

The church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, North Marston

History



The parish church is dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the foundation stones of the church on this site were laid around the 12th century. Pilgrim money enabled the nave roof to be raised and clerestory windows put in. The inner part of the tower dates back to the 15th century: from 2002 to 2004 all of the outer stones were replaced due to crumbling. There are six bells in the tower - tuned to the key of F - and a tenor weight of 13-2-27 from 1925 (with original inscriptions dating from as far back as the 16th century).

The earliest parts of this fine and unusual church were built around 1150, but it owes a great deal of its present glory to its Rector from 1282 to 1314, John Schorne. He was an Augustinian canon revered for his holiness. After his death, pilgrims flocked to his shrine in the chancel of the church because of miracles said to have been worked by him and the healing power of the water in his Holy Well. Pilgrimages to North Marston became the third most popular

in the country and brought huge prosperity: the income to the church, at today's rates, increased from £500 a year to £2.6 million!



The chancel (the altar end of the church) was re-built in the mid-15th century by Dunstable Priory, that had acquired the church in 1320: it was the priory where Schorne had been ordained. The nave (the main body of the church) has been much altered, the north aisle being

added about 1250 and the south aisle in 1320. The east end of the south aisle was rebuilt in 1350 (A) as a chapel to the Virgin Mary, a Lady Chapel. The ornate floral stonework around the capitals (B) and hoods are mystic



A medieval depiction of John Schorne, casting the devil into a boot. From a rood screen panel in St Gregory's Church,

roses: Marian flowers. The porch (C) was also added in 1350. The niche at floor-level in the Lady Chapel (D) was a “boot shrine” for pilgrims suffering with gout seeking to have their condition relieved by inserting their foot into this sacred place. Pilgrims gifts and offerings to the shrine also enabled the nave roof to be raised, the clerestory windows put in, and some of the arches enlarged.

There are signs of medieval wall paintings in various places. The clearest example is part of a floral frieze high on the north wall (E) The small opening high on the north wall of the chancel (F) opens into a priest's room providing, for security, an overview of Schorne's reliquary: this room is known as a watching chamber. Because Schorne's holy well-water was supposed to be an effective cure for gout (pictured in medieval times as the devil being drawn out of a boot) images representing Schorne were

misunderstood by people who assumed he'd captured the devil in a boot, and a legend was born! Schorne is always shown with his trade-mark boot and devil.

During the 15th century the tower was built. It was rendered and painted white as a beacon to pilgrims, visible from miles around. However, in 1478 King Edward IV transferred Schorne's relics to the newly-built St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle hoping to attract pilgrims there. But due to the healing powers of the Holy Well, pilgrims continued to come to North Marston: in fact King Henry VIII visited twice.

When Queen Victoria was left £250,000 by a local landowner, John Camden Neild, she had the chancel restored; a new panel was fitted behind the altar (the reredos)(G) as was the glorious stained glass east window. The royal retreat of Balmoral Castle was paid for with the remainder of the legacy and, on the Queen's instructions, Neild was buried in the chancel . (H)The church



has a number of stained-glass windows including the Neild east window.(G)
 One of the windows is dedicated to Matilda Holden, (J) the wife of local tailor, Henry Holden. She died in 1914 having borne thirteen children. When Henry Holden himself died in 1926 a window was placed in the south aisle (K) commemorating his forty years as a churchwarden. Being a tailor, there are symbols of his trade hidden in the window. The window to the west end of the north aisle (L) has a two-fold commemoration: it celebrates a major refurbishment of the church finalised in 1923, and also the lives of two brothers, Gilbert and Bernard Cheshire, who were both killed in the Great War 1914-18. The church's carved south door (M) was part of the 1923 refurbishment, having been hung two years earlier.

The clock mechanism at the end of the north aisle is from the church clock dating from about 1700, although it is believed this was not the first clock in the church.(N)

In 2014, the church commemorated the 700th anniversary of Schorne's death with a festival of events called "Schorne 700" and placed a commemorative plaque in the floor of the chancel (O) .

(Written by John Spargo)

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| A: Lady Chapel | J: Matilda Holden's window |
| B: Mystic Roses | K: Henry Holden's window |
| C: South Porch | L : The Cheshire window |
| D: Boot shrine | M: South door |
| E: Wall painting | N: 1700 Clock mechanism |
| F: Watching chamber | O: Schorne's Commemorative Plaque |
| G: Reredos | |
| H: Neild's tablet | |

