

More about St Mary's



[extract taken from www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/som/vol7/pp18-42]

In the late 7th century there were two churches in Bruton, the larger believed to have been founded by St. Aldhelm (d. 709) and the other dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which housed an altar brought from Rome by Aldhelm and presented by him to King Ine. Both churches were still standing in the earlier 12th century. One of the two churches may have been used by a religious community founded before the Conquest, according to a 16th-century tradition, by Algar, earl of Cornwall. That church probably became the conventual church of the priory (later abbey) of Augustinian canons founded in 1142 by William de Mohun (II), earl of Somerset (d. c. 1155). The other church later became a dependent chapel of the conventual church, which by the late Middle Ages had two more chapels in the parish at Wyke and Redlynch. The status of all three chapels was anomalous after the dissolution of the abbey.

The second of the two churches surviving in the earlier 12th century was granted with its land, tithes, and customs, to the new priory by the founder William de Mohun (II), and before 1166 it was impropriated on condition that the canons took over the pastoral care of the parish. In 1311 when it had its own graveyard it was described as a parish church, but in 1374 it was considered to be a chapel, annexed to the conventual church, when the canons received papal confirmation of their right to serve it either by one of their own number or by a secular chaplain removable at pleasure. During the 15th century it was commonly regarded as a parish church.

At the dissolution of the abbey it was served by curates paid by the impropiator of the rectory. The living remained a sole cure until 1959 when it was united with Lamyatt, and assumed the status of vicarage c. 1969. In 1982 the vicar became also curate-in-charge of North and South Brewham, and in 1985 the Bruton and District team ministry was formed under a team rector and comprised the ancient parishes of Bruton, Lamyatt, Brewham, Pitcombe, Batcombe, Upton Noble, Shepton Montague, and Bratton Seymour. Today, the benefice comprises Bruton (with Wyke Champflower and Redlynch), Bratton Seymour, Brewham, Pitcombe and Shepton Montague.

The impropiators of the rectory presumably appointed as well as paid the curates of Bruton after the dissolution of the abbey. In 1829 Sir Richard Colt Hoare gave his rights as patron of Bruton and other churches and chapels in trust to amalgamate several of the cures, but the plan was not carried out and the patronage of Bruton passed in 1909 from Sir Henry Hugh Hoare, Bt. to family trustees. In 1958 the trustees, in the person of the Contessa Valentina Visconti di Massimo, transferred their rights to the bishop of Bath and Wells. In 1958 the first team rector was presented by Oxford University. The patronage of the team ministry was exercised by a board.

In 1575 the curate of Bruton was paid £15 a year. From 1648 the minister was paid £100 by the impropiator by order of the Commissioners for Compositions. The reputed value of the living c. 1670 was £50. In 1714 Sir Stephen Fox proposed to increase the income of the 'painful vicarage or curacy at Bruton' by £10 a year and paid that sum from the following year. In 1784 and 1812 the living

was augmented by Queen Anne's Bounty and by parliamentary grant, and between 1814 and 1832 from the same sources to meet benefactions in tithes, buildings, and land from the impropiator, Sir Richard Colt Hoare, so that in 1831 the value of the living was £141, which included a stipend of £40 from the impropiator. There was a further augmentation in 1838.

Sir Richard Colt Hoare assigned some tithes to the living in 1814, and between 1813 and 1832 he gave some land for glebe, amounting in 1836 to between 60 a. and 70 a. In 1899 there was just over 7 a. In 1822-3 buildings called Abbey Stables, against the precinct wall of the abbey, were converted into a house for the minister. This house, now known as Abbey House, is no longer a parsonage house and has been sold to King's School.

In 1377 the parish was served by two parochial chaplains; one chaplain was serving in 1417, and two, a parochial chaplain and an anniversary chaplain, in 1450. In 1452 the bishop licensed the prior and canons to serve the parish church and the chapels of Redlynch and Wyke themselves, but none of the four chaplains serving the parish in 1463 seems to have been a canon. About 1532 two curates and a stipendiary priest, all secular clergy, were employed in the parish.

In 1554 two men were reported for withholding 'jewels and stuff, sold to them as surplus during Edward VI's reign, although the queen had given the church cash to the same value, presumably to redeem them. Use of the rosary had been restored by the following year, but two years later the rood had not been replaced. One curate served the church in the early 1570s, and c. 1594 the minister was reported to be serving Pitcombe, leaving prayers in Bruton to be said by a reader or schoolmaster. John Langhorne, master of the grammar school, served the cure by 1600 and until 1608. In 1604 parts of the church were used as a pigeon house and from 1612 or earlier until 1626 or later as a private dwelling. In 1639 the parish was served by a preacher and a curate. Early in 1646 William Parker was admitted to the living after the removal of a man named Burden, who had been imprisoned for using the Book of Common Prayer in services. The parish was also served by Emmanuel Mason of Wyke until his death

in 1653. After the Restoration Parker lost the living but remained in the parish until his death in 1689.

John Randal, curate by 1666 and until 1679 and once suspected by the Major-Generals, John Goldsborough (curate by 1754 until 1768), and William Cosens (curate 1800-31) were also headmasters of the grammar school. In 1784 services were held twice on Sundays, twice each weekday, and also on saints' days. A service in 1789 beginning at 10 o'clock and followed by the communion was attended by a large congregation. Stephen Hyde Cassan (1831-41) probably owed his appointment as curate to shared antiquarian interests with Sir Richard Colt Hoare.

In 1815 there were two services each Sunday with one sermon, and prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays. By 1827 the incumbent also served Wyke. By 1840 sermons were preached at both Sunday services and communion was given at least three times a year. On Census Sunday 1851 the morning adult congregation numbered 220 with 112 children, and the afternoon 234 with 114 children. The average total was 340 in the morning and 410 in the afternoon. The minister also served Redlynch, Wyke, and the chapel at Sexey's Hospital. By 1870 there were two Sunday services, once a month followed by communion, and early communion twice a month, and the choir was surpliced by 1874.

By 1471 there was a fraternity of Our Lady which was still in operation in 1546. In 1510 a church house received spoons and catering equipment. It was held of the abbey in 1539- 40. A parish house was named on the Hoare estate in 1829.



A striking feature of St. Mary's is that it boasts two towers. The north tower is the earlier, probably dating from the mid-14th century with the west tower dating from the mid-15th century. The west tower is described as "The noblest tower in East Somerset" by Kenneth Wickham, and the church is described by Pevsner as 'One of the proudest churches of East Somerset'. The west tower houses the second heaviest ring of 6 in Somerset including the oldest dated bell in the diocese dated 1528.

In stark contrast to the un-plastered walls of the Nave, the mid-18th century chancel is highly decorative.

There is a small chapel dedicated to St. Katherine in the north aisle.



The parish church of St Mary comprises a chancel with north vestry and south organ chamber, a nave with north tower and north and south aisles, and a west tower. Fragments of 14th-century vaulting recognised in the chancel walls are evidence for the style and date of an earlier building. A crypt below the western end of the chancel dates from the later 14th century and is probably contemporary with the north tower, indicating a substantial rebuilding for a prosperous and growing population. A second rebuilding involved the west tower, the nave, and the clerestory, probably in that order, over a period of c. 80 years until the 1520s. The tower is thought to have been designed and begun c. 1450 and to have been completed before 1490. The initials of Richard Bere, abbot of Glastonbury 1493-1525, and William Gilbert, prior and abbot of Bruton 1495-1532, and the mitre and dolphin of Bishop Richard Fitzjames (1505-22) are

on the battlements of the northern clerestory, and the south aisle was evidently being rebuilt in 1517. The rebuilding of the nave involved an incursion into the chancel and the repositioning of screen and aisle chapels, that on the north dedicated to St. Catherine, on the south to Our Lady. The second, extended eastwards, probably became the Berkeley family pew.



The chancel was rebuilt in 1743 at the cost of Sir Charles Berkeley. Plastering the chancel arch and other work was carried out at the same time for the parish by Mr. Cartwright. The chancel seems to have been redecorated and refurnished in the later 18th century, and the north vestry was probably added. Work on the church in 1770 was later said to have been by Mr. Moulton, who was consulted by the parish in 1777. The church was reseated to the designs of James Wilson in 1842, incorporating 17th-century pew ends, and raked seats were built at the west end for children. The south entrance had by then been blocked. The church was extensively restored by R. H. Carpenter in 1872-7 when the north wall and clerestory were rebuilt and the south vestry extended eastwards to form an organ chamber. Additional seating was made for the choir but the children's seats were replaced by pews and the organ removed from the west tower gallery. Figures in the clerestory niches were added by Owen Thomas. The chancel screen of 1620, incorporating medieval material, was probably removed to the tower arch when the chancel was rebuilt. In 1783 it was incorporated into an organ gallery. The present screen was designed by Randall Blacking and built in 1938.

The nave and aisles contain rows of pews. The pews in the nave are Victorian, however a significant number of the pew-ends are Jacobean

The fragment of an early Purbeck marble font dates from the later 12th century. There is some medieval glass on the north side of the clerestory and heraldic glass of the 16th to the 18th century in the chancel. A table tomb at the west end of the nave, of the mid 15th century, has been attributed to William Gilbert and Richard Bruton (d. 1417). In the chancel is the tomb of Sir Maurice Berkeley (d. 1581) and two wives, and tablets to William Godolphin (d. 1636), possibly by Hubert Le Sueur, and to William Berkeley (d. 1749) by Peter Scheemakers. Pieces of embroidered fabric of c. 1500, possibly from a frontal or cope, were displayed (these have since been stolen).

There are six bells and a sanctus bell. The oldest, the fourth, is dated 1528. The fifth, of 1618, is by John Wallis of Salisbury, the second of 1649 by Robert Austen, and the first and third of 1752 by Thomas Bilbie. The sanctus is of the 17th century.

The plate (which is no longer in use and no longer stored in the church) includes two covered cups, a paten, and a flagon by Gabriel Felling, given in 1706, and two gifts made in 1744 comprising a flagon by Thomas Whipham, an alms dish by James Gould, and a pair of candlesticks by George Wickes, all marked with the year of the gifts. The registers begin in 1554 and are complete.