

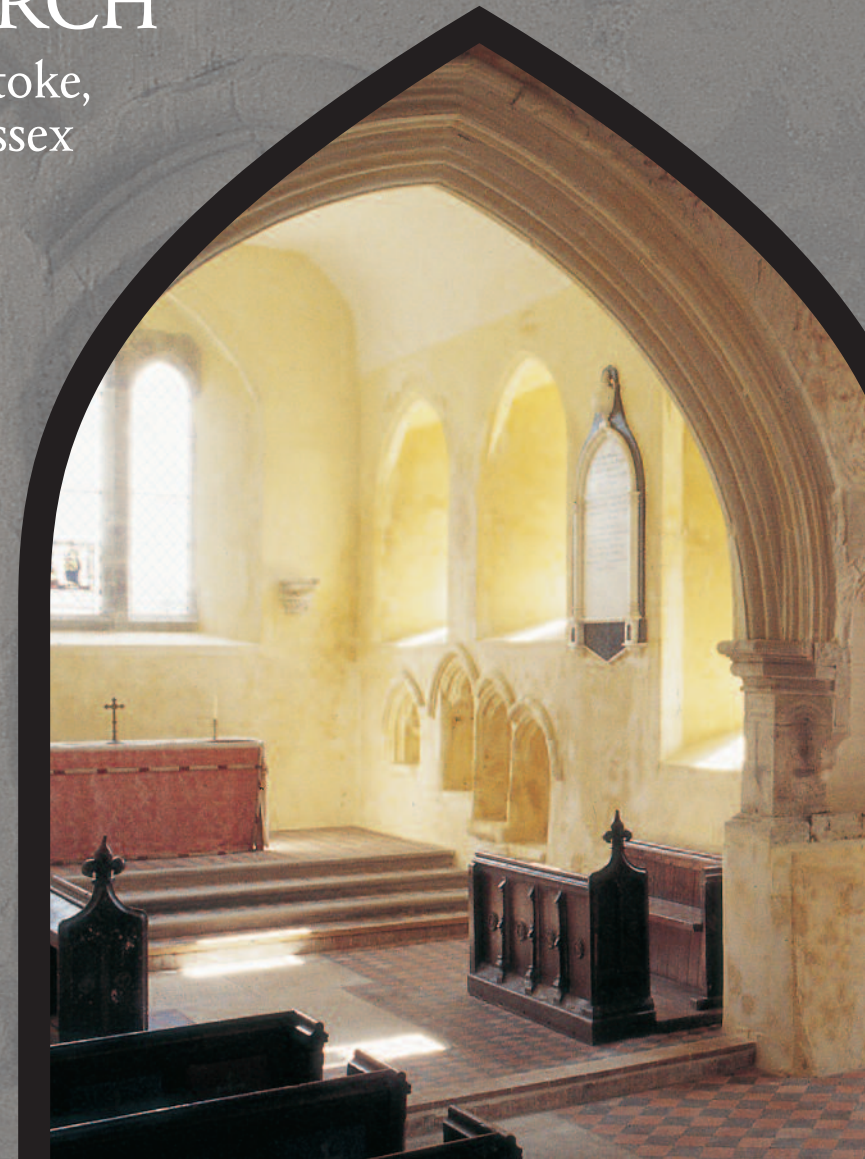


THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST



# NORTH STOKE CHURCH

North Stoke,  
West Sussex



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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*North Stoke, West Sussex*

# NORTH STOKE CHURCH

*by Roy Tricker (Field Officer with The Churches Conservation Trust 1991–2002,  
church enthusiast, historian and lay canon)*

## HISTORY

North Stoke is set in a loop of the Arun where the river breaks through an attractive stretch of the South Downs. Within a radius of about a mile-and-a-half (2.4 km) are three more churches: St Michael's Amberley, to the north-east, is on this side of the Arun; South Stoke to the south-east and Houghton to the north – though both closer – are on the other side. The village of North Stoke (*Stoch* in Domesday Book) takes its name from *stoc* which means simply a place, but sometimes a holy place. With such a concentration of churches it is not surprising to find that the area of the parish is only 953 acres (386 hectares).

Only 51 people lived in North Stoke in 1961 and there are even fewer today. Following the formal declaration of redundancy, this ancient building was vested in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust in 1992 and St Michael's, Amberley became the parish church. Under the Trust's care North Stoke church continues its ministry as a beautiful and holy place. Since vesting, extensive repairs have been carried out under the supervision of the Trust's architects, initially Mrs Penelope Adamson and more recently Martin Ashley.

*Front cover: View looking south-eastwards  
into the chapel (Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: The chancel piscina and triple  
sedilia (Boris Baggs)*

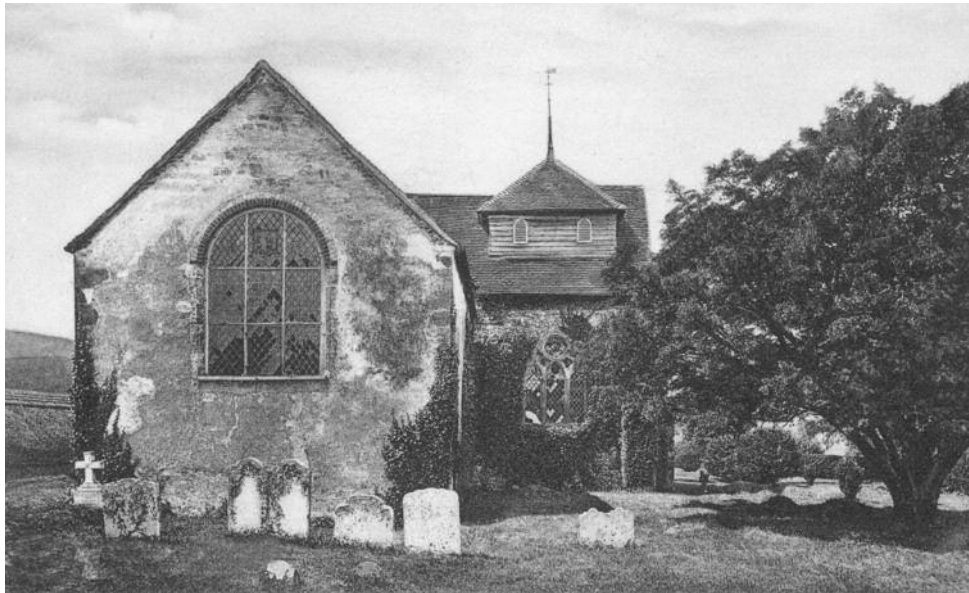


*Below: The church from the east, before the east window was refashioned*

*Right: The same view today (Christopher Dalton)*

North Stoke church is a classic example of the truism that the more remote the location of a church, the more unspoilt it often turns out to be. North Stoke and its church are both recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086, and its special architectural interest lies in the fact that its structure has remained largely unaltered since the early 14th century, while its windows provide one of the best illustrations to be seen in any English parish church of the development of window design between c.1200 and c.1300. Here fine architecture, rustic charm and the

atmosphere of centuries of prayer combine to make North Stoke memorable. It is, in the words of Professor Steer, 'All that we like to think a country church ought to be'. For years it has been known simply as 'North Stoke Church', without any dedication, the identity of its patron saint having long been lost.



## EXTERIOR

The church has an idyllic **setting**, almost a mile (1.6 km) from the B2139 road at Houghton Bridge and Amberley Station. It stands at the end of a lane, with only the farm buildings and the flint-faced farmhouse for company, in a delightful corner of rural Sussex, backed by the rolling South Downs to the south and west.

In the **churchyard**, near the south-east corner of the chancel, are three stone **coffin lids**, with crosses in relief, removed from elsewhere in the church or its precincts. These date from the 13th century and probably covered the bodies

of former priests. Eastwards of the chancel is a row of **18th-century headstones**, some carved with cherubs.

The church itself is cruciform and its plan has remained virtually unaltered for 700 years. Its walls are constructed of flints and stones from the fields, with hewn grey-brown Sussex sandstone forming its corners and windows. The chancel walls are covered with cream-coloured lime rendering.

Where the nave wall joins the south transept is a small **Norman window** which indicates that





*The south transept and chancel, from the south-east (Boris Baggs)*

the nave probably dates from the late 11th century. Its blocked northern counterpart is visible from inside. The other windows in the church show how it was enlarged and improved during the following 200 or so years, particularly during the second half of the 13th century, when the Early English style gradually evolved into the Decorated style of architecture, as small single windows developed into larger openings, divided into two or more lights, thus admitting more brightness and giving scope for artists in stained glass.

To the west of the porch is a simple Early English **lancet window** of c.1200–10 (but partly renewed with later brick), its pointed arch contrasting with the semicircular arch of the Norman window, which is at least a century earlier. The **lancet windows in the side walls of the chancel**, also the blocked **priest's doorway**, are a little later – perhaps c.1240. The three-light **east window** in the chancel dates only from c.1910, replacing a large opening which had long since lost its mullions and tracery and had a brick arch of the 18th century. The **west window** in the nave, however, is authentic 13th-century work, with three lights, embraced internally by a single arch.

The plain arches of the north and south doorways of the nave have been altered and are difficult to date. In the stonework of the north doorway are several **small crosses**, carved by pilgrims in the Middle Ages.

The north and south **transepts** were added to the nave between c.1270 and c.1300, when window design had advanced to provide two- and three-light windows, divided vertically by slender mullions and enriched in their upper parts by tracery patterns. Both transepts have identical two-light **north and south windows**, with a quatrefoil (four lobes) within a circle forming their tracery. However their three-light **east windows** are of different designs. That in the south transept has intersecting tracery and trefoil-headed cusping embellishing the tops of the three lights, whilst its northern counterpart has a pleasing design in bar tracery, rising to a central cinquefoiled (five-lobed) circle. The corners of this transept are strengthened by sturdy angle buttresses, indicating that it may have been intended that this should be the base of a tower. Squatting in (rather than rising above) the north transept roof is the short weatherboarded **belfry**, with its tiled pyramid roof and simple vane.

## INTERIOR

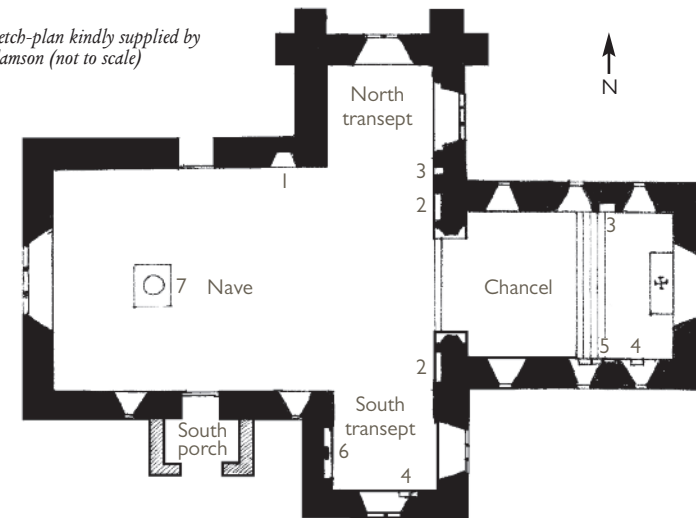
Carved into one of the south-east quoins (cornerstones) of the south transept, facing south and about five feet (1.5 m) from the ground, is a semicircular mediaeval **mass dial**, which was used before the days of clocks to calculate when services should begin.

The **south porch**, of flint and brick, was much renewed in the late 18th or early 19th century. With its wooden bird-gates, it is rustic and homely and in keeping with the church.

Although this is not a large church, its proportions and the simplicity of its plan give the impression of height and space. Light floods in through the clear glass of the windows to illuminate the many features of interest.

From inside it is possible to appreciate further the beauty of the **window design** and to trace its development. Both Norman windows may be seen, facing each other, high in the nave walls. These and the lancet window to the west of the

*Drawn from a sketch-plan kindly supplied by Mrs Penelope Adamson (not to scale)*



- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| 1 Norman windows  | 5 Sedilia                                    |
| 2 Arched recesses | 6 Recess for seats, with sheep's head corbel |
| 3 Aumbries        | 7 Font                                       |
| 4 Piscinae        |  |

porch have wide internal splays to admit the maximum amount of light. At the tops of the other (later) windows, the introduction of an internal scotia arch cleverly reduces the height of the splay at the top of the window.

The wide **arches to the chancel and transepts** are mainly built of chalky clunch from the Downs, with sandstone also in the arch to the north transept. The transept arches die into the walls each side, allowing the maximum amount of visibility. The early-14th-century

chancel arch is handsomely moulded and rests upon short responds (half-piers in the walls), with moulded capitals, beneath which their sides facing inwards towards the nave have been recessed to form arched **canopies** for statues or lights. Adjacent to these, in the east wall of the nave, are larger **arched recesses**, flanking the chancel arch, which may have served as reredoses for the former side altars which stood here. Beside the northern recess is a carved **human hand** holding up the corbel stone.



Around the chancel arch and in the recesses are faint traces of 14th-century **wall paintings** – a reminder that this interior must have been a blaze of colour during mediaeval times. Traces of flowers, foliage and scrolls in red may be seen, including a six-petalled flower and a vine leaf above the tie beam on the north side of the arch. Near the base of the arch, on the north side, is part of a painting in yellow and black, and there is also a fine owl above the chancel arch on the left.

Four sturdy tie beams straddle the nave, above which is the simplest of **roofs**, its rafters strengthened by collar beams. This roof is unsophisticated and functional and many of its timbers may well be 700 years old. The south transept has its original trussed-rafter roof and its ancient timbers may (unusually) be seen from the nave, through the open timbers of the nave roof.

Towards the west end and near the entrance (symbolising entry by Holy Baptism into the





*Left: The ancient, tub-like font (Boris Baggs)*

*Right: Sheep's head corbel, south transept (Christopher Dalton)*

Family of the Church) is the **font**, in which North Stoke children have been baptised for at least 750 years. Its bulbous tub-like bowl (which is quite large enough for a baby to be baptised in it by immersion) rests upon a cylindrical stem, all in Sussex sandstone.

The 17th-century table by the door now serves as the literature table but was the church's **communion table** until the present high altar was made in comparatively recent years.

Beneath the arch to the north transept is a **small square recess**, once probably for storage, or for a light. Into its rear wall have been reset fragments of carved stone.

Both transepts originally served as side chapels and their east windows have **lowered sills** to form reredoses for the altars which stood in front of them. These were once beautifully painted, judging by the fragment of colouring which has been revealed on the southern one.

Above the flat ceiling in the north transept is the church's single **bell**, which was cast at the Whitechapel bellfoundry of C & G Mears in 1850.

The unusual recess in the west wall of the south transept forms a **seat beneath two tall arches**, with a central carved corbel in the form of a sheep's head – something very appropriate in this sheep-rearing area. It has been suggested that the lord of the manor sat here, or possibly, as this may well have been a chantry chapel, members of the family whose forebears were



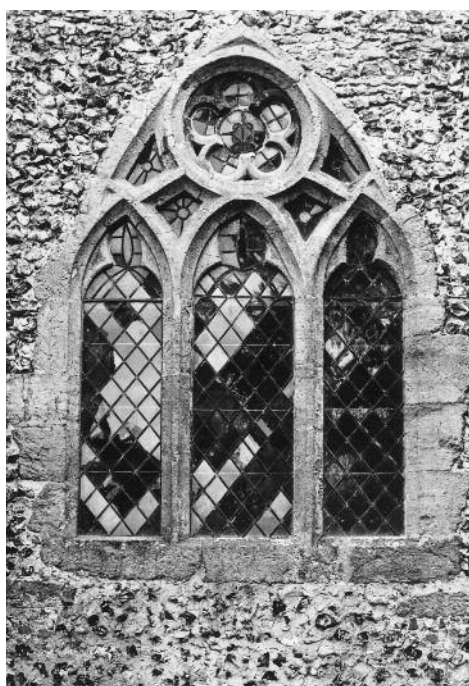
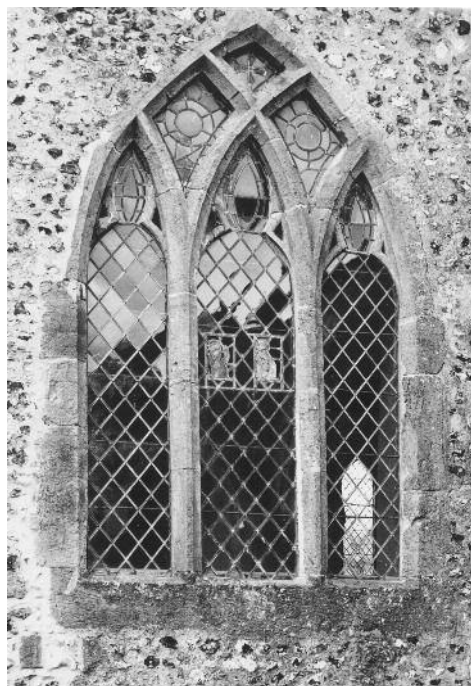
being remembered at its altar. In the south wall nearby is a **piscina**, into which was poured the disposable water used at the Eucharist, with a credence shelf for the cruets, etc. above it in the arched recess.

Although its internal height is reduced by a plaster ceiling, the **chancel** has considerable dignity, with four steps rising to the high altar. The westernmost lancet windows on each side are longer than the others. Their lower sections may once have served as **low-side windows** which had apertures through which an external bell may have been rung at the climax of the daily Eucharist, so that people at work in the fields and homes nearby could pause and join in prayer. The large **ambry** (or cupboard) in the north wall is rebated for a door and one of its hinge-hooks survives. Here the Communion vessels, or maybe the Holy Oils, were stored.

In the south wall are a **piscina** and a set of three graduated **sedilia**, their arches (of which the eastern two have trefoiled heads) being set beneath a continuous hood mould. The piscina recess is provided with a drain for the disposal of water and a credence shelf, whilst the sedilia provided seats for the Celebrant, Deacon and Subdeacon at a mediaeval High Mass.

Left: East window of south transept.

Right: East window of north transept



In the east wall, flanking the east window, are two stone **image brackets**, which formed pedestals for statues. These rest upon corbels which are beautifully carved with foliage, with little tionsured faces beneath, of c.1250.

The chancel **stalls** incorporate pieces of carved 15th-century woodwork. The northern stall-end is almost complete and the south is a copy of it; also most of the carved and buttressed stall

fronts are original. The benches in the nave were provided during the 19th century, almost certainly replacing sets of tall box pews.

Some of the windows in the transepts and chancel contain fragments of mediaeval stained glass. They serve as a reminder that the windows of even a simple country church such as this were filled with saints, scenes and patterns in coloured glass, which not only

beautified the building, but also taught the Faith to the people. Many of the fragments here are not in their original positions but have been imaginatively reset. The surviving glass is as follows:

**NORTH TRANSEPT, EAST WINDOW** Several small fragments, some painted with leaves, have been arranged in the tracery.

**NORTH TRANSEPT, NORTH WINDOW** The quatrefoil at the top retains its original grisaille patterns, *in situ*.

**SOUTH TRANSEPT, EAST WINDOW** The crowned heads of a male and female. She appears to have her original robed body, although his head has been cleverly placed upon a fragment of a robe from elsewhere. Remains of borders, etc. in the tracery above.

**CHANCEL, NORTH-WEST AND SOUTH-WEST WINDOWS** Set in grisaille patterns are the finials which formed the apex of former canopies, which were almost certainly set above figures of saints.

**CHANCEL, EAST WINDOW** In the central light is the crowned figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a crowned male figure. Both have a hand raised in blessing. Some of the glass pieces forming their robes may not be in their original positions. Some experts believe this to be part of a scene of Our Lady's Coronation; others have suggested that the male figure could even be King David, from another scene. This glass

has been dated c.1290–1310 and is therefore a rare and early survival. The border is made up of assorted fragments, including foliage and also a little bird in the top left-hand corner.

On the south chancel wall is a marble **memorial plaque**, crowned with a flaming urn, to John Sayres (d.1820), his wife Elizabeth (d.1809) and his son John (d.1818). They are further commemorated in two of the six **ledger slabs** in the floors of the church, which bear the names of John and Elizabeth Sayres, Robert Newell (d.1750) and William Longe (d.1719), in the chancel, John Sayres Junior in the nave, and Thomas Woolvin and Joan (d.1679 and 1685), also William Blaxton (d.1690) beneath the north transept arch.

# THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that the church is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

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Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF  
St John the Evangelist, Chichester  
In St John's Street, just east of the city centre

St Mary Magdalene, Tortington  
About 1½ miles SW of Arundel, off the road to Ford and Climping

Holy Sepulchre, Warminghurst  
About 1 mile NW of Ashington, off the A24,  
about 10 miles N of Worthing

The Trust has also published a free Educational Booklet for teachers' use on school visits, with ideas for educational and community approaches linked to the National Curriculum. For further details and to obtain the Booklet contact the Education Officer by email: [central@tcct.org.uk](mailto:central@tcct.org.uk)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In compiling this brief guide to North Stoke Church, I acknowledge and pay tribute to the extensive earlier research of Francis W Steer FSA, also to those who have tended this holy place over the centuries and who continue to do so today.

*Right: The south transept window (Boris Baggs)*

*Back cover: Mediaeval glass in the east window (Boris Baggs)*

