



History of the Parish Church of St. Mary

A church is known to have existed here in 1100. In that year Harold of Ewias, the overlord, granted a sum of money from the church of Lydiard to St. Peter's Abbey, Gloucester, so that with it and other endowments the abbey might found a cell at Ewias in Herefordshire. At the same time he gave the abbot of St. Peter's the patronage of the church, thus enabling the abbot to present, or nominate, the rectors of Lydiard. But in 1280 this right of patronage was surrendered by the abbot to John of Tregoze, then lord of the manor. From that time until 1944 the owners of Lydiard, some of whom have been mentioned earlier in this guide, nearly always exercised the patronage. Since 1944 the patronage has belonged to the Bishop of Bristol, in whose diocese the church now stands.

Although, architecturally, nothing of so early a date as 1100 is distinguishable in St. Mary's Church, the visitor's first impression of a 15th-century building is a superficial one; the present structure is of 13th-century origin. TIF date, 1280, when the abbot of St. Peter's surrendered the patronage to John of Tregoze, lord of the manor, is possibly relevant.

The church consists of a chancel with a south chapel, which forms the St. John family mortuary chapel, a nave with north and south aisles, the north aisle being known as the Midgehall aisle, a west tower, a south porch and a south-west vestry. The surviving 13th-century fabric comprises the nave, the second and third arches of the north arcade, and the eastern threequarters of the north aisle. In the second half of the 14th-century the present three-bay arcade was inserted in the south wall of the nave and south aisle added. Thereafter in the 15th-century a scheme of enlargement and general improvement was begun: the chancel was rebuilt, the chancel arch being enlarged, and the south chapel added, an archway being inserted between it and the south aisle; the north aisle was expended westward to the full extent of the nave, and the westernmost archway of the north arcade of the nave inserted to open to this extension; the west tower and the south porch too were added, and the windows of the aisles were completely remodelled. With little doubt this scheme was initiated by Oliver St. John and Margaret Beauchamp his wife, and the work on the chancel and south chapel at least was completed by the time of Oliver's death in 1437. (Margaret had succeeded to Lydiard in 1420.

With one exception, the alterations and additions made since the later part of the 15th-century have little affected the general appearance of the fabric : in about 1500 two small windows were inserted high up in the east wall of the nave, no doubt to improve the lighting of the rood loft, and probably in the second half of the 16th-century the easternmost archway of the north arcade of the nave was formed, perhaps to give access to a pulpit.

The most important post-medieval change, spectacular from within rather than from without, occurred in 1633 when the south chapel, the burial place of the St. John family, was remodelled by Sir John St. John, who died in 1648. Only the 15th-century east wall and window were retained; the south wall was rebuilt, being embellished on the outside with his and his wivies' arms, and the party wall with the chancel was completely removed and replaced by an open



Tuscan screen. At about the same time the tall round headed windows flanking the east window of the chancel were inserted, so too were the clerestory windows in the north wall of the nave; the latter at first extended up into the roof as dormers but they were shortened and given their present heads below the eaves in the 19th-century. In the 18th-century dormer windows were inserted for the same purpose in the south side of the nave roof; here, the third dormer window, the most easterly, was added in the 19th-century. The vestry is also a 19th-century addition, possibly in 1846.

Detailed visual evidence of the changes made to the fabric since the beginning of the 19th-century is provided by two interesting and attractive records. The earlier is a watercolour of the church from the south-east by John Buckler, dated 1810 (see illustration), and the second an early 19th-century model preserved in the great house nearby; it may have been made by one Lloyd, who made similar models of some neighbouring churches in the 1830's. At the beginning of the present century the church was restored under the direction of C. E. Ponting, F.S.A. Most important perhaps was the uncovering of some medieval wall paintings, and most questionable the removal of the plaster panels from the late 15th-century roof of the nave.

The church has stood apart from the village for so long that it has played a somewhat restricted part in the life of the parish. The disadvantage has turned to advantage in the visual sense, in the beauty and tranquillity of the setting among the trees beside Lydiard Park, and in the unchanged appearance of the medieval building. The impression received upon approach is of a small typically English parish church, with low chancel, taller aisled nave and lofty west tower. The windows generally have square traceried heads. The roofs on the northside finish with plain eaves, but on the south side all the wall-heads are embattled, for this is the side seen from the house. The tower is in three stages, the topmost stage containing two-light traceried windows with pointed heads, and finished with a richly-wrought, pierced and pinnacled Gothic parapet of the late 18th or early 19th-century.



The interior of the church is, however, very far from typical. Seclusion has contributed to the survival of ancient fixtures and fittings and the extraordinary wealth of St. John family monuments; to this seclusion, too, their remarkable state of preservation is attributable. They give the impression of a private chapel belonging to a patrician family rather than of a parish church. In c. 1670 the antiquarian, John Aubrey, wrote "for modern monuments . . . it exceeds all the churches in the countie", and the number and richness of the contents are no less impressive today. This is largely due to the pride of family expressed in tangible form by Sir John St. John, who died in 1648.

Sir John began in 1615 by commemorating his parents, Sir John St. John (d.1594) and Lucy Hungerford (d. 1598), with a highly elaborate painted triptych (described more fully below), the most splendid and remarkable monument of the kind surviving in England. Then, having remodelled the south chapel in 1633 and embellished it with painting simulating red marble veneers, he installed within it, in the following year, the superbly extravagant canopied monument for himself and his two wives, Anne Leighton (d.1628) and Margaret Whitmore. This was before Margaret's death in 1637 and his own death in 1648 at Battersea, where he lay in state before burial at Lydiard. Sir John's last monument is the highly individual memorial in the chancel, sometimes called the "golden cavalier", to his son Edward, who died in 1645 of wounds sustained when fighting for the king at the second battle of Newbury.



The three helmets on the walls of the chapel and nave are surviving evidence of the time-honoured custom of carrying the knightly emblems of the deceased at the funeral and then suspending them over his tomb. From the iron brackets, which may still be seen on the south aisle walls, once hung pennants and other heraldic trappings. The helmets, brackets, and poles are all that is left of the colourful scene described late in the 17th-century by John Aubrey: "The Chancell, and the aisle of St. John adjoining, are adorned with about 30 penons: over the altar doe hang two banners of St. George, two guidons (pennants) of Ulster, and on each side a Mandalion (tabard) beautified with all their quarterings, with shield, sword, helmet, and crest, made in manner of a trophie, with gauntletts, gilt spurs, and such like badges of Equestrian dignitie".

Sir John's family pride is perhaps best epitomised in the glass, probably Flemish, which he installed in the east window of the chancel and which shows the descent of the manor of Lydiard Tregoze to himself

through the several families who had held it. The principle features of the window, the olive tree in the centre light and the flanking figures of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, are a rebus on the name Oliver St. John. Below the olive tree are the arms of Oliver (d.1497), younger son of Oliver St. John and Margaret Beauchamp. Below the figure of the Baptist are the arms of another Oliver St. John, Viscount Grandison and Baron Tregoze, Sir John's uncle and benefactor (d.1630). This last shield is not original and replaces the one listed by Aubrey as having twelve quarterings. Sir. John's own arms appear below the figure of the Evangelist.

A monument of some distinction, also with considerable heraldic embellishment, was erected by Sir John's father, another Sir John, to commemorate his parents, Nicholas (d.1589) and Elizabeth (d.1587); this is now in the south aisle. Over the south chapel doorway is a monument to Katherine (d.1633), Sir John's eldest sister. It shows also the seated figure of her husband, the erector of the monument, Sir Giles Mompression (d.c.1663), who was possibly the prototype of Massinger's Sir Giles Overreach. Nearby stands the latest monument of note, which is by Michael Rysbrack. It comprises an urn on a pedestal against a pyramidal backing and is to John, Viscount St. John, who remodelled Lydiard Park and who died in 1748.

The decorative exuberance of the St. John monuments, in variety of form and richness of colour, gives something of the quality of a stage-set towards the east end of the church, an effect which is enhanced by the elaborate coloured and gilded wrought-iron communion rails, which incorporate, among other heraldic details, the St. John crest and monogram S.J. The rails date from c.1700 and were no doubt commissioned by Sir Walter St. John, who died in 1708. He may also have had installed the curved ceiling of the chancel painted with sun, moon and clouds sprinkled with gilt stars. The whole is seen through a coloured and gilded Jacobean chancel screen surmounted by a large and splendid freestanding carving of the Stuart royal arms.



By contrast, the nave and nave aisles are entirely medieval and severely simple. But the remains of wall-paintings and stained glass are sufficient to show that by the time of the Dissolution the whole was enriched with a series of pictorial scenes, hierarchic and didactic, detailed and colourful. The outline of a great Rood still appears over the chancel arch, flanked lower down by half figures in Tudor costume; of the latter period too is the head of Christ between pomegranates in the south porch. Other scenes still traceable include the martyrdom of Thomas A'Becket, over the west respond of the north arcade of the nave, and St. Michael weighing souls, over the second pier from the east in the south aisle, both of the 15th-century. Perhaps the most beautiful single survival in the church is the small 14th- or 15th-century painting on the second pier of the south arcade of the Risen Christ, deeply moving in presentation and exquisite in colouring.

The fragments of stained glass include: a delicate and sensitively drawn head of the Virgin crowned and nimbed, of about 1420 and possibly York work; figures of the Prophets of about 1470; the three Seraphim, one of whom bears a rose en soleil, one of the badges of Edward IV; angels holding scrolls inscribed with the "Gloria"; and shields which include the Northwood arms.

The font dates from the 13th-century. The pulpit is Jacobean, and so too are many of the pews: the St. John family pew should be noticed in particular. Some pews have been made up from earlier panels, and others are late Georgian or Victorian.

Not immediately accessible to the visitor are the bells in the west tower and the church plate. The five old bells are post-medieval; the most interesting fact about them is that Numbers 1, 2 and 3 are dated 1635 and are thus closely contemporary with St. John St. John's works within the church. Number 4 by Abraham Rudhall of Gloucester, 1757, was recast in 1964. Number 5 is by William and Robert Cor of Aldbourne, 1701, and is richly decorated. A new treble was added in 1964.

The plate all dates from the 17th-century and includes two large flagons of 1650 and 1663 respectively, an almsdish of 1669 and a chalice and paten of 1649. The first three pieces were given by the daughters of Sir Charles Pleydell.

Source: text transcribed from "Lydiard Park and Church: An Illustrated Survey of the Former Home of the St. John Family and of the Adjoining Church of St. Mary" guidebook,
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