

The Church Of St. Michael Atworth



A Short History

The Church Of St. Michael - Atworth

Most churches in Britain have evolved over the centuries as their buildings and contents have been modified, added to or taken away. The church of St Michael at Atworth is no exception. The purpose of this account is briefly to trace such changes and to set them in the context of the circumstances in which they took place. It is to be hoped that this condensed history may be of interest not only to visitors but also to those who live in the village.

The Name of the Church

As far as we know the parish church at Atworth has been dedicated to St. Michael from its beginning. Until the Reformation in the 16th Century, the liturgy kept the 29th of September as the day of St. Michael the Archangel, and no doubt this was the title given to the church at the time. It is, perhaps, significant that this is the name still used in the Diocesan Directory and in Faculties. The Book of Common Prayer commemorates "St Michael and all Angels" on September 29th hence the name St Michael and All Angels sometimes applied to the Atworth Church today. The new Roman liturgy links September 29th not only with St Michael, but with St Gabriel and St Raphael as well. Which of these titles is correct is a matter of opinion. The view taken here is that throughout time our patron has been St Michael and it is therefore by his name alone that the church should be called.

Early Churches

There is evidence that churches have existed on the present site since Saxon times. In 1001, King Aethelred II granted permission to the Abbess of Shaftesbury to build a chapel at Atworth. This was completed about 1070 and mentioned in the

Domesday Book of 1086. The nave was partially destroyed by fire, between 1100 and 1200, and subsequently rebuilt. The first vicar was Thomas de Muleton who was duly presented by the Lord of the Manor and patron of Atworth church, Richard Cotel of Cottles House, in 1298. In 1451 the church was rebuilt and enlarged by Thomas Beaushin of Cottles House. The existing tower is all that remains of this building which lasted nearly 400 years. The simple embattled and saddleback design of the tower is typical of 15th century churches built in small Wiltshire communities such as Atworth with a population of around 700, where financial resources were limited. The only authentic picture known of the medieval church is the beautiful watercolour by John Buckler painted between 1800 and 1810. This is now in the possession of the museum of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society at Devizes. a good copy can be seen in the Atworth Museum, in the barn of Poplar Farm House, Bradford Road.

The Present Church

By 1831, the fabric of the old church was giving cause for alarm and it was decided to demolish all of it except the tower. The new building was designed by Mr R.E. Goodridge of Bath in early Gothic revival style, the costs of construction being met largely from a grant by the Incorporated Society for Promoting the Enlargement, Building and Improving of Churches and Chapels. Seating was provided in the nave and gallery for 428 persons, 263 of that number being declared "free and unappropriated forever". The present pews date from 1881 and were the work of Mr F Titt who ran a carpentry business on the site of the Village Institute. The church was duly opened on 17th January 1832. The building is chapel-like (in its early years it was frequently referred to as "the chapel"). It is set a little to the south of the old tower, being joined to it by a short corridor leading into the vestry at the base of the tower. In the east wall of the upstairs chamber can be seen a stone archway which marks the connection with the medieval church. To-day, entry to the tower is by the original door on the north side. The outline of the junction between the

roof and the former nave and the tower is clearly visible on its east side.

Removal of the nave exposed to the elements several of the tombs that had formerly lain there, including that of Mrs Jane Brown (nee Pawlett) of Cottles House, who died in 1706. A bequest in her Will, recorded in detail on her tombstone, made possible the first organised education in Atworth.

Apart from the memorials which are considered separately, a number of other items were transferred from the 15th century church. These include the stone font and the four tablets, two on each side of the altar, recording the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. The pulpit is medieval with richly canopied panels. It did not belong to the former church but was transferred from St Michael's, Melksham, probably following the reorganisation of the building in 1845.

The stone altar is a memorial to Lady Kathleen Fuller given by the St John Ambulance Brigade in 1964 and its ornaments were a memorial gift from Church members and other friends. It will be noted that the altar, which was originally against the east wall, is now a yard from it. A re-design of the sanctuary so as to conform more closely to the requirements of modern liturgy took place in 1981, and is dedicated to the memory of Mrs Florence Griffiths, mother of the vicar.

The Rev. G.E. Griffiths retired to Cornwall in 1994. His successor, the Rev. Graham Force-Jones, served as vicar for Atworth, Shaw and Whitley from November 1994 until September 2006. In July 2007 the Rev. Jill Perrett was instituted and remained until July 2013. In July 2014 the Rev. Shona Hoad succeeded her.

The East Window

Besides its beauty and intricate artistry, the east window has considerable historical interest. It is a memorial to the widow of Major Sir John Fuller of Neston Park, who, by her second marriage, became Mrs Norah Forestier-Walker. She lived at Cottles House and was a great benefactress to Atworth. As the window records, she died on 22nd February 1935.

The stained glass is the design of the late Hugh Easton whose name is in the bottom left hand corner in the unusual form of a weather vane. His work enjoyed a high reputation and is widely represented throughout Britain, including in several cathedrals. One of his best known windows is that commemorating the Battle of Britain at the east end of Westminster Abbey. The peaceful Galilean setting of the Atworth window, with the little town and church, suggests the possible influence of Ann Macbeth's beautiful tapestry The Good Shepherd which hangs in Patterdale Church (Cumbria) depicting a somewhat similar background of surrounding hills. but whether Easton was ever aware of the tapestry remains conjecture. The Coat of Arms at the bottom right corner of the window is that of the Fuller family. The Atworth window is not unique. A duplicate (without the coat of arms and with a different dedication) occurs in the church of St John the Evangelist, Churt, Surrey. Perhaps there are others!!

The Bells

Originally, the tower housed a ring of four bells one of which was removed about 1533. The treble bell dated 1350, now, alas, cracked and without its clapper, is inscribed Ave Maria and was cast in Bristol. It is the oldest item in the church dating back to the Norman building and claims to be the most ancient bell in Wiltshire. The second bell was cast in 1786 by William Bilbie of Chewstoke (Somerset), to the memory of Guillian

Webb, church warden. The tenor bell dated 1606 was made by Roger Purdue of Bristol and is inscribed Gloria in Excelsis Deo. Today the state of the tower would not permit the ringing of the three bells and only the second and tenor are chimed before services.

The Organ

A single manual organ presented to the church in 1889 was replaced in 1974 by a two manual instrument purchased for £2000 with funds raised in the village. This was an early John Compton instrument dating from 1909 and represents one of his early attempts at electric action. It was originally in the Congregational Church of Newton Burgoland (Leicestershire), but was rebuilt in 1936 and moved to Donnithorpe Methodist Church (Leicestershire). From there it came to Atworth. Various modifications and enlargements have since been carried out by Robin J Winn of Melksham (Wiltshire) including the provision of the present three manual console.

This instrument has now been replaced. The present organ was removed from Cirencester Baptist Church in November 1996 and temporarily stored in this church. In July 1997, after the last vestiges of the old organ had been dismantled, work commenced on overhauling and erecting the new organ. The purchase was made possible through the generous contribution made by Mr and Mrs Bernard Kain to commemorate their 25th Wedding Anniversary and 25 years of living in Atworth. It was built by Henry Speechly for Cirencester Baptist Church and was officially opened on 25th November 1892. It had two manual keyboards, a pedalboard and 11 speaking stops. In 1926 the firm of A.J.Price renovated the organ and made substantial tonal alterations in line with the thinking of that time. Again in 1973 it was overhauled, this time by the firm of Nicholson: only minor modifications were carried out, though these went some way towards returning the instrument to its

former specification. Here at Atworth the only tonal alteration was to remove the 8' Salicional rank in the Swell department (inserted in 1926) and to reinstate the 4' Principal rank which was present in Speechly's scheme. In addition (because the organ was contained within a chancel chamber at Cirencester) new casework was made for the exposed treble side. The work was carried out by Peter Munro of Devizes. The organ as now constituted contains the following stops:-

GREAT	Open Diapason	8'	SWELL:	Violin Diapason	8'
	Claribel	8'		Lieblich Gedackt	8'
	Dulciana	8'		Principal	4'
	Octave	4'		Trumpet	8'
	Harmonic Flute	4'			
	Fifteenth Flute	2'	PEDAL:	Bourdon	16'
	Swell Unison to Great			Great to Pedal	
	Swell Sub-Octave to Great			Swell to Pedal	

Memorials

There are a number of ancient memorials belonging to the previous church. The finest of these at the south-east corner of the chancel records part of the Pawlett family history ending with Jane Brown of Cottles House whose educational bequest was mentioned earlier. Among the 17th century memorials in the vestry is a plaque to Edward Tydcomb, surgeon, who died in 1689; a reminder that at one time the Atworth community may have been sufficiently self-contained to have its own doctor. At the south-west corner of the nave in the choir vestry is a memorial to Daniel Gingell, brewer, of Box and his wife Ann who died in 1813 and 1814 respectively; while in the middle of the north wall are two tablets to the memory of members of the Webb family who died from 1800 onwards. The name is still prominent in the village to-day.

THE LOOP

Donated in 1998 in memory of Mrs Audrey Evans to commemorate her work with the deaf and hard of hearing, this system enables those with a 'T' Switch on their hearing aid to receive a direct transmission from the microphones used in public worship.

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W.H.Dowdeswell

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with updating printed in italics.

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