



Architecture of the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Rickmansworth

From the Outside

Approaching St Mary's Church from Rickmansworth town centre, the feature of the church that first strikes the eye is the tower, dating from 1630, faced with knapped flints, dressed with stone, but built internally of brick. The spirelet or 'Hertfordshire spike' is probably as old as the tower.

The lofty flint-faced nave and chancel date from the 1890 rebuilding of the church, which replaced all of the 1826 building except the two brick-built side aisles. The intention was that the new building should harmonise with the tower.

The Way In

Entering the North Porch, notice the St Christopher window, given in 1946, in thanksgiving for the ending of the 1939-45 war. We go through the door into the main part of the Church, past the Library.

Facing us, looking South, is the Font, placed at the West end of the Church during the rebuilding of 1890, to be a symbol of baptism, the means of entry into the Church, the family of Christ.

The Nave and North Choir Aisle

Turning now to our left, we can appreciate the lofty spaciousness of the Nave. At the far East end of the Church is the High Altar, below the East window.

The chapel at the far end of the North Aisle is the Lady Chapel, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. The altar at the far end of the South Aisle is the Resurrection (formerly Requiem) Altar.

Along the walls of the aisles are a series of Stations of the Cross. These are a series of bas-relief panels depicting events following the arrest of Jesus until his being laid in the tomb. The series starts by the Lady Chapel and continues along the North wall of the church to

the West end, then along the South wall back to the Resurrection Altar.

All round the walls and floor of the church and in the tower and churchyard are memorials to members of local families, many of them re-positioned when the church was rebuilt. Among those on the North Aisle wall is one to a one-day-old baby.

The Lady Chapel is used for most weekday Eucharists and Morning and Evening Prayer.

The Nave Platform and Chancel

Immediately to the right of the Lady Chapel is the Pulpit, installed during the 1889-90 rebuilding.

The Chancel steps, to the right of this, were extended in 2001 to form a Nave platform, used at Parish Eucharist services for the consecration and administration of the Sacrament from a portable altar. The altar, which is stored when not in use in the North Choir Aisle, is dedicated as a symbol of united Anglican and Methodist worship in this church.

From this point, the East Window can be fully appreciated. Christ is depicted hanging from the Tree of Life, conquering the serpent of Evil. Below him, from left to right, stand Longinus the Centurion, St Mary Magdalen, St Mary the Virgin, and St John. Along the bottom of the window are the symbols of the Four Evangelists; at the top is a choir of angels.

Moving on into the Chancel, the oak choir stalls date from the 1889-90 rebuilding. In the North Choir Aisle is the Organ Console, and, on the East wall, a memorial to Sir Thomas Fotherley, a Privy Counsellor to Prince Charles, later Charles II, and other members of his family. He purchased the lordship of the Manor of Rickmansworth in 1632, and died in 1649. The monument is by William Wood the Elder (c. 1634-1731) a notable sculptor of the period. It probably dates from 1691-1702.

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In front of us now is the High Altar, used for those Sunday and Holy Day Services when the Nave Altar is not appropriate. The curtain behind the altar conceals the remnant of an elaborate setting removed towards the end of the 1930s.

To the left of the High Altar is the church's most notable monument, a simple tomb chest of stone, with a black slate inscription panel, carved white marble coats-of-arms with animal supporters to each end and a black marble top. Until 1803, this stood in the centre of the chancel but it was then dismantled. The top slab was used as the High Altar top until the early years of the last century when the tomb was restored. It commemorates the Rt Hon Henry Cary, Baron of Lepington and 2nd Earl of Monmouth who died in 1661 in possession of the Manor of the Moore (Moor Park).

In the North and South walls are modern glass windows, incorporating stained glass from the old Rickmansworth High Street Methodist Church. That on the North is the Methodist Youth Fellowship Window, of 1955, depicting the Cross of Christ, a boy carrying the Torch of Life, a girl with the Book of Knowledge, and John Wesley riding his horse. That on the South is the window of the Methodist Women's Fellowship and shows the Nativity, with emblems of the Methodist Church and its Home Missions Division.

The South Choir Aisle contains the pipe organ installed in 1951 by Messrs John Compton as a memorial to those of the parish who served in the 1939-45 war. In 2001, the organ was substantially remodelled and a new great organ added, on the left as we leave the Chancel. The oak Lectern was originally at Peshurst Church in Kent.

South Aisle

We continue past the Resurrection Chapel, used for regular commemoration of the faithful departed. Here is the Book of Remembrance, and further along the South Aisle is the only brass memorial to survive in the church, moved from its original position.

There are three figures: Thomas Day, died 10th July 1613, in the centre; Alice, his first wife, died 10th July 1585, on the left; and Joane, his second wife, died 6th August 1598, on the right.

The War Memorial is at the far end of the South Aisle. The door to the left gives access to the Church Centre, added in 1982 as a joint project with the Rickmansworth Methodist Church. To our right is the Font, and the doors into the base of the Tower. We are now back at our starting point.

The Rickmansworth Rose

Finally, in the church grounds you will find the Rickmansworth Rose. Until the late 18th century, the only roses grown in England were species that flowered just once a year. However, in 1789, the first specimens of a repeat-flowering rose plant from China arrived in England.

This rose, with a soft-pink, semi-double flower, was called the 'Monthly Rose' - it can flower in every month of the year. Sir Joseph Banks, the famous plant collector, and James Lee of the Vineyard Nursery in London, both attempted to cultivate the rose without success. It was in the garden of John Parsons in Rickmansworth that the rose first flowered in England. Presumably the sheltered position and damp micro-climate helped!

John Parsons, the son of a wealthy London brewer, was born in 1722. After the death of his father in 1741, he spent much time in Paris, accompanied by his mother and his two sisters. It may have been there or when she was performing at Covent Garden that he first set eyes on Domitilla Camperini, younger sister of 'La Barberina', one of the most famous 18th Century Ballet dancers, and herself a dancer. At all events, they married, and settled in Rickmansworth in 1784, making their home at 'The Elms', now part of St Joan of Arc R.C. School.

We do not know how Parsons obtained his rose. As a wealthy man, he may have had money invested in the East India Company, which traded with China, or he may have had it from

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Thomas Bates Rous, a director of the Company, who lived at Moor Park. European rose enthusiasts were most impressed by the rose, though it was not showy by modern standards. Henry Andrews, the botanist, thought that it was 'one of the greatest ornaments ever introduced to the country'.

The rose, known as 'Parsons' Pink China' was used extensively in the 19th century for breeding purposes and almost every rose grown today that is not a native species rose owes something to John Parsons' rose.

Domitilla died in 1796 and John followed her two years later. Their remains were placed in a vault beneath the old St Mary's Church and a memorial tablet erected, which is still in the church, though it has clearly been moved during the 19th-century rebuilding of St Mary's from its original site.

Parsons' rose is still cultivated today, under the name of 'Old Blush'. Three specimens of the rose have been obtained and planted in the church garden, two near the tower and one in the cloister behind the wall on which the Parsons memorial has been placed. These may serve as mementoes of John and Domitilla, and to their unknown gardener, to whom no doubt much of the credit for the flowering of the rose is due.

This piece is based on an article by Jane Kilpatrick, which appeared in the Rickmansworth Historical Society Newsletter. Our thanks are due to her and to the Society for permission to make use of their material.