

St Mary The Virgin, Burton Bradstock

Introduction

St. Mary's is the largest of eight churches in the Bride Valley, the others being at Shipton Gorge, Litton Cheney, Long Bredy, Puncknowle, Swyre and Littlebredy. There is a daughter church at Chilcombe, which has no known dedication.



St. Mary's Church stands on slightly raised ground near the centre of the village. It is a handsome, good sized building of cruciform design with a central tower, which until last century was adorned with pinnacles. Like most of the houses in the village, it is built of local rubble stone (Inferior Oolite and Forest Marble), probably from the quarries at Bothenhampton, and is for the most part roofed with Delabole slates from Cornwall. Externally the church presents a pretty uniform appearance, but it is worth a walk around to look at the head stops and gargoyles, some of which are original, though a lot of repair work has been carried out to both windows and mouldings. It is interesting to note the round headed arches over the windows in the north wall of the chancel. These are relieving arches to take the strain of the weight on the square headed windows and could be contemporary with the wall, i.e. early 16th century, but on the other hand the regular appearance of the stones leads one to consider whether perhaps the top of this wall was refaced in the 19th century.

Some memorial stones are built into the external wall of the south aisle, and if you search long enough you will find the "false teeth" there too. The church yard was cleared and levelled about 1949, leaving only the table tombs and one or two others.

On entering, one finds a place of light, for our church has very little stained glass, and was fortunate that the inevitable Victorian restoration was sympathetically carried out by E. S. Prior, and the windows are for the most part glazed with "Prior's Glass". This is a place which has been evolving through some nine centuries to become the building we know today.

It is probable that there has been a church on this site from early times, and the rebuilding which has taken place through the centuries is thought to be on 12th century foundations, though the nave and chancel have in all probability both been lengthened. However, the original cruciform plan is maintained, with noticeable misalignment of the east end, a pattern which is considered by some to be symbolic of the drooping head of Christ on the cross. This irregular plan could in fact, represent the church known to have existed here at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086.