# Sir Edward Hext and Low Ham Church

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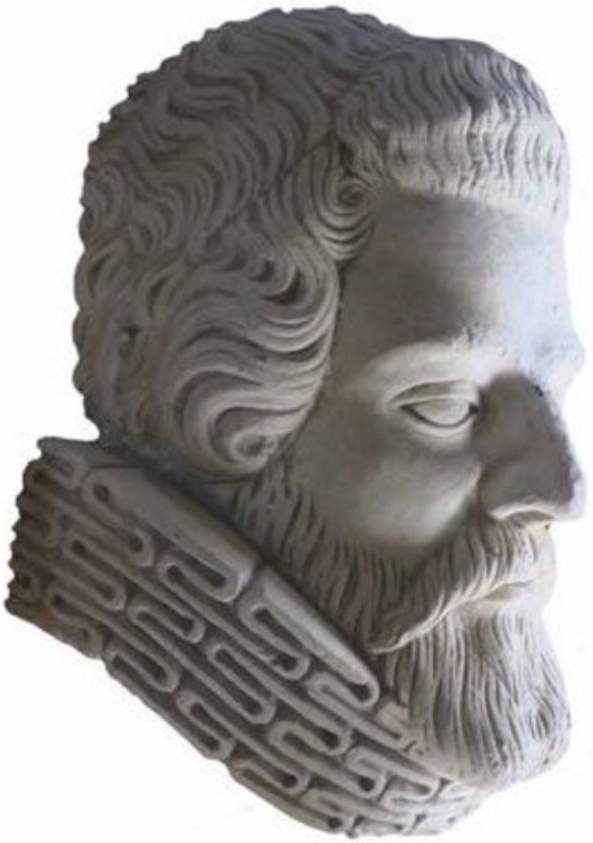
# SIR EDWARD HEXT

Sir Edward Hext lived in an interesting time. Born in the penultimate year of the reign of Henry VIII, his life encompassed the reigns of five monarchs, two changes of national religion, the threat of the Spanish Armada, the union of the English crown with that of Scotland, and several attempted assassinations of the monarch including the Gunpowder Plot. Through his own outstanding capability, political contacts and advantageous marriages Hext became rich and influential. He died at the age of 79, just over one year before the death of King James, having witnessed considerable social change and episodes of famine, plague and social disorder. It was an uncertain, and even dangerous, time in which to be a public figure.

## An Exceptional Life



The only known representation of Edward Hext is this effigy on his tomb in the church at Low Ham. He was born in 1545, the first son of George and Mary Hext of Pickwell, on the north Devon coast near Ilfracombe. The Hexts were a minor west country landowning family. Little is known of Edward's early life until he trained as a lawyer in the Middle Temple from the age of 23 to 31. He was called to the Bar in 1576 and took chambers in the Temple, which he occupied for

life. Here he gave an early indication of his interest in building by remodelling his chambers.

At the age of 32 Edward made an advantageous marriage to 30 year old Agnes Hunton, widow of Thomas Walton of Low Ham and mother of two young sons, James and Thomas. Through this marriage he acquired a large house and land in Low Ham. The Hext family subsequently purchased additional land, including the Manor of Low Ham. Edward and Agnes had no children, and she died in 1592 at the age of 45. Within a few months Edward remarried, to another widow. His second wife was Dionis (or Dionysia) Stonehouse, widow of Walter Lawson and mother of a daughter. Their only child, Elizabeth, was born in the same year, 1592. Hext had by now purchased the Manor of Somerton and had rebuilt the Walton house, which was still standing in 1689 and was "thought one of the best houses in the West of England". No visible sign of it exists today but it is thought to have been located near the top of the hill south of the church, with its origins in an earlier Manor house of lands in Wearne and Huish Episcopi.

For most of his early life Hext would have been alert to the threat of invasion by Spain as England was kept in a state of armed readiness. When he became a JP he would have become responsible for raising money and men for the militia. As Lord of the Manor he would have been responsible for equipping and training 20 to 50 foot-soldiers, and would have possessed his own armour and weaponry.

Throughout Hext's lifetime there were recurring epidemics of plague in England. Outbreaks were irregular in occurrence and variable in their effect on mortality. Very few years passed without some deaths and, in the worst epidemics, death rates of around 20% of population were recorded for some areas.

## Hext and the Law

Edward Hext served as a JP (Justice of the Peace, or Magistrate) from 1585 until his death in 1624. He was appointed as a judge in the Assize Courts in 1604. As a JP, he heard court cases in the local

community and dealt with civil and criminal proceedings, dispensing summary justice in less important cases of Common Law and also ruling on local administrative matters.

England already had a well established legal system. Justice was controlled from the centre through the Courts of Assize (or Assizes), which sat at intervals in each county of England, and to which judges were sent to hear important civil and criminal cases. The country was divided into six circuits and the judges were known as Circuit Judges. Hext held the commission of 'Oyer and Terminer' from 1602, which authorised him to hear and determine cases at the Assizes, and he became a judge of the Western Circuit in 1604. The Assizes were accompanied by elaborate ceremonial, to demonstrate to the citizens the power of the state.

JPs were required to hold, every three months, courts known as Quarter Sessions. Routine legal cases were handled in the Petty Sessions, the monthly courts run by the JPs. Cases that fell outside the authority of JPs were referred to the Quarter Sessions or the Assizes. The Quarter Sessions were made up of two or more JPs, presided over by a chairman, and sat with a jury. The Assizes, also with a jury, exercised both civil and criminal jurisdiction, although most of their work was on the criminal side. They heard the most serious cases, notably those subject to capital punishment.

The cases that came before Hext as a JP mainly concerned theft, with a significant proportion of bastardy (maintenance) orders. Examples include the case of a man accused of the theft of hay from Sir Edward Hext himself, and another concerning the theft of a frying pan at Langport Fair. More serious cases included a person accused of stabbing the landlord and his wife at The Bear Inn in Somerton. One of the more remarkable cases was that of a group of four men who had attempted to kidnap maidens to be sent to the recently founded colonies of Bermuda and Virginia.

Hext claimed that less than one in five crimes actually came to court. This was no doubt partly due to the fact that there was no police force. Another important factor was the increasing ineffectiveness of

the existing enforcement system. In most parishes this included a Constable, a Churchwarden and an Overseer of the Poor. Appointed by the local citizens, they served for a term of one year and, like the JP, were unpaid.

The responsibility for law enforcement fell on the Constable. His duties were mainly in disputes over land or tenancies, but he was on call, day or night, to deal with civil disorder and criminal activities. If a murder or robbery had been committed, or a criminal had escaped, the Constable was responsible for recruiting and remunerating a search party. The Constable could call on local men for help, and anyone who refused to join a chase, or lend their horse, was fined. When a miscreant was caught, the Constable had to keep them under lock and key; those guilty of serious offences had to await justice at the Quarter Sessions or the Assizes. A Constable could summon a trained band of soldiers to quell a riot, and was responsible for enforcing compulsory military training for the men of the parish.

Both the Constable and Churchwarden were responsible for monitoring moral behaviour in the parish and for enforcing religious rules. The Overseer of the Poor had the power to compel people to pay a local tax to help the poor and was required to help find work for those of them who were able bodied. This system of enforcement, which was very local and discretionary, depended on private initiative. The cost of going to court frequently led to cases being settled by mediation. While still enjoying strong public support, the enforcement system had by this time become inefficient at dealing with higher levels of increasingly sophisticated crime.

In 1596 Hext wrote to Lord Burghley, the Lord Treasurer, advising him that “Crime is increasing in Somerset”. He attributed this partly to the fact that “Many people are starving as there is little food”, (there had been food riots following several successive years of crop failures), but identified the worst criminals as wandering unemployed soldiers “who are not afraid of the law and even threaten the judges”. He claimed that most of the criminals were lazy and refused to work. A crime wave did indeed sweep England and Wales between 1550 and 1630, coinciding with a rapid increase in the population. In response

Hext proposed that the already harsh sentences prescribed by the courts should be more rigorously applied. He also recommended to the Privy Council the re-establishment of houses of correction, “which the rogues fear more than goal”, and suggested that criminals should be given useful employment in the military. To modern sensibilities Hext’s views on criminals might seem harsh, but he seems to have been fair and, for his time, enlightened. His words and actions reveal a genuine concern for an orderly society and the alleviation of poverty.

## Hext in Parliament

Hext entered parliament as MP for Taunton in 1597 and was re-elected in 1604, when he was knighted for his services. At this time there was no official system of political parties, MPs forming factions according to their personal views and loyalties. Hext became a prominent figure in the first Parliament under King James, making at least 19 speeches and receiving 50 committee appointments. His first speech was badly received. As a result, he introduced a popular motion against hissing in Parliament, describing it as an expression of opposition which debased the honour and privilege of the House

Throughout his career, Hext was preoccupied with issues of poverty and social regulation. He served on committees for the relief of soldiers, mariners and prisoners, for the release of poor debtors and on grain distribution. Other committee appointments concerned punishment of ‘rogues and sturdy beggars’, the haunting of inns and regulation of alehouses.

As a lawyer, Hext was regularly called on to evaluate Parliamentary bills on legal issues. He was a member of several legislative committees concerning laws to protect the rights of farmers and landowners, and punishment of rural crimes, as well as diverse matters such as preventing frivolous lawsuits and limiting the number of attorneys in the Westminster courts.

The first constitutional crisis of Hext’s second Parliament arose over the Buckinghamshire election, when Sir Francis Goodwin – who had been declared an outlaw for refusing to comply with a court order

concerning his debts – was elected to Parliament. By convention, outlaws had been banned from the Commons, but Parliament ordered Goodwin to take his seat. The King intervened to oppose the order, saying that such privileges of Parliament had been granted by the grace of the monarch. Hext initially supported the King in requesting a conference of the Commons and the judiciary, to decide who determined electoral returns, but was subsequently appointed to help draft the Commons argument for refusing to admit the alternative candidate. A compromise solution was found, but from this date the Commons gained the authority to determine membership, even when it conflicted with the King's views. Hext later opposed a bill to disqualify outlaws from sitting.

In 1610 the Chancellor, Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, introduced a plan called the Great Contract, in an attempt to increase Crown income and remove debt. The plan proposed that, in return for an annual grant of £200,000, the King should give up a number of his feudal rights. This included purveyance, the right to command purchase of provisions for the royal household and army, supervised by the King's own purveyors. Hext was appointed to present a Commons petition against purveyance, which was subject to widespread corruption. The Chancellor's plan was eventually rejected by both the King and Parliament.

Hext was no admirer of the current Anglican establishment. Nominated to attend a conference with the Lords on ecclesiastical government, he proposed that church laws be examined, and supported a petition to grant dispensations to clergy who were opposed to the full Anglican ceremonial. He also served on committees for legislation to prevent non-residence of clergy and the selling of ecclesiastical offices, and to regulate ecclesiastical courts.

Five days after the discovery of the Catholic 'Gunpowder Plot' on 4 November 1605, Hext moved that "Mr Speaker should make manifest the thankfulness of the House to God for [the King's] safe deliverance" and declare that MPs should be ready with "the uttermost drop of their blood" to defend the true Anglican religion. The following year, he was nominated to recommend a strategy for "proceeding against

Jesuits, seminaries and all other Popish agents and practitioners" and supported legislation which made them swear an oath of loyalty to the King and deny the power of the Pope. In public, at least, he was no supporter of Catholics.

In 1596 Hext was elected treasurer for the collections of relief for maimed soldiers in Somerset. He pursued his concern for ex-soldiers and mariners, serving on two related committees during his first term as MP for Taunton.

## Religious Sympathies

Edward Hext lived through some of the worst upheavals of the English Reformation – the final years of Henry VIII (who had established the Church of England in 1534), Puritan fervour under Edward VI (1547–1553), the return to Catholicism imposed by Mary I (1553–1558), and the constant threat of Catholic invasions and plots during the subsequent reigns of Elizabeth I and James I.

When Hext was born, Henry VIII's Protestant Reformation had been steadily evolving and the reform of church doctrine and ritual was well underway. Shrines, images of saints and votive candles had all vanished, monasteries and pilgrimages were banned, a Bible in English had been placed in every church and Mass was said in English. The King was the Supreme Head of the established Church of England, promoting the concept of the divine right of kings in opposition to supreme papal authority.

During Hext's early childhood the Reformation gathered pace following the accession of Edward VI. Within a year church processions were banned, chantries abolished, and a wave of iconoclasm began – the interior of churches were whitewashed and stained glass, statues and roods (crucifixion scenes on rood screens) were defaced or destroyed, and altars were replaced by communion tables. In 1549 all Latin prayers and liturgy were replaced by the Book of Common Prayer in English, representing a fundamental change in traditional church worship.

In the traditionalist West Country where a significant proportion of the population remained Catholic, especially in rural areas, this was a catalyst for a series of uprisings. Those who rejected the reformed church faced prosecution and punishment. Heretics thought likely for conversion were subjected to imprisonment under harsh conditions, forced to undergo public penance, fined and had their property confiscated. Those who persisted in their rejection, effectively denying royal supremacy over the church, were convicted of high treason which carried an automatic sentence of death. Across the country thousands of citizens were executed. After the death of Edward VI in 1553 the country briefly returned to Catholicism under Queen Mary I, known as Bloody Mary for her persecution of Protestants, in a vain attempt to restore Catholicism in England during which hundreds were executed. On her death in 1558 she was succeeded by Elizabeth I, the last Tudor monarch, who restored England to Protestantism.

Understanding the threat of a Catholic crusade against heretical England, Elizabeth and her advisors sought to establish a Protestant church that was mildly tolerant of Catholicism, for which she took the title of Supreme Governor of the Church of England. A new Act of Uniformity in 1559 made attendance at church and the use of the Book of Common Prayer compulsory, although the penalties for recusancy (failure to attend) were relatively mild. Countrywide the Reformation continued to cause considerable disturbance to social, economic, and political affairs, inflaming religious tensions by the prosecution of Catholics and dissenting Protestants which continued throughout Elizabeth's reign.

Although no supporting evidence has been found, it seems most likely that the Hext family would originally have held traditional Catholic beliefs. Like many during this turbulent period they may have discretely changed their religious practice to align with that of the reigning monarch, in order to protect their position and preserve their wealth, or even to survive. When Edward was born, England had already been a Protestant country for twelve years and a change in his parents' religion would have resulted in him receiving a protestant eduction during his formative years. When he reached adulthood he

already appeared to exhibit moderate Anglican sympathies, and he lived the rest of his life as a subject of two successive Protestant monarchs.

By the time Hext attended the Middle Temple as a 23 year old law student in 1568, it was the 10th year of Elizabeth's long reign, but Catholic plots remained a danger. Some telling details are recorded from Hext's time as a student. In 1571 he shared his chambers with Robert Snagge who was MP for Lostwithiel in Cornwall and a champion of the Puritan cause in Parliament. At about this time Hext was paid to spy on fellow student Lawrence Banester, a suspected Papist and servant of the Catholic Duke of Norfolk, in order to discover evidence of the Duke's involvement in the 1569 Rising of the North, which intended to place Mary Stuart on the English throne.

Further glimpses of Hext's religious views come from his Parliamentary record more than 30 years later. In 1604 he was appointed to attend a conference with the Lords on ecclesiastical government. He was evidently no admirer of the Church establishment, because he proposed "that the bishops' canons might be looked into, by which the subject is sued and much grieved." He also backed a petition to grant dispensations to clergy who were opposed to full Anglican ceremonial. He was opposed to established, but abused, practices such as the selling of church offices and non-residence of incumbent clergy. There is the impression that Hext the MP had little sympathy with High Church Anglicanism.

The Gunpowder Plot by English Catholics to blow up King James when he attended the House of Lords was discovered on 4 November 1605, and Hext was among those who recorded his thanks to God for the King's deliverance. Soon afterwards, he helped to formulate a strategy for "proceeding against Jesuits, seminaries, and all other Popish agents and practisers." He supported the persecution of those accused of attending Mass, which he described as "so high a fault."

The evidence of his youth and maturity, extremely limited though it is, suggests opposition to Catholicism and High Church Anglicanism alike, and some association with Puritans. A final piece of evidence

comes from the family chapel that Hext built in Low Ham, in the final four years of his life. The strictly Gothic architecture of the church, the Gothic chancel screen and the altar at the east end of the chancel are all echoes of pre-Reformation churches and, at the least, seem to imply a traditional Anglicanism. There is no hint of Puritan beliefs in this building.

Hext's private family chapel appears to stand as a deeply personal statement of a traditional faith.

## Later Life

From the autumn of 1609 Hext began to suffer periods of quite severe illness, causing him to resign from Parliament early in 1610. Frequently unable to travel he became increasingly involved in local and personal affairs, although he continued to serve as a JP. By now his estates included the Manors of Somerton, Low Ham, High Ham and Aller, amounting to a total of about 4,500 acres and requiring significant administrative attention.

At this time Hext became closely involved in the execution of the will of Nicholas Wadham. Hext was a close friend of Nicholas and Dorothy Wadham who lived at Merifield, near Ilminster. They had no children and Nicholas, one of the wealthiest men in England, intended that a large part of his wealth should be used to found an Anglican college at Oxford. Nicholas had entrusted his wife Dorothy with the task of carrying out his plan, which he had shared with close friends and associates, including Hext. His Will appointed his wife Dorothy as his sole executrix and Hext and Lord Petre, Dorothy's half-brother, as overseers of the Will. It specified a bequest for an elaborate funeral and burial in the church of St Mary at Ilminster, but made no mention of founding a college. Instead it empowered Dorothy to sell certain of Nicholas' properties *"and ymploy such of the sommes of money to be made of the same sales, to such uses and purposes as I have requested her and she hath assented thereunto according to my mind and true intent therein".*

A few days before his death Nicholas was visited by Sir John Davis, a man of poor character who had been involved in a rebellion against Queen Elizabeth. Davis somehow persuaded Nicholas to sign a deed which made him a co-trustee of Nicholas' legacy and proposed diverting some of the money for the benefit of existing colleges. Davis subsequently started a campaign of false and slanderous claims that Dorothy was misusing the legacy and delaying the implementation of Nicholas' wishes, and claiming that he was now the senior trustee. It quickly became clear that the disputes over the trusts governing Nicholas' legacies could only be resolved in a court of law.

Hext assisted Dorothy in disproving Davis' allegations and slanders and a case concerning the dispute was heard in the Court of Chancery on 27th June 1610. Hext had retained Sir Edward Phelips, lawyer and speaker of the House of Commons, as counsel for Dorothy having previously paid his fee of £12. The verdict of the hearings recorded that "all witnesses were ready and willing to perform any trust in them concerning the erection and foundation of a college in Oxford when it shall be erected and founded in according to the true intent and meaning of Nicholas Wadham". It also recorded Dorothy's unwillingness that Sir John Davis "should have any meddling with the erection of the college".

Ignoring the legal problems Hext, Lord Petre and Bishop Montague (a close associate of King James) had already drawn up an agreement outlining a plan of how the building of the college should proceed. Dorothy had chosen as her architect, William Arnold, to whom Hext had paid £5 to prepare preliminary designs, writing to Lord Petre: "If I had not tied him fast in this business we should hardly keep him". Hext, in London, lobbied his contacts in Parliament and at Court and the King's approval of the plans was obtained. Hext rode to Oxford bearing letters from the King, the Lord Chancellor and the Archbishop of Canterbury in support of the project and requesting a reasonable price for the proposed building site.

Hext examined the site, describing it in some detail in a letter to Lord Petre, noting its facilities and value and recommending its purchase which was completed on 29th May 1610. Once the legal disputes

regarding the trust were settled, work on the college proceeded quickly. Hext involved himself in procuring building materials, in negotiations with the Lord Treasurer for timber from the royal forests and assisting in arrangements for the opening of a stone quarry in Oxford. He subsequently excused himself from further involvement as he was seriously ill, having already made a significant contribution towards the creation of the new college. Wadham, known as the Somerset College, was constituted and admitted to the University of Oxford on 3rd April 1613.

The late 16th and early17th centuries were times of economic depression for Somerton and in 1615 Hext outlined plans to increase its prosperity. He purchased a weekly market for the town and built a Market House, for the sale of corn downstairs and wool and yarn above. His plans included redevelopment of the market area and Buttercross which were later implemented by his grandson, Sir Thomas Stawell.

Hext had been concerned with the relief of poverty throughout his professional career and, shortly before his death, he began building an almshouse in Somerton. His widow, Dionis, saw this project to completion in 1626.

During his final years Hext created his church, a building extremely unusual in the purity of its Perpendicular design. He oversaw the construction of his tomb as a recreation of a late Mediaeval tomb chest, with a recumbent effigy of himself in armour of about 1580, his head resting on a plumed helmet and feet on a lifelike hound, in the manner of a Mediaeval knight.

# LOW HAM CHURCH

## An Earlier Church in Low Ham

In 965 King Edgar gave the manor of Hame (High Ham and Netherham) to the Abbot of Glastonbury. At that time there would have been a Saxon church at High Ham, and one may also have existed at Netherham although there is no evidence of this. In 1316 the Register of Bishop John de Drokensford (Bishop of Bath and Wells 1309–1329) records the revoking of the Grant of a Chantry to John de Burcy "in the Chapel of Netherham." A memoir by Adrian Schaell, Rector of High Ham, written in 1598, describes the existence of "a chapple at Netherham (Low Ham) being encompassed with no churchyard, narrow obscure and renowned with no ancient monuments." The original chapel could have been built by Serlo de Burci, a Norman knight who participated in the invasion by William the Conqueror in 1066, and received extensive lands as his reward, including the manor of Netherham. Hext's church was probably built over the foundations of the Norman chapel.

## The Building of Hext's Church

The present church was originally built as the private chapel of the Hext family, but no contemporary record of its construction has been found. The building material is local Blue Lias limestone, with Ham stone dressings. It is generally considered to have been built in about 1620, but historical evidence can circumscribe the date more precisely. The church had not been built before the 9th December 1617, the date of the marriage of Hext's only child Elizabeth to Sir John Stawell. The marriage ceremony is recorded in the High Ham parish register as having been performed in St Andrew's, High Ham. If

Hext's chapel had existed at this date, he surely would have arranged for his daughter's marriage to be held there. The church had evidently been built by 10th November 1623, the date of Hext's Will, which states that he was "to be buried in the North Isle of the Chapple of Netherham under a tomb which I have caused to be made there".

A deed of endowment of 1622 directs the rent and profit of 21 acres of Hext's lands to be paid for a minister to preach one sermon in the church at the fore-noon of each Sabbath day. For each failure to do so 10 shillings were to be deducted and given to the overseers for the poor.

The church is generally considered to have been built 'all of a piece', unlike the majority of parish churches. It was not, as some accounts claim, rebuilt by Sir George Stawell (Hext's grandson) between 1660 and 1690. Stawell did make some changes in 1663 to 1669, and

possibly repaired damage that the building may have suffered during the Civil War.

Building was carried out very late in the Gothic period when Renaissance architecture, originating in Italy, had already become the prevailing style in Europe. The Renaissance also introduced the profession of architect, schooled in the art and science of building, who worked out a detailed design on paper before transmitting the drawings as instructions to the builder.

England at this time still preserved the medieval practice of constructing buildings under the supervision of a master craftsman, either a master mason or a carpenter. Generally described as the 'head workman' or 'architect mason' he was in fact the architect, also responsible for supervising all aspects of the building work, sometimes participating in the work himself. After laying out the building plan on the ground, the design of a building was developed during the building process under the detailed instruction of the architect mason, who sometimes provided drawings as a visual aid to support his verbal instructions.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that the Somerset architect-mason William Arnold may have been involved in the design of the church. Arnold's first known commission was for the design of Montacute House in 1598. Other known works of his include the rebuilding of Cranborne Manor, the design and building of Wadham College Oxford, and the remodelling of Dunster Castle. Arnold's possible involvement in the building of Hext's chapel is suggested by the fact that he was a local man, professionally active between 1595 and 1637, and his architectural style was largely Gothic. He was also known for introducing classical features with mannerist details, derived from his knowledge of contemporary architectural publications from the Low Countries.

Hext clearly admired Arnold, writing to Lord Petre in 1609: "He is so wonderfully sought after being indeed the absolutest and honestest workman in England." Hext personally paid him £5 in 1610 to draw up the initial plans for Wadham College. Nevertheless, other arguments

indicate that Arnold's involvement could not have been close. Surveys of the building have shown that its construction is not to the standard achieved elsewhere by Arnold's team of masons, suggesting that the chapel was built by others. Furthermore, the style of the church lacks the flair and originality characteristic of Arnold's best work. An alternative candidate suggested for the designer and/or builder is John Spicer, a Freemason who worked with Arnold at Wadham College, although he lacked the experience of Arnold as an architect.

## The Architecture

From the late 12th until the early 16th century, all churches built in northwest Europe were in the style that has become known as 'Gothic'. This term was first used in the sense of 'barbaric', in contrast to the Classical style based on the temples of ancient Greece and Rome, which was then judged to be 'civilised'. Gothic architecture is now recognised as one of the most sublime expressions of the striving of the human spirit for the divine.

Above all, the Gothic style is characterised by the pointed arch, which is repeated in windows, doorways, arcades and vaulted ceilings. These features first appeared in France in 1140. In England, the Gothic has been classified into three successive phases: Early English, with simple, narrow windows called lancets; Decorated, with larger windows, partly filled with elaborate stonework tracery; and Perpendicular, late Gothic with flattened arches and emphasis on horizontal and vertical lines in tracery and mouldings. Perpendicular is the first uniquely English architectural style, unknown in Europe. Among the finest examples of parish churches in this style are the many 15th century churches of Somerset, with their much-admired square towers at the west end of the building.

Although the peak of Perpendicular Gothic church-building was the 15th century, the style never entirely died out and was still favoured by the Elizabethans. However, through the later 16th and early 17th centuries, Classical motifs such as columns and pediments became common within basically Gothic churches. Hext's church is extremely

unusual in the relative purity of its Perpendicular design. It has been aptly described as “an almost archaeological reconstruction of a Perpendicular church of the late 15th century,” showing all the typical elements of nave with western square tower, side aisles with clerestory windows above, battlemented parapets, and separate chancel.

The architect, possibly William Arnold, showed some freedom in the unusually short and high nave and especially in the window tracery, which demonstrates the influence of other architectural styles. This is especially notable in the east window, with its elaborate circular stellar tracery in a hollowed almost semi-circular arched recess.

In the church there is a chancel screen, as would have been present in all pre-Reformation churches. There is no trace whatsoever of Classical motifs within the church (except in bench-ends and pulpit; while these are Jacobean, they were installed from churches elsewhere).

*The east window*

## The Communion Table

The communion table, which takes the place of an altar, is a simple, portable, wooden table with well turned legs. It is Jacobean in style and contemporary with the church, but has a top which was added much later. This was probably part of the substantial refurbishment undertaken between 1883 and 1889 by Sir Charles Wathen, former Lord of the Manor. This included raising the chancel floor and

installing the communion rail, reredos, and panelling. Charles Wathen also had the East Window re-leaded and installed the chancel stained glass side windows, pulpit, stone screen, font and the clock.

## Hext's Tomb

The tomb of Sir Edward Hext and his second wife, Dionis, in the northeast corner of the church, is one of its most notable objects. The tomb was installed at around the time that the church was built, since Hext's Will of 1623 records his desire "to be buried in the North Isle of the Chapel of Netherham, under a tomb which I have caused to be made there". Its form is that of a Mediaeval tomb chest, surmounted by recumbent effigies of the armoured knight and his lady, with his head resting on a plumed helmet and his feet resting on a hound. This design, and the Elizabethan clothing and armour, are remarkably old-fashioned for the Jacobean period. Interestingly, Hext is portrayed wearing armour of the period when he would have been expecting to face the Spanish invasion (1580). The armour is shown in extraordinary detail.

The base of the tomb is unfinished, since it bears no inscription. The plaque on the wall behind the tomb appears to have been intended (or originally installed) as a floor slab. The iron railings are original and must have contributed to the almost perfect preservation of the sculpture. The quality of the carving is superlative and worthy of a far richer and more eminent couple. The sculptor is unknown.

## The Stawell Monument

On the east wall of the south aisle is a monument to Ralph, 1st Lord Stawell (who was buried in the church) which incorporates a memorial to John, 2nd Lord Stawell. Attributed to William Stanton, it is finely carved in white marble and slate. White curtains looped on Corinthian columns open to reveal the main inscription on a black background with heraldry in the carved pediment and a military trophy below. On the base, putti lift a drape from the second inscription.

## The Screens

In most late-Mediaeval (14th–17th century) English churches a decorative screen of wood or stone separated the chancel (the easternmost space containing altar and choir) from the nave. Its upper parts were of decorative latticework – allowing the congregation a view of the sacred space beyond. The screen at Low Ham was an integral part of Hext's original church, but the paintwork, texts and angels were added by his grandson George Stawell.

Like the rest of the church, the chancel screen is in a simplified late Gothic (Perpendicular) style. It is surmounted by an elaborate cornice, resembling a miniature rood loft, although neither rood nor loft are present. The upper part of the cornice was gilded. Hext's screen was otherwise undecorated, but his grandson George Stawell added angels,

biblical texts and the polychrome paint of the cornice. The angels' features show individual variation, leading to a suggestion that the faces may have been modelled on members of the Stawell family or on others known to the craftsmen.

The text on the west side of the cornice is a Stuart favourite and an appropriate testament to the Royalist allegiance of the Stawell family: "My sonne feare God and the Kinge and meddle not with them that are given to change" (Proverbs 24: 21). On the east side, the inscription reads: "Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone that beleeveth" (Romans 10: 4).

The painted stone screen at the other end of the church, under the tower, is also in Gothic style, carved in Caen stone by Thomas Clarke in 1823. It was removed from the Lord Mayor's Chapel, Bristol, and installed at Low Ham as part of the refurbishment by Charles Wathen, who was Mayor of Bristol. Adjacent to this stone screen is an octagonal stone font. It is decorated with relief panels on each face and dates from the late 19th century.

## The Coat of Arms


On the east wall of the north aisle hangs the coat of arms of Charles II, probably placed in the church during its embellishment by George Stawell. The paint layers on the polychrome sections of the chancel screen correspond with those on the royal coat of arms, providing strong evidence that the colouring, inscriptions and angels on the screen were likewise added by George Stawell.

During recent conservation work, it was discovered that the coat of arms bears a text on the reverse, suggesting that it was originally intended to be

seen from both sides. The text reads: “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: Whether it be to the King as Supreme” (1 Peter 2: 13). This emphasises Stawell’s support for the king and for the role of the monarch as head of the Church of England.

In some churches the royal coat of arms was sited in a prominent position on the top of the chancel screen. Edmund Rack’s record of Hext’s church in the 1780’s describes “An elegant Gothic screen richly carved and gilded, with the King’s arms cut in wood above it”.

## The Pulpit

The Pulpit, which is contemporary with the church, is of carved and painted oak with gilt enhancements. Originally from the church of St Peter and St Paul in Muchelney it was exchanged for a pulpit which had been removed by Charles Wathen from the Mayor’s chapel in Bristol together with the stone screen now installed at the entrance to the church.

## The Pews

The pews on each side of the centre aisle are contemporary with the church and were probably the only seating installed when the church was built. Some of the pew ends still carry the original applied carved decoration of two columns surmounted by an arched capital. These pews show evidence of later alteration; the seats having been widened,

the seat backs repositioned and the wooden sill plates joining the pew rows replaced.

The pews in the north and south aisles are a later addition, possibly by Ralph Stawell when he was Lord of the Manor, and the church had been opened to the local population as shown on a seating plan of 1677.

## The Clock

A church clock mounted in a tower is known as a turret clock and is one of the earliest types of clock. In 12th century Europe, towns and monasteries began building clocks in high towers to strike bells to call the community to prayer. These public clocks played an important role in regulating the timekeeping of people's daily lives. The clock at Low Ham is Victorian, but there was probably a church clock as early as the 1660's and perhaps before.

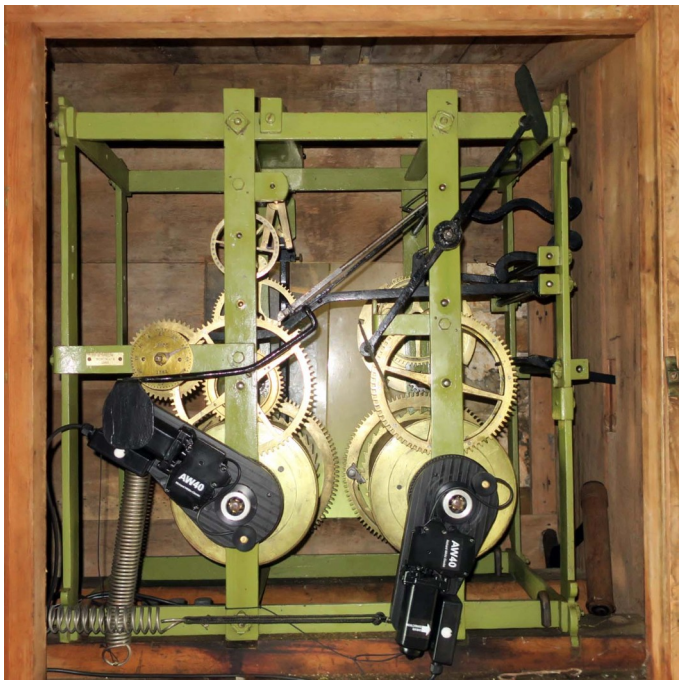
It is not known whether Low Ham church had a clock installed when it was built. One was certainly installed later, which was reputed to have "a six foot pendulum which swung out from the wall." This suggests that it had a verge escapement and may have been made around 1660. No other details of it exist and it was replaced by the existing clock as part of Charles Wathen's refurbishment of the church in 1889.

The present clock was made by Isaac Dell of Bristol in 1881 to a rather old-fashioned design, technically known as a 'two train side by side birdcage movement.' Dell Brothers were well known clockmakers and precision engineers, who showed examples of their work at the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace, London, in 1851.

The clock has two sets of gears, called 'trains'. Each train was originally powered by a weight, on the end of a steel line wound around a metal barrel in the clock. As the weight fell by gravity, it pulled the line, unwinding it and turning the barrel. Each barrel has attached to it a large gear wheel, known as the great wheel, which as it turns drives a train of gears. The first train, called the going train, drives the clock to tell the time. The second train operates a mechanism which strikes the hours on a bell. Each of the clock barrels

turns on an axle which has a protruding square end to which a winding handle can be attached to wind the weights up by hand.

To avoid the arduous weekly rewinding of the weights it was decided in 2015 to install an electrically powered automatic winding system. Several different types of system were available, from which a system known as remontoire, based on the application of a smooth constant source of power, was chosen. At the time this was fairly unusual for a turret clock.




The installation of the system involved the removal of the driving weights and cables from the clock, and their careful storage so that in future they could be reinstalled to restore the clock to its original condition, if required. Specially designed weighted arms, incorporating electric motors, were clamped to the winding squares of the clock in a manner that required no changes to the original mechanism.

In operation each arm starts from a near vertical position and slowly falls under its own weight, turning the drum and driving the clock. When it approaches its lowest position a limit switch is activated which turns on the electric motor and returns the arm to its starting position. This simple and reliable system has successfully powered the church clock since 2019. Its installation was managed and funded by the Church in the Field Charitable Association.

## The Bells

The tower houses two Mediaeval bells. These may have come from the earlier church on the site and been preserved by Hext in his rebuilding

of the church. They remain in use today. Following Mediaeval Christian practice, the bells were named according to their purpose.

The Angelus bell, the larger of the two, is inscribed ‘Angelus Michael Maria Gabriel’. It also bears an eagle stamp similar to that on bells at Charlton Musgrove and Closworth in Somerset, and other bells in Wiltshire and Dorset, which were made by a Salisbury founder. It is dated about 1500 or earlier. The bell’s inscription is somewhat unusual in that it replaces the name of Raphael, in the conventional naming of the three principal archangels, with that of Mary. The Sancta Maria bell carries the inscription ‘Sancta Maria Hora pro Nobis’ (‘Hora’ was a misunderstanding by the founder for ‘Ora’). The bell bears the same stylised cross mark and the same lettering as a bell at Wraxall in Dorset, with the name of the founder Thomas Hey, possibly of Sherbourne. Its date is thought to be before 1350. Both bells of Hext’s church date from before the Reformation.

The name of the Angelus bell is a reminder of the early Catholic practice of praying upon rising in the morning and again at the end of the day, summoned by a particular pattern of ringing the Angelus bell. Following the Conquest, the Normans introduced a curfew when the populace were required to extinguish all fires, vacate the streets and return to their homes. After the curfew was abandoned, a bell continued to be rung at the end of each day and was still commonly known as the curfew bell. The Angelus bell was also known in some areas as the ‘Ave’ or ‘Gabriel’ bell. The Sancta Maria bell again reflects Catholic prayer in its name and inscription, referring to the Litany of the Saints with its inscribed invocation ‘Holy Mary pray for us.’

## The Church Plate

This consists of four pieces: chalice, paten, flagon and dish. These were donated between 1665 and 1669 by Sir George and Sir Ralph Stawell (sometimes ‘Stawel’), grandsons of Sir Edward Hext, and respectively the second and third sons of the founder’s son-in-law, Sir John Stawell. George Stawell embellished the chapel and had it consecrated in 1669. Both George and his younger brother Ralph

succeeded to the title of Lord of the Manor of Low Ham. All the plate was later regilded by Charles Wathen. The Communion cup is large and plain. Among the assay and maker's marks is a Gothic 'F', indicating manufacture in 1663. The inscription on the bowl reads: "Sacelli Low Ham in Comitatu Somerset – Ex dono Radolphi Stawell Armigeri – 1665" [Of the chapel of Low Ham in the county of Somerset, by the gift of Ralph Stawell, Knight]. The paten (dish for wafers) bears the same inscription, but a date letter for 1664.The markings on the flagon are the same as those on the paten, with the date letter G, for 1664. The inscription reads: "Sacelli Low Ham in Comitatu Somerset – Ex dono Georgii Stawell Armigeri – 1665", recording it as the gift of Sir George Stawell, the second son of Sir John Stawell. The dish is inscribed only with the date 1669, and carries the same maker's mark as seen on the other items.

The plate is now kept in secure storage, elsewhere.

## Saving the plate

There is a traditional local story of how the east window saved the church plate. In 1921 the Low Ham estate, after being advertised for sale for several years, received an offer to buy just the church which at that time was still a private chapel. The potential buyer claimed that ownership would entitle him to all the chattels in the chapel, including the church plate which he apparently considered to be of great intrinsic value.

The rector of High Ham and his wife, campaigning to preserve the plate, consulted the Church authorities in Wells. The Bishop confirmed that the plate belonged to the Church only if satisfactory proof of the building's consecration could be produced. Unfortunately, none could then be found. (Rack's notes, recording the lost window inscription, were acquired by the owner of a private archive soon after Rack's death in the 1790's. The archive, including Rack's notes, apparently remained undiscovered or inaccessible to the public until it was purchased by the Bristol Record Office in 1947.)

One day after the meeting with the Bishop, following a service in the church, the rector's wife was offered an old paper found at Netherham Farm, on which was a handwritten note of an English translation of the Latin window inscription recording the consecration. This was subsequently demonstrated to have been written by the Rev. Joseph Shaw, a former rector of High Ham, and provided the crucial evidence that saved the plate by proving that it was the legal property of the Church.

*

Recent restoration of the church was completed by the Churches Conservation Trust in 2018. Conservation of the rood screen, Stawell monument and Coat of Arms has subsequently been undertaken, funded by the Church-in-the-Field Charitable Association. Further details can be found in the church.

Research by John Head, Patricia Richards and David Reid.

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