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# A History of St. Helen's Church

## Wheathampstead

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### Building Materials

Cruciform in shape, the plan of the present building was completed by the end of the **fourteenth century** and has remained largely unchanged for the last 600 years.

St. Helen's is built of flint rubble, or Totternhoe clunch, with flint facings and limestone dressings. There being no stone in the area, it is thought that the medieval builders used stone from the Midland quarries shipped down the River Ouse to Bedford and from there conveyed by horse and cart along the Roman roads to Wheathampstead.

### The Spire

Crowning the tower rises a splendid "broach" spire constructed of wood set at a very steep angle on a square base, and rising to a diminishing octagon. It is clad externally with strips of lead arranged in a herringbone pattern. The present spire is an 1865 reconstruction of an imagined earlier medieval version.

### The Tower

The tower is central and dates from about **1290** when the earlier tower needed rebuilding as we know from records in Lincoln Cathedral Registry which tell us of the granting of an indulgence for twenty days to all who contributed to the cost of the work - an early example of the practice so abhorred by Luther in later years.

From outside you can see the original corbel table (a row of stone brackets carrying the plinth) with the Edward I buckle ornament. The bell chamber windows are modern.

### The Bells

The inventory of **1548** mentioned four bells in the tower. These must have been fairly large, as in **1717** they were recast by Richard Phelps of Whitechapel, with no additional metal, into a ring of six, with a tenor of 17 cwt.

In **1885**, the second, fourth and fifth bells were recast (probably because they had become cracked) by John Warner and Sons of Cripplegate.

By **1936** all the bells and their fittings were deteriorating, and a decision was taken to have them all recast and rehung in a new timber frame with all new fittings. This work was entrusted to John Taylor and Co. of Loughborough. The tenor of the new ring weighed 14¼ cwt., and the bells were tuned to the key of F major. The dedication of the installation took place in September **1937**.

After some repairs to the tower in **1971**, the ring was augmented to eight with the addition of two trebles, cast by the same foundry in **1974**. The work in the tower of extending the frame and hanging the bells was carried out by voluntary local labour. The new bells were dedicated in March **1974**.

To commemorate the induction of the Rev Tom Purchas an entirely new peal was devised and rung in September **1980** - The Wheathampstead Surprise Major.

## Thirteenth Century

An ambitious scheme of restoration was begun during the early part of the century, the Saxon church having become dilapidated. The energetic Normans decided to put things to rights by first of all rebuilding and lengthening the chancel (c.**1238**). The east window triple lancets date from this time as do the window and doorway with its dog-tooth decoration on the north side of the sanctuary.

By **1290** work on the chancel was completed and the crossing was reached. Money was running out and in order to put up a new tower, the Bishop of Lincoln, Oliver Sutton, granted an indulgence of twenty days to all contributors.

## Fourteenth Century

Much rebuilding and additional work was done in the early part of this century. Following the rebuilding of the tower, the south aisle of the nave was added and the south porch in **1350**. The west end of the nave was rebuilt with its fine doorway and arch with ball-flower ornament c. **1320**. The two-light windows at the aisle west end and the octagonal piers with their moulded capitals and double-hollow-chamfered arches are typical of that date.

The north aisle was added later, the recessed tomb in the north wall probably being that of a benefactor of this work.

The north transept or Lamer Chapel was rebuilt about **1330-40** with its large five-light traceried window in the north wall and three-light windows in the east wall. This window has a lowered sill supporting the reredos of the altar to St. Nicholas that used to stand beneath it. This reredos of seven canopied niches with leafy crockets and foliage in the spandrels was found walled up in **1865** and restored then to reveal all the artistry of its itinerant medieval stonemason who did not quite finish the work. Perhaps he was carried off by the Black Death which ravaged the country at the time. Pevsner has described the carving as richer than anything in the county, except for the east end at St. Albans Abbey. He comments, "Much money must have been available and an architect with a good sense of display". The Macry family were the most likely benefactors of this work, their leopard's head emblem being discernible in the reredos to those sharp-eyed enough to see it. (The same emblem may be seen on the font, also of early 14th century date.)

The south transept was rebuilt shortly afterwards with its fine east window showing some original fine feather cusping in its tracery and big fleurons. Its south window of four lights with net tracery is of the same date as that in the opposite wall.

In the chancel the lancet windows on the north and south walls were replaced and enlarged about **1380**, and the small low window at the west end of the south wall of the chancel is of about the same date.

The two-storied vestry on the north-east side of the chancel was also added about this time. It was thought by one authority to have housed a hermit or recluse, the upper floor possibly being used as a treasury.

## Later Middle Ages

The beautiful canopied piscina, or priest's wash basin, to the right of the high altar is the most noteworthy contribution of this period. Again the Macry leopard's head is used in the vaulting of the canopy showing this decorated work to have been the gift of that munificent family.

Finally, the **medieval** improvements to the church were completed with the insertion of the easternmost window in the south aisle with its three cinque-foiled lights.

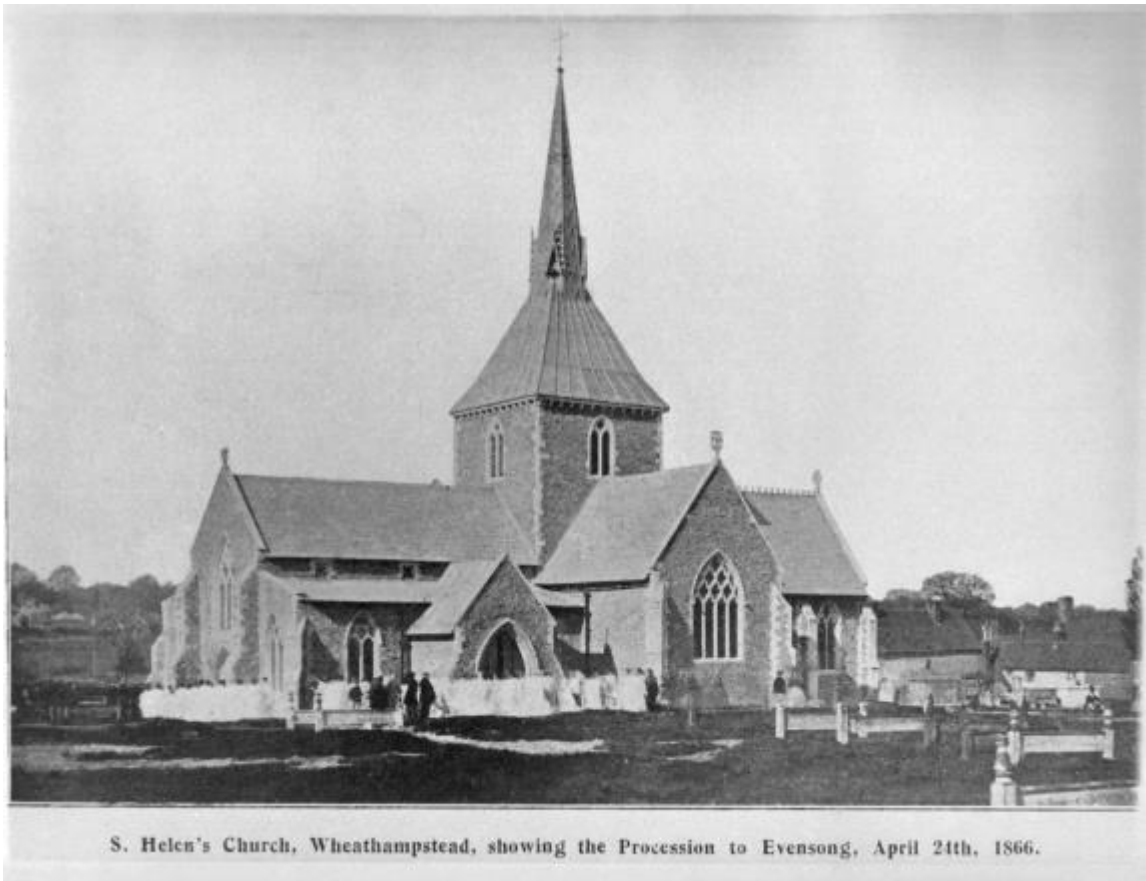
## The Restoration of 1865

Canon Davys found St. Helen's to be in great decay when he arrived: windows were walled up some feet above the sills, with badly decayed external tracery; the south porch had been filled up level with the ground outside and lengthened to house the fire engine; the north porch had gone altogether, and the only entrance to the nave was by the west door which was covered by a modern porch used to store coal and the sexton's tools.

The exterior of the whole church, except the tower, was covered with plaster, and the decaying buttresses had been mended with brick, slate or anything else readily available.

Canon Davys aimed to renovate and restore St. Helen's to its original medieval glory, raising the roofs of nave and chancel to their original pitch, and the spire to its ancient proportions. Transept roofs were repaired and decayed window tracery carefully restored. The plaster was stripped from the outside walls revealing the original flint facing.

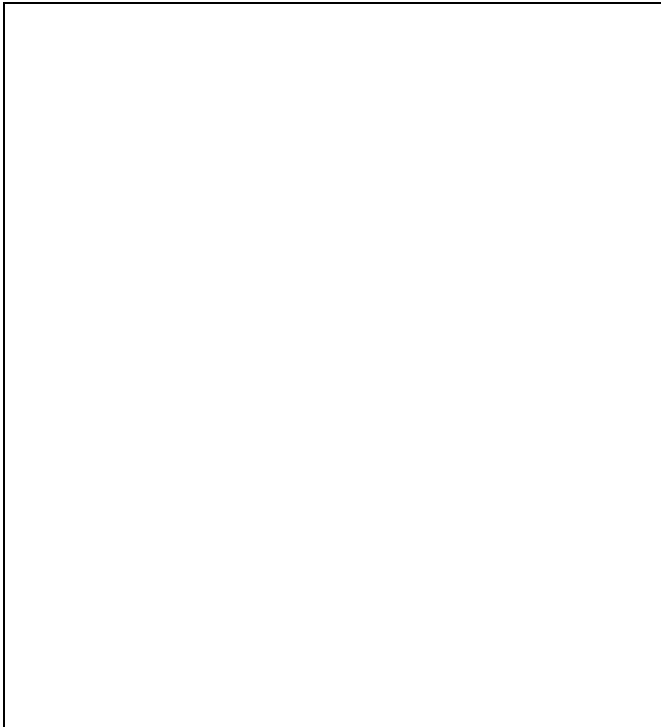
Inside, the seating, flooring and ceilings were restored and a Walker organ installed in the chancel.



"Picture contributed by Rodney D Locks."

(Copy of an old photograph presented to the church by Geoffrey Odell. Dec 1971)

## Some interior pictures



The very beautiful **Reredos** under the east window of the North Transept of St Helen's church was discovered during the 1865 restoration by Canon Davys. Canon Davys has stated that "the Transept has been from time immemorial a private chantry, and the **reredos** rose at the base of its east window, above an altar at the level of its internal sill. The window had been blocked up, but on opening it the **reredos** was found, as well as the tracery of the window, in a very perfect condition, with the original stanchions and some very interesting fragments of stained glass in situ"

Whoever the artist may have been, for some reason the work was left in an unfinished state, as was the window above. The intended figures were never placed in the brackets intended for them, .....The Victoria County History gives the dates of this transept as between 1330 and 1340.

Anne Thompson

A statue of **Apsley George Benet Cherry-Garrard** (1886-1959), in his polar gear, located in the north Transept of St Helen's church. "Cherry" as he was known was taken as an assistant zoologist to the **Scot's Antarctic Expedition**. He travelled with the polar party two-thirds of the way to the south pole.

He wrote "**The Worst Journey in the World**" whilst convalescing after the First World War.

