

The Chancel and High Altar

Though the walls of the enclosed Chancel are ancient, what we see now is almost uniformly Victorian, the work of the architect Benjamin Ferrey in the 1860s. He was however only responsible for the structure, wisely replacing the previous undistinguished East window (itself a replacement) with one much more in keeping with the graceful Early English arch that forms the entrance to the Chancel from the Nave.

The East window dates from 1890 and depicts the Crucifixion. The vividly patterned wall and ceiling decoration, replete with symbols of Christ's passion, and of St Mary, dates from the same time.

The High Altar stands on the same spot as it has done for the last 800 years. We believe that the first Rector, Aumericus de Harcourt, was buried to the left hand side of this Sanctuary (the lid of what may well be his coffin is in the Chapel of St John, under the tower), but all trace of his tomb was removed in the restoration of the 1860s.

Beneath the chancel are also buried Mary Blandy, the Henley woman hanged at Oxford in 1752 for the murder of her father. Many, including the Rector at the time, doubted the verdict and so allowed her to be buried here, next to her father and mother. It is said that a later Rector had her remains removed from the church!

One definition of a Church building is 'an altar with a roof over it' – if that be the case, then here is the altar over which the roof was raised all those centuries ago, a roof which has protected not only the altar but the good people of Henley who have come here with their sorrows and their joys, in time of great need and in time of great plenty, to 'kneel where prayer has been valid' and to seek God's grace and strength, as well as to thank him for his goodness.