

ST. SWITHUN'S CHURCH EAST GRINSTEAD



A BRIEF TOUR AROUND THE CHURCH

ST. SWITHUN'S CHURCH EAST GRINSTEAD

At The Heart of East Grinstead for Almost a Thousand Years



For over a thousand years a church has stood on the site of St. Swithun's church serving as a centre for Christian Worship and a focal point in the heart of our town.

This hill top position was chosen as a site for the church in the late tenth century.

It was named after one of the most popular saints of that time, St. Swithun (Bishop of Winchester, (852-862).

Swithun was a much loved man who requested that his body be buried outside Winchester Cathedral so that he could remain close to the people. When his remains were buried inside the Cathedral, the story goes that St. Swithun was so upset that it rained for 40 days, hence the myth that if it rains on St. Swithun's Day (15th July) it will rain for 40 days.

The church is open during the daytime. People are welcome to come in for quiet prayer, to enjoy a few moments of peace in the church, or to look around the Church.

Free leaflets tell visitors about the church and its history and about church services

Church History

Soon after the Priory of St. Pancras was established in Lewes; in 1078 Alured who was "pincerna" or cup bearer to Robert the first Count of Moretain, gave the church of East Grinstead and half a hide of land belonging to it at Imberhorne, towards the support of Lewes Priory.

This is the first mention of such a building in East Grinstead. This grant was confirmed by William Count of Moretain, half-brother to William the Conqueror, by a charter circa 1108.

The appointment of incumbents (Priests) was in the gift of the Prior until 1554 when it was given to Anne of Cleves. She had been divorced by Henry VIII in 1540; the right of presentation probably being given to her at the time of the confiscation of ecclesiastic property in 1545. She died in 1557 and the privilege of presentation passed to the Sackville family.

The original church was built in 1078 and it is thought there may have been an earlier wooden building on the site.



The 1078 church was replaced in the 14th century and the early painting shows what the church looked like with its three transepts and large tower.

On the 6th September 1683 the church steeple was struck by lightning and burned down. The tower was rebuilt in 1684 of poor quality materials and on the 12 November in 1785 the Church Tower collapsed as a result of the poor building works in 1684.

An Act of Parliament was passed allowing for the reconstruction of the Church and by 1789 the Church was completed having cost £30,000 (£2.5million at today's value). The architect James Wyatt designed the new church. Stone quarried locally at Selsfield, Blackwell and Wych Cross was used. The tower was designed by J. T. Groves and supervised by the Inwood brothers, after Wyatt died.

It is said that Mr. Speaker Abbott, whose funeral hatchment hangs in the church, wanted the tower to be twenty-five feet higher so that he could see the weather vane from his mansion at Kidbrooke in Forest Row.

St. Swithun's Church stands just behind the eastern end of East Grinstead's High Street. The tower reaches into the sky; the church is a landmark for miles around.



Restoration is an ongoing process – substantial work took place in the 1980's at a cost of £500,000. Recently major restoration has taken place to the tower and clock, pointing and replacing stonework, re-leading the stained glass windows on the south side and replacing the lighting system at a cost of £200,000.

The clock in the church tower dates from 1831.

The hands and fingers on the clock along with the gold tips on the tower pinnacles were recently gilded.



Maintained by a small dedicated team of volunteers, the Churchyard covers 2.5 acres of mature trees and shrubs. The Churchyard has won prizes in the East Grinstead in bloom competition. In the churchyard there are two major features which should be noted; the grave and memorial to John Mason Neale and the memorial stones to the three protestant martyrs who were condemned to death during the reign of Queen Mary on 18th July 1556.

John Mason Neale Memorial

The grave and memorial to John Mason Neale, Warden and Chaplain of Sackville College for 20 years is situated in the southeast corner of the Churchyard.



The East Grinstead Martyrs

Near to the south door of the Church there are memorial stones to the three protestant martyrs who were condemned to death during the reign of Queen Mary on 18th July 1556.

Thomas Dungate, Ann Tree and John Foreman refused to deny their religion and paid the ultimate penalty.

The inscription reads: "Beneath these stones are interred (as is believed) the ashes of Thomas Dungate, Anne Tree, and John Foreman, who were burned to death in East Grinstead High Street in 1556, for adherence to the reformed Faith; even unto death"

We continue to remember them by regularly placing fresh flowers on their memorial.



The Church Mice

Found on the north door you can see our "church mice".

Robert Thompson, born in 1876 dedicated his life to the craft of carving and joinery in English Oak. He taught himself to use the traditional tools and by 1919 he was experimenting with his own ideas for producing furniture based on the English styles of the 17th C The Church Mice carved on the outside of the North door are representative of Robert Thompson's work.

The now famous mouse symbol, found on every item crafted by Robert Thompson's factory has an uncertain history.



The story told by Robert Thompson himself is that one of his craftsmen remarked "We are all as poor as church mice" Whereupon Robert carved a mouse on the church screen he was working on. That particular mouse has never been found but it has continued as a trade mark of quality and dedication to the craftsman ever since.

Entering the Church through the South door from the High Street we walk into the porch where there is a brief history of the church and a list of the Incumbents from 1220 to today.

This list makes interesting reading and is a fascinating reflection on the history of England.



Inside the Church

Entering the Church we can't help feeling small inside its vast space.



St. Cuthman Window

Immediately above the south door, there is a stained-glass window depicting St. Cuthman pushing his elderly mother in a wheelbarrow.

His legend states that he was a shepherd who cared for his paralysed mother.

When they fell on hard times he was forced to beg from door to door. He built a one-wheeled cart so that he could move his mother around with him. They set out east, towards the rising sun. When the cart broke he decided this was a sign from God to stop and build a church.



This occurred at Steyning where he began building a church – now called St. Andrew's where the Cuthman chapel was named in his honour.

Whatever date we ascribe to Cuthman, this church was in existence in 857 A.D. for we know that King Aethelwulf of Wessex was buried there in that year.

Dame Katherine Grey

Along the South wall there is a monument which is a fragment of a much greater one, which had coats of arms for Dame Katherine Grey, who died in 1505, her first husband Sir Thomas Grey, (left) and her second husband, Richard Lewkenor (right). The church tower fell down in 1785, causing great destruction. After 1785, Thomas Wakeham rescued the 2 figures of knights, and the inscription, but he rescued the wrong central figure. This is not Katherine, but a male civilian, made in about 1520.



Wakeham added his own monument with a Latin inscription, in a shape and style at odds with the original brasses.

Katherine Grey was a lady-in-waiting to the Queens of Edward IV and Henry VII. She was the daughter of Thomas, Lord Scales. He was put to death by the Yorkists in 1460.

As Katherine did not inherit the Scales title, she was probably illegitimate.

Marriage to Sir Thomas Grey made Katherine a kinswoman of Elizabeth Woodville, who first married Sir John Grey, and later became Edward IV's Queen.

Katherine served Elizabeth Woodville, then Elizabeth of York. Katherine and her second husband, Richard Lewkenor of Brambletye, were benefactors of the church.

Katherine may have lived a long life, as she was possibly born before 1436. She did not mention any children in her will.

She wished to be depicted in a shroud or winding sheets, between her 2 husbands, according to her will, it is thought this was not done.

(This Katherine Grey is not Lady Jane Grey's younger sister, who was later Lady Katherine Grey with no known connection with this church)

Further along the south aisle wall there are a number of wall tablets.

In particular two tablets commemorate the victims of enemy action in East

Grinstead on 9th July 1943 and 12th July 1944. 235 people were killed when bombs were dropped on East Grinstead during the second World war.

Not all 235 victims are named; the names on the tablets only recognise the regular worshippers of this church.



The Earl's Coronet and Cross next to the Vicar's Vestry and a number of the wall tablets are from the earlier church.

There are four Funereal Hatchments on the walls, One bearing the Nevill (Abervagenny) Arms, with the Motto "ne vil velis" (form no mean wish).

Two with the Cranston and one with the Sackville coat.

The font is made of stone with a wooden lid.

This lid was made in memory of the Reverend Blakiston (D.Y.) who was the Vicar at this church from 1871 to 1908.

The Morgan and Smith Organ was dedicated on April 28th 1937 by the then Vicars brother the Bishop of Lewes (The first choice being indisposed)



The February church magazine in 1937 includes a note that the organ builder could not name a date for completion due to the difficulty in obtaining certain materials and due to work urgently required for armaments.

However, work commenced in the March and completed the following month at a cost of £2,500.

Some of the pipes from the old organ were used in the construction of the new organ.

Above the organ pipes is the bell tower room where the bell ringers ring the bells before Sunday services, Special Celebrations, Civic Services, Anniversaries and weddings.

The bells, the largest peal in the county, were recast in 1982.



Through the generosity of members and friends and to celebrate the centenary of the Sussex County association of change ringers the bells at St. Swithun's were increased to twelve, plus an extra bell to provide a light octave. The new bells were dedicated on the 9th November 1985.

St. Swithun's church has the only ring of twelve bells in the County of West Sussex.

John Mason Neale

On the North wall, the Oxford Movement window shows John Mason Neale and 4 colleagues.

John Mason Neale is the central figure

He was Warden of Sackville College (across the churchyard) from 1846 to 1866.

He wrote many hymns and carols there including 'Good king Wenceslas'.

Neale's Prayer desk is in the Lady Chapel; his crucifix hangs over the High Altar.

He is buried in the Churchyard, close to Sackville College, where he was Warden from 1846-66, arriving aged 28, with his wife and 2 small children (they had 3 more).



He was connected with the Oxford Movement, which sought a revival of "The Beauty of Holiness" in the Church of England. Low Church people were suspicious of John Mason Neale; especially in East Grinstead, with its 3 Protestants Martyrs in Mary Tudor's reign.

Clerestory Windows

The round windows in the south clerestory include some animals; dogs, a cat, and a guinea-pig.

Why a Guinea Pig?



The guinea-pig represents wartime airmen who were badly burned. They were treated at East Grinstead's hospital by Archibald McIndoe, using pioneering surgery. They called themselves 'Guinea Pigs'. There are also dogs and cats requested by the owners of the animals who donated to the installing of the windows during the restoration in the 1980's.

Cast Iron Head stone for Anne Forster

Here lies Anne Forster daughter and Heir to Thomas

Gaynsford Esq. deceased 18th January 1591 leaving behind 2 sons and 5 daughters.



The John Staples Memorial

The memorial to John Staples is one of the tablets recovered from the old church he was the Vicar from 1689 to 1732.

Both sons were lawyers. John the younger was a major benefactor in the rebuilding of the current church

The Lady Chapel

The central figure depicted behind the Chapel of the Nativity Altar (Lady Chapel) is the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Christ Child. Flanking either side are carvings of the Archangel Michael (right) and Archangel Gabriel (left).



To the right of the Altar you can see John Mason Neale's prayer table. Some organ pipes from the predecessor organ can be seen on which the then Incumbent The Revd. Blakiston painted portraits of some of his parishioners. He was the Vicar from 1871 to 1908.

Leaving the Lady Chapel we pass the oak pulpit, dating from 1838 and depicts scenes from the life of Christ including his charge to St. Peter, the Sermon on the Mount, the Good Shepherd and the Women at Samaria. The carving is of excellent quality and a treasure.



The High altar is to the right of the pulpit and is dressed in a coloured frontal according to the Christian season and is the focal point of our worship.

Remember how differently it looked in 1901.

This just to highlight that although a church may be old it is constantly changing to suit the needs of the worshippers and the times in which they live.

The High Altar

The figures on either side of the High Altar are of St. Edmund a 9th Century saint, shown with a tame wolf and St. Swithun (Bishop of Winchester 852-862) with ducks at his feet indicating his popular association with the weather.



The recently purchased modern altar Frontal was purchased thanks to a legacy left by Mrs. Jay Levesley

The Sanctuary mosaic floor is said to be the work of Constance Kent, a girl condemned in 1865 for the murder of her brother.

On her release from prison she moved to Australia where she lived to a

great age.

It was very likely that this mosaic was one of the works carried out by Constance Kent while in prison. She worked mosaics while in prison and it is very likely that those in our sanctuary date from this time. However, 150 years after the gruesome Road Hill House Murder, Constance Kent remains an enigma and the tradition of her connection with the creation of our mosaic at St Swithun's is still difficult to prove.



Above the Altar is a painting of "Christ in Majesty". Christians believe in the Resurrection of Jesus – meaning that after Jesus died God raised him from the dead.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was given to the Church (The people) to enable it to continue its work.

The painting "Christ in Glory" is by Sebastian Comper.

The elaborately carved Rood Screen was designed by Arthur Blomfield (1919) and bears a crucifix by Sir Ninian Comper.

The crucifix is an important symbol of Christ dying to save our sins



The Rood Screen

The Rood Screen is a War Memorial in honour of a local man, Guy Francis Devitt who was killed in World War I.

Second Lieutenant Guy Francis Ormond Devitt of the Rifle Brigade was killed on 30th July 1915.

His name is inscribed upon the Menin Gate memorial at Ypres. (Panels 46-48 and 50)
 The screen was set up in his memory by his parents.
 He was the youngest son of Andrew and Jane Dales Devitt, the family used to live in Herontye House and attended St Swithun's church.
 Before the outbreak of war, Guy worked for a Colonial broker of rubber.
 According to letters sent by his Commanding Officer after Devitt's death and now held by his family, Second Lieutenant Devitt was a highly regarded officer and much loved by his men.



The Lectern

Because it soars upward, the eagle is a symbol of the resurrection or ascension of Christ.
 By extension, the eagle symbolizes baptized Christians, who have symbolically died and risen with Christ.
 In front of the Eagle is a reminder of East Grinstead's past association with the iron industry.
 The front iron tombstones were found in a garden near the church and was placed here

by a parishioner

This tombstone reads "Here lies Anne Barclay sometime wife to Henry Barclay Doctor of Law
 Deceased the 12th May 1570"

This iron was found in a garden near this church and was placed here by the care and at the expense of Mr. W.V.K.Stenning in 1881"
 This iron tombstone was used as a hearth stone in the old Vicarage and found after the fire of 1908.



The Memorial Chapel

The Memorial Chapel commemorates the dead of both World Wars. Memorial to those lost during the First World War and the Memorial to Henry Standen.

The black slate tablet in this Chapel is in memory of Henry Standen.
 Henry was a worshipping member of this church who was badly burned during World War II.



He and other airmen, who were treated by Sir Archibald McIndoe at the Queen Victoria Hospital, formed the Guinea Pig Club and are remembered here and in one of the Clerestory (roof) windows.

The banner of the Royal Canadian Air Force also hangs in the Memorial Chapel.

Leaving the Memorial Chapel takes us back to St. Cuthman pushing his elderly mother in a wheelbarrow and the end of our guide to the church.