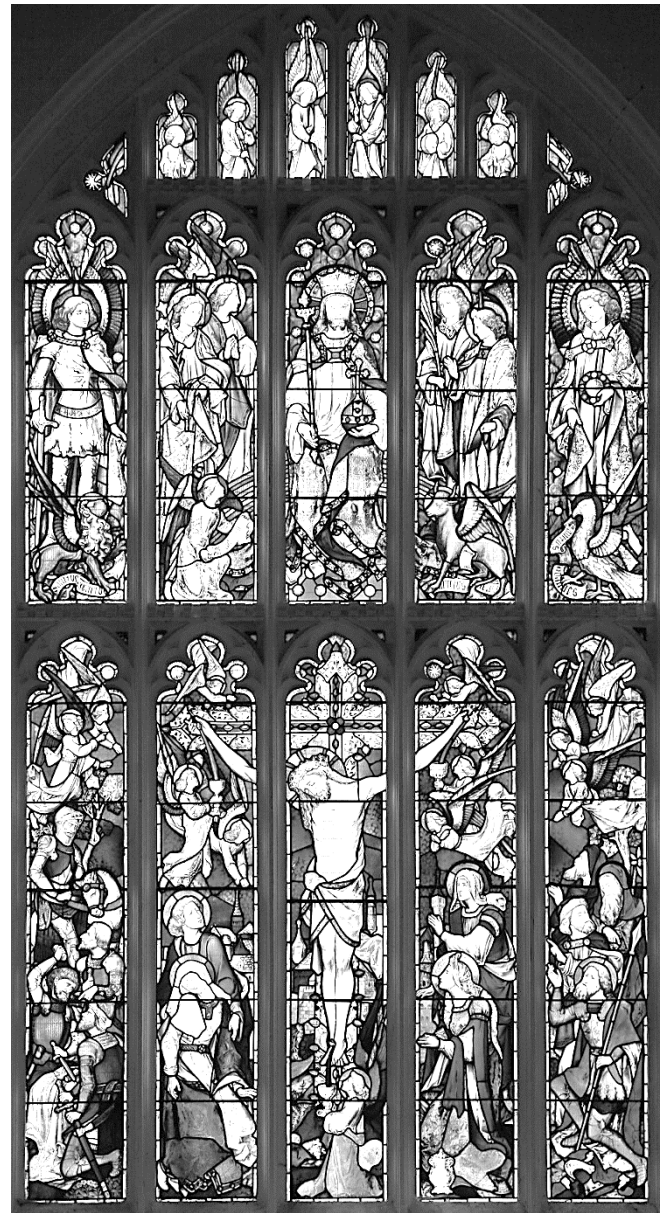


St Neots Parish Church (St Mary the Virgin)

Huntingdonshire / Cambridgeshire

A brief history and guide

including a tour of the stained glass windows
and information about the church organs



This booklet is free of charge: please take it away with you if you wish.

(Donations towards parish costs are always greatly appreciated)

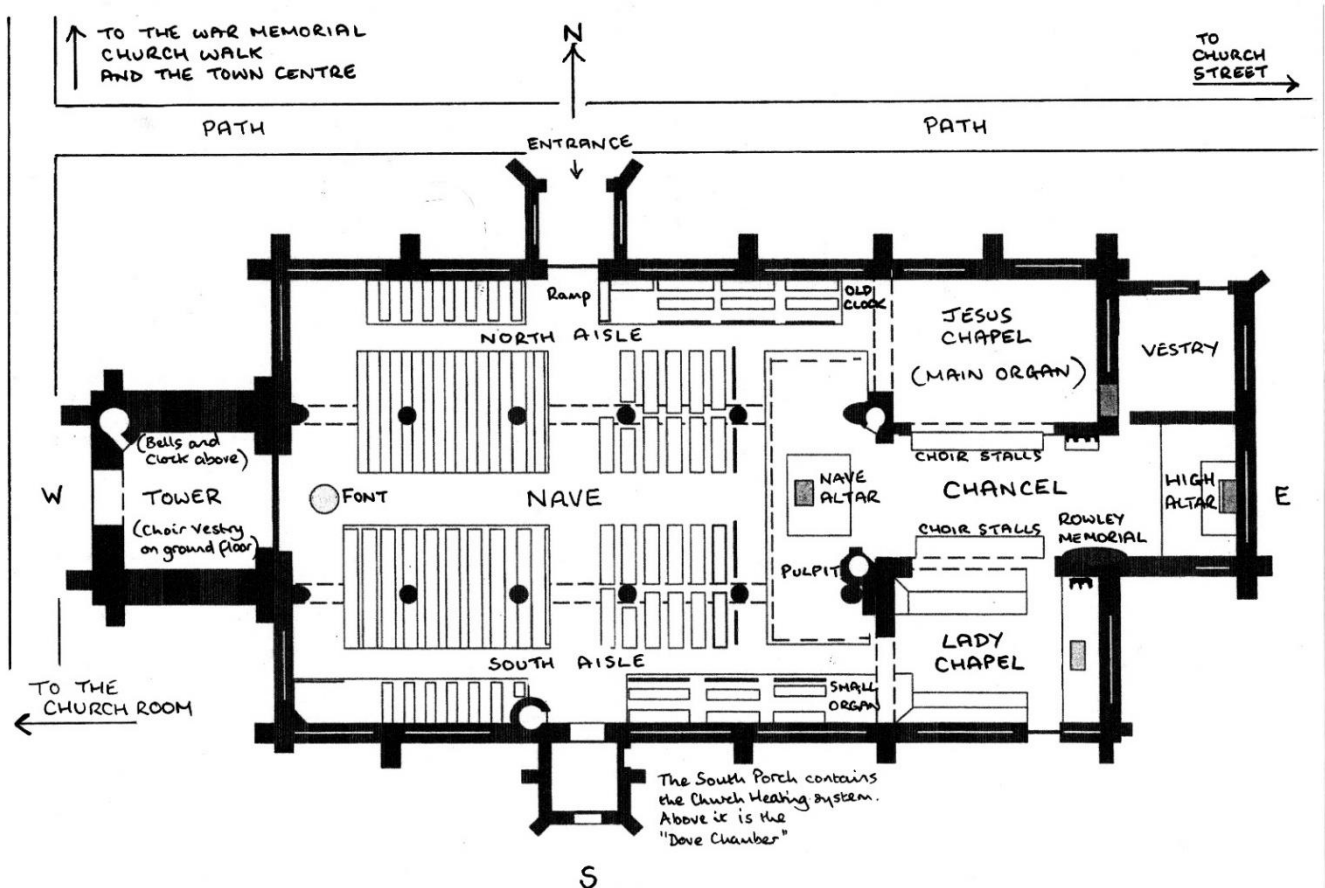
Welcome to St Neots Parish Church

Like the parish churches of Eynesbury and Eaton Socon, this Church of England church is dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, the mother of Jesus.

Like many great and historic English parish churches, St Neots Parish Church has a rich history across all the centuries of its life. Some of its history contributes to the bigger story of the town; its tower is a distinctive local landmark and a symbol of the town's identity; and its graveyard (which has been closed for burials for over 150 years) contains the graves of many of St Neots' most notable citizens, as well as the town's main War Memorial (dedicated in 1925).

This guide can't tell all these stories, but it can offer a few pointers, and give some details about things that you can see here. We hope you find it helpful.

This guide isn't intended to be a guide to Christian faith, either. But if you take time to view the wonderful stained glass windows that we have here, you will find a telling of the main events of Jesus's birth, life, death, and resurrection, and you may find that an encouragement to find out more. There are Bibles in various corners of church, as well as hymnbooks that contain many great Christian poems, and other leaflets for prayer and reflection. We hope that you find time to pause, to reflect, and to pray while you are here.



Guide – *What can you see?*

However you entered church, we recommend that you begin by going to stand beside the Font, at the west end of the Nave, under the archway to the Tower. From there you can gain a good overall sense of the beauty of the building, before you look at the various parts described here. Details about the windows (which are particularly notable) and about the organs follow in separate sections.

The Font

Eight sided (as many fonts are - the '8th Day' being the day of New Creation in Christian symbolism), this font is an exceptionally crude and rough structure on a squat round base, and is believed to be as old as the first church here.

How many generations must have begun their Christian lives here!

The Arches of the Nave

The 15th century Nave belongs to the Perpendicular period of architecture. The soaring height, accentuated by the graceful thinness of the pillars, and the light coming in the high windows (the Clerestory) gives a particularly majestic impression, and speaks of the prosperity of the town at the time the Nave was raised. It is undoubtedly one of the most striking churches in the area.

The stone **pillars** have not always been painted white, but this is a style of decoration found in other local churches, and it was done here in the mid twentieth century. It is a puzzle why the arches didn't quite reach the tower, and why the south side includes an additional part arch at the east end.

The archway into the west tower is exceptionally high, but the arch into the Chancel at the east end is also high, giving a fine view all the way to the High Altar and the Great East Window.

Screens

In medieval times the Chancel arch had a wooden screen (fragments found in the 1960s are on display near the main organ). Above the screen was a gallery (reached by a spiral stair through a now-blocked doorway) on which would have stood the figure of Christ on the cross (**the Rood**) with Mary and John at his side. These were removed during the Tudor Reformations in the 16th century.

Other wooden medieval screens remain in place, however: the four screens that divide the two eastern chapels from the Chancel and the side Aisles all date from around 1480-1500 – the best of them the one with vine leaves, grapes, and Tudor flowers, between the main organ and the North Aisle

The roofs/ceilings in the Nave and Aisles

Although not easy to see clearly from ground level (and particularly difficult to see when the Nave lights are on), all the ceilings in the church are among the church's greatest treasures. Apart from the Chancel ceiling (see later), all the roofs of the church are 15th century: they are filled with intricately carved woodwork on all the main crossbeams, as well as on the cornices (where the ceiling meets the walls).

In the **highest roof** (the main roof of the Nave) winged angels reach out above each of the windows, each holding a different object. The beams also have angels on each face. The cornices include deer, lions, griffons, hunting dogs, hares, rams and hounds. Above the Chancel arch, the roof is a special **canopy** above where the rood screen once stood: its painting and gilding were restored in 1863.

In the **South Aisle**, the beams include carvings of dragons or alligators (?), dogs, deer, fish, boar (?), and birds; while the cornice includes unicorns, lions, griffons, hounds, deer, dragons, and a rabbit between two dogs.

The **North Aisle** is less varied: it lacks animals but still has many angels.

The floor and walls of the Nave and Aisles

The **pews** in the Nave and Aisles (with machine-made poppy-heads and carved symbols) are newer woodwork: installed in a single scheme in 1847. Some timber floors were replaced in the 1930s, some pews at the very front were removed in the 1960s. In 1998, the floor of the eastern half was replaced with flagstones, a raised dais and moveable pews, making the space more flexible.

The square **Nave Altar** (its shape inspired by the 20th century continental liturgical movement) was made in 1998 using elements from older altars & a local table. Some coloured coverings date from then; red and purple from 2023.

The **pulpit**, which has stood on both sides of the Chancel arch over the years (with carvings of St Peter, St Paul, and the four evangelists with traditional biblical symbols – the man, the lion, the ox, and the eagle), dates from the 1860s.

The **old clock** mechanism, at the west end of the North Aisle, dates from the early 18th century: it was replaced by new clock in the tower in 1919 (see later).

In the wall of the North Aisle there is a small **niche for a statue** which probably predates the windows in that part of the building.

Above the South doorway, the 18th century Royal **Coat of Arms** originally topped the organ case that was in the church at that time.

To the right of the South doorway is the town's earliest **Great War Memorial**.

The **scale model** of the church was made by a Polish refugee toymaker, Roman Hoenigsman, in 1957.

The eastern part of the church – the Chancel

This is the oldest part of the building (late 12th century), but it is also the part most affected by Victorian restoration. The **east wall** had to be rebuilt in 1855, when it was given its exterior of dressed stone. The altar rail, the altar and its surrounds, the choir pews, the tiled floors and the three stalls (medieval?) and front were also all installed in the 19th century.

The **roof** of the Chancel, with some attractive gilding, was restored in 1901.

The **figures** holding up the roof beams are much older: they depict some of the apostles with their traditional emblems – N: Bartholomew, James, Matthew, John; S: Thomas, Andrew (?), Philip, Peter. The three fish appearing in the robes of Philip are probably not associated with the ‘three fishes’ myth connected with St Neot.

There are **memorials** in various parts of church, many of them connecting with notable St Neots families – among them Fowler, Hatley and Gorham, and 3 generations of the Day family (19th century owners of the Priory site, including the brewery there). Some memorials are to former clergy, but there is also a simple plaque to a notable St Neots character – Sammy Hawksford/Hawkesford, who lived across the road from the church in Brook Street, dying in 1966 at the age of 92 after a lifetime of service to the church as sexton, bell-ringer and clerk.

The Rowley Family memorials

4 generations of the family are remembered here.

Owsley Rowley (died 1824) and his wife Ann acquired the Priory Farm in 1793, later building a house on Priory Hill; their elder son was David (died 1855). Both Owsley and David were leading county figures in Huntingdonshire.

The flamboyant **memorial tomb in medieval style** is to three people - David’s younger brother, George William Rowley, George William’s elder son George Dawson Rowley (who died on the same day as his father in 1878); and George William’s widow Jane (died 1886), who is depicted in the effigy. The tomb was designed by the architect Frederick A Walters, and was the last work of the sculptor Thomas Earp, installed in 1893.

The gold-painted **gates**, with the family motto ‘Deus providebit’ (God will provide) were added later for protection.

George Dawson’s son, George Fydell Rowley (died 1933) is the last to have a memorial here, although another generation lived and died before Priory Hill House was sold and eventually demolished.

George Dawson’s brother, **Charles Percival Rowley**, was closely involved in the creation of the memorial tomb and the stained glass windows (see later).

The eastern part of the church – the Chapels

The two chapels at the east end were built as part of the 15th century expansion of the church. Each belonged to a Guild – a society that paid a priest to celebrate masses for the dead and to give charity.

The Jesus Chapel belonged to the Guild of Jesus. It was built with a more elegant dressed stone exterior, but the decoration in the roof was simpler than in other parts of the church. When the Nave was filled with pews in 1847, the Jesus Chapel became the home of the main organ (see later), and latterly the place for other cupboards and equipment. These obscure or hide several memorials.

The Lady Chapel belonged to the Guild of St Mary. It has been used in various ways since the Reformation, but the Chapel as we see it today was created in 1961. It has possibly the most notable **roof**, with the most intricate carvings, but the roof is also quite fragile and has needed pinning in recent years.

The Lady Chapel is also now home to a small late-Elizabethan **communion table** – likely to have been used for main communion services until the installation of the 19th century High Altar – and two free-standing medieval **stalls**, which came from Milton Ernest in 1848 (possibly originally from Warden Abbey).

Out of sight

The parish has several things, not normally on display, which – though not of significant value – may be of interest to specialists. Please enquire via the office if you wish to know more.

During the restoration of the church in the 1840s, two panes of glass were created out of fragments of **medieval glass**. These include figures believe to be of St Stephen and St Laurence, two monograms of the M symbol for Mary, and the instruments of the Passion. These panes are kept in the Vestry. There are also fragments of medieval glass which the Reformers didn't reach in a window in the north Clerestory.

The parish has a library of 18th century **books** (theology and other).

There are various wooden **carvings**, surplus to normal requirements, kept in different places in the church and its separate rooms.

Though many **documents and registers** have long ago gone to County Archives (and some were badly damaged by flood), we still have several connected with the 1847 re-ordering.

The ancient **parish chest** is on long-term loan to St Neots Museum.

The **Sanctus bell** is ancient, quite small, and difficult to hear in church!

The Stained Glass Windows

A notable planned scheme – the story of its creation

As in many places, the medieval stained glass windows were systematically destroyed during the 16th century Reformation and 17th century Civil War. We do not have exact information, and we only have collected fragments.

Following the 1847 pew refurbishment, and the new organ of 1855, the installation of the new windows began, with major support from the Rowley family, when the Revd Charles Lyndhurst Vaughan (a prominent Tractarian and later the first vicar of Christ Church, St Leonards on Sea) was vicar (1854-1864).

The scheme (telling of the life of Christ from Birth to Ascension) began with the window with scenes of the Resurrection, to the south of the High Altar (an 1859 memorial to David Rowley); continued with the new East window in 1864 (the Rowley family contributed a third of the cost, and Charles Percival Rowley was closely interested in the design); then the Annunciation window as a memorial to Vaughan's successor, Charles Collier (who died of epilepsy after only a year in post). The scheme then completed the Lady Chapel, and moved by stages gradually westwards through the church.

The majority of the windows are by John Hardman & Co of Birmingham, designed by Hardman's nephew **John Hardman Powell** (who was also son in law to the architect Augustus Welby Pugin). Three of the windows appeared at Paris exhibitions in 1867 and 1878 before installation, and one appeared at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876.

Following the death of his father and brother on the same day in 1878, C P Rowley commissioned two, more mournful, windows – the Widow of Nain, and the Agony in the Garden – and then stepped back for a time. Windows made by Clayton and Bell appeared at the west end (the Baptism and Transfiguration windows were in memory of local doctors; the West window was also a Collier memorial) and in the south clerestory (Old Testament figures, 1879). A window in memory of Collier's successor as vicar, George Bowes Watson (vicar 1866-75), was designed by Heaton Butler & Bayne (Robert Bayne had previously worked for Clayton & Bell) – it is notable that the whole window is filled by a single striking picture.

The final window in the set, in the Jesus Chapel, was one last C P Rowley commission: the Trial before Pilate, designed by Charles E Kempe, in memory of Caroline Rowley (the widow of George Dawson Rowley), who died in 1900.

A tour of the Windows

This tour begins in the Lady Chapel and works clockwise around the building. With some exceptions, it follows the story of the Life of Christ.

Many of the windows are distinguished by the major picture spread across four lights: but there is also much delight to be found in the smaller scenes and images above (especially the two sets of images above the main pictures in the Lady Chapel), and in the incidental details inserted into the main images.

The Lady Chapel

Small window: The Annunciation – the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary, saying that she will bear the Son of God (Luke 1).

(Hardman - In memory of Charles Collier, vicar 1865-6)

East window: The Adoration of the Magi – the wise men from the East, following a star, come in search of the new-born king (Matthew 2).

(Hardman – the gift of C P Rowley, exhibited at the Paris Exhibition in 1867)

South window: The Adoration of the Shepherds – shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem come in response to the message of the angels (Luke 2).

(Hardman – the gift of C P Rowley)

South Aisle, East

Window 1: The Presentation of Christ in the Temple – Mary & Joseph bring their firstborn son, offering two young pigeons – Simeon and Anna look on (Luke 2).

(Hardman – in memory of William and Elizabeth Day, 1869)

Window 2: The Wedding at Cana – Jesus and his followers attend a wedding where, in Jesus' first sign/miracle, six stone jars of water become wine (John 2).

(Hardman – the gift of C P Rowley)

South Aisle, West

Window 1: The Woman of Samaria – while the disciples seek food in town, Jesus encounters a woman with a colourful story at Jacob's well (John 4).

(Hardman – the gift of C P Rowley, exhibited at the Paris Exhibition in 1878)

Window 2: The Widow of Nain – Jesus brings her deceased son back to life; the smaller panels show other similar miracles by Jesus. (Luke 7)

(Hardman – the gift of C P Rowley following the death of father & brother in 1878)

South West Window - The Baptism of Christ: Jesus is baptized at the beginning of his ministry by John; the heavens open, a dove descends, and a voice declares him God's beloved son (Matthew 3 / Mark 1 / Luke 3)

(Clayton & Bell – in memory of Dr Samuel and Mrs Sarah Allvey)

The Great West Window, upper level

The 'Four Doctors (teachers) of the Western Church' – from L to R: St Ambrose of Milan (hymnwriter and theologian); St Jerome (bible translator); St Augustine of Hippo (great theologian); St Gregory the Great (pope).

The Great West Window, lower level

Four figures from the history of the English Church – from L to R, St Alban (first martyr); St Augustine of Canterbury (missionary of Pope Gregory); St Ethelbert (first Christian King of Kent); the Venerable Bede (historian & theologian).

(Clayton & Bell – in memory of Charles Collier, Vicar 1865-6)

North West Window – The Transfiguration: Jesus takes his companions, Peter, James, and John, up a mountain, where his face shines with dazzling light and he is transformed, Moses & Elijah also appearing (Matthew 17 / Mark 9 / Luke 9)

(Clayton & Bell – in memory of Dr Joseph and Mrs Helen Rix, 1879)

North Aisle, West

Window 1: The Miraculous Catch of Fish – after a huge catch, and a confession by Simon Peter, Jesus calls the disciples to follow him (Luke 5).

(Heaton, Butler and Bayne – In memory of George Bowes Watson, vicar 1866-75)

Window 2: The healing at the Pool of Bethesda – a man, ill for 38 years, longing to be put in the pool for healing, is healed by Jesus on the Sabbath Day (John 5).

(Hardman – the gift of C P Rowley, exhibited at the Parish Exhibition in 1878)

North Aisle, East

Window 1: The Anointing of Jesus's feet – Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet with a costly jar of ointment; Judas, on the right, complains (John 12).

(Hardman – the gift of C P Rowley, following exhibition at Philadelphia in 1876)

Some details in the picture could be consistent with the different story in Luke 7

Window 2: The Entry into Jerusalem – Jesus, riding on a donkey, hailed by crowds that strew the ground with cloaks (Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, John 12).

(Hardman – the gift of C P Rowley, c.1869?)

The Jesus Chapel *If you go through the curtain, please take care with obstacles*

Window 1: The Agony in the Garden – Jesus prays that he may do the Father's will, as his disciples sleep, with Judas and Temple guards near (Luke 22).

(Hardman – in memory of George Dawson Rowley, died 1878)

Window 2: Jesus appears before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who symbolically washes his hands (Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 19)

(C E Kempe, 1904 – in memory of Caroline Frances Rowley, died 1900)

The Great East Window – lower level

The Crucifixion of Jesus. The cross appears to sprout leaves, as a symbol of the life that flows from it. The sky above Jerusalem turns dark red. Angels gather the precious blood flowing from Jesus' wounds, while, at his feet, from L to R: the soldiers gamble for his clothes; the Beloved Disciple comforts Jesus' mother Mary; Mary Magdalene and another woman look on; the Centurion confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, while several men, possibly the Sanhedrin (perhaps including Joseph of Arimathea, pointing) observe (from all four gospels).

The Great East Window – upper level

Jesus, after his ascension, sits enthroned in majesty. The symbols of the four evangelists (Mark the lion, Matthew the man, Luke the ox, John the eagle) are at his feet; while angels are at his side, with the archangels Michael (L) and Gabriel (R) also in attendance. A choir of musical angels is above (echoes of Revelation). *(Hardman – the window given by subscription after the wall was repaired, 1860s)*

The South East window

Three scenes after the Resurrection: the Angel in white telling the women that Jesus is risen (Matthew 28); the guards startled (Matthew 28); Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus in the garden (John 20).

(The first window in the scheme: Hardman – in memory of David Rowley, 1859)

The South Clerestory (the high windows in the Nave)

Each scene depicts a figure from the Hebrew Scriptures accompanied by angels. From L to R (E to W): Moses (with 'horns', Exodus / Numbers); Miriam (with a timbrel in her hand, Exodus); Barak (Numbers); Deborah (Judges); David (with a harp – 1 Samuel). *(Clayton & Bell, 1879)*

Did you notice?

Whenever heaven breaks in (Baptism / Transfiguration / Resurrection / Throne), the faces of many angels appear in some of the darker coloured glass.

Like the two main Christmas windows, some pairs of windows across the church echo each other in style – Jerusalem at the Presentation and Entry; the banqueting tables at Cana and the Anointing; the well/pool canopies at Samaria and Bethesda.

The clothes are all in the style of art created in the years when the body of the church was built, and the musical instruments likewise.

The windows along the north wall don't have frames around the pictures in each light, giving a greater sense of continuity between the window lights.

History - *How long has the church been here?*

The early history of St Neots is difficult to tell with complete confidence. The oldest parts of the fabric of the building which you see – the lower walls of the east end of the building, including a blocked north window and a simple arched vestry doorway (which has been moved from an earlier position), date from the late 12th century (possibly c.1180). This is all that remains of a church, much smaller than the current one, which would have been complete before 1200, and in use (and extended from time to time) for 200-250 years. Most of the rest of the structure you can see was built in the middle of the 15th century; the tower followed, and was completed in 1530.

It is not clear whether there was a place of worship on this site before these stone remains. Great Paxton and Eynesbury are both older settlements, but the latter included Anglo Saxon dwellings in the area near this church, and it was in the manor of Eynesbury that a Benedictine priory, staffed by monks from Ely, was established in 974 by Earl Leofric and Countess Leofreda (sometimes called Alric and Ethelfleda). The Anglo-Saxon priory may have been on the same site as the Norman refoundation under the monastery of Bec in Normandy (i.e. nearer the river, north of the Market Square); but there is an alternative argument that the Anglo-Saxon priory was on the site of what became this church.

Wherever the priory was established, it became the home of the remains of an Anglo-Saxon saint, **St Neot**. Neot had been venerated in the community around him in Cornwall following his death there in c.877. The story of how his remains, and others from Cornwall, came to Huntingdonshire a century later (a time when several monasteries were founded or re-founded in the Fens under the influence of Bishop Ethelwold of Winchester) is beyond the scope of this guide; but it is worthy of note that **Anselm** (Abbot of Bec 1078-93 then Archbishop of Canterbury 1093-1109, and one of the greatest of medieval theologians) came to the priory in his early years as Abbot (around 1080) to inspect Neot's remains and initiate the refoundation of the priory (the church of which was re-dedicated in 1113).

A market developed close to the Norman priory in around 1120, and when this parish church was first built, it would have been staffed by priests from the priory. Priests from the Priory were followed in the 13th century by vicars - the list of known vicars can be seen on boards in the South Aisle.

The Organs

We believe (from a reference in a will) that there was an organ here before the Reformation, but the first organ of which we have firm information is the one built by Justinian Morse in 1749. It stood in the arch of the west tower until 1847, when it was moved to the Jesus Chapel. All that remains of it now is one rank of pipes – the choir Cremona. One of its (likely but not certain) players was the composer William Tans'ur (1706-83), who is buried east of the Lady Chapel, near the road. When the organ was replaced in 1855, the Morse case was removed, and later used as a side case at St Philip's Church, Birmingham (now the Cathedral).

The present main organ in the Jesus Chapel is still quite substantially the instrument that was installed in 1855 by George M Holdich, a London organ builder of growing reputation. Although it has three times had major restorations (in 1900, 1972 & 2006) by Bishop & Son of Ipswich, and has been repositioned within the chapel, most of its sounds are still those of an early Victorian instrument of three (mechanical action) manuals and pedals. It is regularly used not only for services but also for organ recitals, and concerts with visiting choirs.

The small organ, beside the entrance to the Lady Chapel, was built by the Revd Roger Henthorne in 2003 from second-hand materials (with woodwork by a congregation member, Reg Flower) to be a two-manual and pedal stand-in instrument while the main organ was being restored. An extension organ, with low wind pressure, it continues to be used for some services and concerts.

Bells and Clock

St Neots has a long association both with bell-ringing and with bell-founding. The tower did have ring of bells from the outset. In 1753, a new ring of 8 was cast by the noted St Neots bell-founder Joseph Eayre (his foundry was the conical shaped building by the Priory Centre); but the heaviest bell (the tenor) had problems, and needed casting again in 1764. Eayre's business eventually passed to Robert Taylor (who in 1810 also recast the six bells that are still at Eynesbury), and Taylor's business moved to Loughborough, where all the St Neots bells (by then difficult to ring) were recast in 1919 as a War Memorial. Two additional treble bells were added by Taylors in 1984, making a ring of ten in D flat with a tenor bell weighing just under 30cwt (close to the weight and pitch of Westminster Abbey).

The clock mechanism that is currently in the tower was also installed in 1919 as part of the town's War Memorial. It sounds the Westminster Chimes every quarter hour (except when hammers are pulled back for full-circle ringing). Since the 1970s, it has been wound by an electric winding system.

The Church Exterior

The North Porch, our normal main entrance, was first built in the 1480s – but it was rebuilt in the 19th century, using original materials where possible. Note the styles of the heads on the door posts!

St Neots Parish Church is unusual among churches in not having an obvious back corner or utility area where visitors don't tend to go. This does sometimes present challenges, but it also means a circuit of the building's exterior can reveal some interesting details.

Working anti-clockwise from the North Porch, one can see first, across the churchyard, the main town **War Memorial**. It was dedicated in 1925, six years after the interior tablet, bells and clock, and has been the location of the Annual Town Remembrance Parade, and other annual acts of Remembrance, since then. **The oak tree** next to it was a Millennium gift from the village of St Neot, Cornwall. North of the War Memorial on the west side of Church Walk is a former grave-digger's hut, and on the east side are the former buildings of the **parish school**, which moved to a new site on Wintringham Road in the 1960s. The buildings are now used by St Neots Voluntary Welfare Association and other businesses.

The Church Tower, with design features that echo many of the great church towers of Somerset, was completed in around 1530, and is 130 feet / 39.6 metres high to the top of the pinnacles.

The great West Door is not frequently used (apart from by choir members and bellringers – new members for both are always welcome – and by brides to enter at weddings) because of its access difficulties.

The Churchyard has been closed for burials since the mid 19th century, apart from the interment of cremated remains in an area set aside at the east end. St Neots Town Council currently holds the statutory duty to keep the churchyard and its boundaries in good order.

The South Porch, with its room above, (known as the Dove chamber, after a 17th century vicar who used it as his study – it has some original black and white painted beams), is the church's most impressive entry point, and also dates from the 15th century. Unfortunately, it has been the home of the church's heating system for several decades, and cannot be used for access. The small priest's door further along the south wall, in the Lady Chapel, can be opened when needed.

Our other church – St Mary’s Eynesbury

Five minutes’ walk to the south of St Neots Parish Church, **St Mary’s Eynesbury** contains the oldest stone structure in town – the pillars in its mid-12th century North Arcade (the South Arcade was built a century later).

Eynesbury Church’s **bell-tower** was rebuilt in 1687, following its predecessor’s collapse after a lightning-strike years earlier. Its 6 bells, rehung for the Millennium, date from 1810.

The **chancel**, damaged in the fall, was not properly rebuilt until work in 1857-8 under the supervision of the architect A W Blomfield.

Eynesbury Church’s **north porch** was built in the nineteenth century as a gift from a local character, Lt Colonel W Humbley, as a thank-offering for surviving more than 20 battles from Copenhagen to Waterloo: he is buried beneath,

A **former east window** of the church now forms part of the former school building (now a private house) across Montagu Street from the west end of the church. The parish school moved to new buildings behind the old ones in the 1960s.

Eynesbury Church is not often open to visitors outside service times, but in addition to the north arcade it does contain other items of historical interest.

Twelve of the pews are the town’s other major collection of **fifteenth century woodwork**. Not only are they ancient in themselves (and particularly uncomfortable!), they also possess distinctive individually carved bench ends of animals and fantastical creatures that are known locally as the **‘Eynesbury Zoo’**.

More recent woodwork includes a late 17th century pulpit (with modern base), an early 19th century altar made from an oak tree at the Rectory (now the private ‘Tudor House’), and a paschal candle stand fashioned from an older bed post.

In the Nave floor of Eynesbury Church, there is a twentieth century memorial tablet (where the Font stood, before a re-ordering) to another notable nineteenth century Eynesbury character, James Toller, born here in a now demolished cottage on Rectory Lane in 1798. He grew to be over 8’ tall (being known nationally as **‘The Eynesbury Giant’**, he was taken round the country to fairs, and even presented to royalty), but died here at the age of twenty. He was buried at an unknown location within the church, for the protection of his remains.

There is a board in church recording the **Rectors and patrons** of the parish of Eynesbury stretching back to the 12th century.

Acknowledgments and sources

Church guidebooks are notorious for their capacity to make unsupported claims about the history or merits of their buildings.

This brief history is not original research: it reworks and simplifies material found in several previous leaflets, making some corrections where errors appear obvious. It tries not to overstate the significance of the building's particular features (although some are quite notable). It keeps an eye on the current (2014) edition of 'Pevsner', and has also used information available in C.B.Newham's 'Country Church Monuments' (2022), David Rudd's 'Church History' (2023), and the Revd Stephen Day's 'Stained Glass in Huntingdonshire – A field guide' (2018), both of the latter are available at the date of writing at St Neots Museum. It has been informed by several general books on St Neots history, and it is also indebted to the Revd Roger Henthorne (Head of St Mary's School 1967-93, Assistant Priest here from 1979) for information he has supplied on the church organs.

The authors of previous leaflets also deserve acknowledgement here: Canon Leonard Galley (Vicar 1943-64) created extensive notes and illustrations which adorned a guide published in the time of his successor, Canon Stanley Griffiths (Vicar 1965-78); this was simplified in a leaflet made by Jeffrey Grenfell-Hill in around 1980, which was itself revised by David Rudd in recent years.

The author of this guide is the Revd Paul Hutchinson, who took up his post as the parish priest here in January 2020. On 1st March 2020, the historic parishes of St Neots and Eynesbury, separate since 1204, were united into the single parish of St Neots with Eynesbury, under a Team Ministry of which the author was the first Rector. His St Neots predecessors were Vicars; his Eynesbury predecessors were Rectors. The distinctions between the titles are not further elaborated here!

If there are inaccuracies in what is written here, please let the parish know. Within the limits of this form, we try to be as accurate as we can be.

First edition, 2024

Historical note – the parishes of St Neots and Eynesbury were in the ancient diocese of Lincoln (previously Dorchester) until 1837; since that date, they have been in Ely Diocese. Our immediate neighbour across the Great Ouse, Eaton Socon, was in the same dioceses until it (and the rest of Bedfordshire) was moved in 1914 into the diocese of St Albans, where it remains (even though Eaton Socon itself is now in Cambridgeshire).



More detail about the various elements of this guide, other history, and current church activity, is available on the parish website (www.stneots.org)