



## **The Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Bishopstone**

### **Introduction**

A beautiful church is always seen to advantage in a beautiful setting. Bishopstone Churchyard, irregular in shape and falling away steeply to the north-east, makes a wonderful setting for the Church.

It is dedicated in the honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary and its Patronal Festival is kept on the feast of her Purification, the ancient Candlemas Day, February 2nd. Quite distinct from this is its Dedication Feast, held on August 26th or the Sunday after that. On this day thanks are given for the church, a fair formerly visited the village and relatives from afar came back to visit their families.

Bishopstone was an episcopal manor from the pre-conquest days and continued so until 1869 when the Ecclesiastical Commissioners became owners of the village upon the death of the then Bishop of Salisbury.

### **The Story of the Church**

There was probably a small church here in Saxon times but nothing remains of it. Of the Norman church only the door in the north chancel wall shows us the rich carving of the late twelfth century. Bishop Forrest Browne, of Bristol, earlier in the century thought this door as fine as any work at Malmesbury Abbey (the head on the arch is the Malmesbury Beast). This door was re-set during a later rebuilding. The main fabric of the church is in the perpendicular style of the fifteenth century. Large windows filled with clear glass give plenty of light inside and the parapet of the south aisle acts as a foil to the massive tower when seen from the churchyard.

For over 300 years after the Reformation there were no structural changes in the Church. Yearly "Churchwardens' Repairs" were carried out. Constant lime-washing, re-glazing, re-seating and re-paving can be traced in the annual presentments and in the old account books. As with so many churches, thorough restoration had become necessary by the middle of the nineteenth century and it was carried out in 1881-1883. The first resident Vicar for 60 years, the Rev. Allan Ifill Pile, arrived in 1880 and under his enthusiastic leadership the church was restored and transformed. The roof of the nave was raised and clerestory windows added. This must have been the intention of the medieval builders, for the top of the great tower arch was, until then, higher than the nave roof. The gallery in the tower was removed and the whole church re-seated in pitch pine to replace the old pews which were irregularly arranged. So a clean and neat interior was the result.

The present appearance of the church dates from 1891. On Good Friday night in that year a fire broke out in the tower. The fine peal of bells was melted, all but one bay of the nave roof was destroyed and all the furnishings were burnt. It is remarkable that by Christmas of 1891 the church was again restored and fine oak pews replaced those of pitch pine. The carved oak altar commemorates Queen Victoria and the reredos her son, Edward VII. The central panel of the altar shows Christ in Glory surrounded by Four Beasts of the Apocalypse. The paintings in the reredos are of scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary. Finally in 1910 the organ was installed in a gallery over the small chancel arch. The Rev. Herbert Ault, Vicar from 1886 to 1916 would find the main features of the church as he left them.

## Points of Special Interest

**The Font.** Half the font is Norman and was found in the north porch in the 1881 restoration. London stonemasons then carved a matching half. On it is the mark for a padlock can be seen which was used to lock the font to prevent the desecration of the consecrated water. The cover was added in the nineteen-twenties.

**The Ancient Glass.** The Decorated east window of the north aisle contains some beautifully coloured glass, all that remains of the medieval glass destroyed by Cromwell's soldiers. The Virgin's monogram, M. R. (Maria Regina), a chalice and a dove representing the Holy Spirit are among the surviving fragments.

**The Old Clock.** One of the casualties in the fire of 1891 was the old church clock, made in 1654 during the Commonwealth. It was the gift of William Barnestone and it may be seen in a case in the tower vestry.

**Carved Heads.** Medieval stonemasons (and woodcarvers) delighted in carving heads, sometimes beautiful as in that of our Lady by the pulpit, sometimes grotesque as in those by the south door.

**Monuments.** The church is not rich in monuments, although the floor has many seventeenth and eighteenth century tombstones. The most interesting monument is the tablet in the chancel to Edeth Willoughby, wife of Christopher Willoughby, Lord of the Manor and London Merchant, who died in 1670. It records his life as a merchant in the East and how twice she waited six years for his return until he stayed in England and they lived happily together. 'They enjoyed mutual solace in their marriage .... She was a woman of faithful to her friends, and beloved by all'. His own tombstone very frankly - but in Latin - records that he was most happy in his first marriage to (Edeth) but unhappy in his second. He was buried on a January night between 8 and 9 o'clock in 1681.

Members of the Curtis family might well be proud of Charles Curtis who six times crossed the Atlantic under sail and lived for 31 years in Antigua. There must be many people who would sympathise with the Rev. George Wakeman. When his wife died in 1813 'a warning was denied', but as a good evangelical he reflected 'how many fall as sudden, not as safe'.

**Communion Plate.** The church has a chalice and paten bearing the date 1627 and the initials of John Wilson, then Vicar; and a silver flagon dating from 1634, but given to the church in 1709 by John Smyth, Vicar, whose coat of arms is on it. There is also a large paten of 1719 and a Communion Alms Dish hallmarked 1780.

**Charities.** The village and church have been well endowed with charities, for the upkeep of the bells and churchyard and church fabric, for a school and for old people. They were of great importance before the State provided educations and pensions for all and they still contribute to the material welfare of Bishopstone. In Willoughby's Gift there is a provision for a curfew at 8 o'clock at certain times of the year. According to tradition a man lost on the downs in a mist was guided home by the chimes of the church clock and the curfew is to help others in such need.

**Registers.** These date from 1573 and together with the Account books of the charities and the Vestry books from a fascinating record of village history.

## **Conclusion**

A church is more than its stone and wood and glass and silver. It is a building built to the Glory of God, in which God can be worshipped and wherein God's care for his children can be exercised. Here the sacraments are administered. Prayer is offered, the Bible read, hymns and psalms sung. Here children are baptised, using 1965 the same font as 1165. Here bride and bridegroom take their vows and receive God's blessing at the same chancel step as their ancestors. Here those who have died are brought to the same place in church or their committal to God's mercy and love. Those who now worship in the church are linked by it with the past and future generations of Christian men and women through the communion of saints.

Many more who come to see this church also receive here the blessing of God upon their own lives.

God Grant to the living, grace; to the departed, rest; to the Church, the Queen, the Commonwealth, and all mankind peace and concord; and to us and all his servants, life everlasting. Amen.

J. M. Prior, Vicar, November 1965