

HISTORY OF THE PARISH CHURCH

All Saints', Wootton Courtenay, is well worth visiting. In about 1103, the Norman owner of the manor of Wootton, William FitzHumphrey, gave the advowson of the church to Lonlay, a small French priory then being founded at Stogursey. However, the earliest recorded rector of the parish is John de Wamburg instituted in 1311. Of preceding rectors nothing is known, although the oldest parts of the existing church, the east wall and window of the chancel and lower part of the tower, date from about 1250. Henry VI dissolved some small 'alien priories' and used their proceeds to found centres of education; in the case of Lonlay, Eton. Hence, until recently, the rectors of Wootton have had to be chosen by Eton College. Some have been men of distinction and generosity, notably James Chapman, the first Bishop of Colombo. In the mid 15th century the nave was reroofed and the north aisle added. From 1525 -1540 the nave was refenestrated and the lovely east window of the north aisle added. In 1996 this window was restored.

In the floor of the nave a well-cut stone names two sons of a Royalist rector, John Morley, who is said to have suffered much during the Civil War. Next to it, nearer the screen, is the gravestone of Mary Siderfin, who died in 1717, aged 69, with the rhyme:

“Here you may see where I do ly
As you be now so once was I
As I am now so shall you be
Prepare therefore to follow me”

The church was reseated in the mid 19th century, the north wall was fenestrated and the chancel largely rebuilt and its east window restored. The porch was rebuilt and the upper stage of the tower added. A drawing in the library at Taunton Museum shows our church in 1639 with a shorter, castellated tower. Worthy of note are the ceiled wagon roofs with wall plates and bosses, which were originally brightly coloured, the bosses in the north aisle being particularly large and fine. Mediaeval tiles may be seen in the floor by the aisle altar rail. The painted reredos by Christopher Webber in the north aisle is dated 1943. The crocketed niches in two central pillars facing the nave are unusual features and probably once supported statues.

Nowadays they are ideal for flowers on special occasions. The ironbound mediaeval chest would once have had three locks, the keys for which would have been held separately by three people, the rector and probably the churchwardens. In the chest precious books and such plate as the church possessed could be safely stored. Recently, during drainage work by the west door of the tower, the large, horizontal stones of the plinth on which the church is built were partly revealed. In the porch can be seen an unusual perpendicular monolithic red sandstone holy water stoup decorated with a quatrefoil shield on its south front.

In the churchyard, on a two-step octagonal plinth, stands the base and part of the shaft of a mediaeval cross, sometimes called a 'preaching cross'. Travelling preachers found the places where villagers came to buy and sell

their produce, there to talk to them and to preach the Gospel. This cross is surely as old as the church, if not older. Here is also in the graveyard, an unidentified early 17th century stone - a rare survival in this area.

In the Domesday Book, Wootton Courtenay was simply recorded as Otone, meaning settlement by the wood. Courtenay was added to the village name in the 13th century when the Courtenay family became owners of the manor there. The parish church at Wootton Courtney, dedicated to All Saints, was built between the 13th and 15th centuries and has since been designated by English Heritage as a Grade I listed building. The church features an unusual gabled bell tower.

Extensive and some unnecessary restoration was done in the 19th century with the loss of many interesting features, for instance, the old pulpit with a big sounding board, old seats and a fine west gallery were replaced by the present pulpit and dull, uncomfortable pews - though eased by long cushions in the past few years. The vestry and organ chamber were added in about 1900. Note the very fine carved terminals to the hoodmoulds on the nave windows, inside and out, and the exterior of the east window of the aisle. With the opening of the wall (above the small door at the east end of the aisle) to light the organ, remains of a rood stair were discovered. Below is a blocked hagioscope (squint) which enabled those in the aisle to see the main altar.

The outstanding attraction of Wootton church, in which it excels all others in West Somerset, lies in the quality and quantity of the woodwork carved by parishioners. Towards the end of the 19th century, a Mr Pennington held wood carving classes locally, encouraged by Sir T.D. Acland and Wootton's rector, the Rev. E.R Stanley. There is some excellent carving in Selworthy church and much more in Wootton. That which fills the tower arch preceded the very fine work of the screen in the chancel arch. There is much good mediaeval carving in screens and pew ends in other churches, done by professional carvers; here is the work of our own parishioners who made time to learn the skill and put it into practice. Their names can be seen in the framed list by the font.

In 1964, all the inner roof timbers were replaced owing to damage by death watch beetle, costing over £3,000, a large amount for the village to find at that time, but it was raised by local effort. Although the building has always been well-maintained, in 1989 the Diocesan Architect advised that major works were necessary involving the renewal of all the slate roofs. The cost was beyond the resources of the parishioners who launched an appeal, contacting all churches dedicated to All Saints, applying for grants as well as the usual constant fund-raising events. English Heritage made a grant towards reslating the first three slopes of roof, stipulating that Cornish slates be used. Historic churches Preservation Trust also helped. The parishioners then restored the tower involving extensive work on the bells and the clock. Local talent generously given enabled the parishioners to pay for these works. The clock was restored and is now maintained by a gifted

parishioner. Work continues to preserve and restore our ancient church for future generations. Help from all well-wishers will be gratefully received.

J.K. Ridler, 1990 H.W. 2000