F	1772	Abraham Bilbie
6 of 8	No	17.2.25	E	1936	Mears & Stainbank
7 of 8	Yes	21.2.16	D	1801	James Bilbie
8 of 8	No	30.0.5	C	1775	William Bilbie