

Willen St Mary Magdalene

Statement of Significance v. 1

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Definitions

The definitions of value used in this document are based on the *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance* issued by Historic England.

Evidential value	The potential of the building, its features or furnishings to yield evidence about past human activity, in particular to provide exemplars of particular styles, techniques or craftsmen.
Historical value	The ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through the building to the present. It tends to be illustrative of particular historical trends or associative with particular people or events.
Aesthetic and architectural value	The potential for people to draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.
Communal value	The meaning of the building, its contents or furnishings for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory.
Liturgical value	The importance of particular features or furnishings within the liturgical traditions of the Church of England.

Significance/value	Definition
None	<p>This has no value; its loss would have no effect on the importance of the whole building and site.</p> <p>Note that building elements only rarely fall into this category - when they do it will generally be because they are very recent, poorly executed, and damaging to the historic building.</p>
Low	This has a small amount of value. There may be many of its type, or it may be heavily damaged, or poorly executed.
Moderate	This is of middling value; it may be of good quality, of particular local or liturgical value, or by a well known craftsman but is unlikely to be the only or best example of this type.
High	This is very important, perhaps even on a national level. It may be specifically mentioned in secondary sources.

Executive Summary

Willen St Mary is a brick built church of 1680 designed by Robert Hooke in the Dutch style, for Dr Richard Busby. It is the only known church entirely of Hooke's design. The building replaced a medieval church, demolition rubble from which may be present on the north side of the churchyard.

This unique church retains an almost complete interior of 1680, alteration to which has largely been confined to the east end, where an apse was added in 1862. Original features of 1680 include an elaborate Baroque plaster ceiling, box pews, a pulpit and clerk's desk, and a fine font. The work to add the apse was unusually sympathetic in approach, and has not substantially harmed or altered the Restoration character of the building. This character, and the building as a whole, is of **high significance** for its evidential, historical, and architectural value.

1. Statutory Designations

1.1 National Heritage List for England

The following text is taken verbatim from the online Historic England National Heritage List for England. Oxford Heritage Partnership is not responsible for the contents of this listing or any errors therein, including typographical and spelling errors. For information on corrections and minor amendments, please see: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/minor-amendments/>.

Grade: I

List Entry Number: 1160998

Date first listed: 17 November 1966

Description: Parish Church. 1678 by Robert Hooke for Dr. Busby, headmaster of Westminster School. W. tower, nave and C19 apse. Red brick with stone dressings, plinth coping, chamfered quoins, architraves and cills to windows, moulded cornices. Copper roofs. The tower has two main stages, the upper with stone Corinthian pilasters at angles supporting entablature and parapet with stone pineapples on plinths at corners, each face has a tall arched upper window over a smaller segmental headed window. The lower stage has chamfered quoins and large recessed arched doorway on ground floor approached by a flight of semi-circular stone steps and a round window above the doorway. Flanking the tower are one storey sections with window on outer face and parapet on W. side swept up to tower with pineapple on outer corner. The nave is pedimented at E. end with bull's eye window in tympanum and has three tall arched windows on N. and S. sides. The apse, added in 1862, is of similar materials and has three similar windows. The interior has elaborate plaster decoration, a panelled dado and pews, the floor of the nave has a diagonal pattern of white stone and black tiles. The contemporary pulpit on the S. side of the nave has been slightly altered and the reading desk is supported on an elaborate panel of wrought iron. The organ case is probably contemporary. The font consists of a bowl of white marble carved with cherubs heads, and drapery standing on a green Irish marble baluster and an ogee shaped wooden cover carved with swags of fruit and flowers with a vase finial.

1.2 Conservation area

The site is situated in Willen Conservation Area, first designated 8 February 1978, reviewed 24 March 2020. The review document is available at <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/M19133%20Willen%20CAR%20Mar%202023.pdf>

2. Historical Context

2.1 Willen

Willen is a small village on the northern edge of Milton Keynes, on the west bank of the River Ouzel. The earliest evidence of settlement in the area dates to the late Iron Age¹, when there appears to have been a Romano-British industrial settlement just to the north of the current village, near Caldecote Farm. A Roman road ran past the settlement, continuing south from Willen towards Little Horwood. The settlement was abandoned in the late Roman period, and the area seems to have remained largely unsettled until the 11th century, when Willen formed part of Caldecote in the hundred of Sigelai (later Seckloe/Secklow). The medieval village developed around a crossroads of the old Roman road (north-south route) with a crossing of the River Ouzel (east-west route). By 1292 it was large enough to warrant a church served by a vicar; the church valued at £2 6s 8d and the vicarage at £1 13s 4d - the latter considered poor enough to be exempt from ecclesiastical taxation.²

A manor of two hides was held by Philip de Kaynes in the mid-12th century and, by the end of the century, had passed the de Salford family. From the Salfords, it passed to Rose de Verdon in the early-13th century; the de Verdon family would hold Willen manor until at least the mid-14th century. There is no evidence for the manorial ownership between 1346 and 1499, when it was conveyed by Thomas Malyns to John Mordaunt of Turvey, MP and speaker of the House of Commons. After a number of 17th-century conveyances, it was sold to Colonel Robert Hammond of Chertsey, a committed Parliamentarian who died in 1654. In 1672, Hammond's daughters sold the manor to Dr Richard Busby; during his period of ownership, Busby oversaw the rebuilding of the parish church. Busby died in 1695, bequeathing Willen manor to the management of trustees who were to use the annual income for the relief and support of poor ministers in Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire, Middlesex, and Buckinghamshire. There was also a yearly sum left for the annual delivery of thirty lectures by the vicar of Willen in the parish church, and stipulating that the vicar was always to be a student of Westminster and Christ Church, Oxford. The residue of the estate was left for the purchase of property near Willen for charitable uses. The trustees leased the manor site and it appears to have been used as a farm. In the 19th century the village remained small, with a parish population in 1861 of 80 people in 18 houses. Most parishioners worked in agriculture or supporting trades; the village had two large farms, one of 450 acres (the Manor Farm) and another of 700 acres. There was also a small cottage industry producing lace. A school was established by 1871, whose mistress resided in the vicar's household.

The village remained largely unchanged with minimal population growth through the 19th century and into the 20th century, until the establishment of the new city of Milton Keynes in the 1970's. Associated works around Willen saw the old north-south main road closed to traffic and

¹ Much earlier settlement is evident elsewhere in Milton Keynes, but there appears to be no evidence of it in or around Willen.

² Denton, Jeff et al. *Taxatio*. Published by The Digital Humanities Institute, University of Sheffield; 2014. Available at: <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/taxatio/benkey?benkey=LI.BU.NE.02>

replaced by a footpath through the gardens around the new Willen Lakes,³ the old east road truncated by V11 Tongwell Street, and a large new housing estate wrapped around the northern side of the village. However, the core of the historic village, centred on the church, remained intact. In 1978 the Manor Farm (formerly the manor house) was purchased for the establishment of a hospice, which continues on the site today. The 18th century vicarage, rebuilt in 1930's and again following in 1946, became part of a Priory for the Society of the Sacred Mission in the 1970's. The priory provided the vicar for the church until 1985; in 1997 it was relocated to a smaller house in the village, and moved again, this time to Durham in 2019. In 2011 the parish, amalgamated with Stantonbury, had a population of just under 44,000.



Above: OS map showing Willen as surveyed in 1881 (map reproduced with permission from the National Library of Scotland)

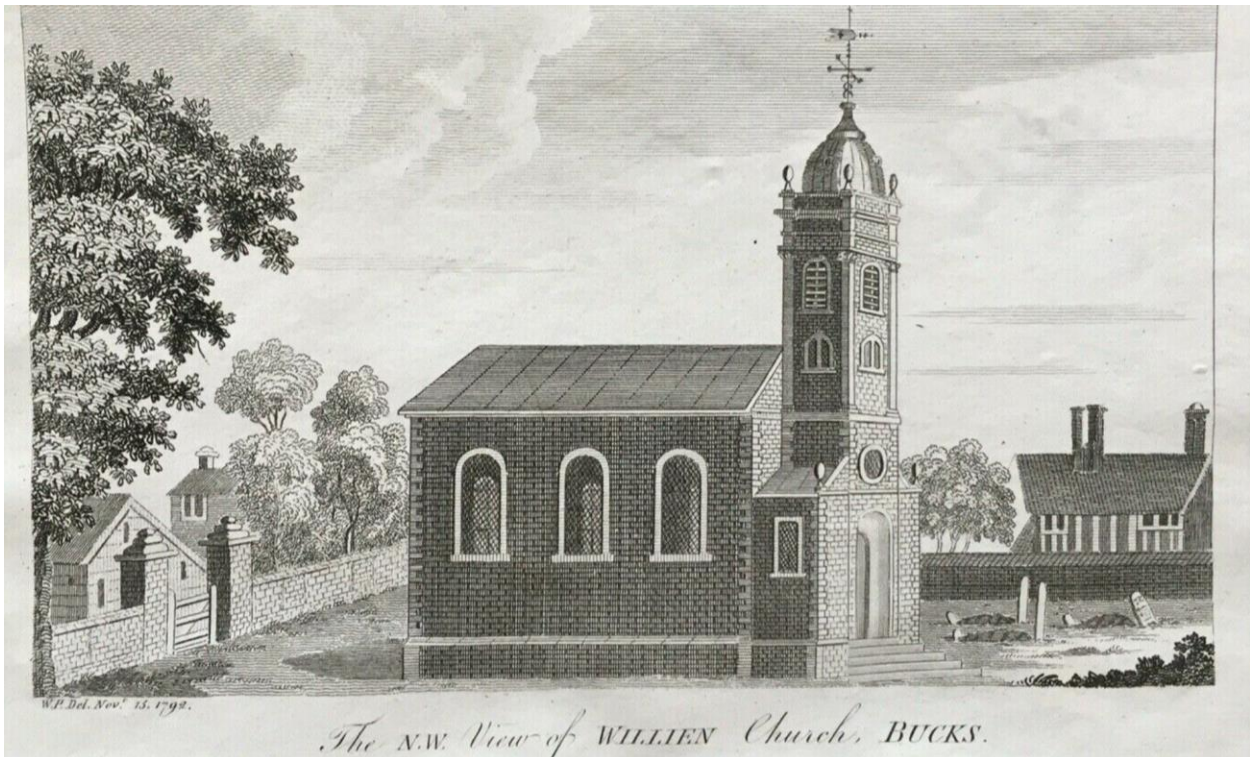
³ Created from and fed by the River Ouzel; the old river crossing was destroyed by the works.



Above: OS 1885-1900 overlaid on modern aerial imagery - note extent of modern development on the north side of the village and in surrounding areas, due to establishment of Milton Keynes. Routes south and east of the village have been truncated and/or removed, leaving the village a quiet, if much enlarged, residential enclave.

2.2 St Mary Magdalene

Although a church is known to have existed in the 12th century, the medieval church was demolished in 1680, and all above-ground traces of it lost. The new church was commissioned by Dr Richard Busby, headmaster of Westminster School and owner of Willen Manor. Although it has sometimes been speculated that the new church was designed by Busby's former pupil Sir Christopher Wren,⁴ it was in fact the work of another of Busby's pupils, Robert Hooke. Hooke's original design was for a simple rectangular nave with a west tower topped by a cupola. The tower was flanked by two small rooms, one of which served as a library housing books donated by Busby and, in the 18th century, by Reverend James Hume, rector of Bradwell.



Above: A perspective of the new church published in the Gentleman's Magazine in 1792 (vol.62 issue 12)

In her study of Hooke's architectural work, Margaret Batten examined his diaries and discovered the following men (identified by surname only) who worked on Willen church:

- Carpenters: Bates, Hayward, Smith?
- Bricklayer: Horn
- Blacksmith: Walker
- Painter: Stevenson?

⁴ For example, this is stated in the Victoria County History account of Willen 'Parishes : Willen', in *A History of the County of Buckingham: Volume 4*, ed. William Page (London, 1927), pp. 502-505. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/bucks/vol4/pp502-505> [accessed 3 August 2023].

- Other craftsmen: Tufnell, Plucknett, Smethwick⁵

In 1862 an apse was added to the east of the 1680 nave and the cupola was removed from the tower, substantially altering Hooke's intention for the building. The majority of the 17th-century furniture and fittings were retained. Since that date, there have been no further additions to the building.

Restoration work began on the building in 1956 and continued until 1970. During that time, copper roofs were replaced with lead, electric heating was installed under the pews, and stonework repairs were carried out. In 1970, the interior was redecorated, the plasterwork repaired and, c. 1978, the 19th-century stained glass was replaced with clear modern glass. Minor later works in the 1970s and 1980s included rebuilding of the churchyard walls, further redecoration and a new lighting scheme.

Between 1150 and 1524, the advowson was held by Tickford Priory. It then formed part of the foundation of Cardinal College, Oxford and its refoundation as Henry the Eighth's College. The advowson reverted to the Crown in 1545. It was granted to Richard Busby in 1676 and subsequently remained with the Trustees of Dr Richard Busby's Charity. Between 1974 and 1985, the Society of the Sacred Mission took responsibility for the parish and provided the vicar. In 1985, the Bishop of Buckingham was asked to appoint a priest in charge.

2.3 Parish Timeline

1680	Medieval church building demolished and replaced by a new church designed by Robert Hooke
1683	Ring of three bells installed in church
c. 1862	Apse added to the church, cupola removed from tower, new choir furniture installed
1956-70	Copper roofs replaced with lead, electric heating installed, stonework repairs
1970	Interior repairs and redecoration
1972	New chamber organ installed
1973	Society of the Sacred Mission move into the original vicarage and take on responsibility for the parish
c. 1978	Replacement of 19th-century stained glass with clear glazing
1985	Village population begins to grow as Milton Keynes expands; parish returns to the care of a priest in charge
1988	Redecoration and new lighting scheme

⁵ M.I. Batten, *The Architecture of Dr. Robert Hooke F.R.S*, The Volume of the Walpole Society vol.25 (1936-7) p.97 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41830372>

3. Significant individuals

3.1 Robert Hooke (1635-1703)

The following is a necessarily concise biography of Hooke with a focus on his architectural work. For a full biography please refer to the excellent entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography by Patri Pugliese, available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13693>

Robert Hooke was born at Freshwater, Isle of Wight, in 1635 to Cecily Gyles and John Hooke. He was a sickly child, but showed early skill at drawing and at mathematics. After the death of his clergyman father in 1648 he was made apprentice to Sir Peter Lely, a Dutch portrait painter working in London. Hooke was dissatisfied with the arrangement and soon left, going instead to Westminster School, where Dr Busby was headmaster. In 1653 he moved on to Christ Church College, Oxford, as a chorister. There, whilst studying, he would work as an assistant to Robert Boyle. He was awarded his MA in 1662. Hooke went on to publish several scientific works, perhaps the best known of which today is *Micrographia* (1665), detailing in text and drawings the observations Hooke made through his pioneering microscope.

Hooke met Christopher Wren at Oxford around 1655, at a meeting of the club that would later form the core of the Royal Society. The two would remain close friends for life and met almost daily in the 1670's; both held professorships at Gresham, they took their leisure together, and worked closely on a number of architectural projects. Hooke has long been recognised as an impressive and important polymath who made a substantial contribution to the development of science and scientific methods in Restoration Britain. However, he has historically been underappreciated as an architect, it being assumed in many cases that he was responsible only for the survey of sites for which Wren produced the architectural designs. However Aubrey, a contemporary and friend of both men, states in his notes on Hooke that "he built Bedlam, the Physitian's College, Montague-house, the Piller on Fish-street-hill [monument to the Great Fire], and Theatre there; and he is much made use of in designing buildings"⁶ As London City Surveyor from 1666 he was responsible not just for the measuring of sites as the city was rebuilt after the Great Fire, but also work on new buildings and civil infrastructure, including the Fleet Ditch, the design of the bridges over the Ditch at Holborn and Ludgate Hill, the new north bank quay on the Thames, and Snowhill Conduit. In the immediate aftermath of the Great Fire he even produced a completed plan for the rebuilding of London on a grid plan, sadly now lost. M.A.R. Cooper, in the last of their series of three articles on Hooke's work as city surveyor, characterises his contribution thus:

"Although Hooke appears to have had little or no practical experience of architecture or building construction prior to his appointment as City Surveyor, his mechanical genius and practical abilities soon enabled him to take a dominant role among the City Artificers and master craftsmen in supervising rebuilding of private property....He displayed not only an exceptional technical knowledge and understanding, but also took a major role in settling disputes between neighbours

⁶ Aubrey as quoted in M.I. Batten, *The Architecture of Dr. Robert Hooke F.R.S*, The Volume of the Walpole Society vol.25 (1936-7) p.84 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41830372>

*by visiting sites, inspecting buildings that were the sources of contention...and hearing the evidence put forward on both sides...Although Hooke's reports are written in a formal style, it is possible in a few cases to detect his intent to improve the living conditions of the citizens in London by practical means."*⁷

Hooke's chief architectural influences were Dutch and French works of the early 17th century, alongside the classical works delineated in publications such as Vitruvius's *De Architectura*. His style changed very little over the c.20 years he was in practice. Batten notes that Hooke drew fairly indiscriminately from these examples, as would Wren, making it very difficult to distinguish the works and drawings of one from the other on stylistic grounds alone.⁸ Nevertheless he is known to have been the architect for the following works:

1671-7	Monument to the Great Fire of London (with Wren)
1674-80	Montagu House (French style; plans in Vitruvius Britannicus)
1675	Royal College of Physicians
1675	Flamsteed House, Royal Observatory (with Wren)
1675-6	Bedlam Hospital
1676	Merchant Taylor's Hall - screen, King's Chamber, parlour adjoining hall
1678-80	Willen St Mary Magdalene (new church replacing demolished medieval church)
1677	Design for the Pepysian Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge
c.1680	Ragley House
1688-92	Aske's Almshouses, Hoxton

Hooke's long term ill health combined with the pressures of work in his other fields seem to have gradually put a stop to his architectural work in the 1680's. The death of his niece Grace in 1687 had a considerable effect on his character, and he became withdrawn and melancholy in his later years.⁹ His primary interest in his last decade seems to have been medicine, and he

⁷ M.A.R Cooper, *Robert Hooke's Work as Surveyor for the City of London in the Aftermath of the Great Fire - Part three: Settlement of Disputes and Complaints Arising from Rebuilding* in Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London, Vol 52 no.2 (July 1998) p.216-7 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/531857>

⁸ Batten, op.cit, p.88

⁹ Grace's short life deserves more attention than we may give here. She was born in 1660 to Robert's grocer brother, John. Her father was made Mayor of Newport in 1668 and seems to have incurred severe debt whilst in post. In 1670 he sent his daughter to live with her uncle Robert in London; he initially sent money to support her but this soon dried up. The intention may have been to find her a suitor with a good dowry, or perhaps just to transfer the cost of her upbringing. Robert made a number of loans to his brother but these do not seem to have been particularly generous; perhaps in deeper debt, John committed suicide only five months after his second term as mayor ended, in 1678. Robert Hooke's diary records that he "slept with Grace" on 4 June 1676, the first of several recorded occasions that year. From 1677 Grace's name is recorded in the diary in conjunction with a Pisces symbol that is thought to represent a sexual act; one entry with the symbol on 5 March reads "Grace perfecte intime omne". The relationship was not widely known whilst Hooke was alive, but would have been as problematic for contemporaries as it is for us today - the age of consent at the time was 12, but Grace was still very young, and the relationship was clearly illegal under contemporary laws against incest and fornication. Whatever it was, it seems to have been over by 1680; indeed Grace had a illegitimate child with Sir Robert Holmes in 1678, not long after her father's suicide. Nonetheless she continued to live with Hooke as his housekeeper until her death; her daughter Mary was left on the Isle of Wight in the care of the Holmes family.

received a licence to practise medicine from the Bishop of London in 1691. He died on 3 March 1703, leaving a chest containing several thousand pounds to his heir, a cousin, Elizabeth Stephens. He was buried at St Helen's Bishopsgate, with his funeral attended by members of the Royal Society.

3.2 Dr Richard Busby (1606-1695)

Busby was born at Lutton, Lincolnshire, to Richard Busby and his wife Dorothy Robinson, in 1606. Little is known about his parents or their background save that his father was a churchwarden. Richard junior studied at Westminster school and then Christ Church, Oxford, where he took both a BA and an MA. After his MA he remained at Christ Church as tutor specialising in Latin and Greek. In the mid-1630s he had an odd, if brief, flirtation with a career on the stage, acting before Charles I and Henrietta Maria in Cartwright's *Royal Slave*. In 1638 he was provisionally appointed headmaster of his *alma mater* Westminster, and in July 1639 he was made prebend of Cudworth, Wells. As headmaster of Westminster, Busby would have to navigate the complex political and religious climate of the civil war and the Protectorate. His personal views favoured the Royalist cause; he seems to have avoided signing the solemn league and covenant in 1644 and is known to have assisted impoverished Royalists. However, he remained largely neutral in public life, was able to establish a working relationship with the school governors appointed by the Protectorate, and despite some troubles retained his post as headmaster through the Commonwealth and restoration.

After the restoration Busby was returned to his position as a prebend of Wells Cathedral, and was also appointed to a stall at Westminster Cathedral. He was ordained as a priest in 1660, and in the same year was made a Doctor of Divinity at Oxford. In 1672 he was made archdeacon of Westminster. Through his various roles at Westminster Busby took part in the coronations of both Charles II and James II.

Busby was headmaster of Westminster for 56 years, and during his tenure was viewed not only as an adept administrator but a good and reliable teacher; he was trusted by families from across the political spectrum to educate their children. John Dryden, John Locke, Christopher Wren, and Robert Hooke were all taught by Busby. He published several grammars, introduced mathematics as well as modern and oriental languages to the school curriculum. His Latin pronunciation is used at the school to this day.

Busby purchased Willen manor from a bankrupt Parliamentarian family, the Hammonds, in 1672.¹⁰ Four years later he acquired the advowson of Willen church. The structure of the church was reputedly in poor condition, and in 1678 he commissioned his former pupil, Robert Hooke, to provide designs for a new church. The old church was duly demolished, and the new church on the site completed in 1680. Busby also provided the church plate, vestments, and books for a small library at the church; he awarded his rectorial tithe to the vicarage for the support of the vicar. On his death (without heirs) in 1695 Busby bequeathed the manor, then worth £501 annually, to trustees.

¹⁰ Colonel Robert Hammond oversaw Charles I's imprisonment on the Isle of Wight.

Busby's primary concern was always Westminster School; his other obligations at Wells and Willen were a very distant second. Nonetheless, his benefactions left a substantial impact on the church and parish.

4. Setting and Churchyard

A formal rectangular churchyard adjoining the former rectory site. The brick boundary walls are laid in English bond with a pyramidal soldier course; the wall bricks are laid in lime, handmade, and measure 8 ½" x 2 ¼" x 4-4 ¼"; the clay has large aggregate inclusions. To the west and south side of the churchyard, plaques commemorating interment of ashes are fixed to the inside of the wall. In the west wall, in line with the tower are two originally c.1680 brick piers in a roughly neo-classical style bearing the churchyard gates. The gates themselves are c. 1980-1, replacing wooden gates; at the time they were installed the pillars were also repaired. To the wall north of the gate are three stone plaques to members of the Society of the Sacred Mission. To the outer face of the west boundary wall are large buttresses. The north boundary wall is topped by a modern close boarded fence. In the east wall is a gate also of c.1980-1, with piers matching those in the west wall and repaired at the same time. The churchyard walls and gate piers are listed at grade 2.¹¹

Along the north boundary are a small number of English yews in a fairly formal row, with an Irish yew at east end. There are also yews on the south side, though planted less formally. To the south east corner of the churchyard is a group of cherry trees and a cedar.

The level of the churchyard is higher on the north side of the church, particularly alongside the north wall. This appears to be demolition rubble, perhaps related to the pre-1680 church; fragments of clay tile, brick, limestone, flint, and lead window comes lie on the surface. It is recommended that this is investigated archaeologically if any development is planned in the immediate area.



Above: View of the north churchyard looking east

¹¹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1125231?section=official-list-entry>



Above: View of the south churchyard looking west
Below: fragments of building material from surface of north side of churchyard



The south side of the churchyard contains the most marked burials, including a row of rector's graves and c. 5 rows of other headstones, some in ironstone. The latter have lost all their carving and inscriptions due to delamination of the surface. At the east end of the churchyard are a few large family burial plots.



Above: 18th-century headstones to the south side of the church

Though modern development immediately around the church site has been minimal there are structures to the east, south and north. To the east is the former village school, now a residential property, and a small green with the village war memorial. To the north, sharing a boundary with the churchyard, is 5 Milton Road, a large c.18th century property that may historically have been a farmhouse. To the south is the site and the surviving buildings of the grade 2 listed manor. To the west is open ground, with a long lime tree lined avenue leading to the west gate. The avenue is fenced with 19th-century estate fencing. At the end of the avenue is a riveted, blacksmith-made gate, likely also 19th century. Views of the church are largely lost by half way down the avenue due to the tree cover. Longer views are possible across the open fields and playground just to the north; from these positions the church is a key feature of the conservation area.

The setting of the church is of **high significance**, preserving much of the core of the village as it was in the 18th century. The churchyard itself is of **moderate significance**, acting as a fairly blank backdrop for Hooke's pattern-book church. The least significant area of the churchyard in above-ground terms is the northern side, which has been marred by the modern close-boarded fence; nevertheless the archaeological potential of the area should be noted.



Above: Green with carriage circle and war memorial, looking towards the east end of the church



Above left: View along the avenue towards the church, the west door is just visible beneath the tree cover
Above right: View of the church from the fields to the west of the site

5. Exterior

Baroque nave and tower of 1680 with small apse added in 1862. Generally the bricks to the 17th-structure are laid in Flemish bond. The bricks are red handmades, the headers are somewhat vitrified. They measure 7 ¼" - 8 ¾" x 2- 2 ½" x 4-4 ¼". To the apse, the plinth bricks are 19th century standards; above the plinth the bricks match the rest of the building, suggesting that this is material salvaged and reused when the opening was formed in the original east wall. The masonry was originally tuck pointed, but this has worn away in places and not been replicated in the repairs at high level on the south side. The window dressings, string course, quoins, cornice and pediment are in Tottenhoe limestone; there are large areas of replacement and plastic repair due to the inherent issues with this stone, and concrete/hard cement has been used extensively for this work.

The roof to the apse is of copper; that to the rest of the church appears to be lead.

With the exception of the east elevation, all the exterior elevations are of **high significance** due to their prominence in the local landscape, and their **historical, evidential and aesthetic value**. The east elevation, substantial altered in 1862, is of **moderate significance**.

5.1 North elevation

At the west end of the elevation is the 1680 tower with its ground floor north projection originally housing the vestry. The north-west corner of the vestry is topped with a pineapple finial. The tower itself is of three stages; the lower two have ashlar quoins, the upper Corinthian pilasters supporting a deep moulded cornice with parapet above. The tower is topped with four pineapple finials; it originally had a cupola but this was removed in 1814.¹² The north elevation of the nave is quite plain, the three large round headed windows have moulded limestone dressings but no tracery. The nave quoins match those to the lower stages of the tower, the original limestone contrasting with extensive patches of repair in a hard light grey mortar. At the east end the tiny apse of 1862 is barely noticeable; its plinth matches those of the nave and its windows are slender round headed lancets, narrower versions of the nave fenestration.



Above: North elevation of the church

¹² H M Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840* p.535 (Yale University Press, 2008)

5.2 East elevation

The east elevation is the only one on which the tiny 1862 apse is an appreciable feature. It has three slender round headed windows with moulded limestone surrounds; the glass is plain and leaded. The plinth uses 19th century brick but the rest of the structures appears to use 17th century brick apparently salvaged when the original east wall was opened up. The gable end of that original east wall has deep limestone cornices creating a pediment, at the centre of which is a round ventilator in a limestone surround. This allows air passage to the void above the internal plaster ceiling in the nave.



Above: East elevation of the church with apse of c. 1862. Note the different brick below plinth level

5.3 South elevation

The south elevation precisely mirrors the north, with the exception of a high level band of modern repointing to the nave which has not replicated the original tuck pointing and somewhat disrupts the uniformity of the masonry here.



Above: South elevation of the church. Note the jarring effect at high level on the nave wall, the result of a different pointing style

5.4 West elevation

The main feature of the west elevation is naturally the three stage west tower, with its small flanking wings originally containing a vestry (north) and a library (south) tied to the tower with rising curves. The west door is set in a limestone apsidal recess, which Pevsner notes matches the south doorway by Wren at St Mary-le-Bow.¹³ The door itself is in oak in a classical style, with a gilded beading and fixed tympanum. The bottom two stages of the tower have bulky, almost rusticated quoins, the upper Corinthian pilasters. Cornices are deep, and dressed with lead on weathering surfaces. The roof, missing its cupola since 1814, has pineapple finials to the parapet. The fenestration is fairly simple, with a round window in the central stage above the door, and then two openings with shallowly arched heads and broken by a central mullion to the upper stage. The lower of these is glazed with clear glass, the upper has louvers to the bell chamber. From the churchyard path there are five original limestone steps up to the circular platform by the west door. A flanking ramp was added to the south of the steps in the 20th century and hidden behind low brick walls. This is mirrored on the north side by additional steps.



Left: the church as viewed from the south-west c.1913

¹³ Pevsner and Williamson, *Buildings of England: Buckinghamshire* p.562 (Yale, 2003) - as noted in section 4, Wren and Hooke worked closely on their architectural designs and this might be better regarded as a collaboratively designed feature rather than the one copying the work of the other.



Above: West elevation of the church, dominated by the tower and flanking vestries

6. Interior

Although it is possible to distinguish the choir on the basis of the furnishing, and the apse is architecturally identifiable, there is very little separation of spaces and the interior has a highly cohesive appearance and character. The interior was generally repaired and redecorated in 1970 and 1988.

6.1 Nave



Above: View from the west door along the interior of the church. Note that subtle distinctions between spaces, largely evident in the flooring and furniture

The nave is of three bays; the easternmost of which is functionally the choir. The roof structure is not visible, but nominal trusses are delineated by bands of foliate plasterwork creating a barrelled and coffered ceiling. In the middle of each of the large coffered panels are lively gilded foliate bosses. Aligned on the centre of each bay is a plaster cherub. Other motifs include gilded scallop shells and open books; the date 1680 also appears divided across two gilded shields. The nominal trusses rest on corbels with acanthus leaf and egg and dart mouldings borne by another cherub. The cherubs are quite lively and face in different directions. The plain plaster ceiling panels are painted pink, in a slightly darker shade than that to the walls; the paint scheme dates to the late-20th century.



Above: View of the plasterwork nave ceiling

The floor is of diamond set limestone flags with darts of black quarry tiles; as a whole it dates to the 19th century (likely 1862) though the limestone flags are reset material of 1680. The black quarry tile darts were likely inset to make good losses of the original flooring material. In the centre of the central aisle is an inset 19th century heating duct with cast iron grilles. To the easternmost bay the floor is original, composed of diamond set limestone flags, slightly raised above the level of the 19th-century floor to the west. Beneath the nave pews is a platform in pine, with an oak edging, also dating to c.1862. Beneath the choir seats is a timber platform covered with carpeted; this probably also dates to 1862 or later.

The nave walls are plastered and painted a pale pink above sill level. Below sill level, the walls are panelled in oak. The majority of this panelling is original; the stiles and muntins have bolection mouldings. Around the present organ of c. 1972, there is some 20th-century infill panelling; the design copies the earlier material but it can be identified by the poorer quality construction details.



The organ is enclosed by original low gates of c.1680, in a neoclassical style with pierced square framing; the hinges are "H" hinges at the bottom and inverted "HL" to the top. The gates are the same design as the chancel or sanctuary gates pictured in a sepia painting of 1862: they may be those gates relocated, or all the gates may have been to the same design.¹⁴

Above: the 17th century organ case and enclosure as pictured in *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Buckinghamshire, Volume 2: North* (RCHME, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1913), p.48.

¹⁴ Buckinghamshire Record Office, PR_231/3/4.



Above: View from the chancel arch looking along the nave towards the west door

To the west wall, the recessed tower arch is entirely plain and slightly rounded at the impostos to echo the exterior west entrance. The west doorway is tall and narrow with a fixed oak tympanum, sadly somewhat defaced by modern cabling. The two leaf oak door within it also dates to 1680. At eye height is a pierced ornamental ironwork panel, in a fretwork style, with a glass panel fitted into it at a later date. The door retains its original iron L shaped hinges, but the current lock is a later insertion, likely 18th or early-19th century. The original lock plate is still on the northern leaf of the door. To the west wall, above the door, a six pointed star on a shield in an oval moulded cartouche.

To the north wall are three round headed windows in deep reveals with circular venting holes to their sills. The glass is set in iron frames and dates to c.1970, when the 19th century stained glass was replaced with clear quarries. Between the central and easternmost windows is a tall, narrow, round-headed organ niche. To the south wall are three more windows mirroring those to the north. The 1680 east wall was removed and replaced with a chancel arch when the apse was added in 1862.

The nave is of **high significance** due to its **evidential, historical and aesthetic value**.



Above left: Eastern face of the west doors to the nave
Above right: Decorative ironwork panel to the west door

6.2 Apse



Above: View of the choir with small apse beyond. Note also the 17th-century limestone flags in the foreground of the image

A small apse added in 1862 possibly by T. H Lewis. Its Baroque plaster ceiling roughly follows the precedent of the coffered ceiling over the nave, but here the foliate plaster detail and cherubs are less well executed.



Above: Junction between the nave and apse showing the subtle differences between the plasterwork decoration

The floor level rises by three black marble steps from the choir. The floor is of diamond set black and white marble flags, with a margin of reset limestone flags of c.1680. The walls are panelled below sill level; the designer clearly aimed to copy the 17th-century nave panelling but did not attain the same quality: the bolection moulding is roughly tacked on and the panels are loose in many places. To the north and south sides of the apse panels have been removed to allow the installation of heaters; heat from these has caused shrinkage and shaking in the panelling above.

The windows are plain round headed lancets, narrow versions of the nave windows.¹⁵

The 19th-century apse is unusually respectful of the Baroque style of the original church and is of **moderate-high significance** due to its **evidential value**.

¹⁵ Stained glass panels believed to be by Arthur O'Connor were removed from the apse windows c. 1978, one survives in the stained glass collection at Ely Cathedral
<https://stainedglassmuseum.com/catshow.php?func=show&seq=0&collno=ELYGM%3A1978.5>

6.3 Base of the tower

The base of the tower serves as the west porch. The floor is covered with limestone flags of c.1680. The flat ceiling is plastered and painted white with a central timber bell hatch. The walls are also painted white. The east and west walls are entirely taken up by the entrance doors. To the north, two steps lead up to a square-headed doorway giving access to the north vestry. The oak door with its riveted-in hinges is likely original; the latch and lock date to the 19th century. A plaque east of the doorway refers to a Benthall family vault; this is unlikely to be in its original position but does prove that there is an intramural burial vault somewhere in the church. To the south is a matching doorway and door, also of c.1680; here the steps are worn where those to the north side have been replaced. On the north side of the door the jambs are peeling revealing that the walls in the west entrance were originally decorated with a yellow limewash.

The base of the tower retains some of its original features but it is a fairly utilitarian space that was not designed with a processional function in mind; it is of **moderate significance** due to its **evidential value**.



Above: View west through the base of the tower

6.4 North vestry

In the south-west corner, against and partially within the north wall of the tower, rise the stairs to the bell chamber; these are accessed from the west side of the doorway. The steps and dressings are in limestone: if any material from the medieval church was reused it is here that it is most likely. The inner vestry door has been removed. The vestry itself has a concrete floor covered with carpet. The walls are plastered and painted white; the flat ceiling is also painted white. To the north wall is a single window; the reveal is panelled in softwood and, on the west side, has the remains of an original shutter. The window is glazed with square quarries of modern glass.

The north vestry space as a whole is of **low significance**.



Above left: Stairs to the bell chamber rising through the thickness of the wall

Above right: View along the north vestry towards the west wall. Note the surviving shutter and timber panelling to the window

6.5 South vestry

Inside the vestry, the doorway is deeply splayed to create a dramatic apsidal recess, matching the external west door. Given the more elaborate appearance of this vestry, it seems likely that this, not the north vestry, originally housed the library of books donated by Robert Hooke.¹⁶ The ashlar work around the door and to the north wall is exposed and unpainted. The other walls have been plastered and painted white. The floor could not be inspected closely due to the carpet covering, but seems to be concrete. The flat boarded pine ceiling dates to the early 20th century. The single window to the south wall matches that in the north vestry but does not retain a shutter or any panelling. To the east wall is a 20th-century built-in cupboard.

The south vestry is of **low-moderate significance**.



Above left: View along the south vestry towards the east wall

Above right: The door to the south vestry set within its dramatic arch

¹⁶ The library was subsequently moved to the vicarage and lost in a fire in the mid-1940s.

7. Furniture and Fittings

There is a particularly high level of survival of furniture and fittings dating to the original building of 1680.



7.1 Font

Baroque font; white marble bowl on a black marble stem and base, an oak cover. Cherubs, swags and foliate detail to the marble bowl. Characterful cherubs and swags of fruits and flowers to the cover which is topped by an urn shaped finial. The cover has been attributed to Bates, one of the carpenters identified in Hooke's diary as working for him on Willen church.¹⁷ **High significance** due to its **evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal value.**



¹⁷ It appears that Hooke worked with at least two carpenters with the surname Bates (possibly members of the same family); see Matthew Walker, *Architectus Ingenio: Robert Hooke, the Early Royal Society, and the Practice of Architecture* (2019), <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/14136/1/516566.pdf>. It is unclear which "Bates" worked at Willen.

7.2 Altar and altar rails

An open framed oak altar with twisted baluster legs and a tacked on moulding. The marquetry to the top has been thickly varnished. The RCHME dates it to the late 17th-century.¹⁸ If this date is correct then the altar would be of **high significance**. However, the tacked on moulding is suggestive of, at least, later alteration.

In the 20th century, altar rails were inserted under the chancel arch. They roughly match the choir stall fronts. A plaque notes they were placed in memory of Geraldine Frances Shipman, wife of the vicar Malcolm Parker Shipman, d. 1931. They are of **moderate significance**.

7.3 Pulpit

Against the south wall of the nave, between the choir and nave seating, a three decker pulpit of 1680 with alterations including the loss of the sounding board and the lowering of the whole structure. The pulpit is of oak with marquetry panels. It is of **high significance** due to its **evidential and aesthetic value**.



¹⁸ 'Willen', in *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Buckinghamshire, Volume 2, North* (London, 1913), pp. 330-331. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/rchme/bucks/vol2/pp330-331> [accessed 9 August 2023].

7.4 Trestles

Two loose trestles in the choir area at the east end of the nave; one either side of the choir. Oak with turned baluster legs and moulded tops. These could have been used as rails, or as short benches, and date to the 17th-18th century. **Moderate-high significance** due to their **evidential value**.



Above: One of the trestles in its current position in the choir

7.5 Stalls

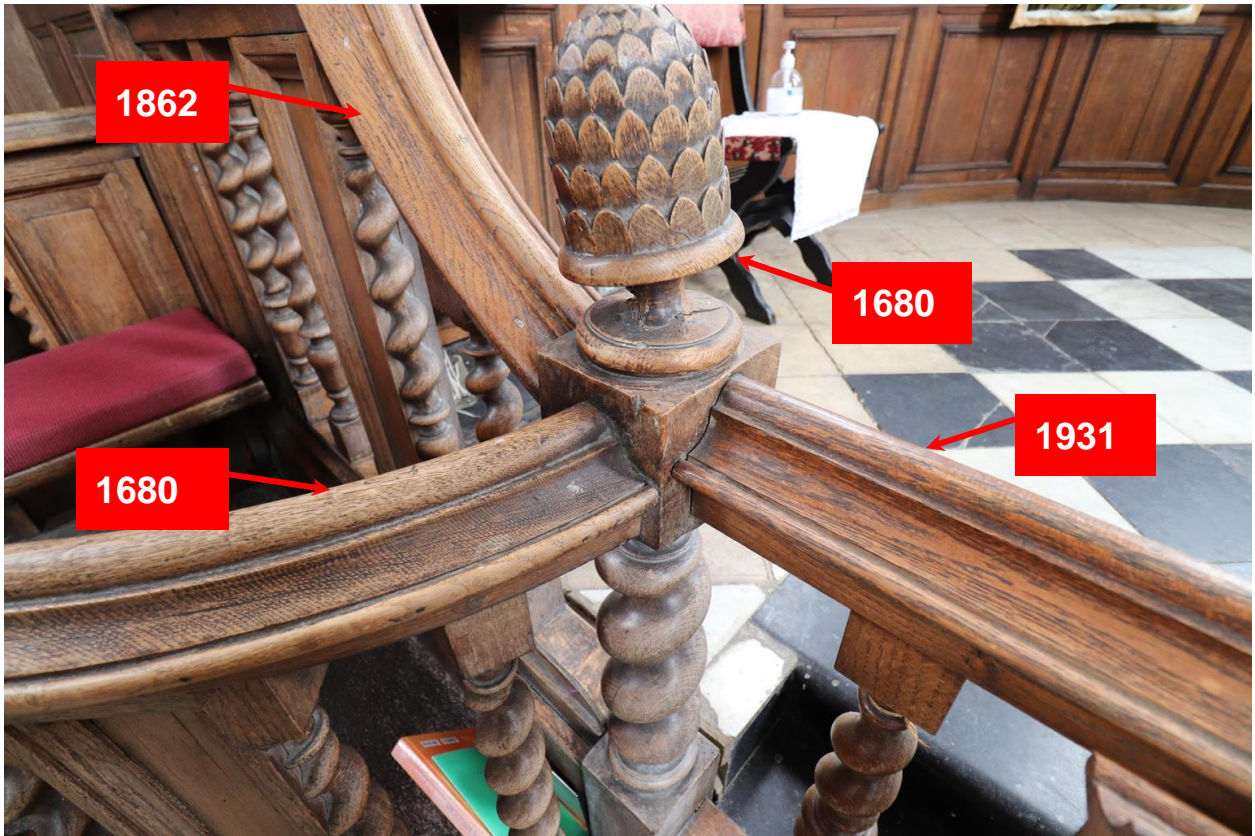
The easternmost bay of the nave contains fixed collegiate-style stalls originally of c.1680 with alterations of c.1862. Two rows of benches on each side of the choir give seating for 20-24 people. Open fronts with twisted balusters and broad moulded top rails. Narrow oak seats. The stall fronts return at the east end to separate the seats from the apse. The original intention of these seats may have been for congregants to move into for communion - reflecting the contemporary sense of communion for some clergy as a “shared, participatory action and expression of faith which, at the Prayer Book invitation to draw near with faith, communicants physically rose from one place and moved to another”.¹⁹ Architectural arrangements facilitating such liturgy can be seen in various of the contemporary London churches rebuilt by Wren (perhaps with Hooke’s assistance) ranging from nominal low rails dividing a nominal chancel from the congregation seats, to full-blown chancel screens.²⁰

The precise original configuration of the seats is unknown as none of Hooke’s plans seem to survive, but we conjecture that there would have been two collegiate-style benches running up to (and terminating at) the east wall. It is plausible that much of the current frontal was the frontal at that time. It does, however, appear that alterations/repairs have been conducted to the seat boards, and that the section of railing curving in the horizontal plane now at the east end of the stall enclosure is not in its original location. This railing may have formed part of a semi-circular railed enclosure around the altar table, being relocated in 1862 when the apse was formed. The returns of the current altar rail, against the north and south walls, are also of 1862, but the large helical colonettes topped by pineapple finials are of 1680, again no longer in their original locations. Further analysis in the form of dendrochronological dating would be required to determine exactly which elements were added in the 19th century. However, the stalls are of **high significance** due to their **evidential and architectural value** in relation to the original 1680 chancel layout and the adaptation of the building and furnishings in 1862.



¹⁹ Mark Kirby in Kirby (ed.) *Chancel Screens since the Reformation: Proceedings of the Ecclesiological Society Conference 2019* p.101 (London: Ecclesiological Society, 2020)

²⁰ Ibid - see chapter 4 pp. 85-108



7.6 Nave seating

The two westernmost bays of the nave retain the majority of the 1680 seating though with some alterations in the form of the pew platforms and replacement of seat boards. The seats are box pews of oak with scrolly tops to the ends. There are eight pews to each side of the nave. Each pew could seat 4- 5 people. The pews are 8 feet long with a 38 inch spacing between them; the seat depth is 12 inches. In the northern block, the two easternmost pews have small return seats along the north wall; in the southern block, the three easternmost pews have these same seats against the south wall.

In most cases, the ends are carved from a single piece of timber with no relief carving. The panelled backs and doors match the wall panelling. The doors retain their original "H" hinges, nailed and riveted in place. All but one of the door catches were replaced in the 19th century, likely 1862. The only original catch is in the easternmost pew in the northern block; it has a decorative chisel-cut backing plate. Beneath the seats, there is evidence of seat boards, supports and panelling elements being replaced in the 19th and 20th centuries. The southern block of pews is numbered with marks made by a thumbnail gouge.

A largely complete set of seats from the 17th century is an extremely rare survival in an English church. They are of **high significance** for their evidential and architectural value.







Inset above: Original catch of 1680 in the top image, replacement catch in the bottom image

7.7 Credence table

Fixed to the north face of the chancel arch, a small credence table created out of c. 1680 marquetry panel - most likely from the sounding board of the pulpit. The design features a six pointed star. It is of **high significance** due to its **evidential value**.



7.8 17th-century chair

Against the south face of the chancel arch, a 17th century chair; its joints in poor condition. Oak with chip carved decoration.

Moderate significance as part of the group of 1680 furnishings.



8. Monuments and Memorials

The following monuments and memorials are of **moderate value** due to their **historical and evidential value**.

8.1 Private memorials

No	Area	Location	Name(s)	Brief description
1	Choir	North respond to the chancel arch	Corbett Whitton Adkins Scriven d. 1922 and Susan Scriven d. 1925	White marble tablet with black enamel inscription
2	Nave	South wall, between central and westernmost windows	Robert Abott, parish clerk, d. 1899	White marble tablet
3	Base of Tower	North wall, east of the vestry door	Benthall family (1854-1887) including Reverend John Benthall, d. 1887	Large bronze plaque with scrolly border

8.2 War memorials

On the south wall of the nave, between the easternmost and central windows, an oval bronze tablet with white enamelled inscription in memory of three casualties of the Second World War.

On the north wall of the base of the tower, east of the Benthall memorial, a framed handwritten roll of honour for the First World War.

9. Organ

Against the north wall of the nave, a chamber organ of 1972. 1 manual, 3 stops, no pedal board. The RCHME of 1913 shows that there was an original instrument of 1680, whose case survived (though adapted to house a new instrument) into the 20th century, likely until the installation of the 1972 instrument. The current instrument is of **low significance**.



10. Bells

A ring of three bells of 1683 by Richard Chandler. The bells are not listed by the Church Buildings Council. In 1991 the ring was converted from full circle to level chiming; in 2023 the bells were hung dead and provided with electromagnetic hammers. The ring is in an original oak frame of 1683 by an unknown maker.²¹ As a whole, the ring is of **high significance** for its evidential value.

²¹ <https://dove.cccb.org.uk/tower/17388>