

## St Helen's Church



Welcome to St Helen's Church. We are part of the parish and under the stewardship of All Saints Worcester.

Believed to be the oldest church in Worcester, and the mother church of Worcester since Saxon times, Christians have worshipped at the site of St Helen's for around 1300 years, although the oldest parts of the current building date back to 1288AD.

Today the church hosts Sunday morning Adventurers, our children's church, and our evening worship gatherings. It is at the heart of our mission for community outreach in the city, and is available as a venue for hire. It has hosted previous Three Choirs events, heritage and civic days, lectures and conferences.

St. Helen's is historically significant and holds a special place amongst the parish churches of Worcester. Sources suggest that it is an older Christian site than the Cathedral. Architecturally, it has seen many changes and additions over the centuries, including a major Victorian restoration and most recently a large scheme of works to bring it into modern use. It remains a good example of how the city churches of Worcester would have looked in the Middle Ages, as a number of the others were substantially rebuilt or altered in the Georgian era. It's Listed Grade II\*.

St Helen's has found new roles to play in the life of the city and its many visitors each year come from reasons connected with historical research, education and as a result of Christian outreach. St Helen's is a beautiful building with a very special atmosphere. The aim of this booklet is to explain some of its fascinating history.

## Origins

St Helen's is believed to be the oldest of Worcester's churches, pre-dating the cathedral which was created in 680. The Saxon period is one which is difficult to understand, with few written records and not much archaeological evidence. What we do know, however, is that shortly after the Norman conquest, in 1092, a synod (meeting) was held in the Cathedral crypt by Bishop (later Saint) Wulstan. One of the matters discussed was which was older, St Albans or St Helen's, brought by Aelnoth of St Helen's and his counterpart. Wise people were asked to look into the matter and found that St Helen's had been regarded as the mother church since the days of King Ethelred & Archbishop Theodore, so before 690, and by implication before the Cathedral.

Circumstantial evidence for the early date of St Helen's also comes from the size of the early parish. St Helen's parish covered 11 current parishes stretching from Knightswick and Martley in the west to Huddington in the east. This suggests that St Helen's was established before any other churches founded in these areas. It occupied an important site within Worcester on the High Street, whose layout was established in the Saxon period.

Another early reference to St Helen's is that in 969 St Helen's vicar Winsius joined the new Benedictine monastery as a monk and gave St Helen's and its income to the monastery.

There is the assumption that the site of St Helen's may even date back to Roman times. The church resides on the border of Roman defences. Additionally, the oldest churches that are named St Helen's are mostly done so to commemorate Helena, mother of emperor Constantine.

## Medieval St Helen's

St Helen's occupied an important space on the High Street. The medieval Worcester fair alternated between The Cross at the north end of the High Street and outside of St Helen's. The Parish of St Helen's was at one point the wealthiest in the medieval city and this is reflected in the size of the church and the lack of surviving oldest fabric due to repairs and reordering during that time.

When there were bells in the tower, they were used for city events and for the morning and evening curfews. The church was also responsible for the nearby lamps from All Hallows (November) until Candlemas (February).

Worcester had a number of destructive fires which would have badly affected the church building and neighbourhood, and after one fire in 1113 the vicar Fritheric donated all the tithes (income) for the rebuilding of St Helen's. These fires led to rules forbidding the use of thatch in Worcester in the city ordinances.

The parish was shrunk during the medieval period as Bishop Blois took most of the land outside Worcester and split it between himself and the Monastery.

The earliest surviving visible masonry in St Helen's dates back to 1288 and is in the north wall towards the east end. Evidence suggests it is linked to a chantry chapel paid for by Stephen Spagard in memory of his wife, where a priest would be paid to pray for her soul.

There are likely to have been four chapels at St Helen's with the others dedicated to St Erasmus, St Catherine and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Cupboards relating to these can be seen on either side of the existing altar area. The church would have probably been very brightly decorated at this point in history.

In 1450 major building work took place and much of what we can see today dates to this period, and may indicate what other local churches may have looked like in this time. Red sandstone from nearby Ombersley was used. A Norman doorway was found during the 1879 restoration but this cannot be seen now. The whole plot of land available was used to maximise space. Later maps indicate the presence of houses abutting half of the southern side as space would have been at a premium in this part of Worcester.

During this period a Psalter was created for use in St Helen's. An illustrated manuscript, it contained prayers, psalms and creeds in Latin for use in services, as well as key dates in the church calendar. St Helen's day was highlighted, as are local saints days such as Wulstan, Oswald and Gudwal of Bromsgrove, and the date of dedication of the Cathedral. It is well-thumbed showing its regular use in services, unlike some medieval books. Many of the prayers and creeds are still said at St Helen's 700 years later, although today these are said in English rather than Latin.

The manuscript is a rare survival of an early medieval parochial service book and is beautifully written and illustrated. It was taken to Exeter by the early 1400s, possibly during the rectorship of John de Beautre who was also a Canon of Exeter. It is now known as the Exeter Psalter and kept in the Cathedral archive.



(Manuscript, 13th cent.) Exeter Cathedral Library:  
D. & C. MS 3508. - Ker ii 814-6

## Tudors

The sixteenth century was a period of great upheaval in England and this would have affected St Helen's. We get a glimpse of this when the then Vicar of St Helen's, Richard Hall, was made to do penance by the Bishop for superstitiously ringing the bells for a man's soul. As times changed the vicars and congregation may have struggled to keep up with the latest instructions.

An inventory at the time shows that St Helen's had fewer treasures than other churches, although it was still considered a wealthy church. Under Henry VII each church was instructed to keep parish registers; records of baptisms, marriages and burials. In them we see thousands of ordinary people from the local community who came and used St Helen's for these important life events.

Pews and chairs may be the norm in churches today but the first in St Helen's only came in 1519 when they were introduced for the old and the infirm. As preaching became more common in churches more seating was added and by 1636 we have a seating plan surviving in the archives. Money was left for sermons to be preached regularly and these took prominence instead of Mass. Pew rates were charged and they ranged from 5s to 10s (between £22 and £44 in today's money) although free seats were available for the poor in the Tower. The money gained in pew rates was used for the upkeep of St Helen's and also to help the poor.

During this period, two vicars of St Helen's went on to become Bishop of Gloucester.

Queen Elizabeth I is thought to have travelled to Worcester on horseback for her visit on August 13, 1575. She was met in Foregate Street by bailiffs and city fathers. The Queen was listening to speeches on a platform by the east end of St Helen's Church on Fish Street when it began to rain. She called for her cloak and hat and stayed to the end, despite the bad weather. Queen Elizabeth stayed in The Bishop's Palace for a further six days, almost bankrupting the city with the costs of accommodation and food for the royal party.

## Civil War

The Civil War was a major event in Worcester's History. The first battle took place at Powick in 1642, with the final battle was here in 1651. During this time the city was besieged and changed hands a number of times causing significant damage and hardship for residents.

The Vicar of St Helen's at the outbreak was Henry Hackett, who along with the Vicar of St Nicholas, was described by Charles I as 'very schismatical and seditious' preachers. It is said that Henry Hackett commanded a Parliamentary troop. He died in 1643 of natural causes and was buried in St Helen's.

Thomas Dennis replaced Hackett, who was later replaced by George Lawrence who the records say had preached since the surrender of Worcester in 1646. He was believed to be a chaplain with the Scottish part of the army and was described as a 'violent puritan and great admirer of the Scotch covenant'. He stayed a few years having a daughter baptized here.

Two characters on opposing sides from the parish were John Nash and Dud Dudley who fought over the same house, and have the largest monuments in the church. Nash was a former MP, mayor and magistrate who commanded a troop of horses for parliament. Dudley was an iron master from the Black Country, a son of Lord Dudley, he moved to Worcester and was married at St Helen's. He joined the Royalists and rose to General of Artillery, military engineers and supplier of munitions. Dudley was a fascinating character who was arrested for his part in a proposed uprising, escaped, was recaptured and sent to the Tower of London where he was sentenced to death but promptly escaped!

As Worcester was held in turn by each side, Nash or Dudley came to the fore. Nash's house, 8 New Street (which is a coffee shop today) was taken over by Dudley when the Royalists took charge, and retaken over by Nash when Parliament retook Worcester. At the Restoration of Charles II, Dudley petitioned the King to be allowed to stay in the house but was ignored and so he stayed in his house in Friar Street. The two men divided in life were buried in St Helen's just a few yards apart, with monuments to both set forever facing each other.

## Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Rebuilding

It took Worcester a great while to recover from the ravages of the Civil Wars, but by the eighteenth century it was more prosperous and many of the city churches were rebuilt and updated at this time.

St Helen's underwent repairs in 1718 when the East wall (facing the High Street) and part of the north wall were rebuilt and faced with limestone. Later in the century a graveyard was opened to the west of the church, and in 1790 the church was whitewashed which would have made it look very different from today.

It was a period of ups and downs for the church with problems for the building resulting in lots of renovation on a regular cycle. The upper part of the Tower was rebuilt in 1813-21 from existing masonry.

In 1836 major work took place inside: new pews were added, as was the gallery at the back, pulpit and organ. It was called 'unsightly' by a later architect and the pews were said to be very uncomfortable as they were too deep to sit on. A census of churches in 1851 recorded that there were seats for 634 people, an amazing number when you look around today, with attendances at morning and evening services at 160 each, with another 160 children attending Sunday school. The local parish at the time was suffering with overcrowding in the streets and courts off the High Street as Worcester's population grew rapidly and toilets shared by multiple houses led to insanitary conditions.

In 1855 the altar reredos area as we see it today was created at the front of the church. This featured an Alpha and Omega symbol and the words of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed which has been said in this site for centuries.

In 1879 despite the previous repairs and historic wealth and support, St Helen's church fell into a desperate state of repair. The roof was failing, and it reportedly had a musty smell, with damp, peeling plaster and ivy growing through the walls.



The graveyard closed as it was full, but burials still took place in the vaults below the church floor. When the vaults needed to be opened, the windows had to be left open for long periods because of the smell which led local residents to complain about the stench.

## The Victorian Restoration

In 1879 Sir George Aston Webb, architect of the restoration, described the ruinous state of the church... 'the pavement looks damp, the old north wall is green in parts where the water pours in ... the plaster ceilings are falling away in patches ...' The restoration of 1879 included the complete rebuilding of the south wall (uncovering a Norman doorway) and the addition of the front porch, the repair of the roofs, particularly of the aisles, and exposure of the old nave roof, the removal of the dormer windows from the nave, the removal of the gallery and the unblocking of the western arch to join the tower and nave areas, the re-flooring of the whole church 'which is full of vaults and graves' with a concrete base under new paving, installation of heating, renewal of seating, insertion of a screen to separate the chancel from the nave, removal of whitewash and plaster to reveal the stonework. The old doors onto the High Street were also sealed up. Soon afterwards the Church House on the curtilage behind the tower was built on the footprint of the old rectory.



## Twentieth Century

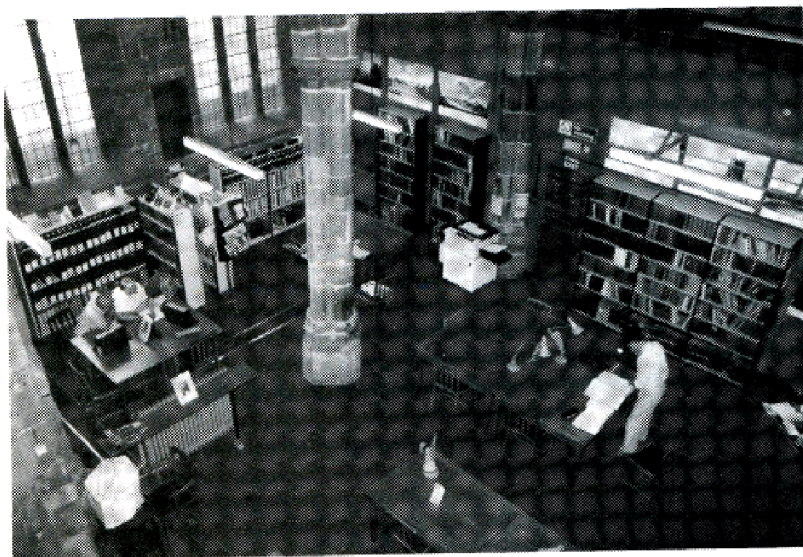
During the 1920's many houses in central Worcester and by the river were condemned as slums and demolished with residents moving to new housing outside of the city centre. St Michael's near the Cathedral closed and the futures of St Andrew's, St Albans and St Helen's were debated. In 1938 the decision was made to close St Helen's as a church and use it as a parish hall for All Saints.

An unforeseen new lease of life came in 1939 when war broke out and the Bishop of Worcester looked at what the most pressing need for the community was. It was said that the biggest social need was a soldiers club where they could come and eat and relax. Under the War Emergencies Act the conversion of St Helen's took place, with pews being removed and a canteen, toilets and billiard tables being added, paid for by the Church Council. The Mayor said that 'they rejoiced that the church was being used for such a good purpose, which was basically Christian'. The Vicar, Rev Buchanon Dunlop was delighted that there was a mix of play and religion in one building with both games and a chapel accommodated.



The club was managed by the YMCA and after the war ended they continued to run it as a centre, building a stage at one end. Many older Worcester residents have fond memories of coming in to use the facilities.

Another change came in 1957 when the church again changed hands and opened as a branch of the Worcestershire Record Office. They had recently been given the Diocesan archives to store and in return St Helen's building was given for use. Two miles of shelving were installed and for the next 40 years many people came in tracing their ancestors or researching local history. One of the archivists was Stella Rimmington who later became head of MI5.



In 2001 the Records Office moved out as the building was declared unsuitable to store historic records. Its stewardship reverted back to the Diocese, which passed it once again to become under the stewardship of All Saints Worcester.

## St Helen's Today

Since reverting back to the stewardship of All Saints Worcester after 2002, St Helen's has become the well-loved heart of the church community. Over the past two decades it has hosted weekly Sunday worship, children's and youth groups, regular community groups, concerts, civic events, weddings, funerals, parties and more. The community's vision for the church is for it to be a space for everyone, and to be accessible for the high street.

Despite its continuous use over the latter part of the twentieth century, the state of repair was never fully addressed and so had a long list of recurring items detailed in its quinquennial reports. It took a lot of vision and effort from the community of All Saints Worcester, but in 2017 St Helen's successfully won a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund for external stonework repairs. Due to costs, the project was unable to make a full repair of the stonework, but worked from the top down to repair the worst areas and to allow for better access for future projects.



In 2018 additional funds were secured through various sources including All Saints Worcester's becoming what is known as a Resourcing Church. The purpose of the project was to transform St Helen's into a modern multi-functional space, whilst complementing its rich heritage. The works completed in September 2023 and involved leveling the whole nave area and installing a new underfloor heating system along with beautiful stone floors. The toilets and kitchen pod that were installed next to the altar and chancel areas some 60 years previous were removed. A new kitchen servery was installed at the base of the tower, and a new extension to house new toilets was built next to the tower, reopening up a sealed doorway in the north-west corner. The church was rewired, and purpose built accessibility ramps were installed into the flooring for the church to be fully accessible to the public.



## The Building

As you look around the inside of St Helen's you can see evidence of 800 years of building and rebuilding and it has changed significantly over the years. The earliest church building was probably timber. By Norman times it would have been built in stone, although various fires would have destroyed or damaged the church in the twelfth century. It was said that a Norman doorway was found in 1880 but the earliest surviving stonework we can see and date is on the north wall, and relates to a chapel of 1288 which was one of four at the front. Most of the surviving church dates to a rebuilding of 1450 and at the time St Helen's may have been the wealthiest church in the city.

The appearance over the years has been greatly altered, with it likely the interior being very bright in medieval times, and at other times whitewashed, until that was removed to reveal the stonework in the 1880 renovation, which is what we see today.

Other than the most recent works from 2017-2023, the last major rebuilding was by Sir George Aston Webb in 1879-80 when the south wall was rebuilt, the interior arrangements of pews and choir stalls changed and the gallery by the tower removed.

The large east window is late Perpendicular with inserted post-medieval tracery by Preedy. Two windows in the south aisle are by Lavers, Baraud and Westlake in 1880. The window of 1884 commemorating Dr Nash, in the south aisle, is by Ward and Hughes.

You can see a variety of graffiti from the relatively recent period to the medieval. Mason's marks are present on the arcade (pillars) particularly on the east end of the south side. Other columns in the arcades have a variety of modern graffiti. The majority of the older graffiti is on the north wall and comprises some heraldic marks (one of which appears to have been converted into a cat at a later date). These form a small group close to the former doorway on the east wall. The porch also contains some modern graffiti, at least one inscription relating to the use of the church during WWII.

Outside the church building a Rectory stood behind the church. This was later knocked down and replaced by a school Church House which still stands today and is the Church Office. The present car park was originally a graveyard, although only had this function for just under a hundred years (between 1790 and 1888). The church was surrounded by railings, including on the High Street and although these were removed many years ago, signs of these can still be seen.

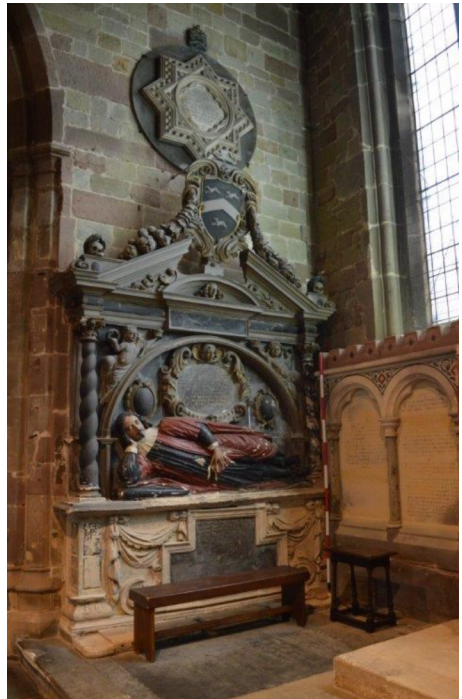
## Monuments

There are a number of monuments of note to people buried in St Helen's. These represent just a fraction of the many people of the parish who were buried here.

The monuments in the church were recorded by NADFAS in 1939 and in 2015. The monuments of John Nash and Dud Dudley are the most noticeable; John Nash's monument is at the front by the altar, it shows him reclining and dressed in his Alderman's robes.

He was a clothier, a key trader in the city and employed 8,000 people. As well as his Civil War connections he was a former MP, mayor and magistrate and in his latter role conducted marriages in the Cornmarket when church weddings were outlawed during the Commonwealth.

On his death in 1662 he left significant money for the poor. He also left money to be lent to tradesmen at no interest and money to rebuild the almshouses on New Street for 8 men and 2 women, which are still there today. He was said to be a man full of good works and liberally supported the poor.



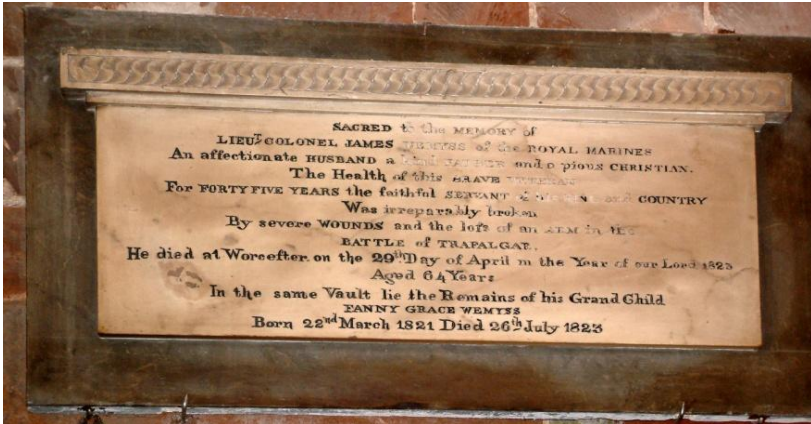
Dud Dudley and his wife Eleanor's monument is located on the south wall. He was an iron master who experimented in new ways to create iron through using coke, writing his theories up in a manuscript. He moved to from Staffordshire and lived at 44 Friar Street, Worc. His monument is unusual, containing chemical symbols written in Latin. The 1648 chemical symbols in the center of the monument are a list of metals:- Lead, Tin, Iron, Gold (Sun), Copper, Silver, Mercury. He died in 1684 but his legacy may be found in his great grandson, Abraham Darby of Ironbridge. The monument was restored in 1911 by the Staffs Iron and Steel Institute.



The monument of Anne, wife of James Fleet, alias Walsgrove dated from 1600 is probably the earliest monument in St Helen's. It is on the north wall towards the east end and features a small statue of Anne, with three male figures kneeling below, and two female, probably representing family members. James' grandfather had endowed Powick Lane almshouses.



The monument of James Wemyss, a Lt Colonel of the Royal Marines is located under the Tower. James Wemyss served at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 on HMS Bellephron where he was 'irreparably broken by severe wounds and loss of an arm'. He survived, returning to Worcester where he died in 1823 aged 62.



The Monument of Nicholas and Margery Archbold under the Tower on the south side was transferred here from St Michael's when it was demolished. Nicolas Archbold died in 1660 and Margery in 1615. The monument features figures and an hour glass which were common symbols of monuments at the time.

On the outside of the south wall is a memorial to Richard Gregory who died in 1760. 'Old Gregory' as he was known was an organ blower at the Cathedral and a well known local character.





The east window was created in memory of St Helen's Vicar, Rev J H Wilding and pictures the Ascension when Jesus went into heaven after the resurrection, watched by the eleven remaining disciples. Nail marks can be seen on the hands and feet of Jesus.

The stained glass windows on the south wall were installed just after the 1880 renovation in memory of DR Nash and James Nash, part of the family of John Nash whose monument is at the front, showing the longstanding family connection even when they moved out to Martley. The windows feature scenes from Jesus' life when he healed people.

## Font

The octagonal font is in the Perpendicular style with carved quatrefoils and roses. Most of the nineteenth century fittings have been dispersed, such as the lectern, at one time in All Saints' Church but now in Christchurch, Tolladine, but the alabaster reredos of 1867 by Frederick Preedy remains.



## Charity Board

On the north wall towards the west end is a charity board which was brought from St Michael's. It records the donations, usually in wills which was given to the local church to distribute. These donations played an important role in the local community, especially before the welfare state. Many gifts of differing sizes were given and enabled the church to give out money at particular times, St Thomas day and Good Friday being key dates.

## Bells

The Bells of St Helen's played an important role in Worcester's life, not just ringing for church services but also to mark city life, and their chimes would have been a familiar sound.

In 1553 the church is recorded as having 'five great bells and a little sanctus bell'. Other bells rung from St Helen's were the 'day bell' rung at 4am each day, the 'pye bell' rung at midnight on Christmas Eve and the execution bell or passing bell, still being rung as late as 1805 as prisoners passed by to execution.

In 1706 these existing five bells were recast into a peal of eight and commemorated Queen Anne and the victories at Blenheim, Ramillies and Menin. They were reputed to be one of the finest local peals and many bell ringing records were set on them. They were sold for scrap in 1951. A set of hand bells from the church is still owned by Worcester City Parish.

The curfew was rung daily at St Helen's from ancient times until the Second World War. As a boy, Edward Elgar sometimes rang the curfew bell at St. Helen's Church, a duty which also entailed giving out precise chimes to denote the date in the month. The young Elgar however took mischievous delight in adding a few extra chimes. Two boards on the south wall commemorate full peals which take over four hours to ring and take place on special occasions.

## The Parish

St Helen's church served the parish, which is the geographic area around the building, and the people who lived and worked there. It would have been an important part of people's lives even if they didn't worship here. Originally in the Anglo-Saxon period it covered an area which is now twelve parishes today, from Martley to Knightwick in the east to Huddlington in the west, indicating the early origin of St Helen's. This was later split off by Bishop Blois but some links remained with those parishes.

For much of the history the parish of St Helen's covered the area immediately surrounding the church building to the west of the High Street, the middle of the High Street and over towards Friar Street. It was a diverse neighborhood; Fish Street, formerly Corviser Street, housed many tradespeople, especially cordwainers (leather workers). Fish Street gives the clue that many fish mongers lived and worked here, although due to the smell they were later moved towards the river, Fish hall however remained just down from St Helen's. Lanes and alleys fed off the High Street and the parish was a mix of wealthy on the eastern side of the parish, and poorer on the western side of the High Street. For much of its history St Helen's was generally considered one of the wealthier parishes. The boundary was important, and like many parishes on Rogation Sunday the locals would 'beat the bounds' and formally tour the boundary in a procession.

Records of 1113 which tell of the Great Fire of Worcester indicate the St Helen's was surrounded by buildings. It is speculated that these may have housed an early Celtic monastic community, although alternatively they may have been houses rented out. Later maps show houses going right up to the church on Fish Street, and even in front of the west end of the south wall. With space at a premium in the city it would have felt very enclosed. Being in such a central location St Helen's would have played an important role in city life; the bells would have rung on behalf of the city, during medieval times St Helen's was responsible for street lighting and the fair alternated between The Cross, at the north end of the High Street and St Helen's.

St Helen's is still consecrated and has never been declared redundant by the prescribed legal process. Since 2003 it has again been used for worship, prayer,

art and craft exhibitions, concerts, children's workshops and other community and charity events.



## St Helen's Church House

The St Helen's Church House was erected in 1889 as a church hall for St Helen's. It was built entirely within the footprint of the Rectory, which was last rebuilt in 1791. The Church House's legend is plainly visible in the lintel above the entrance. It is a single-storey building and consists of a main hall with smaller rooms adjoining. The architectural style is typical of its period for a building of this nature. The building had for a time been referred to as 'St Helen's School Room' (School referring to Sunday School), but has since reverted back to its original name and now is host to the office of All Saints Church. The Church House is wholly in the curtilage of St Helen's Church, and is therefore likewise listed Grade II\*. If considered on its own merits it is likely that the Church House would not be given such a high grade.

From the 1930s for the several decades, the 'School Room' was used as a hall by All Saints' Church, principally for meetings of the PCC and as a Sunday School. During the 1970s, the PCC decided to remove these functions from the 'School Room' to St Alban's Church, just across Deansway Road. St Alban's Church now functions as Maggs Day Centre; a space for the homeless people of Worcester.

The 'School Room' was then leased to Worcestershire County Council for use by the Record Office, principally for storage of documents but also as somewhere that certain conservation works could be carried out. The lease with Worcestershire County Council was terminated slightly before the Record Office moved out of St Helen's Church in 2002. It was then leased to Worcestershire County Council for Worcester Connect, ending in December 2016.

St Helen's Church House is currently occupied as the All Saints' Church office. It is vested in the Diocesan Board of Finance, with the DBF and All Saints PCC being joint trustees, the latter acting as Managing Trustees.

## St Helen's Churchyard

Very little information is available about the St Helen's Churchyard from the old Parish Records held in the County Record Office at Worcester Hive. From the 1884 Ordnance Survey, the land north of the Rectory is shown as a graveyard. However, the graveyard was closed by Order in Council in 1856. There are a few surviving fragments of gravestones leaning up against the west and north walls, along with a memorial stone inset into the west wall in recognition of what once was there.

In the period from 1950-1970, a garden was created around the edge of the Churchyard. The rest was covered with tarmac, and vehicular access created. It was used by both The Record Office and the Fire Brigade as a car park; the old Fire Station being located on the corner of Fish street and Deansway.

## **Acknowledgement**

The information used has been obtained from old Parish Records, Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service, Worcester City Historic Environment Records, Worcester Urban Archaeological Database, 'Churches of Worcestershire' by Tim Bridges and various versions of Statement of Significance

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