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A
SHORT HISTORY
OF THE
PARISH CHURCH
OF
VOWCHURCH
HEREFORDSHIRE



by

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1967



IN AID OF THE CHURCH FABRIC FUND

INTRODUCTION

This brief account of Vowchurch Parish Church makes no claim to supplant the authoritative descriptions of the building and its contents such as appear in the Royal Commission Historic Monuments, Vol. I. S.W. Herefordshire (which includes a 'period' plan), and the paper by the late George Marshall, F.S.A., in the Transactions of the Woolhope Club for 1916, both of which should be consulted for fuller archaeological details and illustrations. Rather it is written from the point of view of drawing attention of visitors to the chief items of interest, especially those which more readily strike the eye and invite enquiry.

Several conjectural references may meet with criticism and it might be thought that the basis of some statements lack foundation. If so, the author shelters behind the fact that he has drawn what may be contended are rational explanations while not possessing any special competence to express definite conclusions. The compilation of a list of patrons, presentations and incumbents would necessitate considerable research in Diocesan records and has not been attempted. In the belfry is a list headed by one vicar, Edward Vaghan of 1560, followed by a gap till 1661, with a continuous record of incumbents since. In the early centuries priests from Hinton, Peterchurch, or from Dore Abbey may have administered the services on occasions.

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DEDICATION OF 1348

It is the Parish Church of the glorious Virgin MARY the Mother of God, the blessed JOHN THE BAPTIST, BARTHOLOMEW the apostle, LAURENCE the martyr, KING ETHELBERT the martyr, BLASIUS the martyr and bishop, MARTIN the bishop, GREGORY the bishop, THOMAS, the bishop, the blessed MARY MAGDALENE, AGNES the virgin martyr, CECILIA the virgin martyr, KATHERINE the virgin martyr, MARGARET the virgin martyr, and MILBURGA the virgin.

PARISH CHURCH OF VOWCHURCH

A short history and description of
the chief architectural features,
with addenda on parochial matters.

Vowchurch does not appear in Domesday Book, there being no manor of that name, although several manors in the parish are listed. In the earliest documentary mention of 1291, it occurs as Fowchirche, the word probably meaning the grey or mottled church, the first element derived from the old English 'fag' (multi-coloured). Manors that can be identified are:—

Manitune	Monnington
Poscetentune	Poston
Alcamestune	Chanstone (probably)

and

More-Whitehouse (possibly), as the name was changed c. 1575.

The church has Norman work incorporated in the walls, but the original plan is not known. There is no evidence of any earlier work, although the presence near the porch of a large block of local cornstone, forming the base for the shaft of the churchyard cross, may indicate that the site was of some ancient significance as a religious centre, or as a tribal meeting place.

EXTERIOR. The surviving Norman portions of the church are:—

- (1) A length of the S. wall of the nave in uncoursed rubble on each side of the porch, with the small round-headed window in tufa stone.
- (2) A shorter length of the N. wall of the nave through which at a later date the N. doorway was pierced.

The continuation of the nave walls and the chancel walls are in Early English style (the junction of which with the Norman can be seen on the external surfaces), and extend the rest of the full length (87ft.) of the church. The E. wall is of the same period. This rebuilding and probably lengthening (while retaining the same width

of 24ft. of the Norman nave) is of special interest as in the year 1348 Bishop John de Trilleck, re-dedicated the church; this would not have been done unless considerable alterations had been made.

The two large three-light windows in the nave and the E. window are of the same period but authorities differ upon exact dating of the four smaller windows, except one on the N. side of the chancel which is modern. The two doorways are ascribed to the 14th century.

The W. wall is considered to have been rebuilt in the 17th century, the nave walls being extended westward a few feet at the same time. The W. window is modern.

The porch was restored in 1860 retaining the original 17th century design.

INTERIOR. Over the chancel are two of the original collar beam arched braced trusses dating from 1348. The roof of the whole church was undoubtedly supported by this form of truss until the year 1613, when an extensive restoration was undertaken. To replace the defective timber of the other seven arched trusses the existing, somewhat plainly worked queen post type of truss was substituted, and massive posts were placed near each end of the tie-beams which extend beyond the posts and rest upon the wall-plates in the usual manner. The angles are broken with curved braces springing from carved console corbels.

The roof of 1613 was reconstructed in this way over the greater part of the length of the church, probably to relieve any outward thrust upon the side walls, which some authorities suggest may have spread, but an examination of the walls fails to detect any marked inclination, and there is no trace of any repair work except at the S.E. corner which was carried out in modern times.

This queen-post type of truss is akin to the local master builder's traditional treatment of roofing a large house or barn.

The remark of a former Bishop of Hereford that "if the side walls of the church were removed the roof would remain in position supported by the posts" should not be taken too seriously. Some years ago one of the posts was found to be loose at the base (probably due to shrinkage in length), and could be swayed slightly from side to side suspended by the tenon in the tie-beam; obviously the post added nothing to the stability of the building. Also some of the posts are twisted which would hardly have happened if any considerable

weight was superimposed upon them by the roof structure. Such vertical stresses would have caused bending or fracture if excessive.

It is difficult to adduce the function that the posts were intended to serve, and the opinion is advanced that their insertion was simply to break the bareness of the large expanse of walling.

Some aver that John Abel (1577-1674) the King's Carpenter, was responsible for the 1613 restoration. Evidence is wanting in support of this attribution, and it cannot be accepted that so outstanding a craftsman would have countenanced the use of material in such a wasteful and structurally needless manner.

The two westernmost tie-beams are of earlier date and may have been inserted when the timber-framed, black and white bell-turret was built or rebuilt c. 1522.

In that year the will of Thomas ap Parry of Poston was proved and included a bequest of a 'white grey ambling colt' towards the building of the steeple. The steeple, or more correctly described as a bell turret, was originally capped by a low pyramidal roof. This was replaced about 1870 by the present short steeple, which is square at the base, the angles being splay-footed to provide an octagonal shape above.

The chancel roof was re-tiled in 1914. In 1950 the roof of the nave was stripped and re-tiled, the steeple was re-slatted, the plaster ceiling renewed and the walls re-coloured at a total cost of £1,153.

A water-colour sketch of about 1830 shows the nave as having a flat plaster ceiling attached to the underside of the tie-beams, and the nave divided off from the chancel by a plaster partition, with a three-decker pulpit in the angle of the N. side.

The walls of the chancel were formerly plastered and whitened, and when this was removed in 1870-1 an attempt was made to obscure the rubble masonry by the application of the existing mortar filling and the all-too-prominent pointing.

Records show that in the early years of the vicarship of the Rev. Beresford Lowther, 1836-1868, the interior of the church, having become dilapidated, a thorough restoration was undertaken by removing in various years between 1848 and 1870 the old oak-panelled pews, the gallery at the W. end, the plaster ceiling of the nave and chancel, the partition and the three decker pulpit (referred to above). The floor of the nave, consisting largely of stone memorial slabs, was relaid. The chancel was treated in the same way and relaid partly with encaustic tiles and partly with stone flags. The panelled and balustered chancel screen of 1613 was again exposed

to view, and the nave was entirely re-seated. The best of the 17th-century material saved from the box-pews was re-fixed as a dado against the side walls.

It is feared that drastic measures were taken at this restoration to despoil the church of many monuments to those who had been buried during the two preceding centuries, among whom were members of the families of Hoskyns, Somerset, Russell, Boughton, Howorth, Morgan, Parry and perhaps Vaughan.

A brass to the memory of Lord Arthur Somerset, who died on June 21st, 1743, aged 72 years, no doubt once fixed to a floor slab, escaped destruction, and is now attached to a roof post on the S. side of the chancel.

FITTINGS. Noteworthy objects and fittings, listed more or less chronologically, include:—

Font. The original Norman bowl of local limestone is decorated with scalloped bands and what are assumed to be two large leaves. The stumps of the iron dowels to which the lid would have been hinged, can still be seen on opposite sides of the rim. The short pillar and base are restorations of c. 1840.

Altar. Forming a sill for the S.E. window in the nave is a medieval sandstone slab with four consecrated crosses, which probably served as an altar. The position originally occupied by this altar may have been at the ambry in the wall near the screen, and that is dedicated by Bishop Trilleck to the Blessed Mary Magdalen on 22nd November, 1348.

Piscina. In the chancel is a 13th-century piscina with pointed arch and stone shelf with twin basins.

Recesses. In the N. wall of the nave are two arched tomb recesses, built subsequently to the wall, which is reinforced on the outside at these places.

Screen. Although this prominent feature is of unskilled workmanship, there is no uncertainty about the date of its erection as the following inscription is carved on a diamond-shaped board nearby in the chancel:—

“Heare below ly the body of Thomas Hill
ande Marget his wife whose children
made this skryne”

and on the opposite side another board with the date 1613.

Parted by a large rosette on the W. side of the upper beam are carved two monsters or dragons, the design presumably derived from the ancient motif (as exemplified on several rood screens of medieval age in Welsh Border churches) of the vine scroll, the emblem of Good, being consumed by the dragon, the emblem of Evil. In this instance there is no vine and the carving is of simple form, perhaps because of the cost of anything more elaborate.

Above on brackets supporting the beam, are traced in profile outline, men's heads, and issuing from the mouth of each is the stem of a plant bearing branchlets and leaves, also what appear to be unclustered fruit of a berry type. On the left hand bracket a bird is shown perched on the stem.

The male and female terminal-pilasters on the posts, said to represent Adam and Eve, are certainly of the same date, and not a modern addition as some authorities assert.

Note the carpenter's marks upon the panels and framing: I, II, etc.

Benches. Two benches in the chancel inscribed “R.K. 1636”. The K stands for Kempt of Chanstone.

Cup. The wooden chalice cup of c. 1625 has a turned stem and wineglass-shaped bowl, with shallow ornamentation and three circles enclosing birds. A rare specimen of this period.

Inscription. On the N. wall of the nave an inscription, uncovered during the restoration of 1950, reads as follows:—

“The King's arms were painted
ANO. DOM. 1664. William Pritchard
John Smith Churchwardens”.

Shields of Arms. The preservation and reconditioning of some of the shields, which are hung on posts and on the screen, of persons or families connected with the parish was entirely due to the Rev. B. Lowther. He states that others of the originals on the 1613 screen were obliterated by paint and whitewash and could not be restored. Consequently several shields representative of more recent times were substituted. The arms are as follows:

Chancel Posts The See of Hereford
 The Dean and Chapter

- Screen Posts
1. Lady Arthur Somerset, d. 1724, wife of Lord Arthur Somerset of Poston, youngest son of Henry, 1st Duke of Beaufort.
 2. Lady De la Riviere Morgan, wife of Sir Thomas Morgan, owner of Chanstone.

- On Screen beginning on the S. end of the E. side
1. Blanche Brydges of Tyberton
 2. Brabazon Lowther
 3. Rev. John Salter
 4. Col. Mountjoy Martyn
 5. Rev. Archer Clive of Whitfield
 6. Herbert Howoth of Whitehouse
 7. Francis Appleyard
 8. Sir Edward Boughton, Bart., of Poston

- On W. side of Screen (former Vicars with date of institution)
1. James Bullock, 1785
 2. Henry Lees, 1831
 3. Beresford Lowther, 1836
 4. William Seward, 1704
 5. John Chelmick, 1690
 6. Thomas Williams, 1750
 7. Robert Lloyd, 1729
 8. William Evans, 1815

- Nave Posts, N. side
1. John Parry of Poston, Initials I.P.
 2. Sir William Russell, Bart., d. 1712
 3. Lord Arthur Somerset of Poston
 4. James Webb of Monnington

- Nave Posts, S. side
1. Rowland Vaughan of Whitehouse, date 1613, Initial R.V.
 2. George Lowther
 3. Laura Lowther
 4. Lord Saye and Sele
 5. Lee-Warner of Tyberton

ADDENDA. A churchwarden's book has been preserved containing the annual accounts (although not complete) of the parish from 1752 to 1793. Tabulated on the first page are the Land Rate Assessments to a value of £681, but the date is unknown as the page has been mutilated. One entry reads "Mr. Seward for the Vicarage £10". This would be William Seward who was Vicar 1704-1729. It is presumed that these particulars were copied from an earlier book as this item long precedes the currency of this book. The mention of

the vicarage tends to confirm the tradition that the present Church Cottages, sometimes called the "Old Vicarage", may have been the residence of the vicar two and a half centuries ago and perhaps for subsequent years. The Church Cottages were built c. 1530 and are situated just to the S. of the churchyard.

The book casts a vivid light on the social and economic conditions in the parish two hundred years ago, but to deduce its full implications would need treatment by an expert familiar with the subject. A brief perusal of the entries or "assessment and disbursements" as they are termed shows that a churchwarden in those days (women are cited as holding office in some years) was responsible for many parochial duties in addition to those relating to the church. The details of these duties are interspersed in one account, sometimes in the office holder's writing, or if unable to write in the hand of a clerk; they include:—

- (1) Levy and collection of the parish rate.
- (2) Payment of house rents to owners of a number of cottages, ranging from £1 to £2.10.0 per annum, on behalf of occupiers unable to pay the rent themselves.
- (3) Issue of cash relief to the poor (usually 1/- per week) and provision of clothing, firewood and other necessities.
- (4) Distribution of charity monies.
- (5) Payments for repair of the roads, for which many cartloads of stone were required annually.
- (6) Rewards for killing of vermin occur frequently, the standard tariff being foxes and fox cubs 1/- each, wild cats 6d. each and hedgehogs 4d. each. A marten is mentioned once, but badgers not at all.

As a sample of the disbursements the following extract from a page for the year 1756 (when Peter Embry was the churchwarden) is typical:—

To washing the Shurplush, Linen and mendings	4/6d.
To Mr. Cornwall's Huntsman for a fox	1/-
To Mr. Dellaheys man for a Catt, 6d. and John Price for one more, 6d.	
To Mr. Scudamore's Huntsman for a large fox	1/-
To Mrs. Web for stone for the Highways	21/-
To. Mr. Jones for mending Vowchurch bridge	4/-

To Bread and Wine and fetching 3/4d.
 Total disbursements for the Church and Highways
 amounted to £7.10.11d.
 Total disbursements for the poor amounted to £35.13.2d.

Signed by: Shuck; Boughton, Thomas
 Williams, vicar, John Nicholas, Anthony
 Stephens, and John Baker, (acting as
 overseers so it would seem.)

Certain named parishioners received constant help. For instance in 1758, one Walter Hunt, probably being incapacitated from doing any active work, was supplied with 2 shirts, britches (sic), shoes, stockings and mending his frock, cloaths (sic) at a cost of 16/1d., and cloth, thread, buttons and all things for a wastcot (sic) at a cost of 4/2d. His relief in cash was 1/- per week.

The glassin (sic) and mending of the church windows seems to have been a recurrent expense, for in 1758 there are three entries, total 14/-, and in the next year two entries of 9/6d. and 14/-.

The reason for so many repairs is not stated, but there can hardly be any doubt that the walls were used for playing fives against, as was the case at the churches at nearby Peterchurch and St. Margarets. There the hooks on which hinged shutters were hung to protect the windows can still be seen on the window jambs. A clue in support of this suggestion is found in the 1760 accounts, when no less than £3 was spent in quarries (glass), lettice wire, timber for making frames, hooks, paint and 6 days work. The frames were evidently fixed over the windows outside, and despite this protection the glass was subjected to constant damage.

A few other extracts, selected from various years, well illustrate local conditions:—

To stoping the oules out of the church	1/-
To the Constable at the bulring	1/-
Pd. for an iron for the stocks	1/6d.
Driving the rooks from Chanston Wood	12/-
To a spining wheel for John Prosser and hurds (flax) for ditto	9/2d.
½ bushels of muncorn, a mixture of wheat and rye sown to be harvested together, were given to Skerm, and others.	
Spent at the meeting (is an unfailing entry)	2/6d.

Another churchwarden's book, dating from 1794 (?) to about 1930, formerly existed but unfortunately cannot now be traced. Its loss is much to be deplored as it contained (if the author's memory is correct) the annual accounts and expenditure on the renovations carried out 1840-1870, chiefly to the interior of the church. A manuscript giving full heraldic descriptions of the Shields of Arms has also been lost.

The parish charities mentioned in 1757 et. sequ. are Landon's, Chelmick's, Hoskyns', Pye's, Hyatt's and Lea's. For the most part the income was distributed in doles, except that in the case of Chelmick's the interest on a sum of £20 out of a total of £105 "for ever might be applied towards the setting one of the poorest children in the said parish an apprentice". John Chelmick was Vicar 1690-1704, and his wife bequeathed part of the money. The same object was to be observed with Hyatt's money £5 per annum) every third year; the Hyatt charity was secured on the Blackmoor Estate (Abbeydore).

The method of investment of the capital sums of these charitable bequests is of interest. Thus Landon's "was payable out of the Widemarsh Moor, Hereford, by Humfrey Howarth, Esq., and others of the neighbours thereof yearly for over twelve poor people of the parish, of which six thereof to be born in the Township of Monnington Stradell". The Landon family owned Monnington Stradell for a few generations. The Humfrey Howarth above was the grandson of Epiphan Howorth (1566-1647) of Whitehouse, Vowchurch.

The churchyard adjoins on the S. side the River Dore, which in Saxon times is said to have formed the frontier between England and Wales, though there were some settlements on the Welsh side. Perhaps then, as now, the river was the boundary between the parishes of Vowchurch and Turnastone.

A bridge existed in 1607, and may have been the successor of the narrow pack-horse bridge, the arch foundations of which can still be seen in the bed of the river downstream from the present bridge.

The tithe barn stood on the other side of the road where the Church of England School is now situated, the site having been acquired in 1872.

The Memorial Hall was built in 1921-2 and up to 1930 the cost inclusive of fittings and furniture was £2,250. The entrance wall and gates were added in 1955 at a cost of £262.