

ST MARY THE VIRGIN

A HISTORICAL GUIDE

THE FIRST CHURCH IN MORTLAKE

Mortlake is a place of great antiquity. The presence of Stone Age implements in the River Thames has suggested the existence of a prehistoric settlement. Before the Norman Conquest in the 11th Century, Earl Harold owned lands and a fishery on the riverside, and the Archbishops of Canterbury occupied the Manor of Mortlake.

The first recorded church in the village of Mortlake was erected in (or shortly after) 1348 under licence from Edward III. The church stood near the Manor House, on the site of the present brewery, and served the spiritual needs of the villagers for nearly two hundred years. The Manor belonged to the see of Canterbury until 1536, when Archbishop Cranmer transferred it to King Henry VIII in exchange for other lands. During Henry's occupation of the house, the land on which the 14th Century church stood was apparently required for other purposes, and in 1543 it was replaced by a church on the present site.

This 1543 building has undergone many alterations and enlargements during its long history, and of the original Tudor church, only the tower remains.

THE TOWER:

The belfry and the cupola are a distinctive feature of the tower which appears as a landmark in many historic prints and pictures of the Thames bank.

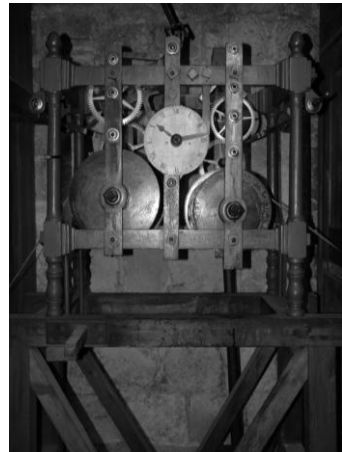


View of Mortlake from the River Thames c 1770

It is believed the tower was constructed using stone from the first church, supplemented with other stone and brickwork to the upper tiers and staircase. The fourth tier was given its current form in 1796, when the belfry was refaced in stock brick with a plain parapet.

The cupola, on the top of the tower, is thought to be original, though it would have been repaired many times over the centuries. The weathercock on top dates from 1678. Inside the cupola is a bell on which the hours are struck. It bears the date 1712, and was presumably installed with the first tower clock. The present clock was made by John Moore & Son of Clerkenwell, in 1838.

Major works to the tower were completed in 2010. These works included the rebuilding of the north-west buttress, repairs to the roof and cupola, a new boiler system and the installation of a new spiral staircase, which now allows easy access to the roof, belfry, clock chamber and ringing chamber. The original stairs had been removed in 1850, when heating was first installed in the church.



The present clock which is still wound by hand every 7 days

The Bells

The tower contains a ring of eight bells, six of which were cast by Philip Wightman of Clerkenwell, in 1694/5, and replaced three much older bells. Two trebles, to make up the eight, were added in 1746, cast by Thomas Lester at what is now the Whitechapel Foundry. Two of the bells were recast in 1751 and 1784 but, apart from being re-hung at various times, remain unaltered since the latter date, and are among the very few eight bell rings to survive intact from the 18th Century. They have a remarkably good tone for their age. The bells vary in weight from about 4 cwt for the treble to 14½ cwt for the tenor.

THE VESTRY HOUSE & NORTH AISLE:

The brick built extension on the north side of the building was the Vestry House. Thought to have been completed in 1670, it effectively provided a North Aisle to the church. Alterations were made in 1816 to extend the North Aisle westwards to its present position.

In 1979-80 extensive re-ordering of the interior was undertaken, and the North Aisle was redeveloped to provide meeting rooms, a kitchen and choir vestry. At the same time the existing parish office and clergy vestry were added as extensions to the original buildings.

THE NAVE & SOUTH AISLE:

The first major alteration to the original Tudor Nave was completed in 1725 when the first South Aisle was added to increase the capacity of the church. As the local population continued to grow, it became necessary to expand the size of the church further, and in 1840 the Nave, side aisles and Chancel were extended in the in the Regency style by Samuel Beachcroft.

The existing Nave and South Aisle were completely reconstructed in 1905/6 by Sir Arthur Blomfield in the early English style, which gives the building it's simple, austere yet noble quality.



The church with the Beachcroft Nave. Note the ivy to the tower which first appeared around 1860 and was not removed until 1930



View of the Nave and North Aisle in 1978 before major alterations were carried out. Note the Lady Chapel to the side of the picture which was erected in 1936

In 1979-80 moveable oak pews were installed with a Nave altar, to create greater flexibility within the building. Memorials were imaginatively re-sited in their present position.

The Memorials

On the north wall are memorials to several prominent parishioners: Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, Prime Minister of England 1801 – 1804, and other members of the Sidmouth family, and Sir Brooke Watson, Lord Mayor of London in 1796. Although she is buried in Kew, there is a memorial to Dorothy Lady Capel, dowager Baroness of Tewkesbury, a great early benefactor of the Mortlake charity school for boys. Addington Court and Capel Court, parts of the housing development on the site of the old Church School, commemorate these two ancient families. A small brass near the north doors commemorates Edward Myles, servant to Prince Henry and Prince Charles,

later King Charles I. Above the West door, is a mosaic depicting the Nativity, given in memory of James Wigan and his wife, benefactors of the church.



The Coventry Memorial

Perhaps the most important memorial in the church is the one located on the east wall of the south aisle. In memory of the Hon. Francis Coventry (1612-1700), it was sculpted by William Kidwell, the leading English sculptor of his time.

A more recent memorial, located by the side of the south porch door, commemorates the tragic loss of Wangle III and its crew of Mortlake Sea Scouts in the English Channel in 1950.

(Full descriptions of all the memorials in the church appear in the 1986 Catalogue which is available on request)

The 15th Century font is the only surviving relic from the old church. It was the gift of Cardinal Thomas Bourchier, Archbishop of Canterbury 1454 – 1486. A full description of its heraldic devices and its history appear on the nearby pillar.

THE CHANCEL:

Built in 1885, the Chancel was panelled in 1928 by Mrs H Minton. The devices in the panels from left to right represent the Province of Canterbury; the Diocese of Southwark; St Mary the Virgin; Worcester Cathedral, patrons of the living; the family arms of John Dee (see below); the family of the Revd E. H. Tupper, then Vicar of the parish.

Two hatchments in the chancel commemorate Mrs Elizabeth Taylor, Lady of the Manor of East Sheen and West Hall, who died in 1826 and Frederick Reeves, of the East India Company (1763 – 1842). Two further hatchments appear on the north wall, commemorating Baron George Best KCE, FRS (1756-1823) and Sir Frances Molyneux Ommaney, MP for Barnstaple and churchwarden of Mortlake.

The Chancel stonework was extensively cleaned and restored in early 2006.

DR JOHN DEE:



John Dee was one of the most learned scholars of the Elizabethan age and was noted for his interest in alchemy and astrology. Queen Elizabeth I came to Mortlake to consult him on many occasions, travelling by royal barge or on horseback from Richmond Palace. His house stood on the riverside facing the church. Born in 1527, he died in 1608 and is said to be buried in the Chancel of this church.

(Revised by Terry Roberts 2010)

Further Reading:

GOING TO THE PARISH by Leslie Freeman, on sale in the church