

# The Parish Church of St. Wilfrid



## **St. Wilfrid – the Saint and the Church in Bognor**

St. Wilfrid's parish church has the rare distinction of standing on land once owned by St Wilfrid. Wilfrid (634-709) was the son of a Northumbrian nobleman. He came to the attention of Queen Eanfled of Bernicia at the court in Bamburgh. She sponsored his education at the Celtic monastery of Lindisfarne (648) and a journey to Rome (652) to study Roman practices. He is best known for influencing the move from Celtic practices to the Roman church practices and for supporting the Roman method of calculating the date for Easter at the famous Synod of Whitby in 664.

He became Bishop of York, built magnificent stone churches with glass windows (both at that time quite novel in England) at Ripon and Hexham and acquired vast landholdings with monasteries in Northumbria and beyond. His success and the effect he had on Celtic practices led to his downfall as he made influential enemies determined to reduce his power.

However, Wilfrid was not afraid to fight for his beliefs when he felt challenged or badly treated. On two occasions (677 and 703) he made the perilous journey to Rome to seek Papal jurisdiction over the crown and the church in England. His hazardous journeys abroad and confrontational approach resulted in many dangerous encounters including being shipwrecked and nearly killed off the coast of Sussex (666), imprisoned by the King in Northumbria (680) and twice nearly murdered whilst travelling abroad.

It was during his banishment from Northumbria in 681 that King Aethelwealh of the South Saxons gave him 87 hides of land at Seal Island (Selsey) for a monastery. Bede records that Wilfrid saved the starving people of Selsey by showing them how to fish productively; he freed slaves and converted the local people, the last pagans in England, to Christianity. When the local king was deposed by Caedwalla, Wilfrid's local landholdings extended to the Pagham Hundred estate which included what has now become Bognor. Before Wilfrid was reinstated to his see in York in 687, he handed the Pagham estate to Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury as a gift for helping with his reinstatement. To this day this makes the parish a peculiar under the jurisdiction of Canterbury.

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## Tracing St. Wilfrid's Church back

**681** Wilfrid was the first bishop of Selsey where the cathedral seat was until c1076 when Bishop Stigand moved the cathedral site to Chichester. The present 13th century chapel of St. Wilfrid at Church Norton is thought to be very close to the site of Wilfrid's original monastery church.



**685** Caedwalla, exiled son of the King of Wessex, overthrew King Aethelwealh of the South Saxons and went on to conquer Kent and the Isle of Wight (Bede mentions that Caedwalla gave Wilfrid one quarter of the Isle of Wight). In **686** Caedwalla issued a charter confirming Wilfrid's rights and territories. The charter mentions Wilfrid's brethren serving God at a church of St. Andrew on the eastern shore of the harbour (St. Andrew's was secularised in 1626 and the remains are thought to be in the garden of Little Welbourne adjacent to the present church of St. Thomas a' Becket in Pagham).

During the 11th century, St. Thomas a' Becket became a parish church.

During the 13th century, St. Mary Magdalene, South Bersted, originally a chapelry of the parish church of Pagham, became styled a parish in its own right (which included what is now the parish of Bognor) in 1465.

**1821** Bognor builder, Daniel Wonham, erected a chapel of ease, St. John the Evangelist, in the Steyne. It was dedicated on Friday 25 January 1822 by Charles Manners Sutton, Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1873 the chapel was upgraded to a church as Bognor became a parish in its own right.

**1880** the foundation stone was laid for a new parish church of St. John the Baptist in London Road designed by Sir Arthur William Blomfield. The church was dedicated in 1886 by the Bishop of Chichester.

**1891** plans were drawn up for a new daughter church of St. Wilfrid and in 1891-2; St. John's in the Steyne was demolished.

**1896** a temporary tin chapel of ease was erected in Victoria Drive (on the site of the present vicarage).

**1905** plans for St. Wilfrid's were developed by the chosen architect G.H. Fellowes Prynne

**1908** an appeal was started to raise £2,000 to finish the first (and what turned out to be the last) phase of the building work. On 22 July the foundation stone was laid.

**1910** on 23 April the first phase, costing £8,200, was dedicated. However the tower, spire, three rear bays and baptistery were never to be completed.

**1955** Bishop Bell consecrated St. Wilfrid's church intimating that completion may take 200yrs!

**1971** The last service was held in St. John's church in May and St. Wilfrid's became the parish church by order of the council on 25 May. St. John's was demolished in 1972 and the site sold in 1973 to make way for the present WH Smith and Boots stores.

St. Wilfrid's - a New Church for Bognor

The painted line drawing by the architect George Fellowes Prynne shows ambitious plans for a 900 seat daughter church to be situated west of the town centre where the parish church of St. John's was located in London Road. The size of the proposed church reflected aspirations for the area at the turn of the century. Known as the Victoria Park Estate, plans included a grand scale drive (Victoria Drive) from the railway station down to the sea and the construction of many fine buildings. Few, other than Sussex Court and Elizabeth Court, were actually built. The present church, though never completed, was clad in stone, not the red brick/stone dressing as depicted in the picture.



***There are many things to see during a visit to St Wilfrid's and a few are shown below:***

The reredos was originally erected in St John's church as a war memorial on 24 April 1919. The figures represent from left to right St George for soldiers, St. Joan of Arc for women and France, St. Nicholas for sailors,



Centre Panel of Christ holding the banner of St. George, St. John the Baptist for the church dedication, St. Mary Magdalene for the previous mother church in South Bersted and St. Wilfrid for the daughter church (as it was then) in Victoria Drive. Note that the centre display is completely different to the original carving which was a traditional Transfiguration scene and removed in 1934.

In the south transept you will find a bronze sculpture by one of Britain's most famous sculptors – the statue of Christ Ascendant by Uli Nymptsch(1897-1977) Commissioned in 1964 by a donor who wished to remain anonymous and originally hung above the altar on the east wall.



The statue was the next commission Uli Nymptsch received after completing for the Nation the statue of Lloyd George in the House of Commons following a motion to the House by Sir Winston Churchill (his last act as Prime Minister).

In the north transept you will find a memorial plaque designed by Eric Gill and his brother Macdonald. Their father was Arthur Tidman Gill, curate of St. John's Church from 1899-1914.



Macdonald became a notable cartographer and was a pupil at the Royal Naval Academy (now Streete Court) opposite St. Wilfrid's church in Victoria Drive. The brothers designed the memorial plaque for one of Macdonald's fellow pupils at the Academy who lost his life when the ship "Brier Holme" sank off Tasmania in 1904.

Eric Gill (1882-1940) was a typographer and letter cutter of genius and a master in the art of sculpture and wood-engraving. Gill's diaries show that he was responsible for some carving work in St. John's church and this is currently being researched.

The church has some fine heraldic adornments and unfortunately some show the attributed arms of St. Wilfrid (such as the 1919 reredos from St. John's) with the attributed arms for St. William of York (seven mascles or lozenges). However a visit outside to the front east face of the building contains all the correct heraldic elements for St. Wilfrid.

From left to right: (1) Arch Diocese of Canterbury as Bognor is a peculiar under the jurisdiction of Archbishop of Canterbury following the gift of the Pagham estates to Canterbury by Wilfrid, (2) St. John St. John's Church was the mother church in Bognor in 1910,

(3) Diocese of Chichester, (4) St. Wilfrid with the correct 6 pointed 3 estoiles, (5) Arch Diocese of York using the York Modern emblem (there is also a York Ancient used in York Cathedral) as Wilfrid was Bishop of York

