

Little Somerford

Brief History of St. John the Baptist



The Church of Little Somerford seems to have been entire rebuilt in the last years of the thirteenth or the first years of the fourteenth century. It is a simple rectangle, 78 feet from East to West by 22½ feet wide, without any structural division between the chancel and the nave. The origin of this unusual plan, at so late a date, is possibly due to building the new Church round an existing Norman Church similar to Rodbourne, which was built not as a Parish Church but as a Chapel of Ease. The Tower was added in the middle of the fifteenth century, the South Porch at the end of the century.

The East wall of the Chancel is modern, with a three-light window and angle buttresses. Aubrey records that in his time the “east window of five or six lights was walled up and overgrown with ivy”. In the South wall is a two-light pointed window, which seems a restoration, the priest's doorway has a pointed head and is also mostly a restoration. To the West is a new single-light window inserted in 1905 to give light to the choir seats. The roof is of rough timbers, apparently of the seventeenth century.

The Nave is 47 feet in length. The roof appears to be of early date; each pair of rafters are tied together with diagonal braces, and this roof has been underbuilt in the seventeenth century with five tie beam principals carrying purlins, which in turn support the older roof.

The Tower is only 14½ feet square externally. In it are three bells bearing the following inscriptions:

- 1) MR DANIEL REYNOLDS & MR JOSEPH FRY CH. WARDENS, JAMES BURROUGH IN DEVIZES FECIT, 1752.
- 2) THOMAS POWELL OF MAUDITT'S PARK GENT 1725. I.E.C.W. JOHN TOSER FECIT.
- 3) JAMES BURROUGH IN DEVIZES BELL FOUNDER FECIT 1753.

There is a scratch dial on the South Buttress, east of the Porch.

The interior fittings include a Screen separating the Chancel from the Nave. In the opinion of Mr. F. Bligh Bond, F.R.I.B.A., this Screen consists of two, and possibly even of three, Screens, put together to fit it for its present position. He dates it about 1350. There is a legend that it came from Malmesbury Abbey; but as to this there is no evidence.





The Pulpit and Reading Desk are the remains of what must have been a very fine three decker. Upon the door to the Desk is the date 1626. There was originally a sounding board of the same date, but this was taken down and subsequently lost during the incumbency of the Rev. A. Evans (1846-1893). The fronts of the seats in the Chancel and the Reredos were carved in imitation of the Jacobean work from timber taken from the Gallery which was removed from the West end of the Church while the Rev. R.G. Brown was Rector.

The Screen across the Tower Arch was erected in 1928 from a design given to the Rector by Sir Robert Lorimer, K.B.E., F.R.I.B.A.

The Altar Rails are simple turned ballusters of early Georgian type and were placed in the Church in 1930.

The Font has a conical oak cover with a ball termination of the seventeenth century.

Preserved on the sill of the window by the Pulpit, is a carved stone, the top of an old Churchyard Cross, dating from about 1300. On one side is carved Our Lord on the Cross, on the other a standing figure of Our Lady crowned and bearing the Child. This stone was found under the Pulpit when Rev. A. Evans was Rector, and it was placed in its present position in 1923.

The Arms above the Chancel Screen are Elizabethan, with the Green Dragon of Wales in place of the Unicorn. It is believed that only two other Churches in the County contain such Arms, the Churches of S. Thomas of Canterbury and St. Martin at Salisbury.

The above notes are based in the main upon a description of the Church kindly furnished by Sir Harold Brakspeare, K.C.V.O., F.R.I.B.A.

Maurice H. FitzGerald, Rector

1933.

Source: Little Somerford, St. John's Church, additional images John Pope