

HISTORY OF ST PETER'S CHURCH

Much of the historical information is taken from A History of the Manor and Parish of Iver by W. H. Ward and K. S. Block (Martin Secker, 1933). Mr W. H. Ward was grandson of Edward Ward and son of William Ward who were successively vicars of Iver from 1803 to 1889. After his death in 1924 his sister, Miss Georgina Ward (Churchwarden from 1924 to 1954), continued to live in Colne House opposite the Church Institute until her death in 1964. The family was therefore actively associated with the parish for over 160 years. A church has stood on the same site for at least a thousand years. The present building incorporates work of the Saxon and Norman periods and of the three main periods of Gothic architecture.

The Saxon Church

A stone church had been built to serve the needs of Iver (then known as Evre, Evreham, Ever or Eure) at least by the later eleventh century. It would have been a small building, with a nave, which still exists as the lower part of the present nave, and a short chancel in which the altar stood. The East end would probably have been square or semi-circular. The position of at least one door, in the wide pier between the two Norman arches on the North side of the nave, was revealed in the course of restoration in 1848. (The Saxon church at Bradford-on-Avon also has a door in the North wall as its main entrance.) The roof would almost certainly have been of thatch and the floor of beaten earth, with a few benches round the walls for the aged and infirm as the only seating.

The Norman Period

The church was enlarged towards the end of the twelfth century. An aisle, which, from some indications in the flintwork of the end walls, was probably narrower than the present aisle, was added on the North side. To do this, the Saxon door and windows were blocked up and two bold semi-circular arches were cut in the North wall. The design of the arches and capitals, and also of the (restored) window at the West end of this aisle, is characteristically Norman. It is probable that the nave roof was continued to cover the aisle, and that it was lit by other windows, similar to that in the West end, in the new North wall. A small recess, with shelf, in the South wall to the right of the present organ case may have been a credence shelf to hold the sacred vessels, or possibly a piscina for washing them. This suggests that there was a subsidiary altar at the East end of the aisle. A small bracket for an image may be seen on the East wall. It is possible, but not certain, that a short tower was built at the West end of the nave during the twelfth century. There are the remains of a small round arched door on the South side of the tower.

We know nothing of the priests who served the church at this period as individuals, but there is evidence that they were rectors in receipt of tithes, who were presented to the living by the Lord of the Manor. The Abbot of

Oseney (near Oxford) claimed a portion of the tithes in virtue of a grant made about 1130, and a charter of Richard I, dated 1194, mentions the gift of the church living as one of the rights belonging to the manor.

The Early English Period

On the evidence of an assessment made in the years 1288—91, which showed that only four churches in the deanery of Burnham were richer, it seems that the rectors of this period were decidedly well off.

The thirteenth century was a notable period of church building in England, and, in common with many other parish churches, Iver was considerably extended and embellished. The chancel was pulled down and replaced by the present one, which is, unusually for a non-collegiate church, almost as long as the nave. The original chancel arch, which was probably narrow and rounded, was replaced by the much larger pointed arch, which still remains.

The roof started from a lower level than at present; the line of the eaves of that period is distinguishable in the walling just above the head of the windows. It was steep in pitch, and may have been tiled; since there were tile works in the area before 1315.

The floor appears to have been covered with encaustic tiles. This type of tile was inlaid with coloured clays burnt in. Some of these original tiles have been preserved in the chancel floor, protected by carpet, at the entrance to the sanctuary, although most of the tiles are Victorian.

The new chancel had three lancet windows on each side. Two remain in the North wall, of which the Eastern one has been blocked and the stonework of the other restored, and one can still be seen in the South wall.

The arcaded recess with sedilia and piscinae belongs to the same period.

At about the same time the South aisle was added by constructing three pointed arches. Like the North aisle, it had an altar at the East end; the platform for this still remains and the recess, possibly a piscina, keeps its place in the South wall. It seems probable also that a complete new tiled roof was carried over the nave and aisles at this time. To complete the transformation a tower was built which rose to about two-thirds of the height of the present tower and was probably roofed with a pyramidal cap or small spire.

The Decorated Period

During the fourteenth century, alterations to the fabric of the church were limited. Two of the lancet windows at the West end of the chancel were replaced by larger windows with tracery characteristic of the Decorated style. The one in the North wall still has the original stonework, (illustrated below) but almost all that of the opposite window dates from the nineteenth-century restoration.

During this period the Black Death swept across the world reaching England in 1348 and returning in 1361. About one third of the population died causing enormous changes to the social and economic structure. The manor court rolls for Iver show that many family names disappeared completely and there are lists of farmsteads left untenanted.

In addition a great change took place in the status of the incumbent and also of the manor of Iver, as an indirect consequence of the foundation of the Order of the Garter by Edward III and the completion of St George's Chapel of Windsor Castle as its chapel. The establishment of the Order required an ample endowment, and manors in various parts of the country were granted to the Dean and Chapter or, to give them their earliest description, the Warden and College of Windsor. Iver, surrendered in 1351, was amongst them. The annual value of the glebe at that time was set at £33 6s 8d, but out of this the College was obliged to maintain a resident priest and the fabric of the chancel. The College agreed with the Bishop of Lincoln, in whose vast diocese, extending from the Humber to the Thames, Iver then was, that in discharge of this obligation it would pay the priest 20 marks (£13 6s 8d) a year by quarterly instalments, and build him a dwelling containing a hall, a kitchen and a chamber. Although he continued to receive fees for marriage and masses for the dead, the effect of those changes was to make the parson a vicar, appointed by the College of Windsor and granted a modest living, instead of a well-to-do rector of independent position as hitherto. The vicar was obliged, out of his stipend, to provide wax, wine, incense and bread for the sacraments and have church books bound.

The Perpendicular Period

We have no documentary records of the next phase of building operations, which left the main structure of the church in the form in which it stands today, but the architectural evidence suggests that it took place in the late fifteenth century. The walls of the chancel were raised and new windows inserted. The East window is a good example of the late Perpendicular style, and the window next to it on the South wall belongs to the same period, but very little of the original stonework survives in either.

The aisles were slightly widened and the walls of both nave and aisles were raised. The upper part of the nave walls was pierced by clerestory windows, square-headed with two lights, three on each side. The steep tiled roofs were replaced by low-pitched leaded structures, the aisles now having separate roofs. The tower was raised to its present height; several courses of 'pudding-stone', which can be clearly seen from the outside, separate the old from the new structure. The present Western doorway was inserted with a window (subsequently replaced in 1898) above it. Although the main structure of the church has changed little since the fifteenth century, the interior would have been very different at that period. In the early years of the reign of Henry VIII it was richly decorated and ornamented. There would have been colour on the walls, where traces remained long after, as well as on the screen and in the windows.

Reference has already been made to altars at the East end of both aisles; one of these was probably the Lady Chapel, referred to in 1523 in the will of William Duffield, which provided an endowment for masses for his soul. Lights would have been kept burning in the chancel and before altars and images; there are records of lights of Our Lady, St Peter, St Christopher, and the Holy Trinity.

Some of the windows carried heraldic devices. For example, the arms of the Blount family, who came into possession of Delaford manor by marriage with a lady of the Ford family, are known to have been shown in one of the chancel windows. Alice Wyld in her will (1520) left 6s 8d for painting the rood loft, where there was a 'doom' painting with a representation of heaven and hell and souls being judged at the Last Judgement (or Doomsday).

Edward VI's Commissioners in 1552 made an inventory of church ornaments, including two silver chalices and patens, two pairs of censers, two candlesticks (there would also have been a three-branch candlestick from a bequest of Alice Wyld), a copper pyx and a pewter basin and ewer. Various vestments of rich material were also listed. (These were what remained after any sequestration by Henry VIII's Commissioners.) We know that, before 1546 when James Annesley left money for the 'sepulture' lights, there was an Easter sepulchre, which was a representation of Christ's tomb.

The host consecrated on Maundy Thursday was stored there until Easter Day. This was probably sited against the North wall of the chancel. In the middle of the chancel stood the large altar tomb of Richard Blount of Delaford, who was Sheriff of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire in 1502 and died in 1508. This remained until the close of the eighteenth century, when it was taken down and the covering slab laid in the floor on the North side of the chancel. Inlaid in this piece of Purbeck marble are brasses of Richard, his wife Elizabeth (nee Ford), their three sons and three daughters.

There may have been a second tomb, possibly to Barnaby Blount and his wife, a drawing of which is held by the College of Arms.

In 1545 Henry VIII forced the College of Windsor to surrender some of its estates, including the manor and rectory of Iver, which were granted in 1547 to Sir William Paget. The vicar's stipend remained unchanged at £13 6s 8d. William Paget had been born at Wednesbury in Staffordshire in 1505, of humble parentage. Educated at St Paul's School and Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and enjoying the patronage of Bishop Gardiner, he rose to a position of considerable influence under Henry VIII. He was employed successfully on a number of diplomatic missions and became in turn a Privy Councillor and Secretary of State. After the death of Henry VIII he continued to prosper under the Lord Protector Somerset, becoming Baron Paget of Beaudesert and a Knight of the Garter. He subsequently fell into disgrace owing to the enmity of Warwick, was fined £6000 and degraded from the Order of the Garter. He was reinstated after the death of Edward VI without fully recovering his former influence. He died in 1563 and is buried at West Drayton, where he had lived.

The Reformation

The internal appearance of the church was subsequently transformed as a result of the changes which followed the Reformation. The side altars were removed, the painted walls whitewashed, and the stained glass taken from the windows. With the enhanced importance of preaching, fixed seats gradually filled more of the floor space, which had previously been clear. The small medieval pulpit was replaced by a larger one. The present pulpit, originally part of a three-decker, dates from 1717.

Apart from the removal of features which were offensive to the Reformers, there seems to have been some neglect of the fabric itself. Reports of visitations in 1612 and 1637 drew attention to the deterioration of the fabric, which was no longer weather tight. The Report of 1637 mentions a steeple and 5 bells and a Sanctus bell. The other main preoccupation of these visitations was to censure various local families for the construction of pews that were too high, and sometimes too prominently placed. At some point galleries were built in the North and South aisles and under the tower to accommodate the growing population for whom church attendance was compulsory. At least one was built in 1771. These must have made the church look dark and cluttered.

The Eighteenth Century

During the eighteenth century the possession of the Churchwardens' Rates Book gives us fuller information about some church activities. At this time the churchwardens had many duties besides the repair and maintenance of the church. They included certain sorts of poor relief, for prisoners in the King's Bench and Marshalsea, for travellers and for disbanded soldiers and sailors. There were payments for killing a wide range of 'vermin' — polecats, stoats, hedgehogs (porpentines), and sparrows.

The payment of fees and expenses for bishops' and archdeacons' visitations are duly recorded. Fees and expenses for bell ringing formed a considerable part of church expenses; new ropes had to be provided annually. Between 1753 and 1756 there were payments to the bell-founder Thomas Swain for casting two bells and rehangng one. The bells were rung frequently; not only for church festivals but for a variety of state occasions and secular celebrations — for royal birthdays, coronations and accessions, the victory of Culloden, 1745, and the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, 1748.

The rectorial manor had been held together with the manor of Iver until 1648, when William, Lord Paget, sold it to Edward Leigh, Thomas Leigh and Richard Finch. It remained with the Leigh family almost to the end of the eighteenth century. In 1800 it was bought by the Rt. Hon. John Sullivan, who came of an Irish family that had established Indian connections. He was Under Secretary of State at War, 1801—5, and had acquired in 1786 the Richings estate, well known during the ownership of Lord Bathurst in the early eighteenth century as an 'Arcadian retreat' where Addison, Pope, Prior, Congreve and Gay were among the guests. Thereafter the rectory remained with the Richings estate, which was bought in 1855 by Charles Meeking from John Augustus Sullivan (son of John).

Recent History

In 1845 the county of Buckingham was transferred from Lincoln diocese to Oxford; in 1862 Iver Heath became a separate parish.

The church underwent substantial restoration in 1847—8, under the direction of Gilbert Scott. Unfortunately Gilbert Scott's report on the building, incorporating his recommendations, was already lost in 1928, and attempts to trace it were unavailing. The Buckinghamshire County Record Office does,

however, have the faculty granted by the Bishop of Oxford in 1847 for repairs and alterations in accordance with the plans and specifications prepared by Sir Gilbert Scott, on grounds of the dilapidation and inconvenience of the church as it was.

More specifically, the faculty provided for taking down all the pews, pulpit, reading desk, altar rails, galleries and staircases. It stipulated that all pews, except for children's, (who were still allotted seats) should be free and open to all. It is therefore clear that the restoration involved the complete refurbishing of the church as well as making good parts of the stonework and the removal of the external porches. These porches, over the West and South doors *seem*, at this date to have been timber-built lattice constructions (*Lipscomb's History of Buckinghamshire*).

Various improvements were carried out in the period 1892—8, at a cost of £1053 raised by voluntary contributions. Alterations in the tower and elsewhere included the replacement of the window above the West door. A clergy vestry was built and new heating installed. A new organ replaced the organ 'with two barrels and six stops, in a gothic case with a crimson damask curtain, brass rail and pillars' given by an anonymous benefactor in 1812. In addition various gifts were made to the church, which included the provision of a new reredos.

In 1904 Colonel Meeking gave a new window (by Kempe) for the East end of the church, dedicated to the memory of his wife and their children. At about the same time he made possible the acquisition of land to extend the old churchyard, to which a new burial ground has since been added.

During the twentieth century there has been no substantial change in the structure of the church, but a good deal has been done to maintain it in a sound and worthy condition. A new East window was given for the South aisle in memory of Sarah Jane Payne. This is known as the 'Comfort' window and has good modern glass. The British Legion Book of Remembrance for the dead of two wars, the pages of which are turned weekly, is found under the Tower. Monuments have been refurbished; some scriptural texts which were painted on the walls in 1913 were removed (in 1966). Stonework has been repaired, gas heating installed, and, most recently, major repairs have been carried out to the roof timbers, seriously weakened by the death-watch beetle. Some of the Victorian pews have been removed to make better use of the building. Electric light was installed to replace the earlier gas chandeliers. The floor of the Nave and aisles was replaced (1986— 1990) by members of the parish under the direction of Mr Ted Roberts.

In many ways St Peter's serves as a model of the English parish church. It illustrates both the evolution of church architecture from the earliest times, and also the social changes in the community it serves, while testifying, through these changes, to the continuity of parish life and worship from before the Norman Conquest to the present day.