

St Mary's Shapwick

Silver and Brass

In the late 16th century, under the influence of the Puritans, the more ornate mediaeval chalices and communion vessels were destroyed and, in many churches, plainer cups with deeper bowls became common. The Shapwick church silver is of this style and consists of a cup and paten, two alms dishes and a flagon, all made in 1746. A wafer box was added in 1976 and a christening shell in 1980, both being made by James Markham who used to be one of the churchwardens. There is no record of any earlier silver, which is not surprising since it would have had to survive the period of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, when Henry VIII deliberately set out to reduce the wealth and power of the church. "Forsters", the only thatched house in the village, is thought to have been the vicarage at one time. When the house was being re-thatched in the last century, four silver christening spoons were found hidden in the roof. The spoons, believed to be dated Charles I, may have been hidden by the vicar if he feared they would be found by Monmouth's rebels, or even by the King's soldiers after the Battle of Sedgemoor in 1685. There is a fine Victorian brass cross together with a pair of candlesticks. More recently a brass cross was donated in 1954 in memory of Major Harry G. F. Royale. M.C.

The Hassocks

When in 1974 the ladies of the village undertook to make new hassocks for the church various books on needlecraft were consulted. In one of them descriptions were given of two "samplers", one made in 1760 by Sarah Fear aged 13 and the other by Hannah Hockey in 1798, also aged 13. Both lived in Shapwick, but unfortunately these samplers can no longer be found.

The Vicars

Most of the names of the vicars since 1230 have been recorded. It is interesting to note that there were no less than six vicars appointed between 1348 and 1353; this was probably due to the Black Death which began in Somerset early in 1349. Churchill Julius, who became vicar in 1875, was Archbishop of New Zealand from 1922-25. The current vicar, Reverend Richard Tweedy, was appointed in May 2016 for the benefice of the Polden Wheel.

The Vicarage

The present vicarage was built in 1992 on the site of the Vicar's Rooms and vegetable garden. The previous 'Old Vicarage' was built in 1926. Unfortunately, the original vicarage, built on the same site, was burnt down in the early hours of 15th December 1920. The strong east wind rapidly fanned the flames and the building was almost gutted before the horse-drawn fire engine from Glastonbury reached the scene. Due to ice on the roads, the horses had considerable difficulty in making good time. Luckily, the vicar's valuable library and most of the downstairs furniture was saved by the willing help of the villagers. After the fire, the vicar was invited by Miss Strangways to live at the Manor; he subsequently moved to Manor Farm until the vicarage was rebuilt.

Conclusion

Our ancient church is a wonderful symbol of the heritage of the settled community life of our village and is, of course, the focal point of our faith, indeed, the church is a visible link with all those who have worshipped here in the past. Let us give thanks to those who built, restored and now care for our historic church. May you who visit, and all who worship here, find peace and the presence of Christ.

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Origins

No firm date can be given for the establishment of the first church in Shapwick. However, the kings of the West Saxons (Wessex) founded Christianity in Somerset when they reached Glastonbury in 658 A.D. King Ine, in his charter of 725 A.D., agreed that Glastonbury, and the seven subordinate churches of Sowey, Brent, Moorlinch, Shapwick, Street, Butleigh and Pilton should be exempt from obedience to the Diocesan Bishop and come directly under the Abbot of Glastonbury. Thus there must have been a church in Shapwick early in the 8th century. This first church was dedicated to St Andrew and was situated in the place now called "Old Church" near Beerway Farm, about half a mile to the east of the present church.

By the end of the 12th century, the Bishop of Bath and Wells had taken over the powers of the Abbot of Glastonbury. On 28th January 1329, the Abbot applied to the Bishop for a new church to be built on the present site because there had been many complaints from the parishioners that St Andrew's was too far from the village. The Bishop agreed and the new church was dedicated, to St Mary the Virgin on 13th October 1331. Even before the time of the present church, the Vicar of Shapwick was also the priest in charge of the chapel of All Saints, Ashcott. In the six churches in the villages of Ashcott, Burtle, Catcott, Chilton Polden, Edington and Shapwick were joined together into one benefice of the Polden Wheel.

Church Records

The oldest existing records of the church are now held in the County Record Office at Taunton and date from 1591. Many names still in the village are found in these early documents.

Patronage

In the beginning, the church at Shapwick was under the authority of Glastonbury Abbey and the Almoner, living in the Manor at Shapwick, was the Patron. By marriage, first into the Bull family and later into the Templer family, the patronage passed to the Strangways until Miss Vialls-Strangways sold the "Shapwick Estate" to Lord Vestey in 1944. Lord Vestey then became the Patron. One of the earlier patrons, William Bull, was a descendant of Dr John Bull who was chaplain to Henry VIII and Edward VI and, it is said, wrote the National Anthem and became the John Bull of England. Lord Vestey had previously bought Mrs Warry's estate in 1943, but not her home, Shapwick House. Thus Lord Vestey's estate consisted of all the farms and most of the land within the parish boundary, although most of the land and farms originally purchased has since been sold off to the tenant farmers and private individuals. Lord Vestey's heir was killed in action in Italy in 1944 and when Lord Vestey died in 1954 the estate passed to his grandson, the present Lord Vestey, and the patronage passed to trustees. However, in 1970 Lord Vestey resumed the patronage and assumed the historic title of Lay Rector. The Lay Rectorial Manor, Shapwick Manor (in the past sometimes called Down House) was built early in the 17th century on the site of the original Manor House and is now a privately run school.

The Church Building

Little is known of the actual building of the present church although the tower was certainly built in the 14th century. The windows of the first stage of the tower are 14th century, but those of the upper stages are 15th century. The church is unusual in having the tower in the centre rather than at the west end. The walls of the nave and the tower arches have the characteristic "batter" of the period (broader at the base than at the top). An old map dated 1764 shows that the church at that time had no frontage on Church Road because a house occupied the corner where the notice board now stands. The northern of the two entrances in Station Road was probably the main gate as in the drought of 1976, the line of a path could clearly be seen running from this gate to the west end of the church. At the east end of the north and south walls of the nave the remains of 14th century piscinas can be seen, these were perforated basins for carrying away the water used in rinsing the chalices. Their position suggests that the altar at that time was in the middle of the church, a position favoured by the Puritans who were strong in Shapwick, but in 1633 the Bishop ordered the table to be put at the east end of the chancel saying that if it was left where it was it would be used for anyone to sit around and talk business or for schoolmasters to use for their lessons. The western half of the nave used to contain an organ loft and musicians' gallery, with a staircase and passage leading thereto. During the Napoleonic wars, ammunition for the use of the Polden Local Militia was stored in the tower. One night the ringers, to warm themselves, lit a fire which set the belfry alight. The ringers hastily departed, but one of their number took up a bucket of water and put the fire out before it reached the ammunition.

The Bells

1702 is the earliest date inscribed on the present bells; the history of any earlier bells does not appear to have been recorded. In 1901 a new treble bell was purchased in memory of Queen Victoria at a cost of £76.10s.

The peal is inscribed as follows:

1. (Treble) IN MEMORIAM VICTORIA, D.G., R et I., F.D. 1901
2. ANNO DOMINI 1702 T.K. EX. DONO. FRAN. ROLLE. ARMIGERI.
3. (No Inscription)
4. (No Inscription)
5. E.BILBIE 1712. JOHN HOLE. RO. JANES. CW.

. (Tenor) WHEN I DO CALL COME SERVE GOD ALL. BILBIE. 1712. JOHN HOLE. R. O. JANES CW.

The bells were rehung in a new oak frame in 1938 by John Taylor & Co. of Loughborough. In the

ringing chamber a peal board dated 1st January 1934 reads:

*"A Grandsire Doubles. 5 Callings in two hours 59 minutes
I. Hillburn treble. P. Barnett 2. F. Skinner 3. H. Smith 4. H. Stevens 5. V. Barnett tenor.
Conducted by H. Stevens. "*

Today these fine bells are rung on special occasions. Joint weekly practices are held at Shapwick & Ashcott.

Restoration

In 1861 the architect George Gilbert Scott supervised a major restoration of the church when the chancel was given a new roof, and the nave was restored using much of the original 15th century timber in the roof. Generous public subscription paid for the restoration. H. B. Strangways, the Lay Rector, paid for the restoration of the chancel and Mr Warry of Shapwick House made a handsome donation. The roof timbers of the chancel and nave were again restored in 1959 and treated against beetle, as were the pews and floors. A sketch dated 1845, shows that there were no buttresses to the tower at that time and that there was a stone balustrade surrounding the top of the tower, with pinnacles at the four corners above the splendid gargoyles. A photograph dated 1870 shows that the pinnacles had been removed and the balustrade replaced by the present embattled parapet; presumably these modifications were part of the 1861 restoration. The tower was repointed externally in 1949. A completely new altar rail was made of Australian oak, which was shipped over specially for the purpose in 1861, presumably by Henry Bull Templer Strangways who was Premier of Australia from 1868-70. Part of the old altar rail can be seen in the Chancel and is thought to date from the 17th century. Behind the altar is a beautiful wrought iron screen erected by the Strangways family. It is dated 1895 and bears the initials MCS. It had previously been used to surround a grave in the churchyard. Electric light was installed in 1936 and the central paraffin hanging lamps removed. The oil lamps on the walls were left and are now used occasionally for special services.

Modernisation

In 2004 a modernisation of the nave was completed to allow more flexible use as a church and village resource. All the pews were removed from the nave area and servery, storage & disabled toilet facilities installed at the west end. New lighting and a public address/loop system were installed. The east end of the nave floor was carpeted and is used for celebration of the Eucharist and to stage special events such as choral concerts and festivals. The middle of the nave floor retains the original terracotta & navy tiles and was complemented with a dark stained wooden floor at the same level. Stackable chairs and collapsible tables give flexibility for worship as well as for the monthly 'Lite Bite' during the week and special events throughout the year. The font was moved to the carpeted area to allow the congregation to more easily participate in the Baptismal Service.

Memorials

The stained glass windows in the chancel are all in memory of the Strangways family whose vault is now railed off in the northern part of the churchyard. At the east end of the nave, in the south wall, the three windows are all in memory of the Warry family of Shapwick House. Their vault was discovered under the nave timber floor during the modernisation. There are many beautifully worded memorial tablets, a number of which reflect the dignity and history of the time. The finest monument is the one in the chancel erected by William Bull in memory of his wife Jane who died in 1657. The large board on the east wall of the tower depicts the coat of arms of the Templer family.