



The Church of St Mary the Virgin, Lesbury

It is thought that Lesbury was established around 1300 years ago and that the original Saxon church would have been a rudimentary structure without seating, altar or lectern. Worshippers would have been left to follow proceedings either sitting, kneeling or standing. The original Norman church consisted of a simple nave, chancel and tower with an aisle and arcade having been added on the north side by the end of the 12th century. In the early 13th century the chancel was enlarged and lengthened.

There are no records relating to the church before 1147 when Eustace FitzJohn de Vesci (who had been created Baron of Alnwick in 1130) gave the first abbot of Alnwick Abbey the church of Lesbury with the chapels of Alnwick, Longhoughton and Alnmouth. Up until the 14th century Lesbury was the principal township in the district and its church regarded as the mother church to the other chapels.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-1541) had great financial implications for the upkeep of church buildings. A survey of Lesbury church dated 1567 stated that the chancel was 'in a state of disrepair' with no glass in the windows and lead missing from the roof. A report of 1604, criticising the church wardens, stated that 'their steeple is likely to fall' and a report of 1659 stated that persons were 'taking down all the lead of the chancel and other ornaments of the church' (Hicks pp36-40). Consequently, there have been many alterations and repairs to the church over the centuries which even the architectural historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner found difficult to interpret. [Click [here](#) to see plans of the church.]

In 1840 Archdeacon Singleton reported 'the steeple if not unsafe, at all events is in an unsatisfactory state resulting in injudicious repairs after some neglect'. In 1846 under the direction of the architect Anthony Salvin the south wall and a portion of the north wall were rebuilt and the roof and tower were repaired at the expense of the Duke of Northumberland and Earl Grey.

On entering the church the most noticeable feature is the large octagonal font dating from the 15th century. It is one of few in Northumberland to escape destruction by extreme Puritan forces in the 1640s: for safety, local parishioners are thought to have buried it but in the process the original plinth upon which it stood was lost. Around



the rim are the symbols of the Percy family. William Darling, nephew of Grace Darling, was baptised in this font after his birth at Lesbury in August 1841.



The west window behind the font is a memorial to Rev George Bray who was vicar, organist and choirmaster from 1908 to 1934. It portrays St Nicholas and a Christmas tree with a small pipe organ at the top. It also includes a bee with the initials 'E.F.' - the mark of Eleanor Fortesque Brickdale (1872-1945) and a rare example of her work as few records of her stained glass window designs survive.

The east window behind the altar dates from the middle of the 14th century. It was believed to have been damaged by explosion. No record of the design of the window was kept so, apart from the central area figure of Christ, the other panels are abstract.

In the south wall of the nave there are three lancet windows by A. K. Nicholson (1872-1939). One is in memory of Sir Henry Hall Scott, founder of the Imperial Yeomanry of South Africa, and his son, Captain George Hall Scott, who fell at the Battle of the Somme. It shows St George and the capture of the village of Montauban by the British and French on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Another window shows Joan of Arc standing above a graphic representations of the Siege of Orleans.¹

Below is a crocheted poppy wreath made by local residents in 2014 to mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of WWI.

In the south wall of the chancel there is the Good Shepherd window designed by Harold Rhodes (1888-1956). It is dedicated to George Ord, a resident of the village who died in 1915. Unfortunately, few records exist of Rhodes' stained glass design work.

St. Mary's church is not well endowed in material possessions but it is interesting to note that a large silver chalice was stolen some years ago and later found in two pieces in a Leeds canal. It was subsequently repaired and is in use again today.

Records from the end of the 13th century state that there were thirteen residents in the parish of Lesbury who were eligible to pay tax. Robert of Emeldon was parish priest of Lesbury in the 1320s. It was said that Robert was a turbulent and violent man, who was guilty of at least one (and probably more) murders, and was later imprisoned for a number of serious crimes: but he was a favourite of King Edward III and was thus able to survive any temporary disgrace.

Lesbury's most notable parson was Patrick Mackilwyan. Thomas Fuller, churchman and historian, gives him a place in his *Worthies of England* published in 1662. Mackilwyan began his tenure by insisting on having his tithes in kind, but settled down with his parishioners and won their regard by visiting the sick in their tents on the Lesbury Moor during the bubonic plagues of the 1660's, although he was then 97. He died at the age of 101, declaring that "Of friends and books, good and few are best."

Of the graves outside the church several are of interest. Since 1786 the Dukes of Northumberland have been buried in Westminster Abbey but George Henry, the 7th Duke, is buried here in Lesbury. There is no evidence to explain why this is so but the following has been suggested. Tragedy struck in 1889 when Ralph, their son, died but they were unable to bury him in St Michael's churchyard in Alnwick as it was full and had been closed since the 1850's. But St Mary's Church had for centuries been the pre-eminent church in the area and it is presumed this gave it an added dignity and made it a 'suitable' place for Ralph's interment. The Duke and Duchess determined that other members of the family, including themselves, who died at home (ie. in Alnwick) should also be buried in St Mary's churchyard.

Another grave of interest is that of George Brown, Master Mariner of Bedlington, who was drowned when his ship Thetis of North Shields was wrecked off Whawburn Sands (now called Seaton Bay) on 5th April, 1799. His headstone reads -

The Boreas blasts & Neptunes Waves
Hath tost me to and fro
In spite of both by Gods decree
I harbour here below
Now here at Anchor I do lie
With many of our Fleet
In hopes to set my Sail again
My Saviour Christ to meet.

¹ The Siege of Orléans was the watershed of the Hundred Years' War between France and England. It was the French royal army's first major military victory to follow the crushing defeat at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, and the first while Joan of Arc was with the army. She was captured and executed by the English in May 1431.

Sources:

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