

# WENDENS AMBO CHURCH

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2006 - 2020

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Much of the new material in this updated version of the church guide comes from research for the village history, “**Wendens Ambo, a History of an Essex Village**” published in 2019. For information about the history, contact [wendensambo.soc@yahoo.com](mailto:wendensambo.soc@yahoo.com)

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# WENDENS AMBO CHURCH

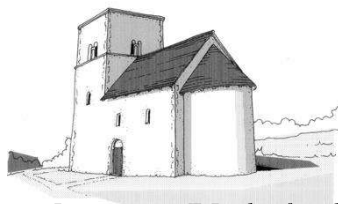
ESSEX

*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 tiny church at Little Wenden was in a ruinous state, and Great Wenden church, a quarter of a mile away, 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 the church of 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, possibly semi-circular in shape.



*Impression: E Rutherford*

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 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 around 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*, the 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 suggests 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. 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 a furnace for heating installed in a pit beneath the floor at the western end of the nave. 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. For most of its life the exterior walls were probably covered with a white plaster render. This is evident in photographs up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When the church was refurbished at the end of the 1800s the render was removed from the lower part of the tower and the aisles, exposing the flint. The render on the chancel and the top level of the tower remained until the early years of the 20th century.

Flint may be used in a number of ways, and when the northern aisle was rebuilt and extended the flints were 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 must 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 unusual 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. What we see now dates from the work carried out in 1895. Before the removal of the plaster render, these too were hidden from view.

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 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 Tower**

The **western tower** is the least changed part of the church, with 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. Scratched in the stone on the southern side of the doorway is a “witch mark” of unknown date, and possibly the outline of a standing figure.

Above this doorway is a two-light early 16th century window (curiously slightly off-centre) 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 filled in – at one time the vestry roof was much more steeply sloped and joined the tower just below the head of the window.

At the level of the bell chamber, 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, east 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 roof and the spire have been repaired and restored on numerous occasions, most recently in 2018 when a very complete refurbishment took place with help from the National Lottery Fund, the Friends of Essex Churches Trust, the Wolfson Foundation (with Church Care) and Allchurches Trust .

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. On the other side of the west door, in the north-west corner, is a 15th century staircase to the bell chamber enclosed in a quarter-round wooden screen, an unusual feature. Opposite the west

door the opening from the nave is a 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.

## **The Bells**

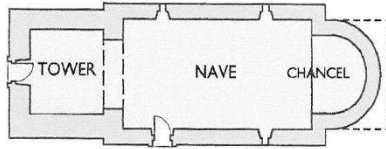
The **bells** have been described as the “best light peal in Essex”.

Over the centuries they have been replaced and supplemented a number of times, but much of the history is lost. In the survey carried out in 1552 the Little Wenden church had three bells and the Great Wenden church – St Mary’s - also had three. Perhaps the sets were combined when the parishes were united and the Little Wenden church demolished, for by the beginning of the 1900s St Mary’s had five bells of which three had been cast, or re-cast, in 1700. In 1904 three of them had to be re-cast as they were cracked, and a treble bell was added to the original five. At the same time the belfry was restored, and the bells were dedicated on 11 November 1904.

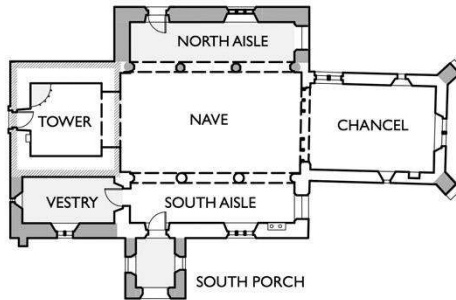


*Development of the church through the centuries*

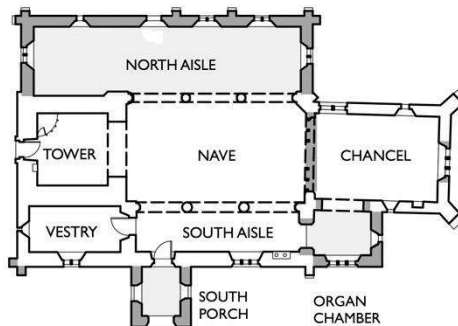
As it probably looked in Norman times:



The additions made in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries:



The church today, virtually unaltered from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:



*Adapted from a study by E Rutherford*

## The South Porch entrance

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.

Entering 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 would be raised by a rope passing round a pulley in the wooden bracket projecting from the arch.

Immediately to the left of the entrance is 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. At some point in the 19th century a fireplace was installed in the vestry, using the window aperture for a chimney taking the smoke outside to above the roof line, which was much more steeply sloped than the remainder of the south aisle.

## The Nave

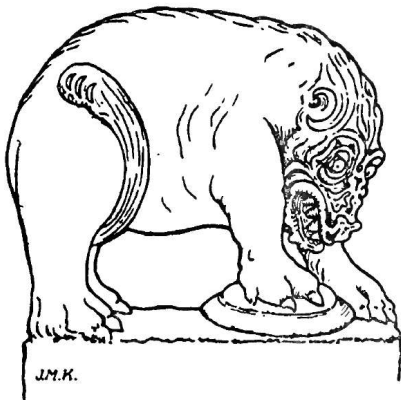
On entering the **nave**, most people are aware of how high it is in relation to its length – the result of the roof being raised for the insertion of the clerestory windows. Evidence of the old roof line can clearly be seen on the east wall of the tower.

On the north side of the nave opposite the entrance 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. Scratched into the stonework of the pillars are a number of graffiti, including some shields which perhaps represent the shields that were depicted on the brasses on the burial slabs in the southern aisle.

The **pews** are a mixture of ancient and Victorian 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.



*From: An Inventory of the  
Historical Monuments in  
Essex, 1916*

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 dated to about 1410 which commemorates **Sir William Loveney** 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.



Sir William Loveney

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. We can be certain of the identification of the brass, because the inscription below it was recorded by Richard Symonds when he visited the church in September 1639 to record coats of arms and other heraldry to be found in churches. The inscription plate was by that time so worn that the date of death was indistinct; and the escutcheons above the figure were already missing – though at least one of them might be represented in a graffito on the round column nearest the brass.

A second grave slab is on the floor of the south aisle, at its eastern end. This is worn almost completely smooth, and only a very few letters on the top left- and right-hand sides can be made out. Symonds mentioned, in addition to the Loveney memorial, the grave of Edward Wilson and his wife Mari, and “another adjoining”. This may be one of those.

Close to the screen on the northern side of the nave, there is a floor slab 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.

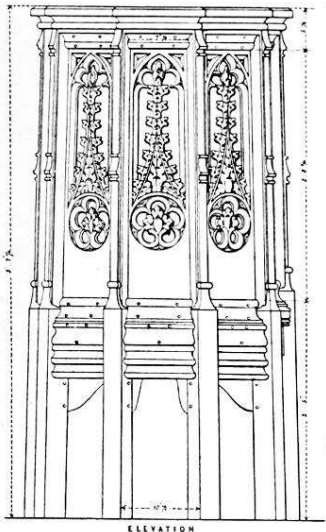
## **The Millennium Window**

The main feature of the north aisle is the Millennium Window, commissioned in 2000, which represents the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary. The window was 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.

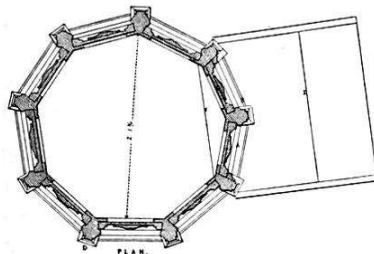
*And the angel came in unto her, and said, “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.” And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, “Fear not Mary, for 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.” St. Luke 1. v. 28*

It was designed by Peter Caller who trained in stained glass window design and making at the Wimbledon School of Art and the Royal College of Art. He wrote, “*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.*”

It occupies a space which was originally a north doorway, created when the church received major repairs in 1857. At an uncertain time but before further repairs were made in 1895, the doorway was converted into a plain glass window.



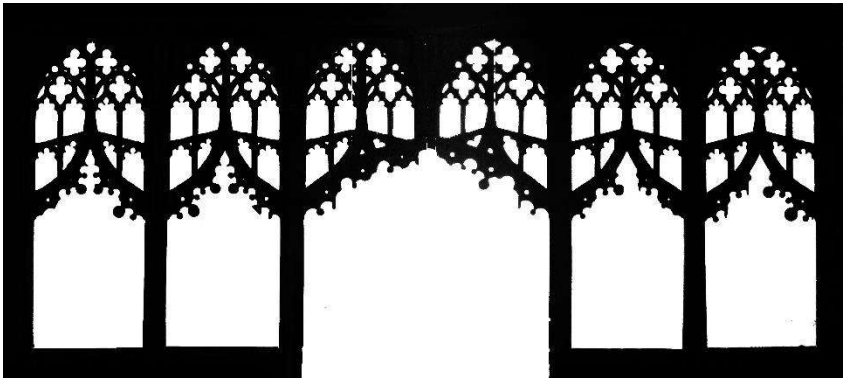
The **pulpit** is most unusual with nine sides, each with elaborately traceried panels, including the two forming the door. It dates from about 1500.



*From: Howard and Crossley, English Church Woodwork: a study in craftsmanship during the mediaeval period AD 1250-1550, 1919*

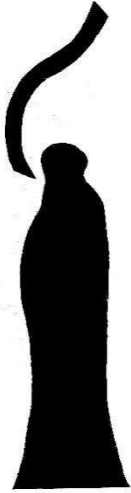
## The Chancel and Chancel Screen

The **chancel screen** is also from around 1500 and, although it has been severely damaged over the centuries, it is still a fine example of beautiful and elaborate tracery. It has been identified, probably, as a product of the workshops of Thomas Gooch of Sudbury in the late 1400s, as it shares details with screens in southern Suffolk from the same maker. Originally there would have been a vaulted spiral staircase at its northern end, giving access to a rood loft projecting from the front of the screen. All this has now gone but evidence remains in parts of the surrounding stonework, and the remnants of the projecting wings that would have supported the rood loft are especially visible at the southern end.



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 Ernest Tristram made detailed

sketches which now hang in the north aisle. Opposite, on the north wall of the chancel, is a small fragment of a late 16th century black-letter inscription within an ornamental frame.



The floor of the chancel, as that of the nave, was re-made at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with concrete into which the old memorial slabs, tiles and parquet blocks were set to provide a level surface. Beneath the carpet there remain two slabs on the north side and one on the south. All bear the indications of long-lost brasses, and only one has a distinct outline, that of a priest surmounted by a scroll which would have contained an inscription containing a prayer. As this may be dated to the late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century, it is perhaps the grave of Robert Rest, noted by Symonds as being in the chancel, who was vicar from 1493 to 1504.

*The outline of the missing  
brass in the chancel,  
probably that of Revd  
Robert Rest*

The charming pipe **organ** was built about 1780. 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.

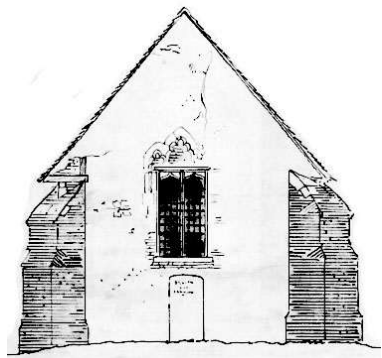


Both the north and south walls of the chancel have small single lancet windows of the 15<sup>th</sup> century with trefoiled heads. A third lancet window, close to the chancel screen on the southern side, was moved and shortened to become the eastern window of the organ chamber. Care was taken to preserve a graffito on the outside dated 1663.

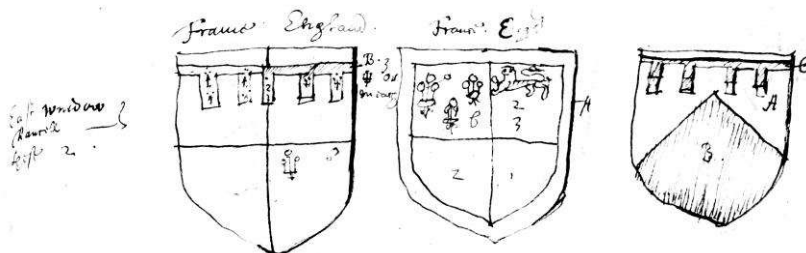
On the north wall of the chancel there is a large rectangular window, also of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Much of the original ironwork remains and there are two horizontal bars across the lower part of the exterior. It seems probable that the bottom of the window was not originally glazed, but was 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.

*The eastern end of the chancel sketched by Revd Geldart showing the two-light window in an earlier three-light opening.*



The evolution of the **east window** of the chancel is obscure. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the window was rectangular, having two lights with trefoiled heads, rather similar to the large window on the north side of the chancel. According to a report of 1898 it was made of wood, inserted in a much earlier opening. At that time the original trefoiled heads of the three-light early-English window could still be made out above the wooden frame. These heads are shown in the architectural drawing made by the Revd Ernest Geldart preparatory to the renovation and partial rebuilding of the chancel at the end of the 1800s.



*Symonds' sketches of the coats of arms. Courtesy: College of Arms*

This may be borne out by the sketches of three coats of arms in the east window made by Symonds when he visited in 1639, possibly indicating that the old three-light window was still in existence then.

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, though it may have been an *aumbry* for storing the oil used in the sacraments.

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 some 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.

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, 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.



Garden of Remembrance and WWI Centennial Memorial  
Dedicated 12 November 2017