

THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. CUTHBERT,  
WELLS



A GUIDE



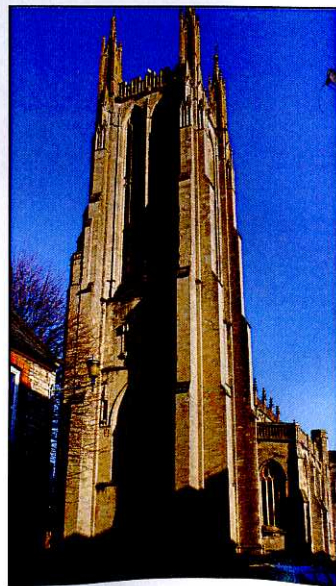
## St. Cuthbert : The Parish Church of Wells.

The vast and well-lit space of St Cuthbert's is often and understandably taken to be the city's Cathedral, but is, and always has been, its parish church; until the mid nineteenth century also the only one in Wells. From its overall form, window and other details it appears to be a late mediaeval building, but it retains substantial elements from the thirteenth century church. Externally the richly detailed western tower—the tallest in the county—with prominent pinnacles, is a striking landmark and testimony to the continuity of Christianity here.

### A Brief Historical Development.

The site adjoins a small mound which may have served as a burial ground even before the coming of Christianity, and has probably been occupied by a church ever since. The rare dedication is to St. Cuthbert, an illustrious Saxon saint; installed as Bishop of Lindisfarne in 685, he died two years later, and is associated especially with Durham, where his tomb is found. This suggests that there was here an early church from that era, possibly a timber-framed building, and no doubt there was also a later stone-built Norman structure replaced by the beginnings of the present one; in the Lady Chapel is the shaft of a piscina from this period.

A large and completely new church was begun in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, establishing the general footprint of what we now see. This was at a time when our gothic Cathedral was also being built, and it is likely that masons from there were also employed here: the form of the main arcade columns is closely related to, but simpler than, those in the Cathedral nave. These columns, as it will be seen, change slightly in colour at about half-way up, because the whole church was raised in height at some time in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the arches and capital columns were raised, and an extra three metres of column inserted, using stone identical to the original, from Doultong Quarry, but slightly lighter in tone; a further alteration saw the insertion of clerestory windows, above the arches, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This latest change can be seen from the steeply pitched roof-line visible on the inside face of the tower at the west end of the nave, but is most noticeable from the regular Perpendicular tracery in nearly all of the windows. At this later stage also the magnificent timber angel roof was added; the colours now seen were painted in 1963, but reflected the nature of the original decoration. It is often forgotten that church buildings contained much colour and decoration, which was rudely destroyed or covered over in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. One further major change to the building, not now evident, was the removal of a central tower in 1561—for more than 100 years St Cuthbert's had two towers, the present west tower having been added in about 1430.





By the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century therefore, the church had expanded to its present size and form, best appreciated from outside. A lofty "Somerset" tower with pinnacles, long nave with aisles, a prominent two-storied south porch with, on the north side, not a corresponding porch as was normal, but a two-storied treasury; immediately east of these are two large chapels, St Cuthbert to the south, and Holy Trinity to the north, each projecting slightly farther than the adjacent north and south transepts. At the crossing a large square tower stood, lower than its western companion. The deep chancel reflects the 14<sup>th</sup> century liturgical approach, when the "mystery" of the Mass was celebrated beyond the rood screen and far from the lay congregation. It projects one bay beyond its flanking aisles. Characteristic of this late mediaeval date are the low-pitched lead-covered roofs concealed by continuous blank-panelled parapets.

### The Interior : Nave

Entering through the stone-vaulted south porch with its characteristic carved bosses, go to the centre of the nave, which reveals a magnificent well-lit interior. First turn left and proceed to the new glazed doors under the lofty tower arch, from which, especially when the great west door is open, a splendid vista can be appreciated, unimpeded to the raised altar in the deep chancel; this ceremonial entry has been made available again only since 2008, when the earlier rooms under the tower were replaced as part of a major re-ordering. At this time also the nave altar was installed, 19<sup>th</sup> century benches removed except for two blocks in the nave, and the painted wooden structures, serving as office and kitchen, were built at the west end of the aisles, so that the church is again available as the centre of its community, as it was in the mediaeval period, used for many activities beyond the vital liturgical ones.

In the nave under its great roof with its enrichment of angels, rosettes and shields, notice the flow of the arcades, with different piers and mouldings to the westernmost bay, which was built at the same time as the new west tower. The continuous five-light clerestory windows, including one in five lights above the chancel arch, made possible by the lower profile of the roofs to the eastern arm of the church were added early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; here also is the area formerly surmounted by the central tower, of which the broad stretches of walling pierced by low arches on either side, are the sole remainders. The arcade piers generally retain their Early English "water-holding" bases and capitals with circular abaci or leaf carvings.

At the nave's west end the lofty Perpendicular



tower arch with panelled inner side (the intrados), and formerly with an 18<sup>th</sup> century gallery, is now enclosed, with elegant glazed doors below, and a traceried glazed screen above to the upper room allowing a good view of the Victorian glass in the main west window. Notice here, too, the steep-pitched profile of the earlier roof, replaced when the clerestory was added. The modern nave altar stands before a block of 19<sup>th</sup> century benches, including, at the front, the mediaeval Corporation Pew with its poppy-head ends.

The beautifully carved Jacobean pulpit is dated 1636, and merits a close examination for figures from the Old Testament such as Daniel in the Lion's Den, Jonah and the Whale, and David and Goliath.



### The Treasury and Chapel of the Holy Trinity

Enter the north aisle with the new enclosed kitchen "pod", passing along to the door immediately opposite the south porch entry, above which is the boldly carved Royal Arms of Charles 1; from the time of Henry VIII all churches of the Church of England have been obliged to display their allegiance to the crown. The broad doorway leads to the former treasury, now the choir vestry. Here an upper floor has recently been reinserted, recreating the original two levels as shown by the small 13<sup>th</sup> century lancets, now opening to the adjacent chapel but originally external, and reflecting the early provenance of this space. Until the Reformation this was the Exchequer where the valuable church plate would be kept. Subsequently it served as an armoury during the time of Elizabeth 1. In 1685 it was used (as were the Cathedral cloisters) for the detention of prisoners after the Battle of Sedgemoor. More recently it was used to house the city fire-engine—apparently not an unusual practice—there is record of it being removed for fire-fighting during divine worship.





Immediately east of the choir vestry is the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, its two Perpendicular bays, having panelled intradoses to the arches and piers. Note the blocked doorway leading to the former Exchequer, and on the north wall another emblazonment bearing the Royal Arms of Charles II, an unusual case of this doubling up: possibly the earlier panel was hidden during the Commonwealth and temporarily misplaced thereafter. The chapel was enclosed in 2014 to create a multi-purpose space for meetings as well as private prayer and contemplation. The Blessed Sacrament is kept in an aumbry in the wall. By long tradition the chapel has been associated with the City Corporation, containing the official seats of the Mayor and Corporation when attending Divine Service; these benches are now at the front of the nave.

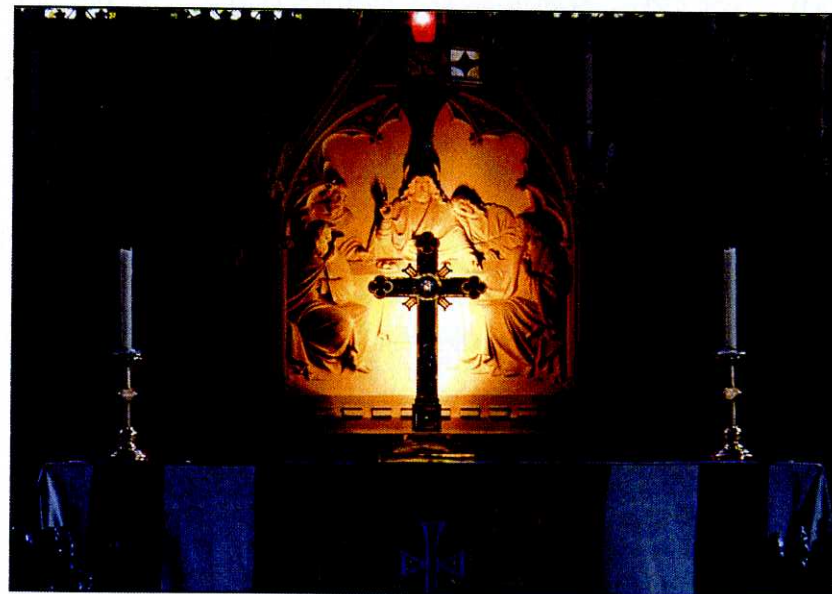
## The North Transept : St Catherine's Chapel

Next to Holy Trinity Chapel and separated from it by what used to be an external wall, complete with three-light window tracery, is the north transept. There is divided opinion as to whether this chapel, or its counterpart to the south, is the Lady Chapel. Although both altars were dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, it is now generally accepted that the south transeptal chapel is the Lady Chapel, whilst this one is known as St Catherine's Chapel.

The much-mutilated reredos on the east wall, for centuries until 1848 hidden behind later plastering, still demonstrates the high quality of late mediaeval stone craftsmanship. Its two tiers of niches contained carved and coloured figures of saints, of which some fragments remain. Under the canopies, although severely cut back, can be seen remains of exquisitely detailed small-scale ribbed vaulting similar to that being used in great churches of the period. In the reign of King Edward VI, who was responsible for the closure and slighting of all mediaeval chantry chapels, the Reformers in their iconoclastic zeal removed and broke up the figures and cut back all projecting parts of the tabernacle work to panel and plaster over all, giving the appearance of a plain wall.

More recently, in the 2008 re-ordering, the wooden floor to the chapel was replaced in stone, including re-setting one large, light-coloured memorial slab to Philip Mahat dated 1634, which was discovered beneath later pews and used as hardcore. Fortunately the slab had been buried without being broken up.

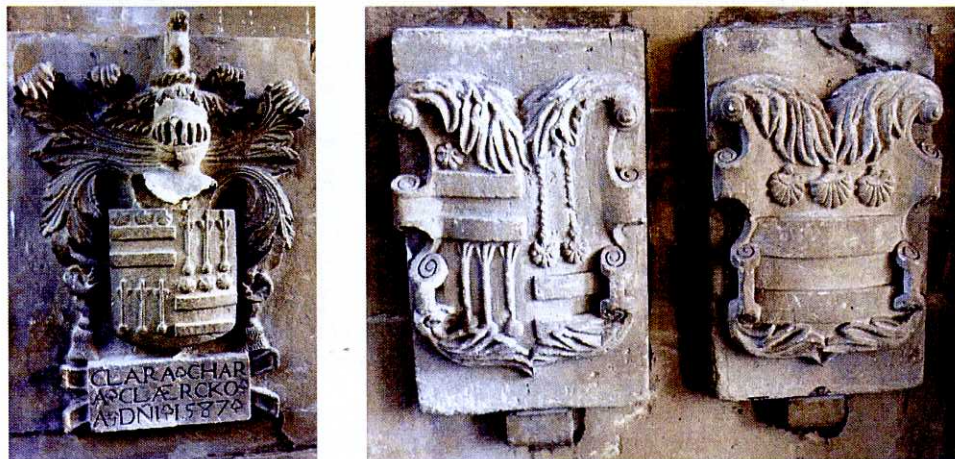
In the corner of the chapel is a copy of the Banner of St Cuthbert, a red cross on a white ground.





## The Chancel and Aisle Chapels

The eastern arm of the church, beyond the crossing and transepts, has the deep chancel, resulting from the 14<sup>th</sup> century plan, with both north and south aisles. Like the remainder of the building this was all restructured in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the two-bay arcades



with Perpendicular arches and panelled intrados were built. The North Aisle is mainly occupied by the 19<sup>th</sup> century organ. Note here the plaque commemorating the 40 years service of John Joseph Chamberlain as organ blower!. On the east wall is a variety of fine carved escutcheons and other monuments either side of the vestry door.

The sanctuary to the chancel projects one short bay beyond the aisles. The reredos, a gift of the Freemasons of the Province of Somerset in 1867, is an elaborately executed design with three main compartments representing The Last Supper: to the left and right of the main subject are figures of St Andrew (to whom the Cathedral is dedicated) and St Cuthbert. This replaced a heavy 17<sup>th</sup> century oak altar screen in the Corinthian style, but here in the Middle Ages was formerly a stone reredos, no doubt of the same quality as those in the transepts. A perpetual sanctuary light hangs above the main altar, creating a spiritual and visual focus to all who enter the church.

The sedilia, with its unusual septfoil head and a piscina on the south side of the sanctuary are late mediaeval but the choir-stalls and furnishings are good 19<sup>th</sup> century work, as is the encaustic tiled floor, characteristic of this period.; the compartmental ceiling with carved bosses is also of similar date.

The south choir aisle is dedicated to St Martin and All Saints with, in the south wall, a pillar piscina in square compartment surmounted by carved blind arcading, sedilla and a very wide priest's door. The Book of Remembrance is in a recess in the east wall, and in a glass case on the north side a facsimile of a 1634 bible: this is a second copy of a similar one presented to the church but subsequently stolen.

## South Transept : The Lady Chapel



The south transept of the church is generally considered as the Lady Chapel. It is also known as Tanner's Chapel, as in the 14<sup>th</sup> century a chantry was established here for Thomas Tanner, an influential Wells citizen and several times its Mayor; in the south wall of the transept is a small incised tablet including, in mediaeval lettering "Anniversare Thome Tanner est in festo S'te Katarine". Here also may have been the burial place of his family. In the south-east corner sits a solitary bell, dated 1664, placed here in 1992 when found to be cracked. Under the great south window lies the recumbent stone figure of Henry Clark who died in 1587. Other fragments from his original memorial can be found on the east side of the north choir aisle; this figure rests on the tomb of Thomas Leigh on which the crude lettering records his death in 1551 and that of his wife in 1606. Thomas took part in some disturbance during the reign of Queen Mary, was briefly imprisoned but subsequently became Mayor of the city on several occasions.

The most spectacular and historically significant part of this chapel is the great "Jesse" reredos filling most of the east wall; it covered the two-light 14<sup>th</sup> century window, retaining fragments of early glass and re-opened at the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration. A little later in date than its damaged counterpart in the north transept, John Stowell's 1470 contract for its erection still exists—a transcript of the wording of this document is displayed alongside. It suffered the same fate as other mediaeval "popish" works in the church and was only rediscovered and re-opened (it had been plastered over) in 1848, at the same time as its companion to the north.

The subject is the Jesse legend which often occurs in windows (as in the great East Window in our cathedral) but more rarely in this carved form. It is symbolic of the springing of the hierarchy of kings and prophets from the stem of Jesse, the father of King David, as prophesied in the Book of Isaiah. Immediately above the altar lies the recumbent form of Jesse, while the twenty-one niches above contained figures of his

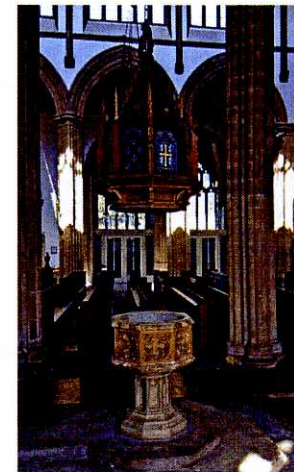




descendants, the centre one at the summit being occupied by the figure of the Saviour. Many fragments of these stone carved figures survive, with remnants of colour and gilding, and an archaeological reconstruction and presentation is to be made when funds become available.

### St Cuthbert's Chapel

The large chapel adjoining the south transept originally contained an altar dedicated to St Cuthbert. During recent repairs the superb compartmental ceiling of 1470, which for long had been concealed by plasterwork, probably from the 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century, was revealed. The unpainted enriched panels, 32 in all, and in many different geometric designs, deserve careful study. Seating was removed from this chapel in 1965 and it is now used as a children's area. A small window to the porch reminds us that this was formerly an external wall.





## KING AND STATE



## BISHOP AND CHURCH



## CITY OF WELLS ARMS

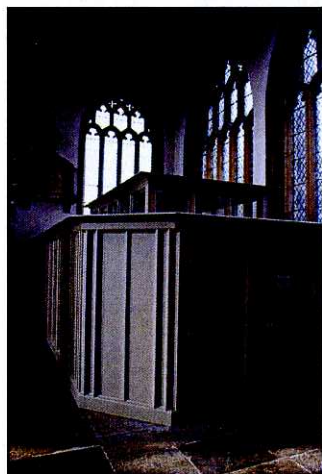


## CHOIR STALL ENDS

In this chapel used to be displayed the Barkham Flagons, with engraved Arms, presented to the church in 1639 by Ezekiel Barkham, who was at one time Lord Mayor of London. His widow founded the Blue School, now a modern comprehensive school lying north of the relief road. The flagons and the Mattock Dish were stolen in 1994 and subsequently were offered to an antique dealer; the engraving and hallmarks had been erased, later hallmarks added and the surface chased and gilded.

## The South Nave Aisle and Parish Office

In 1962 the benches were removed from the south nave aisle, so that it could be used for a bookstall and information centre, and more recently the Parish Office was created. This

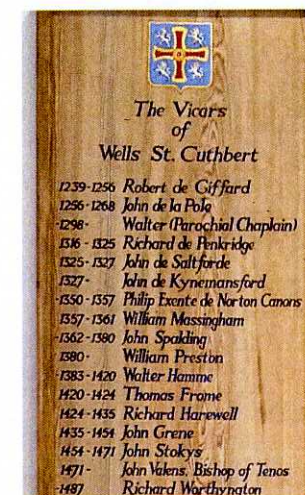


matches the kitchen opposite, deliberately quiet in design so as not to compete with the splendid mediaeval fabric. Here also is found the Parish Chest and the font, with 15<sup>th</sup> century cover carrying an inscription recording its 18<sup>th</sup> century repainting, including the ciphers and coats of arms. Cut into the broad pier at the south-east end of the aisle is the doorway to former rood screen, and below this a display case containing a carved and painted stone Bishop's head with mitre, probably part of the destroyed reredos to the main altar.



## Some Memorials

The church, as was customary, contains various memorials, as floor slabs or more ornately on the walls, mainly from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and later. The most striking, beneath the tower, and more readily appreciated since the re-ordering, is the large, painted stone monument in the classical style, with Corinthian columns framing a deep niche, with the lifelike figure of Henry Luellin, who died in 1614. He was a benefactor of the city, responsible for Llewellyn's Almshouses, sited immediately north of the church on Priest Row. Opposite the memorial is a list of vicars, the earliest recorded being Robert de Giffard, inducted in 1239. Of the wall monuments the most poignant is a small mural tablet recording the death at the age of 19 in 1615 of a young German student who came to England to learn the language. A small brass in a classical stone frame in the south



transept commemorates Francis Hayes, died 1623 aged 34.; here also a lias stone tablet to Richard Comes and a large plain black marble slab of 1683 to Brigetta Coward. The west end of the nave has a series of large floor slabs, often beautifully lettered, mainly from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and, beside the font, clearly lettered, a memorial to Charles Thurlby, 1683. Note the large unbroken floorslab, not even fully exposed, to John Irish, 1701, in the north choir aisle.

## The Church of St Cuthbert and the City Corporation

The corporation was originally concerned as much with religious and charitable duties as with those of local administration, and from this arose that close association between Church and City which continues today. The Corporation until recently appointed one of the churchwardens; records show that from 1378 to 1581 they appointed both; the right of nomination appears to have been the prerogative of the Mayor rather than the Corporation as a whole, and this practice lasted until 1834. By tradition the Vicar serves the office of Chaplain to the Mayor.



## BOSSES FROM ROOF OF SOUTH PORCH



WOLF ATTACKING A LAMB



SOW AND PIGLETS

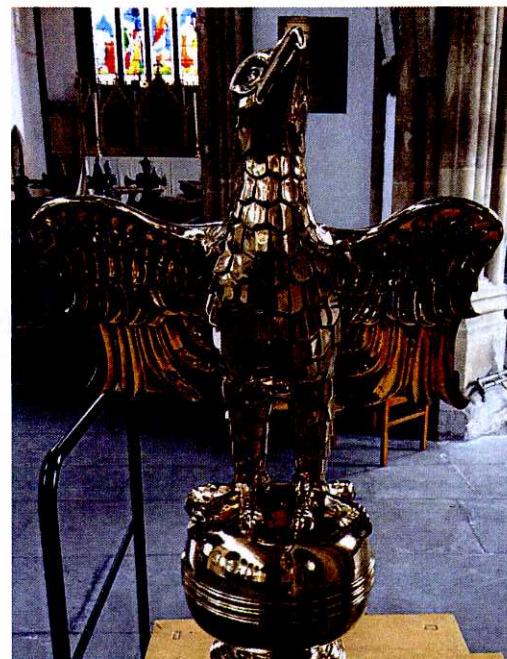
The Corporation pews, which include a carving of the City Arms on one of the bench ends, now occupy the front row of the nave seating. They are reputed to have been made from one of the screens of Glastonbury Abbey.

### The Bells

Since 1888 there have been eight bells in the tower, augmented from the original six when Wells Amateur Bellringing Society donated two trebles to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. At that time the old fifth—now seventh—was recast; the bells were re-hung in a new frame, with new ball bearings, in 1934. In 1992 the peal was hung with new fittings, and the fifth, dated 1664, and being cracked, was put on display in the south transept. The oldest bell was cast in 1624, and the tenor weighs nearly 28 hundredweight.

### The Lectern

The splendid lectern was manufactured in Frome in 1892 by Singer & Co in commemoration of two unknown brothers..



ST CUTHBERT, NORTH AISLE WINDOW



## The Mediaeval Church : an Evocation

Approaching St Cuthbert's 500 years ago, much of the masonry would look to us very new; the most notable difference from now would be the existence of the second tower, at the crossing, but otherwise the building would be immediately recognisable. However, if we try to imagine the interior at this time, shortly before the depredations of the Reformation and subsequent changes in furnishings and décor, we would experience something of a magnificence equal to anything in Western Europe at that time. The immediate difference to strike us would be the profusion of colour-walls, complex ceilings, statues, monuments in stone, all painted in the brightest colours then available, and windows brilliant with light filtered through figured stained glass, mostly illustrating Bible scenes (the "Bible of the poor" for those unable to read or have access to rare printed books) but also perhaps some windows commemorating donors or local guilds, or in "grisaille" - the nearest approach to clear glass then available. By the nave entry by the south door the stone font, which is still there, though bereft of its colour; throughout the church-probably fairly new at this time—a smart array of oak benches with carved ends, some with poppy-heads or other enrichment, such as still survive in the Corporation pews.

At the west end the lofty tower arch, fully open to the stone-vaulted tower, and to the east a similar arch to the broad central tower, possibly with a vivid "doom" fresco. Here also a series of three delicate carved oak screens separating the eastern arm from the laity—the central one carrying the Rood-carved and painted figures of Christ on the Cross, flanked by the Virgin and St. John—and three altars. To right and left further screens to the large flanking chapels each with an altar; in the church at this time were at least 12 altars, and possibly more. By the chancel arch, in the position now held by its Carolean replacement, a painted stone pulpit, like those surviving in the church at Long Sutton and elsewhere in the Diocese. Under the central tower—perhaps already showing some signs of the strains which led to its eventual demolition—screens enclosing each transept, and here, richly emblazoned in colour and gold, the two glorious reredoses above stone altars with cross and candles.

Magnificent though all of this would seem to us-and how much more so to the mediaeval worshipper- the fullest richness of decoration would be reserved for the eastern half of the church, screened away from the populace and scarcely available to them. Here the complex liturgy would be celebrated in great pomp, the central space being terminated by a grand stained glass five-light window representing Christ's Crucifixion, above yet another great stone reredos, now almost completely disappeared (a few fragments do remain). Here is the high altar, a solid stone slab several inches thick, carrying five consecration crosses, and bearing cross and candles, beneath a brightly painted ceiling or Ciborium and with a never-extinguished sanctuary light; on either side of this space with its choristers' seating and lecterns, further timber screens to the chancel chapels, yet again with eastern altars. With incense, bells and chant, led by rich enrobed priests and acolytes, the whole experience could not have failed to overawe the citizen, and there is no wonder that during the ecclesiastical turbulence under Henry, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth, many parishioners bewailed the loss of so much of importance to their daily lives. Remember also that in addition to attending the stipulated services, parishioners

saw the church as the centre of the community, both figuratively and actually, with activities taking place, not only in the porch but also in the body of the building, which in later centuries were regarded as scandalous and irreverent.

Today there is a sense of great openness and light in the building, and since the recent re-ordering, St Cuthbert's is again very much the centre of community and welcome, with opportunities for much beyond the Christian liturgy. We can hope that the same may be possible in 500 years from now !

## The Old Vicarage

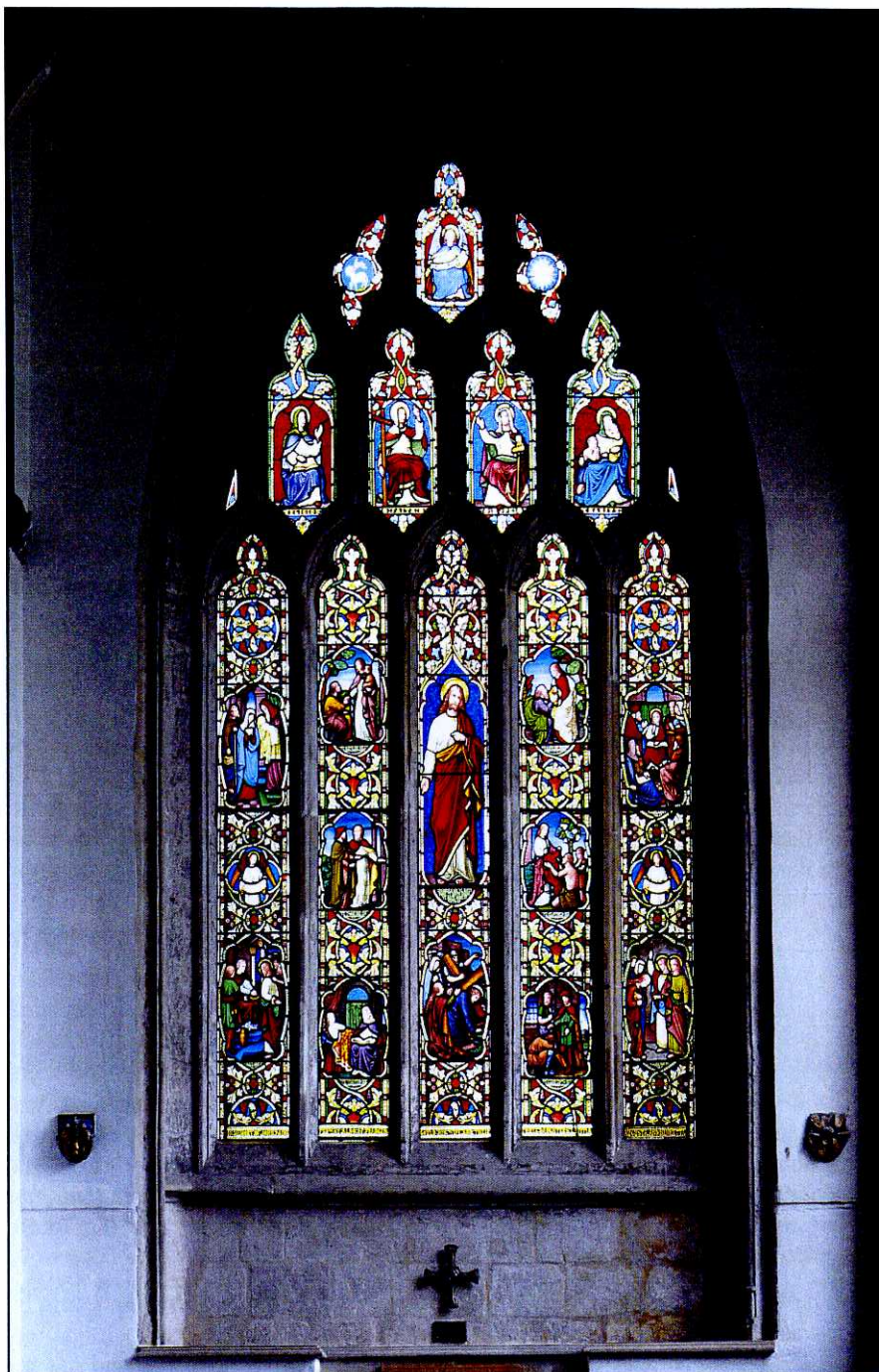
The grandest house in St Cuthbert's Street, set back from the road and opposite the church, is the vicarage. The present building has an 18th century front, with a wing containing the staircase, to which was later added a double-roofed full-height extension, creating a substantial rectangular plan. The noble front has the original sash windows with thick glazing bars, whilst the roof retains three dormers with paired leaded casements, and the rear (south) front has later sashes set to stone moulded architraves with small keystones.



The slated roofs run to an eaves cornice on the street frontage but the rear elevation has a lofty parapet. This, and the window details, indicate the differing stages of development. The interior contains large and lofty main rooms and has many original Georgian features, including timber panelling, working panelled shutters to the windows, cornices and fire surrounds. A dog-leg staircase in oak, with painted scrolled strings and turned balusters, three to each tread, rises through both storeys.

St Cuthbert's Vicarage is a significant adjunct to the church, complementary to it but of a different age, and important in the architecture of the city of Wells. Sadly it was too large and too costly to maintain. It was unsuited to modern day clergy life and has recently been sold.





ST CUTHBERT'S CROSS

### Acknowledgements

Text: Patrick Brown, updated from an original by Peter Stroud.

Colour Plate of Nave : TWM

All Other Photographs : Graham Barrow

Route for Visitors: Updated from an original by Peter Stroud

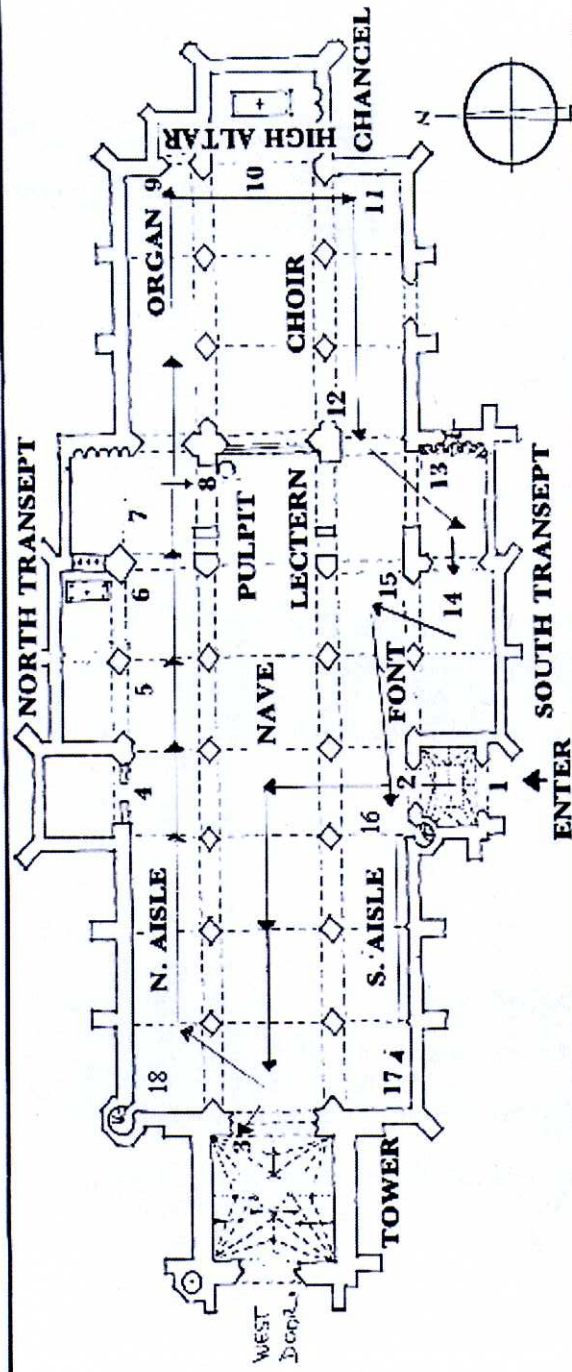
Layout : Graham Barrow and Ruth Harris

Published by The Vicar, Churchwardens and PCC of St Cuthbert

Updated and reprinted March 2016.



# A ROUTE FOR VISITORS



- 1 South Porch.  
Note ceiling bosses.
- 2 The Great Mediaeval Door.
- 3 Nave Arch to Tower.  
Bluellin's Monument.  
View from West to East of  
Nave Ceiling.
- 4 The Treasury.  
Note Coats of Arms of  
Charles 1st and in (5)  
Charles 2nd.

- 5 Holy Trinity Chapel. (M.U.)
- 6 Aubry and Reserved  
Sacrament.
- 7 St. Catherine's Chapel.
- 8 Jacobean Pulpit 1636.
- 9 Armorials on Clergy Vestry  
Wall.
- 10 High Altar Reredos 1867.
- 11 St. Martin's Chapel and Book  
of Remembrance.

- 12 Cased Bible of 1634.
- 13 Tanner's or Lady Chapel.  
The 'Jesse' Reredos 1470.
- 14 St. Cuthbert's Chapel and  
Panellled Ceiling (about 1470).
- 15 The Rood Staircase and the  
16 The Parish Chest 1640.
- 17 Parish Office and Bookstall
- 18 Kitchen