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DISCOVERING....

Devon's Historic Churches



St. John the Baptist
Plymtree

April 2023

St John the Baptist, Plymtree

History



The Yew Tree in the churchyard is officially recognized as one of the Great Trees of East Devon. It is thought to be about 1100 years old (i.e. around Saxon times) and could well have been in existence before the church was on its present site. This means that when the first Rector was appointed to Plymtree in 1261 the tree would have been nearly 400. Suggestion has it that it was planted to replace an earlier Saxon holy tree and this magnificent tree gave Plymtree its name. In 1998 its girth was measured at 655cm at 90cm from the ground.

Saxon origins

As yews were often planted in churchyards, this one from Anglo-Saxon times is one of three visual pieces of evidence of a church preceding the present medieval structure. Inside the Church was uncovered a Saxon arch and the other is a blocked up doorway that is pre-conquest in the north wall. At first the Anglo-Saxon archways appears to be unusually tall but in fact the doorstep is approximately 60cm above the present floor as the floor was lowered when the church was rebuilt. The remains of the Anglo-Saxon north wall were found within the present medieval walls.

Materials used in the building of the Church include volcanic rock, Bath stone and mainly Beer stone. In the 1890s extensive repair and strengthening of the tower was carried out under the direction of the conservator, George Fellowes Prynne. Iron bars reinforced the walls, and a new bell frame was installed along with a sixth bell. At this time cement was commonly used and the back of the niche containing the statue was given a coat of cement. It is thought that the head of the baby Jesus had already fallen off during 19th century.

Hunky punks can be seen on the corners of the tower

Statue of Madonna and Child

On the exterior of the tower is a statue of a Madonna and Child, a rare survivor of the Reformation. When the statue was restored in 1991 a number of stones, a leather ball, and a spinning top were found behind the statue, along with the Madonna's stone crown. The crown was subsequently returned to the head of the madonna! It is possible that these missiles were hurled at the statue, trying unsuccessfully to destroy it. Another idea is that it was used as a target for games of Eton Fives by local youths.



Stone cross

In the churchyard is a Celtic preaching cross made of Dartmoor granite. The cross head was discovered in the 1890s in the foundations of the Church House when it was cleared after a fire, and the shaft found acting as a gatepost for the rectory which burnt down in 1911. The cross was reassembled and dedicated in 1898 to the memory of the Rector George Gutteres (1892 - 1897)



Inside the Church

Rood Screen



Dated to the late 15th century, it is claimed to be 'one of the finest' in Devon. But was it originally here? It looks unlikely, given the awkward arrangement by the south aisle window. However, an expert on the subject thinks it was built for Plymtree. It fits the width of the church and the location of the rood stair, the suggestion is that some woodwork is missing at the window end, which would have made it look less awkward. The Stafford and Bouchier knots are repeated in bosses in the fan vaulting, the link probably being through Isabel, the widow of Humphrey Stafford, earl of Devon who later married Sir Thomas Bouchier

The magnificent colours and carving of the screen are matched by the panels below depicting 34 saints. The first two panels, by the Rood stair, and the panels on each door into the chancel are older than the rest and may have been done at the same time as the screen. The rest are later. The first panel to the right of the

chancel doors presents another mystery. This represents the Virgin and Child with the three Wise Men. It was suggested by the Revd. Mozley that the Wise men represented Henry VII, Prince Arthur and Cardinal Morton. This seems unlikely, but he wrote a book on the subject *Henry VII Prince Arthur and Cardinal Morton* (London, 1878), for those wishing to explore the idea further the book is available to read on line

Alabaster carving

At the west end of the south aisle is a wonderful 16th-century alabaster panel set on the wall. This is thought to be Flemish, and depicts in minute detail a scene of the risen Christ and Roman soldiers. This panel was originally part of the altar until it was moved to the back of the church in the early 20th century. All arms, including those of Christ, were removed by vandals with a hammer and chisel some years ago though it has now been restored

In the tower

In the tower there is a large coat of arms which say G11R. Coat of arms is really Stuart and this was originally C11R but in order to save money when times were hard CIIR became GIIR for George II It was originally on top of the rood screen then on the wall and even moved to the school before ending up in the tower.

Oak Pews

Some date back 400 years and some have come from other churches, The carved ends include carvings of a pomegranite and a tudor rose indicating the marriage of Henry and Catherine of Aragon

Font and pulpit



The 15C Beerstone octagonal font has an unusual 17C oak ogee cover decorated with the figure of a dove

The Pulpit was moved into the centre of the chancel because the preaching of the word was more important than icons . Above would have been a sounding board so that all of the words of the preacher could be clearly heard. The original pulpit would probably have had three tiers

Famous characters

Richard Smart (Smerte) 1400 - 1478/9

Father Christmas originated here in Devon! Smart was rector of Plymtree from 1435-1477 and vicar-choral at Exeter Cathedral c.1428-1466. He composed a number of carols, including the Boar's Head carol, we might imagine boar roaming the nearby woods. Possibly less well known is his Christmas carol. Smerte has 'Sir Christmas' announcing the birth of Christ, this is the first time, as far as it is known, that Christmas was made into a person – hence Father Christmas beginning in Devon.

He is reputed to have retired in 1477 on a pension of £4 a year!



Nicholas Mon(c)k



Nicholas Mon(c)k was educated Wadham College, Oxford and in 1620, Rector of St John the Baptist Plymtree 1647-1656. Monk appears to have been sympathetic to the Royalist cause but convinced Oliver Cromwell's Tryers that he was loyal to their doctrine; the fact that he was the brother of General George Monk, who supported Cromwell, probably helped too.

Monk acted as curate to Thomas Payne, his father-in-law and Rector of Plymtree, then, after Payne's death, in 1647 he became Rector and was authorised to preach sermons (a reading minister was only authorised to read homilies during this period). His skills of diplomacy were put to use as a messenger for the Royalists when he was recruited to visit his brother and determine if General Monk would lend his support for the Restoration. In 1660 he was rewarded for his service to the King when, with the support of Charles II, he was elected Bishop of Hereford; then, shortly before his death in 1661 he became Provost of Eton. Monk's body lay in state for 3 days before being interred in St Edmond's Chapel at Westminster Abbey where there is a monument erected by his grandson in 1723.

John Land

Used to sit in front of the pulpit, J and I 1697 was the date of the death of John Land. His family lived at Woodbeare, He died young, owning 1 The Strand in London which was let to the founders of Childs Bank. When he died he left his money to various charities including this church to make a cushion for the priest to sit on, and two sets of Communion silver

Joseph Dornford

1759 advowson (right to appoint the Priest) was bought by Oriel College, Oxford and subsequently a number of the rectors were members of the Oxford Movement. Joseph Dornford was one of them and was responsible for bringing the alabaster from France. United Reform Church was built as a result of members of the congregation who were unhappy with Dornford and his larger than life personality

Thomas Moz(s)ley

Biographer of Cardinal Newman and married to John Newman's sister Harriet. He financed the raised walkway at the entrance to the church. He also built the school and the school house and paid the salary of the teacher. He was also a regular writer for 'The Times' newspaper.

Lt Gen Sir Edward Schreiber (30 April 1890 – 8 October 1972)



He was born in London on 30 April 1890, the son of Brigadier-General Acton Lemuel Schreiber. He was a senior British Army officer who served in both the First World War and the Second World War. In the latter he commanded the 45th Infantry Division, V Corps and the British First Army.

Educated at Wellington College, Berkshire and the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, from where he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant into the British Army's Royal Field Artillery on 23 December 1909. He was promoted to Lieutenant on 23 December 1912, and served in the First World War with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the Western Front, earning the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) in December 1914, the citation for which reads: *"Very gallant conduct on 14th September in saving horses which had become entangled in blocked road, and man-handling guns away from a position which had become untenable from a very heavy shell fire, continuing to work, although wounded."*

In May 1942 Schreiber was raised to the rank of temporary Lieutenant-General, and in July that year he was appointed to command the British First Army. Schreiber had to resign after only two months, however, as he developed a kidney problem and became unfit for active service. He became a Knight of the Venerable Order of Saint John in 1944.

On his retirement he was appointed Deputy Lieutenant of Devon in 1948, and later Lord Lieutenant of the County Devon: Lieut.-General Sir Edmond Charles Acton Schreiber, K.C.8., D.5.0., of Hayne House, Plymtree.

His association with the church at Plymtree seems to be that he lived out his retirement in Plymtree at Hayne House, and was later buried at the church, as later was his wife Phyllis. His final act was to present the church with another (larger) Bible

Phyllis Schreiber (nee Barchard) died in 1977 in Sussex but both are buried in the churchyard at Plymtree.

Monuments erected in the main churchyard since 1899

Outside the church

131. "Lieut.General Sir Edmond Schreiber, KCB, DSO, DL, of Hayne, 1890 – 1972. "And his beloved wife Phyllis, 1889 – 1977."

(Penelope) Gertrude Veysie

Gertrude Veysie , daughter of Rev Daniel Veysie, was born in Plymtree in 1807. She trained as a nurse in St John's House in London. In 1854 Florence Nightingale went to Crimea with 6 St John's nurses. In 1855 the Rev and Mrs McKenzie arrived in Therapia with Gertrude as one of her 3 assistants. In gratitude for her work Gertude was presented ,along with Florence Nightingale , with a diamond brooch.

The rare Gold Ottoman nursing award brooch was engraved "Presented by H. I.M. The Sultan to Miss Veysie in acknowledgment of her services in the British army in the East 1856". On her return Gertrude nursed at St John's House and died in Hampshire aged 83.



A number of other members of the Veysie family have headstones in the churchyard, amongst them that of Mary Anne Veysie who was a well loved teacher in the village for 35 years. Her headstone declares that she was *"loved and respected for her gentleness and devotion to her duties, died lamented 12th Febry 1876, aged 68 "*

Members of the Group:

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Val Frood
Chris Fuller
Liz Grey
Stuart Jones
Marilyn Medforth
Jackie Moran

Peter Moran
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Photographs were taken by Greg Arnold. Val Frood, Stuart Jones, Marilyn Medforth, Jackie Moran, Ann Payne, Jenny Roberts. Lynda Pidgeon,



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