

## An unusual Glastonbury chair in St Mary's church, Silchester, Hampshire.

After our feast of Glastonbury chairs on the Somerset conference in 2022 I have been paying more attention to these common yet so often ignored items of church furniture, and realising how many variations there are. I was therefore especially pleased when someone posted a picture of this one on one of the many Facebook groups devoted to church crawling, and even more pleased when I realised that we could divert a little off our route and go and see it on our way home from our half-term holiday cottage near Henley. For this Glastonbury chair is totally unique, as explained by a small brass plaque on the back. This is what it says. *'This chair was made from an oak plank which had formed part of the lining of a water culvert at Calleva Atrebatum. After having remained in situ from about the second century the plank was excavated in 1905. (See Archaeologia LX, 161.)'* Calleva Atrebatum of course was the Roman town of Silchester and the church stands just inside the walls on the east side of the site. The chair has minimal decoration — a small square Celtic knot pattern on the back and some carving on one side only of the seat. The latter is a design of two rectangles, with a very similar but more shallowly carved design used on a second Glastonbury chair in the church, where it is used on the edges of both the seat and the back. This second chair and a third one both have Gothic text carved on the arms and the back, along with other decoration, and are



Glastonbury chair in St Mary's church, Silchester, Hampshire, made from timber from a Roman culvert excavated in 1905. It is just possible to see the carved decoration on the side of the seat; the other side is plain.  
*Photo Linda Hall*



Plaque on the Glastonbury chair detailing its construction.  
*Photo Linda Hall*

far more elaborate than the one made from Roman timber. Here the patina of the ancient wood was presumably deemed decoration enough. The church guidebook says that the chair was presented by J. Challenor Smith, who was associated with the Silchester excavations of 1890-1909; who actually made it is not known.

St Mary's has other treasures too which make it well worth a visit; a wonderful chancel screen with a delicate frieze of angels along the top, quite unlike any other screen in the country; a panelled pulpit believed to be from the Commonwealth period, with an earlier domed tester given by James Hore in 1639; a fine wooden eagle lectern from Belgium, donated in 1872; a plain churchwardens' chest on bun feet, with its original three locks all intact, with the date 1724 and the initials WG and IR carved on the front; and a set of fine bench ends depicting plants from the Bible, carved by Ellen and Henry Sealey in memory of her mother who died in 1909.

*Linda Hall*



A second Glastonbury chair in St Mary's church, Silchester showing similar carved decoration on the sides of the seat and the back.  
*Photo Linda Hall*