

# Parish Church of St. John the Baptist Wickhamford



## A GUIDE FOR VISITORS

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you entered, no doubt entranced by the simple exterior of this church. Our forefathers for Christian worship. A more charming setting could hardly be found, alongside the ancient manor house, once a 'grange' (or country house) of the manor of Evesham. Passing through the church door, one feels an atmosphere of peace. This is not accidental. Through careful maintenance and wise restoration, the 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 manors in Stuart times. An entry in the baptism register for Sept. 20 1640 states "the church baptized in the new Church". The **Tower** was completed in 1686, and its single bell, from a local foundry, was hung at the same time.

When you stand in the **Nave**, look up at the **roof**, and admire the strong oak timbers. The roof is 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 'ceiling 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** painted on the boards, with the date 1661. The lord of the manor, Sir Samuel Sandys, had been a 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 would 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 panels of saints and cherub heads were applied to the panels. They appear to have a Norman origin and were probably given by a member of the Sandys family. It is generally 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.

When 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 Milne, who resided at the Manor, and was responsible for many improvements and alterations. The figures of saints on the gallery front are interesting. These also appear to be of continental origin. Both are weeping, and the female saint on the right holds a skull.

When 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 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 parish churches before the middle of the 19th century, when it became the fashion to have choir stalls in the chancel, in imitation of cathedral. The **Altar Table**, though not of 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 rails in for greater reverence, and to prevent fouling by dogs. This did not however prevent desecration in later times. Notice that the door on the right of the Chancel has been removed. This was done by the Rev T. H. Hunt, who came as Vicar in 1852. He was horrified to see 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. It was up-turned and used as a seat. On the left as you enter the Chancel is the carved **oak** chest which was in use when Mr. Hunt came. On the cover is the Sandys griffin. It was an ancestral gift to the church from that family. Again you see cherubs' heads and figures of saints. On those on the pulpit and gallery front, they may have been 'collector's pieces' which the donor 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 Parliamentary man 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 other monuments of the period, perhaps the work of the same sculptor. The architectural features are as refined 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, a brave defender of the city of Worcester for King Charles I, and brother-in-arms of that King. 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 at 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, and is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

# The Royal Arms

## Church of St. John the Baptist, Wickhamford

The Stuart Royal Arms above the chancel arch previously believed to be only of local historical significance have recently been revealed as one of the largest and most splendid examples in the country as well as being among the most interesting.

Traces of an older Royal Arms were discovered beneath the present Arms and possibly date back to the time of James I. (above the Scottish Thistle notice an earlier date visible beneath the present one). In all probability these Arms were restored and re-dated in 1661 following the restoration of the Monarchy under Charles II during the previous year. They were then restored a second time in the reign of James II (1685 - 88) the Royal Cypher, I<sup>2</sup>, being that of James II.

Having deteriorated into a very dilapidated and fragile state the Arms were extensively restored a third time to their present condition in 1984 under grants received from several national trusts and local authorities.

On the roof truss behind the Royal Arms, but hidden by them, is late mediaeval painted decoration of exceptional interest. Along the great tie-beam runs a massive Aaron's Rod in black and red which appears to be c. 1500, whilst the queen struts and collar truss have a simple foliage frail in black and white. A mortice discovered in the centre of the tie-beam could once have held the foot of the Rood with the decoration surrounding it.

Unfortunately, although a photographic record was made at the time, there was no way of leaving the mediaeval decoration uncovered once the restoration of the Royal Arms was finished, and so it remains hidden behind them.

The impressive ceiling surrounding the Royal Arms which is made from beautiful quarter sawn oak is thought to date from c. 1500.

The Royal Arms may be illuminated by the time switch at the door.