

A Short History Guide to St. Laurence Church, Meriden.

A Tour of the Building



The chancel

There are two windows in the north chancel wall. The first is an example of a small round-headed Norman design once filled with thin, translucent leather. The second is a tall, slender lancet glazed from the beginning because glass had made larger windows possible. They were both unblocked during the renovations of 1924.

There is also a small recess. It may have been used as an aumbry, a cupboard in which the reserved sacrament was kept, before the reformation.

The Lepers' Squint

One of the most interesting and unusual features is a squint, an angled hole through what at the time would have been the outside of the church wall.

Usually they were made for lepers, unable to come into church because of fear of their disease. Making it would have been a great act of compassion for the lepers, treating them as Jesus treated the unclean and outcast. Through the squint they could see the Communion Service take place, and as far as was possible participate in the service.

After the aisles were built onto the original outside walls the squint appeared inside the church. Beside its entrance, a smaller Altar was set up where Chantry Priests could say masses.

During the pre-Reformation era, rich people often paid for 'Masses' to be said after their death in the belief that their soul would get to heaven more quickly. The priests who said these masses were known as Chantry Priests.

A chantry house was recorded at Eaves Green, with the last recorded chantry priest being Thomas Massey in 1553.

The Chancel: east wall

The chancel was extended in the 13th century and its 15th century east window renovated to accommodate the memorial window to Rev. Anthony Bliss, vicar for fifty-five years (1759-1815) and his nieces Ann and Mary Marshall.



The Chancel

There is considerable evidence of building alterations; another blocked Norman window can be seen, and a section of re-used Norman zig-zag patterned stone. There is also a piscine – a basin with drain, once used for rinsing the chalice after mass. A large section of wall was removed in 1895 to house the organ. This organ has now gone to Althorpe (home of Princess Diana) and is situated in the Earl Spencer's chapel. The vestry was built later, in Victorian times.

The chancel ceiling was covered in cement and painted to give the impression of stone. But when removed in 1924 a beautiful 15th century oak panelled roof of fine craftsmanship was discovered underneath. There were also traces of thatch, giving a clue to an earlier roofing material.

The Arch

The original Norman arch was been replaced by a wider Gothic one. The division between the chancel and nave used to be full of symbolism with regard to the division between mankind and God, and across the arch was a rood (the Saxon word for a cross). It would have been covered up on Good Friday and decorated at Christmas. Access to this was by a staircase. In 1886 a doorway was discovered in the thickness of the wall by the squint. A circular stairway led upwards and originally ended in a door above and to one side of the pulpit.



The Nave

The arcades, the pillars and arches dividing the Nave from the aisles rest on its foundations and there are signs of Norman windows at the western end. A few traces of medieval wall decoration survive on two pillars on the north arcade, and mason's marks on the pillar nearest the pulpit.

In a later Victorian restoration the 18th century box pews and a notable 3 level pulpit of 8 foot high were demolished.

The Aisles

The usual method of enlarging a church was by adding aisles or wings to the side of the nave. This provided space for altars for chantries priests and social functions. By the mid 1820s the church was becoming dilapidated and too small for the village population of over 800 people.

A vast programme of renovation started, which involved the razing and almost complete re-building of both aisles in 1827 so that galleries could be built in them to provide 100 extra seats. The project also included a slate roof and reflooring. In the process a large fissure appeared near the tower and that part of the building almost collapsed.

The North Aisle

The red sandstone effigy of a knight wearing a 'sallet' helmet, a type of skull cap with a projection at the back, dates the monument to the mid 15th century. It is reputed to be a member of the Walsh family from Walsh Hall; perhaps Sir John who died in 1468. Here also is the Tudor doorway, entrance to the squint and the rood Cross. A drain for washing holy vessels was also found here strengthening the argument for an altar on the spot now occupied by the tomb.

The South Aisle



This is the earlier aisle. It includes an effigy of a knight in armour two generations earlier than the knight in the north aisle. It is on a sandstone box tomb, once brightly painted with heraldic badges.

The tomb of the Knight that can be seen is Sir Wyard, who rented an estate in Meriden from 1370s to his death. Tradition says he lived at Giant's Den, a moated site in the fields to the rear of Meriden Hall.

The Baptistry

By the staircase leading to the West Gallery is a 15th Century octagonal font on a newer base. Before being replaced there, the original baptistry was in the tower.

High on the wall at the west end of the south aisle are old wooden painted boards, on which are inscribed the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed. These had to be put up at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century.

Close to the font is an old chest, covered with an even older lid bearing an inscription about giving alms to God and to the poor. It had three locks so that both church wardens and the minister had to be present to take anything from it. This is all that remains of an alms coffer, once a legal requirement. It was found being used as a door in a farm stable in 1895 and returned to its rightful place in church.

The Tower

Building materials used in the tower suggest three different periods of construction. The lower sections are red sandstone. Above are about three metres of ashlar and in the top section, red sandstone re-appears. There are buttresses and angle gargoyles on the outside. The parapet is a low battlement and the roof an octagonal pyramid.

An inside beam has the name 'W. Thompson', a local carpenter, and the date 1770.

It was repaired in 1827 when one wall started to collapse, after damage by lightning. Lightning struck again in 1894 and 1954. The weathervane is dated 1933.

The War Memorial on the north wall was dedicated by the Bishop of Coventry in December 1919.

The Bells

There are five bells each with inscriptions. The same number were recorded in Queen Elizabeth I's reign over 400 years ago.

The Tenor in B is undoubtedly the oldest and seems to be medieval. There are 16 coins – groats and half-groats dating from Richard II's reign 1377-99 – and one French counter of the 14th century on its shoulders, waist and sound bow.



A bellringers guild was founded in 1898. A row of disused clappers hangs on the west wall of the tower. The five bells were re-roped in 1980.

The Clock

This is in perfect working order and bears the name of William Leeson of Coleshill and the date 1856. It has an unusual two plane escapement of a type normally found only in watches and domestic time pieces.

Leeson was paid to look after clock here from 1848 and £20 was mentioned in accounts in 1857. He undertook repairs and servicing until the turn of the century. A new clock face on the west side of the tower was put up in 1909.

The Churchyard

The original burial ground surrounded the building. It was extended in 1827, with further additions in 1906 and 1970.

Near the porch is a sundial, 1749, protecting the stump of the ancient preaching cross. The cross was built before the church and commemorates the earliest preaching of the Gospel in the forest at this point. It must be very nearly a thousand years old.



Several churchyard memorials are interesting. General Whichcote, a veteran of Waterloo, who lived in Meriden from 1848 to 1891 is buried here, as is Christiana wife of the workhouse doctor, as well as the sister of George Eliot, the authoress. Another unusual records that Richard Taylor 'died of smallpox'.

Outside the main churchyard entrance is a sandstone mounting block – for all those centuries when some people came and left the church by horse!