

# ST MARGARET OF ANTIOCH

*"The church in the fields"*



## A WALK AROUND THE CHURCH



**THE FRIENDS OF ST MARGARET'S, BARMING**

Charity Reg. No. 1057228



## INTRODUCTION

In 1798 Edmund Hasted, Kent historian, wrote that this church, “standing by itself among a grove of elms, the slight, delicate spire rising above the foliage of the grove, affords a pleasing prospect”. So it does, but St Margaret’s has never been just an ornament. Barming people have worshipped and have marked the most important events in their lives here for nearly 900 years.



The original church was built around 1120, no doubt on the orders of the powerful de Clare family who had been Lords of the Manor of East Barming since the Norman Conquest. There was no village then - just a scattering of maybe 30 peasant families - and the church would have been built next to the manor house. West Barming (or “Little Barming”, now Barnjet) was a separate manor and had its own church, but by the late 1400s it had fallen into ruins.

Some say St Margaret’s stands on the site of a Roman villa. Certainly, it seems to have been built on a solid stone base and Roman remains, including some elaborate stone coffins, were found near the church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There is no mention of an East or West Barming church in the Domesday Book and no physical trace of a Saxon church, but Augustine began his work in Kent in 597 and Rochester cathedral was dedicated in 604, so we can be sure there was a Christian community here long before St Margaret’s.

Like all country churches, St Margaret’s has changed as a building. It was upgraded



with a tower and porch in the prosperous 1400s, stripped during the Reformation, and drastically restored by the Victorians, but its essential character has not changed. It remains what it has always been: an unpretentious and welcoming church, especially for local people.

## WHO WAS ST MARGARET?

The dedication of their church to a saint was important to people in the Middle Ages. St Margaret of Antioch was a very popular choice: more than 250 churches are dedicated to her in England alone. Antioch was an ancient city of Syria, and an early centre of Christianity. St Margaret was originally a crusader saint, but became the patron saint of women, nurses and peasants. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, she was revered as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, whose intercession with Mary and Jesus was thought to be particularly effective. Her special concern was to help women during pregnancy and childbirth. Her Feast Day would have been celebrated here every year on 20<sup>th</sup> July.



St Margaret's colourful legend helps explain her popularity. She was born in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the daughter of a pagan priest, but her mother died soon after her birth and she was nursed, raised and later adopted by a pious Christian peasant woman. The local Roman Governor saw her tending sheep and was infatuated with her beauty. When she rejected his advances, he tortured and then imprisoned her for her Christianity. In prison, the devil appeared in the form of a dragon and swallowed her, but the crucifix she held tore the dragon's throat, forcing it to cough her up. She is generally pictured standing modestly but triumphantly over the dragon.

## THE OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH

### Original Norman Building

As you approach the church from the car park, imagine the tower and porch are not there – they were not added until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. What you are left with is the shape of the original Norman church. It was a simple rectangular box with no tower, built using uncut local ragstone. The roof would have been thatch, later replaced with peg-tiles made from clay.

The church points West-East, as is common, and originally had only two parts: a chancel and a nave. The chancel, at the East end, was the holiest part of the church: it contained the altar, which was where the rite of mass was celebrated and was reserved for clergy. The nave was the part of the church for lay people.



The wall facing you as you approach is the East wall: the altar and chancel are immediately behind it. This is the only unchanged wall of the original church. Its 3 round-topped windows are typically Norman. They would have had no glass until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The larger pointed windows on the sides of the chancel and nave were inserted between 1240 and 1340 and remodelled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



### 15<sup>th</sup> Century Tower and Porch

The church tower and porch were built around 1450, probably through the generosity of John Pimpe, of Pimpe's Court, Nettlestead, who also endowed Nettlestead church.

The **tower** is still in its original state. It would not have been built for defence, but



to house church valuables and the bells: bell-ringing became common in country churches in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Above all, it would be built to show the pride of local people and the wealth and generosity of their lords. A tower and spire could be given a religious gloss, too: they were symbols of the link between the church building and heaven.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the belfry contained 3 **bells**, the normal number for this part of the country. Since Victorian times, St Margaret's has had 6 bells, a matter of considerable local pride. One bell cast shortly after 1450 is still in use today: it is inscribed "Pray for us, St Peter". The

other 5 bells were cast in 1883 and 1897.

The slender **spire**, which is clad with wood shingles, was restored between 1725 and 1735 and the weather vane was set up in 1726.

A good big **porch** was indispensable to a parish church. It was not just an entrance but a place of business. Conscientious rectors sat here to perform their parochial duties. This was where parishioners came to arrange baptisms and marriages (Chaucer's Wife of Bath claimed to have had 5 husbands "at the church door"). It was a place of sanctuary, alms giving, shelter, advice and instruction and the first home of the school and church court. By law, all parish notices had to be posted here.



This porch was restored in Victorian times and its outside door was added in the early 1900s; before then it had a half-door. When the porch roof was damaged in the 1987 hurricane and its tiles stolen, it was expertly repaired by soldiers of the Queen's Gurkha Engineers.

### **Victorian North Aisle**

Walk around the tower and you will see a big extension to the North side of the church. This is the North Aisle and it was built in 1850. It includes a vestry for the



rector at its East end.

Technically, an aisle is a side part of a church, parallel to the nave. Wealthier churches had been adding aisles since the 1200s. St Margaret's was late getting an aisle, but this was a major piece of work. Building it involved cutting away the whole of the North wall of the nave and replacing it with pillars.

The North aisle is a good reminder of the confidence and energy of Victorian church restoration. Beginning in the 1840s, there was a huge Anglican revival and a burst of Gothic church restoration all over England. The landed gentry were galvanised by the campaigns of the Oxford Movement and the Cambridge Camden Society. Barming's landowners had become wealthy from hop and fruit farming: they wanted their church to reflect their status.



## INSIDE THE CHURCH

### Alms Box and Font

Just inside the church entrance, on your right, is a small free-standing wooden **alms box**. The original stood at the door from at least Elizabethan times and may have been even older. A 19<sup>th</sup> century inventory refers to it as a “Peter’s Pence” box, which would date it to the 1400s. It was stolen from the church in the 1960s but this is an exact replica, lovingly carved by a local man, Gerald Wilton.

Parish churches have a long history of collecting and distributing alms. In 1798, Hasted recorded 2 recent charitable bequests at Barming. Thomas Harris gave £5 a year for 50 years, 2 shillings of it to be given in bread “*to the poor of this parish*” each Sunday except Easter and Whitsun. John Cale gave £50 in East India Company annuities, the interest to be given to the poor in bread and linen each Christmas.

The **font** is to your left. It is not just for infant baptisms; adults can be baptised



here as well. Traditionally, fonts were placed by the door, because baptism was considered necessary before anyone could become a member of the church family. Today, however, people are welcome as members of the church family before being baptised. So fonts have been moved inside the church.

This font was made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but early fonts always had heavy covers

like this one and locks as well. The holy water, which was kept in the bowl of the font and seldom changed, had to be protected against theft.

### Nave

Turn right at the church entrance and you are looking down the **nave** to the chancel. It is hard to imagine a nave without pews, but before the 17<sup>th</sup> century this would have been clear space. There were no seats, except perhaps some narrow stone benches along the side walls (hence: “*the weakest go to the wall*”).

This was not as hard on churchgoers as it sounds. Before the Reformation, local clergy did not preach and members of the congregation dipped in and out of services rather than staying for the whole liturgy. Besides, the nave was for public



assemblies as well as for worship and would have been in regular use for secular celebrations and events. Seats would have been in the way.

After the Reformation, the clergy were expected to preach and often did so at length. People needed to sit down. **Pews** were introduced into country churches in the 1600s, often with pew rents like season tickets. The early pews were “box” type, with tall sides and doors to keep out draughts. They were for the local gentry and yeomen. The biggest, with lots of leg room and privacy, were placed nearest the chancel for the major landowners.

Box pews fell out of favour in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Camden Society thought they reinforced class distinctions which had no place in worship. Most of them were cleared away and replaced with pews as we know them today. St Margaret’s, as you see, has kept one box pew (made in 1800), but has discretely moved it to the West end of the nave, away from the chancel.

The carved oak **pulpit** is modern (1901). The figures on it depict Jesus, St John the Baptist (with the lamb) and St Paul (with the book).

### **Chancel Arch and Rood Screen**

The **arch** dividing the nave from the chancel was built in 1450, at the same time as the tower and porch. Its position shows that the chancel had been extended since Norman times, at the expense of the nave. This was very common. The chancel was the holiest part of the church: increasing its size glorified God.

Until the Reformation, there would have been a wooden “**rood screen**” underneath the chancel arch. It had solid panelling at the base, open tracery from waist to head height and a canopy and loft above. Its purpose was to allow people to see the rituals of the mass, but keep them separate. A hinged double door in the centre of the rood screen would only have been opened on special occasions. Normally priests conducted services for the people, not with the people.

On top of the screen was a crucifix (or “rood”). On either side of the rood would have been statues of the Virgin Mary and St John and, in this church, St Margaret. Because the statues were in semi-darkness, lights were kept burning in front of them. Traces of a staircase leading to the rood loft (to tend the lights) were found here in 1815. Rood screens were removed from almost all Kent churches during the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I (1547 – 1603).

## **Chancel**

Edward and Elizabeth did not stop at removing rood screens. Orders went out in 1547 “that all images whatsoever should be taken out of churches. All shrines, tables, candlesticks, tindrills, rolls of wax, pictures, paintings and other monuments of feigned miracles should be removed so that no memory of them remains.”

Chancels were stripped and lay churchwardens appointed to keep clergy in line.

By the time of the Civil War and Protectorate, there was probably nothing left in St Margaret’s for the Puritans to remove. Cromwell’s troops marched across East Farleigh bridge to fight the Battle of Maidstone in 1648, but St Margaret’s seems to have been little affected by the tumult of the times. Richard Webbe, Rector for 40 years from 1624, kept calm and carried on.

Today’s chancel has some traces of its early history. In the South wall, to the right of the altar, there is a piscina, a recess for washing the vessels used in the mass, but the decoration is modern.

The Dutch floor tiles and the tracery around the windows were added in the early 1900s by the leading church design firm, Bucknall and Comper. The bas-relief carving of the Adoration of the Magi behind the altar was brought from Italy at about the same time by the daughter of the Rector, The Rev Thomas Carr.

## **Flemish Choir Stalls**

The treasures of the chancel are its oak choir stalls, which are amongst the oldest in England. They may date from 1300. Though made in Flanders, they come from a Cathedral in the South of France. The Beaumont family bought them on the continental antiques market and presented them to St Margaret’s in 1871.

Please look carefully at the carvings on the choir stalls. They are wonderful. There is Samson fighting his lion, St Michael spearing a dragon, the Harrowing of Hell with Jesus helping a woman and child escape from the bottomless pit. There are quaint faces, heads of bulls and a lion representing St Mark.

In the late 1930s, Dr Francis Eeles, Secretary of the Central Council for the Care of Churches, took it into his head that the choir stalls were English, came from Rochester Cathedral and should be returned there. The Rector of Barming, the Rev W.C. Granville-Sharp, was outraged. Fortunately, The Beaumont family had kept their receipts and Dr Eeles was forced to back down.

He wrote a suitably apologetic letter to the Times. *“In view of the evidence produced by Mr Sharp”,* he said, *“I hasten to withdraw any suggestion that Barming stole the stall ends from Rochester Cathedral. Of course, in talking like*



*this to the Rochester Friends, I feel sure they did not think I was accusing the present generation at Barming of burglary and sacrilege.” He had been confused by finding work of this rarity in a little country church: “Though not English, they seem to be unique as the earliest examples of carved stall ends we possess in this country. This, I think, is a statement not open to question and I venture to hope that in making it I shall be forgiven, even at Barming”.*

### **The Rev Mark Noble**

On the wall of the chancel is a memorial to the Rev. Mark Noble, Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries, prolific writer of historical biographies, Rector of St Margaret’s 1786 to 1827. Mark was probably the grumpiest Rector in Barming’s history. He had endless disputes with the local gentry. He died leaving a History of the Parish of Barming amongst his papers. Unfortunately, it was so full of libellous comments about his parishioners that his executors were afraid to publish it.

Barming was a “good living”, with a steady income from glebe lands and Mark was pleased to get it: he described his previous livings as “starvations”. However he was appalled by the state of the church and rectory: *“When I came into possession, nothing could be more out of repair; all was seeming ruin and distress.”* He blamed his predecessor as Rector: *“From his birth he was extremely mean; he was elegant in his manners, an excellent companion but a bad preacher and indolent in that and every other respect.”*

Mark Noble was not “indolent”. Hasted records *“he almost rebuilt”* the rectory and *“at his own expense, entirely repaired and ornamented the chapel; he gave likewise a new alter and pulpit cloth and cushion”*. In 1800, *“with the greatest difficulty”*, he persuaded parishioners to take nave repair into their own hands.

### **Church Records**

St Margaret’s has one of the earliest church registers in the diocese, running from 1541 – 1611. It is a treasure trove for historians but a bit boring for the rest of us – a list of names and dates.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century burial records are much livelier. Rectors at the time often wrote little pen-pictures of the deceased and did not mince their words.

So we read that Thomas Harris (died 1796) *“was one of the most monied men in England: his character was unamiable.”* Rebecca Stead (died 1765) *“had been mistress to the Earl of Pembroke. She was even handsome when much advanced in life, but in her temper she was extremely violent”*.

**Mark Noble**, as we would expect, was particularly forthright in his judgements:

- Richard Becket (died 1798) *“was the eldest son of opulent parents and had a good fortune himself, which he squandered in every idle, every profligate device that could render him contemptible and odious.....The recording angel has not, I fear, engraved a single virtue to save his name from total depravity. He was prayed for in the church. How different have been my feelings when I have witnessed the death of the righteous”*

But he was less critical of repentant sinners:

- Richard Day (died 1799) *“had lived a very immoral life; but gave undeniable proofs of his knowing better, by his open avowal of his belief in the Christian religion. Whilst tenant of the glebe, he was churchwarden of Barming. His behaviour to an unfortunate sister and her children did him great credit”*

And, beneath all the bluster, he was warm-hearted and charitable:

- Elizabeth Golding (died 1798) *“was an inoffensive, honest person. Her father and former friends had lived in great credit here, but she was reduced to receive the pay of the parish. It was in vain I endeavoured to solicit a small pension from her landlord, who not only took away her few acres, but refused to assist more than with a present of a guinea. This I wondered at.”*

### **North Aisle and War Memorials**

The North Aisle is to your right as you walk back up the nave. On its wall are rolls of honour recording the men of Barming who fought in the First and Second World Wars.

The names of all the men who went to war are recorded. The memorials show those who were killed and, in the case of the First World War, those who were injured as well. It is very moving to see the names of 3, 4 and 5 young men from the same family fighting in the First World War – the Mullins boys, the Coppards, the Coggers – and to see that some did not return. 22 Barming men were killed in action in 1914-18 and 20 in 1939-45.

## Stained Glass Windows

All the stained glass windows in St Margaret's are Victorian or later. They are none the less charming for that. There is a lovely little window in the porch *"For John Charles Wooding, churchwarden of this parish for 40 years, 1873-1964"*

Rectors delight in spotting small mistakes in their stained glass windows. In the "Light of the World" window in the chancel, the door at which Jesus is knocking has a new and obviously serviceable outside handle. In the North aisle window, St Mark is shown cutting his cloak with a sword, to give half to a beggar. If you look carefully you will see that he has one too many fingers on his sword hand.



## THE CHURCHYARD

The original churchyard, immediately surrounding the church, is bounded on its North side by a wall and on its West and South sides by a low retaining wall. The ground level within the churchyard has been slightly raised over the centuries by its constant use for burials.

Approaching from the East (the car park), the boundary of the church yard is marked by a Victorian mounting block on the left side of the path. This was for parishioners travelling by horse.

Many of the gravestones are badly eroded, but there is a complete list of their inscriptions, carefully compiled by the Kent Family History Society, in the new Maidstone library.

The earliest memorials are grouped on the South and East side of the church, fairly close to the building. The oldest legible headstone and one of the smallest, is on the East side of the church: *"Here lieth the body of Charles Fletcher the younger, deceased the first day of June in the Year of Our Lord 1662"*

It is not surprising that there are no earlier memorials. Headstones did not become popular until the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, a single churchyard cross often served as a memorial for everyone. Indeed, in earlier centuries, bodies were often only interred for a few years before being removed to make way for new burials. Space was at a premium until churchyards were finally enlarged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Just so the children know, the chest tombs in the churchyard do not contain bodies: they are just for show and stand on top of normal graves.

There is no crypt beneath the church building, but there is a crypt, containing family tombs, in the churchyard. It is covered by a mound of earth now, to prevent vandalism. It is on the North side of the church, with the marble chest tomb of Jane Ellis above it.

Just inside the eastern entrance to the churchyard, on the other side of the path to the mounting block, is the headstone of William Selby, yeoman, who died in 1804 at the age of 42. William was for 16 years the long-suffering churchwarden of the Rev. Mark Noble. In his will, he left a bequest *“to amply make recompense for so long deferring to repair the church”*, but his apologies were not necessary. His friends had a truer sense of his worth. They wrote on his headstone *“A truly honest man lies here. Selby, farewell, what few can boast is thine”*. He is a reminder that it was not just the Rectors who made this church.

The present graveyard, to the South of the church, is a lovely, tranquil place, beautifully maintained by the church’s “yellow wellies” volunteers. Please walk around and look at the memorials – no-one will mind.

## AND FINALLY

Thank you for visiting our lovely church. We hope you’ll come again.

There is no space here to describe the work of St Margaret’s today, but please visit our website (just google “St Margaret’s Church Barming”) to find out about our services and our many community groups and events. You will be surprised: this church works really hard “to help make Barming an even more caring and active community”.

And, of course, small financial contributions to help with the upkeep of the church are always welcome:

*If aught thou hast to give or lend  
This ancient parish church befriend.  
If poor but still in spirit willing  
Out with thy purse and give a shilling.  
But if its depths should be profound  
Think of God and give a pound!*

Don’t be strangers.

