

## St Leonard's Church Sunningwell



The fundamental design is that of a cruciform or transeptal church with a nave, two transepts (the northern transept being the site of the vestry and tower above), and a chancel. As in most English churches, the chancel is at the east end; but unusually the west end takes the form of a porch.

### *Churchyard*



The present gravestones date from various periods since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There is also the base of a presumably medieval churchyard cross. At the top of the tower there is an embattled parapet, with pinnacles and gargoyles at the angles. Note that the tower is built of better stone than the earlier parts of the church. It was well restored in the early 2000s. On the south side of the church, look for the blocked lancet windows, part of an earlier construction of the nave. The yew tree adjacent to the Jewel Porch is approximately 600 years old.

### *Jewel Porch*



The Jewel Porch is seven-sided and unique. Built by John Jewel, rector in the 1550s and later bishop of Salisbury, its style is a mixture of Gothic (door and windows) and Renaissance (columns and parapet). In days gone by it must have afforded welcome shelter to people waiting for services and for baptisms which often took place in the porch. It is not known at what date he took orders, but in 1551 he appears as rector of Sunningwell. He evidently continued to live in Oxford, visiting the village on Sundays to take services. In 1555 he moved to Frankfurt he returned to England in 1559 and in 1560 was appointed to Salisbury.

It would seem that the porch was built after Jewel returned from the Continent, where he must have been inspired by some examples of classical architecture. We do not know why it was built to cover the original west door, or why it takes the very rare form of a heptagon. Maybe the seven sides have symbolical significance; on the other hand, the shape may have had its origin in some question of practical convenience.

### *The Font*



The stone font with octagonal stem and bowl is 15<sup>th</sup>-century. It is lined with lead, and its wooden cover was a 19<sup>th</sup>-century addition.

### *The Nave and South Transept*

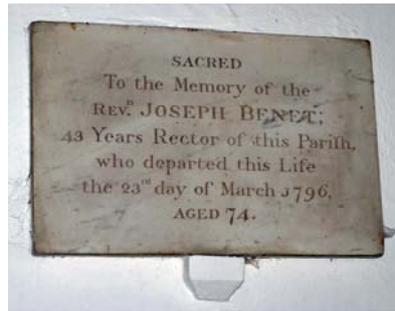
Before the late Middle Ages there were, typically, no benches or pews in the nave of a church, enabling the congregation to walk about and come and go quite freely. Pews were probably first installed in churches in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The oak seats at Sunningwell were renewed as part of the 1876 design, but the old carved elm bench-ends were reused. These massive examples of rough wood-carving are technically known as ‘poppy-heads’, perhaps from the French *poupée* (a doll[-shape]).



The nave is 13<sup>th</sup>-century with an embattled north wall. The two blocked lancet windows in the south wall (visible clearly from outside the church) suggest that an earlier wall was incorporated in a later construction. The former presence of a rood screen dividing chancel from nave is suggested by the slot in the wall in the south-east angle of the north transept. The screen of the south transept is probably the centre part of that original screen.



On the south wall of the nave is a monument to Revd Joseph Benet, who was rector in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and a friend to the young J.M.W. Turner (b. 1775), when the artist visited the village to see his relatives here.



The hexagonal pulpit is Jacobean, while the oak lectern is modern.



The south transept is late 15th-century in date, but its west window dates from Tudor times. Its east window has three Victorian panels depicting the Virgin Mary flanked by the ascetic archbishop of Canterbury, St Edmund Rich (1175-1240), who had been born in Abingdon, and Sunningwell church's patron saint, Leonard, shown with the chains which symbolize the traditional belief that he could liberate captives.





*The North Transept and Tower*



The north transept and the tower date from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. The ground floor now houses the vestry. The first floor, which previously held the organ, is now a meeting room. Above this there is a ringing loft. The bell chamber, above the ringing loft, holds six bells, on a wooden bell frame, the oldest bell being the tenor bell dated 1653. This tower, or rather a predecessor on the same site, is associated with Roger Bacon, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scientist who won the complimentary title 'Doctor mirabilis'. Bacon, a Somerset man, settled in Oxford about 1250, where he began those researches which made his name famous. He is said to have made experiments in the tower of Sunningwell church and, as he declared the possibility of microscopes and telescopes long in advance of their known production, we may well wonder whether he did not use the tower-top as a vantage point for testing his telescopic theories.

### *The 'Bishop's' Chair*



This is actually a bardic chair, specially made to be presented to the winning poet at an eisteddfod, or Welsh cultural competition. Sunningwell's chair dates from 1873, when it was competed for at the National Eisteddfod held at Mold in Flintshire. The victor was a Congregationalist minister called Rowland Williams (1823-1905), serving at that time in London. Neither his verses nor his sermons are much esteemed these days, but Williams, under his bardic name of Hwfa Môn, was one of the great showmen and literary giants of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Wales. How it came to Sunningwell, no one can now remember.

The inscriptions read:

(outside upper arms) CYMRU LAN [fair Wales] GWLAD Y GAN [land of song]

(on back) TYWYSOGAETH CYMRU [principality of Wales]

(across inside arms and back) EISTEDDFOD GENEDLAETHOL YR WYDDGRUG [National Eisteddfod Mold]

(around base) OFNA DDUW AC NID RHAID IT OFNI DYN [fear God and you need not fear man]

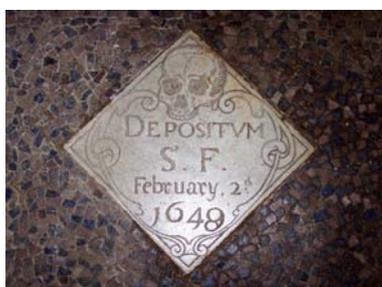
The Bishop's chair is kept in the vestry and may be viewed on request.

### *The Sanctuary and Chancel*



The north and east walls are 13<sup>th</sup> century, but the east window was rebuilt in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century in decorated style. The east window depicts the birth of Christ and the adoration of the Magi. Seddon evidently derived ideas and patterns from his friends in the pre-Raphaelite movement; but his work is distinctive too. The dark blue and green coloration is particularly striking.

The window on the north side is from this period, but the two square-headed ones in the south wall exhibit the flatter tracery of the perpendicular period., which began about 1350 and lasted through the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The communion table is oak of the Elizabethan period. Medieval builders did not live in an age of mass production and symmetry. Note the slope of the chancel walls, and the fact that the chancel is not central to the nave.



Samuel Fell (rector 1625-49) and his family lie buried on either side of the sanctuary. Fell's major job in his later years was as dean of Christ Church, the largest of the Oxford colleges. When the Civil War broke out in 1642, King Charles I made Oxford his centre of operations and spent much time there, not least at Christ Church. After the King's execution, on 30 January 1649, Fell is supposed to have died of shock and grief. Certainly his tombstone shows the date of 2 February 1648/9 (according to the old calendar then still in force the year began only on 25 March



The marble tablet on the north wall of the chancel is a monument to Mary, wife of Sir Thomas Baskerville, and to her son Hannibal Baskerville. It incorporates below it another to Sir Thomas himself which formerly stood in the old St. Paul's Cathedral before the great fire of London. Note the shield with the Baskerville arms. This family, who were lords of the manor of Bayworth, are believed to be related to the Baskervilles who inspired Conan Doyle's story; but they soon died out here. Sir Hannibal was a learned eccentric who frittered away much of the estate.

The whole chancel decoration was completely redesigned in the Victorian period by the architect John Pollard Seddon (1827-1906. He renewed the woodwork (except the roof, which appears to be much older). The oak chancel stalls and desks were part of the 1876 restoration design. The new scheme is important for two unusual and masterly creations, the east window and the floor tiles.



The tiles are the only ones of their kind in England (though similar pavements can be seen in two Welsh churches restored by Seddon: at Llanbadarn Fawr, near Aberystwyth; and at St Jerome, Llangwm Uchaf, near Usk). The tiles illustrate the fourth chapter of Revelations, the last book of the New Testament. The pavement includes a nine-tile group centred on a winged figure above a globe, surrounded by seven lamps with lettering beneath: Scientia, Consilium, Sapientia, Fortitudo, Timor, Intellectus, Pietas (Rev. 4:5: 'And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and *there were* seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God'.) There are also four-tile groups showing six-winged versions of an ox, a lion, an eagle and a man; these are the 'four beasts' round about the throne (Rev. 4:6). Another four-tile group depicts one of the 'four and twenty elders' who sat near the throne and 'cast their crowns' before it, while yet another shows a complex lamp, in fact a duplex (twin-wick) burner oil lamp, a rare non-traditional image for a Victorian tile.

MORE DETAILED INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE ON YELLOW CARDS TO BE FOUND IN THE CHURCH

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