

GREAT AMWELL CHURCH

A HISTORY OF THE BUILDING THROUGH THE CENTURIES

BY
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This article attempts to describe and explain the changes to the main structure of Great Amwell Church over the last 900 years or so. Reference being made to the historical context in which the significant changes occurred. The detailed alterations to the interior of the church during the Victorian renovations will be left to a later article, in order to do them full justice. It is hoped that an explanation of the changes which involved features being gained as well as lost will give an insight into how the church in its present form has come about.



The photograph was taken on the 1st October 2016 and shows the south side of the church as seen from a footpath in the churchyard. It gives a good impression of this delightful small church nestled among trees on the valley side above the equally picturesque Amwell Pool.

The oldest visible fabric in the current building dates the church to the C11th. However, it is likely that today's building replaced an earlier wooden one of Saxon origins. It is also probable that much earlier places of worship occupied this site or were close to it. Such pre-Christian worship is likely to have been connected to gods associated with the springs at Amwell at the base of the valley side directly below the church. These springs were comprised of four main springs and several minor seepages of water at the surface from which emanated several millions of gallons of fresh uncontaminated water a day. These springs like so many others often became places of worship and were later adopted by the Romans after their invasion of England. This may explain why the Vestry minutes of 1878 relate that "A considerable quantity of Roman tiles were found in the north wall of the chancel". Many of the tiles are now hidden from view behind the organ. At least a Roman building was either on the site or nearby and may have been a place of worship to the spring god, by Britons and Romans alike, thankful for the health bestowing qualities of the water from underground.

Although Christian worship survived at St Albans after the Romans departed in the early 400s AD until St Augustine arrived in the country in 596 AD it is unlikely that a Christian church survived at Great Amwell. According to the Rev Hassell vicar at Amwell 1600-1657 writing in his early years at Amwell, the St John the Baptist Church at Great Amwell had been previously dedicated to St Augustine. The key piece of evidence for this comes from Rev Hassell's tithing book. In which he wrote;

"This church of Amwell (as old Gehesey hath told me) was dedicated to St Austen [St Augustine] whose image he remembers fixed in the chancel by the east windhoe, the memorial of that place where he stood remayneth still visible; but no extraordinary offering to it at any time." [\[see appendix\]](#)

The dedication to St Augustine tends to be suggestive of quite an early date for the establishment of a Christian church on the site. However, exactly when the wooden Saxon church on the site was built will probably never be known precisely although the parishes links with Hertford might suggest a date after the founding of Hertford as a significant town in 912 and 913.

Following the Norman conquest of 1066, the church was given to Ralph De Limesi a valued supporter of William I. Ralph a very rich man received some 40 estates in England after the conquest. The church building at that time was most likely a wooden Saxon church, perhaps standing on the site of the current church. There has grown up a tendency for writers to assume that the Saxon church at Amwell stood on the site of the current chancel. However, it is worth noting that where it has been possible to carry out an archaeology survey under a later church it has sometimes been found that the original Saxon church was below the nave. Perhaps in those cases the original church remained in use until the new chancel was brought into use. The redundant church then demolished and the new nave built over the top. It is not known what occurred when Amwell church was rebuilt by Ralph De Limesi.

The first written record of a church at Amwell can be found in the Domesday Book of 1086. In which a priest is mentioned implying the presence of a church, as part of the holdings of Ralph De Limesi in Amwell. The question then arises as to when the Norman chancel and the nave were built. The existing fabric today of both parts of the early church include original materials which are formed of cemented chalk and rubble with stone dressings at corners and apertures. The nature of this fabric suggests that they were built in the late C11th or into the C12th. The chancel contains a small round headed Romanesque window in the north wall near the organ. It is splayed on both the interior and exterior of the wall. A style that came into use just after 1066 and went out of favour at the end of the 1100s. The rounded [apsidal end] of the chancel is also characteristic of that period, a form only found surviving in two other Hertfordshire churches at Bengoe and Great Wymondley. Although the nave does not openly display features of the C11th two blocked-up Norman style windows, thought to resemble the one still extant in the chancel, were found buried in the north wall of the nave. This discovery was made by Mr Cheffin and Mr Tuck in 1851 while placing a flint facing onto the north wall. One window being located behind the pulpit and one near the gallery that then existed at the west end of the nave. It is reasonable to assume that both the nave and the chancel once had matching pairs of such early windows on both the north and south sides. In, addition, some corner stones in the south west corner of the nave are a close match to similar ones known to date to the end of the C11th in the remains of the church of the abandoned village of Great Snarehill in Norfolk.

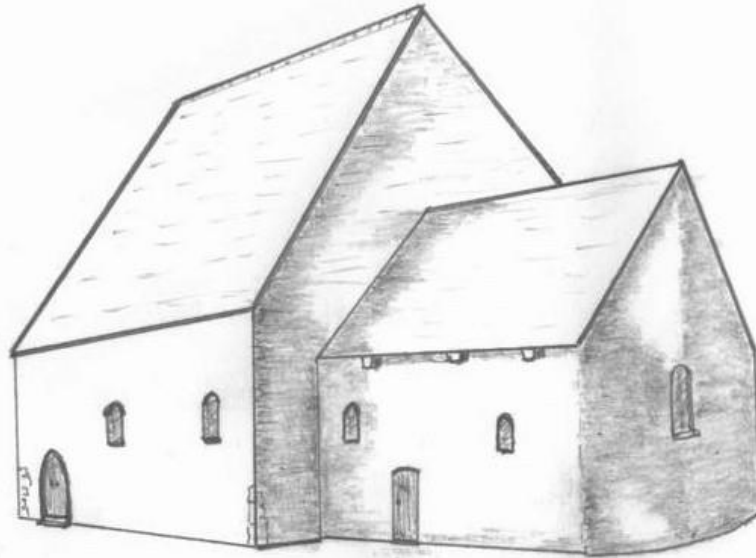


EXISTING C11th CHANCEL WINDOW

These two pictures show the interior and exterior views of the Romanesque type window still surviving in the north wall of the chancel. A similar window was found buried in the opposite side of the chancel wall as well as another at the west end of the south wall during renovation works in the C19th.



Great Amwell Church about 1100 AD



The above sketch gives an impression of how the church at Amwell, as built by Ralph De Limesi, might have looked on completion. The large door shown in the nave south wall, on the sketch above, was later to acquire a timber built, slate roofed porch dated to the C15th. Both the nave and chancel doors shown on the sketch no longer exist.

Ralph De Limesi was to give the church at Amwell along with its tithes to the Benedictine Priory of St Mary at Hertford which he himself had founded as a cell of St Albans Abbey. Ralph became the first Prior of the newly formed foundation and remained so until his death, which is recorded as after 1093. The Priors of Hertford priory then became the Rectors of Great Amwell and a Vicarious [substitute] was appointed by the prior to run the church and parish at Amwell. It seems very likely that Ralph would have wanted to hand over a completed church including both chancel and nave to the Priory.

The architectural style of the church and the details of Ralph's life tend to suggest that both the chancel and the nave at Amwell were built between 1066 and c1090. This would imply that the priest mentioned in the Domesday book was preaching in the newly built Norman church at Amwell in 1086, which may have been fully completed by that time. However, the lack of written contemporary evidence means that it remains today a matter of interpretation of the known evidence which remains to us all these centuries later. It might be reasonable to assume that the Priory at Hertford would not have had the funds to make much investment in the small church at Amwell. This is perhaps supported by the knowledge that Ralph De Limesi's descendants continued to financially support the small priory at Hertford well into the C12th. One imagines that the church at Amwell would have been seen as a source of income from the tithes and received money for basic maintenance only, for many years to come. *Amwell church was to remain with the Priory until it was granted to Anthony Denny on the 9th February 1538. This grant seems to have arisen due to significant financial problems at the priory.*

One early change to the church was the creation of two squints or hagioscopes either side of the chancel arch. The arch itself is Romanesque in style and dates from the time the chancel and nave were first built. The squints are round headed openings in the wall slanting in towards the altar which allowed people in the nave to catch a glimpse of the altar when sitting on either side of the nave. The incentive to form the squints arose from the doctrine of Transubstantiation which emphasised the importance of the altar in the Eucharist service which was affirmed by the fourth Lateran Council in Rome in 1215. This means that it is reasonable to date the Hagioscopes to the C13th. In the Victoria County History of Hertfordshire, published in 1912 edited by William Page, it is mentioned that the hagioscopes had been recently enlarged, but no actual date for this enlargement was mentioned.

One notable change in the C14th was the creation of a large window in the centre of the south wall of the nave. Some have suggested that it might have been the first steps towards creating an arch into an intended south aisle for the nave. If that were true the aisle was never built although many churches did receive such an addition in the C14th. Moving on to the C15th, a door with a wooden frame was created in the north wall of the chancel, the chancel roof was replaced, a porch on the main door to the nave was built and the church acquired a west tower. The considerable work involved would have required a considerable sum of money, which raises an interesting question as to where such an excess of money could have come from. The Manor of Amwell had passed into the hands of the Abbott of Westminster in 1270 and the church remained with the Priory at Hertford. Neither seems likely to have been spending such sums of money on a relatively poor parish.



At the western end of the north wall of the chancel is an unusual low door dated to the C15th. Doorway is sandwiched today between the organ and the corner of the north and west walls of the chancel. The door surround is made of oak which is very unusual for a door on an external wall of a church at that time. It suggests that sometime in the 1400s a door was cut in the chancel wall which led to an extension no longer remembered nor recorded. Some have suggested that it may have been a vestry. Today of course it does lead to a much more modern vestry. However, the doorway is inconveniently low as it was built to the original floor level of the chancel which was later to be raised in the 1850s.

When the chancel roof was replaced in 1856 two of the three tie beams and king post structures they supported were removed. The one remaining dates from the C15th century and suggests that along with all the other work in that century the chancel roof was replaced as well. Rev. Harvey in his book *Great Amwell Past and present of 1896* mentions that the remaining tie beam is of solid oak and an entire trunk of a tree roughly cut to fit the wall plates. All three went outside the building and their ends could be seen under the eaves of the chancel. He mentions that one of the tie beams was visible down in Amwell Marsh, in use as a post. The Rev Harvey was unaware of the fate of the other oak tie beam.



A rather attractive C15th addition to the church was the erection of a wooden porch with tiled roof for the traditional main entrance to the nave through large doors at the western end of the south wall. The porch was described in the late C18th as not being a substantial structure but it had survived for nearly four centuries. The first written mention of a porch is dated October 1626 but is thought to be C15th in date. Visually it appears to have been like the porch still existing at St James' church in Stanstead Abbots. Amwell porch was removed in 1799 and the doorway then bricked up. The position of the door was to be disguised when flints were applied to the south wall of the nave in 1851. Even today it is possible, despite the flint facing, to just make out the outline of the doorway in the south wall of the nave. Once the doorway was no longer in use the main entrance to the church became the west doorway in the tower. It is worthy of note that the historic changes to the chancel came under the control of the priest/vicar and the churchwardens oversaw changes to the nave. This may explain to some extent why the chancel and nave seem to be somewhat different today despite being built about the same time.

The tower of Amwell church was built between 1420-1430 and stands at the west end of the church. It was built with three stages and an embattled parapet at the top. The octagonal, timber framed and tiled spire that exists today is a modern replacement. Access to the top is via a narrow spiral staircase in the south west corner of the tower. At the time the tower was built it was thought important for parish churches to have a tower and bell or bells to call parishioners to services. The belfry at Amwell is located at the top of the tower with sizeable two light wooden louvered openings on each of the four faces.



This 1977 wintry scene of the tower was taken from the west path leading to the church.

Unlike today the bells were rung from a small room just below the belfry. It still exists today as a rather dark and low-ceilinged room through which the bell ropes from below pass through up to the belfry. The greater part of the tower was undivided and was open to the nave through a rather architecturally impressive arch. The construction of the tower arch must have required the removal of a considerable part of the original west end wall of the nave. This early C15th feature is perhaps the most striking architectural feature of the church today even if a ringing floor has been inserted into the lower section of the tower. The new ringing floor was placed at a height that would help show off the C15th large window incorporated into the tower's west wall. The west window is of three cinque foiled lights under a four-centred arch; the mullions are of modern stonework. Below this window is the original C15th oak door which underwent restoration in 1881. This involved the removing of several layers of paint and renovation of the wooden door and metal door fittings. This work was made possible by the generosity of one of the churchwardens Lewis Payne esq.



A 1920s view shows the tower arch. The lower part of the tower is covered by a glass sloping roof, separating the lobby from the tall open space above.



This photograph was taken on the 22nd of July 2009 and shows the C15th west door and its contemporary ornamental limestone surround



This photograph of the bells in Great Amwell Church belfry was taken on the 20th April 2010. It is of interest as it shows the nature of the louvered windows and the finish of the internal walls as well as the bells. The earliest date for a list of bells is 1552, when three bells and Sanctus bell were recorded. In 1910 there were still three bells and they were usefully listed as follows;

1. A treble unmarked
2. A bell recast By R. Oldfield inscribed
"Praise the Lord 1612"
3. Tenor Bell
[Elizabeth I shilling set into it]

Plus, a small Sanctus bell described elsewhere as: -

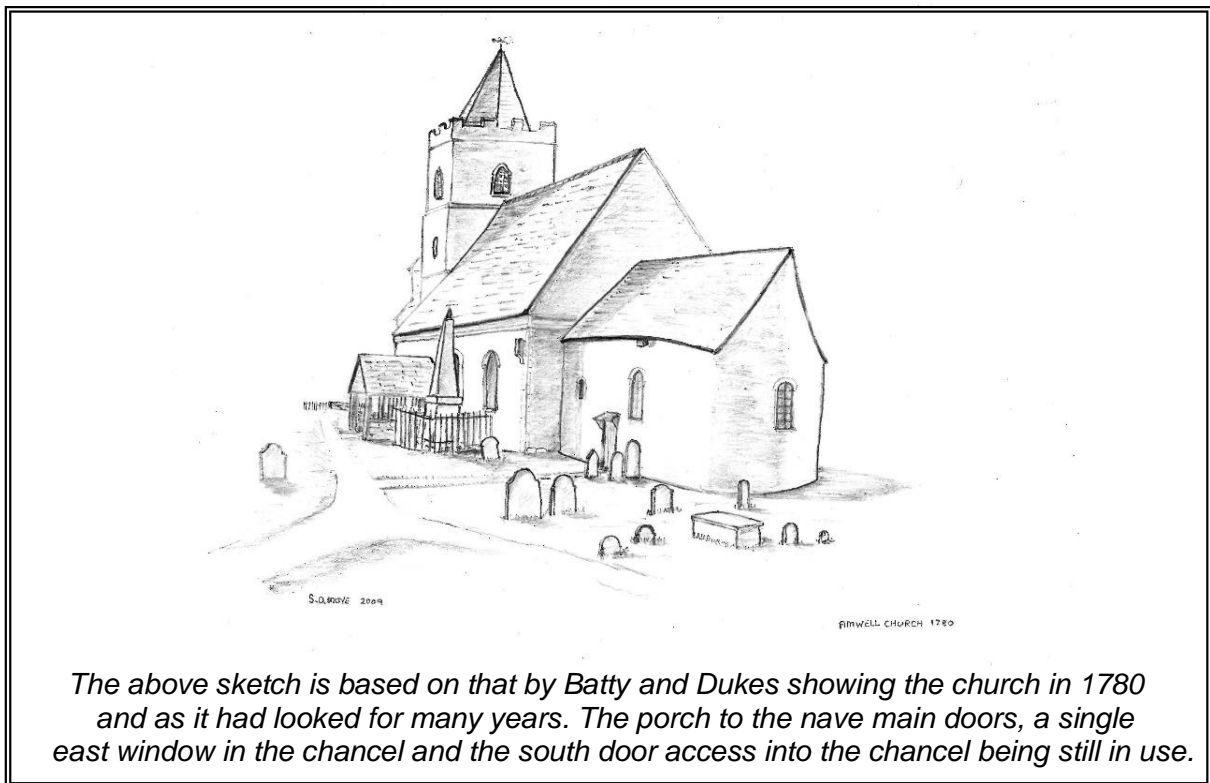
Olde Sanctus bell or [Lytle Bell] is of 1347 by L. H. Chambers Bell Founder. These are quite rare only six bells from this founder have been identified.

NOTES

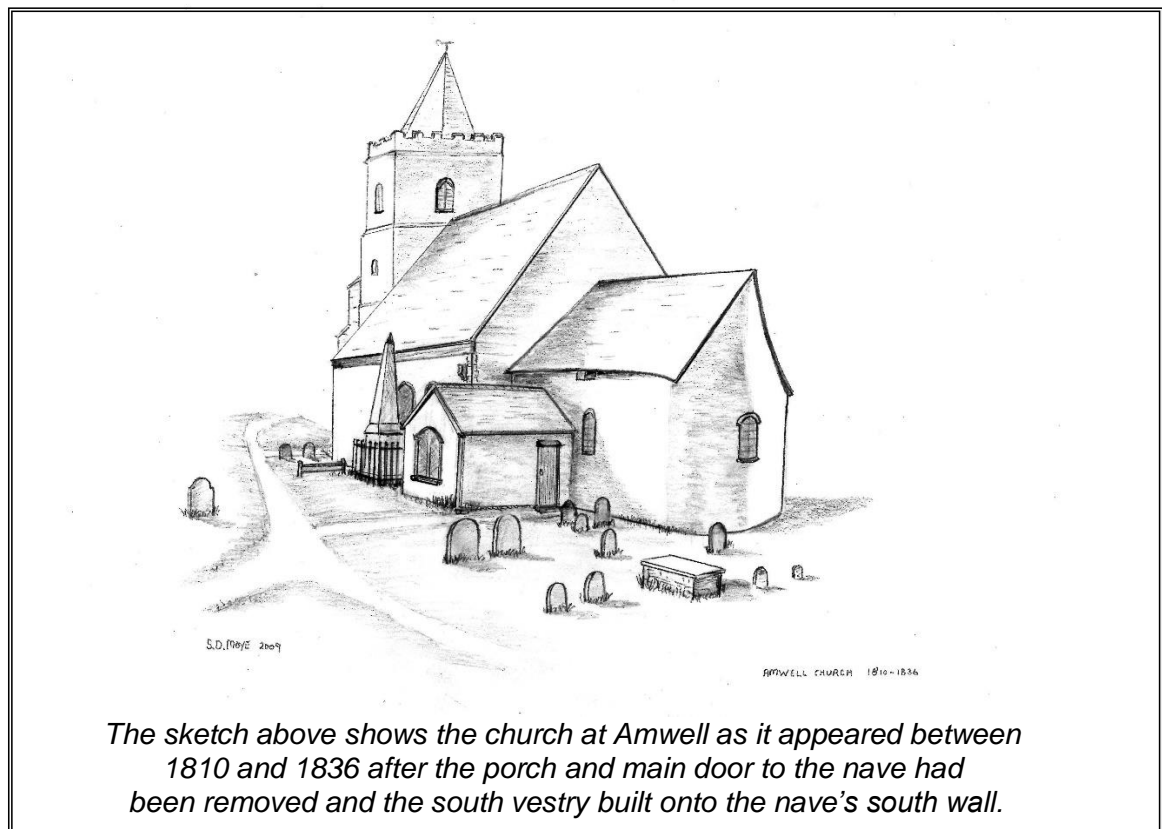
The small Sanctus bell may have been in the church for much longer which might suggest a roof top bell and even a bellcote may have existed before the tower was built.

Elizabeth, I reigned from 1558 to 1603 so a replacement bell 3 had been purchased after 1558. The recast Bell, no.2 mentioned in 1910, is thought to be one of three bells in the church in 1552. The Sanctus bell is thought to always have been rung from the base of the tower by the use of a long bell rope, a feature still in place and functioning today.

Some have suggested that the Tower and the porch may have been constructed at the same time. What is certain is that a great deal of new building and renovation took place in the 1400s. There seems to have been little further change made to the main structure of the church until the end of the 1700s.



In 1799 the porch on the south wall of the nave and the doorway associated were removed. The doorway dating back to the C11th was blocked up with bricks. In 1810 a vestry was built on the north side of the church and almost abutted up against the east wall of the nave. Access from this new vestry used the existing door in the south chancel wall to give access to the interior of the church.



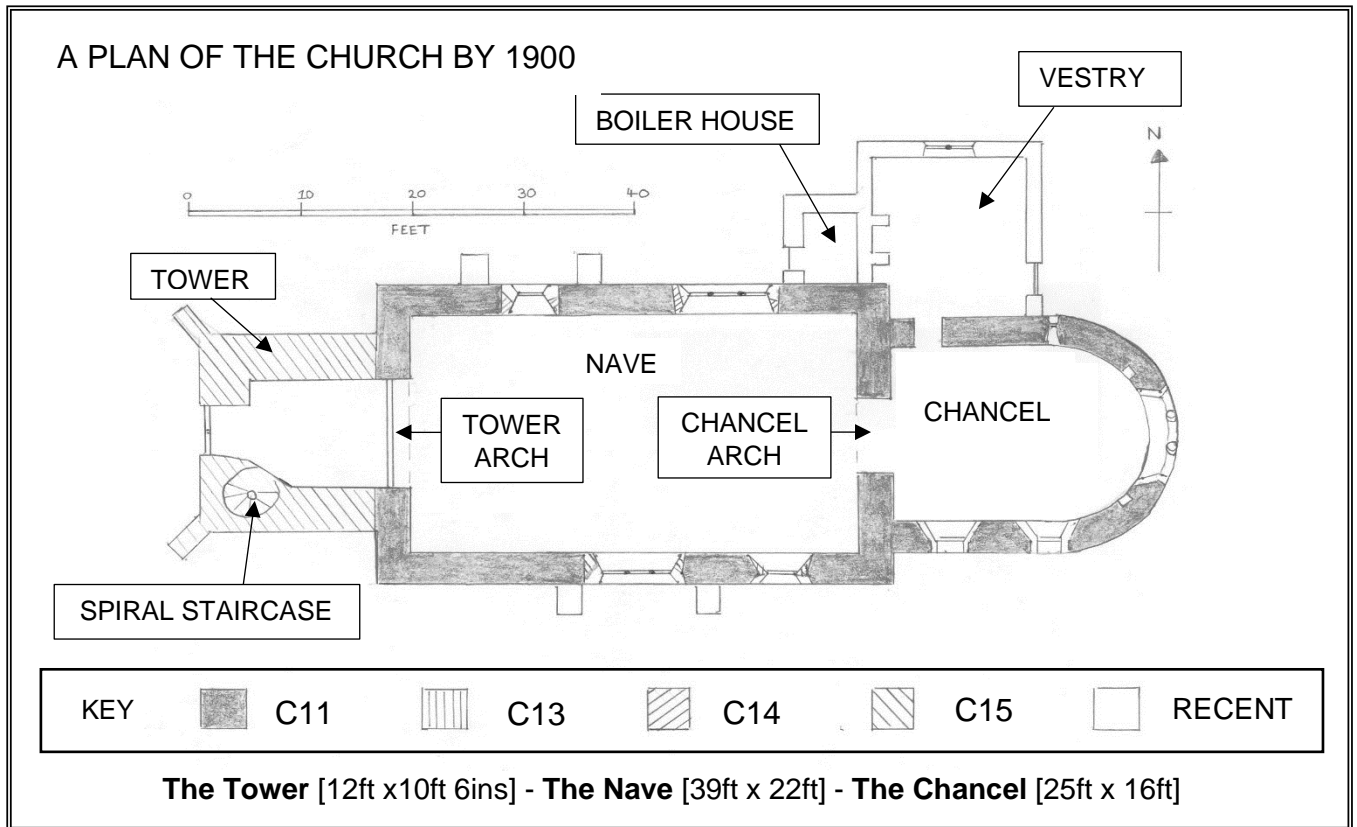
In 1820 the east window in the chancel was replaced to a slightly changed shape with a wooden frame. The new north vestry of 1810 was not to last long as it proved very hot in the summer months and was replaced by the current vestry on the cooler north side of the chancel in 1836. The first half of the C19th continued to be a busy time at the church with the churchwardens adding a flint facing to the walls of the nave. However, this was only a harbinger of much bigger changes to come. The Rev Mordant Barnard was in the mid-1850s to embark on a major renovation of the chancel. As far as the building itself was concerned it involved the almost complete renovation of the chancel roof. [see page 4 above] Externally the most noticeable change to the roof in 1856 was the treatment of the east end. This involved the cutting down of the east wall and a sub roof constructed to bridge the gap. Rev. Barnard himself was unhappy about the result and he is recorded as hoping this rather awkward treatment of the east end of the roof might be put right at some later date. A more successful outcome at the east end was the insertion of three windows replacing the one smaller one only so recently refurbished in 1820. It was at this time that the chancel floor was raised with two steps inserted at the base of the chancel arch.



Both the pictures above were taken on the 22nd July 2009. The left hand one shows the east end of the chancel with its splendid windows of 1856 and the end roof arrangements that displeased Rev Mordant so much. The right-hand view shows the boiler house added in 1865 as part of Rev Parrot's alterations which were mainly focused on the nave. Just visible beyond the boiler house is the north vestry of 1836.

The Rev Parrott and churchwardens embarked on considerable refurbishment of the nave in 1865 beginning with a new boiler room and making plans for considerably more work the following year. The boiler room was designed to remove the need for a coal burning stove to be used inside the church during the colder months. Work in 1866 was to include the complete replacement of the nave roof and the adding of four buttresses to the walls of the nave. Needless to say, the church could not be used for about a year and services took place in the school building just up the hill. [This was the original wooden school building which was to burn down in 1874]. In march 1866 an appeal was started for a church clock to be inserted into the west face of the tower. This scheme was not carried forward and no further record of it has been found. The work on the nave was completed by July 1866 and the church officially reopened for normal use on the 8th August with celebrations of the event throughout the day. Much of the extensive changes carried out by both Reverends Barnard and Parrot were concerned with the interior layout and fittings of the church which were not directly connected with the structure of the building itself.

Given the large amount of work that had been completed in the first 65 years of the C19th it is perhaps not surprising that there was no significant structural work carried out on the church until well into the C20th.



Given that the first half of the C20th saw two world wars it is no surprise that major changes at Great Amwell church had to wait until 1949. In that year an appeal was launched to restore the church bells as by that time the bells could only be clapped rather than properly rung. This was because the wooden framework was riddled with death watch beetle and could no longer cope with the stress of the bells being fully rung. In 1952 it was decided that this project would be dedicated as a memorial to King George VI. The work proceeded and in February 1954 the old bells now retuned were rehung on new wooden frames. The ancient small Sanctus bell of 1374 was also returned to the belfry. Miss J. M. Mylne mentioned that this bell had spent time at the chapel of ease at Woollensbrook in the north west of the parish. Two new bells named George and Elizabeth were added bringing the total to five bells plus the Sanctus bell. As part of this new work a new ringing floor was inserted into the lower tower and long bell ropes were provided for the bells. The Sanctus bell was provided with a longer rope allowing it to be rung from the ground floor of the tower. The old ringing room located just below the belfry became just a rather dark space where the bell ropes pass through from the ringing floor to the belfry. Two years later in 1956 a sixth bell was added by the generosity of a parishioner.

In 1996 the roof tiles on the nave were replaced having lasted some 130 years since they had been replaced as part of Rev. Parrot's Victorian refurbishment of the nave. In 2000 the chancel, vestry and boiler room also had their roof tiles replaced. In the summer of 2009, a trench was dug along the base of the tower's north wall to effect repairs. In the ongoing battle against the decay of such an old structure in 2019 an appeal was in progress to fund the refurbishment of the tower. By that date £32,000 of the required £95,000 total had been raised. The work being needed in order to repair the crumbling limestone of the corner stones, door arches and window surrounds of the tower. Professional advice suggested that the problem was serious and advised remedial work within two years. At the time of writing funds are being raised to replace the heating boiler in the church. These are the most recent renovation works on the church building in its long life since Ralph De Limesi paid for it to be built in the C11th. It is to be hoped the church will continue to be maintained for many centuries to come.



Modern view of the chancel arch showing the ringing floor created in the 1950s. The tall tower arch itself dates from the early 1400s.



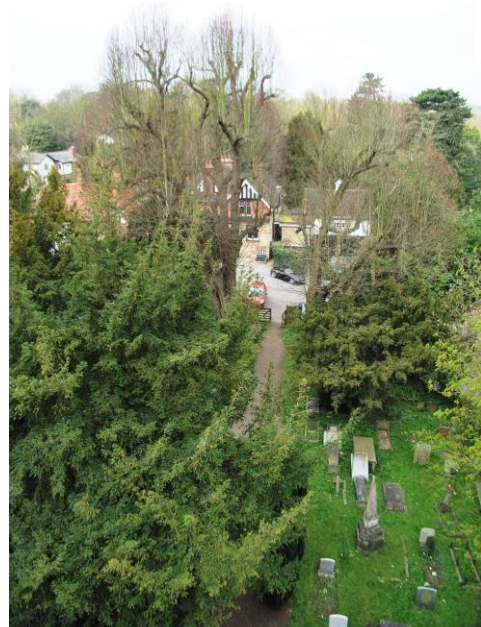
A view of the chancel arch from the ringing floor. The hagioscopes are angled to aid sight of the altar from either side of the nave



A



B



C

A The trench dug for remedial work by base of south wall of the tower in 2009.
 B View of the chancel arch and hagioscopes from the chancel.
 C The view from the top of the tower looking west towards the George IV public house



A modern view of Great Amwell church from the south east taken on the 17th February 2007

Appendix

A C16th change of dedication for Great Amwell Church

The church of St. John the Baptist at Great Amwell was according to the Rev Hassell, vicar at Amwell 1600-1657, was previously dedicated to St Augustine. The following extract is from The Parish Register and Tithing Book of Thomas Hassall of Amwell. Hertfordshire Records Association ISBN 0 9510728 4 6. On page 181

“This church of Amwell, as old Gehesey hath told me, was dedicated to St. Austen {St. Augustine} whose image he remembers fixed in the chancell by the east windhoe, the memoriall of that place where he stood remayneth still visible; but no extraordinary offering to it at any tyme.”

[The memoriall of that place where the statue was placed was a niche to the north of the alter]

Old Gehesey refers to an Amwell resident who had been associated with the church all his life and had given some 50 years dedicated service to the church. He had seen some 5 or 6 vicars come and go in his time. Rev. Hassell refers to him as Clerk to the church. He clearly was not the Vicar who at the time were often referred to as Clerk but it undoubtedly was used to indicate he was the parish clerk for many years. Rev. Hassell gives us an insight as to the nature of the man in his burials register. [Rev Hassell; Burial register [Entry within the 1613 November section]

Thomas Gehesye (Gissey) aged four scores yeares and seven yeares, an honest and upright man who all his life had been a servant to the church of Amwell died the 11th day of November and was buried the 12th day of the same. Memoria justı benedicta {The remembrance of the just is blest}

Thomas Gehesye was born in 1525 and so would have known the church when it was dedicated to St. Augustine. The change no doubt taking place during the religious upheavals of the mid 1500's when a new dedication was seen as being appropriate to accommodate the dramatically changing religious views occurring at the time. This took place after the Act of the ten articles in 1536 in the reign of Henry VIII which led to parish churches quickly being stripped of their ornaments and imagery including statues. Those that escaped this treatment by the end of Henry VIII's reign in 1547 were very likely to see it occur in the reign of Henry's son Edward VI [1547 until 1553].



The two sedilia / alcoves can be seen in this modern view either side of the altar. It is the one to the left of the altar [the one with the flowers] that held the image/statue of St Augustine until sometime in the mid 1500's. It should be remembered that the top of this alcove reached higher up the wall when it contained the statue. It remained as an empty niche until the mid-1850s. Then it was reduced in height and the lower part extended down to the floor with a similar alcove made to the right of the altar.

A much later reference to this statue and niche in which it was placed can be found on page 20 in a book titled "Great Amwell Past and Present" written by Rev W. J. Harvey in 1896. It is an extract from the section that describes the changes made to the chancel by the Rev Barnard commencing in 1856.

"The two sedilia within the rails [chancel rails] were made at the same time. There was originally one niche, apparently for an image, on the north side; the head of this was lowered and the niche cut down to the ground, a corresponding seat being made at the same time on the south side."

The statue It was also described elsewhere, in connection with the mid 1850s renovations, stating that a statue had previously been in a niche in the east wall of the chancel to the left of the altar. This niche remaining until the renovations to the chancel took place during the incumbency of the Rev Mordant Barnard. The niche had its head reduced in height and then it was extended down to the newly raised floor level. A matching sedilia being formed on the opposite side of the altar to form a pleasing and balanced arrangement either side of the new triple east windows. Today these openings are alcoves and do not contain a stone seat as suggested by the use of the word sedilia by Rev. Harvey.

The earlier primary evidence supplied by the Rev. Hassell does strongly state that the Church at Great Amwell was previously dedicated to St. Augustine. {*The dramatic shift in religious views in the 1500s being the cause of it being re dedicated to St John the Baptist.*}