

THE ANCIENT CHANCEL OF ST CUTHBERT

More Historical Information

(i) From The Dorset County Magazine # 24. by Cyril N. Chester

Travellers passing along the A30 which runs through part of the parish of Osborne, two miles east of Sherborne, will see the ancient chancel of old St Cuthbert's Church. This actually stands just over the boundary in the parish of Castleton.

The chancel, site of the nave and the churchyard are fenced by iron railings and surrounded by a small piece of glebe land, the whole being enclosed by a stone wall. About 1860 the old chancel and church were forsaken and a new church built in the village which was consecrated in June 1862; some of the stones from the old church were used in the erection of the new building.

Letters sent by the Bishop of Salisbury in 1860 to the incumbent, Rev. W. H. Lyon, give some explanation for the action taken at the time:

"Dear Mr Lyon,

"I have heard with great pleasure that there is a prospect of your attempting to get a new church at Osborne. I was very grieved to see what a sad condition it was in, but I felt sure that all your parishioners, and you, would soon resolve to take some steps for its restoration, or rather for rebuilding it. My present letter is:

"One to remind you that money may be raised on the rates, and paid off in 20 years. This is a most fair arrangement, especially in the case of those who have no permanent interest in a parish, as for instance, tenant farmers.

"Two, and to suggest to you well to consider whether it might not be advisable to remove the church to a site nearer the parsonage, the schools, and most of the population. I could license you to perform the services of the church in some unconsecrated building when your works commence, but I should be most unwilling to do so before.

"With all good wishes, I remain, Mr Rural Dean, Your Faithful Brother, W. K. Sarum."

The second letter is from Archdeacon Buckle at Upwey Rectory, Dorchester. It is dated 17 December 1860.

"My Dear Sir

"I lately made, as you are aware, an official inspection of the parish church of Osborne. I found it in such a state of dilapidation, both externally and internally, that I was very unwilling to give any directions to the churchwardens as to the reparation of a building, which it appeared to me, nothing short of rebuilding could put in a fit and becoming condition. I am not aware whether the churchwardens have made any more in the matter since my visit, but if not I would earnestly press upon you the necessity of consulting with them, and the laded proprietors on the subject, when I have no doubt some definite arrangement will be made for effecting a work which I believe all will acknowledge to be necessary.

"I remain, my dear sir, yours faithfully, R. B. Buckle, Archd."

In 1931, Rev. Alan Williams became rector and he immediately made efforts to raise funds for the rest having the advice of Mr. A. R. Powys, secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. By 1936 the work of restoration now completed, services of thanksgiving were held on Trinity Sunday, 7 June, with the Bishop of Sherborne (Dr. G. B. Allen) and many of the local clergy attending, and once again, after a lapse of 75 years, Holy Communion was celebrated in the chancel. A service is now held on Trinity Sunday each year.

In the 13th century control of churches passed from the lord of the manor to the monasteries, the monasteries being responsible for the chancel and lay people for the nave. According to Dean Chandler's register, Osborne was a Chapel of Ease to Sherborne Abbey on this spot in 1405, and the present chancel was added by John Dunster, sacrist of the abbey, and Abbot Meyer in 1533.

Tradition has it that John Dunster was the first rector of Osborne and was buried at the entrance to the chancel. If so his tomb may be seen on the right of the west entrance, a flat stone, upon which the figure of a cross on three steps is carved; this was exposed during excavation of the nave.

Viewing the chancel from outside we see the west entrance is a blocking up of the chancel with a reset 15th century doorway. Above this is an early 16th century moulded beam instead of a chancel arch, showing the mortices for the rood loft. Reset in the gable are two of the nave 15th century windowheads discovered in the rectory garden.

The bell turret used to stand clear of the gable but it was thought to be insecure and was lowered at the restoration. The ancient bell is probably 15th century.

On the north side is a window of four lights now blocked. The lintel bears a Latin inscription which, translated, reads, "Pray for the good estate of Master John Dunster, Sacrist of Sherborne, who caused this work to be made." Flanking it are shields, one with initials "I.D.", perhaps of John Dunster. Those of the other side have the arms of Horsey.

Coming to the east end is another similar window with an inscription on the lintel in Latin which, translated, reads "Pray for the good estate of Master John M. Abbott of Sherborne, now Lord of this Manor 1533" Flanking the head are shields bearing a crozier between the initials "I.M." and the arms of Sherborne Abbey. Above the windowhead is a shield of the Royal Tudor Arms with a crown. The gable has a cross with a weathered figure of Christ. On the south side is a similar 16th century window without inscription or shield, and a small doorway. Inside the chancel, set in modern panels, are 15th century tiles found when the site was cleared to expose the foundations of the nave. The beautiful oak pulpit has the date 1639 carved on it, and the altar rails are of the same period.

The 17th century communion table, found in the schoolroom where it had been used as a table, now stands on a large slab, probably the ancient altar. Broken fragments of the font, gathered up from a nearby garden, are also here. It is recorded in the churchwarden's account that the ten commandments and creed were written at a cost of one shilling per score of letters.

Drawings showing how the old church looked hang in the chancel.

The roof is of the west country type.

In the floor are two memorial slabs. There are many payments in the churchwarden's account "for work on the tower" which probably stood at the west end of the nave.

The register dates from 1567.

To the south of the chancel, outside the churchyard fence, are two large elm trees surrounded by iron railings five feet high, set in a heavy stone plinth. Within is a headstone with the following inscription: "In Memory of Mr. Robert Goadby, late of Sherborne, Printer, who departed this life, August 11th, 1778, Age 57. Death is a Path that Must be Trod, If Man would ever Come to God. The Fir-Tree aspires to the Sky and is clothed with Everlasting Verdure; Emblem of the Good, and that everlasting Life which God will Bestow on Them. Since Death is the Gate to Life, the Grave should be Crowned with Flowers. Here also lies Rachel, his Wife, who died March 30th, 1798."

By his own particular desire a fir-tree, and a variety of perennial flowers were planted upon his grave. The fir-tree has gone and the elms are a worthy substitute today. Robert Goadby was a great lover of nature. To the vicar and churchwardens of Sherborne he left £4, for the poor to be distributed annually, and the sum of £2 to the vicar of Sherborne to preach an annual sermon on the first Sunday in May "on the wisdom and goodness of God in the works of creation."

He had an extensive business as a printer and bookseller and was the author of many books and pamphlets. Hutchin's "History of Dorset" tells us "His press was numerous, almost all of them of a moral or religious tendency, a conductor of several miscellaneous periodicals, publications, which were greatly approved, and from which he carefully excluded everything of an immoral or irreligious nature. *The Sherborne Mercury*, his weekly paper, was "uniformly conducted in a manner friendly to the liberties of Englishmen." *The Western Gazette* had its origin in *The Sherborne Mercury*.

(ii) From *Country Life* September 11, 1942

THE SMALLEST CHURCH?

Sir, - I have often heard that the church at Osborne, near Sherborne, Dorset is the second smallest in England. Recently you published a picture of that at Culbone, but Osborne is smaller. It is 21ft. by 12ft., and was built in 1533 by the last Abbot of Sherborne. It was a fowl-house in 1931, and has recently been restored by the Rector, the Rev. Alan Williams, with the approval of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings. It has a typical West Country wagon vault on oak rafters.

- F. R. WINSTONE, *Bristol*.

(iii) From *The Western Gazette* June 7, 1936.

ANCIENT CHANCEL RENOVATED WORK OF ST. CUTHBERT'S AT OSBORNE BISHOP AT THANKSGIVING SERVICE.

Upon the completion of the renovation of the interior of Old St Cuthbert's chancel at Osborne – the second smallest occasionally-used church in England – services of worship and thanksgiving were held in it on Sunday.

The work has been carried out by Mr. Alfred J. Stainer, of Sherborne, who received detailed instructions from the late Mr. A. R. Powys, towards the end of 1935. The cost has been £62 15s, which does not include the repair of the beautiful oak pulpit of 1639, or the excavation of the site of the XIV century nave. This has revealed the size of the original church, and a tiled pavement of the same period. Portions of the ancient font have been found in a neighbouring garden, and the tympanum of a fine mural monument, which was buried in the wall of the glebe.

The Rector, the Rev. Alan Williams, has been the leading figure in the restoration ever since he came to the parish in 1931 and found the chancel desecrated and uncared for – in fact serving as a fowl house. Gradually the money was acquired and the renovation work was done. A sum of about £150 has been spent, of which £11 is still owing.

FIRST FOR 75 YEARS

Holy Communion, at which the Rector was the celebrant, on Sunday morning, was the first celebration to be held in St. Cuthbert's for 75 years. Since 1861 it had not been used for services other than funeral services, and apparently since 1914, when the Home Office closed the graveyard for burials, the chancel had been unused, though Mr. Williams has held a service outside it every Trinity Sunday since he has been at Osborne.

On Sunday afternoon, in the presence of a large gathering of parishioners and others, the form of service prepared for the opening of restored churches was used.

The Bishop of Sherborne, preceded by the Churchwardens and clergy, walked from the old Post-office to the west door of St Cuthbert's. The Bishop knocked thrice on the door, and after it had been opened by the Churchwardens, prayers were offered and the service continued. About 30 people were able to be inside the building and the remainder joined in the service from outside.

The Bishop gave an address; the Rector also took part in the service, and other clergy present were Archdeacon Barnett, Canon S. H. Wingfield Digby, Rev. Arthur Field, and the Rev. W. M. Askwith (rural dean). At the second evensong Canon Wingfield Digby was the preacher.

Interesting copies, by Miss M. V. Williams, of drawings made of Osborne Church by a London Architect, Mr. J. Buckler in 1802 can be seen in the chancel. The drawings, which were contained in a book discovered by Mr. John Rickman in the British Museum, show what an interesting and beautiful little Parish Church Osborne once possessed. This was pulled down in 1861.

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Restoration of the Chancel
of the old Parish Church of S. Cuthbert

Trinity Sunday, June 7th, 1936.

SERVICES

8 a.m. Holy Communion.
11 a.m. Mattins and Holy Communion.
3 p.m. First Evensong and Sermon.

PREACHER:
The Rt. Rev. The Lord Bishop of Sherborne
(Dr. Allan)

6.30 p.m. Second Evensong and Sermon,
PREACHER:
The Rev. Canon S. H. Wingfield Digby, M.A.
(formerly Vicar of Sherborne)

OFFERTORIES AT ALL SERVICES WILL BE DEVOTED TO THE
RESTORATION FUND. ABOUT £45 STILL NEEDED.

ALAN WILLIAMS, Rector.

THE PRIORY OF SAINT FRANCIS, DEANE ABBAY, DORSET.

at the Rectory lawn after the service

(v) Two further items from *The Western Gazette* May 1937 & 13 August 1937

**A DORSET CHURCH. RESTORING ST. CUTHBERT'S, OBORNE.
SMALLEST OCCASIONALLY-USED CHURCH IN ENGLAND**

The holding of the annual Trinity Sunday service at St. Cuthbert's, Osborne, on Sunday provides opportunity for reference to the restoration – now almost completed – of this, the smallest occasionally used church, and one of the smallest churches in England.

Largely through the instrumentality of the former Rector, Rev. Alan Williams, and with the approval of the Society of the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, this notable old building – which had become disused, but which it was felt should not be allowed to fall into further disrepair – has been restored to such a condition that it ought to stand for an indefinite period.

Altogether about £175 has been spent on the restoration and practically the entire cost has been met. The remainder of the scheme consists of the preservation, for exhibition in the chancel, of the best of the ancient tiles which have been found during the excavations in the nave of the old church, and the restoration of the old font, the remains of which have been found in a neighbouring garden.

About £10 or £15 will cover the cost of the completion of the whole work, and subscriptions will be gratefully received by the Rev. Alan Williams, who is continuing his interest in the scheme.

The work has been excellently done by Mr Stainer, of Sherborne, and much interest and help have been given by Messrs. C. W. Pike and C. N. Chester (the Churchwardens), Mr Wilfred Cheeseman, who is acting as caretaker, and others.

Any who wish to inspect this interesting example of ancient architecture may do so by obtaining the key from Mr Cheeseman's house nearby.

Services have been held at St. Cuthbert's on Trinity Sunday, for the past seven years. Sunday's services were conducted by the Rev. W. M. Askwith (vicar of Sherborne and Rural Dean), in the afternoon and the Rev. Alan Williams in the evening, the Rev. W. F. Carpenter (rector of Osborne and Poyntington), being present on each occasion.

AN OLD DORSET CHURCH ST. CUTHBERT'S CHANCEL AT OSBORNE "SAVED FROM COMPLETE OBLITERATION"

The restoration of the chancel of Old St. Cuthbert's Church at Osborne, near Sherborne, the little sanctuary, so familiar to travellers on the London-Exeter road, has been practically completed, under the advice of the late Mr. A. R. Powys, of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings.

The work has cost £176, of which £132 was received in donations, the remainder being from service collections, visitors' box, etc.

The Rev. Alan Williams, of Clatcombe House, Sherborne, until recently rector of Osborne, who has been responsible for the restoration work, states that only two things remain to be done: - (i) The placing of the best of the XV. Century tiles in cases to be cared for in the chancel. These were discovered when clearing the site to expose the foundations of the nave; (2) the putting together of portions of the broken font, which were found in an adjoining garden. The cost will be about £10.

In 1936 the late Mr. John Rickman, who gave his young life this year for the cause of freedom in Spain, unearthed in the British Museum a book of drawing of Wilts and Dorset churches by John Buckler and his son, John Chessel Buckler, in 1802. A copy of these was made by Miss Mary V. Williams at the Museum and is hung in the chancel.

We now know, continues Mr. Williams, the size and appearance of the XIV. Or XV. Century nave, which was allowed to fall down in 1861, when the present less beautiful church was erected further up the valley. In the wall of the surrounding

glebe, a carved XVII. Century plinth of Ham Hill stone was unearthed. The drawing of the church from the S.W. showed it was the top of a tablet on the west wall of the nave. The rest of the tablet, with its inscription, was destroyed.

“Each year on Trinity Sunday since 1931 services have been held in the chancel. What further use can be made must be left to future rectors of Osborne – but at all events a consecrated building hallowed by the prayers and worship of many generations of Osborne folk, has been saved from complete obliteration.”

(vi)

A LITTLE DORSET CHURCH.
OLD ST. CUTHBERT'S AT OBORNE
A RENOVATION SCHEME

To the Editor of the *Western Gazette*.

SIR, - Travellers by road or rail between Sherborne and Templecombe may have noticed that scaffolding has been erected at the west end of Old St. Cuthbert's Chancel at Osborne. This shows that the second stage in the preservation of this ancient structure has been commenced. The west wall, which leans badly, is being re-erected and the turret, with its 14th Century bell, restored. This will cost about £50. More than half this amount is in hand. When this is finished there will still remain the repair of the barrel roof and ceiling. For this another £50 will be needed. The work is being carried out under the guidance of Mr. A. R. Powys, of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings.

The funds have come in very slowly, and I am anxious to see it completed. I have been told that this preservation is waste of money, but I cannot feel that it is right to allow a consecrated building, which was regularly used by Osborne parishioners between 1533 and 1861, to fall into ruins. Will those to whom the little building is familiar help me to carry out the preservation? Every Trinity Sunday (which falls this year on June 16th) an open-air service is held at 3 p.m. in the little graveyard, and by that date I trust I may receive sufficient assistance to relieve me of the present financial burden. Donations may be sent to me, the Manager of the Westminster Bank, Sherborne, or given at the collection on June 16th.

Yours faithfully,

ALAN WILLIAMS

Osborne Rectory, Sherborne.

There was a chapel of ease to Sherborne Abbey on this spot in 1405, according to Dean Chandler's Register. It was dedicated to St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, who died in 687. In 1533 the present chancel was added by John Dunster, sacrist of the Abbey, in the time of Abbot Meyer. Tradition has it that John Dunster was the first rector of Osborne and was buried at the entrance to the chancel, if so, his tomb has recently been uncovered and repaired. The nave contained four windows and a porch. Four window heads were discovered in the Rectory garden in 1931, and have been

removed to the south side of the chancel. The nave was pulled down in 1861, and some of the stone forms part of the new church situated half a mile up the valley. The site of the nave was used as a burial ground until 1914, so the foundations of the building are lost. The chancel contains an oak pulpit, altar rails and altar table, all of the date of 1639. The altar table was used in the infants' school-room.