



A view of St John the Baptist Church from the War Graves

The history of the Parish Church of St. John the Baptist, Meopham.



The next day John (the Baptist) saw Jesus coming towards him
and said,
'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

John chapter 1 verse 29

The Parish Church of St. John the Baptist, Meopham.

Welcome to this our ancient village hall,
the spot whereon more than a thousand year
the folk have worshipped, married, had their ale,
confessed their sins, been carried on a bier.
In pious grief, for his dear parents' sake,
Simon rebuilt in stone this house of God
whose outer walls, where fallen in a quake,
Archbishop Courtenay again restored.
Tradescant, John the gardener, here was wed
who bought to England plants from lands afar.
Lord Fairfax his victorious army led,
resting their horses for the Maidstone war.
This pulpit, richly carved and wrought in wood
by parson Edward Smedley here was bought,
discarded from St. Margaret's where it stood,
when at Westminster school our vicar taught.
We thank Victorians who built our tower
from pepper-pot to lofty parapet,
new roofs, floors, pews and organ were their dower,
their stained-glass windows in new stonework set
and you this previous heritage who share
may hear sweet bells across the meadow say
you have done well to rescue and repair.

*The poem was originally written for the Flower Festival at St John's in
September 1981 and subsequently published in a revised form in
Elsie Cook's Village Diary in the Meopham Review in December 1988*

Rectors and Vicars of St John the Baptist since 940 AD

drawing on research by members of
the church and of the Meopham
Historical Society.

Rectors

940 Wina (Saxon Priest)
1200 Virgilius
1296 Alexander de Martin Thorpe
1305 John do Banquett
1308 John do Baknel
1314 Thomas de Stowe
1318 John de Sandale
1325 Abe de Baldock Gerald:
ob 1344
1345 Stephen do Itham
1348 John de Ingleby
John Blod
1367 John de Kirkebi

Vicars

1403 William
1408 John Stapelow
1410 Walter Stonying
1414 John Folsham
1452 William Baron
1458 John Bromfield
John Veer
1477 Richard Smith
1486 Robert Sedgford
1494 Ricard Smith (again)
1501 Hugh Saunders
1504 William Gydding
1524 William Marshall
1550 Edward Burnell
1553 John Byrde
1550 Edward Burnell (resigned)
1555 Martin Haggard
1567 Hugh Gewas

1569 Janes Drewe
1576 James Kaye
George Wreake
1593 Robert Hemmings
1594 Martin Fotherby
1594/5 Ralph Shiers
1609 Thomas Pigott
1646 William Gibson
1670 Christopher Copeland
1707 Richard Collins
1711 William Gates
1713 Laurence Broderick
1742 Thomas Wright
1763 Samuel Sandy
1770 John Tatham
1786 Edward Smedley
1816 John Thompson
1854 John Hooper
1875 Lewis Woodward Lewis
1900 Arthur Frank Cowley
1919 Owen George Tait
1933 Ernest Cannon I
1946 Vernon Nicholls
1956 Frank Mitchell
1966 Brian Birchmore

Rectors

1975 David Giles
1986 David Williams
1996 Struan Dunn
2009 Gordon Oliver
Priest – in – Charge
2014 – 2019 Alyson Davie

Rectors

2019 Alyson Davie

The History of St John the Baptist Church, Meopham

There are two Commonwealth War Graves in the graveyard of St John's

Private T.H. Wellard

Service Number: CH/7484

S.S. Teeswood, Royal Marine Light Infantry who died on 08 April 1918 Age 42

Remembered with Honour St John the Baptist, Meopham Churchyard Right of Church, near pathway.

Private C. Maynard Service Number: F/24545

Army Service Corps, "L" Forage Coy who died on 08 May 1916

Remembered with Honour St John the Baptist, Meopham Churchyard on East boundary.

More information can be obtained from Meopham Historical Society <https://meophamhistorical.org.uk>

The history presented in this guide is based mainly on the script of "Celebrating the Centuries", an event to mark the 1400th anniversary of Rochester Diocese in 2004. The script was written by Clive Adams, Peter Kettle, Ailsa Rees and Revd. Philip Wootton,

There has been a church on this site for over a thousand years, and much of the building we see today was built in the early 14th century. Throughout its history it has been the centre of village life, both religious and secular. Evidence from Saxon times is sparse but clearly Meopham developed to become a prosperous village, centred on the manor. The earliest mention of Meopham was in a deed of 788AD for land in Trottiscliffe when it was referred to as being on the northern boundary.

About two hundred years later King Edgar set about reforming the laws of title and required that every Thane (Nobleman / Landowner) should build a church on their land. There is no physical evidence of a church at Meopham, but, since it was probably wooden, it has been obliterated by later buildings. The existence of a church is indicated in a will made sometimes around 965AD by the Lord of the Manor at Meopham, Byrthric, to which one of the witnesses was the local priest, Wina.

The Mediaeval Church

We know that early in the 13th century, a stone church building stood on this site, the earliest evidence being under the lower part of the tower. However, by around 1240 the Chancel was built, consisting of three bays, and shortly afterwards the North Chapel.

It is probably between 1320 and 1325 that the church we see today was rebuilt. We have evidence that a church in Meopham was dedicated: "To dedicate in canonical form the Parish Church of Meopham in our immediate jurisdiction in the Deanery of Shoreham, newly constructed" (Archbishop Reynolds). By tradition this extensive building was funded by the largesse of one Simon de Meopham, who was born here and later became Archbishop of Canterbury. His tomb is to be found in the Cathedral at Canterbury today. We know that only a few years later in 1328 he issued an Indulgence, 'whereby 40 days of penances were remitted to all who

should confess their sins, visit Meopham, walk around the churchyard, say the Lord's Prayer, and pray for the souls of his (Simon's) parents and of the faithful departed'. This, of course, generated income for the Church, as pilgrims en route to Canterbury along the Pilgrim's Way would divert to Meopham for such indulgences.

The church suffered extensive earthquake damage in 1382, when the aisles of the nave collapsed. However, another Archbishop, William Courtney, ordered a rebuilding programme which was completed in 1386.

By the mid-15th century, the church was a substantial building, with a large open space that was used as a village amenity as well as for worship, "There can be no question that in the Middle Ages the church was an all-purpose building; the church was a home from home where people could sleep, live, eat, drink, act and meet. It was part and parcel of everyday life; it was to be used; and used it was" (J. G. Davies). These uses would have included church ales (village feasts), markets and dramatic performances, and even work in the wet weather. The church building was therefore an integral part of everyday life.

It was in the mid-15th century that further additions were made to the church. In the archives of Christ Church Canterbury, there is a record of work carried out by a Richard Eldrede for tiling the roof of the chancel. It was at this time also that the North Chapel was linked with the chancel and stairs were cut to give access to the rood loft. The squint or hagioscope was built. Its function is not entirely certain, but it may have been necessary for the action of the high altar to be seen from the front of the stairs, either for a bell to be rung at the relevant time or so that singers in the loft could be directed.

The chancel and nave were separated by a huge screen, which served as a barrier to the laity, who were refused entry to the chancel, which was reserved for clergy and choir. This rood screen was supported by a huge beam. On it was a larger-than-life crucifix, with Mary and John on either side. The size of this can be gauged from the notches that

Present and future

Although the church looks similar to what it was over a hundred years ago, its history is not over. The village of Meopham has grown very substantially around it, especially in the past half century, so that the size of the community has finally caught up with the size of the 14th century buildings. Work continues to maintain and improve the fabric of the building, but most importantly the life of the church has to remain connected to that of the village.

In the 1990s, the most important development was the construction of the modern St John's Centre, opening in 1993, to provide a home for a wide range of church and village activities. The Rev. David Williams, the Rector then, wrote about the importance of this development in the Meopham Review shortly before the Centre was officially opened by the Bishop of Rochester, the Rt Rev. Michael Turnbull on 19th June 1993:

"In the 650 years since Simon de Meopham completed the building of this fine parish church, successive centuries gave, added and adapted here and there, but the St John's Centre is the most extensive addition to the church in that time. In a profound sense, however, we are equipping the church to recapture the broader function that it had in mediaeval times. A parish church is always set in the middle of a community and the Centre will enable us to express this more effectively."

With the refurbishment of the church in 2011, the installation of a new floor, and the replacement of the Victorian pews, the vision of the church as part of this community was further extended. As well as creating an open flexible space for worship, teaching, and evangelism (including services 'in the round'), the new layout has also provided opportunities for a wide range of other uses, concerts, barn dances, markets, and a BBC broadcast of 'Any Questions. We will continue to strive to keep St John's as a focus of worship and a place to serve all who live in the village.

before the altar itself). The purpose was to elevate the Holy Communion service, which then had often lapsed to being celebrated only four times a year.

The other important new introduction to St John's in the 1850s was that of the organ, replacing the orchestra (flute, clarinet, violin and cello) which had formerly performed from the musicians gallery at the west end of the church. There had actually been a hiatus of a couple of years in 1852 – 3 when no music had been performed, due to a “difference of opinion” between the musicians and the vicar, the Rev. John Thompson, an elderly bachelor who was the incumbent here for 38 years until 1854. The first mechanical organ (a barrel organ offering a selection of sixty favourite hymns) was presented in 1855 by Mr. William Smith - Masters of Camer, 10 years later it was replaced by a good pipe organ, funded partly by Mrs. Smith-Masters of Camer, partly by voluntary subscriptions. That survived until 2000.

A key person supporting the redevelopment of the church at this time was Mr. Robert Barnett, who bought Meopham Court in 1852 and devoted much time, thought and money to church and parish. The East window and carved stonework below it were donated to the church in memory of Mr. Barnett by his widow.

By the end of the 19th century, the external appearance of St John's Church was much the same as it is today. The tower was built up and the clock added in 1879 – another gift from Mrs. Barnett. The Vicar from 1875 until he died suddenly on Easter morning in 1900 was The Reverend Lewis Woodward Lewis, to whom we should give considerable credit for the collection and preservation of historical information about both church and village. The brass lectern in the nave was given in memory of Rev. Lewis. He was responsible for the establishment of the Meopham Church Monthly (now Review) in 1894. Other recent innovations at the time of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 include the singing of carols in church for the first time (1896) and the establishment of the Mothers' Union by Mrs. Lewis in the same year.

can be seen in the arch where the arms of the cross fitted in. These figures were lit by one or more candles. Access to this was by a staircase, behind our pulpit, although nothing remains of the screen itself. A fragment of a carved beam of late medieval design, and said to be part of the rood screen, was still lying in the church in 1936, but it has since disappeared (H. Gordon Slade).

The character of the church would have changed substantially with the Reformation, beginning in 1551. While many undesirable aspects of mediaeval religious life were swept away, so were most items of beauty (and value) as the church was “purified”. The Protestant approach to churches no longer required the demarcation of a holy space like the mediaeval chancel. The reformer John Calvin wrote: “We must beware of imagining that churches were the proper dwelling of God where he is more likely to listen to us, or of attaching to them some kind of secret sanctity, which make prayer there more holy”. Churches still mattered, but it was the people who were holy, not the buildings. “Godliness” did not just happen; people had to be trained in it, and churches were refitted for these ends. The Reformation makeover of St John's went for simplicity, with whitewash everywhere and altar candles, wall painting, stained glass, statues, and vestments all banished.

The Civil War and Christmas Rebellion

On one particular day in the 17th century, 31st May 1648, St John's Church was at the centre of the nation's history. That day it housed the army of Parliament -the “Roundheads” - as it moved to put down a rebellion.

The Civil War had been won two years earlier; Parliament was victorious, King Charles I was defeated and captured, but as so often, the peace was harder to win than the war. Parliament now wanted to convert hearts and minds, so pressed the claims of the Puritan form of Protestantism. Special days of fasting were declared - a way of giving thanks to God for the victory. One was 25th December 1647: Christmas Day had been declared a fast day. In effect, Christmas was banned. In Canterbury, this news prompted rebellion. Many celebrated in the normal way, with church bells ringing and evergreens decorating the streets. Parliament sent forces to

put down such a show of festivity, and a riot in the street followed. Many were arrested and faced with military justice. A petition sent up to Parliament in protest was ignored, its instigators threatened.

The Civil War had on the whole by-passed Kent, but now many who had remained passive were enraged. Bands of men formed across the country. Armaments were seized, towns and castles secured by the rebels, and Dover Castle besieged. Royalists from abroad flocked to Kent to join the uprising. It was then that Colonel Fairfax, head of the Parliamentary army, acted, entering the county with 7,000 men on 30th May, heading for Rochester.

For the commander, Meopham Court made an ideal overnight stop, the opportunity to review his intelligence reports and determine a new strategy. His scouts, hidden in the deep folds of the downs, had observed through their field glasses the enemy encampment on Burham Heath, eight miles east of the Medway. Meanwhile in the great barnlike structure of Meopham church, men and animals could be lodged overnight. The actions of such armies were notorious for the damage they did to medieval churches. Statues, screens, altars, and pictures had already been removed, but anything left would certainly have been destroyed. A record shows the bells were recast a few years later, presumably after damage done at this time. Had Meopham's ringers dared to ring in Christmas Day, as had been done at Canterbury?

The next day the troops moved on. Fairfax used his intelligence well, avoiding the Medway bridges at Aylesford and Maidstone itself by going on to East Farleigh, then turning round to attack the town at its weakest flank. The battle of Maidstone, 1st June 1648, was unpleasant and vicious, but Parliament was victorious within the day. Meanwhile a smaller Royalist force, presumably including Meopham men, took on a company of Fairfax's men at Stone Bridge near Northfleet, with a similar lack of success. So ends this particular brief appearance of Meopham on the stage of national events.

Today the most important relic of the Reformation period that can be

seen in the church is the carved wooden pulpit. This dominates the entry to the chancel in St John's, and well illustrates George Herbert's line: "The pulpit is the parson's joy and throne" - even more so when it had its original three tiers. The top one, for the preacher, was entered by way of the spiral staircase that once gave access to the rood loft. Dating from 1682 and made for St. Margaret's Westminster (not coming to St John's until 1810) it is a powerful symbol of the importance attached to preaching in the Reformation period.

The Protestant faith had to be taught, and the pulpit was the principal place for proclaiming new ideas. Herbert combined such a belief in the power of preaching with more than a little condescending with regard to his rural audience: "Sometimes the parson tells them stories and sayings of others, according as his text invites him; for them also men heed, and remember better than exhortations; which through earnest, yet often die with the Sermon, especially with Country people; which are thick, and heavy, and hard to raise to a point of zeal, and fervency, and need a mountain of fire to kindle them; but stories and sayings they will long remember."

Victorian times: the church revived

While the walls of the church date back to the 13th and 14th centuries, the interior owes much to the Victorians. In 1858 and 1859 a very major renovation and alteration programme was carried out, at a cost of £1,185. This was a very large sum – at the time the average wage of a rural labourer was less than 10 shillings (50p) a week. The nave and chancel were re-roofed with "open roofs" rather than ceilings; stone corbels were installed to support the chancel roof arches; the chancel floor was tiled; oak stalls and benches were installed (doing away with a number of large private family pews) and the nave and chancel walls were replastered.

Another change happening in every church in the Rochester Diocese at this time was that the level of the floor of the chancel was raised above that of the nave (with a further step placed just