

WENDENS AMBO CHURCH

ESSEX

*First and foremost we need to remember that our churches
have been built for the honour and glory of God,
where the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier of
mankind may be worshipped by his people.*

Laurence King – A guide to Essex churches

Originally Wenden consisted of two parishes, Great Wenden (Wenden Magna) and Little Wenden (Wenden Parva) and both are referred to in the Domesday Book. In 1662 the parishes were amalgamated to become Wendens Ambo – literally the “Wendens together”. The reasons why this came about were clear in the petition to the Bishop of London: the church at Little Wenden was in a poor condition, the villages were less than half a mile apart, Great Wenden church was big enough for all the parishioners and since the reformation the church income from both parishes was so small that they were scarcely able to retain one minister. So Little Wenden church was pulled down and Great Wenden, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, became the place of worship for the people of the new parish of Wendens Ambo.

Many features of the building go back as far as the 11th century and it is quite likely that it replaced an earlier Saxon structure although all traces of this have gone. When it was rebuilt, the Norman influence was apparent and the church had a characteristic prominent tower,

rectangular nave and a small chancel. By the 13th century the church was too small for the increasing population and a south aisle was added, extending westwards to align with the front of the tower. At the same time, the chancel was completely rebuilt, becoming longer and wider to meet the requirements of greatly elaborated ritual.

Early in the 14th century a further extension was made by adding a north aisle, which was considerably shorter than the south aisle, extending only to the east wall of the tower. The north and south walls of the nave had to be substantially removed to accommodate these aisles with columns being inserted to support the roof.

By having the new aisle windows further away from the original nave, the light must have been poor but it was not until 1500 that this was remedied; the roof of the nave being considerably heightened and clerestory windows inserted in the upper walls. Within a few years two further clerestory windows were inserted close to the east gable of the nave, probably to give additional light to the Great Rood or Crucifix above the screen in the chancel arch.

Slightly earlier, a south porch was built. It is unlikely that this replaced another, for the worn state of the south doorway seems to indicate that it had been exposed to the weather for many years. After the Reformation, no further structural alterations were made until Victorian times other than the construction of brick buttresses in the 18th century to support the chancel walls when it was found that they were not strong enough to support the roof. In 1857 the north aisle was completely replaced, the new one being extended westwards to balance the building. A doorway was inserted in this new aisle but was later removed and replaced with a window. In 1895 more work was carried out; the re-roofing of the nave and south aisle, clerestory

windows replaced and heating installed. The following year the south aisle was extended eastwards to create space for an organ, necessitating an arched opening in the south wall of the chancel. The south porch was rebuilt. Substantially, this is the building that we see today.

The church is built of the only material available locally; the hard flints found in the chalk beds that underlie the rich soil of the area. Flint may be used in a number of ways but in Wenden they have been polled, a method whereby they are split across with the dark coloured inner part exposed to the outside of the building. The use of flint requires a large amount of mortar. The strength of the structure depends on the durability of this. It is not possible to achieve a sharp edge using flint and therefore stone or some other material has to be used for corners and the surrounds of windows and doors.

Here a hard form of chalk known as clunch is used but it does not wear well – something easily seen from the surroundings of the west and south doors. It is fortunate that flint has been retained in all extension work over the years; so maintaining a harmony, throughout the building, which has been lost in many other churches, especially those with 19th century “improvements”.

One curious feature of the building is the external east wall of the nave, which stands above the chancel. Unlike the rest of the church, it is not of flint but of upright wooden beams which are clearly visible from the outside, the spaces between them being filled flush with mortar or similar material.

The church is a splendid example of various architectural styles in vogue at the time when the alterations were being made. Of the original nave very little remains due to the piercing of the north and south walls to form columns and arches to accommodate the aisles, but it is the style of these features which has enabled building dates to be established.

The **western tower** is the least changed and most interesting part of the church, not least because of certain Saxon features which were incorporated into the Norman structure. This illustrates that architectural styles do not change suddenly; local craftsmen were using the basic Norman model for their new church but included features that they had known from pre-Conquest times. The doorway is a striking feature, having a round-headed arch of Roman bricks which probably came from the remains of a Roman villa about half a mile to the south-west, the site of which was rediscovered in 1853. A plain piece of stone forms the tympanum over the door.

Above this doorway is a two-light early 16th century window and higher up on the north, west and south sides are single pointed windows, each having above the remains of earlier windows with heads turned in Roman bricks. The one to the south has been completely filled in.

At belfry level, on the same three sides there are two-light windows, those on the north and south being largely original. The south window has two round-headed openings separated by a Norman column with a cushion capital and square base. On the north window this column has been replaced with a rectangular pilaster, which is probably a later restoration. Although the west window was replaced in the 15th century, the Norman dividing column was retained.

An interesting feature is the series of circular sound holes near the top of the tower just below the castellated parapet, two on the south and west and three on the north. This peculiarity is also found in the Saxon tower of St Bene't's in Cambridge.

A tall slender shingled spire rests on the tower, dating from the 15th century, of a type known as a "Hertfordshire Spike".

The entrance to the church is through the **south porch**. Only a tiebeam supporting a short kingpost remains of the previous one built in the 15th century. The south doorway, much eroded, was originally of two orders with attached jamb shafts with foliated capitals. On entering the **nave**, most people are aware of how high it is in relation to its length – the result of the roof being raised for the insertion of the clerestory windows. Evidence of the old roof- line can clearly be seen on the east wall of the tower. On the north side are three arches resting on octagonal columns with moulded capitals and bases. Over the arches are hood mouldings terminating in four grotesquely carved heads with intriguing expressions. One has a monkey face whilst another appears to be winking. The earlier arches on the south side are typically early 13th century of two square-edged orders springing from round pillars with plain circular capitals and bases.

An unusual feature is the position of the **vestry**, which had been formed from the western end of the south aisle where it flanks the tower. The partition wall (rather crudely built) is likely to have been done in the 15th century. The ironwork on the vestry door is of interest. In the west wall of the vestry is a much restored 13th century lancet window.

Walking round the church, the first item of interest is the **font**, which dates from the 14th century; although the upper part may not be original as it does not quite match the square base, which is attached to one of the columns. The wooden domed cover dates from about 1600 and is raised by a rope passing round a pulley in a wooden bracket projecting from the arch. At one time the cover would have been locked in some way, as its purpose was to prevent holy water from being taken from the font.

The **pews** are a mixture of old and modern but many of the medieval bench ends have been retained. On the south side of the front pew is an excellent example of carving – a representation of a boar with its foot on a mirror. This illustrates one of the legends from the Book of Beasts, the “Tiger and the Mirror”, but as the carver had never seen a

tiger, the common boar had to suffice. The story relates that a female tiger, robbed of her cub, pursues the robber but he throws down a mirror to distract her. Seeing her own reflection, she mistakes it for her cub and stoops to suckle it, so enabling the robber to escape. The Christian moral is that the devil casts illusions of pleasure before us to destroy our souls. At one time the robber stood at the other end of the pew but this has long since gone.

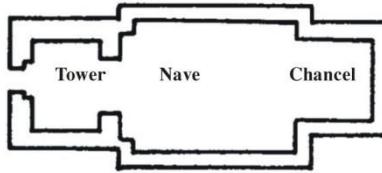
Close by, in the **south aisle**, there is a plain double **piscina** with two circular sinks. This is a sure sign that there had been an altar nearby at one time as the purpose of the piscina was for the rinsings from the sacred vessels and the water in which the clergy washed their hands. Next to the piscina is a large slab, which was probably moved from the floor to its present position when the organ chamber was built.

It bears the **brass** of a man in plate armour of c.1410 believed to commemorate Sir William Lovenay who held land in great Wenden for over 30 years and was also patron of the living of Little Wenden. A man of high office, he was appointed Keeper of the Great Wardrobe on the accession of Henry IV in 1399. In his will he directed that his body be buried in St Mary's Wenden Magna and although his death did not occur until 1436, the date of the brass can be explained as it was quite common to procure these long before death.

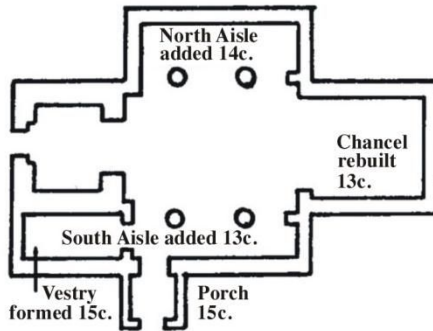
The brass shows him with a large sword at one side and a dagger at the other and his hands enclosed in gauntlets. His spurred feet rest on a crouching lion. Above his head are the outlines of three shields and there was an inscription plate below his feet.

Development of the church through the centuries

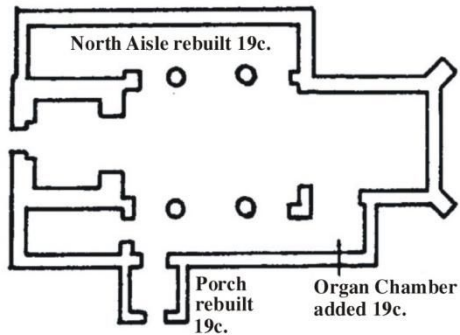
As it probably looked in Norman times:



The additions made in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries:



The church today, virtually unaltered from the end of the 19th century:



The **pulpit** is most unusual with nine sides, each with elaborately traceried *through the centuries* panels, including the two forming the door. It dates from about 1500. The **chancel screen** is from the same period and although it was severely damaged, it is still a fine example of beautiful and elaborate tracery. Originally there would have been a vaulted spiral staircase. All this has now gone but evidence still remains in parts of the surrounding stonework.

Passing through the screen and into the **chancel**, one notices on the south wall the damaged remains of a 14th century painting illustrating the story of St Margaret the virgin martyr of Antioch. For centuries this extensive painting of red ochre lay hidden under layers of limewash and it came to light when the wall was pierced to create the organ chamber. It was not until 1934 that a partial restoration was made by carefully removing the top surfaces. Professor Tristram made detailed sketches which now hang in the north aisle. Opposite, on the north wall of the chancel, is a small fragment of the late 16th century black-letter inscription within an ornamental frame.

The charming **organ** was built about 1780 and the pipes and framework are elaborately gilded. The maker is unknown, as indeed is its history, but it was installed in the church at the end of the 19th century. Examination reveals that it has been much modified in its time and it is thought that it may originally have been built for a private house.

The east window of the chancel is relatively modern but is set in the jambs of the original 13th century predecessor. Both the north and south walls have small single lancet windows with trefoiled heads and on the north wall there is a large rectangular window, all of the 15th century. The large window is notable, for much of the original ironwork remains and there are two horizontal bars across the lower part of the exterior. It seems probable that the bottom of the window was not originally glazed, but fitted with an opening wooden shutter.

In pre-reformation times this served a ritual purpose, for at the Consecration and Elevation of the Sacred Elements during the Communion service the shutter would be opened so that those outside would know that the most holy part of the ceremony was taking place. An examination of the window surround shows that the mouldings of the jambs and tracery do not extend to the bottom of the window.

Both north windows in the chancel were restored and re-glazed in 1986 in memory of Kathleen Statham and eight fragments of fine medieval glass donated by Kathleen Riley were inserted into the large window. These fragments are from a number of English and continental sources and one of them, a 16th century Flemish Roundel depicting the Crucifixion with St. Mary and St. John, is a splendid piece.

In the south wall, appropriately close to the high altar, is a trefoil-headed **piscina** and to the right of it a deep rectangular hole, the significance of which is unknown.

Returning to the nave, there is a floor slab close to the lectern commemorating Ann Churchman who died in 1684, the earliest dated memorial in the church. Other commemorative slabs lie along the centre aisle.

High on the north wall of the nave is an elaborate memorial to Ambrose Andrews, a local landowner who died in 1718. He was the son-in-law of Ann Churchman.

Apart from a few family memorials and Professor Tristram's drawings, there is little of interest in the north aisle.

Proceeding to the tower, the opening from the nave is a very large and plain round-headed arch. The glass screen modelled on that in a church near the Dordogne river in France was installed in 2000 by public subscription. Inside **the tower**, there is a 14th century ogee-headed holy water **stoup**, which is in a most unusual position

next to the west door. As these stoups were always by the usual entrance, it appears that in early times the west door was the normal access to the church rather than the traditional south door. In the north-west corner is a 15th century staircase to the belfry enclosed in a quarter-round wooden screen; a most unusual feature.

The **bells** have been described as the “best light peal in Essex”. Originally there were five, cast in 1700, but in 1904 three of them had to be recast as they were cracked and a treble bell was added. At the same time the belfry was restored.

It is fortunate that the original **registers** for baptisms, marriages and burials still exist although these are now held by the Essex Record Office in Chelmsford. These date from 1540, and for a number of years before the union of the parishes in 1662, the registers of both parishes were combined.

Notable among the **church plate** is a secular Elizabethan cup of 1589 with a cover or patten of 1568. A cover older than the cup is rather unusual but there are records of the loss of an earlier cup and the replacement used the original cover. This cup probably came from Little Wenden church, as the parishioners there were required to subscribe for a new one in 1588. The fate of the Great Wenden cup is not known.

In 2000 a Millennium window was commissioned and is described as follows:

THE ANNUNCIATION: ST. LUKE 1. v. 28

And the angel came in unto her, and said, “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.” And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, “Fear not Mary, for thou hast found favour with God. And behold, thou

shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son and shalt call his name JESUS.”

Peter Caller, the artist, has written:

My objectives in this window are to create an art work which prompts us to quietly reflect on the beginning of Christianity and to encourage viewers to be captured by the effects of an example of inspiration through faith. The form of the window is derived from the narrative windows of the mediaeval age and the mystical and poetic art of Marc Chagall. In the left hand panel, the form of the Archangel is suggested rather than described and is genderless. It is motionless, its energy crackles and fizzes through space; it is a light form, insubstantial against a dark background while Mary reads as a dark form, a substantial being, solid, against a light background. The Archangel and Mary exist in contrast with each other, a heavenly body communicates with an earthly body, light counterpoints with dark, Ying and Yang, balance in nature. We look across at the Archangel and down to the surface of the earth, in one glance accepting a real village shown in minute realistic detail and the abstract image of the Archangel. The village is Wendens Ambo. The momentousness of the annunciation enters Wendens Ambo even through the minutiae of everyday life.

In the right panel Mary stands with her back to the Archangel. She is anxious, fearful, stiff. Her body is ready to flee. Yet.... she turns to engage with the Archangel. She regards it openly, no fear in her calm gaze...her body ready to escape, mind open, waiting, expectant. The Archangel projects its message through space in rays of energy and Mary receives the words in her heart. The moment is here. Mary holds the lily, a symbol of her purity and virginity. The lily curves upwards and to the left connecting with

the direction of Mary's gaze, leading the viewer's eye across to the Archangel. She is represented as a modern young woman.

Peter Caller trained in stained glass window design and making at the Wimbledon School of Art and the Royal College of Art. He lives in Hertfordshire near Kings Walden. The window has been paid for by a generous donation from the Wendens Ambo Millennium Committee and a grant from an anonymous local charity. Together with the glass screen erected in the tower arch by subscription, it marks the Bi-Millennium. It occupies a space which was originally a north doorway, created when the church received major repairs in 1847. At an uncertain time but before further repairs were made in 1895, the doorway was converted into a plain glass window.

Outside the church building, opposite the main entrance porch, is a recently completed (2017) memorial garden for the interment of cremated remains. It offers a place of repose and contemplation and provides a timeless view of the historic cottages lining Church Path. The people whose ashes are interred in the garden are named in the Book of Remembrance inside the church. Nearby is the recently erected Portland stone memorial commemorating the centenary of the First World War, and recognising all those who have died and suffered in times of warfare.

For a time Wendens Ambo ceased to be a separate ecclesiastical parish when in 1975 a team ministry was created for Saffron Walden, Littlebury and Wendens Ambo although it remained a civil parish. This was a happy resolution of a problem when, a few years earlier, consideration had been given to the closure of the church due to ever rising costs. This would have meant adding this ancient and beautiful building to the sad list of redundant Essex churches. Since that time a further reorganisation, in 2012, restored it as an ecclesiastical parish grouped with neighbouring parishes in the Cam valley within the United Benefice of Saffron Walden and Villages. It is a matter of rejoicing that regular services are still held.