

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2018

Berkshire Churches

A selection of historical, unusual and sometimes hidden, Berkshire Churches and churchyards (and near neighbours) were described when Catherine Sampson gave a fascinating illustrated talk. Churches are often the oldest surviving buildings in a community, being at the hub of the village or town - not necessarily in an ecclesiastical context. The most interesting were not the big churches, (such as St George's, Windsor), but the tiny ones - many being 'out of the way', which can be difficult to find.

The first group of churches Catherine described were those where their location told the story of their history. Shifford church, for example, is surrounded by fields, and only able to be reached by a footpath, whilst St Oswald's at Widford (also in south Oxfordshire, near Burford) is another that stands in the 'middle of no-where'. "A gem of a medieval church", it is now owned by the Church Conservation Trust, as there no community for it to serve, or to support it. It has been like that since the 14th century. The fields around it have small 'hillocks' - the remains of the 'house platforms' of the village that once existed there. Probably, the village moved away following the devastation of the Black Death, maybe because the villages thought it would benefit them to live in towns, or possibly if the Lord of the Manor, as landlord, thought it more profitable to have sheep in the fields than for people to live there. The result has been that the church, consisting of a chancel with a bell above, has had no extensions, no Victorian alterations, and retains its medieval wall paintings, with St Christopher opposite the door and others in the chancel. Open 7 days a week, it is easy to walk to - once it is found! St Thomas's at East Shefford, in the Lambourn valley. Being on the Berkshire Downs, sheep can be found grazing around it. Again, untouched by later alterations, it also belongs to the Church Conservation Trust, and is another small medieval church containing wall paintings and monuments to the Fettiplace family. There is no electricity, lighting being by candelabra. It also contains a small staircase that would have given access to a rood screen, so that the cross and statues on top of the screen could be changed depending on the church season. Such screens were removed, and staircases blocked off, in the reign of Edward VI - the staircase is small - such that only 5 or 6 year olds would have been able to use it. The Fettiplace memorials in the church show that they were a very rich family. Such were believed to have to spend longer in purgatory after their death, but by paying for a minister to pray for them they could reduce that time. They probably also paid for mourners to attend - symbolically feeding and clothing the poor. A gate in the churchyard is all that remains of a picket fence that once surrounded the church. Standing in isolation, the sign asking users to shut the gate seems somewhat superfluous! Visitors need to remember to collect the key from a box back along the footpath to unlock this church. The tiny church of St Margaret's, just along the Downs at Catmore, is always open -its key having been lost in Tudor times.

A different reason for a church not being surrounded by village homes arose at Nuneham Courtenay. The road through the village is straight, with neat rows of identical cottages alongside. This is unusual - villages usually 'grow' over time, buildings reflecting the style current when they were built. About 1¼ mile from the road is Nuneham Courtenay House. Its predecessor was bought by the Harcourt family, who lived there for a couple of generations, but having outgrown it by the 1750s, wanted a more palatial mansion set in landscaped grounds. The problem was that it stood in the centre of a medieval village. The solution was to build a new (the present) village, have Capability Brown lay out the grounds, and build a new house. Removing the village also meant demolishing the church, which was replaced in 1760 by one in the style of a classical temple. It was convenient for the Harcourt family - but not villagers. A new village church was built for them in the Victorian era, the classical temple becoming a private chapel for

the Harcourts. With falling church attendance in the late 20th century, the Victorian church became redundant. The chapel is another now belonging to the Church Conservation Trust - although to gain access, visitors need to ask at the reception area of the House. Another reason for the location of a church is that for St Frideswide's at Frilsham (between Theale and Newbury). It stands (unusually) in a circular churchyard, and almost certainly is a Christian use of a former pagan site.

A second group of interesting churches are those that are intertwined with history. St Georges at Hatford, near Faringdon, The Seymours and Dudleys were two powerful - and opposing - families in Tudor England. Anne Seymour was the niece of Jane Seymour, the 3rd wife of Henry VIII, and it was hoped that the marriage of 11 year old Anne to John Dudley would enable a truce between the two, but it did not last. When (Catholic) Queen Mary came to the throne, John Dudley (with many of his family) were imprisoned. Although Mary relented, John died soon after, leaving the 17 year old Anne a widow. She then married Sir Edward Unton, of Faringdon, in Hatford Church. - probably to keep the marriage secret from Queen Mary. Another of the Dudleys was married at St Michael's, Cumnor Robert Dudley was 18 when he married the 17 year old Amy Robsart. He was also imprisoned in the Tower of London, but emerged stronger both physically and politically than his contemporaries. Robert Dudley became a close friend and special confidante of Elizabeth I, and it was rumoured that he planned to get rid of his wife, and marry Elizabeth. It seems likely that he and Amy never lived together, she staying with various friends, by 1560 at Cumnor Palace. On the day of Abingdon Fair she, unusually, asked all the servants to go together, leaving her alone in the house. When they returned, she was found at the foot of the stairs with a broken neck. Gossip suggested Dudley was responsible, but he was not in the area at the time, and a Coroner's Inquest resulted in an open verdict. The resulting scandal, however, meant that Dudley could no longer be as close to Elizabeth as previously. It was said that Amy's ghost haunted both the church and the house - and when Dudley passed by one day, she told him that he would "join her in days" - and he died in his sleep a day or so later. The Palace was haunted by her until demolished, and she continued, it is said, to haunt the church, until 6 ministers arrived from Oxford to exorcise the ghost and drive it into the hills, from where it fell into a pond and drowned - and there have been no problems with it subsequently. A different historical association concerns St John the Baptist at Burford. This was a very rich church in the Cotswolds woollen territory. In 1649, during the Civil War, Charles I had been executed and Cromwell had seized power. Two groups of the Levellers - republicans who did not agree with Cromwell's thinking - arranged to meet at Burford. They were met by members of the New Model Army, who were loyal to Cromwell, and rounded up some 340 of the Levellers, and locked them in the church. When the loyalists returned a few days later, they found only 20 left in the church - they had forgotten that the church had other doors through which their 'captives' could escape!

Catherine finished her talk by mentioning a number of other churches to 'look out for' from Slough in the east to Aldworth in the west, some with unusual architectural features, others with unusual monuments to former inhabitants, and others connected to noted families.

Many of the Churches described by Catherine are now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, and an 'index' page to churches in their care (which lists details of how to reach several of the ones mentioned can be found at: <https://www.visitchurches.org.uk/visit/church-listing.html>

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, March 13th, when the Society will hold its AGM, and details of the programme for the coming year will be revealed, the first meeting of which will be on Tuesday 10th April.