

Winter 2021/22

# St Mary's, South Cowton



## CHURCH PLAN

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## A finely-crafted church built in warring times

St Mary's stands above the water meadows of South Cowton, the village having long disappeared. The settlement is mentioned in Domesday Book as 'Cudton', probably translating as 'Cuthbert's settlement'. A church dedicated to St Cuthbert (d. 687) may have existed here at that time. Any trace of an earlier building has disappeared and the present structure was built during the 1450s. To the South one gets a great view of the neighbouring castle on the hill to the south. Sir Richard Conyers, a supporter of the House of York, erected both buildings between 1450 and 1470 at the start of the Wars of the Roses.

This handsome church, like the castle, is sturdy in character. The heraldry and inscriptions carved onto the exterior walls of the tower and chancel indicate that the Boynton and Conyers families were instrumental in the church's construction. Inside the craftsmanship is superb, especially the stained glass, wall painting, consecration crosses and roof. There is also a porch with a barrel roof and room above and a strange 'two-faced' carving on a choir stall.

Christopher Conyers inherited the manor of South Cowton from Joan Beaufort, wife of Ralph Neville, first Earl of Westmoreland and grandmother to King Edward IV, Richard III and Warwick 'the Kingmaker'. Conyers' son Richard built the nearby castle and probably paid for much of the building of St Mary's. Effigies believed to be of Richard and his two wives lie in the chancel.

Above the porch door, the Latin inscription around the shield reads, 'Pray for the soul of Richard Conyers and Alice his wife'. The heraldry over the chancel door includes the inscription 'Christopher Boynton'. The architecture reflects the turmoil of the period, having been built during the Wars of the Roses. The tower is fortress-like and the nave, chancel and tall porch, with few decorative features except for heraldry, have the appearance of solidity and defense.

## Facts & Figures

Financial Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Visitor Numbers	1,939	504	2,505	2,016	Not available
Conservation Expenditure	£0	£0	£2,431	£0	£3,656
Maintenance Costs	£8,821	£1,747	£2,358	£1,998	£1,548
Utilities Costs	£82	£82	£86	£83	£82

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## Conservation report:

What have our Conservation Team identifies as priorities for the building in the short, medium and long term?

Annualised maintenance costs (Exclusive of VAT):	£2,381
Routine maintenance costs: (Per annum and exclusive of VAT):	£1,290
Other maintenance costs: (Exclusive of VAT):	£0.00
Short term repairs	£27,460
Medium term repairs:	£25,295
Long term repairs:	£0.00
Desirable repairs:	£0.00

## Get Involved!

The Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) wants each of the churches it cares for to once again sit at the center of the community it serves, whatever that community looks like. Many of those churches however no longer have a physical village or community immediately around them or easily identifiable as such but that doesn't mean there isn't a community somewhere that can love and care for these often beautiful old buildings and breathe fresh life into them.

St Mary's at South Cowton fits that description perfectly. All that remains of the village are a few lumps in the ground of the field between it and the castle but it's a beautiful little church with an interesting and vibrant history. We, The CCT and a small number of already engaged local residents, and the church need a group of local people to come together and spend some of their valuable time caring for and using the church. The building is crying out for some enthusiasm, innovation and a little bit of love.

Some ideas already muted are to re-wild the churchyard, bringing back some wild flowers to the area and all the benefits that will bring for local wildlife and eco-diversity. Champing, like camping but in a church rather than a tent. This is proving extremely popular elsewhere in the CCT's portfolio with Champers crying out for places to Champ further North and maybe the return of some religious services to the church but none of these ideas will come to fruition without the support of the local community. The church may be in the custody of The CCT but it belongs to you.

Please attend our next community event at St Mary's to find out more and have your say.

Your CCT Local Community Officer is Mark Sproat [msproat@thecct.org.uk](mailto:msproat@thecct.org.uk) Tel: 07392087023

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## **Part B - Consultation**

Results of and comments on public consultation efforts and results to be recorded here:

### **Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2022:**

A church open day was held at St Mary's between 11am and 1pm. The event was well attended with maybe between 35-40 people in the church across the two-hour period. Mark Sproat explained to the assembled group that as a representative of the CCT we wanted to find a community that could get involved in and care for the church.

Referring to the Church Plan MS noted that ideas that had been suggested in conversations with local people are Re-wilding the Churchyard, Champing and the return of some religious services. There was a mixed response to the first two ideas on the day with some participants raising concerns with the idea of letting the churchyard go wild and the concerns of near-by residents being communicated through attendees of local residents. The idea of re-starting services at the church was well received on the day.

Further conversations took place between smaller groups and on a 1-2-1 basis. During these there was an expression of the concern that re-wilding would result in an overgrown and unkempt churchyard. One person referred to a churchyard locally and their opinion that anything similar at St Mary's would be opposed vehemently. Representations were made on behalf of the owner of the farm immediately next door to the church over their concerns around champing and the possibility of anti-social behavior that might be committed as a result. Reassurances we're given to try to allay these fears but further work and conversations are required in the community to develop support as plans progress.

Positive conversations were also had around the church on both subjects and the possibility of bringing services back to the church. Revd. David Bartlett was present and indicated that he would support the return of some services to St Mary's following further discussion with the community. Mark Sproat explained that the best way forward would be to create a community based group of supportive residents who could lead on future discussions around any proposals

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and seek the support of the whole community. Some present expressed an interest in exploring this further.

One person in attendance expressed concern over how memorials and head stones would be cared for in the future with one other person contacting Mark Sproat directly outside of this event to make similar representations.

Ten attendees left their details on the Signing-in Sheet, eight of which gave consent to the CCT to make further contact. Mark Sproat has received emails from two further interested parties both of which have agreed to further contact. This document and summary of the Open Day will be circulated to these and other interested parties and publicised in local publications.

**Next Steps:**

Mark Sproat to assess the commitment locally to forming a Friends of St Mary's community group and to facilitate this being done if the commitment exists.

Mark Sproat to discuss with Revd. David Bartlett the possibility of delivering a service in the church in the near future.

Mark Sproat to work with interested parties and the CCT to clearly set out what Re-wilding means in this location so that an informed position can be taken by those who received the idea positively and those that expressed doubts and concerns locally.