Saint Mary the Virgin
The Ancient Parish Church of Prittlewell,
at Southend-on-Sea in Essex.

A Brief Guide to the Church Interior

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Guide available to download from: www.stmarysprittlewell.co.uk
Welcome to...
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We are delighted that you have come to visit our wonderful church and we welcome you. It is our privilege to be the inheritors not just of a beautiful building but also a place of a living faith which has been handed down to us through the centuries for 1300 years.

As you walk around the church we hope that you will take a few moments to stop and remember with thanks the many builders and craftsmen, priests and countless people who have been part of its life, and especially those who continue to meet together for prayer and worship today.
Our church, above all, is a house of prayer.

Please do not leave without adding your own prayers to those offered here. But remember that prayer is not just words, it’s the offering of heart and mind and soul to God.
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A Brief History of the Church

For more than a thousand years there has been a church on the site of Saint Mary’s, Prittlewell. When the Saxon settled here, soon after the Roman Legions had left Britain, they found a fine, dry site overlooking the River Thames, with a fresh water stream, the Prittle Brook and good grazing land nearby.

There is archaeological evidence that a small chapel was erected on the site of the present church in the 7th century. A portion of the Saxon doorway of that tiny chapel remains today as part of the north wall of the chancel. For four hundred years or so, the small Saxon chapel served the developing village of Prittlewell. In the 11th century, the Norman nave was built, which greatly enlarged the building, and the chancel of the new church was built over the foundations of the old Saxon chapel.

The church at Prittlewell is mentioned in the Doomsday Survey of 1086. Towards the end of the 12th century, a processional aisle was added to the south side of the nave. The south aisle was enlarged and completed in the late 15th century, almost doubling the size of the church. In the 15th century, the magnificent tower was built, together with a porch and an eastern wall that now forms part of the Jesus Chapel. Since then, the structure of the church remained unaltered, save for the addition of the vestries in modern times.

Did you know?...

When the town of Southend-on-Sea was established at the “Southe Ende” of Prittlewell village, the church of Saint Mary the Virgin became the mother church of Southend. Over the centuries, the church at Prittlewell has seen joyous times, and has fallen on hard times.

Shortly after Henry VIII’s reign, at the time of the Reformation, so much of the church’s income assets were seized that the church wardens sold the church plate to ‘pay for maintenance of the church’. In the Second World War, Saint Mary’s suffered blast damage from bombs falling nearby, but daily services continued at the normal times throughout those difficult years.

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The Church Interior

The porch, the two-storey south porch, is lit by two windows which contain the only original tracery now remaining in the building. To the right of the heavy carved Tudor door is a Holy Water stoup. In the stone work at the sides of the door are holes into which a bar could be fitted as a bolt.
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The Font

The unusual octagonal shaped font is 16th century, but its base may be earlier.

The Tudor Rose and Pomegranate Motif is that of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, his first wife: the cover is modern.

In the first column of the arcade is a chrism niche to contain the salt and oil used during the Baptism service in Pre-Reformation Times.

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The blocked doorway in the west wall led to a room outside the church which was either a school room or the lodging of the Jesus priest. By this doorway are three memorial tablets. The two memorials to previous vicars were originally placed in the Chancel and moved here in the 1950s.

On the top one Southend is spelt in two words, a reminder that it was once just the South End of the Parish of Prittlewell.
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The Tower

The internal dimensions of the tower are 15 feet by 14 feet 6 inches, and the walls are about 5 feet thick.

In one corner is a door to the staircase which leads to the ringing chamber, the clock floor and the bell chamber.

The tower was completed in 1478 and restored in 1871, originally the tower housed the organ and the choir on a raised floor, the entrance to which can still be seen in the South East corner.
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The Tower Bells

The church tower was completed in about 1478 and the first mention of bells was in 1550 when a new bell frame was installed. An inventory of 1552 recorded five bells and a Sanctus bell. Richard Holdfield of Cambridge recast at least three bells of the five in 1602 and John Darbie of Ipswich recast the tenor bell in 1682. In 1772 a bell fell down out of its frame and cracked and was recast the following year by Thomas Pack and William Chapman of the Whitechapel Bell foundry. A new clock by Thwaites and Reed of Clerkenwell was purchased in 1800 and with it a bell to strike the hours; this bell was cast at Whitechapel by Thomas Mears Senior.

A sixth bell was added to the ring in 1806 by Thomas Mears and Son. All the old bells in the ring, with the exception of the 1806 bell were recast by Mears and Stainbank (of Whitechapel) in 1872. In 1895 Mears and Stainbank added two smaller bells to complete the octave. In 1902 John Warner of Cripplegate, London added two more smaller bells to complete a ring of ten bells and at the same time recast the 1872 tenor bell. By 1967 the fourth bell had become cracked, this bell was recast by John Taylor & Co. of Loughborough.

In the early years of the 21st century the frame installed by John Warner was deteriorating and needed replacing. The opportunity was taken to replace the bells which had been cast at five different dates by four different founders. A new ring of ten bells was cast at the Whitechapel Bell foundry in 2010, who also replaced the framework and fittings. A second hand bell, previously at St. Mary at Walls, Colchester which had been stored for many years, was acquired as a service/funeral bell. This bell was cast by John Darbie in 1679 who had originally cast our tenor bell in 1682. Nine of our old bells are now in use elsewhere, three in Malta, the others in this country in London, Bedfordshire, Gloucestershire and Essex (at Willingale).
In the north east corner is a fine 13th century raised cross slab or stone coffin lid. This was found upside-down, used as a flag stone, when the floor was relaid in 1870. These memorials are very scarce in Essex.

The Nave, above the arcading at the west end of the Nave are the blocked-up heads of Norman windows. This was the outside wall of the church before the south aisle was built; it’s thickness is apparent where the arches have been pierced through it. In the north wall are traces of other Norman windows.

The west door, like the south door, could be barred and holes to allow this are still visible. The blocked door above led to a gallery and the corbels which supported the former organ floor can be seen jutting out from the walls. This floor and gallery were removed in 1870.
On the south wall near the tower is a board bearing a list of the vicars of the parish from 1323 onwards.

An example of a 15th Century Coffer or Dragons Chest

The Vestries
The vestries and the door leading to them are modern. The opening shows the original stonework of the former external north door.

The wooden panels hanging on the south wall are from a traceried coffer or dragon chest which belonged to St Mary’s. This dates from the 14th century and had remained intact until about 1870.
Just before the chancel arch the roof is raised, forming a short clerestory with two windows on each side. This was to give light and space for the rood (Cross) loft which spanned the nave at this point. The staircase to the rood loft can still be seen in the wall by the Victorian pulpit.

The stone sill in the wall above is all that remains of the upper doorway. The bottom step of this staircase shows the height of the floor prior to the restoration in 1870. This change is reflected in the columns, where the base is well above the present floor. Looking down the nave from the chancel steps one becomes more aware of the great length of the church and the different shapes of the arches and columns.
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The Chancel Roof
This hammer-beam roof
dates from the 1870 restoration. The gilding
and colouring was completed in 1965 in the mediaeval tradition.
Four winged angels form the finials of the hammer beams on each side of the roof. They clasp their hands in prayer and face the altar. Attached to the wall plates on each side of the roof are three larger angels bearing a shield carved with the implements associated with the Passion of Christ. Monograms of the name ‘Mary’ can be seen between the beams.

In the north wall is half of a Saxon arch, built with Roman bricks. This is the oldest part of the church. Excavations have discovered the old south wall of the chancel, now beneath the choir stalls, and revealed at least three floor levels between the earliest and present one.

There are brass plates in the floor of the aisle which mark the sites of the monumental slabs removed in the 1870 restoration. The originals are now set in the floor under the tower.
In the church are a number of banners of special note are ones for the Mother’s Union and Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

‘Ecce Ancillia Domini’ translates as ‘Behold the Hand Maiden of the Lord’.

To the left of the altar is the banner of the Mother’s Union and to the right of the banner of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. ‘Ecce Ancillia Domini’ translates as ‘Behold the Hand Maiden of the Lord’.

The Sanctuary, the 16th century aumbry set in the south wall is used for keeping the reserved Sacrament. The lit candle is a sign that the Sacrament is present.
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The Organ

William Hill and Son, famous for the organs of York Minster, Birmingham Town Hall and Sydney Town Hall (Australia), built the present organ in 1915. *It was possibly the last organ by Dr Arthur Hill and his family business before this great firm was amalgamated with Norman & Beard Ltd.*

The organ was neatly fitted into a small space with tubular-pneumatic action and a pedal trombone was added in 1925. It has two manuals and pedals of twenty speaking stops and three coupiers. Though perhaps on the small size for this large church, it has been cleverly located between the two arches of the chancel.

*It has a fine tone and is much admired by organists.* In 1997 the organ underwent a major overhaul and was completely restored by the famous firm of Harrison & Harrison of Durham during which the key action was electrified and a mixture was added to the Great Organ. In 2017 the underground blowing chamber (under the Jesus Chapel was ‘tanked’ the reservoir replaced and the organ itself given a full checkup.
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The Jesus Chapel
As the church is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the south chapel is not designated as a Lady Chapel, it is instead dedicated as the Jesus Chapel.

*The Jesus Chapel’s hangings are always red to signify the blood of Jesus shed for the redemption of the world.* To the right of the altar is a particularly fine banner made for the church congress held in Prittlewell in 1920.

To the left of the altar is an ancient niche. In the south wall is a piscina originally used to wash the chalice after Holy Communion. In the 15th century England interest was renewed in the Bible and education, embodied in the Jesus Guild.

A group of local businessmen formed a Jesus Guild in Prittlewell which received a Royal Charter in 1477. They financed the building of the south chapel and endowed the Jesus Guild’s own priest. The Jesus Guild also partly financed the building of the south, or Jesus, aisle with a small schoolroom at its west end, as the Jesus Guild priest was also the schoolmaster. St Mary’s school, now housed in a modern building in Boston Avenue and East Street, has therefore had continuous existence since the 15th century.
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The South Aisle

This is perpendicular in style. Against the south wall is a fine statue of the Virgin and Child from the school of Nicholson given to the church in 1936. Over the third arch from the west end is a consecration cross, but it is difficult to find.

Can you find it?

Behind the small doorway beside the south door is a stair case leading to the room above the porch, now the chapel of St Michael and St George. Sadly because it is difficult to access it's not open to view.