



# BWAS

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Archaeological Society

## See it for Free!

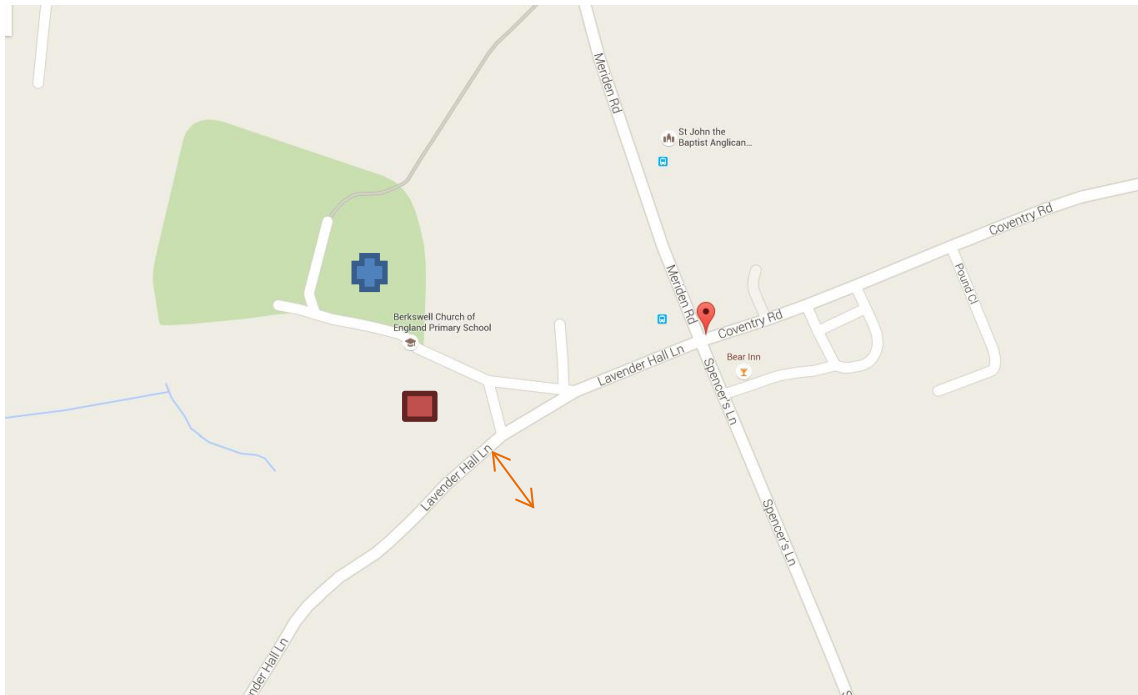
BWAS site guides provide information on free and accessible archaeological sites in Birmingham and Warwickshire

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### BERKSWELL NORMAN CRYPT


Sat Nav - Nearby postcode - CV7 7BJ

**Ancient church with a well preserved Norman crypt and a historic well located in the village of Berkswell, near Coventry.**



 St John Baptist Church

 The Well

 Footpath to Ram Hall and station

**Parking** - There is a signposted car park in the village .

**Public transport** – Berkswell railway station is 2.25km distance walk along roads from the village centre with services to Birmingham and Coventry. There are no footpaths along the roads on part of the route. It is possible to take a slightly shorter route to the village using footpaths across fields for much of the way (see OS maps). Take the ramp from platform 2 at the station and walk about 400m along Truggist Lane, passing Baulk Lane, and look for a footpath going across fields to the left. There are no regular bus services serving the village. For train times see <http://www.networkwestmidlands.com/>

**Access** - The church and churchyard are generally accessible (Tel 01676 529123) and the well is in public open space near to the village green, off Church Road. There is a shop and public house in the village and a public house near the station.

There is no public access to Ram Hall.

Find out more about Berkswell Parish at <http://berkswell.org/>

#### Maps

Ordnance Survey

Landranger - Map 139

Explorer - Map 221

Grid reference

SP 243791

## What you can see

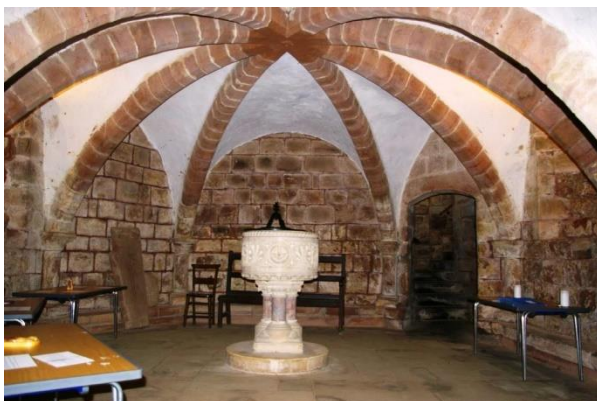
Berkswell village is named after Bercul's well, a natural spring around which a settlement grew in early medieval times. The church of St John Baptist and its crypt are fine examples of Norman architecture.



Begin your visit by exploring the Church of St John the Baptist at the far end of Church Road . The nave of the current church was constructed around 1150 and the chancel slightly later but it is likely there was an earlier Saxon church on the same site. There is an excellent guide book available in the church with more information about its history and development.



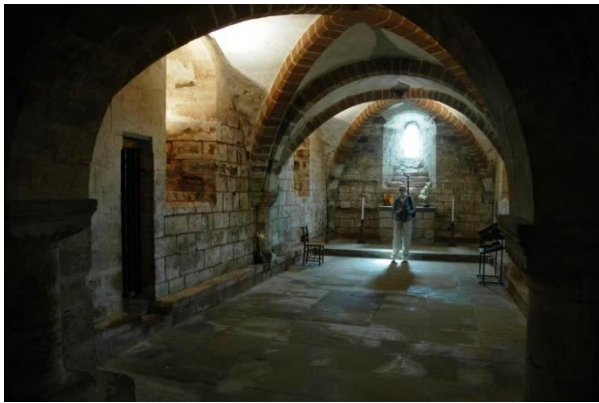
Once inside the church walk towards the fine Norman chancel arch and look to the left behind the pulpit and to the right beside the lectern . Here you will find two doorways which were the original entrances to the crypt below. They led to flights of steps constructed within the thickness of the walls. You will see where they come out when you get into the crypt. To do so make for the north aisle and about half way along you will find the entrance to the crypt down a flight of steps inside one of the box pews!



At the bottom of the steps you come into an octagonal crypt (the western crypt) which is directly beneath the nave of the church. The crypt is one of finest examples of Norman architecture in the country.



Just before going through the archway into the eastern crypt take a look through a well-lit square opening in the wall to the right. Here you can see the remains of stonework exposed during repairs undertaken in 1967. This stonework looks as if it may well have been originally on the outside of a building leading to the suggestion that the eastern crypt may have started life as free standing building.



Now go through to the eastern crypt which lies beneath the chancel of the church and, as you go through the arch that connects the two crypts note the barred doorways to the left and right. This is where you would have entered the crypt if coming down the steps from the two doorways you saw in the nave earlier.



It is likely a crypt was originally constructed here to hold the relics of a saint. One possibility is St Milred, Bishop of Worcester who died in 772 or St Mildred, Abbess of Minster-in-Thanet who died in 725. Having relics, even just one bone of a saint, attracted pilgrims and pilgrims were an important source of income for the early church in England. In the later 19<sup>th</sup> century possible foundations for a shrine were found beneath the floor of the octagonal crypt. If relics were held in a shrine here they may have attracted large numbers of visitors and the two access points would have allowed for a one way system for pilgrims to enter and leave the shrine.

When you leave the crypt take some time to explore the rest of the church which is of considerable interest. Also walk around the outside of the church before leaving noting the carved corbels, like faces, high up under the eaves of the chancel and the early preaching cross base in the churchyard which today has a replica of an older cross found nearby in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



On leaving the churchyard you will find the well itself in an open space to your right, consisting of two stone tanks. The larger one was most probably for general use and the stonework probably dates from renovations undertaken in the mid 19th century, formalising what was the site of an original natural spring and the reason for the construction here of the church and village.



The smaller tank with steps leading down to it was probably for drawing fresh water for drinking. It has been suggested that it the well may have been used for baptisms in early times. It is also possible that the spring was a sacred site in pre-Christian eras as Saint Augustine instructed the missionaries who came to England to make use of existing places of worship and pagan shrines were often replaced by Christian crosses and churches.



If you walked from the station on the footpath off Truggist Lane you will have passed Ram Hall – a 17<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse with remains of an earlier moat. No public access but the footpath passes through the farmyard. This is an easy 10 minute walk across fields from the village, look for the footpath sign near the village green. Also look out for the unusual five holed stocks on the village green which may be 200 years old or more!

#### Refs:

- Kerr, N and M, Norman Sites in Britain (1984)
- Slater, T, A History of Warwickshire (1981)
- Alcock, N, W, Transactions of Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society (TBAS), Innovation and conservatism: the development of Warwickshire houses in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Vol 100 (1986)
- Chatwin, P, B, TBAS, Open meeting. Vol 51 (1926)
- Cossins, J, A, TBAS, The Well and Church of St John the Baptist at Berkswell. Vol 10 (1880/81)

#### Links:

<http://www.berkswell.org/church/explore/crypt>  
<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/warks/vol4/pp27-34>  
<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1045806> (Ram Hall)

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