



# Antiquities of Bishopstone

This news article follows on from the account of the parish church fire on Good Friday 28 March 1891.

As showing some interesting facts concerning the village, the antiquity of the church, and also its complete restoration in 1883, we reproduce below an account of the same as published in the *Advertiser* at the time of the restoration. It was early in May 1883, that the reopening service took place, when the Bishop of the Diocese (Dr. Ellicott) paid his first visit to Bishopstone. He was accompanied by the bishop of Antigua, the late Rev. J. Smith, of Little Hinton, the Rev. A. H. F. Bordez (formerly of St. Paul's Church, New Swindon), and a number of other clergy and gentlemen, and the day was set apart as a general holiday in the village. The Rev. J. Pile was then vicar of the parish.

According to Bacon's *Liber Regis*, there were returned for entry in the King's books no less than six ecclesiastical benefices in England and Wales designated as Bishopston, or Bishop's Town, three of them being situated within the county of Wilts, two of them in the extreme south, and the other in the extreme north of the country. Bishopstone, *alias* Ebblesborne, situate in South Wilts, was a rectory of considerable value, but the other two, which were vicarages, were returned at comparatively small amounts; and at that time the three places were within, and formed part of the Diocese of Sarum, one of them, however, at the present time, that situate in North Wilts, is within the Diocese of Bristol and Gloucester. As regards the number of houses and population, neither of the Bishopstones ever attained to any distinction, the one in the neighbourhood of Swindon being by far the most considerable of the whole lot; but, as it is only natural to expect, they are all somewhat interesting for their ecclesiastical buildings or churches.

John Aubrey, writing for his *Topographical Collections* in 1659, says of our North Wilts Bishopstone: "This place, as the name imports, belongs to the Bishopric of Sarum. The mannour is now leased to a Layman, and he again lets estates to his Tenants, who all do him yearly this service for their lands as followeth. Every plow or teame at three days warning, makes, in the husbandman's phrase, three journeys, *i.e.*, plougheth three days for the Lord, at 2d. a day, and bread and cheese *gratis*. At wheat harvest every messuage is bound, likewise at three days warning, to maintaine a reaper. These breake their fast at their owne, and afterwards are entertained at the Lord's charge, *viz.*, at dinner every man hath a pound of beefe, a pound of mutton, a handfull of salt, and four pound of bread, and among all a barrell of beer. This is brought to them into the field; at evening they all come to the mannour house, and again every man hath four pounds of bread, one pound of cheese, and a candle (? caudle), or a cuppe of beare. Here is an old seate, called "Hocker bench", hewn out of the side of a banke near the Maypole where they keepe their revelling. It is probably so called from the ancient Saxon custom of Hocking at Hocktide, for joy at the death of the Tyrant Hardicanute the Dane. Hither the ancient and graver men, calling themselves Aldermen of Hockerbench, resort to keep good order and be spectators of the dancing and pastime of the younger. *Mem.* There is a Hockerbench likewise at Hartwell in Barkshire: ideo *quære*. Near unto this place, as the *indigenæ* informs me, was sometimes a *Sanctuary* called *paradise* whither whosoever fled

he was free from all arrests. In the Church here hath been very fine painted glasse, but all broken, by the parliament soldiers in the late evil wares; one window only, viz., that in the east end of the north aisle, escaping the fury of the puritanical zealots. In it are three women saints, each, standing in a nich of curious architecture. That in the first columnne holds a sword reversed in her right hand, a book expanded in her left. That in the middle I suppose to be the B.V. On an escroll at her feet *Sacred Mar. ora pro nobis.* The figure in the third columnne holds two baskets in her right hand, and a booke as aforesaid in her left. In the limbe of the same window: *say qui istam fenestram fieri fecit.* At the top of the third column and the same window this coate : Some *device* in a *shield* at the top of the first columnne, viz., *Argent, over a starre of 6 points proper*, an Eagle rising *Argent*, Another broken in the middle columnne. In the third columnne of the last window in the same aisle, a saint's head broken off. The upper garment is seminated all over with these letters, H within a circle Or. On both sides of the same saint, these words counterly varied *thu Merci*: at the foot of the same saint, M on a shield within a circle Or. Some device in a shield in the East window of the south aisle, *Argent*, some birde rising in base, but metall upon metall. In the south aisle is an opening through the wall into the Chancell: over it winds up a small pair of stairs, at the top of which is a (diamond shaped) peep hole into the Chancell. In the nave of the Church, beneath his picture on a brass plate affixed to a marble, this following inscription : Of your charite pray for ye sowl of Harry Preci, which Harry decesid the day of Juli, the yeare of our Lord God M. Vc.XXIII, on whose soule Jhu have merci, Amen. This on a marble near the altar: "Having finished her course, here resteth the body of Edith, wife of Christopher Willoughby of London, Merchant late Sheriffe of this Countie, who decesed this life the 15th of August 1670".

*Nota* : That about An Dni 1657, Mr. Gilbert Keate, Lord of this manor under the Bishop, gave 4 pounds per annum to fower poor people. Since the estate is sold to Christopher Willoughby, Esq., Merchant".

Now, this description of the church, as it existed in Aubrey's time, is interesting principally as a record, and not as a description of either its late or present appearance. But before noticing the edifice as it is to be seen today, or proceeding to give any account of the place, it may be well to notice what is further applicable from an antiquarian or archæological point of view. Canon Jackson, in a note to his Aubrey, says :- "This Bishopstone belonged to the See of Sarum: Bishopston in South Wilts to that of Winchester. At the Muster in 1538 the archers, &c., from this parish were supplied by the Bishop of Sarum, Lady Darrell and William Wroughton. When Church property was confiscated in 1647-51 the episcopal Manor was sold to John Oldfield and Matthew Cendrick for £2261 16s. 2d. The Lordship of the Manor is now in Lord Holland's family. An old Manor House was taken down in 1860. The Vicarage was a Peculiar in the gift of the Prebendary of Bishopston., now in the gift of the Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol".

And further on there is another note, referring to the Christopher Willoughby, to whom the estate was sold, as follows : From this odd inscription it appears that immediately after a contract of matrimony, Mr. Willoughby went abroad on mercantile business and was absent six years; that on his return the marriage was completed; that he then went away again for six years and a quarter more, but that upon his second return the domestic life was resumed, and continued without interruption. He was a proprietor in 1639 40; and by Indenture 8th June 1680, he conveyed the Tithes of Clinch in the parish of Milton Lislebourne (formerly Milton Abbott's), near Pewsey, in this county, for various charitable purposes, chiefly for the benefit of Bishopston. His own epitaph in the church mentions that he was "infelix in secondis nuptiis". It is not, of course, for us to say that the example set by this Mr. Willoughby has been pretty well followed down to nearly the present day. But it is very certain that although the place has had quite a succession of generous benefactors, it has been on the whole sadly neglected, and it must very often have felt very much like that lady must have felt whose husband, immediately after matrimony, went abroad on mercantile business, and whose marriage was not completed until his return, after six year's absence. The Ecclesiastical Commissioners are the principle owners in the parish and until recently many of the labourers' cottages belonged to them, and a more wretched lot were not to be found in the whole county. The cottages were as bad as the church, which simply exhibited a mass of gruties and rubbish. And yet there were to be found some interesting points about it, ranging from Saxon work down to what is known as Churchwarden's restorations, in which lime wash and ochre play a leading part. The present appearance of the edifice, even in its restored form, bears evidence of the fact referred to by Aubrey, that it suffered much at vandal hands.

Indeed, it is simply impossible to say what it was originally like. The tower, which contains a very fair peal of bells, is massive, and altogether out of proportion with the nave, aisles, and chancel. Indeed, in the restoration it has been found necessary to raise the roof of the nave no less than five feet to make it equal in height with the tower arch, which, being open, adds considerably, in appearance at least, to the length of the nave. Some few of the features noticed by Aubrey still remain, but only a few. There are only three or four fragments of stained glass, in stance, and these have been collected together and placed in the east window in the south aisle. And close to this window there is the curious stairs cut out of the south pillar or wall of the chancel arch, and the peep hole which he refers to and which is undoubtedly a small hagnoscope looking on to the altar, but there are no signs of any Priest's chamber – there is not even a south porch. The stairs evidently led to a rood loft, no remains of which now exist, but the marks of the entrance door to it are plainly visible. In the north or opposite pillar or wall of the chancel arch to that in which the stairs are there, is cut out a wide passage, through which the stairs are there is cut out a wide passage, through which a procession might pass. This passage takes an angular direction, pointing directly to the centre of the high altar. In the north porch there is a doorway in the east wall which leads directly into the north aisle without the necessity of going into the body of the church and on to the opening in the chancel arch wall, admitting of the possibility of a procession of Priests passing direct from the north porch to the high altar.

The Norman doorway in the north wall of the chancel still exists in marvellous preservation. It exhibits a very fine example of the dog tooth moulding, the carvings being a sharp and clear as though a work of recent date. And yet this doorway is possibly only a fragment of some former building, found by some restorers of a former period to the present, and put where it is now to be seen, because it could there be seen to advantage. That the church once possessed other interesting examples of Norman workmanship is very certain. In making preparations for the raising of the clearstory walls there was found a fragment of an old Norman font, which had evidently been first discarded and then used as an ordinary wall stone to fill up a gap or help to build up the wall. This fragment now forms an actual part of the font, which has been designed and skilfully executed on its lines.

With regard to the way in which the restoration has been carried out, we need say little more than it has been under the direction of Mr. Christian, the architect, who, we are informed, has been so well satisfied with the manner in which the work throughout has been performed by the builder (Mr. Wheeler, of Wantage) that he has requested him to carry out other works under him, although previous to their entering upon the work at Bishopstone they had been entire strangers to each other. The original contract for the work, we understand, was £1248, but in consequence of the number of extras which it was found necessary to introduce as the work progressed the total cost will not be less than £1600. Of this sum the Ecclesiastical Commissioners contributed £700, the remainder being made up by the contributions of the inhabitants of the village and friends. We may here mention that all the old pews and a gallery in the tower have been removed, the seats throughout being of open, but of a very comfortable character, and made of pitch pine, the general effect of the restoration being to give the whole interior a light and open appearance.

**Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle, 04 April 1891**

**OPC Note:**

Source of information in the newspaper article:-

Liber Regis, Vel Thesaurus Rerum Ecclesiasticarum. By John Bacon, Esq. 1786

Receiver of the First Fruits Office

The Topographical Collections of John Aubrey, 1659-70