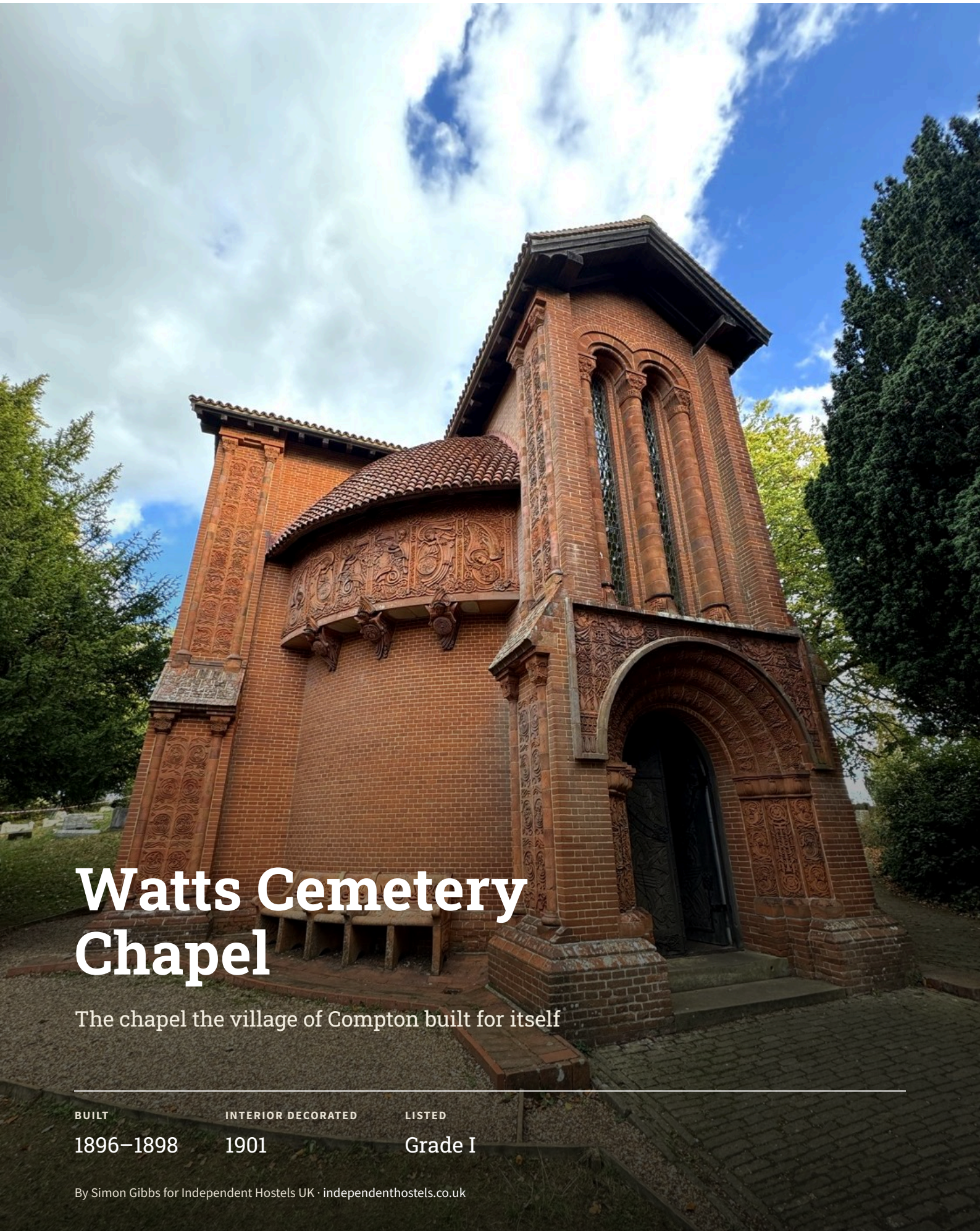
Independent Hostel Guide

VISITOR GUIDE
COMPTON, SURREY



Watts Cemetery Chapel

The chapel the village of Compton built for itself

BUILT	INTERIOR DECORATED	LISTED
1896–1898	1901	Grade I

By Simon Gibbs for Independent Hostels UK · independenthostels.co.uk

COMPTON, SURREY

A village chapel, made by hand

Behind a cemetery wall in Compton stands one of the most unexpected buildings in Surrey: a small red-brick chapel covered, inside and out, in carved and painted ornament.

The old churchyard at Compton closed in 1895, and the parish council set up a new cemetery. Mary Seton Watts, an artist who lived in the village and was married to the painter G. F. Watts, offered to design and build a mortuary chapel for it. Her husband paid for the work.

Building began in 1896 and was finished in 1898. The builders were villagers, not professionals. Seventy-four of them are recorded as taking part, each with a separate job, working in evening classes taught by Louis Deuchars under Mary's direction. The interior was decorated in 1901.

The terracotta, made from local clay, came from classes that Mary ran in the village. Many of the people who worked on the chapel went on with her to found the Compton Potters' Arts Guild, which made pots, garden ornaments and memorials for decades afterwards.

HISTORY · THE WATTS FAMILY

Mary and G. F. Watts built Limnerslease, their home, a few hundred yards from the chapel. It is now part of Watts Gallery, which also looks after the chapel.

BUILT
1896–1898

INTERIOR DECORATED
1901

DESIGNED BY
Mary Seton Watts

PLAN
A Greek cross within a circle

MATERIALS
Local red brick, a pantiled roof and terracotta

LISTED
Grade I, 14 June 1967

WHERE
Down Lane, Compton, Guildford GU3



The chapel from the cemetery, with its curved wall and terracotta benches.



The entrance, with doors and surround carved in terracotta.

STEP INSIDE

Angels, knotwork and a tree of life

The plan inside is circular, with four deep arms vaulted by pairs of thick ribs, and almost every surface is covered in ornament.

The decoration is gesso, a kind of plaster relief, painted in sombre blues and reds. Long, narrow angels carry cameos in ornate frames, looped together into a chain around the walls. More angels fill the vault, with cherubs' heads on the ribs and four seraphs at the top of the ceiling. A tree of life tangles its roots in a frieze around the lower wall, and the altar recess is gilded and holds a painting by G. F. Watts.



Looking up into one of the four arms.



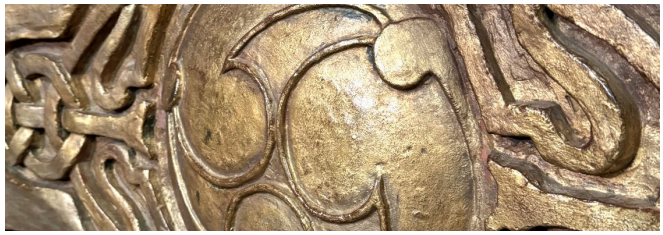
An angel in a frame of cameos.



The altar recess.



Celtic-style knotwork picked out in gilt.



Interlaced carving along a rib.

> "Their hope is full of immortality."
>
> An inscription inside the chapel.

The patterns draw on Celtic Revival designs, mixed with Art Nouveau and, some writers say, Egyptian influence. Historic England's list entry calls the result a "Modern Style" version of Celtic Revival.

AROUND THE CHAPEL

What to look for, and how to visit

From the path the chapel looks almost Italian, but the detail is all Compton.

The red brick is cut and rubbed into patterns, and terracotta runs up the doorways and window shafts. A square bell turret stands at the south-east corner.

- **Winged figures.** Three sit as corbels on the curved walls between the arms of the cross.
- **Carved doors.** The doors and their surround are covered in terracotta ornament.
- **Window shafts.** Each arm has two round-arched windows on tall shafts with foliage capitals.
- **Terracotta benches.** They line the outer walls, a good place to sit.



Carved terracotta on a window shaft.

Nearby

The Watts Memorial Cloister stands a few yards away, with memorials to the Watts family. Members of the Huxley family, including Aldous Huxley, are buried in the cemetery. Watts Gallery and Limnerslease are a short walk away.



The carved door and surround.



The outer wall and its benches.

ON THE WALK · PUTTENHAM BARN TO TANNERS HATCH HOSTEL

Watts Gallery stands on the route at Compton, and the chapel lies about 750 metres south of the track, a detour of roughly fifteen minutes each way. The chapel is looked after by Watts Gallery, so check their website for opening times before you go.

Sources: Historic England list entry 1029541; Watts Gallery. Photography by Simon Gibbs.