



Hilmarton St. Laurence Church History

Early History

The earliest we know of a church in the village of Hilmarton is the 13th century. It is thought that the earliest surviving visible part of the church is the north arcade, the series of arches separating the Lady Chapel from the main body of the church, possibly dating from around 1200. The columns here are of the Early English order (1190-1275), each with a different capital, and there's an interesting face under the one at the back. (Other, rather disapproving, faces can be seen on two memorials to the right of the font).

Going back to the church building itself, there are also thought to be 14th century parts in evidence today. One is the little passage to the left of the chancel arch. This feature can be seen in a few other Wiltshire churches, such as Bremhill and Avebury, and provides a sight line to the priest when at the altar for sections of the congregation.



Behind this and other choir stalls, is the 14th century chancel walls, now blocked off, which led to the top of the screen.

The chancel arch is 15th century, and incorporates the stone screen in Perpendicular Gothic (1350-1550) style. The fragments of paint here are thought to be original. The carved wooden beam above the screen was brought from the church at Highway, which united with Hilmarton in 1952 and was closed in 1955. Its altar was transferred to the Lady Chapel here in 1954.

The nave, with its wonderful wagon-type roof, probably also dates from the 13th century.

St. Lawrence

By early in the 15th century, the church had been dedicated to St. Lawrence (or St. Laurence). Not much is known about the 13th century saint, except the story of his martyrdom.

Lawrence was archdeacon to Pope Sixtus in Rome, who was arrested and executed in 258 AD by order of the Roman Emperor Valerian. As the Pope was led away, Lawrence had cried out in protest and the Pope Sixtus predicted that the same fate would befall Lawrence in three days' time.

Two days later, Lawrence was also arrested and told to give up the treasures of the church to the emperor's men, as they had been his responsibility. He asked for a day's grace in order to gather the treasures together.

His task took him around all the poorer [arts of Rome, and he arrived at his trial the next day, followed by a huge crowd of beggars and the poorest of the city. He told the judges "These are the treasure of the church".

This was seen as an act of defiance by the Romans and he was condemned to death. A great fire was prepared and Lawrence was bound to a gridiron and set over the fire to slowly burn to death. He was said to have borne his fate with great fortitude.

In the left section of the large east window behind the altar, you can see a depiction of St. Lawrence with the gridiron – the emblem of his martyrdom, at his side. He is commemorated here on the Sunday nearest 10th August.



Troubled Times

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries by King Henry VIII, the right to appoint a clergyman passed to Henry's wife of that time, Anne of Cleves, for one year only, and then back to the crown. In 1553 Crown Commissioners took the silver from the church for the king, leaving in its place only a small chalice.

In the 17th century, religious dissent flared up in the parish. In 1650, during the rule of Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, a group of parishioners wanted to introduce lay readers into the church. The incumbent of the time, James Wealsh, resisted vigorously, refused to contribute towards the cost and was threatened with imprisonment. He was eventually ejected from the parish in 1657 for disobeying Parliament's orders, and after the Restoration of the throne of King Charles II, unsuccessfully asked to be reinstated.

Wealsh's successor, however, Robert Rowswell, in 1662 was also ejected from the parish, this time for his puritanical views.

Non-Conformity

Nonconformity in the church continued to flourish in this parish at least, especially in Goatacre. By the end of the century, the Rector had great difficulty claiming his lawful tithes from some of the parishioners there.

In 1783 it was noted that church attendance was poor, services were held only once each Sunday and that parishioners were "too busy on their farms" or were full of "profaneness and irreligion". There were only about 10 communicants in the whole parish, but the Sunday School provided a service in the teaching of "plain English and Christian religion" in a time before education for all.

But by 1864, things had improved. Two services were held each Sunday, the communicants' numbered 48, the total congregation for the year was about 600 (total village population at the 1861 census was 787) and the church was apparently always full.

This, no doubt, had something to do with the Poynder family.

Restoration

In 1840, Thomas Poynder began by having the tower partly rebuilt and the chancel restored. A little later, the south porch was rebuilt to a design by Poynder's agent Henry Weaver, who supervised the work.

In 1848, Thomas Poynder presented the silver chalice and pattern, flagon and almsdish used today, hallmarked 1847. As an aside, however, they built over many medieval parts of the church which are now lost to use.

The memorials either side of the church door attest to the generosity of Thomas and William Poynder in the improvement of the church. The family's great tombstone lie outside to the north-east of the church.

Today

The work continues. Apart from general and routine maintenance. A major project to restore and rehang the bells and restore the clock and parts of the tower to make it safely accessible were undertaken in 2005 – 2006 and some of the stained glass windows were repaired in 2008. Our rediscovered (in 2020) King James Bible, printed in 1611, has found a safe home in its lectern, specially made by local craftsman, Alan Tilbury, beneath the window dedicated to its original finder in 1857, Rev. Francis Fisher. Another local craftsman turned the Paschal Candle stick in 2009. Both pieces are of English oak.

The Community Corner, a kitchen and lavatory in the NW corner for the use of the whole community and completed in 2013, is also faced in oak.

1875 Sweetland pipe organ under repairs, cleaning and tuning in 2018. Over 100 eyelets and pulldown wires were found to be in a very poor condition due to rusting and denaturing of the metal. The solution was to replace them all in a single operation using phosphor bronze material, which resists oxidation far better than the steel wire. At the same time the organ blower was replaced with a modern silent one as the old one has been identified as being underpowered and noisy. The total cost of the project was in excess of eleven thousand pounds and was paid for by local fundraising and some generous donations.

St. Lawrence's is very much a central part of village life. All kinds of events involving the village school and the wider community are held here as well as regular services, baptisms, weddings and funerals, and celebrations of all the main Christian festivals.

If you feel able to contribute towards the upkeep of this beautiful and historic building, or would like to find out more about future projects that are planned, please contact the Churchwardens. Giving can be made anonymously if preferred and wherever possible gift-aided. We also operate a very simple and effective Parish Giving Scheme that has significantly helped us throughout the COVID 19 pandemic period when sadly the church had to close for many months. We would be delighted to provide more information about this scheme upon request.

Thank you for taking an interest in our Parish Church and discovering some of its past and present history.

John Henly – Churchwarden.

Source: Hilmarton St. Laurence, John Henly.
Photo's: John Pope.

