

# A Brief History of the Church

Warblington was settled by the Romans. A Roman villa stood in the fields a few hundred yards to the North East of the church and the remains of a Roman structure have been found in the churchyard. Roman bricks and tiles can be seen in the two rounded arches on either side of the Tower ❶.

The church certainly dates back to Saxon times and the centre portion of the Saxon Tower still remains. It contains a high porch (now inside), which was a typical Saxon arrangement ❷. Originally this may have formed a kind of outside pulpit, necessary because the church would have been far too small then to accommodate the 120 Domesday inhabitants of Warblington parish – they would have had to stand in the churchyard.

It has been suggested that, in addition to the church, there was a monastery on the site of the ruins of Warblington Castle and that both the monastery and the church were built and endowed by Anglo-Saxon King Edgar in conjunction with Athelwold, Bishop of Winchester, between 959 and 975AD. The Domesday Book of 1088 lists two religious buildings (ecclesiae) in the parish of Warblington to which 4 hides of land were attached for the use of the monastery. Also, the crosses on the stone coffins in the Chancel indicate the burial tomb of a Prior or Abbot, similar to those found in Romsey Abbey.

In the thirteenth century the population of Emsworth grew very rapidly and between 1290 and 1340 the church was rebuilt. A new nave was constructed to the west of the old building; the lower storey of the Saxon tower was cut away and the present Chancel arch inserted ❸, with the upper storey of the tower remaining in place; the tower was also built up to be clear of the new nave roof – quite an impressive feat of engineering for its day. Shortly after 1300 the Chancel was rebuilt on the foundations of the old church, which explains its relatively great length, and at the same time a chapel was added to the north (now the Vestry) ❹. In 1340 the North Porch was built. It still contains a number of 14<sup>th</sup> Century ships' timbers ❺.

Between 1348 and 1349 Warblington's population was decimated by an outbreak of the Bubonic plague and building work ceased. The local population never returned to Warblington in any numbers, choosing instead to live in nearby Denvilles and in Emsworth.

The next significant period of rebuilding and improvements was during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is thought that the West door was inserted around the time of the building of Warblington Castle ❻. This residential castle was built for Margaret, Countess of Salisbury between 1515 and 1525. King Henry VIII visited in 1526 and it is thought that he would have visited the church. It is known that King Edward VI visited in 1552 and that Queen Elizabeth visited in 1586. It is possible that the West door was created for one of these royal visits.

The third and last period of extensive building and renovation began at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century after an extended period of neglect. At one time there were three bells in the tower but two were removed in 1800 and sold. The remaining bell, dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century,

is inscribed *Sancta Pale Ora pro Nobis* (St Paul, pray for us). The spire was added to the tower ❷, pews were fitted and extensive restoration took place inside. The present organ was installed in 1833. It was relocated within the church in 1893 but returned to its original (and current) position in 1926. Many of the stained glass windows were installed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and are of a very high quality. There is one window executed by George Daniels and another by Edward Frampton both highly regarded in the field of stained glass during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Medieval documents refer to the Church of Our Lady (or St Mary) of Warblington but the present dedication is to St Thomas à Becket. This change of name took place in 1796 when the then Rector, The Rev William Norris, argued that Emsworth's Fair Day was held on the feast of St Thomas à Becket and that the church should be dedicated to him.

## The Watch Huts

These rare examples of Watch Huts were commissioned in 1828. At that time the demand for bodies for dissection and teaching purposes outstripped supply. Possibly because of the churchyard's remote location watchmen were employed to guard the churchyard and prevent the digging up and selling of the bodies of recently buried parishioners.

The Parish used to include the Emsworth area and the present Emsworth parish was separated from it only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when St James, North Street, was built by public subscription. A chapel of ease, St Peter's, was built in Emsworth in 1789 but it had no burial rights and so even into the 19<sup>th</sup> century the dead had to be brought for burial along the footpath (either carried or on a cart). They entered by the East Gate and were usually buried at that end of the churchyard. It was for this reason that there is a Watch Hut in the South East corner of the churchyard as well as one in the North West corner. Both huts had fireplaces and there is a poem on the interior plastered wall of the South East Watch Hut:

*I loved her when the bloom of health played sweetly on her cheek  
When life beamed brightly from these eyes so joyous yet so meek  
I loved her when afflictions power had laid these beauties low  
I loved her when the mark of death was sealed upon her brow  
Her dark hair still floated on her fair and lovely neck  
She looked the shadow of the past of former hopes the wreck  
Yet from that sparkling eyes ..... a pure and heartfelt ray  
I'm told of hope beyond the grave when life had passed away.  
If we ..... on .....*



# St Thomas à Becket Church



**4**  
The Vestry.

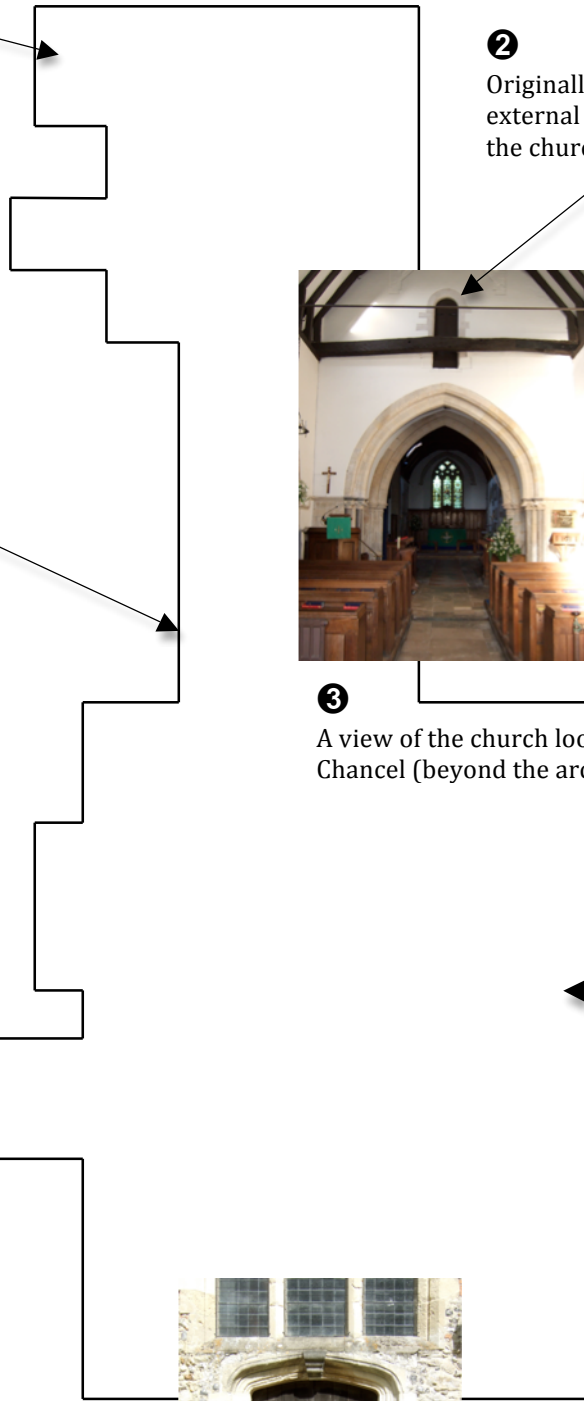


**1**  
Reddish Roman tiles can be seen around the top of the arch of this window.



**5**  
The North Porch is the entrance used for most services.

Not to scale



**2**  
Originally, the high porch was an external feature that looked out onto the churchyard.



**3**  
A view of the church looking East towards the Chancel (beyond the arch).



**7**



The inscription on the sundial reads: "Tho. Smith, Wm Downor, Churchwardens 1781."



**6**  
The West Door, probably created in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.