

Welcome

Welcome to Bunbury parish church!

You will find here the history of this village and of this nation.

You will find here beauty, the work of craftsmen and artists spanning six centuries.

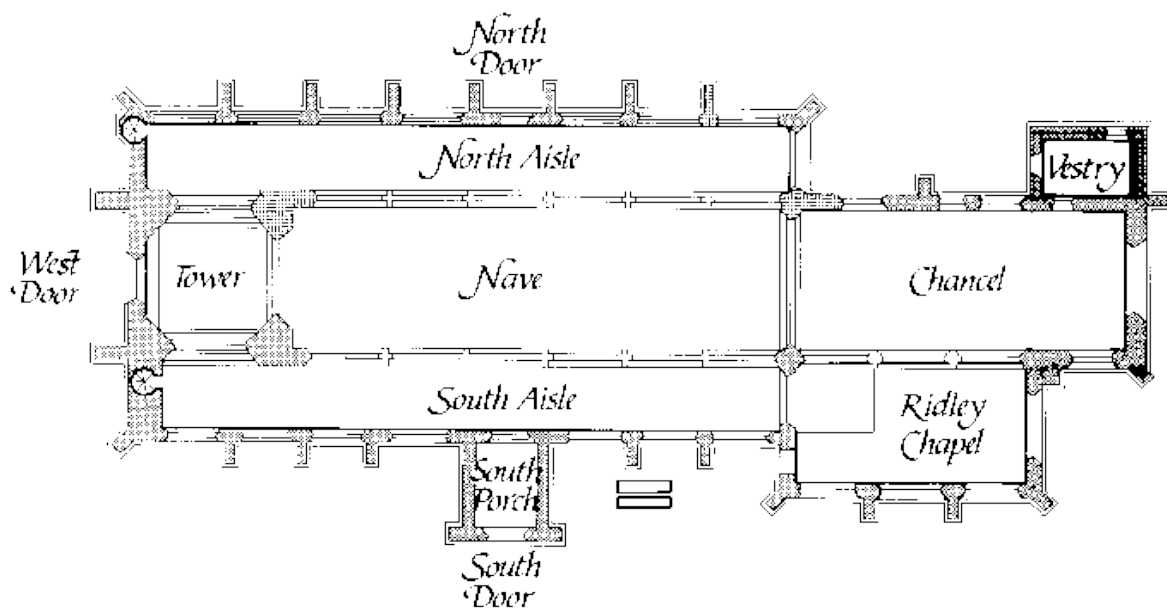
You will find here peace, a place of calm in a chaotic world.

You have found the spiritual focus of this village community, the home of a living, worshipping, witnessing family of Christians.

We pray that you will find here the Lord of history, of beauty and of peace.

God is of course present in every part of His world, but all through the centuries many have found it easier to be aware of Him in this place. May that prove to be so for you.

If you are not able to visit the church it is hoped that through these pages you will capture some of the history and beauty of this place of worship.



A thousand years of worship

Local people have worshipped on this site for over a thousand years. A church is people; the building itself is only an architectural record of a community at prayer. So the structural alterations of many centuries reflect two things: a continuity of worship, and the ever changing rituals and beliefs of the English Church. Or, put simply, in the words of Sir John Betjeman:

Our churches are our history shown,
In wood and iron and glass and stone.

c. AD 755	Wooden Anglo-Saxon church on site
1086	Bunbury mentioned in Domesday
1135	Stone Norman church exists
1320	Church rebuilt in Decorated style.
1385-6	Sir Hugh de Calveley endows new collegiate church.
c. 1490	Nave remodelled.
1527	Ridley Chapel begun by Sir Raufe Egerton
1548	Chantry chapels and colleges dissolved during Reformation; Bunbury loses its endowments. Church reverts to Crown
1565	Elizabeth I sells tithes to Thomas Aldersey (London haberdasher and Member of Parliament).
1590	Aldersey appoints puritan Haberdashers' Company as his trustees.
1642	"Bunbury Convention" held in church. Neutrality of Cheshire in Civil War declared.
1643	Convention fails. "Church fired by Royalists much damage".
1700s	Nave galleries added
1751	John Wesley preaches at Bunbury.
1863-6	Victorian "restorations": plaster, wall-paintings, box-pews, galleries all removed; new roof; floor tiled.
1931	Electric light introduced.
1940	Land-mine seriously damages church
1960	Reverend Ridgeway appeals on new medium of television for repair funds.
2000	?

Tower of Strength



Stand here beneath the lofty arches on a winter's day, and the only sound, above the souging of the wind, is the slow, iron heart-beat of the church clock, high above.

The bottom section of the tower, like much of the chancel at the other end of the church, dates from Sir Hugh de Calveley's 14th-century rebuilding of an earlier church. Embraced by the aisles, the tower stands on three fine Perpendicular arches within the nave. The tower has walls nearly six feet (2m) thick, and is founded on a sandstone outcrop - a rock of ages in another sense. The walls are strong enough to withstand the enormous stresses put upon them by the swinging of the bells. The ring of eight bells - the oldest an early 16th century tenor bell, the most recent two added at the close of the 19th century weighs a total of 66 hundredweight (3,350 kg). It is no wonder that early towers sometimes collapsed.

On windless days the peal of the bells still carries out to the old parish boundary a difficult task at Bunbury, despite a tower 70 feet (21m) tall. For the ancient parish was large, ranging over 17,000 acres (6,800 ha) and twelve townships, from Tiverton to the north of Bunbury to Ridley in the south. Towers were once landmarks too. When the mediaeval forest of Mare and Mondrem stretched away on either side, and the Gowy valley was a maze of marshland, Bunbury church tower must have been a welcome sight.

The Nave

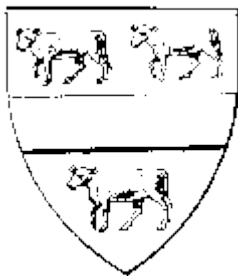
For the People

The English medieval church was a mysterious succession of self-contained boxes. The nave and chancel, for instance, were far more separate than they are today. The word chancel comes from the Latin "cancellus" meaning screen, and described that part of the church which was screened off, exclusively for the clergy's use.

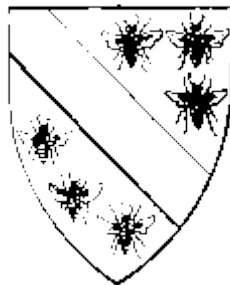
The nave, in contrast, belonged to the people. "Navis" in Latin means ship; the nave carried the people safely across the seas of life: it was an Ark of Salvation.

It was Sir Hugh de Calveley's money, with timely diocesan help, that had paid for the 14th-century rebuilding of the church. In its new form the church incorporated a college, the responsibility of whose chantry priests it was to sing requiem masses for the soul of the founder.

Other patronage was to follow. Look above you at the frieze of angels supporting the roof beams. The painted shields they hold display the arms of prominent local families.



The three calves of
the de Calveleys



The six bees of the
Beestons



The lion rampant with
three arrows of the
Egertons of Ridley

Each is a lasting reminder of local power and generosity. Even so, the upkeep, redecoration and any alterations to the nave remained the responsibility of the parish. Raising this money was the job of the churchwardens, who had also to provide many of the church furnishings, such as bells, bell ropes, a bier for the dead, and a [font](#) with a cover and lock.

It was an expensive business. But the strength of the parishioners' commitment to their church was demonstrated when, in about 1490, the nave and aisles at Bunbury were remodelled.



The oak of the main, west door is 600 years old:
it is as hard as iron.

Services in the Middle Ages

There were no seats or pews in the nave of any English church until the late 15th century. Although the clergy for a long time had both fixed stalls and movable benches, the medieval villagers either stood or knelt. As elsewhere, the floor at Bunbury was of bare earth, brushed perhaps with bull's blood to keep the dust down, and strewn with rushes.

Each of the day's three main services Matins, followed by Mass in the morning, and Evensong in the late afternoon, while it was still light - was intoned in mumbled Latin. Apart from the occasional "Amen", the services were incomprehensible to many of the people, as indeed they were to some of the clergy. The villagers could play no direct part, for as yet there were no hymns or psalms. They could only look on. English was seldom used; and the sermon, as we know it, did not come until after the Reformation - from 1538 onwards, when the first pulpits began to appear.

Candles, Wall Paintings and Incense

The light flooding onto this lofty church was not always so bright. Devotional and memorial stained glass, showing an array of saints and heraldic devices, darkened the medieval interior. In about 1840 the nave windows were fitted with iron casements, or frames. Sadly, this work destroyed the last fragments of medieval glass. It also, inadvertently, weakened the stonework. So much so that when, in 1940, a land mine blew in the Victorian stained glass, much of the windows' stone tracery was also destroyed. The present plain panes are modern, yet irregular like medieval glass; so they still distort the churchyard yews into dark spires.

Guttering candles provided the only extra light in an incense-filled interior. In the gloom the church was rich with decoration. Ormerod's History of Cheshire tells us that, before the 1863-6 restorations at Bunbury, "This superb country edifice ... contained as rich a variety of ornament as any church in the county".

Until Victorian times most of the walls, ceilings, stonework, woodwork, tombs and statues were painted and gilded: the church interior was a hymn to colour.

Wall paintings, showing scenes from the Bible and the lives of the saints, or giving graphic warnings against the Seven Deadly Sins, were universal in the Medieval Church. They were the Poor Man's Bible, a "visual aid", essential in a pre-literate age.

Only fragments of the wall paintings remain at Bunbury. Most were obliterated by lime-wash at the Reformation, to be replaced by written excerpts from the scriptures. Of those few spared, the majority were later destroyed by the Victorian mania for church restoration. As each mural was uncovered, it was briefly recorded and then hacked away. Even the stonework was retooled.

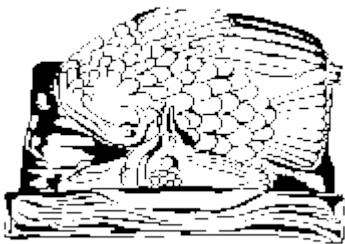
The North Aisle

Wall of Glass

The north aisle, on the left as you face the altar, is a virtual wall of glass, its eight bays broken only by the narrow exterior buttressing. The fifth bay from the tower end encloses the north door, set in a square frame. Known as "the Devil's Door" in medieval times, the door was left open during the service of baptism in the belief that any evil spirits in the child would escape through it. The door itself was replaced in 1630; the date is carved into the wood on the outside in large curving numerals.



Typical of the Perpendicular style, the north aisle is richer in decoration than the south. Look above you. The label stops, where the arches of the arcade meet, feature angels playing medieval instruments. Higher still, the stone corbels supporting the roof beams form a carved menagerie: bears and dogs mingle with leering human faces and mythical beasts.



Look for this carved stone pelican high above the Communion Table in the north (left-hand) aisle. The pelican plucking at her breast to feed her young upon her own blood (known as "the Pelican in her piety") is a symbol of Christ's Passion.

Pagan Symbols

The north aisles 14th-century stone reredos, part of an earlier church, is divided into five compartments. Among the carved foliage are two small figures. There is also a Green Man, or Jack-in-the-Green - a human face with a mask of leaves springing from his mouth.



A curious reminder of pagan beliefs the Green Man occurs in many medieval churches. As part of the Midsummer rites in pre-Christian times a youth garlanded with leaves was sacrificed as a mate for the earth goddess. In death he symbolised fertility and rebirth.



In front of the stone reredos is the Communion Table, which dates from 1659, the last year of the Commonwealth. Above the table is a modern oil-painted triptych, its Christian symbolism in direct contrast to the older altar-piece. Behind is a stained-glass window by Christopher Webb. It replaces Victorian glass destroyed in 1940. Medieval tiles found during excavations under and in front of the high altar in 1952 have been re-laid close by.



Triptych open



Triptych closed

The South Aisle

The south aisle is on the right as you face the altar. Compare the two aisles: they are not the same. Loss of enthusiasm or lack of money, half-way through the 15th century remodelling of the nave and aisles means that they differ in a number of ways.

The windows are smaller in the south aisle. Perhaps the passion for memorial stained glass was fulfilled once the north aisle was complete. Whatever the reason, the north aisle was rebuilt from the ground up, while the south aisle reused some of the older wall. Up to the cills the stonework dates from the 14th century. Note, too, the string course - the projecting horizontal band that runs along the wall and up over the south door.

There are few decorations in the south aisle; only the roof corbels, or supports, have crude animals and faces carved upon them: these winged beasts and dragons have peered down on 600 years of congregations.

Look carefully at the end wall of the aisle, below the organ pipes. Protected behind the screens until the 1860s, on a thin skin of plaster, is a painted medieval altarpiece. It is almost invisible today. Nearly seven-and-a-half feet (2.3m) wide, but only eight inches (20 cm) high, it shows Christ rising from the tomb. On either side stand the two Marys, and beyond them two bishops wearing the vestments of the Mass and holding crosiers. One of them is probably St Boniface, patron of Bunbury church. Although born an Englishman, he became archbishop of Mainz, in Germany. He was martyred while on a missionary journey to Frisia, and is buried at Fulda.

The wooden screens surrounding both aisle chapels were carved and decorated with painted wainscot-panelling. Parts of these - enough to allow a reconstruction to be made - were rescued in 1949. They have since been restored at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, and are displayed on the south aisle wall.

The South Porch

Today, the south porch houses relics of the church's past - Norman stonework, several grave slabs and freestone effigies, as well as the old church clock.



Both the inner and outer doors of the south porch are original. The south door was once the normal entrance to the church, and the west door, the main entrance today, was reserved for special occasions and processions. Villagers congregated in the south porch on summer evenings to talk over the day.



Three 18th-century charity boards hang on the tower wall. Like others in the vestry they record, for all to see, money given for distribution to the poor of the parish.

At the end of the south aisle, the visitors' book contains signatures from around the globe. The blue and gold curtains behind hung originally in Westminster Abbey at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

The Font



In Medieval times the parishioners, having entered by the south door, would file past the font before moving up the nave. The present octagonal font dates from 1663. It replaces Bunbury's medieval font, misused during the Civil War (1642-1649), when the church housed prisoners taken in local fighting at Beeston Castle and Tilstone Fearnall. The scrolled oak cover has been restored to its original colours of black brown and gold.



Found buried under a yew tree north of the church in May 1882, this statue was thought at first to represent the Virgin Mary. Later research told another story: the effigy commemorates Jane Johnson wife of the dancing master of Nantwich, and is dated 1741. Aged only 24, she may have died in childbirth.

The Chancel



Beyond the nave is the chancel. The seclusion of this area in the medieval church was maintained by the rood screen, so called because it supported the Rood - a carved statue of Christ on the cross, flanked by the Virgin and Saint John the Evangelist, sometimes with supporting angels. The word comes from the Old English "rod", meaning "cross". Made of wood, the heavily painted and gilded screen usually ran across the width of the chancel arch.

The present chancel screen is not old, but dates from 1921. It was designed and installed by Fred Crossley, the Cheshire church-historian. The intricate carving survived the 1940 bomb damage.



The chancel, like the tower, is essentially that of Sir Hugh de Calveley's 1385 collegiate church. Only the roof is a little later, dating from 1520 when the chancel walls were heightened. It is still, however, the oldest roof in the church.

Chanters and Singers

Why did Sir Hugh de Calveley insist upon so large a chancel? The end of the 14th century, when Bunbury church was extensively rebuilt, was a period of recovery and expansion. More than a quarter of the population had died from the Black Death, the plague which swept across Europe

from 1348 onwards, and forty years later society was only just returning to normal. Fashions changed, and churches all over the land were altered and enlarged to accommodate private, parochial and gild chapels. Most of these, like Bunbury, were in the new Perpendicular style.

The chancel in Sir Hugh's collegiate church was designed to provide room for a chantry staff of eleven - a master, a submaster, five chaplains, two chanters, and two singers. Their job was to pray for the souls of the king, Sir Hugh and their ancestors.

The new chancel was also the setting for Sir Hugh's magnificent alabaster chest tomb. The church was still unfinished at his death in 1394, when he was about 79 years old; his tomb was installed in 1416.

A warrior's Tomb for a Giant of a Man



This is the earliest alabaster tomb in Cheshire, made from stone quarried in Derbyshire but carved in London.

The effigy is not a faithful likeness of Sir Hugh, although he was undoubtedly very tall. Carving reached a high level of skill in this country in the 14th and 15th centuries, but more attention was paid to details of dress and armour than to faces. Traces of red and green paint which once covered the whole tomb are still visible. Damage to the tomb is mostly old: the graffiti were scratched by Civil War prisoners held in the church.

The spiked railings around the tomb, which are original, are called a "hearse". The eight main spikes once held devotional candles, and, on special occasions today, still do.

Sir Hugh was a colourful character: while still young, he had fled the country after killing a man. From then on his life was to be one long adventure. A contemporary described him as "a man of teeth and hands, who could feed as much as two, and fight as much as ten". He fought all over France and Spain, sometimes for the English king, and sometimes as a mercenary. He survived a violent shipwreck, was captured and ransomed at least three times, was excommunicated by the Pope, was Governor of Calais and of the Channel Islands, and at last retired from battle when he was 60-70 years old. Only then did he decide to endow Bunbury Church.

Whether Sir Hugh is actually buried here is open to question. The "tomb" may be only a cenotaph, for a record from 1393, just one year before his death, refers to "John, son of John Whytemore [of Chester] being about to leave the country in the train [or armed band] of Hugh de Calveley, knight" Sir Hugh may have died, and been buried, abroad.

An Old Sea-Dog

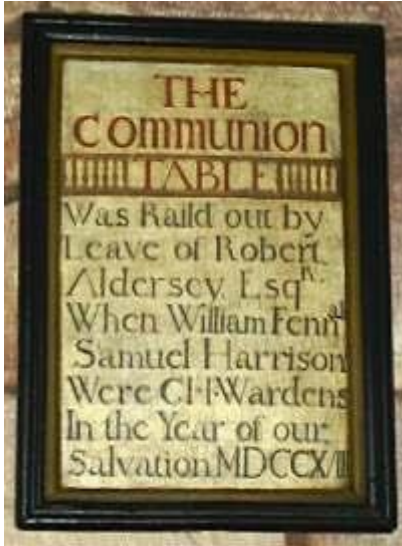


Within the altar rails is the elaborate tomb of Sir George Beeston, restored to its original colours in 1937. He was a descendant of Sir Hugh de Calveley, who lived through the whole of the 16th century. He served four monarchs, was Admiral of the Fleet, and fought in many famous battles. Most outstanding was his part in the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, when, as commander of the Dreadnought, along with four other ships, he broke the Spanish line. He was then 89, and was knighted for his services.

The High Altar

Since earliest times the altar has been an essential part - the heart - of the church. But in both construction and position the altar, too, has seen many changes. In Anglo-Saxon times it was of wood - a table symbolising the Last Supper. From 1076 it was decreed that altars be made of stone:

some contained a concealed cavity for holy relics. At the Reformation (from 1538 onwards) altars reverted to being made of wood. Many stone altars were destroyed: that at Bunbury was reused as a stepping stone over the River Gowy, just below the church. The wooden altar was damaged by a land mine in 1940 and now stands in the north aisle.



The removal of the rood screen at the Reformation meant that the high altar needed alternative protection from irreverent people, and dogs. Although altar rails were first introduced in Elizabethan times, those at Bunbury date from the early 18th century. They have well-turned balusters, sufficiently close together to keep out dogs. A benefaction board, recording gifts to the parish, tells us that The Communion Table was railed out ... in the year of our salvation 1717".

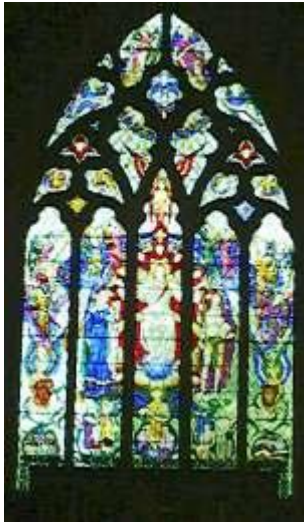


On the south side of the chancel, to the right of the altar, and dating from the 14th century, are the sedilia. These canopied stone seats, in their Decorated niches, were for the clergy to sit in during long services.

Next to the sedilia is a double-drained piscina, also belonging to the 14th century. It was only rediscovered when the Victorians stripped off the plaster and whitewash accretions of centuries. The shallow stone basin

allowed the holy water, used by the priest to wash both his hands and the vessels during Mass, to drain away into sanctified ground.

The East Window



The east window, behind the altar, predates the Black Death and Sir Hugh's collegiate church. In the Decorated style, it was reused from an earlier church. Compare it to the later Perpendicular windows in the aisles, for example: the stone tracery here is more complex and flowing. Fragments of medieval glass from a Jesse window (showing Jesus' family tree) were discovered beneath the floor nearby. This medieval stained glass window, dated 1343, survived until the mid-18th century, when "A great part of the east end was blown down in the Great Wind of the Spring".

Between then and 1840 the east window was blocked up, while the whole of the east end outside was covered in ivy. The present stained glass is modern. It was made in 1954 by Christopher Webb's studio, and incorporates local scenes.

While removing the ancient plaster on either side of the east window the Victorians uncovered two painted figures. On the left-hand side was an angel; and to the right, a child in arms, with the emblems of the Crucifixion - a hammer and pincers.

The Ridley Chapel

Beyond the south wall of the chancel is the Ridley Chapel. It dates from the early 16th century, and is the only later addition to the original plan of Sir Hugh de Calveley's collegiate church.

Sir Raufe Egerton, yet another distinguished soldier, and standard-bearer to Henry VIII, was knighted by the king for bravery in the French Wars. He was also presented with the manor of Ridley - centred on a tiny hamlet two miles south of Bunbury.

In order to perpetuate his line under the patronage of God, Sir Raufe decided to build a chantry chapel at Bunbury. It employed two chantry priests to pray for his soul, and the souls of his family. Sir Raufe also provided a chantry house, roofed in Welsh slate, for the priests to live in. The house still stands today, just to the south of the church.



Look at the wooden double doors with their intricately carved trellis work. Linenfold panelling, resembling draped cloth, survives on the lower half. On the reverse are carved the monograms of Sir Raufe and his wife Mary. What a labour of love these doors are.

The stone screen of the arcade, inside the chapel, retains much of its 16th-century painted decorations. They are some of the earliest Renaissance wall-paintings in the north of England.

Until the 17th century, Sir Raufe's marble chest-tomb with his name and arms upon it stood in the centre of the chapel. It was probably destroyed during the Civil War. Under the carpet a sandstone frame marks its original position. True to character, Sir Raufe also left full instructions for the stained glass, ornaments and statues. Two pedestals, still on either side of the altar, once held "two tabernacle gilt canopies for images". The two stained-glass roundels in one of the south windows are cadency

marks - heraldic symbols that show the seniority of the bearer within the family.



The chapel was never finished. It was still incomplete when Sir Raufe died in 1527, and only extensive instructions in his will allowed work to continue. But seven years after his death, Henry VIII became Supreme Head of the Church of England and dissolved the monasteries. Later, came the dissolution of parish church colleges and chantries, and the chapel fell into decay. As late as 1873, it "had become so dilapidated as to be perfectly unbearable, there being a hole in the roof producing intolerable draughts". Some repairs were made then, but it was not until 1894 that it was fully restored with a new roof and external parapet. That so much has survived is surprising.

Centre of Puritanism

Under the patronage of Thomas Aldersey, a local-born Puritan who had bought the right to endow the preachingship in 1565, Bunbury soon became a centre for non-conformism. It was the first church living of which the London Company of Haberdashers Aldersey's trustees - gained control. They were often in conflict with local Catholics. "You of this parish", wrote the Bunbury preacher in 1633, "live mixed with so many Papists as nowhere more in the whole country" A census of 1640 shows the parish contained no fewer than 112 recusants - illegal Catholics in a Protestant nation.

By 1744 a small Bible study group, meeting in the vestry, were presented by the Bishop of Chester with a copy of Birkett's 'New Testament Commentary'. However, within the year attitudes changed, and they were thrown out. The Commentary remained, and can still be seen displayed halfway along the north wall of the chancel, in what was once a memorial niche.

The group became the first Methodist Society in Cheshire. John Wesley - the famous itinerant Methodist preacher preached from the pulpit of Bunbury church, and later, in 1751, at the forge in the centre of the village.



The tour of the church ends here. However, as you leave, look up to the arms of the [Haberdashers' Company of London](#) over the west (main) door: consider that the vicar is still appointed by the Company, and paid as "the Preacher of Bunbury", like his predecessors over the past 400 years. This is yet another point to illustrate the church's long history as a place of worship.