

WE WELCOME YOU to the Parish Church of **St Mary the Virgin** which is the **largest church in Essex**, with an overall length of 183 feet, while the height of the tower and spire is 193 feet

The East Saxons who gave their name to Essex were pagan, but after St Cedd led their conversion to Christianity in the 7th century there was in all probability a Saxon wooden church here. The massive Norman stone church that was known to exist in 1130 was rebuilt and enlarged in the early form of the **Decorated** period between 1250 and 1258. A general rebuilding in the **Perpendicular** style was begun in about 1450 and the present church takes a high place, from an architectural point of view, among the parish churches of England. The spire, however, is more modern, for it was built, and the upper part of the tower was renewed, in 1832, to the design of Rickman and Hutchinson.

As you enter the church, pause to survey the magnificent **NAVE**, impressive in length and more than 50 feet high, a remarkable example of the best work of the Perpendicular period. One of the most significant church builders of the 15th century, John Wastell, was in charge of the building work. The **BANNER OF THE MOST NOBLE ORDER OF THE GARTER**, which belonged to Richard Austen, Lord Butler of Saffron Walden KG CH (1902-1982) hangs at the west end of the nave. This banner previously hung above Lord Butler's stall in St George's Chapel, Windsor. The town gets its name from the **SAFFRON FLOWER** (crocus sativus) which was extensively cultivated in this locality for about 400 years until the end of the 18th century. The roof and spandrels contain representations of the saffron crocus, as well as emblems of many well-known Tudor families who gave money to the church, but a pair of binoculars is necessary for detailed examination of the carvings of the nave arches and roof bosses.

Over the tower arch are the **ROYAL ARMS**, ordered to be put up in churches in 1660. The tower contains a fine peal of **12 bells**, one of the largest rings in Essex. Eight of the bells were cast in 1798

from the metal of the previous peal, and the remainder were added in 1914. The Saffron Walden Society of Ringers is one of the oldest companies in the country, with a 300 year history.

Turn left into the north aisle; the door leading into the north porch (now the clergy vestry) is believed to be some 500 years old. American visitors especially will be interested in the brass plaque on the north wall, which commemorates George Minott, one of the founders of Dorchester, Mass. The elaborate but mutilated canopies surmounting the **9 BRASSES** fastened to the wall survive from the 13th century Decorated period church. The Brasses are all that survive a catalogue of neglect and wanton destruction in past centuries. The **EASTERNMOST WINDOW** is in memory of John Thomas Frye, organist from 1824-1884, who was only 8 years old when he was appointed to the post by competitive examination.

Ascend the steps into the north chapel, which was rebuilt about 1526. The plain **MARBLE TOMB** is that of John Leche, Vicar from 1489 until his death in 1521. He and his sister Dame Johane Bradbury were generous benefactors of the church. The **PAINTING** over the altar was given by the 1st Lord Braybrooke in 1793. It is a 200 year old copy of Correggio's famous 16th century painting now in the Parma Gallery, **Madonna and Child with St Jerome**. According to tradition, the **CHANCEL ROOF** was brought from St Gregory's Church, Sudbury, Suffolk by Thomas Audley. The **CHANCEL PILLARS** are from the 13th century. The **SCREEN** and **ROOD LOFT** were given in 1924 and the impressive rood figures were added in 1951, in which year the organ console was placed upon the loft. The **ORGAN** dates from 1824 and was completely rebuilt and enlarged in 1971-2 and is now the equal of the best cathedral organ.

A special feature (and still a rarity in this country) can be seen from the south aisle, where the pipes of the **TROMPETA REAL** (royal trumpets) point prominently towards the nave. Pass through the screen into the south chapel, now the choir vestry, and you will see

the black Belgian slate **TOMB** of **LORD CHANCELLOR AUDLEY** who built the chapel. Returning, notice the good **MODERN STATUES** of St Mary the Virgin (in whose honour the church is dedicated) and St James the Great (patron Saint of Walden Abbey and of travellers) which were added in 1920. These stand within the **CHAPEL OF REMEMBRANCE** which was created in 1998. The Guild of the Holy Trinity, an early forerunner of the town council, met in the **MUNIMENTS ROOM** over the south porch. The **OCTAGONAL FONT**, from the late 15th century, has a modern cover of carved oak. **The MEDALLION** in the great west window is the only pre-Reformation glass in the church. It is said to be a likeness of Queen Margaret of Anjou and it survived the Civil Wars. Its counterpart in the west window of the north aisle is a representation of the Virgin and Child, based on the design of the Mother's Union banner, and celebrates the Millennium year 2000.

Illustrated **GUIDEBOOKS** and **POSTCARDS** of the church are available at the west end, together with the Parish Magazine and a selection of books and pamphlets. The fabric of the church is now in good order, following a massive programme of repair and restoration over many years, but the maintenance and upkeep of a building of this magnitude is enormous and we are grateful for all contributions, which may be placed in the blue safe.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit to our beautiful church of St Mary's. Details of our services are displayed on the Notice Boards, and we most sincerely invite you to share in the worshipping life of the church whenever you can. Meanwhile, we wish you a safe journey home.



The Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin Saffron Walden

A Walk-Around Guide