

The Story of St Helens Old Church

The tower is all that remains of the old church of St Helens

St Helens Church tower stands just off of National Trust land, and is an intriguing sight, located where the sea meets the land. It's the last remaining part of the ancient church that once stood here, and now serves as a marker for those at sea.

The first church at St Helens, or 'Etharin' as we think it was then known, was built on the Duver in Saxon times by Hildila who was Chaplain to Wilfred, Bishop of Chichester.

The wooden church

Wilfred had been granted land on the Isle of Wight by Caedwalla the Saxon king, who took the Island by force in AD686.

The simple wooden church with its views over to Chichester was built following Wilfred's visit to the Island in AD704 and is believed to have survived until it was burnt down by the marauding Danes in AD998.

Founding the priory

A priory at St Helens was founded after the Norman Conquest by French Benedictine monks. The church was rebuilt in Norman style to serve both parish and priory. It was dedicated to St Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, from whom the village subsequently took its name. The tower was added in the 13th century during the reign of Henry III.

The Old Church in decline

The Benedictine community in St Helens survived for over 300 years until financial problems led to it disbanding in 1414. The property was given to Eton College who owned it until 1799 but failed to maintain it, so the church gradually fell into disrepair.

Old Church St Helens has been used as a white sea mark for hundreds of years



Its exposed position became even more acute in the 1620s when Sir Hugh Myddleton built an embankment across the harbour from the duver (dunes). Limestone rocks making up the foreshore had protected the church but were now used in the construction of the new embankment, which only lasted eight years.

Dismantling the church

In the 1630s, the sea defences were further undermined by the tenant of the priory, who sold off the church stones.

A dispute arose with his parishioners, but it's likely that they too were removing stones for their own purposes.

Blocks of soft sandstone from which the church was built – known as 'Holy Stones' - were used by sailors of vessels anchored off St Helens to 'holystone the decks' - meaning to scour and whiten them.

As a result, the church was left jutting out on a peninsula, washed on three sides by the sea. Eventually only the tower remained, and this was subsequently bricked up and painted white as a seamark for Navy ships in 1719. It fulfils this purpose today and is associated with the high-level seamark on Ashey Down erected 16 years later. A new church for St Helens was built further inland in the 18th century.

Source: National Trust.