

A Guide to St Andrew's Church by Chris Short



Some interesting facts

- The church was consecrated in the year of Magna Carta – 11 July 1215.
- The village and church have their own saint – Congar. A few years ago parts of his shrine were discovered under the floor of a barn.
- The church and nearby Refectory (old vicarage) have an amazing number of carved faces and gargoyles.
- The Refectory dates from about 1446 and is of national importance. It holds the record for having the longest continuous occupation as a parsonage in the country.
- The bells have the fourth heaviest peal of eight in the world.
- The church, Refectory and vicarage (dating from 1824) are all Grade 1 Listed and make up a unique collection of buildings.
- The churchyard contains a monument to a local farmer who captured a highwayman.
- The first recorded vicar of St Andrews was Theabold de Bucketot in 1228.

A book to celebrate 800 years since the consecration of the current church can be found at

congresburyhistorygroup.co.uk and ***YCCART.co.uk***

Early days

At Henley Wood just to the north of Cadbury Hill a pre- Roman shrine was succeeded by three phases of Roman stone-based temples, used at least to the end of the Roman period.

A possible shrine dating from the late to post-Roman period was revealed by the excavations on top of Cadbury Hill during the period 1968 to 1973.

Human skull fragments also found during this excavation were dated to c790-390BC and were possibly associated with ritual acts during the Iron Age. They were found in a layer of rubble which suggested a structure destroyed in the 6th century. The rubble was used to make a platform found to contain a space in which it has been suggested was a timber structure. It has been postulated that this timber structure was a wooden baptism tub or wooden cross indicating a focus of Christian activity.

Several eminent archaeologists consider that there was a monastery, founded by St Congar, on the hill top. Probably in the later seventh or early eighth century the current site of St Andrew's church was selected and a religious settlement established within a square enclosure.

St Congar

Legend says that he was the son of an Emperor of Constantinople, who in 711, fled from his home to avoid marrying the girl his parents had chosen for him. (Some put the date much earlier in the sixth century.) After wandering through Italy and France, he came to Britain, and settled here. One strand of the legend says that he had a dream, in which an angel revealed to him where he was to live: in his dream he saw a wild boar, there he was to stay. Upon waking, St Congar saw a boar lying in a bed of reeds. On that spot he founded an oratory, dedicating it to the *"Sacred and Undivided Trinity"*.

In a legend, similar to that of Joseph of Arimethia's thorn at Glastonbury, it is said that St Congar wished for a yew tree to provide shade; he planted his staff in the earth and on the following day it put forth leaves and grew into a wide-spreading tree. (See [page 11](#))

The legend also states that the King of Wessex, hearing of this miracle, granted land to St Congar, on which the saint built a stone church, and where he appointed twelve canons. It is said that St Congar died on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but that his body was brought back to Congresbury for burial. His feast day was kept on the 27th of November.

Another tradition points to Congresbury as a place where a Christian bishop lived before the time of St Athelm. It is said that in 721 Bishop Daniel removed the bishop's see from Congresbury to Wells.

More certain evidence of a very early religious community at Congresbury comes from the writings of the Welsh monk John Asser, who in an account of the life of King Alfred, written in 893, wrote of the year 886 *"He called me to him at twilight on Christmas Eve and gave me two letters in which was a long inventory of all the goods in the two*

monasteries of Amgresbyri (one manuscript says Cungresbury) and Banuwille (Banwell)".

Whatever the precise historical details St Andrew's church stands on a site long dedicated to Christ.

Did St Congar exist?

There is considerable evidence to substantiate the existence of St Congar although he is believed to be one of the worst recorded of all the British Saints.

St. Congar's chapel (now the Merle chapel in St Andrew's church) was called this name throughout the middle ages. It was a place of pilgrimage, recorded in medieval pilgrim guides and in medieval wills where bequests were frequently made to St. Congar's chapel.

St Congar's shrine

In 1995 several pieces of carved stone were revealed that had been dug from the floor of a barn in Brinsea.

Three substantial carved stones, and one smaller piece, now reside in Taunton County Museum. They have been dated to the end of the tenth or beginning of the eleventh century and are believed to have come from the shrine of St Congar constructed between 1033 and 1060. One piece is carved on two sides with two figures, Christ and an unknown saint.

Two other pieces, nearly life size and carved with drapery, fit together and contain a fragment of a figure, showing the lower abdomen and knee. Is this a representation of St Congar himself?



The current church was consecrated on 11th July 1215. Built in the early English style it was extensively altered and enlarged in the 15th century.

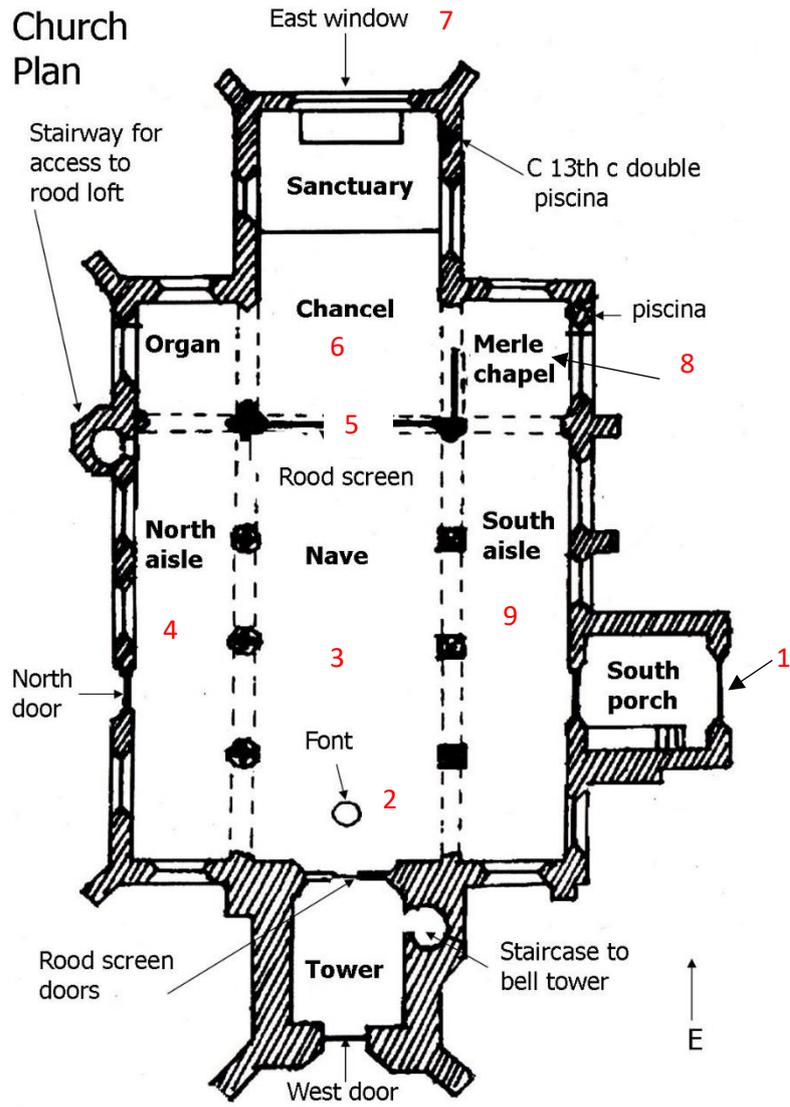
The church and environs

Vicarage and Refectory

St Congar's tree

Hardwick memorial

Cross

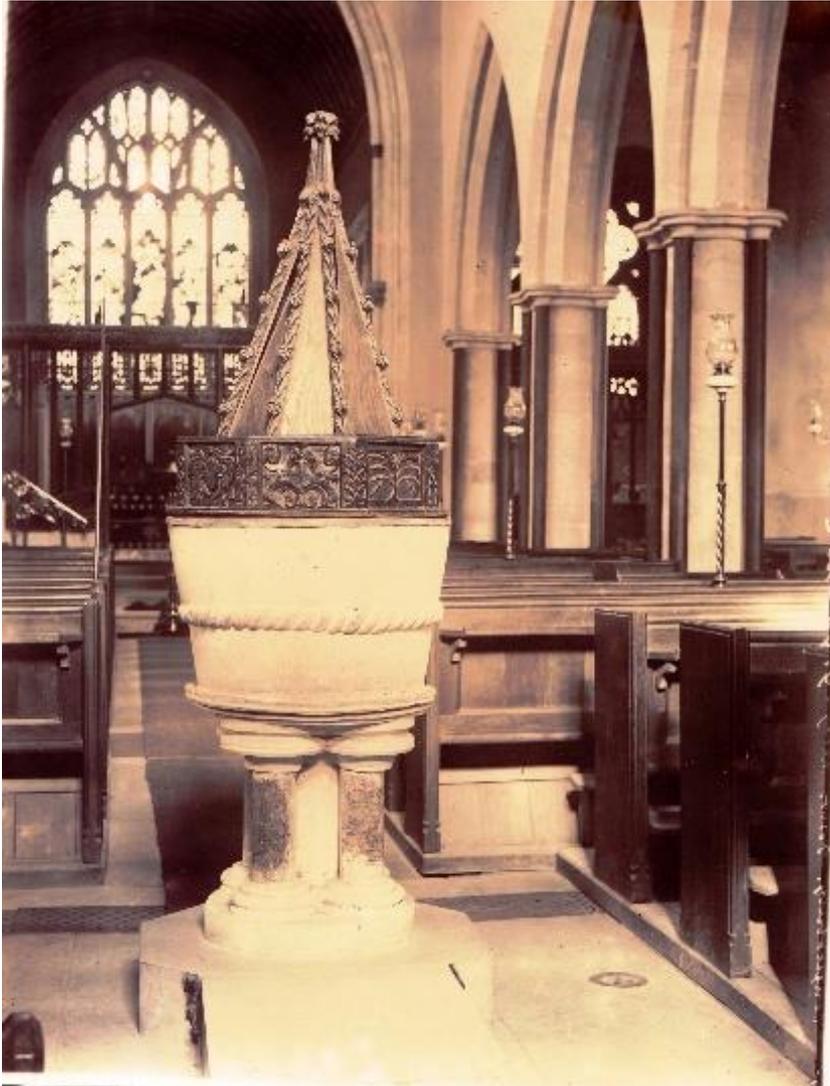


South porch (1)

The wonderful finely carved 15th century inner doorway still has its early wooden door.

The font and tower screen (2)

The font is at the west end of the nave. The Norman bucket shaped bowl has cable mouldings, It is on a 13th century base with four Blue Lias shafts. These shafts mirror the Early English pillars of the north aisle. The same design is seen at the base of the pulpit and double piscina mentioned later in this guide. The 17th century wooden font cover is in the form of a spire.



The font in 1892

To the west beyond the font is the tower screen, the doors of which belonged to the rood screen. The tower screen was glazed and extended into the arch in 1949.

Nave (3)

The Wagon roof of the Nave was said to have been raised to its present height in the fifteenth century. The clerestory windows above the arches, which have two windows to each bay, may date to the same period although Pevesner considered they are reminiscent of East Anglia and perhaps date to the period 1320-50.

The ribs in the wagon roof were renewed in 1951-2, when the 15th century square bosses, incorporating seven "green men," were cleaned and restored to the roof.

Facing the nave at the top of the windows and supporting the roof timbers are particularly interesting stone corbels. 18 little red and green figures are shown to be suffering from such things as tooth ache and headache. They are believed to commemorate William of Bitton II, Bishop of Bath and Wells 1267-74, (Also known as William Button), who in the early 1250s was also vicar of Congresbury. William generated a posthumous cult as a healer of such ailments. The corbels are said to be original and painted in their medieval colours.



Left: One of the green men.

Right: One of the corbels commemorating William Bitton 11.



The pulpit was presented in 1856 by Joseph Haythorne, then vicar.

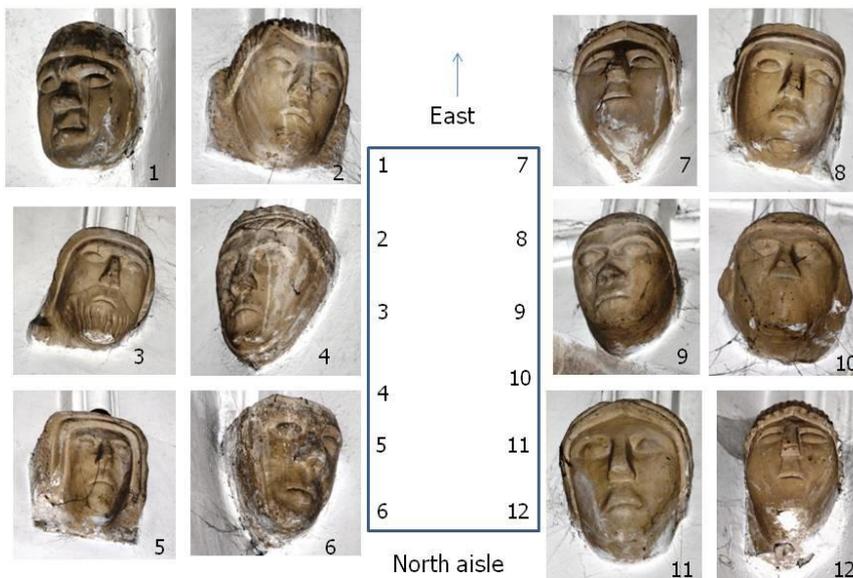
North aisle (4)

The 13th century north arcade of Bath stone has unusual piers of four attached shafts with chamfered angles between. Both capitals and arches are moulded. About half way up these arches are four corbels.



Two of the corbels called the lady and the knight.

Just under the roofline and lining both sides of the north aisle are 12 figures thought to date to the 15th century.



The screen (5)

The Screen is part of an elaborate and richly carved Rood Screen of the fifteenth century

The actual Rood (an image of Christ on the cross) was, during the Middle Ages and probably until the Reformation, supported on a beam which rested on the head corbels about half way up the chancel arch. In front of this, there was once a Rood Loft (a sort of platform, or gallery) which was used on festival days for the reading of the Epistle and the Gospel, and to accommodate the Choir). It was supported by a beam which stretched across the body of the Church. Traces of this arrangement can still be seen. To your far left, for example, on the North wall is a small doorway below the outline of another. The upper doorway led out into the Rood Loft, reached via a spiral staircase in the wall from the lower one. Between the two doorways can be seen a stone corbel depicting an angel bearing a scroll; this, together with a similar corbel opposite (by the window on the south wall) supported the beam under the Rood Loft.



This small carved figure is at the end of the screen

The chancel (6)

Passing through the screen, enter the chancel. On your left, the organ fills the former chapel of St Katherine's (later called the Lady Chapel) Hidden by the large organ pipes and very difficult to see with the naked eye are four corbels.

On your right, note the attractively carved parclose screen separating the chancel from the south (Merle) chapel. The painted wooden roof of the chancel dates from the mid-nineteenth century; note how the floral designs include stars over the sanctuary.

On the south wall of the sanctuary is an unusual and elaborate double piscina (literally: fishpond, a form of drain to take rinsings from vessels used during Holy Communion). It is thought to be over seven hundred years old.



The double piscina

Above the piscina is a window in the Decorated style of the fourteenth century. It depicts the four patron saints of the British Isles: St George, St Andrew, St Patrick and St David. Note the contrasting style of the window with that on the north side of the chancel.

The east window (7)

The tracery at the top of this fine Perpendicular window contains delicately coloured medieval glass. Note the contrast with the stronger colours of the Victorian glass of the five main lights of the window. The three centre lights depict St Andrew bringing the boy with the loaves and fishes to Our Lord before the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. The light on the left depicts Andrew with Jesus and John the Baptist. The right hand light depicts Andrew with his brother Peter kneeling before Jesus. Thus, there is a theme of 'bringing'; John the Baptist bringing Andrew to Jesus, Andrew bringing Peter, and Andrew bringing the boy with the loaves and fishes.

The clear 'sky' above the heads of the figures was originally at the base of the window where it was hidden by a reredos (the backing for the communion table). After removal of the reredos, during the restoration work of the early nineteen fifties, the glass was removed from the window and replaced, with the figures lowered to their present position, and the 'sky' glass placed above them.

The Merle chapel (8)

Passing back through the screen, turn left into the south aisle. On your left is the Merle Chapel known formerly as the Chapel of St Congar. This was until 1952 a private chapel attached to the manor of Iwood in the ownership of the Norman and the Richardson families. It was restored in 1880 by Ann de Merle of a Huguenot branch of the Norman family, which explains the choice of four French saints for the east window.

Below two Biblical scenes, the sower and the faithful servant, are depicted St Louis, a thirteenth century King of France; St Denis, Patron Saint of France who as the glass illustrates was beheaded by the Roman Governor of Paris in 275; St Remigius, sixth century 'Apostle of the Franks' and St Vincent of Lerins, fifth century monk.

The south window of the chapel depicts the Transfiguration of Jesus with Moses (left) and Elijah while Peter, James and John sleep; it commemorates the restoration of the chapel.

The prettily painted ceiling probably dates from the 1880s, but the corbels under the roof line are said to be of the 15th century.

The communion rail and kneeler were added as part of a general restoration of the chapel in 1982.

In the south wall is a single piscina, and an arched recess which some consider marks the site of the tomb of the church's founder. The screens and windows carry designs of the coats of arms of the families connected with the chapel.

South aisle (9)

The arches of the south aisle also date from the fourteenth century. Only the bases remain of the thirteenth century shafts supporting the south pillars. The purely decorative Purbeck marble shafts were added in 1856. They mimic the Early English style and so complement the north pillars opposite.

The Perpendicular windows of this aisle contain modern glass placed as a war memorial in 1949. From the east end, the three matching designs relate to the three armed services and depict St Clement, St Michael and St George. The lines written on the bottom panels of the RAF window were composed by Eleanor Lutley, wife of a former vicar of St Anne's, Hewish. These windows are in marked contrast to the more modern west window in the aisle, dated 1971, which shows Jesus surrounded by young children.

Just under the roofline and lining both sides of the south aisle are a further 12 figures which are thought to date to the 15th century.

The tower

The fifteenth century tower is one of the few in this area surmounted by a spire. The spire is decorated with a band, and the whole structure rises some 120 feet. It is topped by a gilded cock weather-vane, the design of which recalls Peter's denials of Christ, *"before the cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times"*.

The clock on the east face of the Tower dates from the mid-nineteenth century. The tower was re-pointed and restored in 1951, at which time a new floor to the clock chamber was added. The west door is no longer used.

The bells

The bells are amongst the finest and heaviest in the West Country. Their former cage was dated 1624 and was replaced by a steel frame in 1910. The latter was further restored and strengthened in 1981.

Of the inscriptions on the eight bells, the oldest are to be found on Bells Nos. 4, 5 and 6, all of which bear the words *"Anno Domini 1606. G. P."*

Bells Nos. 3 and 8 (Tenor) bear the date 1754. The former is inscribed with the names of William Jones and Thomas Oszen, Churchwardens; and the latter *"Thomas Belbie fecit 1754. Hear me, Oh hear me, when I crye, Prepare to live, prepare to die."*

Bell No. 8, the heaviest of the bells was reputed to weigh 38 cwt, however it was weighed in 1982 and found to weigh 34 cwt 8 lbs.

Many gargoyles can be seen around the walls of the church and empty niches can be seen high up on the north and east walls. The ancient lead roof of the Nave was replaced by one of copper during the 1950 -1952 restoration work.

The churchyard

The oldest tombstones are:

Seymon Knight, 1615 (east of the south porch)

Mary Watts, 1633 and Thomas Inman, 1689 (near to and north of the east window)

This 13th or 14th century churchyard cross was intended to both sanctify the churchyard and commemorate the dead. Gravestones only became fashionable in the late 17th century.

Close by the churchyard cross, and banded with iron, were the remains of an ancient yew tree out of which a beech tree now grows. This was known locally as St Congar's Walking Stick (see Legend of St Congar). Sadly the remains of the yew tree were vandalized and only fragments remain.

East of this is an interesting Celtic cross memorial in marble. It commemorates Mr Charles Capell Hardwick, who was wounded by a highwayman yet managed to pursue and capture his assailant and hand him over for execution at the County Gaol on April 22nd 1831.



St Congar's tree before it was vandalised.



Hardwick memorial

Victims of the Swiss air disaster of April 1973 are commemorated by memorial in the form of three attractive wooden seats in front of the current office block (west of the church).

The medieval parsonage



Beyond the churchyard, and to the north-east of the church, stands a fine two-storied fifteenth century building, known locally as the Refectory. This was the vicarage until 1824, when the adjoining Georgian building was added.

Note the carved faces on the window surrounds

The two-story porch is an imposing structure has some fine carvings around the doorway and remains of three angels holding shields. Above the doorway is another most unusual angle covered in "feathered" legs. The inscription *Laus Deo* is Latin for praise god.



The angel over the porch