Part I: The church in its village environment

St. Mary’s, Iffley is the jewel in the crown of this beautiful village centre with the thatched church hall, former glebe field, stone houses and cottages, together with the fine Rectory building now partly used as a Landmark Trust house. The church may be seen well from the West (especially on the ringroad) standing proudly above the river Thames with the flood plain/meadows beyond, slightly downstream of the lock and the site of the former mill. Despite its now urban environment and the nearby ring road, Iffley manages substantially to retain a village atmosphere.

The church is set in a fine churchyard with many tombs of various dates (mostly not of any great significance, although one may be that of Annora, the thirteenth century anchoress, who had a cell to the South of the chancel) together with a medieval churchyard cross (the original head of which, now in the church, depicting the Lamb of St John the Baptist may reflect the medieval church dedication referred to in the fifteenth century) and a very ancient yew tree. On the basis of estimates of the age of yew trees by their girth, the tree may be older than the church. The churchyard is bounded on the West by land falling down towards the river Thames, and on the South and East by walls. On the North side, there is a vestry building and towards the North West, the Rectory. The church lies in a Conservation Area.

The church was built using local Oxfordshire stone, in the 1150s to 1170s. It is usually stated that it was built by the St. Remy family, though it seems likely that the funds for its
construction came from the Clinton family, arising from the marriage of Robert de St. Remy to a daughter of Lescelina de Clinton. This probable patronage by one of the major families of the twelfth century is reflected in the quite exceptional design and decoration of the church. Although no more than a single ailed parish church, the quality of the sculpture, as well as its profusion both externally, on the doors and the tower, and internally, not only on the tower arches and in the chancel but around the windows, the use of Tournai “marble”, especially in the tower arches (the finest surviving example of such use in the United Kingdom), and the grandeur of the West front design, all indicate a patron with connections at the highest levels. The importance of Iffley church is such that, despite all the possible exceptional buildings in Oxfordshire which might have been chosen, it was Iffley church which graced the front of the dustcover of Pevsner’s Oxfordshire, when it was published in 1974. The original Romanesque design has survived to a significant extent, barring the intrusion of larger Gothic windows, although the sanctuary area was rebuilt and presumably enlarged in the early thirteenth century in a fine and very graceful early Gothic style.

The exterior of the church is noted for its magnificent West door with continuous beakhead and chevron ornament, together with a hood mould containing symbols of the evangelists, the dove of the Holy Spirit and a number of zodiac figures. The very fine South door has a medley of sculpture including a centaur family, knights on horseback and a man (presumably Samson) fighting a lion. Exceptionally, the bases of the door columns are supported on crouching animals, now almost indecipherable. Zoomorphic bases are hardly known in England, the best known other example being the Prior’s door at Ely. The south side of the tower has a fine but wholly recut opening, presumably reflecting the original. There are a few surviving sculptures from the corbel table.

The church may only be entered through a Western baptistery area, in the centre of which is a Tournai “marble” (actually limestone) font on stone shafts, three with spiral fluting. The interior, a prominent and important feature of which is the rising floor level as one moves East, is dominated by the fine tower arches with Tournai “marble” octagonal columns. These are almost identical to those found in the transept and nave of Tournai cathedral. The decoration of the arches is highly unusual both because the design is not known elsewhere and because it is very rare for such arches to have a single repeated motif in this period, especially on both tower arches. The interiors of the Romanesque
windows, unusually, are highly decorated with chevron ornament, such as may be seen in the church of St. Cross in Winchester.

The internal furnishings of the church are largely a result of the nineteenth century reordering, although the baptistery area was re-equipped with fine oak stalls and seating in 1995, when a new lectern and priest’s desk were also installed. The nineteenth century choir stalls in the chancel were substantially modified at that time.

The proposed substantial enhancement to the lighting will affect all parts of the church, but will not entail substantial additional wiring. It is proposed to place white painted wooden batons on the sills of the windows in the baptistery, nave and under the tower (similar to those in the chancel as shown in the photograph), behind which many of the lights and their transformers will be placed. The two chandeliers, which were moved to the baptistery area in 1995 and it is now proposed to remove, are twentieth century.

**Part II: The significance of the areas affected by the proposals**

**The Chancel**

The chancel has a domical vault (it has been suggested alluding to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem) with fine ribbed vaults supported on clustered shafts, the hollows
filled with sculptures including rosettes, a man’s head on one side and a beautiful bird rising from a nest. This last has been much reproduced in literature on Romanesque and early Gothic sculpture. The ribs culminate in a magnificent boss with animal masks, pine cones and at the centre a serpent or dragon apparently sloughing off its skin. As with other aspects of the church, the chancel displays influence from Reading Abbey, founded by Henry I, as well as the Chapter House doorway in St. Frideswide’s at Christchurch. It has been suggested that the masons may have moved from St. Frideswide’s to work at Iffley. The proposal outlined below would substantially enhance this area of the church, which is of exceptional significance.

There are Victorian choir stalls, which date from the 1840s, installed under the architect R. C. Hussey (Tyack 2003). The front stalls were substantially altered in 1995, when they were shortened to irregular lengths, and the poppyheads at each end were removed (Fig 10, Tyack 2003).

It is proposed to remove the existing choir stalls and related wooden wall panelling. This would require the replastering and painting of the North and South walls, up to a height of about 2 metres and the replacement of the existing wooden flooring beneath the existing rear stalls by stone flooring to match the existing floor of the chancel. The existing underfloor heating would be extended under this flooring. The stalls would be replaced with two rows of oak moveable benches.

It is proposed to install a handrail up the steps beneath the East tower arch up to the chancel. The handrail will extend from the end of the pew at the North side of the aisle. This will require drilling of fixing points in the steps which are of limited historic significance, being part of the re-flooring of this area carried out in the mid 1990s.
The Sanctuary

The floor level rises significantly as one enters the sanctuary and the bases of the Romanesque clustered shafts are at this higher level, indicating that there was a Romanesque East end beyond these shafts, perhaps an apse.

It is proposed to replace the existing altar rail, installed in 1959 to an outline design by Ninian Cooper, with a new altar rail which will be removeable. Fixing points will require drilling holes in the position of the existing rail. The step is not of any age or significance.

The thirteenth century sanctuary has two recesses in the South wall, the first having a relatively plain piscina of pillar form with half round drain in moulded cap, and the second, perhaps originally an aumbry, with moulded jambs (rather battered on the West side) and slightly shouldered square head. It is proposed to insert a stone sculpted front, framing a wooden lockable door in this second recess. The sculpted front would be inserted in the rear hollow of the moulded stone opening, with minimum intrusion into the wall.

To the West of the aumbry and piscina, there are very fine sedilia, put in presumably after the death of the anchoress, Annora, when there would no longer be a need for the opening from her cell into the sanctuary for her to be able to observe the Mass. The sedilia are in a style, using dying mouldings, much in use in Royal circles in the later thirteenth century and also to be seen at Dorchester Abbey.
The baptistery area

As stated above, the interior may only be entered through a Western baptistery area, at the centre of which is a Tournai “marble” font on stone shafts. The proportions of the font are very similar to those of a number of other Tournai fonts in England dating from this period, including those at Winchester and Lincoln Cathedrals. Unlike these however, it is unsculpted, perhaps because the doors to the church were, as stated above, highly sculpted. It is not known whether the site of the font is original, but there seems no reason to doubt that it is. There are three doors to this area, probably reflecting relatively complex liturgies, and all have to pass by the font as a potent reminder of their baptism and baptismal oaths. The baptistery area may originally have had a partition between it and the nave (not necessarily full height) and this delineation of the area was re-introduced by the creation of new stalls and seating on three sides around the font in 1995. The nineteenth century organ now blocks use of the South door and the North door has not been in use until recently.

It is proposed to allow more frequent use of the North door and for this purpose, there will be alteration of the ground level, by removing the step outside this door and the
insertion of a mat well. A new handle will be attached inside the door to allow it to be opened and shut from the inside as well from outside.

In 1996, a fine Piper window was placed in the South window of the baptistery, depicting a Tree of Life with speaking birds and animals announcing the birth of Christ. The symbolism of the window aptly complements that of the Romanesque sculpture in and on the church.

As stage 2 of the proposals, it is intended to reorganise the notice boards, possibly raising the level of the screen to the rear of the organist’s seat, insert shelving for guidebooks and cards etc., move the list of incumbents to the West wall, and replace the present very heavy font cover with a modern light oak cover. Most substantially, it is planned to insert a new stained glass window in the North window, opposite the Piper window, to a design by Roger Wagner.

Bibliography