

St Mary the Virgin, Bottesford - a historic tour



Welcome to St Mary the Virgin, the parish church of Bottesford in the Vale of Belvoir. "The Lady of the Vale" has been a local landmark for centuries. We hope you enjoy your visit and that you will come back to visit again.

My credentials are simply that of someone who has enjoyed looking round St Mary's for several years. I am not a qualified church historian, and am open to any comments and information you may have. *Neil Fortey, July 2016*



The parish church of St Mary the Virgin stands in an extensive churchyard bounded by a loop of the River Devon. Dated headstones go back to 1669, and interments still take place in the churchyard, which has been here for perhaps a thousand years. The site stands apart from the centre of the village, whose centre is on the other side of the river. The early 17th Century rectory is also on the opposite bank, and the only bridge across is still the narrow packhorse bridge built early in the 17th Century.

Bottesford is a large parish, both in area and population, which forms the northernmost tip of Leicestershire, which on the map looks like a finger of land pointing north between the encroaching counties of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. Its origins are Anglo-Saxon, the name indicating the 'house by the ford'. Most probably, the ford is that by the western gate to the churchyard, where the Kings Highway from Long Bennington and the Great North Road still splashes through the River Devon. The location and status of the original 'house' are uncertain. The inclusion of the parish in Leicestershire owes more to Anglo-Saxon lordship and land ownership than to geographic logic, in that the low lying Vale of Belvoir extends seamlessly into southern Nottinghamshire whereas the city of Leicester feels further away beyond the high heaths south of Belvoir Castle.

The three counties meet at the Three Shires Bush, the northernmost point of Bottesford parish. Geographically, this is the heart of the Danelaw. The road running north-south past this point, once referred to as the Kings Highway, runs from its junction with the Great North Road southwards into the Vale of Belvoir and Belvoir Castle itself, crossing the Devon by St Mary's at Bottesford, where it also meets the old trackway from Allington in Lincolnshire and Longhedge Lane, the pre-Norman road leading to Hazleton Ferry on the River Trent.

There were Danish settlements here, Easthorpe, Beckingthorpe and Wimbishthorpe, during the time of the Danelaw, creating a complex community before the English shire boundaries were consolidated in the 10th C or thereabouts. St Mary's is at the geographical centre of its parish. The Parliamentary Enclosure Act map of 1771 conveniently displays the boundaries of the three townships of Bottesford, Easthorpe and Normanton, and the church is seen to lie close to the central point where the three meet (suggesting that Beckingthorpe and Wimbishthorpe had become redundant names by this time).

Bottesford has the possibly rare distinction of two entries in the Domesday Book. The Norman lord was Robert de Tosny, and the displaced Saxon lord was called Leofric. The main entry specifies the presence of a priest, which implies that there was a church and burial ground here at that time. Domesday also indicates that Leofric had been lord of a set of villages in the Vale of Belvoir on the Leicestershire side of the boundary with Nottinghamshire, and that these came into possession of Robert de Tosny *en bloc*. It is tempting to envisage them as having been a single Anglo-Saxon estate that had become divided into separate manorial parishes before the Conquest. You could even stick your neck out and suggest that St Mary's would have been the

parish church of the original estate, within the old Soke of Melton, which might push its history back into the 8th or 9th Century.

The second Domesday entry names a set of new inhabitants, 'francigeni', presumably followers of Robert de Tosny and his king, William I. The area of land involved is not named, but it may well be what became known as Normanton, still the northern part of the parish reaching up to the Three Shire Bush. This area later came under ownership of the Colville family, and then the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller, but did not become a parish in its own right. Nichols records that the vicar of Bottesford was required to perform mass in the church at Normanton three times a week.

So we are at the site of a probable Anglo-Saxon parish church. This building is no longer in evidence. It probably was a wooden structure on or close to the site of the church we see today.

The church building of St Mary the Virgin is a stone building dominated by its slender spire which rises to about 210 feet, said to be one of the tallest village church spires in the country. One of the purposes of this tour is to examine how this building came to be, and perhaps to ask why it developed as it did. To me, one question which seems to sum this up, is to ask why is it so big? To put this in a bit of context, St Mary's is larger than other village churches in this area, but falls far short of the grandeur of the nearby parish churches of Melton, Newark and Grantham. Perhaps the nearest comparison is the church of Waltham-on-the-Wolds, another probable Anglo-Saxon estate centre.

Did the Normans build a new church at Bottesford? Probably not. There is no evidence of one that I am aware of. The oldest features we can see are, so far as I know, two short columns, cylindrical with pancake-like capitals and dog-tooth ornament, features typical of the early gothic style known as Early English. These are seen at either side of the chancel. On the southern side is a column and traces of associated features that appear to have formed part of the surrounds of an early priest's entrance. From the outside there is also the trace of a gothic arch that formed the canopy of the original doorway. A corresponding column on the northern side of the chancel can be seen inside the door to old vestry, now the Benefice Office.

These features seem to indicate that the present chancel, despite the changes it has seen, preserves the width of the original building. It has been suggested that the chancel is built on the footprint of the nave of a Norman church whose Sanctuary would have been east of the present east wall. My view is that there is no evidence of a Norman building. The original Anglo-Saxon church building stood some years after the Conquest, and was replaced around the mid-12th Century by a new stone-built basilica in the new gothic style. In this view, the present chancel stands on the footprint of the chancel of this 12th Century church, whose nave would have stood within the plan of the later nave of the present church.

If this is correct, we can pick out another feature of the early gothic building, by observing the sequence of rooflines preserved in the eastern gable of the nave. Prominent among them is a steeply pointed gable-top enclosing walling of crudely cut blocks, in contrast with the high quality limestone blocks of the later walling above this gable. Could this gable-top be a tiny part of the eastern termination of the 12th Century nave? This would further indicate that the early stone building had a chancel whose footprint was that of the present chancel, and a nave within the plan of the present aisled nave.

The 12th Church church would have been built under the patronage of the Lords of Belvoir of the d'Albini, or d'Aubigné, family, who had succeeded the de Tosny by marriage. This family can be traced to a village of Aubigné in Normandy. Curiously, there were in fact two baronial families of this name in Norman England. According to Wikipedia, they originated from separate manors in Aubigné, and were not related. One came to be based at Belvoir, the other at Wymondham in Norfolk. William d'Albini of Belvoir was among the barons who face King John and Runymede, while William d'Aubigny of Whymondham was on the other side, as one of the King's household, and later became the Duke of Arundel.

In 1257 the Lordship of Belvoir passed, again by marriage, to the de Roos, whose base was at Helmsley, in North Yorkshire. They remained at Belvoir Castle until 1461. During this long expanse of time St Mary's grew to be the much as it is today. The de Roos were a powerful Crusading family who fought alongside the King in the Hundred Years War. Bottesford church benefitted from their patronage. The market cross in the centre of the village also dates from their time, and it is possible that the village's grid-like plan of streets was laid out as part of a plan to develop a small market town to serve the Vale. The church would have been enlarged to serve its anticipated needs as much as to reflect the status of its overlords.

The most prominent features of St Mary's belong to the Perpendicular Gothic style of architecture which became dominant in the latter parts of the 14th Century and more particularly in the 15th Century. This was the time of renewed economic growth, driven by the wool trade, following the horrors of the Black Death. It is said that the Perpendicular is a peculiarly English style, a departure from the more flamboyant or Decorated gothic that was still employed on the other side of the Channel, perhaps reflecting an urge to be free from French influence during the latter parts of the Hundred Years War.

These ambitions evidently came abruptly to a halt in 1461. Thomas, the 9th Baron Roos, was with Henry VI when he fled to Northumberland after the Battle of Towton. He was eventually captured after the Battle of Hexham in 1464, and promptly beheaded. Belvoir and its estates were awarded by Edward IV to Sir William Hastings, who according to Nichols allowed Belvoir Castle to fall into ruin, and thus seems unlikely to have shown interest in continuing to develop the village itself.

After 1485, a new era began at Belvoir, and by implication at Bottesford. Edmund de Roos, the 10th baron, returned from exile and briefly resumed ownership of his father's estate. He was ousted in 1493 by Sir Thomas Lovell, a close supporter of Henry VII, who had him declared incapable (mad) by Act of Parliament, and made himself manager and heir of Edmund's affairs. On Lovell's death, Belvoir passed to his great-nephew Thomas Manners, who was elevated by Henry VIII to become the 1st Earl of Rutland and started to rebuild the castle.

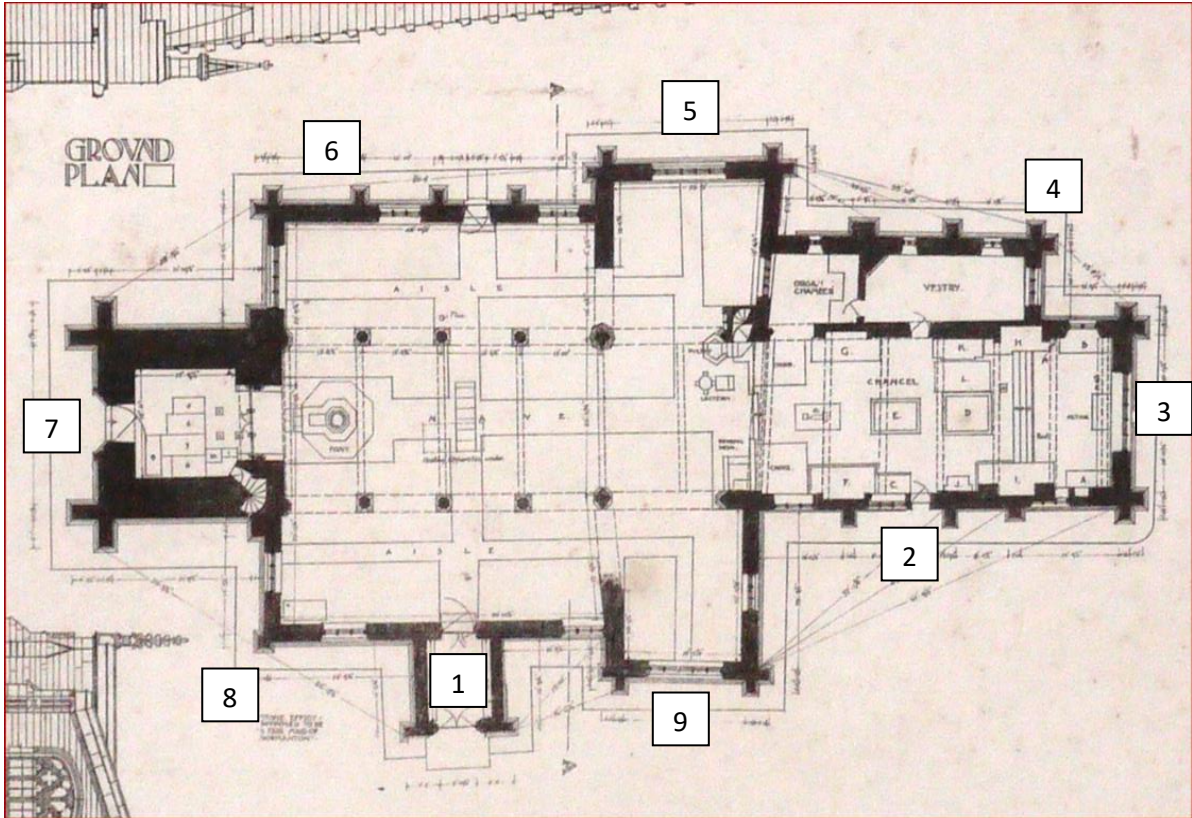
Development of St Mary's resumed only in a limited manner. Some of the grotesques, especially those seen in the nave, may well date from Edmund's time, but there was probably no major work until the 1st Earl took charge. After the Reformation and Dissolution of the Monasteries, the chancel became a mausoleum for the Earls and Countesses of Rutland, and their family. This brought about its enlargement and partial rebuilding, not least due to the need to accommodate the enormous monument of the 6th Earl. Coffins were also placed in crypts constructed beneath the eastern end of the chancel and under the rebuilt north aisle of the chancel.

The chancel ceased to be used for burials after the 10th Earl became the 1st Duke of Rutland, and a new mausoleum was constructed at Belvoir Castle. It was not until the 19th Century that significant building activity resumed. St Mary's, like so many churches, was enthusiastically restored the Victorians. Though we may regret some of their changes, we have to be grateful for the work by Gilbert Scott, who was able to straighten the lean which had developed in the tower of St Mary's, and thus stop it collapsing.

One of the aims of this tour is to try to identify different stages in the building of the church and unravel to manner in which it arrived at its present form.

Introduction to the Tour

The aim of this tour is to make a circuit of the outside of the church looking at the different stages of construction, and then go inside to examine the interior and the monuments in the chancel.



1. Assemble in the church porch

This porch built in the 1300s used to have an upper priest's chamber reached via an external staircase. Two features to notice are the (i) the outlines of shoes carved into the stone benches probably early in the 19th Century (there are dated examples in the lead of the roof), and (ii) a crudely carved face that peers at us, ghostlike, from the interior wall of the porch.

2. The priest's doorway

Turning left from the porch, and passing the south transept (where we shall come back to in a little while), our tour moves to the priest's door in the south wall of the chancel. The chancel is built mostly out of rough blocks of Liassic ironstone, the local building stone obtained from the hills around Belvoir Castle. Adjacent to the late mediaeval entrance still used today there are traces of an older entrance that have survived despite the changes and partial rebuilding of the wall in the 16th Century. We can see remains of dog-tooth moulding of Early English style, of a pancake-like capital and traces of a gothic arch rising above the doorway, indicating that there was

a 12th Century church here. The chancel underwent changes when a north aisle was added and the doors into the chancel were refashioned, then again when following the Reformation the chancel became a mausoleum and was enlarged to accommodate the monuments of the Earls of Rutland. Square-framed late-Perpendicular windows were inserted in the chancel wall, and a clerestory, with simpler 17th Century 'Tudor' windows, added in order to enlarge the roof space. There are also records of the south wall of the chancel being taken down and rebuilt in order to install the enormous monument of the 6th Earl of Rutland, which we shall see in a little while.

3. Eastern wall of the chancel

The eastern wall of the chancel is also of ironstone, but with the addition of a great eastern window in the Perpendicular style of the 1400s. To the right of the path is a tiny headstone dated 1669, the oldest known in the churchyard (and with the distinction of being a Listed Building - is this the smallest Listed Building in Britain?).

If we stand well back, we can see the eastern gable of the nave, in which are the remains of a series of old roof-lines. Most prominent are two steep-angled gable points that mark out different stages of wall building. The lower one can be interpreted as the line of the original steep roof of the chancel, while the upper may mark that of the original steep roof of the nave.

4. North side of the chancel

Turning the corner, at the eastern end of the north wall of the chancel is a small area of the old ironstone walling, with two windows, the lower of arched gothic style, the upper a square-framed window probably of 16th Century age. There is a distinct change in the thickness of the wall between these windows, suggesting that the upper part belongs to the 16th Century clerestory, here in local stone which might well have been cheaper than that used on the southern side of the chancel.

The remainder of the north wall of the chancel is hidden by the vestry, which replaced the gothic aisle that originally stood here (as indicated by blind arches that we shall see in the inside of the chancel). This vestry is another post-Reformation addition, which in the late 1600s was used as the village school room, until a new school was built in the NE corner of the churchyard in 1720. The vestry now houses the Benefice Office.

5. The north transept

The north transept is dominated by another great Perpendicular window, but its walls are of ironstone. This poses an important question. Should we assume that this

masonry is part of the original Early English church building, on the principal that this was the stone used in this early construction as distinct from the grey Ancaster stone used in the later stages? The alternative view would be that this transept was built of ironstone simply because it was a local stone, easier and cheaper to obtain, and because this is the northern side of the church not normally seen by visiting dignitaries?

6. The north aisle

Continuing to move anticlockwise around the church, we pass from ironstone to walling constructed of well-cut ashlar blocks of grey limestone probably from Ancaster, the nearest major location of quarries in the Lincolnshire Limestone to Bottesford. In the wall is a gothic doorway flanked by two large square-framed windows with what appears to be Perpendicular-style tracery. These can be seen as a variation in the Perpendicular style. It is tempting to see them as having been added to finish construction of a part of the church hitherto left uncompleted when work was stopped by the Black Death, or they may be added as replacements of earlier windows.

In contrast, at the western end of the aisle, next to the tower, is an arched window, apparently of an earlier Perpendicular or even late-Decorated style. This western window is set very close to the buttress of the tower, which appears to be encroaching on it, suggesting that the tower is later than the aisle.

The aisle has a very gently-inclined roof, above which rises the northern side of the nave clerestory, in the Perpendicular style, whose gallery of close-spaced windows is accompanied, on the outside and also on the inside, by grotesque carvings of people (including a king and a queen) and monsters. The gallery is topped by an elaborate pinnacle balustrade which continues round to top of the eastern gable of the nave and along the southern flank of the clerestory. This same balustrade is seen on top of the southern transept, as we shall see.

7. Tower

The immense tower and spire appear to have been constructed as a single architectural unit. The tower is some 80 feet or more in height. In its western wall is a fine Perpendicular style window above the western door. This is an arched doorway set in a square framed surround. In the triangular spandrels are on one side the symbols of the crucifixion, and on the other the three-bougets baronial arms of the de Roos.

The parapet of the tower displays bestial gargoyles and a series of plaques with grotesque face and floral designs, including one with a green man design, the only green man in this church. The parapet is battlemented and has pointed turrets or kiosks at its corners.

Above the tower rises the elegant crocketed spire, reaching to about 210 feet, surmounted by a golden cockerel weather vane. The long resident jackdaws of the spire have recently had to share their space with a pair of peregrine falcons, which we may well hear and if lucky see flying around.

The runway of RAF Bottesford, opened in 1941, aligns with the spire of St Mary's, which was thus in danger of being struck aircraft. The weather vane was removed and the tower lowered slightly, and red warning light was added, to avert such a disaster.

8. The south aisle

The south aisle, like its northern counterpart, the tower and the nave clerestory, is built of grey limestone blocks. However, here the windows have a distinctly flamboyant style of tracery, suggesting the Decorated Gothic rather than the Perpendicular Gothic architectural style. The nearby church of St Wulfram in Grantham is famous for the quality of its Decorated windows. These at Bottesford are smaller and less elaborately constructed, but nonetheless they display the curving intricate tracery characteristic of this style of church building, dating from the 13th and early 14th Century.

The profiles of the pediment and simple moulding of the top of the walling of this aisle continue round the porch, where we started our tour, indicating that the porch also dates from this period, both aisle and porch being built in one stage.

9. The south transept

The southern transept is in the Perpendicular style already seen in the nave clerestory. In its interior we can see where older masonry ends, either because it was taken down or simply fell down, and newer masonry begins. Clearly, an older transept has been replaced by what we see today, in which another great Perpendicular window is topped by the intricate balustrade. There are two life-size and life-like gargoyles, known affectionately as the Bellman and the Alewife, together with grotesque faces and two empty statue niches below which the de Roos arms can still be made out.

To sum up

There was an Early English gothic church, built probably in the 1100s, which consisted of a nave and chancel, both with steep roofs, probably thatched. This was built either by William d'Albini III, lord of Belvoir, or by Robert de Roos, the first of his line of lords of Belvoir.

This church was enlarged and re-modelled by successive members of the de Roos. The first stage of this included construction of the south aisle and porch, perhaps in the first half of the 1300s, in the Decorated gothic style. It is possible that the transepts and north aisle were also added at this stage, though they were considerably modified and rebuilt later. In fact, it may be that the north aisle the last of these to be started and was left unfinished when building came to a halt with the arrival of the Black Death in the middle of the 1300s.

Building resumed after a long interval, in the new Perpendicular style of architecture. The north aisle was completed. The tower and spire were added. A clerestory was added to the nave, creating a high, gently inclined roof and rows of windows. In addition, the old south transept was replaced in the new style. Exact dates are unclear, but it is probable that all this work was completed between the late 1300s and 1461, when Edward IV attained the 9th Baron and William Hastings became in effect an absentee overlord of Belvoir.

It is worth adding that St Mary's Doom painting must date from the time of the building of the clerestory, as must the mediaeval stained glass now preserved in one of the windows of the chancel clerestory.

After the Battle of Bosworth, it is probable that some limited work was carried out, but nothing major until the Earls of Rutland decided to use St Mary's for their funerary monuments through the 16th and 17th centuries, leaving their remarkable legacy of lifelike alabaster and marble statues. This entailed enlargement of the chancel and addition of a new vestry.