

Glossary

Altar a stone or wooden table where Christians celebrate the Eucharist, and offer to God their sacrifice of thanks and praise.

Communion – another name for the Eucharist.

Constantine the Great – Roman emperor and St Helen’s son who in 313 AD declared Christianity to be one of the legal religions that could be practised throughout the empire.

Eucharist – Christians’ main act of worship. It includes listening to the Bible, and blessing and then eating and drinking bread and wine, as commanded by Jesus.

Evangelists – writers of the four Gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) of Jesus’ life and teaching.

Font – a receptacle to hold water for the administration of baptism ‘in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit’ by means of which a person becomes a member of Christ’s mystical Body, the Church.

Mitre – a ceremonial hat worn by a bishop, shaped like a flame to recall the descent of the Holy Spirit like ‘tongues of fire’ on the church’s first ministers, the Apostles.

Reredos – decoration, usually of stone or wood but sometimes of fabric, placed behind an altar to cover the wall space between the altar and the window above it.

Reformation – a period in the first half of the sixteenth century when dissent over corruptions of the medieval church and papacy led to division and the formation of various distinct ‘churches’. The church in England separated from the papacy in 1534 under King Henry VIII and became ‘the Church of England’.

Resurrection – the central Christian belief that on the third day after his crucifixion God the Father raised his Son, Jesus, from the dead in a new and transformed life.



St Helen’s Wharf on the river Thames.



Nave Altar and High Altar through screen - view from West Door



Lighting the chandelier, Lady Chapel.



Choir and organ, St Katharine Aisle.



A Short Guide & Tour

This short guide will help you identify the most important features of the church, and gives you a walking route to follow.

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Welcome to St Helen’s

This is a building that has been steadily evolving for over a thousand years. Each generation has made its mark on it in ways that reflect their life and spiritual vision. So you are looking at living history, the outward expression of the life of a Christian community that has worshipped here without a break since at least 995AD.

Today we, the latest representatives of the St Helen’s Church community, are delighted to welcome you, and hope you enjoy your visit.

Some Historical High Points

- 600 – 700s** A small nunnery, Helenstowe, existed on this site.
- 995** A Saxon church dedicated to St Helen already existed on this site.
- 1180** The present structure began to take shape.
- 1247** The Lady Chapel was added to the existing church by Abingdon’s prominent Guild of Our Lady.
- 1380s** The Guild commissioned the Lady Chapel painted ceiling, completed in 1391.
- 1420** The Fraternity of the Holy Cross built the St Helen, now Nave, Aisle where, at the east end, the high altar was re-located. This was followed by the addition of another aisle southward, the St Katharine Aisle.
- 1538** The dissolution and despoliation of the prestigious Abingdon Abbey under King Henry VIII occurred.
- 1539** The last of St Helen’s five aisles, was built closest to the Thames. The church was re-ordered according to Reformation principles.
- 1700s** A major Georgian re-ordering took place.
- 1873-97** A major Victorian, neo-gothic renovation took place.
- 2003** The most recent re-ordering began.
- 2006** A new ring of bells was installed in the tower.
- TODAY** The Church continues as a vibrant community of Christian worship, witness and service to the people of Abingdon.

From the Welcome Desk, walk eastwards along the North or Jesus Aisle to the Baptistry. You are walking along the original nave of St Helen's.

1 Baptistry

This is thought to be the location of the Saxon church which the present building replaced. The font is a marble copy of the fine Norman font in All Saints Church, Sutton Courtenay. The font cover is dated 1634.

2 Tomb of John Roysse

The dissolution of Abingdon Abbey meant the abolition of its Grammar School. Prominent Abingdonian John Roysse re-founded the school in 1563. It is now the prestigious Abingdon School. This finely wrought tomb, including Roysse's family coat-of-arms, befits his important place in Abingdon's history.

3 The Lady Chapel

The Chapel, whose origin dates from the first extension of the church in the mid-thirteenth century, honours the mother of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary. The lay-out and most of the fittings of the Chapel are the result of a late Victorian re-ordering. Behind the altar hangs a beautiful example of modern English tapestry (1988) designed by renowned weaver Bobbie Cox. Inspired by the Anglo-Saxon poem, 'The Dream of the Rood'. The symbolism of the tapestry is the tree on which Christ was crucified, which became 'a beautiful tree of glory'. The hassocks and kneelers, made by parishioners, match the ceiling and tapestry. The chandelier date is mid-seventeenth century. Clergy and lay people gather in this chapel daily for morning and evening prayers.

4 The Painted Ceiling

In the 1380s the Guild of Our Lady commissioned the unique painted ceiling of 52 panels portraying the Tree of Jesse, the family tree of Our Lord, based on St Matthew's Gospel 1:1-16. Prophets alternate with kings of the House of David.

In 1873 fourteen panels were discarded and those remaining on the south side were pushed to the east end. At the restoration of 1983-91 the kings and prophets were put back in proper order with 'ghost panels' representing the missing ones.

The series begins at the east end on the south side with a 'ghosted' Jesse (the father of King David) in the usual recumbent position, with the vine growing out of his body. The north side begins with Moses holding the stone tablets and ends with four panels of St Joseph, the Archangel Gabriel, a Lily Crucifix and Our Lady. A vine at the bottom connects kings and prophets. (For further details see the Illustrated Guide to the Ceiling.)

5 The Pulpit

This fine pulpit is one of several pieces of furniture provided in the Stuart period (around 1630) for the Church of England's worship according to the Book of Common Prayer. Notice the neo-classical design features.

6 The Mayor's Pew

As the parish church of Abingdon, St Helen's has always played an important role in civic life. For centuries the Mayor and Town

Councillors have used the church for acts of worship and on important civic occasions. When the Mayor attends he or she occupies this pew (1707). The fine iron-work, including the stand for the Mayor's mace, is original, but the royal heraldic lion and unicorn are replacements.

From the Mayor's pew walk around the edge of the altar space until you are in the church's main aisle.

7 The Nave or St Helen's Aisle

The powerful medieval Fraternity of the Holy Cross added this large aisle in 1420, thereby advancing the church's expansion toward the Thames. After the Reformation this became the only worship space in the church. The ceiling of this aisle was raised during the Victorian renovation.

This aisle, like the others, is adorned with a splendid brass chandelier of 1710. Notice at its top a dove with an olive branch in its beak inspired by the story of Noah's flood.

8 The Nave Altar

At the centre of the platform, stands the beautiful, simple white oak altar. The Christian altar is a symbol of Christ in our midst. So each Sunday and at festivals the worshipping community gathers around the altar for the chief act of Christian worship, the Eucharist. The Nave Altar defines the sacred space yet does so in an inviting way. The raised platform on which it stands is designed with tiles from elsewhere in the building. Like a theatrical 'thrust stage' the nave altar area is fully visible to the congregation, which now surrounds the altar on three sides. The area can also be used for performances.

9 The Chancel & East End

From this central vantage point you can take in the neo-gothic screen, chancel, high altar, and carved wooden reredos designed by the distinguished Victorian architect and designer G F Bodley.

10 The St Katharine Aisle

Also added to the church by the Fraternity of the Holy Cross (c. 1420) this aisle had special connections with the Fraternity. An altar stood at the east end (behind the organ) so that the Fraternity could

conduct worship according to its needs. Before its destruction at the Reformation, the aisle's west window included names of all of the Fraternity involved in building Abingdon Bridge.

11 The Organ

St Helen's fine organ was built by the distinguished Durham firm of Harrison and Harrison and installed in 1927. A major reconstruction of the organ and renovation of its fine casework (built for St Helen's first organ of 1726) was completed in 2005. Notice the delicate carving of King David playing the harp above the console on the north side, the angels' faces on the west side, and the crown and mitre trophies at the top of the west side. (A full guide, *The Organs of St Helen's Church. An Outline of the History*, by David C Wickens is available.)

Now proceed into the east end of the fifth and last aisle.

12 The South, or Reade, Aisle

The fifth and final aisle to be added was built in 1539 by Katharine Audlett to rebury her husband John, the last steward of Abingdon Abbey. In 1537 he was buried in the Abbey Church which was partly destroyed at the Abbey's dissolution in 1538. Note their initials 'K A' and 'I A,' and 1539, the date of completion, just above the southernmost wall.

The aisle retains the oldest furniture of the church: settles and the Jacobean Communion table which stood at the east end of the nave until replaced at the Victorian restoration. On the South wall, note the windows

whose theme is Jesus' resurrection.

Today, we fill this aisle with chairs for large services, but otherwise it is kept clear for use by exhibitions, social gatherings, and concerts.

13 William Lee Memorial

Note also in the Reade Aisle William Lee's wooden panel; this Mayor of Abingdon died in 1637 aged 92 leaving 197 descendants!

14 St Helen's Window

The West window by M Farrar Bell (1965) shows St Helen, the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great, holding the cross on which Jesus was crucified. According to a later tradition, she discovered the true cross in Jerusalem.

Now walk along the west wall of the church towards the Welcome Desk where you began.

15 West Windows

The west side of the Church has a variety of Victorian windows. The window at the west end of the St Katharine Aisle depicts the Passion of Christ at the bottom with pictures of Old Testament prophets and relevant prophetic texts above. The window above the west doors of the main aisle pictures scenes from the life of Christ at the top and scenes from the life of St Katharine of Alexandria below.

Passing the west doors the next window at the west end of the Lady Aisle depicts, appropriately, women saints of the Bible. Finally, in a very different style, the west window of the Jesus Aisle depicts the four evangelists.

Stepping back outside as you exit the North Porch, walk toward the archway to view the Tower and the extension of the Exchequer Room.

16 The Tower

The tower with its lancet windows dates from around 1180; its fifteenth-century spire has been rebuilt several times. From the 1860s until 2006 the main entrance of the church was through the doors at its base. New bells were dedicated in 2006.

17 North Porch and Exchequer

The North Porch, now the main entrance, was built by the medieval Fraternity of the Holy Cross, based at St Helen's, which used the upper floor, the Exchequer Room, for meetings and safe keeping of its revenues. It now holds archives.

Now walk in the direction opposite the tower across to the west side of the church.

The churchyard offers much of interest. St Helen's five roofs become lower from north to south with the exception of the Victorian roof of the main nave rising high above the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century roofs of the St Katharine and South Aisles.

18 The West Porch

The Victorians ornamented this fine porch further. The symbolic figures of the four evangelists occupy each corner. Above the door is a charming small statue of St Helen, patroness, holding a miniature model of the restored church in her left hand.

Now walk toward the river until you are at the south west corner of the church.

19 Sun Dials and South Porch

From this vantage point you can see the sun dials and initials 'K A' (Katherine Audlett, the benefactress) carved in the stone as part of the last phase of St Helen's expansion. Finally you can also see the very last addition, the South Porch, built in 1543 by Katherine Audlett's heir, Thomas Reade of Barton Court.

