

Statement of Significance

St Mary's church Ware

The grade 1 listed parish church with its striking architecture is the most prominent building in Ware and is situated at the top of Ware High Street. It has been the focus of worship and civic life since the fourteenth century. It is a surprisingly large church for a small town and unusually includes transepts. Its octagonal font is the most richly decorated medieval font in the county and is contemporary with the rebuilding of the church in the 1380s.

There is much of historical interest that links to this rebuilding in the fourteenth century. Joan of Kent was responsible for the rebuilding so corbel heads in the north and south aisles are based on her death mask. Another corbel, showing a hart with a chain represents the badge of Richard II – Joan of Kent's son.

The history of the church goes back much further than the fourteenth century though. Christian burials in Ware can be dated to Roman times and later on the Saxons certainly had a church for the Domesday Book records a priest in Ware. On the present site the Chancel is the oldest part and dates from c.1250 although much restored.

Nowadays, the church remains a primary focus for civic functions. Many couples choose St Mary's as a wedding venue and the church is well used for town and remembrance services.

In addition the church is increasingly used as a concert venue with long standing monthly Monday concerts now supplemented by monthly Thursday ones. As well as bringing the wider community into the church these also offer a platform for young or upcoming local musicians. St Mary's is also developing as an Arts focus and there are regular exhibitions showcasing of local artists' work.

The statement of significance from the listing is appended below.

The church consists of a tower, chancel, nave, north and south transepts and aisles, south porch, organ chamber and lady chapel.

The nave, tower, chancel, and transepts were likely erected C13, and the nave rebuilt early C15 with the clerestory and aisles added. The south porch and the north and south chapel were added C15.

The church was restored by George Godwin, who renewed the stonework of some windows in 1847-49, and further in 1886.

The south chapel was restored in 1903.

The exterior building fabric is flint with clunch dressings, quoins, and string courses. The roofs are lead covered with embattled parapets. The tower is in 5 stages, with offset angle buttresses, clunch quoins, and a recessed leaded needle or 'Hertfordshire Spike'. The windows vary from C14 to C19, with cusped ogee and reticulated tracery, all largely restored in C19.

The interior is largely painted plaster, with fragments of C19 decorative wall paintings present below the extant scheme, discovered during the redecoration of the nave, north and south aisles in 2022-23. The nave and chancel ceilings are tie-beam and king post timber with corbels, decorated with heraldic shields, faces and grotesques. The north and south aisles are of similar construction, and ceilings are decorated with floral bosses. The mosaic flooring and marble dado and wall mosaics within the chancel date from 1893. The north chapel has been occupied by an organ since 1866. The oak communion rails c1640 were brought from Benington Church, with a Jacobean altar, reredos and panelling installed during the 1886 restoration.

