



St Mary the Virgin,
Black Bourton.
The Story told in pictures.

As a Grade 1 listed building the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Black Bourton, is in the top 3% of important historical buildings in England. Apart from the medieval wall paintings this church also has some notable architectural features like the chancel east windows, chancel priest's door, the service marker (scratch dial) and the nave arcade. The chantry chapel to the Hungerford family and the font are also well worth examining.



The earliest mention of the village is in the Domesday Book, 1086, where “three manors” of Black Bourton are listed, as are two mills. In the Hundred Rolls of 1279 the three manors are still recorded but only one mill. One of the three manors was owned by Oseney Abbey in Oxford and a second by the Hungerford family. The earliest part of the building is the chancel which could have been a

Norman chapel judging by the three lancet east windows and the small Norman priest's door with a Maltese cross in the tympanum. In 1180 this chapel was presented to the Abbey of Oseney by Hugh de Burton and Ralph de Murdac who were probably Norman lords of the manors here. The monks built the nave and probably inscribed the sun dial type “service marker” (above left) on the window stone (far left).



The cylindrical font on a square base with carved feet dates from the time the arcade was built, 1190.

Almost as soon as the chapel became the property of the Abbey of Oseney the 5-bay transitional arcade to the north aisle was built, in about 1190. This remains today as built with chamfered arches and cylindrical pillars topped by scalloped capitals, in two cases, and a quatrefoil design for another. Some changes were made to the north wall of the nave in the 13th century including the building of the Hungerford chapel in which the recumbent figure of Elinor Hungerford, died 1591, lies in a Corinthian tabernacle.



The chancel arch is 13th century leading to the 12th century chancel, the original chapel, beyond. The three lancet east windows are original in wide splays although the heads may have been altered in the 15th or 16th century. The piscina, for washing the chalice, in the east wall, above right, has a trefoil head and carved foliage corbel and probably dates from the 12th century. An aumbry, dry cupboard, is also in the east wall to the left of the altar. The chancel has a flat headed perpendicular period window with deeply cusped lights and a Tudor hood moulding, 1450 - 1550, in the south wall to the west of the priest's door, external view below right. Two windows of the same design and period are in the north chancel wall. The church was reroofed in 1847 and extensively restored in 1866 by E.G.Bruton under the direction of the Diocesan Architect George Edmund Street. Consequently all the roof-supporting corbels, above left, are recarved versions.



St Richard of Chichester 1197-1253.

At one time wall paintings would have covered the walls of medieval churches due to the general illiteracy of the population. Many were destroyed by Order of the Council in 1547 during the Reformation when superstitious images were banned. Others suffered from neglect and more were destroyed by the Victorian restorers who stripped the plaster off church walls back to the stonework.

The paintings which decorate the Early English nave of this church were probably executed between 1250 and 1275 when the Canons of Oseney Abbey owned it. They may have been painted by a Canon or commissioned by them. They show a strong resemblance to work found in the Hugh Psalter which possibly originated in the Diocese of Lincoln.



Angel appearing to St Joseph.

Mainly the common earth pigments, red and yellow ochre, were used for painting, other colours were expensive and rare. The painting is made directly onto prepared dry plaster and the fresco method, painting on wet plaster was not used.



The Adoration of the Magi.

In an age of illiteracy these paintings were the visual aid to explain the stories in the Bible and also the history of revered persons in this age, for example St Richard and St Thomas a Becket.

These paintings have survived by luck and painstaking labour.

They were covered with plaster and limewash during the Reformation and revealed again during the period when

the Victorian restorers were working on the church.

E.G.Bruton the restorer stripped the plaster off the walls in nearby Broadwell church so all paintings there have been lost.

The Vicar of St Mary's in 1827-1873 intended to preserve the paintings when uncovered during restoration but while he was in London for several weeks a curate covered them in whitewash.

They were discovered again in 1932 by Professor E.W.Tristram from Oxford University and he spent a considerable time carefully removing the flakes of whitewash and restoring them to the state you see today.



Martyrdom of St Thomas a Becket.

The sources of information for this guide have been numerous but specifically include the guides found in the church itself and local history books. Some information about medieval wall paintings has been researched from the world wide web. The author acknowledges to work of others in the production of this guide.
Photographed and produced by Derek Cotterill. 2009.