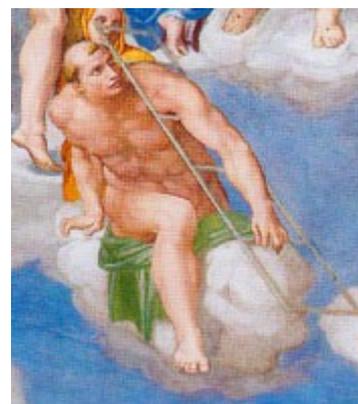


St Laurence Church, Winslow – Church History

(Based on guidebook written by David Critchley – see end for details.)

In 792 AD Offa, King of Mercia, gave the newly founded Abbey of St Alban's a gift of land including Winslow and surrounding villages. The Saxons may have worshipped at a wooden church here but it was the Normans in the 12th century who built the church of stone which still forms the heart of St Laurence's today. Even in these very early times, St Laurence's was more than just a simple parish church. Instead it was the mother church for Granborough, Aston Abbots and Little Horwood.

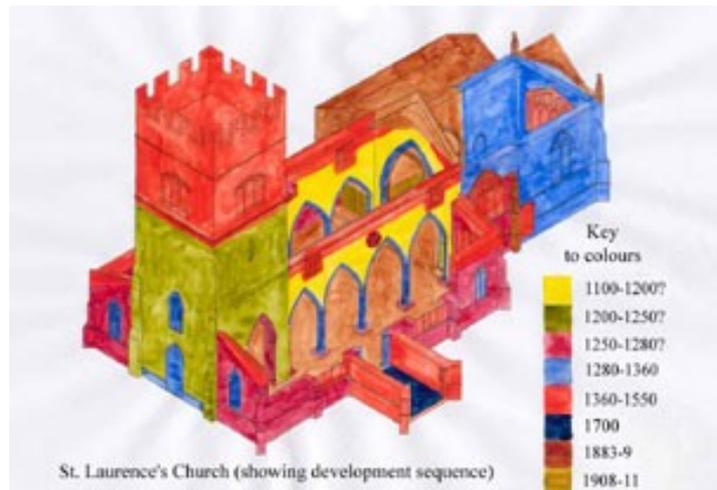
Our church is, unusually, named after St Laurence who was an official of Rome martyred in 258 AD by the Prefect for refusing to reveal the treasures of his church. Instead he simply pointed to the poor and needy, but was roasted to death, which is why his symbol is a griddle (as depicted here in the roof of the Sistine Chapel in The Vatican).



We do not know who the early clergy were. St Albans Abbey may originally have sent out monks to serve the town but the first named vicar of Winslow was John, recorded in 1275. Boards either side of the south door record the names of subsequent vicars up to the present day. Technically, the position is that of a Rector rather than a Vicar and the 40th (and current) incumbent, Belinda Searle-Barnes, has taken the title of Rector.

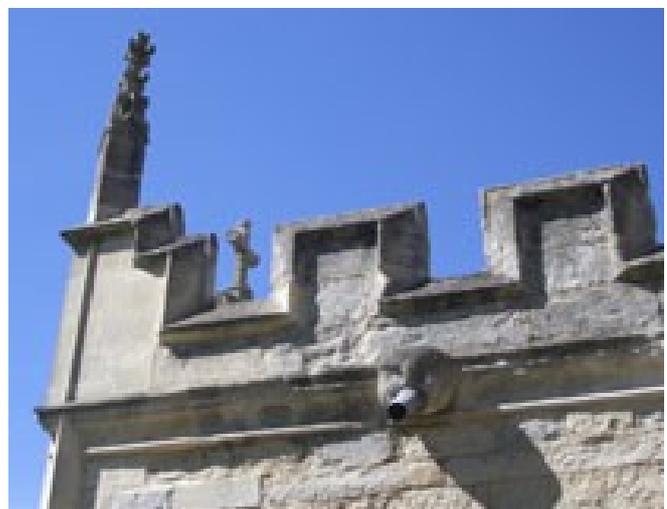
The Abbey drew income from Winslow including an agricultural tax, or tithe, where farmers had to give 10% of their produce to be stored in the Great Tithe Barn.

As Winslow grew in size the church building grew with it. The coloured cutaway diagram below shows the periods from which parts of the present building can be dated. The tower was added to the west end in the first half of the 13th century to house bells which the parishioners believed would ward off the devil. The south door was for everyday use, the west door for processions and the north door to let the devil out at christenings. Later in the 13th century, early narrow aisles were replaced with the wide aisles that can be seen today. This entailed reworking the arches as can be seen on the cutaway diagram. Larger windows were added from the end of the 15th Century as printed books began to be available requiring better light to be read.



Wall paintings were also used to inspire worship. Murals dating from the 15th/16th Centuries are still visible on the north wall. They depict the Day of Judgement, St Christopher carrying the infant Jesus across a stream (shown here) and the death of Thomas a Becket who was murdered in Canterbury cathedral in 1170.

The belfry and porch were also added in the 15th to 16th Centuries, the latter featuring particularly gruesome stone heads as water spouts.



During the Reformation, King Henry VIII founded his own church independent of Rome and, as with all churches in England, St Laurence had to change from Catholicism to the new Church of England. Henry, and his successor Edward VI, dissolved the monasteries and stripped the churches of anything suggesting idolatry or superstition. Records show that St Laurence had to surrender most of its chalices, crucifixes, alter cloths, silk and satin vestments and other artefacts. A new Prayer Book was introduced in 1549, omitting all reference to St Laurence and provoking the 'Prayer Book Rebellion' in Buckinghamshire and beyond. From the early 1600s the church began to re-equip itself in accordance with the Church of England practices including a recast sanctus bell, a new alter cloth and a pulpit.

In 1654 a General Baptist congregation formed in Winslow and initially met in private houses. A year later a 15 year-old boy named Benjamin Keach joined the group and within 3 or 4 years he had been chosen as their preacher. When Charles II came to the throne in 1660 he started to crack down on dissenters and Keach was imprisoned and pilloried. By 1668 he could no longer preach without interference and so

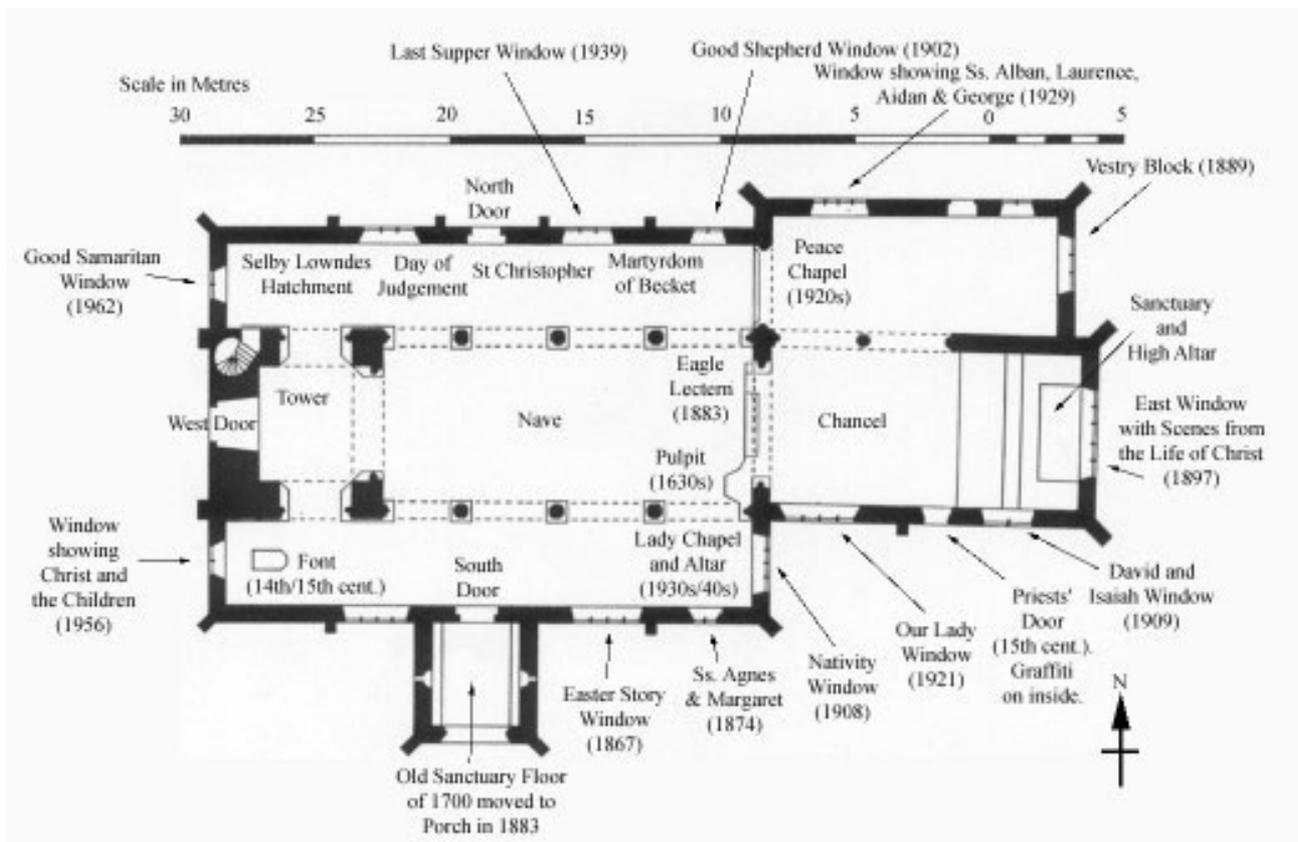


Keach's Meeting House

moved to London with his family. The Winslow Baptist congregation continued to meet in private but the 1689 Act of Toleration allowed them to worship in public without fear of persecution. In 1695, William Gyles and his wife Mary built a meeting house for the Baptist congregation which was later named after their first preacher, Benjamin Keach.

During the 17th and 18th Centuries St Laurence continued to re-equip itself including recasting the bells and adding a Singers' Gallery. The weathervane (a gilded cockerel) was added to the tower together with a chiming clock which marks the quarter-hours and plays the tenor part of *St David's*, an old Welsh tune accompanying the metrical version of Psalm 95.

In 1700, Robert Lowndes was building Winslow Hall, designed by Sir Christopher Wren. Within the church he also restored the chancel and altar and reglazed the windows. By 1839 the capacity of St Laurence church was 522 and in 1851 a census of church congregations showed 832 attendances over the morning, afternoon and evening services. At the time of the census the population of the town was only 1889 people.



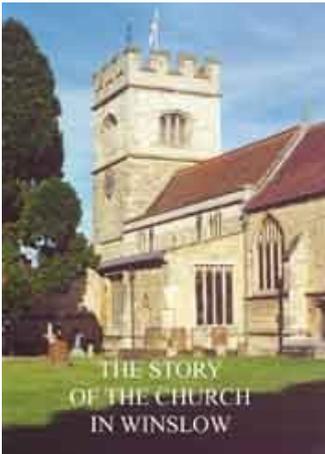
By the late 1800s, the art of stained glass had been revived and commemorative windows started to appear in St Laurence. See the annotated plan above for their locations and details. These can be viewed, together with other views of the church, by going to St Laurence, Winslow > Picture Gallery in the Main Menu of the website.

A new roof over the chancel and nave was installed in 1883, but the original 15th/16th Century roof has been preserved beneath. The interior of the church was completely refitted including new reredos, hangings and a large brass eagle lectern. An ornate medieval piscina in the south wall was reconstructed. This was the period when proper church choirs began to be formed and at St Laurence they were allocated pews in the chancel, in front of the alter, in order to be able to lead the services better. The vestry extension was added in 1889 to house the organ and the Sunday School.

During the 20th Century the tower clock was given faces and hands and the Sunday School area was converted into a Peace Chapel commemorating the 51 Winslow men who perished in the First World War. It also remembers the victims of an aircraft accident in 1943, during the Second World War, when a Wellington bomber crashed on to houses on the site of the present British Legion Hall on Elmfields Gate. During this War the owners of Winslow Hall, Sir Edward and Lady Tompkins invited the Roman Catholic Church to establish a chapel in a wing of the Hall and St Alban's Chapel was formally blessed on 12 September 1948. Catholics come to worship from a wide area and it has also

been used for ecumenical services by the interdenominational Winslow Christian Fellowship which was founded in 1989. Preachers from all these churches meet regularly and some special services are shared, such as those on Remembrance Day and at Christmas. This ecumenical approach is typical of Winslow in the 21st Century where differing beliefs are respected and a friendly welcome is given to all.

St Laurence's Church has provided the spiritual heart of Winslow for well over 800 years and, God willing, will continue to do so for many more yet.



This history of the church was taken from the guidebook 'The Story of the Church in Winslow' written by local author David Critchley in 2001. Copies are available at a cost of £2.50 (inc P&P).

The guidebook can be obtained by sending a cheque or postal order made out to "St Laurence Parochial Church Council" for the appropriate sum in pounds sterling to:

Hon. PCC Secretary, c/o The Vicarage, Vicarage Road, Winslow, Buckingham, MK18 3BJ, United Kingdom.