

A photograph of St Mary's Church in Devizes, showing its Gothic architecture, a large tower, and a smaller building with a tiled roof. In the foreground, there is a grassy area with several gravestones.

**St Mary**  
DEVIZES TRUST

A place of **COMMUNITY** use & **CHRISTIAN** worship for the **FUTURE**

## The Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Devizes

St. Mary's was the original church in Devizes. The present building, started by Bishop Roger of Salisbury in 1143, replaced an earlier simpler church built outside the castle walls for the growing town. The surviving Norman elements are the chancel walls and some of the decoration. The nave, aisles and tower were rebuilt about 1436, through the generosity of the wealthy clothier William Smyth. He is commemorated in the carved inscription on the nave roof. The porch is transitional Norman, older than the present nave, although the upper stage was rebuilt in 1612. The only later additions were the clergy vestry in 1852 and the tower clock dials in 1921, although there were restorations in 1844, 1924, 1963, and 1969.

### Interior

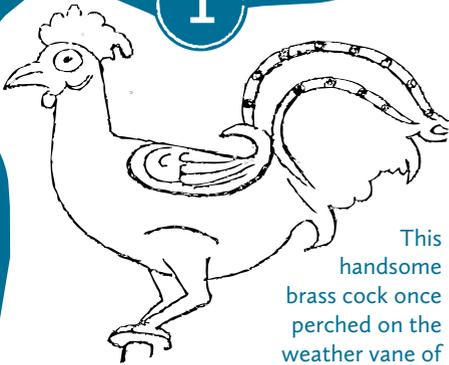
Entering the church by the south porch, one is impressed by the fine proportions of the interior, the graceful lofty arcades, the unusual height of the tower arch and the Norman work in the east end.

### The Sanctuary and the Chancel

The Sanctuary and the Chancel are of Norman origin although they have been tampered with, particularly with the insertion of Perpendicular windows and a larger chancel arch. The east window contains stained glass put in 1890. The east wall is embellished with a fine wall-arcade of intersecting arches, with typical Norman ornamentation. Similar arcading on the north and east walls was lost when the Perpendicular windows were installed. The roof has fine groined vaulting supported by shafts with moulded bases and Norman caps. On the west side of the chancel arch there are squints and higher up is the upper doorway to the rood loft stairway.



1



This handsome brass cock once perched on the weather vane of the tower.

2



The arch leading to the chancel has carved decoration.

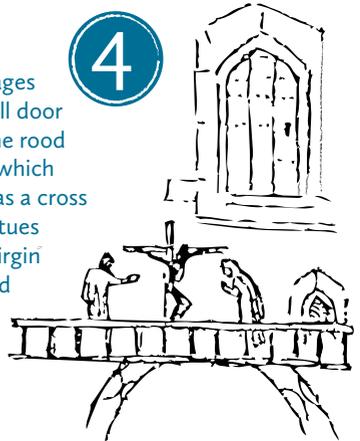
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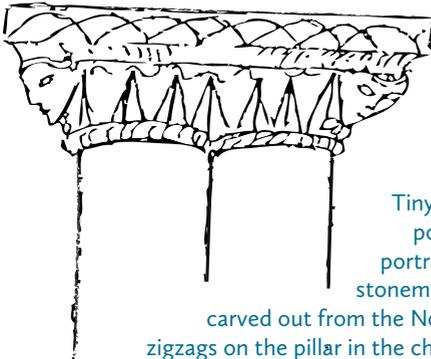
Above the arch are the arms of King George III

4

In the middle ages this small door led to the rood loft, on which there was a cross with statues of the Virgin Mary and St John.



5



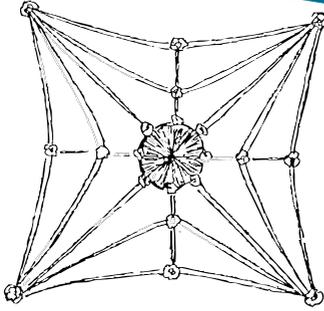
Tiny faces possibly portraits of stonemasons, carved out from the Norman zigzags on the pillar in the chancel. They are part of the original church.

6

The fine wooden roof is supported by heads of kings, queens and bishops. The golden painted Latin inscription asks us to pray for the soul of William Smyth who rebuilt this part of the church, and who died in 1436.

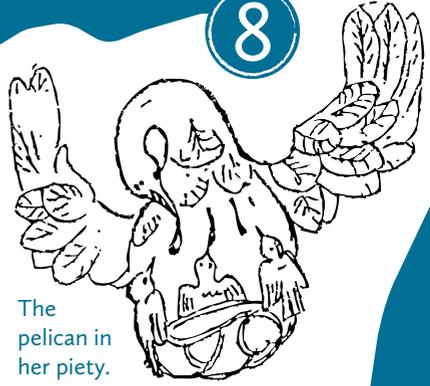


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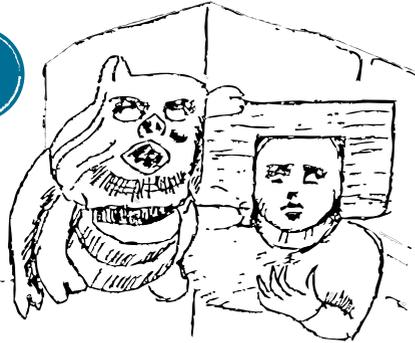
The beautiful star-shaped vaulted tower ceiling has a circular central hole giving access to the bells.

8



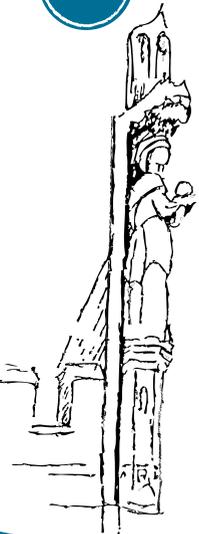
The pelican in her piety. A wooden carving of the bird who fed her young with her own blood. A symbol of Christ's sacrifice.

9



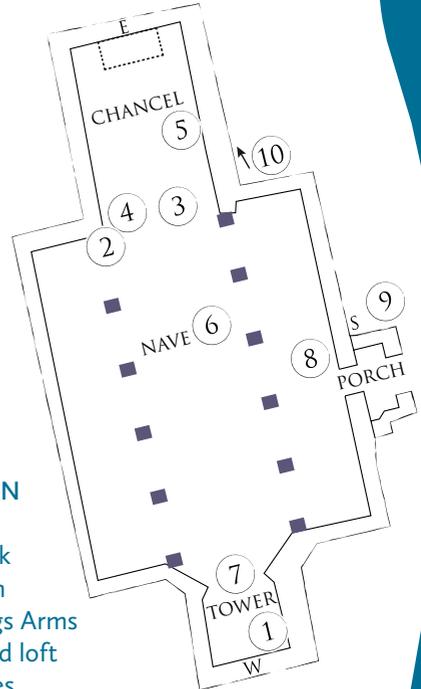
Above the porch is a carving of a woman struggling with a monster.

10



High on the east end of the nave roof and visible from the churchyard is a statue of the Virgin and child.

Below the statue are two stone shields showing the initials of William Smyth who rebuilt the nave and tower



PLAN

1. Cock
2. Arch
3. Kings Arms
4. Rood loft
5. Faces
6. Nave Roof
7. Tower
8. Pelican
9. Woman & Monster
10. Statue of Virgin & Child

## The Nave

The Nave carries a commemorative inscription on the fine roof to William Smyth, the wealthy clothier, who paid for the rebuilding of the nave, aisles, and tower:

*ORATE AIA WILLI SMYTH QUI ISTA ECCLESIAM FIERI FECIT.  
QUI OBIIT PRIOMO DIEMENSIS JUNII ANNO DIE MILLO  
CCCCXXXVI.*

‘Pray for the soul of William Smyth who had this church (re)built and died on the first day of June 1436’.

The nave windows are three cinquefoil lights under pointed heads, the lower windows have vertical tracery, the clerestory window has quatrefoils and the roof displays the same Perpendicular style. The present tie-beam roof, originally painted in bright colours rests on corbels representing Henry VI, Queen Margaret, and Robert Nevill, Bishop of Salisbury from 1427 to 1438. Additional rafters at either end terminate in carved demi-angels with shields.

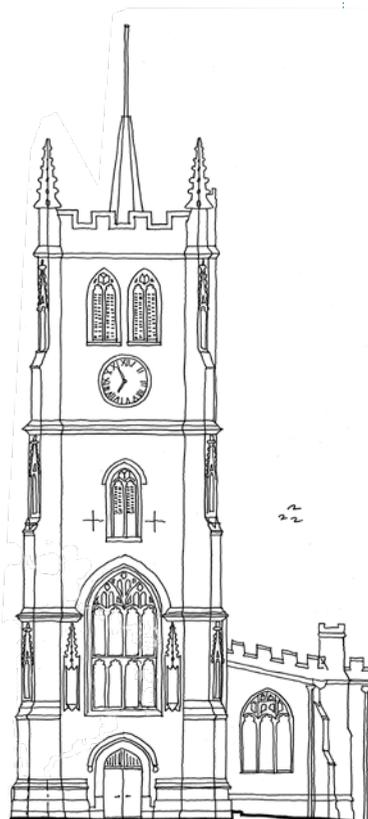
About 1880 the west window was opened up by the removal of a gallery that had been built in the middle of the eighteenth century. The west window with its stained glass has been described as: *‘a curious window depicting in no logical order scenes from the life of Christ’*. The organ, located in the gallery was moved to its present position nearer the chancel. The organ is an instrument of two manuals and pedals in a Gothic case and dates from about 1855. Above the door of the south porch there is a fine carving of a pelican feeding her young. The medieval belief was that the pelican would wound her breast to nourish her young and that this act of self-sacrifice was a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The coat of arms on the chancel wall of the nave is that of the House of Hanover before 1801.

## The Tower

The Tower is one of the most remarkable features of St. Mary's with its soaring tower arch. It is forty feet high and ten feet wide, its apex being level with the top of the clerestory. The chamber below the bells has a vaulted ceiling with a bell trap in the middle. The internal door to the gallery is early eighteenth century.

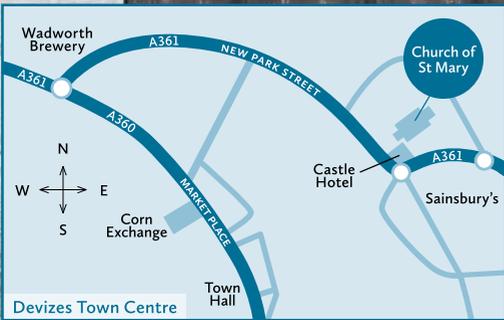
## The Exterior

An excellent view is obtained from the southeast corner of the churchyard. The Norman origin of the chancel is apparent in the buttresses at the eastern angles and the similar pilaster buttress of the south wall. The aisle buttresses are typically Perpendicular. The bays of the clerestory are defined by crocketed pinnacles. Over the east gable of the nave rising above the chancel roof, is a fine niche which contains a late medieval statue of the Virgin and Child, a rare survival of this period. The base of the pedestal includes two shields on which are carved William Smyth's initials. Tradition has it that one of Cromwell's army tried to pull down the statue but fell down and was killed. The tower is 91 feet high, the tallest tower of all the Devizes churches and has an embattled parapet, stepped angled buttresses and crocketed pinnacles. Around the church are grotesques, drip stones, and gargoyles, carved heads of people and animals, including a monk, two bears, and a dragon and a man beneath tree (representing the temptation).





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Devezes Town Centre

**The photographs on the following pages show more shots of St. Mary Devizes church, kindly supplied by Charles Slater and Tony Scorer**

