

THE SETTING

There was a church on this site by 1090, when records show that it was given to the Priory of St Pancras at Lewes, including a levy of tithes to support the church and clergy. The present church was classified in 1987 on the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest as Grade 1 (the highest listing). The Parish Registers date back to 1539; the originals are now housed at the West Sussex Record Office in Chichester. There have been seven key stages in the building and development of the present church and its surroundings. A useful starting point is the painting of St Mary's in 1805 before the almost total rebuilding began in 1847. This is illustrated below; a copy hangs on the wall near the south door.

What is now the south aisle and Resurrection Chapel were the first to be built, in the late 13th or early 14th centuries, although only the lower parts of the walls are now original. The porticus, and the old font and pulpit disappeared in the 1847 restoration and were replaced by the present stone porch, octagonal stone font with heavy oak lid, and stone pulpit. Great damage was done in these restorations to the historic integrity of the church. Fortunately the Victorians left the tower intact.

Under the floor of the pews to the south west of the present pulpit there is an ancient bricked-up vault, accessed through a small channel.

From this, through a hole in the brickwork, can be seen five leaden coffins. These probably contain the remains of those named on the tombstones set in the floor above. All the pews are still fitted with low access gates. The chapel was dedicated by the Bishop of Chichester in 1964 and is now called the Chapel of the Resurrection. It was previously the Children's Corner. Within the chapel is a small curtained recess, or aumbry, which holds the reserved consecrated sacrament for communion.

THE TOWER

The sandstone tower with its oak-shingled broach spire was built rather later, in the 15th century. The window at the base of the west wall was originally a door leading directly into the church.

The belfry has a ring of eight bells, three of them dating back to 1614. Three others were hung in 1878, and two more were given by parishioners in 1936 to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of King George V the previous year. At the same time five of the old bells were recast, tuned and toned by Gillett and Johnson of Croydon. No 5 bears the inscription "Brian Eldridge me fecit 1628". No 3 is probably very old but may have been recast more than once, although the old inscription remains embossed on it "Vox Augustine sonet in aura Dei". When the bells were rehung in 1936 the tower was strengthened and an iron frame substituted for the old oak one: the weight of two tons and the vibration of the bells was damaging the stonework.

There has always been an enthusiastic team of bell ringers. Eric Knapp, captain for many years, was elected a member of the Sussex County Association of Change Ringers in 1937. The clock was installed in 1879 by public subscription in remembrance of F.B. Robinson of Balcombe House.

MAINTENANCE, REPAIRS AND DECORATIONS

Any old building requires constant care and attention, and this church is no exception. Over many years, major repairs have been needed to the sandstone walls; the Horsham stone slabs and clay tiles to the roofs; the oak shingles on the spire; damage caused by damp penetration; wood rot in floors and other woodwork; replastering of ceilings; and complete internal redecoration. Some of the cost has been grant-aided, but a large proportion has been given by parishioners and visitors throughout the ages.

THE OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH

St Mary's has the pleasant, unpretentious, look of a small country church of mainly Victorian origin, without special architectural merit. The walls are built from local sandstone all cut from the same quarry over several hundred years up to the present day. The main roof facing south is clad with Horsham stone slabs, with plain clay tiles elsewhere. The broach spire is in oak shingles. The roof was retiled in 1988, as commemorated by a wooden plaque inside by the door to the rector's vestry.

The churchyard was extended in 1910 from land given by Lord Cowdray and Lady Denman. It contains 28 chest or table tombs of the seventeenth and later centuries, all standing closely together; but some have shifted and are leaning, though stable. Also several eighteenth century headstones. A record of the monumental inscriptions is kept by the Rector, and there are more details of the church and churchyard in "Balcombe: The story of a Sussex Village" by Leslie Fairweather. A quiet browse around the tombstones can be very rewarding. In 1986 the top part of the churchyard was closed to burials under the 1853 Burial Act, and is now maintained by Mid Sussex District Council. The lower part is still in use and is maintained by the church. A commemorative yew tree was planted in the churchyard behind the chancel in Millennium year 2000.

MEMORIAL FURNITURE AND DISPLAYS

A part from the memorial windows there are other plaques and commemorations throughout the church. Above the rector's stall in the chancel is a brass plate listing all the rectors since 1333, around 50 of them, some serving almost the same number of years. A memorial to Balcombe men who died in both world wars is next to the British Legion window in the north aisle, and is the focus of the annual Remembrance Day service when all the names are read out.

In the front pew of the north side of the nave is a brass plate marking the spot where Queen Mary sat at the wedding of her niece, Lady May Cambridge to Captain Henry Abel Smith of the Royal Horse Guards, on 24th October 1931. Other guests included the Prince of Wales, more members of the Royal family and many foreign royalty. Princess Elizabeth, now Her Majesty the Queen, was a bridesmaid. The bride was the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Athlone who lived at Brantridge Park.

There are over 130 new hassocks embroidered since the year 2000, donated by individuals and organisations. There is a book in the church, bound by Rona Smith, listing them all.

The main tombstones are in the churchyard but there are also a number of memorial stones set in the floor of the south aisle, the earliest dated 1656, and stone wall plaques.

The church consisted of only the south aisle and tower for about 500 years after they were built. Not until the nineteenth century were any major additions and alterations undertaken. Then two came in fairly quick succession. The first, between 1847 and 1850, doubling the size of the church by building the present nave (but not the chancel) and including the various changes to the south aisle described earlier.

In 1831 the population of Balcombe was 641. In 1841, when the railway was completed, that had increased to 1,542 (although 550 were railway workers). The numbers settled down to 880 by 1861, but continued to grow steadily over the years. The church was still not big enough to satisfy parishioners' demands and between 1872 and 1875 the north aisle was built, plus a large chancel to accommodate the main altar and choir. The small Vestry built in the 1847 renovation was removed to make way for the chancel, with a new and larger Vestry tucked into the corner between the north aisle and the chancel. Under it was built a boiler room. Above the altar and on each side of the chancel arch are carved stone heads of three kings, two queens and a bishop.

For about 700 years the church had no toilet for its congregation and visitors. After examining about six possible locations inside and outside the church, a toilet, which could accommodate disabled people in wheelchairs, was finally built in 1998 outside the church at the west end of the north aisle.

The local quarries at Paddockhurst from which the sandstone for the original church had been obtained had luckily just reopened, and the same stone could be used. It will take time for the new stonework to weather but its appearance will gradually match the rest of the church.

THE LYCHGATE

The winding path up to the church from the road through a gap in the hedge, had always been a rather undistinguished entrance to the church itself: it needed a stronger focus.

To celebrate the Millennium, English Heritage Buildings sponsored a competition throughout the south east to donate a lych gate to the most deserving church. Balcombe won the prize and with oak donated by the Balcombe Estate, and to the design of Michael Noble, the carvings of John Randall, and the enthusiasm of Norman Howard, the Rector and many other villagers, the work was finished in 2002. It now forms an imposing, yet traditional, entrance to the church.

A framed illustration and account of how this was achieved hangs near the west door.

STAINED GLASS WINDOWS

The large west window in the nave (illustrated) is in memory of George and Fanny Amilia Meek, of Brantridge, who died on December 8th and 13th 1874 respectively.

He was High Sheriff of Sussex who caught a fever at Lewes Assizes, of which he and his wife both died. It depicts the arrival of the kings. A separate leaflet is being prepared describing the other windows and monuments.

WALL PAINTINGS

Painted biblical texts abounded in the late nineteenth century around the walls and following the shape of the arches in the nave and aisle arcades. Over the window above the main altar, for example, was an elaborately painted text "Unto us a child is born: unto us a child is given". All these texts had been painted over by 1900.

Now, on the south side of the west door, is a beautiful stencil of The Annunciation painted in 1987 by Rona Smith and her daughter Dione Verulam. Their initials are in the lower left corner and further details are on a display board.