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# GIs, God and the Great Western

Dating from the 1200s, tiny St Mary's Church at Old Dilton, Wiltshire, has recently been a place of work for conservation mason [Andrew Ziminksi](#). He reflects on the personal histories accumulated in a building repaired by the SPAB and now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. Photographs [John Lawrence](#)

**N**ear the military market town of Warminster in Wiltshire, on the south side of the Wessex mainline connecting Bristol Temple Meads and Southampton Central, sits Dilton Marsh railway halt. I am pretty sure that John Betjeman penned his well known poem of the same name after a visit to the nearby redundant church at Old Dilton. Did passing passengers ever see him? A solitary figure perched on an isolated GWR bench, his trilby at a jaunty angle dispensing the drizzle down his nose after he had ambled the few hundred yards back across the fields.

For there, cosseted by the walnut trees, sits the church of St Mary, which Betjeman finds in his *Guide to English Parish Churches* one of the most atmospheric in Wiltshire. It sits on the edge of the Biss brook, a feeder for the Bristol

Avon and fuel source for the three long-gone wool-processing mills that manufactured the renowned broad cloth. The approach by car is a Tarmacked ancient hollow way – an accident black spot if the lane were any busier, as the north aisle wall towers abruptly and directly on the road distracting unwary passers-by.

Betj was attracted to places that capture and bind inward emotions, and at St Mary's the evidence of this attraction for many folk over many generations is plain to see. The 14th-century walls of rubble (but coursed) forest marble show remnants of a thrown roughcast render finish. Evidence of an earlier church exists, with the porch of the 1230s and lots of reused bits of carved stone built into the walls. The north aisle was added in the 15th century. After a perambulation around its fairly unremarkable exterior, noting the slender iron cross on the top of the spire with its strange

“flute like openings”, one enters via the former priest's door into the chancel. First impressions are of the schoolroom balcony on the first floor, limewash and the communion table moved back at some distant time to the position of the altar. This feels like a house for meeting with more than a memory of dissension, and the rest of the church's area is crowded out by box pews from the time of the Georges and boasts a triple-decker pulpit with tester. It was noted that the congregants sang in a primitive style, so maybe it's not just the fine interior that seems destined never to change.

The pews here are the stars of the show. They became increasingly popular with the rise of the sermon as the main act of worship, making it a piece of furniture common to most English churches where “*Unable to remain holy in thine presence we wilst cloister ourselves from thee*”.





The gallery north of the chancel was once used as a schoolroom and contains a fireplace, which is the only nod to modernity of comfort; even now the church is powerless.

The economy-minded Georgian congregants at Dilton consolidated their stock of old medieval benches, enclosing them with boxes; here a section of ancient rood screen, there some panelling saved from some local dwelling. The oak panels with elm seats and floorboards form a true harmonious concoction. Doors with locks (the keys having long disappeared) witness their installation at the expense of the congregants, and there is much contemporary graffiti that may point to their ownership.

At Dilton it is easy to look deeper; its oak and limewashed stone provides a base for short messages and curious cartoons, masons' marks and autographs. Other graffiti artists can be seen elsewhere here. One Harold Cypher (an American soldier) and some of his pals pencilled their names above a door arch just a couple of weeks before D-Day. What were the emotions of this man when he recorded his presence here for posterity? Did Harold survive the war?

Yes, I believe he lived in Pennsylvania, but, unfortunately, he died this summer – just a few

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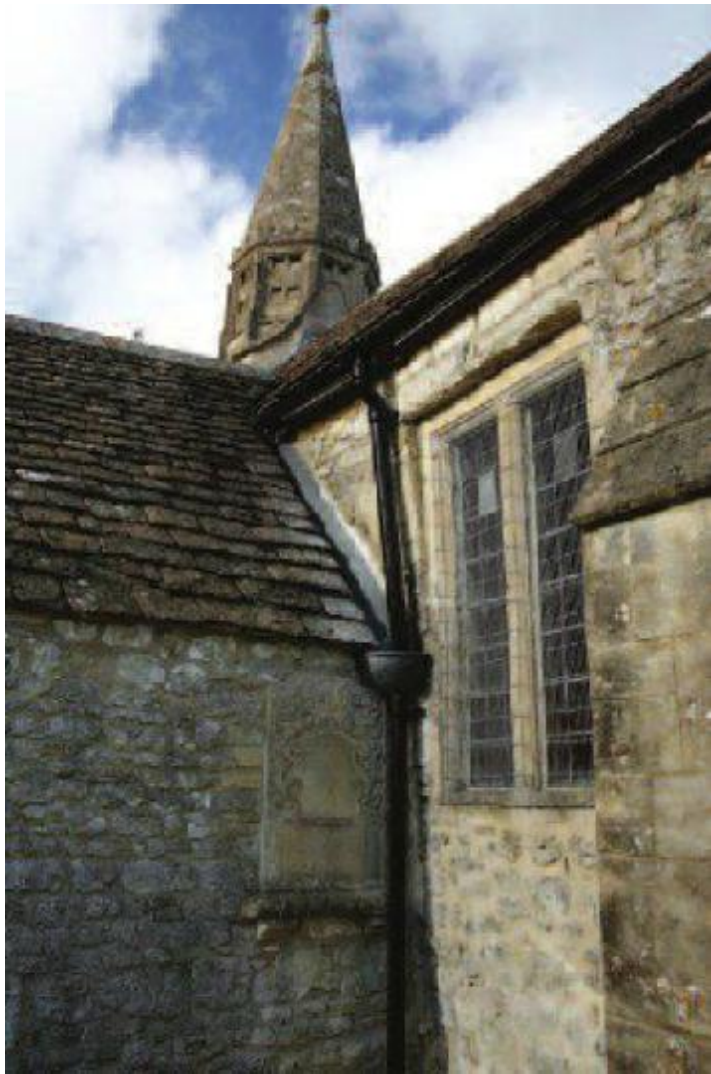
weeks before we discovered his inscription. It would be interesting to know more about him. Email enquiries to folk in the United States with the same unusual surname name on Facebook have not yet been successful.

When the church closed at the turn of the last century care and repair was funded by the SPAB, and, in 1933 and 1952-3, the Society advised on extensive structural repairs which were completed in 1958. I suspect that the current, gritty Ministry of Works-type cementitious repointing was done at this time.

**T**oday, grade I listed St Mary's is cared for by the hard-pressed Churches Conservation Trust, which is sadly weathering a stormy period as a result of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review.

Over the last few phases of Quinquennial works here we have got to know St Mary's well, working with Michael Drury of St Ann's Gate Architects of Salisbury.

St Mary's is a true marshaller of antiquity but also of brown rot and weevils. This summer we have, amongst other maintenance jobs, been



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Above (from left) Georgian box pews at St Mary's; guttering came late to the church, and damp had been a familiar problem; Andrew Ziminski contemplates another day's work at St Mary's, encouraged by his hound

Left, one of two small galleries at St Mary's; below, the cipher of Harold Cypher, a GI who fought in France soon after he left his mark, in May 1944



tackling the effects of damp and ongoing rot to the bases of the box pews. The big problem is water ingress, as a photo of 1905 testifies. St Mary's has never had any gutters nor, more importantly, an adequate stone slated barn-type eaves detail to throw water clear of the building. Consequently, timber pew bases against wall areas were damp and decayed by brown rot and probably cellar rot (*Coniophora puteana*). Weevils feed on this early stage mulch and thus compound the decay. Underneath the pulpit there was a large body of decaying timbers of different ages, suggesting a long history of problems. Application of chemicals to kill the fungus would not destroy mycelium (the "roots" of the fungus that absorb nutrients) as they are within the rubble walls and could be seen behind the more modern plaster when it was removed.

John Wilson (our archaeological carpenter) and I have taken large areas of the internal floor apart, reduced earth levels and removed fungal fruiting bodies. With the new drains and guttering we hope to have reduced moisture levels enough to deny the rot its food source without the use of chemical treatments.

The time spent on our hands and knees here

have been rewarding in many ways. Here is the evidence list of the lost past found under the pews – pins, marbles, clay candle-holders, pins, pins, pins, musket ball, desiccated rat, more pins, buttons, teeth, one copper coin, sections of clay pipe, bits of pot, nails, one shark's tooth and an ammonite suture. A small amount of the finds that have been placed back under the pews.

The village moved with the advent of the railway leaving St Mary's isolated in a small hamlet. One would think it has only been a less visited place in its more recent history but many stop here: ramblers, locals, ancestor-seekers, and most would understand Philip Larkin when he writes in "Church Going": "Though I've no idea what this accoutred frowsty barn is worth, it pleases me to stand in silence here."

Hope to see you there at the candlelit Christmas service. ■

*Andrew Ziminski is a partner in Minerva Conservation, and a former SPAB William Morris Craft Fellow.*

*St Mary's Old Dilton lies a few miles east of Frome, and a short drive south of Trowbridge. See [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk) for details.*