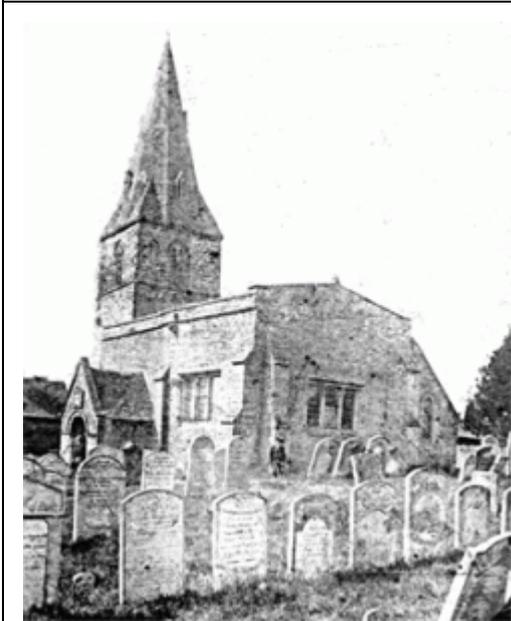
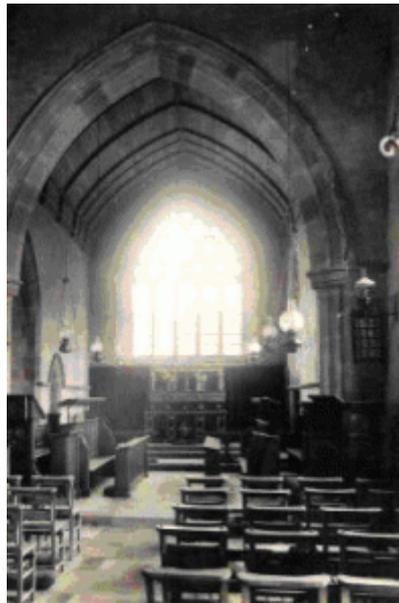


Village History – St Mary’s Church

The parish church of St. Mary the Virgin, properly a chapel of ease to neighbouring St. Andrew’s Church, Thornhaugh is of considerable antiquity being Saxon in origin and certainly 11th century if not earlier. A “chapel of ease” is a subordinate place of worship to a mother church, in this case St. Andrew’s at Thornhaugh, which is sited for the ease, or convenience, of worshippers where the mother church may be a distance away.



St Mary's Church, Wansford, from the outside



St Mary's Church Wansford, Inside view

Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Wansford, prior to the addition of a new chancel in 1902

The interior of St. Mary’s, Wansford, before the provision of electric lighting and, in 1967, the installation of pews.

St. Mary’s possibly stands on the site of an earlier, wooden church which – given its location – may have replaced a pre-Christian temple or place of ritual. St. Mary’s is strategically located in a dominant position at the top of the northern slope rising from the old bridge. It is also set at the nodal point of the former Great North Road to London and Scotland and the roads to Leicester, to Northampton, to Peterborough and also the road that wends to the market town Oundle via Yarwell, Nassington and Fotheringhay; latterly where stands the remaining portion of the once great collegiate church and the site of Fotheringhay Castle – the birthplace of King Richard III and the prison and place of execution of Mary Queen of Scots.

In 1221, it is recorded, “indulgences were granted to all travellers giving alms for the repair of Walmesford Bridge”.

At an unrecorded date, possibly during the 1400's, the church lost its chancel and subsequently fell into a great state of disrepair and dilapidation. The photo shows St. Mary's in 1902, just before the new chancel was built and a vestry and organ chamber also added. Between those dates, St. Mary's laid claim to be the smallest parish church in England. Then the interior measurements were just short of 30 feet by 25½ feet comprising the tower, nave and north aisle. The tower is a mere 8 feet square internally and can be dated to the 13th century with its lancets, two light bell openings and dog-tooth decoration. The broach spire typical of the Nene valley has two tiers of lucarnes and probably dates from c1300. It houses six bells. The fifth bell was donated in 1960 by the Barron Bell Trust and the sixth, known as the Barnaby Bell, was presented by the proprietress of The Haycock and installed in 1968.

The oldest part of the church is the 11th century Saxon window in the west (tower internal) wall. Below this window may be seen a dedication inscribed "This loft erected by Pank Medmore, Esq. Merchant of this place. Janry 1st 1804". Such lofts, or galleries, were for the benefit singers and, perhaps on occasion, accompanying musicians and provided 'overflow' for the congregation when church attendance was high. Few such lofts, or galleries, once common in parish churches, remain anywhere today; the majority having been removed during widespread 'renovations' during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. St. Mary's loft suffered a similar fate. Beneath this dedication is a triptych. The first panel contains the Creed and the Lord's Prayer and the second and third panels contain Exodus XX; the Ten Commandments.

The south doorway is Transitional c1200 and the north arcade of the nave was built soon after. The south wall of the nave was rebuilt in 1663 along with the porch, the latter providing a buttress to the 'downhill' aspect of the church. At the time of the building of the new chancel in 1902, the foundations of the old chancel were uncovered and so, appropriately, the site of the new chancel corresponds with its much earlier predecessor.

The church possesses an exceptionally fine font of Norman origin that has been dated at about 1120. It has striking figure sculptures including warriors and probably John the Baptist and Jesus. It was rescued from Sibberton Lodge where it had been used as a cattle trough. It was possibly originally the property of the church of the now lost village of Sibberton or cast out of its rightful home during the turbulent times of the Reformation. During the excavations carried out during the building of the chancel, the broken bowl of what was possibly St. Mary's original font was discovered and this was used to create a base for the rescued font. The bowl of the font is densely carved with figures, in period Saxon style, within what is described as a thirteen-bay arcade. A story 'in the round' if you will. Clearly, such strong, visual representation would have been deeply significant to an overwhelmingly illiterate population one thousand years ago and during succeeding centuries. Sadly, interpretation is difficult and only informed guesses may be hazarded at both the identities of those depicted and

meaning. In part it is thought to represent the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist. The bowl of the font is lead lined.

The altar was built by a Wansford craftsman, George Simpson, in 1967, and includes some oak from the earlier altar. Also, in 1967, pews were installed to replace chairs. The pews previously graced St. Mark's Church, Camberwell, and were donated by the Green House Trust, London.



View of St Mary's Wansford

One of the fine prospects of St. Mary's as once seen from the water meadows and river, before these centuries-old views were blocked by property development during the mid to late 20th century.

The church plate comprises a silver cover paten dated 1569, a silver communion cup dated 1570, a silver plated alms dish of about 1876, and a pewter flagon which was purchased by the church in 1740 at a cost of 9 shillings [45 pence]. This ancient church silver is nowadays lodged in a bank vault for security reasons. The earliest interments evident date from the seventeenth century.

As we pass through the third decade of the second millennium, itself the celebration of the passing of two thousand years since the birth of Christ, it is entirely fitting that one ponders the likelihood that St. Mary's could quite possibly be celebrating over one thousand years of continuous Christian worship at the same site. During those many centuries St. Mary's has suffered neglect and damage as well as renewal and rebuilding; both in the spiritual and practical senses. During this entire period, St. Mary's has remained a spiritual focus for both the local community and passing travellers: whilst more temporal institutions have come and gone in great numbers.

Is it not a fitting challenge that today's villagers and visitors, whatever their background or persuasion, should consider in what way, or manner, they might contribute to the future welfare and upkeep of our Parish church, Wansford's oldest resident, as we progress further and deeper into the third millennium? Your own contribution, however modest, will be most gratefully received and duly acknowledged. Thank you and peace be with you. Treasurer: Mrs J Rogers, 1 Robinswood, Wansford

Expanded and adapted from Wansford at the Millennium, published in aid of St. Mary's Church. © David Stuart-Mogg