

# St Thomas à Becket Chapel

## History

**B**ishop Brantingham's Register records that in 1377 a licence was granted by the Bishop to Richard Juyl "to have divine offices celebrated in his presence by a duly qualified priest in the chapel of St Thomas the Martyr". St Thomas' was one of several chantry chapels supported by church guilds within Bodmin. During the reign of Edward VI the idea of Purgatory was denounced; chantries were dissolved and their endowments seized by the Crown. The adjacent parish church was one of two churches supported by St Petroc's Priory; the Priory church was demolished during the Reformation in the 1530s (remains of this church are visible on the opposite side of the road).

### What is a chantry chapel?

Chantry chapels were used to offer prayers and to celebrate masses for the souls of the dead, in order to speed them through Purgatory to Heaven. Wealthier people frequently built their own chapels and paid for the services of a priest; others joined religious guilds to endow a chapel.

**A**fter the Reformation the former chapel was converted to a Grammar School (a list of schoolmasters employed here commenced in 1550) and remained so until the early 19th century. The undercroft remained in use as a charnel house for the parish church and was locally called the "Bonehouse" in the 18th century.

A National School for Girls took over the former chapel in 1833 and used the building for a further twenty years. Some repairs and alterations may have occurred during this time; tracery in a window head in the south wall was simplified and the original medieval tracery partially cut away for a Victorian replacement. In the mid-19th century the building appears to have fallen into disrepair and had lost its roof by about 1900.



*(Above)* A water-colour drawing made by John B Swete in 1780. The half-hipped roof at the western end is likely to be a post-medieval alteration. The windows appear to have been partially blocked up; note the tracery shown in the head of the west window.

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*(Below)* An engraving by James Ferguson, published by Sir John Maclean in 1873. Within a century the walls and roof of the chapel had become engulfed in vegetation. The windows in the south wall, shown partially blocked by Swete, contain simple Y pattern tracery, probably added when the building was in use as a school.

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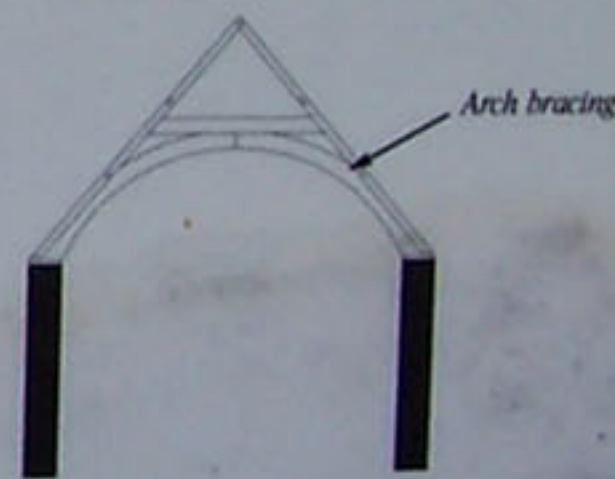


**R**e-use of the chapel after the Reformation has undoubtedly contributed to its survival into the modern period. A series of repair works undertaken during the 20th century has aimed to conserve the building for future generations.

## The Chapel

**T**he chapel retains a fine 14th century Decorated east window; this is a comparatively rare survival as many examples in Cornwall were replaced during expansion of churches in the 15th century. A finely moulded piscina (bowl for washing the communion vessels) is located in the south wall nearer the altar and next to it three seats, or sedilia, for the clergy. Small square holes lintelled with stones visible in the internal and external walls are putlog holes, used to support scaffolding beams when the chapel was built. When construction was completed these would have been infilled with rubble and plastered over. The holes seen today have become re-exposed through erosion of the masonry.

The chapel itself is built above a crypt or undercroft with a ribbed (vaulted) roof. This area is accessed from a doorway below the chapel porch and is lit by small openings at ground level on the south side. Early illustrations show the chapel had a roof covering of slates. The apex of the east gable, above the altar, probably once supported a finial cross. It is likely that the roof structure comprised principal roof trusses with arch-braced timbers, the usual pattern found in Cornish churches.



*(Above)* A section through the chapel showing a reconstruction of the roof timbers.

The chapel is now in the care of the Diocese of Truro. Repairs to the building have been grant assisted by English Heritage.



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