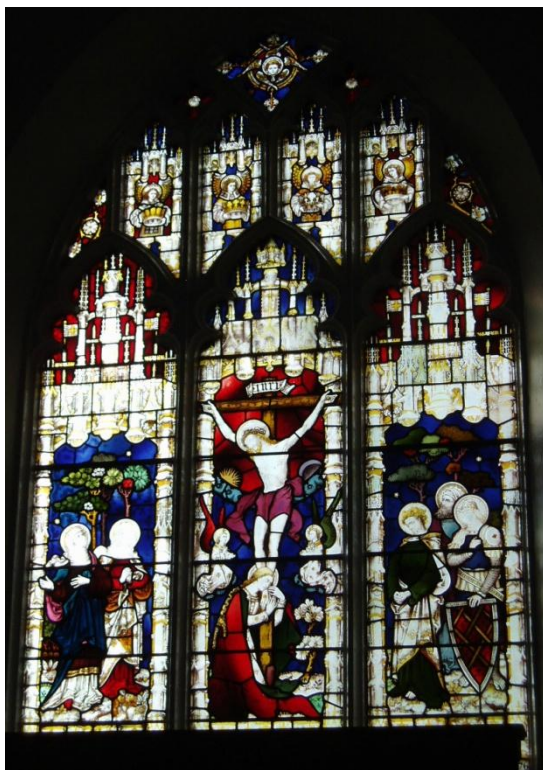


St Mary the Virgin

Congerstone



The Crucifixion (Chancel East Window)

A Brief History
by
John Matthews & Mike Foley

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MainSources

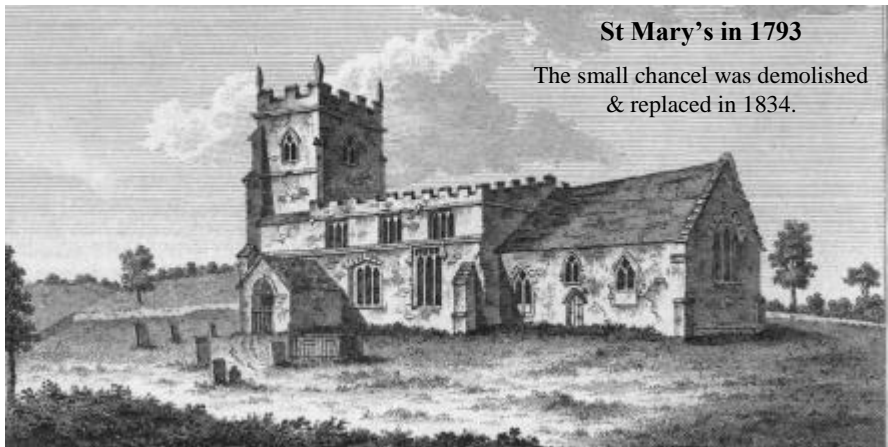
- St Mary's Church records
- Leicestershire Records Office, Wigston
- J.Nichols (1809-1811) The History & Antiquities of the County of Leicestershire

ST MARY the virgin is a small but ancient building of stone, in the Early English style, consisting of chancel, nave, North aisle, South porch and a low embattled Western tower containing 5 bells. It occupies a secluded position at the Western edge of Congerstone with views across the river Sence to Bilstone and Gopsall Park. The low tower is not often seen from within the village or from most of the approaches to the village. Possibly the best view of the church is from the Castle Farm - Gopsall cross-roads looking down the remains of the avenue of trees planted in about 1913 by the 4th Earl Howe in remembrance of his wife, Georgiana. The avenue was then called the "New Walk".

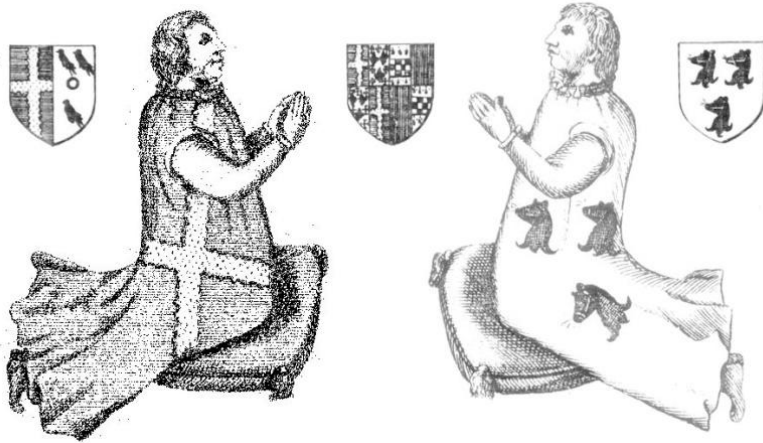
Early History

There is no mention of a church in Congerstone (then Cvningstone) in the Domesday survey of 1086AD. However, the Matriculus of 1220AD mentions Congerstone briefly as being under the patronage of William, the then rector, who had been instituted by Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln. Thus, William de Cvningstone was the first recorded priest and patron in the village. In 1221AD William de Cvningstone, William Basset and Robert de Eseby were made justices for "gaol delivery" to Leicester.

Nothing remains of, or is recorded about, the original church building. It would probably have been of wood or wood and stone construction with a beaten earth floor and thatched roof. The oldest parts of the present church (the tower and nave) are probably 15-16th century with the remainder being relatively recent 19th Century additions and alterations. Again, there is little information about how the building evolved prior to the relatively well documented 19th Century alterations.



Nichols, in 1809, documents the presence of wall paintings and some stained or painted glass (actually Coats of Arms) in the tower window and in "the South window on high". Two of the wall paintings were "pictures of one kneeling" with writing beneath referring to Johannes Charnels and Roberti Langham. The former was presumably related to Richard and Thomas de Charnels who were rectors in Congerstone from 1298 to 1349AD. None of the glass or paintings remains today.



19th Century alterations to St Mary's

The church underwent two major phases of refurbishment and alteration in the 19th century, both funded by the Earls Howe who were patrons throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is probable that this is when the wall paintings and original glass were destroyed.

1834

The alterations that took place in 1834 were originally planned in 1831 by William Martin and had a great effect on both the outward appearance of the church (compare the 1793 drawing with the photo on the next page) and the accommodation within. The small chancel was demolished and replaced with one that is the width of the nave and North aisle together and has an over-large South door. The Family and Servants' box pews were installed at this time. The Family pew, immediately to the left of the altar, included an open fire for added comfort. The fireplace remains today but is unusable as the chimney on the apex of the East end of the chancel roof has been removed. Additional work included the erection of the tower arch with gallery, into which was installed a "fine toned" organ (*not* the current organ or "Handel's" organ from Gopsall Hall), and construction of the arches from the North aisle to the chancel.

As a result of the demolition of the old chancel and erection of the current, larger structure several flat stones that were between the communion rails had to be moved into the nave. The stones of two rectors (Rev William Gibbs, died July 10th 1757 & Rev Mr John Muxloe, died August 7th 1740) were placed at the East end of the aisle near the pulpit. Today, the stone to Rev. Gibbs is missing, the floor merely showing signs of where it had lain. The other stone moved from the old chancel was for Anne, wife of the Rev William Gibbs who died on April 6th 1744. It can be found at the West end of the aisle.

1897

The Faculty allowing the 1897 alterations was granted by "Divine permission of the Lord Bishop of Peterborough" and was in response to a petition from the rector (Henry Elias Slater Pochin) and the then churchwardens, John Dawkins Senior and John Dawkins Junior. Problems with the church at that time were cracks in the South wall and tower, a badly leaking roof and a porch in a state of advanced decay. The estimated cost of the repairs was between £200 and £600.

Permission was given provided that there were no alterations to the seats, plaques, stones or other architectural features. The work performed included the erection of a new porch (the present porch) and removal and replacement of the roof. The "plan"



St Mary's c1950

Note the large chancel built in 1834 and presence of a chimney on the chancel roof serving the fireplace in the Howe family box pew.

for the porch was a simple, annotated hand drawn sketch in ink on a piece of white cloth. Although it states in the plans that the porch was to be built in Hollington stone, inspection of the current porch indicates that it is actually cement rendered red brick! The church was closed for 4 months and services were held in the School. The brass plaque in the Servants' box pew commemorates the reopening of the church on Christmas Day 1897. The plaque reads:

This inscription is designed to commemorate the opening of Congerstone Church on Saturday December 25th 1897 it having been thoroughly restored both inside and out including a new roof and South wall at the expense of the Patron, The Right Honourable Richard William Penn Curzon, third Earl Howe, whose liberal gifts are thus gratefully recorded by the Parishioners.

Church links with Gopsall & the Curzon family

As already indicated, the lords of the manor at Gopsall were generous Patrons of the church in Congerstone, especially throughout the 19th Century. In addition to St Mary's, the Curzon family also had strong links with the churches within the villages of Norton, Twycross and Shackerstone. The generosity of the family towards St Mary's in the 18th century may well have been at the expense of Twycross because of the then Earl's concern, in the 1830's about the vicar of Twycross (DeClifford), who appeared to be "lacking in the spiritual parts of religion" (*extract from a letter written to the Rev. William Roby in 1835 by Earl Howe*). The Right Honourable Richard George Penn Earl Howe was still acknowledge as patron in 1914 when Adrian Stewart Rolleston became rector of Congerstone (see plaque on the South wall of the chancel).

The oldest reference to Gopsal (the old spelling) in the church is the worn flat stone in the nave that is partly obscured by the organ that was installed in 1914:

*Depositum Mariae Tittle, nuper de Gopsal,
oeconomicae, placidae, providae, & piaae.
Obiit A.D. 1755, & aetatis suae 59^o.
Vita caduca, vale.*

On the North wall of the chancel, in the Family box pew, is a bronze monument to Georgiana Countess Howe by Frampton (1909). The inscription is flanked by slender angels and surmounted by a small figure of St George:

GEORGIANA COUNTESS HOWE

Born May 14th 1860

Died Feb 9th 1906

SHE HATH DONE WHAT SHE COULD

WIFE OF RICHARD GEORGE PENN 4th EARL HOWE

AND DAUGHTER OF JOHN WINSTON

7th DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH K.G.

*AMONG HER MANY WORKS HER NAME WILL EVER BE GRATEFULLY REMEBERED
FOR HAVING DEVOTED HER VERY LIFE TO THE FORMATION AND ORGANISATION
OF THE IMPERIAL YEOMANARY HOSPITAL SOUTH AFRICA 1899-1900*

In the Servants' box pew are three stone plaques in memory of a faithful servant (Mrs Anne Hodson) and two "devoted" nurses (Susan Dolby, 1914 and Emily Hales Chapple, 1915). The oldest reads as follows:

*SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF MRS ANNE HODSON
WHO WAS UNFORTUNATELY BURNT TO DEATH
DECEMBER 16TH 1824
SHE WAS 60 YEARS OF AGE 30 OF WHICH
SHE SPENT IN THE SERVICE OF THE CURZON FAMILY.
THIS SMALL TRIBUTE OF REGARD IS ERECTED BY
A GRATEFUL MASTER TO THE MEMORY OF AN ATTACHED
AND FAITHFUL SERVANT.*

Other evidence of the church's association with Gopsall include two of the stained glass windows in the chancel, a silver paten (dated 1718), the organ, pulpit and the church Bible, Prayer book and Missal. The latter were purchased for the church in memory of Countess Georgiana Howe by the rector (Leonard Ottley Warner), churchwardens (Alfred Bates & John Dawkins), villagers (eg. Dawkins, Tanser, Arnold, Hextall, Jackson, Hodgkinson, Twigg), Her Ladyship's Stable servants and the Curzon House servants.

St Mary's today

The Building

The present building is a combination structure made from three types of stone and some brick. Much of the lower parts of the tower, North aisle and South wall of the nave appear to be built of Carlton stone whereas higher levels and the tower buttresses are red sandstone. The "new" 1834 chancel is constructed of yellow sandstone. The SE buttress of the chancel bears a mason's mark. Most of the lower parts of the South



St Mary's today

Note the chimney on the chancel is no longer present.



Carved head at the top left corner of the "square" nave window.



Stone "downpipe" bracket on the South wall of the nave.

wall of the nave, between the porch and chancel, are rendered, presumably reflecting the 1897 repairs to the church. The porch and some areas of the repaired South wall of the nave are rendered brick. The lower windows of the nave are unusual as they are of two different designs, the "square" window being adorned with carvings of a man's head which is very weathered.

General fixtures and fittings

The church is famed for its wide chancel with over-large South door and large areas of ashlar sandstone. The central block of nave pews and the seats along the South wall of the chancel have cast iron poppy heads similar to those in several local churches (eg. Holy Trinity, Norton) and paid for by the Earls Howe.



Other fixtures and fittings of note include the simple octagonal sandstone font, pulpit (in memory of Evelyn Eyre, 1921), carved wooden eagle lectern (in memory of Rev Henry Pochin, 1901), carved wooden reredos (*in remembrance of Lieutenant HFB Taplin CMR who died of wounds received at Wepener during the Boer War April 1900*), wall plaques to three rectors Roby (1839), Pochin (1901) and Rolleston (1941) and the Decalogue, Creed and Lords Prayer painted on wood either side of the altar.

The church dispensed with oil lamps for lighting in 1945 when the church was connected to the electricity supply. Ten years later the heating was upgraded from a stove, which stood at the centre front of the chancel, to the electric heaters present today.

Flat stones

In addition to the flat stones described elsewhere, there are three others in the nave. Two are immediately inside the nave doors, one in memory of Mrs Jane Vernon (died October 18th 1733) and the other, the oldest, to John Ashpinshaw (died September 2nd 1724). The third stone is in the aisle and dedicated to Roger Styant, gent, late of Coton in the parish of Market Bosworth who died July 7th 1733 at the age of 93.

Stained glass

There are 4 large stained glass windows and 4 lancets. The latter are in the chancel either side of the altar on the East, North and South walls and show Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The oldest of the large windows is that above the altar (about 1880) which depicts the Crucifixion and is in memory of the 2nd Earl Howe (16th January 1821 to 4th February 1876) – *see front cover*.



Behind the choir stalls, the South window of the chancel depicts Jesus and the Centurion (left side) and the walls of Jericho (right side) and was erected in memory to Richard William Penn, 3rd Earl Howe, by his children (George, Evelyn, Edith & Erick). This window also contains the Coats of Arms of the 2nd Life Guards (Egypt 1882) and the Grenadier Guards.

The stained glass windows in the South wall of the nave are both undated and the window nearest the pulpit, representing the parable of the sheep and goats, also has no dedication. The window nearest the door depicts St Anne, St Mary Virgin and St Elizabeth and is dedicated as follows:

This window is erected to the Glory of God and in memory of Jane Presbury Lee (nee Neale) who died Dec3rd 1913, by her three sons Rev HB Lee MA Cantab; WG Lee MD Cantab; Capt RAMC; AN Lee BA Cantab; Brigade Major 178th (Sherwood Foresters) Infantry Brigade.



The oldest stained glass in the church (15th century) were in the vestry door until 2019. The two glass panes depict cockerels and have inscriptions in latin.

Organ

Often said to be the organ played by Handel at Gopsall Hall, the present organ was a gift from Earl Howe in memory of his sister Evelyn Eyre. It was built by Henry Willis in 1892 and was in Oldbury Hall (Nuneaton) before being moved to St Mary's in 1914. This organ replaced the "fine toned" organ in the tower arch gallery that was originally given to the church by Earl Howe in 1834. The organ has 18 stops, 30 foot keys and 4 pedals in addition to the double keyboard. Above the organ in the tower arch is the Royal Coat of Arms.

There are two brass plaques on the organ. The oldest dates from a time prior to the organ being installed in St Mary's and is in memory of R.M.K (Dec 6th 1885) and M.K: (Jan 16th 1891) - "*They are gone where the redeemed are keeping a festival above*". The other records the gift of the organ to the church:



*Presented to the church by Richard George
Penn, 4th Earl Howe
In memory of his sister Evelyn
Here through the feeble twilight of this world
Groping how many! - Until we pass and reach
That other, where we see as we are seen!*



The Church Bells

At the beginning of the 19th century the tower housed 2 bells. In 1841, six years after the building of the new chancel, Earl Howe funded the installation of a ring of 5 bells. The bells were cast by JW Taylor (Bellfounders of Loughborough & Oxford) and installed in St Mary's. The fate of the original bells is unknown but they were probably melted down and contributed metal for the making of the new bells. The bells are marked with the maker's name around the top and dated 1841 and all but the smallest (the treble) have inscriptions. The following is on the largest (tenor) bell:

*When wedded hearts contract seal
I ring for them the merry peal
When friends lament the parting soul
Herald of death I toll
For young and old For grave and gay
My chime resounds each sacred day*

One bell is dedicated to the rector (FM Knollis MA) and curate (JM Cox BA), another to the churchwardens (J Sands & E Baxter) and the third is inscribed "*God save the Queen 1841*".

As indicated by the invoice, the clappers and ironwork were in need of repair/replacement by 1876:

From: <i>Bell Foundary, Loughborough Nov. 25th 1876</i>				
To: <i>The Gentlemen Churchwardens of Congerstone</i>				
Bought of John Taylor & Co.				
Date		£	s	d
Oct 3	<i>To mans time & expense at work at Congerstone Church Bells</i>	8	14	10
	<i>To repairing wheels</i>	4	6	0
	<i>To 5 clapper joints, 4 sets of ironwork etc</i>	8	4	0
	<i>Mr Taylor - journey to inspect Bells</i>	1	1	0
	<i>Total</i>	22	5	10

By 1951 the church bells were in a dangerous condition and the estimate for repairs was £590. Money was raised from individual donations (eg. from Lampard, Rolleston, Pearce, Dawkins, Clarke, Shepherd & Robotham), and from activities such as the Church Fair (£120.6s.0d), Young wives (£1), Bring & Buy (£6), Jumble sale (£10.13s.3d) and Xmas Fair (£23.1s.6d). The rector (Rev. Crowther-Green) wrote to John Taylor & Co asking them to remove the bells but, even though the money required had been raised, failed to tell the company to perform the necessary repair work and to re-hang the bells. This resulted in the bells being unavailable for the Coronation celebrations, the bells only being re-hung after the Rev. Crowther-Green had left Congerstone!

The current metal frame on which the bells are hung is dated 1952 and bears the name of the manufacturers, John Taylor of Loughborough. The two men who did the work lodged with Mr & Mrs Yorke who were specifically asked (by their employer) to provide the men with separate beds!

The Church Plate

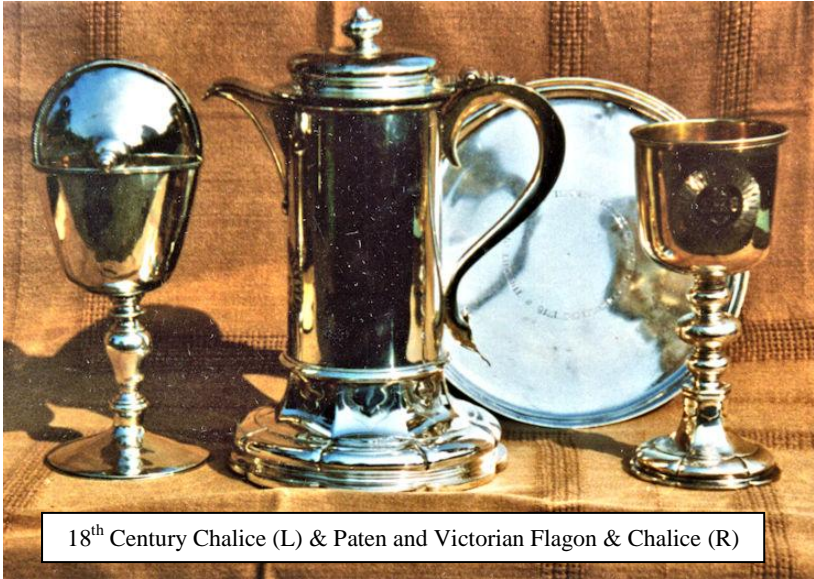
Some of the Church Plate was given to St Mary's by Queen Adelaide in 1840. However, there are two pieces of silver, a fragile chalice and paten, dating back to the eighteenth century. This paten is inscribed:

The Gift of Felicea Iennens to the Church of Congerstone 1718

Felicea Jennens (Iennens) died in 1744 and was an aunt of Charles Jennens who inherited Gopsall in 1747 from his father (Charles Jennens Snr). She was benefactress to the Blue-coat charity school, Birmingham.

The 1840 silver consists of 2 chalices, a paten, a flagon and 2 alms dishes. It is all inscribed:

To Congerstone Church August 1840



The rest of the Church Plate consists of a pewter wafer box (cross on lid) and 2 glass cruets. The silver is stored in a bank strong room for safekeeping.

Churchyard

The original churchyard, home to Congerstone's oldest inhabitants, is now "closed". It was "closed" at the Court at Windsor Castle on 24th April 1996 *and* at the Court at Buckingham Palace on the 19th March 1997. A new burial ground adjacent to the West side of the churchyard and administered by Shackerstone Parish Council was opened in 1996.

The oldest stone, inside or outside the church, is to John (no surname), son of Joseph and Mary late of St Andrew, Holborn, London, 16th June 1721. A stone with a particularly sad inscription is:

*In loving memory of Walter William son of James and Annie Stretton
who was accidentally drowned in his fathers mill dam at Bilston
August 27th 1881 Aged 6½ years*

An inscription on one stone describes two unrelated people who were servants in the Rectory for Rev RE Hall who was also the Domestic Chaplin to Earl Howe:

*In affectionate remembrance of two valued servants
George Hunt who did May 30th 1862 aged 37 and
Eliza Bircher who died March 7th 1863 aged 47
They each lived at the Rectory 20 years as fellow servants 19 years*

The most famous monument that resided in the churchyard from 1906 to 1919 was that in memory of Countess Georgiana Howe. Her body and the monument were removed to the churchyard at Penn Street where they can be seen today.



Another grave of a "famous" Congerstone character, still marked with a small vase, is that of John Beauchamp ("Sailor") who died in 1956. He lived on the Barton Road in a shack built from old tar barrels.

Perhaps the most prominent grave in the churchyard is that marked by an altar tomb. The tomb can be seen clearly in the engraving made of St Mary's in 1793. Although the majority of the writing on the side and end panels is now too worn to read the full inscriptions can be found in Nichols. The tomb is dedicated to the Grundy family.



Part of the inscription on the South side of the tomb is as follows:

In memory of Mr John Grundy, late of Spalding in Lincolnshire, who, without the advantage of a liberal education, had gained by his industry a competent knowledge in several sciences.....He died Dec. 30th, 1748, aged 52 years.

A native of Bilstone, John Grundy lived in Congerstone for 42 years before moving to Spalding in 1738. He was an accurate land surveyor and teacher of mathematics. Much of his work involved surveying the navigation in the counties of Chester, Lancaster and Lincoln.

The large number of memorials to members of the Dawkins family bears out the fact that they have lived and worked in the village for over 250 years. The village bier is dedicated to William Dawkins who died September 28th 1932.



**The village bier
decorated for
Harvest Festival
1997**

A small slate stone of note, because it is not in the churchyard, is the one found by Horace Lees (now deceased) in his garden on Bosworth Road. The inscription is roughly carved and reads:

*Here Lieth The Body of Sarah Wife of Johncourt
who departed this life the 22 of December 1757*

There does not appear to be a replacement stone in the churchyard and the church records of burials at this time have been lost.



Rectors of Congerstone

1186	William de Congerstone (Priest)	1642	William Mount
1200	(Instituted by St. Hugh of Avalon, Bishop of Lincoln)	1659	George Wright (An awakening Preacher with an extraordinary gift in Prayer. A Protestant Minister appointed by the Commonwealth & ejected shortly after the Restoration)
1232	Philip (Sub-Deacon)		
1270	Robert de Leycestri (Sub-Deacon)	1661	Thomas Masters (Priest)
1298	Richard de Charnels	1676	Walter Stannifield
1324	Thomas de Charnels	1695	John Muxloe
1349	Henry de Bradburn	1740	William Gibbs
1361	John Bonde of Sibbesdon	1758	George Booth
1380	Robert Keygate	1759	John Bird
1390	Gilbert de Sutton (Rector of Dolgelly, Diocese of Bangor)	1793	John Roby
1391	John Gylot	1839	Francis Minden Knollis
1408	William Baker (Vicar of Chepyng Kingston, Diocese of Worcester)	1842	Robert Edwin Hall (Domestic Chaplin to Earl Howe)
1412	Richard Bachit	1889	Henry Elias Slater Pochin
1467	Richard Normanton	1901	Leonard Ottley Warner
1483	George Holden	1912	Ethelbert Goodchild
1492	William Horne	1914	Adrian Stewart Rolleston
1512	Thomas Storer	1941	William Edward Spencer
1528	Richard Frampton	1949	J.P.V. Crowther-Green
1533	William Calcrofte (Chaplain)	1955	R Griffiths Sowerby
1553	Robert Parr	1962	Robert W Park
1561	George Patey	1977	Edwin R Boston (Priest-in-charge)
1605	Julius Watson	1987	John C Seymour
1640	Richard Dawson (Living sequestered)	1994	John Plant

Donations welcome

All proceeds to St Mary's Church

Contact Gill Lawrence (Treasurer)
oldpogill@gmail.com

Acknowledgment

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