

**A GUIDE TO THE
PRIORY CHURCH OF ST. LAURENCE
BLACKMORE**

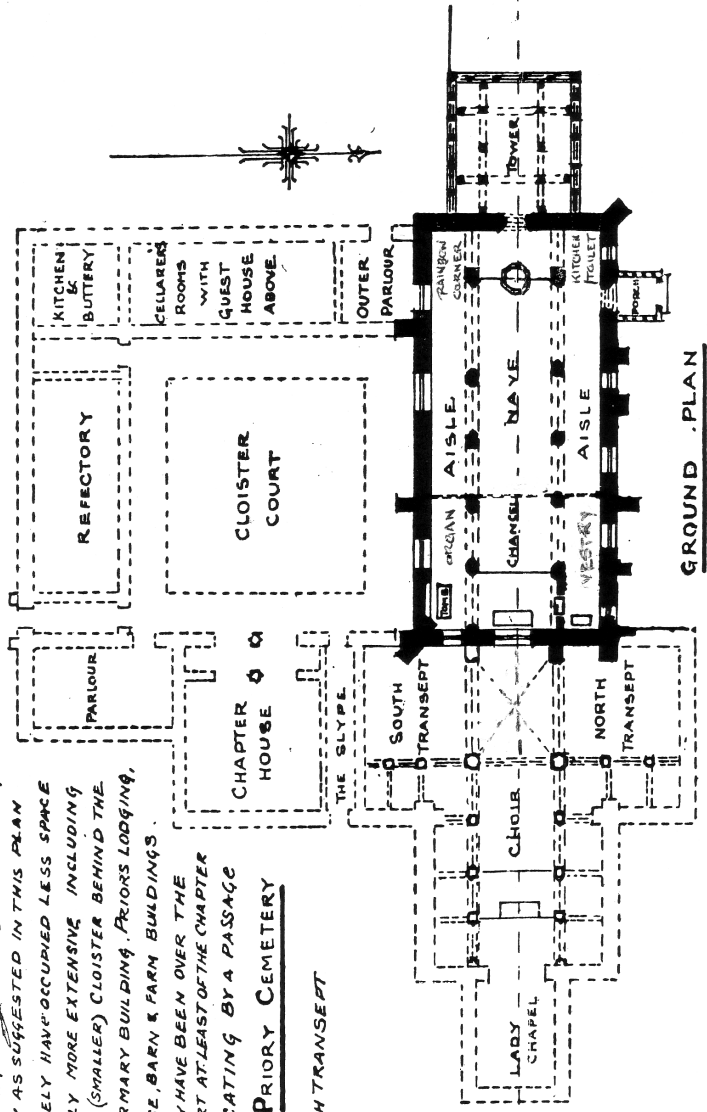


THE CHURCH AND PRIORY OF S. LAURENCE, BLACKMORE.

THE PRIORY BUILDINGS MAY HAVE BEEN ARRANGED IN SOME SUCH WAY AS SUGGESTED IN THIS PLAN THEY CAN SCARCELY HAVE OCCUPIED LESS SPACE AND WERE PROBABLY MORE EXTENSIVE INCLUDING POSSIBLY, A SECOND (SMALLER) CLOISTER BEHIND THE REFECTORY, INFIRMARY BUILDING, PRIORS LODGING, STABLE, BREWHOUSE, BARN & FARM BUILDINGS. THE DORMITORY MAY HAVE BEEN OVER THE PARLOUR AND PART AT LEAST OF THE CHAPTER HOUSE COMMUNICATING BY A PASSAGE

PRIORY CEMETERY

AND STAIRS WITH THE SOUTH TRANSEPT



DRAWN BY ROBERT.A. BROWNE OF INGATESTONE FROM A PLAN BY MR WYKEHAM CHANCELLOR AND SKETCHES BY THE REV H.L. ELLIOT OF GOSFIELD, Co. Essex. 1914.

UPDATED 2005

A GUIDE TO THE PRIORY CHURCH OF ST LAURENCE BLACKMORE

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Priory Church of St Laurence, Blackmore. This splendid Church, as the name suggests, was once an Augustinian Priory. It was founded in about 1160 by Richard, Bishop of London, and endowed by Adam and Jordan de Samford, who held the Manor of Fingrith (the local name for this area). The later marriage of Alice Samford, in 1249, to Robert de Vere, the future 5th Earl of Oxford, transferred the Manor to this powerful Essex family, becoming probable benefactors to the Priory.

Historic records indicate that there was a building on this site previously, maybe as early as 1114. The Priory was never large, with a Prior and 12 Canons, but had a key role in local history until the Dissolution (1540).

The Prior was responsible for providing a priest to serve the parish. When he failed to do so, in 1309, Ralph de Baldock, Bishop of London insisted that within ten days "*...Divine Offices be performed at the altar in the body of the Church ... by fit Ministers ... to be presented to the Bishop, and on behalf of the parishioners that at their own charge they should find one Missal, one Chalice, one Vestment, and several other things ... requisite for the celebration of Mass, as are found by parishioners in other parishes*".

In the taxation of 1291, we know that the Priory held land at Blackmore, Margaretting (where the Priors were also Patrons of the church), Willingale Doe, Willingale Spain, Stondon Massey, and many other local parishes, even as far away as Great Hormead in Hertfordshire.

Because of the Priory, the village grew through both trade and tourism. The Bull (currently closed), at the top of Church Street, has been an inn since about 1385.

In 1524, authority was granted by King Henry VIII to Cardinal Wolsey to dissolve several smaller priories. This included Blackmore. It was intended that the money raised would fund a college in Oxford. In the following year, Blackmore Priory and its land was assessed at £85.9s.7d (£85.48). This was one of the largest values of priories suppressed in Essex at that time. In a further declaration, in March 1526, the rectories at Blackmore and Margaretting were granted to Wolsey. The remaining four Canons were ejected, and the Priory was transferred to Wolsey in 1527. However, two years later, Wolsey was stripped of his wealth when he fell out with the King. In 1531, the Priory was passed from the Crown to the Abbey at Waltham Holy Cross. This was the last monastic establishment in England to be dissolved in 1540. About this time much of Blackmore Priory was demolished.

The Church and nearby Priory lands were sold to John Smyth, auditor to Henry VIII. For five generations, through to 1721, the Smyth family held the Manor and the advowson, being the right to appoint the parish priest. In the 1580s the parishioners of Blackmore were engaged in a bitter dispute with Thomas, John's son, and heir, over the right to use the Chancel.

After the Reformation, Blackmore became a quiet and relatively poor village. It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the church was restored. Recently, internal alterations have been made to accommodate the needs of the worshipping community.

This Church is not a museum, but a living witness to the love of God over many generations. Do take time to ponder this as you look around.

THE FONT

Our guided tour begins at **the Font**, which is 13th century. It is here that the people of Blackmore have been admitted to the Church of God through Baptism. The Registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials date back to 1602 and are in safe keeping at the Essex Record Office.

Looking to the west, away from the altar, you will see a large doorway with two arched windows and a circular window above built c.1170. This was the original **west entrance** to the Priory, before it was sealed by the tower, which we will return to later. The returning bays on either side are also Norman (Romanesque) architecture and, above the arches on either side are holes that formed the **Clerestory**. We know that the roofs in the aisles were of a lower pitch than that seen today.

Turning around, one must assume that these arches were carried along the full length of the Nave. The **arcade of the North Aisle** (left hand side) dates from the 13th century, though rebuilt in the late 19th century when it was discovered that it was leaning some 13 inches (32cms) to the north. The **South Arcade**, unusually built of brick, dates from the 16th century, and is thought to have replaced a similarly designed arcade to the north side when it too failed. There is a red mark on one of the arches, a crude letter "M", and a **Consecration Cross**. It is thought to refer to Mary the mother of Jesus, and of Christ's crucifixion on a Cross.



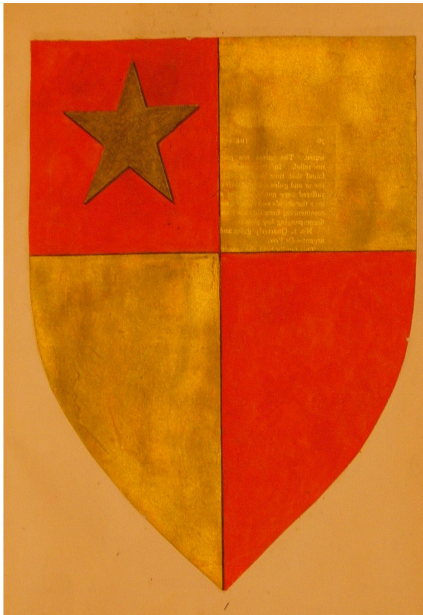
The Font and Rainbow Corner

THE NAVE

Walk up the Nave and look at the ceiling. There are several **bosses** and **shields** at the intersections. Copies of the shields are on the pillars. These show strong connections with the, already mentioned, de Vere family and the Royal family of Mediaeval times. The shields include the emblems of the 8th, 9th and 10th Earls of Oxford, King Richard II, and his uncles John of Gaunt and Thomas of Woodstock.



The Nave looking east



Shield of the de Vere family

Robert de Vere, the 9th Earl of Oxford, married Phillippa, grand daughter of King Edward III. He died in a hunting accident in 1392, but had a close relationship with his cousin, Richard II. He was King of England from 1377 until his enforced abdication, to Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, in 1399. Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, was murdered in 1397 at King Richard's behest.

When the North aisle columns were rebuilt, and roof repaired,

in 1898, the shields were taken down and examined. It was concluded that the Nave roof could not have been built earlier than 1381, or later than 1397. It is highly likely that the de Vere family were benefactors to the Priory because both the family shields of the de Vere and Samford families are above the Chancel steps, the furthest East, marking the end of the Nave. During the Middle Ages there would have been a Rood Screen at this position. Until the Reformation, Services were conducted in Latin from behind the Rood Screen in the Chancel. The people of Blackmore have always used the Nave to meet and worship, but in those times only observed the priests partaking of bread and wine during the Mass.

THE CHANCEL

Move now into the Chancel. The **Organ** dates from 1906, and was dedicated on Holy Innocents Day, 28th December.

The **Altar** itself and the kneeling benches are modern. Here, since the Reformation, Christians in Blackmore have received the bread and wine, symbols of Christ's body and blood.

In the 16th & 17th centuries, church attendance, and the receiving of Communion, was compulsory. These were turbulent times in English history. Buried in 1660 near the altar is the body of Simon Lynch, curate of Blackmore and one-time



The Organ



The Memorial to Simon Lynch

Rector of Runwell, from where he was ejected for his traditional views during a time when Puritans held sway. Lynch's epitaph, **under the loose carpet on the left-hand side**, bewails his plight as being "Sequestered, prosecuted and persecuted to the day of his death by Gog and Magog". Around him are buried five generations of the Smyth family, who owned the Manor after the Dissolution for a period of 180 years.

The Chancel has not always looked so well kept. In 1817, when the Archdeacon of Essex inspected the church he wrote "The Chancel pavement of this Church is as green as a Pasture Field and the Church the most cold wet and comfortless of any in the Archdeaconry".

The **East Window** was enlarged in 1907. The glass depicts the crucifixion of Christ. All the coloured glass in the Church, with two exceptions, dates from the first two decades of the 20th century.

The painted **Shields** on the ceiling of the Chancel date from 1969. They depict the four Bishoprics with which the Church has been associated: London (until 1846), Rochester (until 1877), St Albans (to 1914) and Chelmsford. There are also shields of St Laurence, to whom the church is dedicated, and St Chad (or St Cedd), who brought Christianity to Essex.

Look to the screened area on the left. This forms the **Vestry**, which was moved to here in 1988. Until the beginning of the 20th century this was the site of a

Mausoleum to the Crickitt family, who owned land in Blackmore during the 19th century. It then became a Lady Chapel, but after the church was flooded to a depth of 3 feet (1 metre) in 1987, a decision was made to create a Vestry here. The **Screen** (1902), around the Vestry, was once part of a Rood Screen which ran across the church where the Chancel steps are. Its removal, opening of the Chancel, and introduction of a sound system with hearing loop, means that the church can be used for more flexible forms of worship as well as for concerts and other events.

SOUTH EAST CORNER

Being careful of the step, now go to the area behind the organ. When King Henry VIII dissolved the Priory, Blackmore was sold to John Smyth. John demolished most of the Priory but allowed the people to use both the Nave and Chancel for worship. His descendent, Thomas, later withdrew the parishioners right to use the Chancel and there then followed a bitter dispute which went, in 1583, to the Essex Archdeaconry Court. The people of Blackmore won the case. The **monument** to Thomas, who died in 1592, and his wife, Margaret, can be seen here. It was restored in 1960, but many fragments are missing.



The Monument to Thomas and his wife, Margaret



Cresset Stone

There are some other interesting features in this corner of the church. A **cresset stone**, the only one surviving in Essex, was used to illuminate the way for the Priors to attend services. There is a **blocked-up doorway**, which once led out to the Cloister and living quarters of the Priory. Above the door is a **strange stone creature**, possibly a salamander, or a boar, the symbol of the de Vere family. The most recent coloured glass can be found in the **small east window**: a memorial to Margaret Eastmond, Mothers Union leader, who died in 1979.

THE BELL TOWER

Now walk the length of the Nave to see the interior of the **bell tower** made entirely of English Oak, including the studs, probably sourced locally, and completely original, except for part of the spire which was restored in 1900. The quality of construction is superb. It is the largest in Essex and was described by architectural historian, Nikolaus Pevsner, as "one of the most impressive, if not the most impressive, of all timber towers in England". Like Margaretting, it is constructed on ten upright posts, the largest about 22 feet (6.7 metres) in length. Uniquely to Essex, it rises in three stages.

The tower contains five bells, which for the last one hundred years have been chimed, not rung, because of a risk that tiles may become dislodged. The earliest bell was cast in Colchester during the English Civil War (1647).

In 2004, the timbers were tree-ring dated by Dr. Martin Bridge, an expert from Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory. He concluded that the oaks were “felled over the space of three winters, in 1397/98, 1398/99 and 1399/1400, suggesting a date for construction of the tower in 1400, or one or two years after this date”. The west window frame was also assessed, and Dr. Bridge concluded, “it is clearly part of the same batch of timbers used in the construction, reinforcing the idea that the west window is indeed original, and not, as some have suggested, a later intrusion”. This major new discovery rewrites the history of the church. We now know that the Nave Roof, the North Door (through which you entered), and the bell tower are all contemporary which might suggest that a central tower collapsed through the Nave roof sometime during the 1580s.



Inside the Bell Tower

THE CHURCH TODAY

Return to the Church itself. Look again at the Norman arches. On your left is a small **Kitchen**, installed in 1990, and on your right, an enclosed **Rainbow Corner** (2005), used by young children on Sundays as well as a meeting room on other occasions. Until 1988, this was the Vestry area, which moved to the site of the former Lady Chapel, on the north side of the Chancel. Such alterations to this ancient structure are indicative of the changes considered necessary by

today's worshipping community whilst being sensitive to the importance of this Grade I listed building.

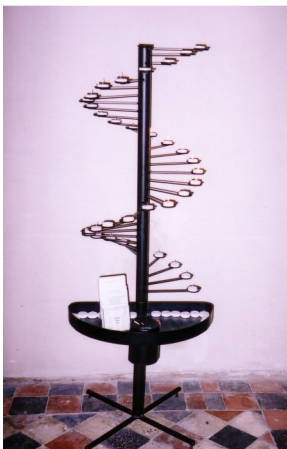
Recently an **ancient stained glass window** depicting the church's patron was restored by the Friends of St Laurence and placed in a light box by the west door to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the church's foundation (2014).

The church has many features which pre-date the Reformation, when Blackmore, through the presence of a Priory, and, no doubt, funding from the de Vere family, was at its wealthiest. Even the Black Death of 1349 did not have an adverse impact on the village. Quite the reverse. It



St Laurence Stained Glass

seems land values rose as did the wealth of the Priory. The reason that so many features have been conserved is because of the relative poverty of the village following the Dissolution. In 1902, at a celebration gathering following the restoration of the Church, the Vicar (Rev. Walter Layton Petrie) said "In the initial stages of the work pressure was brought to bear on him to build a new church and leave the old one as a ruin". Fortunately, this did not happen.



Votive Candle Stand

Having looked around, **you are invited to sit quietly** for a while and reflect on the worship, which has gone on here for many centuries, and to add your prayer. That is why this church is here. A further recent addition is the **Votive Candle Stand** (2004), enabling visitors to light a candle.

OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

Outside the Church is a much-enlarged churchyard. On the right, as you leave the building, is a **Rose Garden**, being the first Garden of Remembrance for the burial of ashes. The **Millennium Garden** (2001), semi-circular in shape, with low walls for memorial plaques, is the most recent addition to the exterior.

Between the two gardens are some of the **Oldest Gravestones** in the churchyard. There are two dated about 1710 to the Twogood family. Behind, near the wall, is a slab, dated 1699, to Robert Petchey.



Skull & Crossbones Grave

As you leave the grounds, you will pass under the **Lychgate** (1914), in recognition of the (approximate) 800th anniversary of the foundation of the Church.

Turn then and look back at the continuous roofline of the Nave and Chancel, and the magnificent pagoda-style timber bell tower.

Thank you for coming to our church. We hope that you have enjoyed your visit and will want to come again.

WHAT WE DO

A Church service is held at 11am each Sunday.

The church building is open daily to visitors and in addition holds:

- a café on Tuesdays (Serenitea Café)
- a parents and toddler group on Wednesdays (Little Lauries)
- a monthly craft group (Create)
- Teas In the Tower, on the 1st Sunday afternoon of each month from May to October.
- regular concerts and events



Groups also meet during the week in people's homes for prayer and for Bible Study and discussion.

The Friends of St Laurence support the church community in the upkeep of the building.

There is a separate leaflet containing further information.

Also, visit our website: www.blackmorechurch.org.uk

Find us on Social Media:

- Facebook:  Priory Church of St Laurence Blackmore
- Instagram:  stlblackmore



The Priory Church of St Laurence from Church Street

CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY

- 12th Century First church built at Blackmore.
- 1160 St. Laurence Priory founded and endowed by the Samford family.
- 13th Century Early English arcade of the north aisle built.
- 1381 - 1397 Construction of roof with heraldic bosses.
- 1400 Tower added to west end of church.
- 1527 Dissolution of Blackmore Priory – granted to Wolsey.
- 1529 Priory reverted to Crown.
- 1531 Priory given to Waltham Abbey.
- 1540 Second dissolution of Priory. Priory pulled down. Brick pillars of south aisle probably date from this time. Dormers put in.
- 1581 - 1583 Dispute between villagers and Thomas Smyth over right to use chancel.
- 1817 Archdeacon orders repairs.
- 1877 Church restored. Two windows made in south wall.
- 1896 - 1902 Major restoration of Church – north arcade rebuilt, north wall restored, bell tower spire repaired and reconstructed. New Pulpit and Lectern. Carved wooden Screen put in to divide nave from chancel (It now surrounds the Vestry).
- 1907 The large east window glazed with stained glass.
- 1914 Celebration of 800th anniversary.
- 1987 Church flooded (August). Hurricane (October).
- 1988 Screen removed and repositioned around new Vestry. Removal of Pulpit (dated 1902).
- 1990 Installation of kitchen and toilet facilities.
- 1993 Installation of sound system.
- 1995 First woman Incumbent appointed.
- 2001 Enlarged Garden of Remembrance created.
- 2002 Tower re-shingled (previously 1988).
- 2004 Bell Tower tree-ring dated.
- 2005 Rainbow Corner enclosed to form meeting room.



Researched and written by Andrew Smith
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