

The earliest evidence of a church in Overtone (Cold Overton) is from the Domesday Survey of 1086: 'on the demesne of Drogo De Beurcre lived a priest.' However, Matriculus, records the earliest named priest: 'Romainus was rector in 1220.' The advowson of the church was settled by Walter Espec on the Priory of Kirkham in Yorkshire, which he founded in 1151. The Priors of Kirkham continued to be patrons until July 1274. Then the centuries of patronage by the Lord of the Manor of Cold Overton began with Sir Nicholas de Segrave.

This fine South door with Christ in Majesty is the oldest part of the church. It dates from the late twelfth century when a rebuilding of the whole church was begun, and carried on to completion in the thirteenth.

As rebuilt in the thirteenth century the church consisted of a nave with an aisle each side, only two bays in length, and a chancel without aisles. With some additions, it still keeps that form. The north door, the pillars, arches of the nave, and at least the lower part of the walls, and the lancet window at the west end of north aisle, are of that time.

The chapel was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the piscina found here points to the existence of an important altar. Evidence in the stone work of the pillars here suggest the existence of a parclose screen which at this time partitioned this side chapel from the main body of the church. It is upon the crumbling plaster walls of the Lady Chapel that fragile sections of previously, white washed over medieval paintings cling. The Nativity, of Christ, the Gathering of the Apostles at the Death of the Virgin, the Funeral of the Virgin, St. Catherine, St. Margaret and St. John the Baptist. These paintings, dating from the thirteenth century, are unique and rare survivors of the Reformation.

In the first half of the fourteenth century the Chancel was rebuilt, keeping the lower part of its sidewalls with the thirteenth century piscina, credence and sedilia.

In the fifteenth century the richly decorated Western tower, with parapet spire was built. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings wrote in 1889 that it was "a most excellent specimen of design and workmanship, the carved beasts on the angle at the base being especially worthy, of note." The carving was the work of an East Midlands "School" of carving, probably members of a masons' guild, based in Oakham.

The fifteenth century also saw the addition of a porch, a clerestory to the nave and the entire roof made new. Today, the upper walls of the west end of the nave still clearly show the pre-fifteenth century roofline of the church. The church also gained a Rood Loft and Rood Screen. 'Rood' is an old English word for 'Cross'. In its simplest form the gallery or 'Loft,' filling the space above the Chancel Screen, would support a great cross. We can only guess as to the final form this dominating object of veneration and devotion took. Today only a blocked door remains, partly visible, above the nineteenth century fireplace in the east end of the north aisle.

In 1547, the church was perhaps at its best, untouched by the Reformation, resplendent in a blaze of colour from the stained glass and its richly painted walls, ceiling and Rood. Now only a few precious fragments of glass in the South cancel and Lady Chapel windows, the wall paintings and especially the carvings on the South door are rare survivors of the destructive zeal of the reformers.

By 1690s, the Lady Chapel had become the burial place for the St. Johns, who had the present Cold Overton Hall built. Simple slabs mark their graves beneath the south aisle, with decorative monuments along the east wall. About this time a vestry which once stood on the north side of the Chancel was pulled down and a gallery erected 'of the worst type' in front of the tower arch.

The 1780s saw the last major structural change with the extension of the south aisle to provide a family chapel and burial vault for the Frewin-Turner family, who then lived at Cold Overton Hall. The west window was built using a 12th century cross shaft that used to stand in the churchyard.

In 1893, the Chancel was restored and the wardrobe in the Frewin-Turner chapel, now the Vestry, was made from the fifteenth century oak beams.

In 1889, the gallery was torn down and the tower arch opened to the church. Lord and Lady Manners of Cold Overton Hall provided the pews in the nave and the candle brackets. The church had to wait until 1939 to get electric lighting.

In 1926 James Montague of Cold Overton Hall (from 1912 to 1946) provided the stained glass, Holy Table, reredos, angel riddle posts, oak Chancel screen, panelling, clergy desks, choir stalls, pulpit and money towards the war memorial lectern. These were, 'a thanks offering for safe return from The Great War and recovery from his recent illness.' One desk and the east window bear his coat of arms. The other desk and the same window show the arms of Canterbury and Peterborough. They were dedicated by the Bishop of Peterborough 1926 just before the Diocese of Leicester was created.

Stained Glass

Fragments of medieval glass remain in situ in the west window at the north end of the Chancel, and the east window of the Lady Chapel.

The stained glass of the east window and in the north aisle, were the work of Reginald Bell of Clayton and Bell, London 1926.

The Bells and Clock

The tower supports three melodious bells in a steel frame from about 1900. The tenor weighs 0.5 ton and bears the inscription 'Thomas Norris made mee 1664 H.G.H.B.'

The Norris family were bell founders in Stamford. The second bell, cast by John Danyell in 1486, bears the inscription 'Nomen Magdalene (C) ampana gerit melodie' and weighs 8 cwt. John Taylor & Son of Loughborough cast the 6 cwt treble bell, in 1857.

The clock, built by S. Smith and Sons of Derby, runs for seven days. It strikes on the hour and has a pinwheel escapement giving excellent time keeping. One dial faces The Hall so that the owner could keep a check on the time, whilst a second dial, some 15 ft higher, faces south so the rest of the village may see it. It replaced a 17th century wooden clock made by John Watts of Stamford. That clock had a square dial mounted, vertical diagonal and facing the Hall. Shown in a print of 1792, it would have required daily winding which doubtless hastened its replacement.

The Roll of Honour and War Memorial

On the North wall is a record of those of the village who fought and gave their lives for their country in World War One. The War Memorial is the Lectern carved with the names of those that died in that war.

The Organ

Built by Thomas Lane and Sons of Stony Stanton and Earl Shilton, mid 19th century and originally in the Arnesby church, it was purchased for £90 in 1962.

Church Registers and Communion Plate

The church Registers date from 1556. The Communion Plate consists of four pieces made in London in 1738 and presented by John Turner, then owner of The Hall. He was High Sheriff of Leicestershire in 1738 and presumably gave them to mark his Year of Office. Each piece bears the Sacred Monogram and the same Latin inscription. His memorial slab lies to the left of the organ. The Plate is no longer in the church.

The Wall Paintings

In 1889, the Committee of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings saw the necessity for preserving the plaster as, 'we know there are paintings under the white wash and it maybe someday, they will be exposed to view and we cannot tell what light they may throw on history.'

Their rarity can be put into perspective, if we see how few thirteenth century English paintings are in our museums and galleries. The truth is such irreplaceable works of art now crumble. Your donations will allow vital conservation. We hope you have enjoyed your visit and will come again.

Cover photograph taken about 1890 by an unknown photographer.

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A Brief History of St. John the Baptist, Cold Overton, Leicestershire

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