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Nostalgia

Chapel of St Wilfrid, Church Norton, has an interesting history

Although it can seat only 35 people, the chapel is opened every day and the Friends of St Wilfrid's were named Volunteer Team of the Year by the Churches Conservation Trust earlier this year

Changing Times

Olivia French, learning and community engagement officer
The Novium Museum

At first glance, St Wilfrid's Church looks like a charming and simple cemetery chapel, however the story behind this unassuming building is a very interesting one.

This 13th century building, which stands in a sleepy corner of a large churchyard, close to Pagham Harbour, was formerly the chancel of the much larger Norman church and probably sits on the site of the first church, later Cathedral of Sussex, which was established by St Wilfrid Bishop of York in AD 681.

Following a quarrel with the Northumbrian King Egfrith, Wilfrid moved to Selsey for a brief period of six years. The wife of King Aethelwealh, King of the South Saxons, had converted to Christianity and persuaded her husband to grant Wilfrid some land for a church and a monastery.

During his time here, Wilfrid built a church dedicated to St Peter, founded an episcopal see and converted the pagan inhabitants of the Kingdom of Sussex to Christianity.

The original structure would have been made from wood, and then replaced with stone as the Diocese was then organised from the site of St Wilfrid's church up until 1075 when Bishop Stigand moved to Chichester.

The church subsequently remained to serve the needs of the local people who had established themselves under the church's protection.

In 1864, the much larger part of St Peter's Church was removed stone by stone and rebuilt further south in the newly-built town of Selsey. The chancel that remained at the site was then closed and used as a mortuary chapel until 1917, when St Wilfrid's was granted chapel status by Bishop Ridgeway.

The current building, which dates from 13th century, contains many



“**This little chapel continues to be an important place and is cared for by the local people**”

interesting features, both from the past as well as some more modern additions.

To one side of the church sits a Tudor monument dedicated to John Lewis and his wife Agatha. John was Lord of the Manor when it was annexed from the episcopal see by Queen Elizabeth I in 1561.

On the monument, both John Lewis and his wife Agatha are represented in a popular Tudor pose, they can be seen kneeling opposite each other at carved kneeling benches 'prie-dieus' in what is considered to be a position of piety.

In the panels beside them are representations of St George slaying the dragon and St Agatha, the 14-year-old Roman virgin who became a Christian, being tortured by soldiers – a grim depiction but striking.

St Wilfrid's Church at Church Norton

Picture: Churches Conservation Trust

Another notable feature of the chapel is the impressive Great East Window, which is home to the Wingfield Window memorial.

The window was commissioned by Maurice Wingfield and produced by the notable stained glass firm Heaton, Butler and Bayne, who produced stained glass for numerous churches through Britain and the United States from 1862 to 1953.

The window depicts three main characters, all of whom were connected to Maurice – his brother John Wingfield and John's friend Thomas Agar Roberts, who both died in the First World War, and his second wife Stephanie Agnes, who died in 1918.

Above the three panels dedicated to relatives, there is a representation of St Wilfrid holding a portrayal of the church he built at Selsey and an image of King Aethelwealh, who gave St Wilfrid the land to build the church.

Although the structure which stands here now does not date from St Wilfrid's time, this little chapel continues to be an important place and is cared for by the local people, including the Friends of St Wilfrid's Chapel, who work alongside the Churches Conservation Trust, which has overseen the maintenance of the chapel since 1990.

Although it can seat only a maximum of 35 people, the chapel is opened every day, cleaned with fresh flowers, and prepared for baptisms, weddings, funerals and blessings as they occur, as well as hosting theatre and other performances as often as possible.

Earlier this year, the Friends of St Wilfrid's Chapel were awarded by the Churches Conservation Trust the Volunteer Team of the Year.

Despite being a small church, it has a varied and engaging programme of events to fundraise and encourage all visitors, old and new, to come and experience its atmosphere and charm and allow future generations to enjoy little gems like St Wilfrid's chapel for many years to come.