

ST MARY'S CHURCH, ILMINSTER – STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE  
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The church at Ilminster, rising high above Silver Street, is the most distinctive and visible feature of the Town – cruciform, substantially Perpendicular, made largely of Ham and Moolham stone, with embattled walls and a fine Somerset crocketed pierced-stonework Crossing Tower. The Crossing is also the focal point internally, its four arches carved with blind tracery on the under-face (another Somerset characteristic) rising to a beautiful fan vault. The other most notable (and probably the latest) Medieval feature of the Church is the Wadham Chapel in the North Transept, the extraordinary 'glasshouse' chantry chapel built for the soul of Sir William Wadham (d. 1452). The Nave and Clerestory were extensively rebuilt in the 1820s, but the impact of this is mitigated on the outside by the original fenestration of the Aisles. The Chancel, largely original externally, was restored in the 1880s as a memorial to the Vaughan-Lee family; while the Lady Chapel in the South Transept was re-floored and re-furnished during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, losing much of its patina.

The NAVE (including the present 'Narthex', discussed further below) is the product of a radical transformation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, partially modified in the early 20<sup>th</sup>. In 1824–25, in order to create three new galleries on the west, north and south sides of the church, the whole interior west of the Crossing was taken down and rebuilt, to designs by William Burges of Exeter (a less inspired architect than his later namesake). Presumably with a view to improving the galleries' sight lines, the five original bays in the Nave were replaced by three wide bays, formed with two pillars a side instead of four. The re-used pillars were raised on plinths to the height of the pews, and the clerestory above was also rebuilt higher, with three shallow windows corresponding to the widened arches below. The original five-bay rhythm is still revealed in the aisle windows. In 1902 the Galleries were removed, and the West Gallery rebuilt (as at present), but the structural changes to the Nave and Clerestory are irreversible. The glazed screen in the Nave, creating a separate 'Narthex' at the west end, dates from 1978.

Since the 1820s the church has undergone other less radical alterations, notably in the 1880s (by J. D. Sedding), 1902 (C. F. Ponting of Marlborough), 1912 (F. Bligh Bond of Glastonbury) and 1934 (Carøe and Passmore).

The CHANCEL was restored and refurnished in 1881–82 at the expense of Vaughan Hanning Vaughan-Lee of Dillington (1836–1882), by J. D. Sedding (the Diocesan architect) – with coloured marble paving, carved oak roof (copying the original?) and light oak pews (choir stalls). The pews are carved with Vaughan-Lee's monogram and the date 1882, the year of his early death, so this act of patronage became his unofficial memorial. (Evidently the two front pews on each side were made to accommodate the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century back benches and two free-standing clergy desks, the latter extant by 1865.) The altar (modern) is dressed with an exceptional satin-stich altar frontal by Vaughan-Lee's widow Clara (d. 1911) and her three elder daughters, inscribed and dated 1885 in the embroidery (in outstanding condition as it is usually covered by a modern cloth). She and her husband are formally commemorated in the freestone reredos of 1912 by Bligh Bond, who also completed the roof left unfinished by Sedding. The reredos, originally white, was only coloured in 1954. The East Window above, by Burlisson & Grylls, c. 1888, completes this late Victorian scheme.

In 1889 Sedding lowered and re-paved the floor of the NAVE and CROSSING, in a project to install a new heating system; with marble paving (more modest than the Chancel floor) and iron grilles (both reminiscent of his contemporary Holy Trinity Sloane Square), and with hexagonal tiles along both aisles re-used from the previous floor. Sedding introduced the present Nave pews, and he re-used the panelled fronts of old pews (made in 1765) to form a dado along the north and south sides of the church. The North and South Galleries survived until 1902 when Ponting (who deplored Burges's work) removed them and replaced the West Gallery with the present, shallower version. (The Gallery is now furnished with 'Sedding' seats, probably from the Nave which has been thinned at the east end and in the 'Narthex' area.) The roofs of the Nave and

Aisles, which Burges had plastered (white, picked out in blue, with 'huge gilt bosses') are now each treated differently: the South Aisle with oak panelling (1912); the Nave with a 15<sup>th</sup>-century-revival Somerset-style roof by Carøe & Passmore (1934); and the North Aisle with plain beams, probably as revealed by stripping the plaster. The sensational Crossing, which unites the four arms of the church, is largely in its original form (apart from the carved wood roundel at the apex, with 'IHS' (JESus) monogram, presumably 19<sup>th</sup>-century).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the removal of the galleries, stained glass showing episodes in the life of Christ was introduced to the windows of the north and south aisles; one window at the west end of the North Aisle, originally intended for *Christ Sustaining the Multitude*, remains clear.

The NARTHEX (so-called) bears the hallmarks of the repeated remodelling of the West Gallery and its access stairs. In 1934 the area south of the door was screened off (east-to-west) to serve as the choir vestry, and the small door inserted in the south corner. This screen was removed in 1978, when a full-length (north-south) glazed and arched screen was inserted between the pillars of the Gallery, defining this space as a 'Narthex' separate from the body of the church. Latterly this space has been filled up with miscellaneous modern furnishings in an *ad hoc* manner. The outer West Doors, made in 1956 from redundant seats (of 1902) under the Central Tower, lead on to utilitarian metal-framed glazed inner doors. The Narthex leads into the Nave through engraved glass doors by Tracey Sheppard, 2000.

The LADY CHAPEL (South Transept), of a piece with the original structure, houses the handsome Elizabethan wall monument to Humphrey Walrond (d. 1582) and a Gothic piscina. In 1912 this space was adapted by Bligh Bond as 'a side chapel for daily use', with oak block floor and a carved oak altar table (commemorating Henry Shepherd and his family); separated from the South Aisle by the present gothic screen, c. 1913. The War Memorial tablet is also located here. The benches date from 1954. John Reyntiens' good stained-glass window (2007) is in keeping with this modern space, which has lost any patina of age.

The WADHAM CHAPEL (also 'St Katherine's Chapel') in the North Transept is the most glorious and potentially the most numinous part of the Church. It was presumably built soon after Sir William Wadham's death in 1452, to house the large chest tomb to Sir William and his mother, carved with figures in ogee niches and surmounted by a Purbeck marble slab inset with two engraved brass figures. The second monument, scarcely less impressive, commemorates the founders of Wadham College, Nicholas (d. 1609) and Dorothy Wadham (d. 1618) – another tomb chest with brass figures surmounted by a strapwork tablet in architectural surround. The late 17<sup>th</sup>-century turned screen encloses the Chapel but has itself been altered. In 1889 it was set back 2 foot (northwards), so cramping the space around the main tomb. The walls are now very coarsely pointed, but were almost certainly plastered originally. The leaded panes, slightly and variously tinted, cast a shimmering light throughout, which was unadulterated for four hundred years until the installation of the stained-glass window by Christopher Webb in 1964.

A made-up screen with folding doors (one door old) stands between the North Aisle and the North Transept, muddling the view of the screened Wadham Chapel. It was probably erected in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps in connection with Ponting's proposal in 1902 to use the Wadham Chapel as a vestry (for the choir?).

## FITTINGS AND FURNISHINGS

FOUR BRASS CHANDELIERS (two single-tier and two double-tier), cast by Thomas Bayley in 1762 by bequest of William Raw, now dispersed between the Chancel, Wadham Chapel and Lady Chapel. Originally, they were made as two chandeliers, each of three tiers, and probably hung in the Nave. Probably converted to four (as now) c. 1802. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century photographs show the two-tier chandeliers in the Nave and Lady Chapel (single-tier chandeliers not in photos). The present arrangement perhaps adopted in 1934.

ORGAN introduced by Sedding in 1889, at that time between the Crossing and the North Transept, where the space was increased by moving the turned screen of the Wadham Chapel two foot closer to the Wadham Tomb. Moved up to the West Gallery in 1934, subsequently repaired and modified at various times. It was placed centrally in the gallery until the 1970s; probably moved to its present position, off-centre to the south, when last restored in 1980. (The previous organ, brought from St Mary Redcliffe, was erected in Burges's West Gallery in 1825 and removed in 1889.)

FONT medieval, possibly older than the church. Stood at the south-west corner of the South Aisle in 1825. Moved later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, probably to the Nave, then back to the west end of the South Aisle in 1889 (to make way for Sedding's heating and re-paving). In 1902 Ponting moved it back to the west end of the Nave. Moved to its present position (the east end of the Nave on the south side) in 1978. *Apparently, the builders in charge of the last move strongly advised against ever moving it again.*

PULPIT 17<sup>th</sup>-century, much altered, perhaps initially in 1865 (when a vestry meeting was called 'to hear proposals for alterations to Pulpit, Reading and Clerks' Desks'): was the tapered plinth repaired or replaced at that point? In 1889 it was moved from the south side of the Nave to its present position on the north side; the present steps presumably date from that move. Other alterations are visible from inside.

TWO OAK CHESTS, one now in the Wadham Chapel and one in the South Transept. The former 17<sup>th</sup>-century (probably the 'One Chest with 3 Lockes' inventoried in 1633, the latter probably early 18<sup>th</sup>-century (first inventoried in 1735).

HELMS hanging in the Wadham Chapel (two) and Lady Chapel (two), possibly late 16th-century. An 1831 engraving of the Jacobean Wadham tomb shows one of the latter in situ as now. Those in the Lady Chapel (or 'Coombes Chapel') are said to bear the crest of the Hilliards of Sea, a manor that passed to the Combe (or Coombe) family. [*Probably more is known about these than so far established for this report.*]

ROYAL ARMS of George IV, 1825 (presumably marking the rebuilding of the Nave for the galleries; perhaps this was marked by a Royal visit?).

LADY CHAPEL ALTAR, commemorating Henry Shepherd and his family, made in (or just after) 1912.

BRASS LECTERN, late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, possibly bought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as 'antique'.

OAK ARMCHAIR in the Chancel, 19<sup>th</sup>-century perhaps with some old parts. Given in 1938 in memory of William Alfred Hutchings, churchwarden, by his children

BANNERS, badly faded [*origins not yet established for this report*]

TWO BRASS CANDLE STICKS (floor-standing), either side of the altar [*need research*]

Much low-grade furniture around the rest of the church and some redundant items currently stored in the Gallery. All needs checking off against the inventory to confirm date of acquisition and which were gifts.