

# The Parish Church of St Mary, Potton

By Mr John Hunt  
1987 with additions 1999 & 2003



Potton parish church is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and is situated on rising ground to the east of the town and just under half a mile from its centre. An ancient right of way known as the Church causeway runs from King's Street across the meadows and brook to the western approaches to the church.

## Historical Background

There may well have been a church at Potton in Saxon times, but the first mention of one is in 1094 when Simon de Senlis, Earl of Northampton granted St Mary's Church to St Andrew's Priory, Northampton. Thereafter, the priors of St Andrew's became Lords of Potton Rectoria, the manor in which the church lay, the incumbents being Rectors of the Parish.

In 1394 the prior invested the abbess and convent of Minoreesses of the Order of St Clare, outside Aldgate, London, with the advowson of the church, as well as that of St Swithin's chapel in the town (which was in existence in 1107), the prior retaining the rectorial rights as Lord of Potton Rectoria. After this event the next incumbent (in 1404) and his successors became Vicars of the parish.

The Dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th century saw great changes. Potton Rectoria (the Rectory manor) and the right of the rectorial tithes passed into the hands of the Crown. They were leased to various tenants and were sold in 1591 to Rowland Litton. After this the rectory manor and the 'right of tithes' passed by sale in different ways. The former passed into the ownership of several families, including the Burgoynes, Spencers and Whitbreads.

In 1917 Samuel Howard Whitbread sold all his manor lands in Potton at auction. The right of the rectorial tithes also passed through several hands and in 1698 it was purchased by Thaxted parish in Essex under a decree in Chancery and in pursuance of the will of William Lord Maynard. Trustees were appointed as 'rectors impropriate' (or lay rectors) who were, and still are, responsible for the upkeep of the fabric of the chancel of the church (a duty that may lapse if an Act of Parliament is passed to abolish lay rectorships). The advowson or right of presentation of the incumbent also passed to the Crown at the Dissolution and was retained. It is presently exercised by the Lord Chancellor as representative of the Crown.

The tithes, both rectorial and vicarial, were exchanged for allotments of land by an Act of Parliament in 1815. Tithe Farm (the allotment granted to the rectors impropriate) and Vicarage Farm (the vicar's allotment) were the main acreages that followed this exchange, both having been subsequently sold off.

In October 1916 the vicar of Potton, The Rev R S Bagshaw was instituted at Cockayne Hatley as Rector, with dispensation to hold Potton Vicarage with Cockayne Rectory. In February 1931 the two beneficiaries were permanently united. In March 1973 the United Benefice was joined by Sutton, the incumbent thereafter becoming rector of the united benefices of Potton with Sutton and Cockayne Hatley.

### **The Church**

The Church today consists of a chancel with adjacent south chapel (the latter now part sacristy and part organ chamber), nave, north and south aisles, north transept (Lady chapel) north porch with room above and tower. The earliest parts can be dated to the first half of the 13th century. These comprise parts of the north and east walls of the chancel, the north transept and the wall supporting the chancel arch. The north and south aisles with their arcades, and the nave are early 14th century. The north porch and tower are 15th century as are also parts of the chancel north wall, and were probably built when the old north vestry (now demolished) was added. The south chapel with its arcade is early 16th century (probably around 1500). The font is plain and appears to be very old, but has not been dated with certainty. In August 2002 the font was moved from the tower arch, where it had been since Victorian times, and placed under the 1994 "900 years window".

### **The Chancel**

The east window has three lights (replacing an earlier one of two lights). The stained glass depicts the Last Supper and was placed there in 1888.

The oak reredos was erected in 1907 and the carved angels were added a few years later.

On the south east corner there is a fragment of a piscina, clearly not in its original position.

The oak screen and sedilia on the south side were in position in 1899, as also were the main choir stalls, the front stalls being put there in 1902.

The arcade that separates the chancel from the south chapel has two bays, and at the western end is a small angled window which, before the south chapel was built, gave light to the seats backing onto the rood screen. A similar window, serving the same purpose is at the opposite side.

The organ is situated beneath the western arch of the south arcade and was installed in 1893. It replaced the old instrument which was positioned beneath the tower arch at the west end of the nave.

The windows in the north chancel wall are of different dates. That at the eastern end is of early 15th century date and has three lights. Its sill has been heightened, presumably to rise above the roof of the old north vestry that was built against the outside wall and was demolished about 1500.

A doorway and a piscina on the outside of the chancel wall are other reminders of this old vestry. Just to the left of this doorway is another (now blocked up on the outside) which is slanted, probably to clear the west wall of the old vestry. A small lancet window of 13th century date is part of the earlier fabric and is situated above the door leading to the old vestry. To its left is another large window of three lights, the coloured glass depicting two scenes of Our Lord with Mary and Martha. To the left of this window is a small cinquefoil single light which, like the one opposite, threw light on the seats backing the old rood screen.

The oak screen beneath the chancel arch was erected in 1921. Two pairs of medieval 'misericord' oak seats back onto the screen, one pair on each side and facing the choir. They serve as clergy stalls.

### **The South Chapel**

The chapel and arcade were built about 1500. The eastern half now serves as a sacristy, the remaining area is almost wholly occupied by the organ chamber. There is a doorway of more recent date on the south wall.

The three windows have cinquefoil lights, the one on the east wall has glass which contains a central panel depicting Our Lord breaking bread with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Portraits and photographs of past Vicars are displayed on the walls of the sacristy.

## **The Nave and Aisles**

The nave has five bays and is early 14th century and contemporary with the north and south aisles. The clerestory has five square headed windows on each side.

The south arcade can be dated to about 1310 and has piers of four engaged shafts and pointed arches. The north arcade, dated about 1300, has four octagonal piers and also has pointed arches.

The chancel arch is the full width of the nave. The entrance to the medieval rood is high up on the north side of the nave near to the chancel arch. The north aisle has three windows on the north side and one at the west end. Where not modernised they are of 15th century date. The doorway leading to the north porch is 14th century. Another door (now blocked) once provided an entrance into the church from the bottom of the stairway in the north porch. The names of Rectors and Vicars of Potton (from 1202) are displayed on panels adjacent to this blocked doorway. The arch between the aisle and the north transept is of more recent date. The south aisle has three windows on the south side of 15th century date and one at the west end of later date. The doorway in the south wall used to lead into the south porch which was removed in 1848. The western end of this aisle is now used as the choir vestry. The window at the eastern end of the south wall has stained glass in three panels and depicts (left to right) the Nativity, the Crucifixion and the Risen Christ with St Mary Magdalene in the garden of Gethsemany. Bronze plaques recording the names of those Potton men who gave their lives in the two World Wars are placed on the south wall and to the left of the doorway. Between this doorway and the memorial plaques is the radiantly coloured stained glass window, designed for 1994 by Mr Carl Russell, commemorating the 900th anniversary of the church. It shows the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove flying from the sun with its golden shafts. There are four angels' trumpets heralding the joy of Pentecost.

## **The North Transept (Lady Chapel)**

Part of the walls and a few other features may be dated to the first half of the 13th century. The window in the north wall, of three panels, is relatively modern, its stained glass depicting the Samaritan woman at the well (left), Our Lord seated (centre) and a lady with a pitcher and a boy with a staff and flagon (right). The window in the east wall is 15th century and has clear glass. A stairway closed by a door with 'V.R. 1837' written in studs, on the south east side leads to the ancient rood. Memorials to departed members of the parish are placed on the walls of the transept. A burial vault exists beneath.

## **The North Porch**

The porch is of 15th century date and has entrances to the outside on the west and north sides. A lozenge shaped stone panel, with indents for a brass

(now lost), is fixed to the east wall. It represents a memorial to a priest. The stairway in the south east corner leads to an upper chamber which may have been used as living quarters by a visiting or assistant priest. The chamber contains square headed windows on two sides.

### **The Tower and Belfry**

The tower is 15th century and has four stages and an embattled parapet. The stairway is in the north east corner with access from the bell ringing chamber. On the walls of the chamber are panels; those on the south and west recording benefactors and their benefactions. The earliest benefactions go back to 1558. Other panels on the west and north walls record the provision, in 1838, of increased seating accommodation in the church to 984 persons, various feats of bell ringing, and one recording the re-tuning and re-hanging of the bells in 1982. There are six bells, the two earliest being cast (or recast) in 1706. In 1982 the bells were taken down and re-tuned at the Whitechapel Foundry, London. At the same time the intermediate floor was cleared of rubble, dust and pigeon droppings and rotten timbers replaced.

### **The Churchyard**

The burial ground surrounds the church. It was enlarged in 1842. Some of the grave stones (though not always in their original positions) are those of benefactors to the church and can be seen. The oldest is that of John Snitch who died on 12th June 1687. Many of the older stones, particularly those of the 17th and 18th centuries, have partly sunk into the ground and their inscriptions are thus only partly visible. In 1879 burials were discontinued in the old part of the churchyard, and in May 1882 the whole churchyard was closed to burials except for a few vaults and walled or fenced graves.

Thereafter all burials have been made at the town cemetery in Sandy Road which opened in 1882. A record of all known burials in the churchyard has been compiled by the Potton History Society.

The Churchyard is the responsibility of the Town Council. They undertook a major restoration of the boundary wall in 2003.

### **Parish Registers and Records**

The church registers begin in 1614 and the bishops' transcripts in 1602. The register books to 1812 are deposited at the County Record Office at Bedford. The registers have been published from, 1602 - 1812 in the Bedfordshire Parish Register Series, Volumes 61 and 62. Many of the old churchwardens' books have not survived the passage of time. The earliest extant records, the Overseers of the Poor Account, start in May 1638 and have been published in Bedfordshire Notes and Queries, Volume III, page 272.

## **Church Property**

The Vicarage was sold in 1983 and a new Rectory has been built on lower ground to the west in 1985.

The church hall (originally the church school) was built in 1848 on glebe land on the west of the road that runs past the church near the junction with the causeway. Subsequent renovations and extensions were carried out in 1882, 1897, 1964, and 1972. The hall is used for many activities not only those specifically connected with the church.

A number of other properties that originally belonged to the church, some of them from charitable bequests, have now been sold. The field at the back of the hall is part of the church's property and is used for church fetes and for other activities, especially during the summer months.