

St Mary the Virgin, Sheering

A brief guide

The whole building suffered serious smoke damage caused by the 2010 fire. During the cleaning process some fragments of **14th century wall paintings** in red ochre were found in the chancel - architectural lines, foliage and flowers were uncovered. After mapping and conservation, most were covered up again except for the illustrative patch left exposed in the right-hand corner of the east wall.



The **reredos** (1931) is dedicated to the wife of the Rev H Williams. The **processional cross** (1969) was made and presented to the church by John Atkinson, Organist and Choirmaster. Some **mediaeval decorated tiles** (not on view) are preserved under the platform of the communion table.



The upper lights of the side window next to the communion table are made up from fragments of old stained glass. They include (bottom right) a rare depiction of a mermaid – sadly lacking her head and right arm.

Return via the main aisle to the main door. To the left of it, set into the wall, is a **stoup** which was uncovered during the 1970s restoration.

In the **porch** (added in the time of Henry VII, now restored) look back at the main doorway which dates from the 14th century. The head stops on the door arch may depict Robert Fitzwalter and (restored) his wife Gunnora. Some think the graffiti marks were made by men going off to the Crusades, making the first downward mark on leaving and completing the cross on their safe return. Others think they are 16th century. The earliest of the graffiti dates is MDI (1501). Outside the porch, don't miss the **gargoyles** and carvings, including a man with a bush and someone wrestling a lion. The exterior of the tower was restored by Sir Thomas Graham Jackson in 1906 and by Bakers of Danbury in 2011. See if you can spot the **Roman tiles** in the corner between the tower wall and the 1903 extension, and don't miss the **unusual clock faces** - part of Sheering's War Memorial – which were added in the late 1940s.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit. You will always be welcome to join us for worship (every Sunday morning) or any of our other activities.

Please feel free to look around, take time to reflect or pray, and appreciate the peace of this place.

St Mary's is the parish church of Sheering. The village probably derived its name from the Saxon personal name Scira - perhaps there was a concerted effort in tree clearance and building by Scira's people sometime in the early Saxon period? In the Little Domesday Book of 1087, Sheering appears as a substantial settlement with 32 acres of meadow, woodland for a hundred swine, a mill, and the unusual distinction of possessing a mule - one of the only two mules mentioned in the book (the other is in Norfolk).



In Saxon times there were two Manors of Sheering, 'Cowick' or 'Quick' which possessed Sheering Mill and 'Sheering' the principal Manor. At the Norman conquest the former was granted by the Conqueror to his uncle, William de Warren, and the latter to his nephew, Peter de Valoines. The church and patronage rights were attached to the Manor of Sheering. The living of Sheering has until recent times been a Rectory, and until 1712 the patronage was with the Manor of Sheering Hall. Our present Patron is Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford.

To start your tour of our Grade-One-listed church, stand just inside the main door and look up. **The nave roof**, one of the special features of the church, dates from the early 14th century. It has two bays with tie beams. The central purlin is forty feet long without a join, and is thought to have come from Hatfield Forest. This is a hammer-beam roof, a style which is almost confined to the eastern counties of England. A hammer-beam is the projecting beam from which the main arch of the roof springs, and the span is ingeniously reduced accordingly with a minimum of outward thrust. In the 1970s it was discovered that the ravages of death watch beetle had made the roof unsafe. Restoration left the appearance unchanged, but the old beams are now supported by steel girders above the visible ceiling. The painting on the underside of the beams nearest the chancel arch was uncovered during electrical work in 2011.

Now look around you. The contents of the church have changed over the centuries, but most of the structure is 14th century, probably on the site of a 12th century church. However, the north aisle (containing the row of pews furthest from the main door) was only completed in 1902/3. Construction involved breaking through the old north wall and the loss of two windows (Early English and Norman). At the same time two galleries and their staircase (pictured right) were removed from the nave.



Look at the wall beyond the main door. Here there is a copy of a 14th century **consecration cross**.



The original (pictured), was uncovered in the 1970s, and was probably painted for the dedication of the then-new 14th century church. Unfortunately in 2010 a fire caused by an electrical fault completely destroyed the old cross, burned the pews in this corner of the church down to the earth (the ones you see now were moved here from elsewhere in the church), damaged the roof beams above (now repaired) and caused extensive smoke and water damage. We are grateful to many residents of Sheering, local organisations and grant-making bodies for their support and donations which, with insurance, paid for repairs and additional restoration.

The **wall plaque**, dedicated to Mrs Douglas (wife of a previous Rector) is by Gilbert Baines RA who is known for his bas reliefs in the Concert Hall in Broadcasting House, Langham Place.

Look through the glazed doors into the base of **the tower**, which is the oldest part of the church. It was begun in the 12th century by Robert Fitzwalter, Marshal of the Magna Carta Barons, possibly on the site of an earlier church. Until the doors were donated in 1974 there was only a curtain over the entrance – even now chilly drafts can be felt in the winter! Inside on the left, note the rare **timber screening** and the two remarkable **single-plank doors**. Ahead of you is a fine **modern window** (1974) by John Hayward. The four **bells** (17th and 18th century) can be chimed, though not at present change-rung because the tower is not strong enough. To your right is the restored **12th century font**, a copy of which stands in the Nave. The **baptismal ewer** was donated by the children of Sheering Parish in 1904.

Leaving the tower, on your left is a painting **Journey to Easter** (1994) by church member the late Gordon Crossley. Use the magnifying glass under the picture for more information!

Next visit the north aisle. The memorial board records Rectors since 1220. The **stained glass window** in the north wall (by James Powell & Sons of Whitefriars, 1909) is in memory of the Misses Scoones, benefactors who lived in the village. To its right, the window in memory of Mr and Mrs White contains fragments of old stained glass which were salvaged from the large window behind the organ.

Before the organ was screened, a curtain hid the **organ pipes**, where village boys and girls would labour at the organ pump - an activity which only ceased when electricity was installed, about 1947. Now this area is set aside for quiet prayer before and after services. The **St Mary's banner** hanging on the organ screen was found in a cupboard in the vestry by previous churchwarden Anna Lowe in the 1980s, who commissioned restoration by Miss Trundle of Hatfield Heath.

Now go up the step into the **chancel**, passing under the triple Chancel Arch which was added about 1875. The **choir stalls** and the Rector's desk were donated by members of the Scoones family. The **roof** is probably 16th century, and has two bays divided by a heavy collar-beam with curved braces. **The organ** was installed in 1911 and subsequently rebuilt and enlarged by Cedric Arnold of Thaxted (see plaque). After severe smoke damage caused by the fire in 2010, the organ was completely dismantled and rebuilt by Michael Young. The trumpet and trombone pipes added at that time make a wonderful celebratory sound. To the right of the organ, note the **14th century doorway** into the vestry. The **vestry** also served as a priest's chamber, and originally had an upper floor (see the high window overlooking the chancel).

The **14th century stained glass** in the upper part of the East Window is anecdotally "as good as anything in the V&A"! It depicts eight orders of angels and, in the centre, a coronation of the Virgin Mary. The lower lights are a Victorian memorial to the parents of the husband of Elinor Glynn (a notorious early 20th century novelist) who lived at Sheering Hall.

