

# Statement of Significance

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## About the Parish Church of All Saints

All Saints' is a Grade I listed church situated at the heart of Houghton Regis; in the centre of what used to be the old village and is now a fast-growing town. A pre-Conquest church located on the site of the current Parish Church was one of very few in Bedfordshire to be mentioned in Domesday Book (AD 1086), which records that it was held by William the Chamberlain, who also held St Mary's Church, Luton. Houghton Regis itself, as its name suggests, was held directly by the Crown. King Henry I gave Houghton Regis to Earl Robert of Gloucester, and subsequently his son William granted it to the monks of St Albans Abbey in 1153. However, only the font remains today from that church. All Saints' was reconstructed in later centuries, probably (before or) under the leadership of Abbot John Moore of St Albans, who ordered the Tithe Farm adjacent to the churchyard to be constructed between 1396 and 1401 (demolished in 1964 to make way for the Bedford Square shopping centre).

## Architectural Notes

The current church was built in 14<sup>th</sup> century in the Rectilinear Gothic style. The tower was remodelled in the same style and raised in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The roof and carved ceiling of the nave were also remodelled during the same period.

All Saints' tower features a beautiful Victorian stained-glass window by Underhill of Exeter above the west door, flanked by medieval canopied niches. The ringing chamber and the bells are accessed via a staircase in the southwest turret and crowned by castellation. Six bells are housed on the top floor. The oldest of them cast in 1580 are reputed to be the oldest in Bedfordshire. The cross above the tower is a later addition and it used to be surmounted by a weathercock installed in 1750. An experienced team of ringers meet in the tower twice weekly – together they have won many competitions at regional and national level.

The Norman font is the oldest known feature of the church, having been constructed well before the present building was even begun. It is made of Totternhoe stone and it features fine decorative carvings. The font is part of a local group of fonts known collectively as the 'Aylesbury Group' after the fine example housed in Aylesbury Parish Church.

In the south aisle wall is a tomb with the effigy of a knight at with a lion at his feet. This is understood to be the tomb of Sir John de Sewell who accompanied the Black Prince to Aquitaine in 1366 in the retinue of Hugh, Earl of Stafford. It is carved with quatrefoils framing heraldic shields displaying a chevron and three butterflies - the earliest heraldic shield associated with a member of the Sewell family. The monument has suffered considerable decay in the last hundred and fifty years. The hamlet and manor of Sewell are situated within the parish of Houghton Regis, to the east of the Watling Street.

A medieval *piscina* and decorated ceiling indicate that an altar stood near the tomb, suggesting that this area of the church may have been a chantry chapel for Sir John and his family.

### Chancel and Sanctuary

The chancel was partially rebuilt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after many decades of neglect. At that time the chancel arch was reopened. It is believed that the roodscreen was partly restored during the same period using fragments of the original one. The Victorian restoration also preserved many other original features, such as two medieval book safes, two aumbries, and the tracery of the great east window.

Two 15<sup>th</sup> century brass effigies survive embedded in the floor. These commemorate two priests buried in the chancel; William Walley, vicar of All Saints' between 1493 and 1506, and one of his relatives who also ministered in the parish. The rest of the area is mostly paved with the ledger stones of the Brandreth family, buried four abreast in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. The sanctuary floor around the altar is paved in black and white marble tiles.

The solid oak High Altar (205cm wide) was installed by public subscription in 1919 as a memorial to parishioners who died in World War I.

The oak reredos (200cm by 145cm), which we would like to replace with a triptych, was purchased in the mid-1920s to complement the new altar. It is set on wooden battens and can be lifted away from the wall with no damage to the church fabric. The PCC envisage relocating this against the organ case in the south aisle where the altar does not have any background ornament.

### Importance of All Saints'

The Parish Church is of great importance for the people of the Houghton Regis and of the locality because of its civic role, its rich worshipping life and pastoral role, the beauty of its architecture and distinct liturgical tradition. An image of the church features of the town seal and the PCC has great links with the Town Council.

All Saints' is also the focus of educational visits from people of every age – from pupils of local schools visiting us as part of both RE and History curricula, to U3A members exploring parish churches in the area. Guided visits (especially during open days) are also very popular.

All Saints' importance has been recognised at a national level by the National Lottery Heritage Fund which generously financed most of the critical repair works to the outer fabric in 2019. Because of this recognition, the PCC have been able to successfully apply for a few other grants and to further the restoration and renewal of the Parish Church.