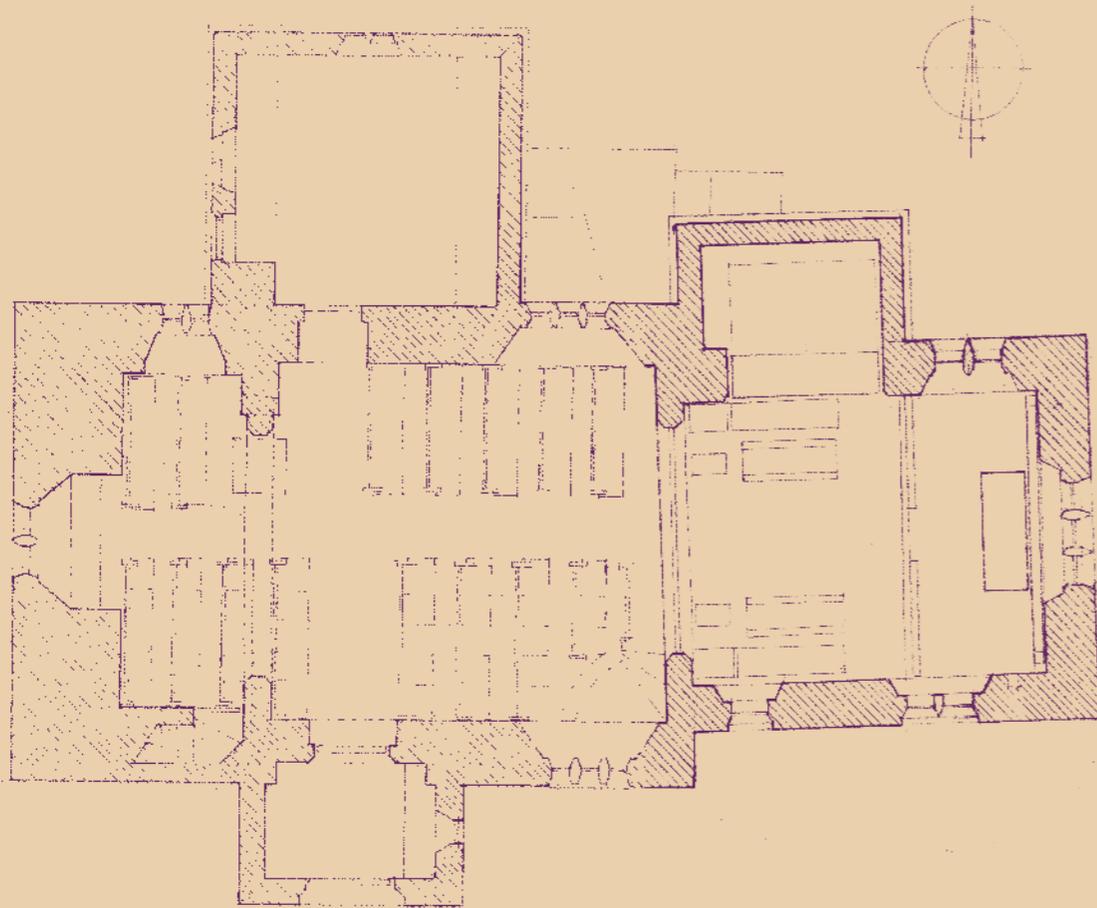


Charlcombe Parish Church of The Blessed Virgin Mary



by Richard Frewer and David Machin • Photography by Robin Allison-Smith

This book is dedicated in thanks to God for the life and ministry of Father Francis Bell, Rector of Charlcombe 1961-1985



Cover: St Mary's from the north east

Inside cover: Plan of St Mary's by Richard Frewer

Charlcombe Parish Church is dedicated to The Blessed Virgin Mary and is the oldest church in Bath in current use. The church is part of the Local Ministry Group for North Bath, is open every day, and has a thriving congregation. The Holy Eucharist is celebrated every Sunday at 9.00am. All are welcome.



Mothering Sunday 2008 at Charlcombe Parish Church, with our oldest member of the congregation Mrs Margery Berry aged 102 and youngest, Eve Collins aged 1.

Join us on a tour of this special church building...

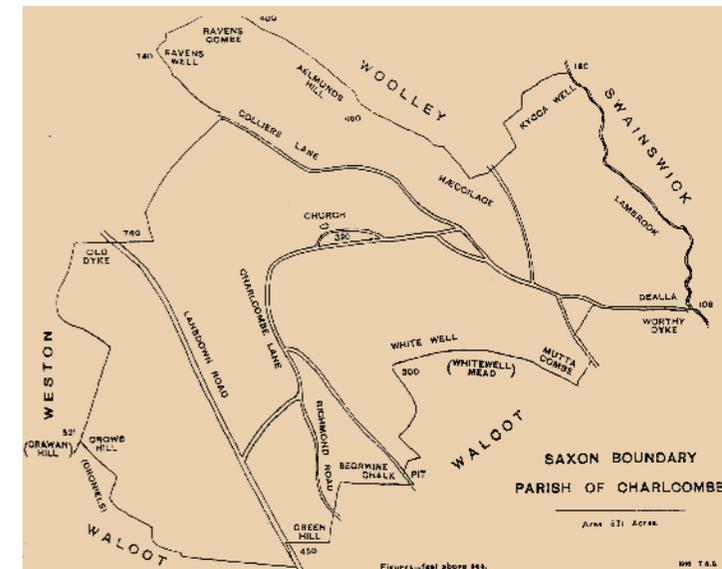
If you are reading this in the church itself, you are standing in the oldest ecclesiastical building in Bath in current use. Although the nave and chancel were much restored in 1861, the organ chamber constructed in 1886 and the vestry added in 1901, the church, probably on the site of very early sacred structures, retains sufficient evidence to identify its Norman origins. Its ancient history has been obscured in the mists of time. Some of the early parish records, now in the care of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, are written in Anglo-Saxon as well as in Latin. These suggest that the site may have been given to the Abbess Bertana in 675/676 A.D to found a religious community of 100 virgins in the area of Bath.



Certainly for over a thousand years until recent times, the church has been the centre of worship for a largely agricultural community. Today the church has a growing congregation and the building continues to enjoy a peaceful environment and a lovely setting amongst the hills. Nevertheless, its proximity to the city has meant that from time to time its history has become entwined with that of the famous Spa. Jane Austen wrote of its popularity as a destination for walkers from the city, and its atmosphere was particularly favoured by those of a romantic disposition. Henry Fielding, the author of *Tom Jones*, eloped, and was

Watercolour, King George III Topographical Collection

The Saxon Parish boundary



married to Charlotte Cradock in the church in 1734. The church also contains a monument to his sister, Sarah who died in 1768. Sarah Fielding was herself a key figure in the development and history of the English novel.

The Church and its environs

Archaeological digs have shown that there were a number of simple timber dwellings directly to the north of the churchyard dating from the Saxon period. There are also remnants of a further stone building attached to the north-east of the church. As illustrated in Hieronymus Grimm's drawing on page 6, the lane originally passed the south porch and ran along the present bridle-path to the east. Westwards, the road continued along the contour behind the old Tithe Barn (now The Barn House) to Charlcombe Old Farm. The present metalled road, which runs below the Holy Well, was a simple track leading to other dwellings including Alma Cottage which, in its original steep-roofed thatched form, is reputed to have been a retreat for clerics from the Abbey. Although the church is very small, its importance is suggested by its early parish boundaries which extended a considerable distance: over Lansdown towards Weston, over Fairfield Park, and beyond Sion Hill towards the city of Bath.

Exterior

The church restoration of 1861 was under the supervision of Sir George Gilbert Scott but any record of the changes made at the time have been lost, so that details of the building before the work can only be surmised from what we now see and from some pre-1861 drawings. These show a very large second buttress on the south elevation of the chancel suggesting that the church suffered serious structural movement over the centuries.



A south-east view in ink of Charlcombe Church, drawn in July 1790 by Samuel Hieronymus Grimm.

The medieval church is built of local oolitic limestone and, in Cotswold fashion, it is roofed in natural stone, beautifully graded in size from eaves to the ridge. The ancient part of the church consists of nave and chancel, both aisleless, and a small porch to the south. The fact that the width of the aisle and chancel are different and that the geometry of three parts of the building is so out of alignment suggests that the stone structures were built at different times and might have been preceded in part by a wooden enclosure. Another hypothesis is that the chancel was designed to bend at 5 degrees to symbolise the angle of Christ's head on the cross as he died.

The most unusual feature of the exterior is the square bell-tower corbelled out from the west gable, which is probably 14th century. It has two square openings and a notably tall castellated parapet. This is entirely supported on the very thick west wall of the church above a narrow anterior arch and is only accessible from a stairway constructed within the thickness of the south wall of the nave. It originally contained two bells separated by a low stone wall running east-west: one dedicated to St. Peter and one to St. Mary. The one remaining bell is inscribed VENITE EXALTEMUS A.D 1845. Such bell-cotes are a feature of several churches in Somerset. Other examples may be seen at Brympton d'Evercy, Ashington and Chilthorne Domer.

Whether any of the existing fabric pre-dates the Norman Conquest is difficult to ascertain but early drawings show that the present vestry doorway on the north



A west view in ink of the church and parsonage at Charlcombe, drawn in July 1790 by Samuel Hieronymus Grimm.



side of the nave was an external door that originally led to a track cut in the hillside. This opening is formed from two plain narrow round-headed arches of which the higher faces the nave. The doorway and the font are probably the oldest surviving features, possibly early 11th Century. The south doorway, also Norman, is architecturally richer but renewed. It has one order of columns carrying trumpet capitals on the porch side. The porch itself is entered through a round-headed arch and it has a small round-headed window on the east side.

Interior

In the Middle Ages, except in the finest royal and ecclesiastical buildings, the only material used was that which could be easily transported to site. If the whole building could not be constructed in ashlar, any architectural finesse was carved or built in fine stone and the walls between were built of random rubble. To give this a smooth surface, a thin coat of lime plaster was applied and finally painted with a lime and tallow wash. Such an example can be seen in the church at Weston Zoyland, Somerset.

The Chancel and Nave



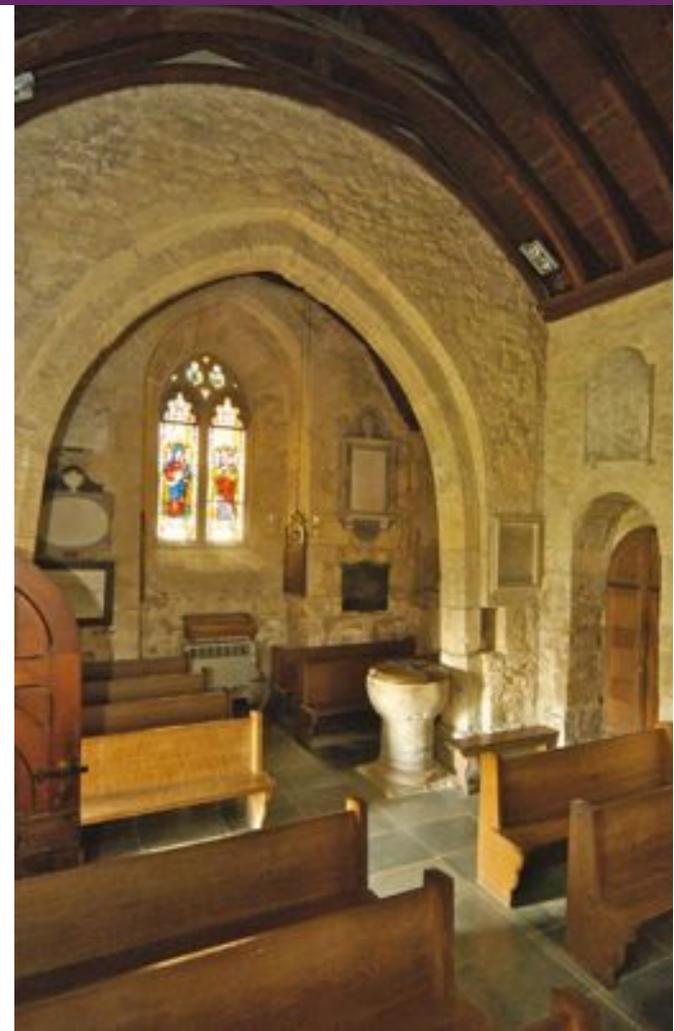
The Chancel seen through the squint

The two arches which divide the chancel, the nave and the rear section have similar pointed arches. These are chamfered and are taken, uninterrupted by columns, to the floor. They define the central section of the building and appear to be 14th century.

At the back of the church carved into the nave arch on the north side is a squint (hagioscope): a small irregularly cut rectangular hole. It is a curious feature generally allowing a worshipper to witness the raising of the Host from behind a screen. However, the layout of the building makes this unlikely. A further possibility is that, in a small enclosure in the north-west corner, may have dwelt a hermit or leper who could thereby share the Holy Mysteries.

The Victorian restoration was characteristically thorough. Much of the stone tracery was replaced, a pine pitched roof structure replaced a barrel ceiling and the rough stone walls were

The Font at the West end





again plastered. There was a wainscot with typical pitch-pine pews. New fittings, including reredos, chancel screen and stained glass windows, were installed at this date.

In recent years for purely pragmatic reasons, the wainscot and plaster have been removed to reveal the present rough stone finish which gives the interior a very particular rustic, timeless, meditative atmosphere.

Organ

A new organ by Harrison and Harrison of Durham was installed in 1916. This small instrument is a rare example of their work. Only one similar organ exists, in St. Paul's Cathedral. Harrison and Harrison also built organs for King's College Cambridge (1934), Westminster Abbey (1937) and St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol (1912)

Charlcombe's organist Mr Nicholas Thorne at the Harrison instrument.



A drawing in ink of the circular stone font in Charlcombe Church, drawn in July 1790 by Samuel Hieronymus Grimm.

Font

The Norman font is the most unusual object in the church. Cut from a single block of stone and placed on a circular pedestal and carved base to present the shape of a chalice, it is vigorously incised with leaves in two tiers.

Pulpit

This is unusual, being of stone, cylindrical and perfectly plain except for a simple cornice. The wood lining laps over the stone to form a cill. The inside of the pulpit on the south wall is cut back to make space for a wooden seat. Recent study suggests that there may have been a further door in the south wall allowing direct access to it for the priest from outside. There is a similar severely plain stone pulpit in Wells Cathedral dated to the 1540s.



A drawing in ink of the pulpit in Charlcombe Church, drawn in July 1790 by Samuel Hieronymus Grimm.



The Windows

The east window has perpendicular tracery (15th century) renewed at the time of the installation of the glass which shows

Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ in Glory and the Road to Calvary. With the exception of the window in the north wall of the nave (1932), the glass is all Victorian.



East window 'Christ in Glory'

Porch window: St. Mary

The Baptism of Christ



The Crucifixion



Reredos

The full width of the chancel east wall is faced with a finely worked Victorian carved reredos by the sculptor H. Ezard dated 1862. The square panels portray symbols of the four evangelists: from the north: Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, while the three central ones (quatrefoils within circles) represent the Agnus Dei, Cross of Christ and the Pelican in her Piety.

Furnishings

In 1967 the pitch-pine pews were removed and finely crafted oak pews were installed. These were the work of the Yorkshire firm of Robert Thompson, well known for the signature little mouse carved into its pieces. These can be seen at low level under the pews. More recently a container for a memorial book was installed together with an aumbry. Work completed in 2006 included a new stone floor, heating and a good standard of lighting.

“The “mouse man” pews by Thompson of York



The Church Quiet Garden and Holy Well

The church maintains the garden on the southern slope. This is a member of the Quiet Garden Trust and is open to the public. In it is the Holy Well of St Mary’s, sometimes called the Monks’ Well. It is fed by a spring in the former rectory garden, and was moved from there in 1989 and rededicated by George Carey, Bishop of Bath and Wells and subsequently Archbishop of Canterbury. A modern stone carving of the baptism of Christ stands above the elliptical pool. The water was famous for “being good for the eyes”, and recent tests have confirmed its purity. The Holy Well is used for baptisms today and is also a focal point for prayer and celebration on special Christian festivals such as Ascension Day and Easter Day. Quiet Afternoons in the garden are organised monthly during the summer.

Leo Feasby is baptised at the Holy Well in 2004 by Charlcombe’s Parish Priest the Reverend Jonathan LLoyd. Photograph by Brian Hills





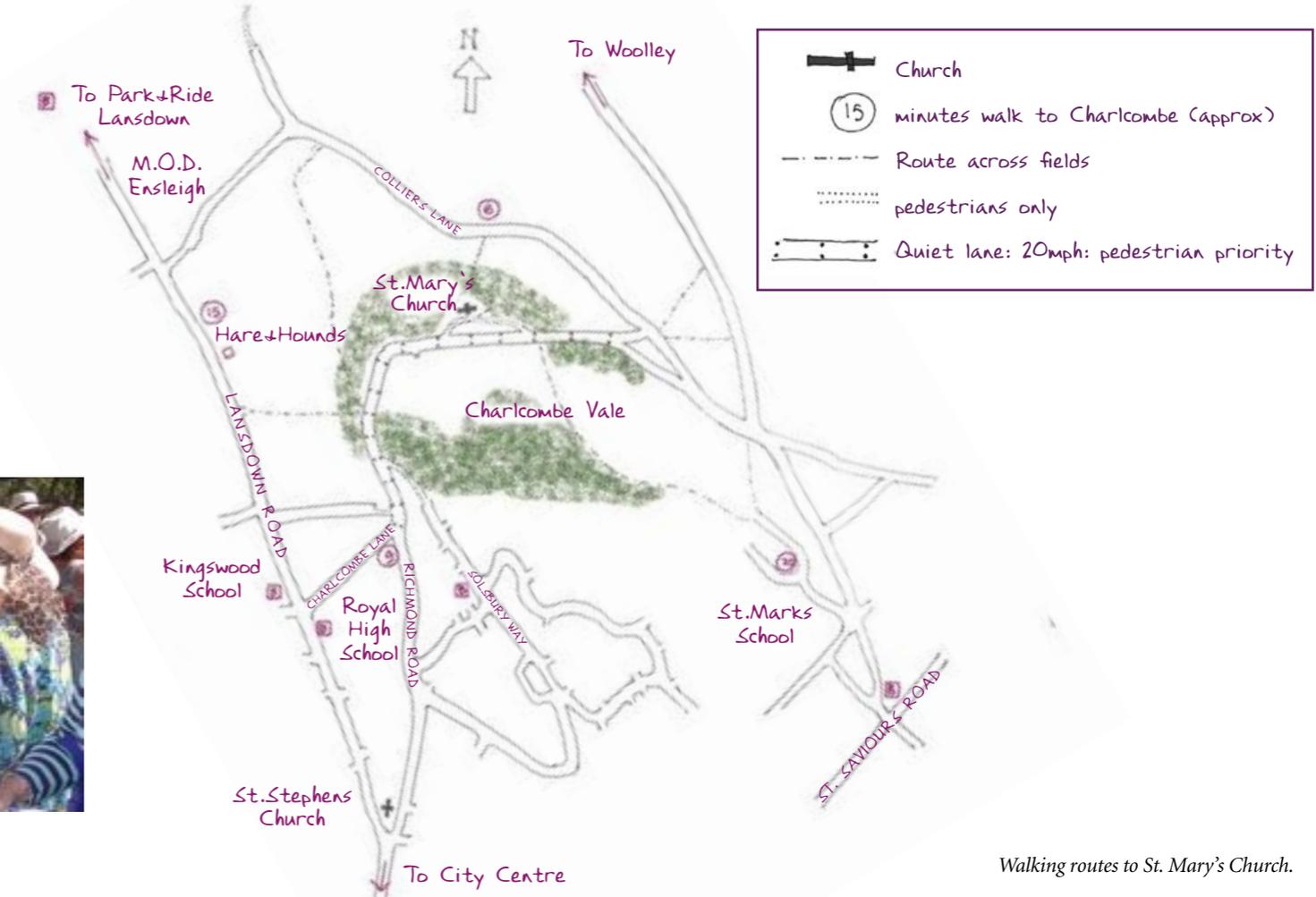
The life of the Church today

Charlcombe is a living Christian community gathering together for the Holy Eucharist on Sundays at 9.00am and for Evening Service at 6.30pm once a month. The Parish of Charlcombe covers a large geographic area and includes Kingswood School and The Royal High School and over 1500 residents. Baptisms, weddings and funerals are conducted at the church. The Friends of Charlcombe Church organise regular social and fund-raising events in support of the maintenance of the church building.

Do come and visit Charlcombe Parish Church and Quiet Garden. It is a real oasis of peace and stillness, and has been a place of Christian prayer for a thousand years.



Left: A summer wedding at St Mary's. Photograph by Lawrence White
 Above: The annual Friends of Charlcombe Church Barbeque. Photographs by Jonathan LLOYD



Walking routes to St. Mary's Church.



Acknowledgements

The Friends of Charlcombe Church for their generous sponsorship of this book with Fr Bell's legacy
Text based on the former *Charlcombe Church Guide* by Miss Jean Pratt
Lectures by Thomas S. Bush to Bath Literary Society 1916 and vestry records compiled by Billy Barr
Church Notes for Somerset, Sir Stephen Glynn 1848 Ed. Michael McGarvey, publ.1994 ISBN 090 173 2303
North Somerset and Bristol by Nikolaus Pevsner, first published in 1958 in *The Buildings of England* series pp152
Official Church Records, Taunton Records Office tel. 01823 278805
Vestry Minutes 1839-1936, Faculty plans 1886-1986, Fabric repairs 1893-1935
Diocesan Collection, Faculty Plans 1886-1952
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Further Reading

Bath Abbey, Kenneth Hylson-Smith, Friends of Bath Abbey, 2003
Somerset Archaeological Society Proceedings; Somerset Records Society;
Proceedings of the Bath Literary and Scientific Institution

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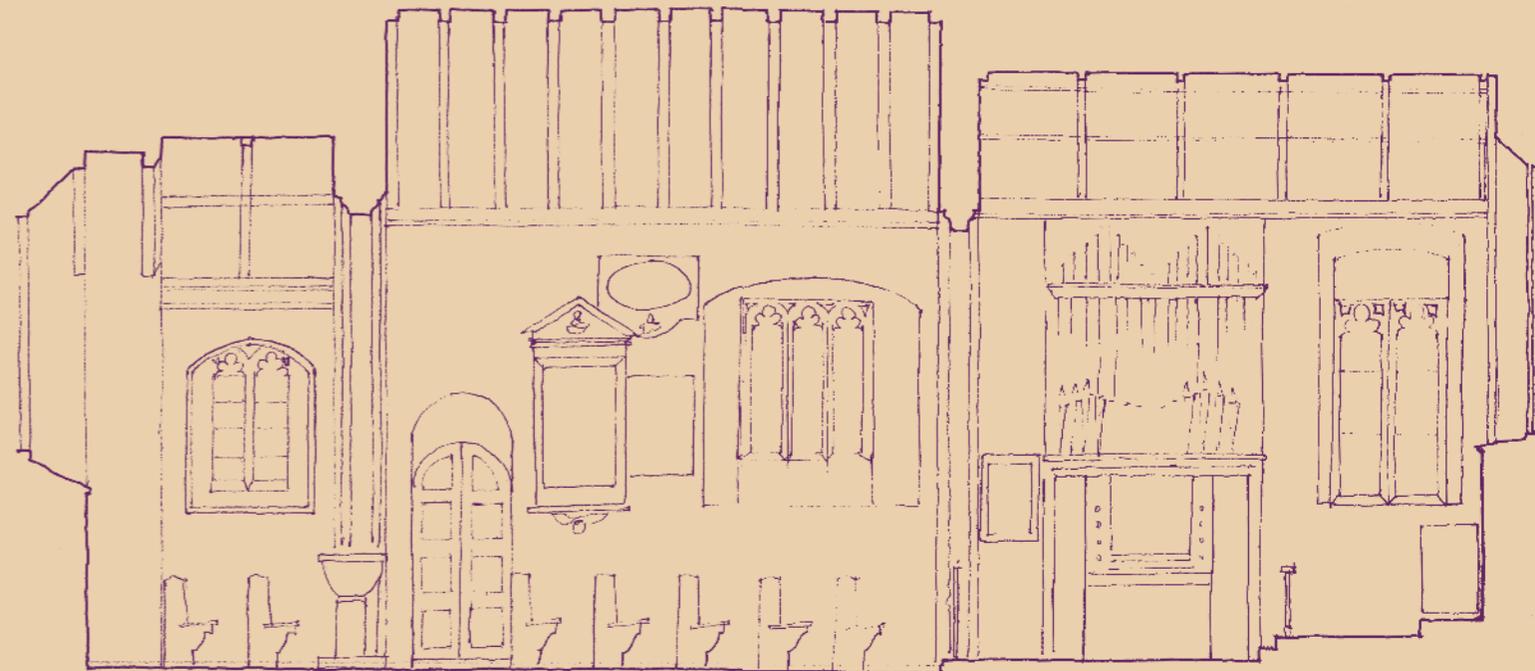
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North elevation of St Mary's by Richard Frewer

Back cover: A north-west view in ink of Charlcombe, taken from the hill, drawn in 1788 by S.H. Grimm

Inset: From Jane Austen's letter to Cassandra, June 2nd. 1799, 13 Queen Square, Bath

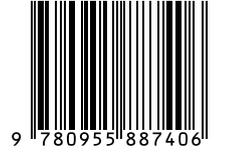


*We took a charming
walk to Charlcombe
sweetly situated in
a little green Valley*

JANE AUSTEN 2 VI 1790

 THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
Diocese of Bath & Wells
Changing Lives. Changing Churches for Changing Communities

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The aim of The Diocese of Bath and Wells is to resource and encourage confident Christian communities which express joyful hope in the Gospel, for the sake of the world they serve, by changing lives, changing churches for changing communities.