

THE ARTS SOCIETY NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE
(A member society of The Arts Society)
Visit to St Mary the Virgin Church in Baldock on
Thursday 23rd April



We were 26 members on this excellent guided tour of the church. Our guide, Mike Maddox, married to the Vicar, and a lay reader at the church, was very knowledgeable about the history of the building and shared many amusing anecdotes with us.

We started in the churchyard where Mike introduced himself and went on to explain about the significance of some of the graves. The gravestones are quite recent because before 1700 most people were buried with wooden markers which have all decayed and disappeared. The graveyard is now closed to new burials and managed by the council.

One grave which stands on its own, with iron railings around it, is made of cast iron. It is that of a man called William Clarkson who was an advocate of the abolishment of the slave trade - there is a covenant on the grave stipulating that a ritual statement is made by the clergy each year.

We were then taken to the end closer to the town to be shown the oldest part of the church. On the way there, we saw the tomb of John Smith who was rector at the church and had helped to decipher the code used by Samuel Pepys in his diaries.



Mike then explained the reason why the church was built and its place in Baldock.

To learn more about the history, go to the church website:

<https://www.stmarysbaldock.org.uk/history-of-st-marys-baldock/>

Before entering the church, which is always open to all, Mike made us aware of the faces on each side of the door and of the dragons on the roof of the North Porch. These features can easily be missed as they have been painted white.

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When we entered the church, Mike took us to the centre of the nave so that we could see the oldest part of the church at one end and the Font at the opposite end. The Font is Norman in design and has probably been in use since the twelfth Century to baptise the people of Baldock. It is still used frequently. Unfortunately, there is no record of what happened to its cover.

The black and white tiles on the floor of the baptistery and the steps leading up to the font date from 1901. The window in the tower, now clear, is to the memory of Vickris Pryor who died in 1849. Described as “the worst window in the church”, it once had images representing Abraham, David and Moses.

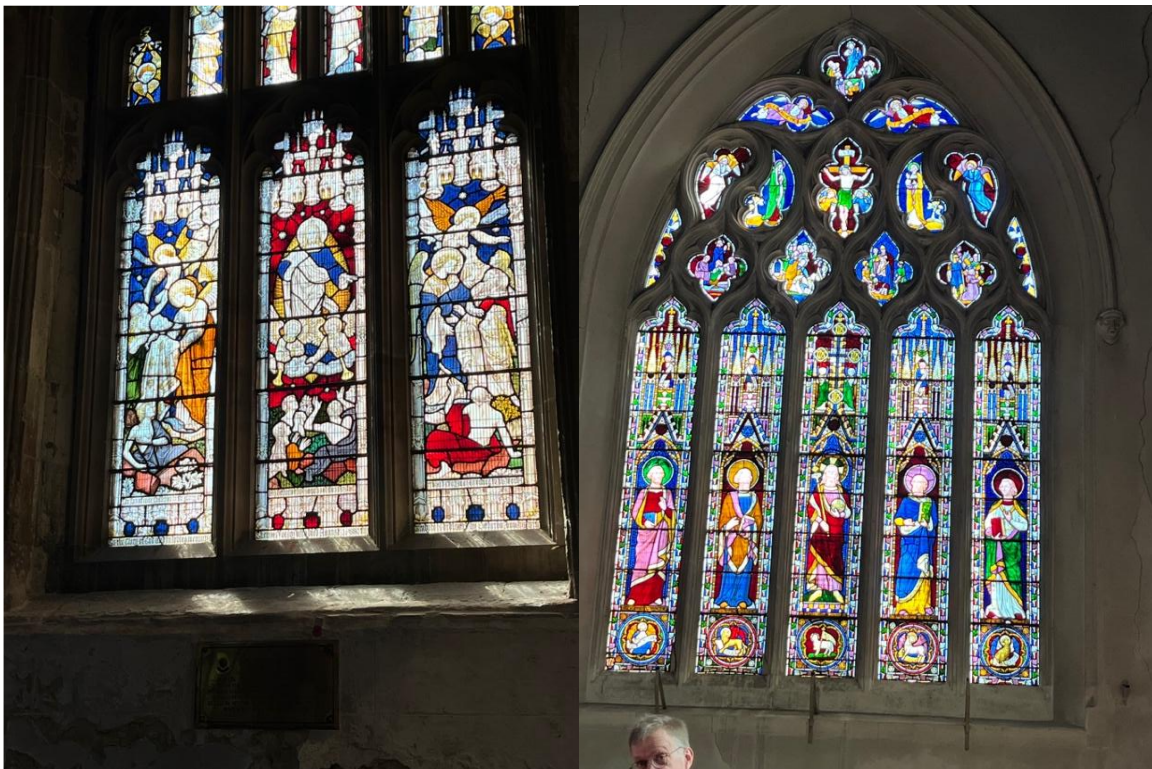
The Medieval chest, in the corner, was an ‘Arca Domini’ (chest of the Lord) and used to collect “St Peter’s Pence”, the tax of one penny per household payable to the Pope at ‘Lammas’. This was an Anglo Saxon festival meaning “loaf mass” when a loaf would be baked using the wheat from the first harvest on the first day of August. This chest was locked so that the donations could not be taken.

We then went down the nave looking at the decorated graves on the floor. We reached the High Altar by walking through the central section of the beautifully carved oak Rood Screens. They are some of the oldest parts of the church. On the North section of the screen, Mike showed us the carvings of the Green Man and of a Mermaid.

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The stain glass windows are of very good quality, and they depict stories from the bible.



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Mike spoke for about one hour and was so knowledgeable and enthusiastic that we lost track of the time.

After the talk we were served refreshments by Rhian who had baked all the delicious cakes . Most participants stayed for a chat afterwards and the feedback was very positive.

Carole Chapman
Outings Secretary