

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 13th 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 14th 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 15th 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 16th 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.



