

Parish Church of St. John the Baptist
Wickhamford



A GUIDE FOR VISITORS

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Before you entered, you were no doubt entranced by the simple exterior of this church, built by our forefathers for Christian worship. A more charming setting could hardly be imagined, alongside the ancient manor house, once a 'grange' (or country house) of the abbots of Evesham. Passing through the church door, one feels an atmosphere of timelessness. This is not accidental. Through careful maintenance and wise restoration, the internal arrangements are much as they were 300 years ago.

Though the Chancel dates from the 13th century, the Nave walls were re-built by the parishioners in Stuart times. An entry in the baptism register for Sept. 20 1640 states: "the first baptized in the new Church." The **Tower** was completed in 1686, and its single bell, cast in a local foundry, was hung at the same time.

As you stand in the **Nave**, look up at the **roof**, and admire the strong oak timbers: The trusses are of 'queen post' construction (i.e. with two supporting posts). Above the chancel arch the roof has a ceiling of moulded panels. This is 15th century work, and formed the 'canopy of honour' over the Rood (representation of Christ on the Cross). In place of the Rood, removed at the Reformation, are the faded remains of the **royal coat-of-arms** of Charles II, painted on rough boards, with the date 1661. The lord of the manor, Sir Samuel Sandys, had been a doughty royalist, and governor of Evesham in the Civil War. This was how he commemorated the coming of the King into his own again.

Looking down now to eye level, you will see the **three-decker pulpit**, to the left of the chancel arch. These were once very common, but were mostly swept away in mid-Victorian times; Wickhamford has one of the few remaining in this part of the country. The minister used to read the service from the middle tier, and mount the pulpit for the sermon; the parish clerk occupied the lowest stall, and led the congregation in saying the psalms and responses. The pulpit is mediaeval. It was re-panelled in the late 17th or 18th century; later still carved figures of saints and cherub heads were applied to the panels. They appear to have a N. European origin and were probably given by a member of the Sandys family. It is traditionally held that several of the beautifully carved panels in the ends of the **box pews** were given by this family. The six nearest to the pulpit on the left are said to be Flemish.

If you now turn round and face west you will see the choir **Gallery**, with its panelled front. The gallery had been taken down in the 1890s, but was restored in 1949 by the late George Lees-Milne, who resided at the **Manor**, and was responsible for many improvements and

benefactions. The figures of saints on the gallery front are interesting. These also appear to have a continental origin. Both are weeping, and the female saint on the right holds a skull.

Before passing through the 17th century oak **gates** into the Chancel, you may like to look at the **memorial tablets** on your right. The Elizabethan one is to Jane Sponer, whose husband was tenant of the Manor when it was owned by the Throckmortons, who bought it from Queen Elizabeth I in 1562. The modern memorial to George and Helen Lees-Milne, with its beautiful lettering, is the work of the sculptor Reynold Stone (1966).

The first thing to notice about the **Chancel** is its freedom from choir stalls. This was usual in small parish churches before the middle of the 19th century, when it became the fashion to put robed choirs in the chancel, in imitation of cathedrals. The **Altar Table**, though not genuine Jacobean, is made of carved pieces of oak of that period. The **Communion rails** date from the 17th century. Archbishop Laud ordered that altars should be placed against the east wall and railed in for greater reverence, and to prevent fouling by dogs. This did not however stop their desecration in later times. Notice that the door on the right of the Chancel has been filled in. This was done by the Rev. T. H. Hunt, who came as Vicar in 1852. He was horrified to notice the men throwing their hats and coats on the Altar as they came in by this door. He also restored the old plain **stone Font** to its proper use, having found it in the Chancel, up-turned and used as a seat. On the left as you enter the Chancel is the carved **oak Font** which was in use when Mr. Hunt came. On the cover is the Sandys griffin. It was another gift to the church from that family. Again you see cherubs' heads and figures of saints. Like those on the pulpit and gallery front, they may have been 'collector's pieces' which the font was specially designed to display.

Much older than the monuments and furniture of the Chancel is the **fresco** of the Madonna and Child on the east wall, which was revealed under a coat of white-wash early in the present century.

What most catches the eye in the Chancel is the magnificent canopied **Sandys monument** on the north side. You will see from the inscriptions that Sir Samuel Sandys the elder and his son and heir Sir Edwyn died within three weeks of each other, in 1626. Sir Samuel, who bought Wickhamford Manor in 1594, was the eldest son of Edwyn Sandys, Archbishop of York, and at one time Bishop of Worcester. Samuel's brother Sir Edwyn, a great Parliamentarian, was Treasurer

of the Virginia Company in the reign of King James I, and it was through his influence that the first representative assembly in America met at Jamestown in 1619. It is possible that among the first colonists were Wickhamford villagers from his brother's estate.

The double tomb in alabaster is one of the finest in the district, which has a number of this period, perhaps the work of the same sculptor. The architectural features are as re-fined as the delicate carving of the figures themselves. The whole monument was carefully restored and re-painted in 1956, thanks to a generous grant from the Pilgrim Trust.

American visitors (and others) will be particularly interested in the floor-slab monument to **Penelope Washington** (within the altar rails). Here is to be seen the prototype of the '**Stars and Stripes**' of the United States of America, the arms of the Washington family (in heraldic language 'two bars and three molets in chief'). The inscription is in Latin, and has to be read with one's back to the east wall. It relates the piety and virtue of this lady, and her generous deeds in Wickhamford. She was the daughter of Colonel Henry Washington, the brave defender of the city of Worcester for King Charles I, and brother-in-arms of that Sir Samuel Sandys who put up the royal arms in the church. When Henry Washington died, his widow, Penelope's mother, married his friend Sir Samuel, and that was how Penelope came with her mother to live at Wickhamford.

Before leaving the church, you may like to see two interesting features in the **Vestry** under the Tower. On the right-hand wall are the panels of the original 14th century pulpit, which were discovered some years ago behind the present panels. On the left is a large **cupboard**. The painted panels once adorned the walls of Ribbesford Manor, near Bewdley. Besides the arms of the Actons of Ribbesford are the arms and heraldic emblems of the royal family of that time. Among the initials to be seen are HR (King Henry VIII) and PE (Prince Edward, afterwards Edward VI). Other panels from the same set are at the Greyfriars, Worcester, in the possession of Mr. and Miss Matley Moore.

You have now finished your tour of the church. Before you go, kneel or sit in one of the pews and join yourself in spirit with past and present worshippers here, in giving glory to God. You can say some words that have sounded out within these walls for hundreds of years:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.