

ST THOMAS OF CANTERBURY
CHURCH
NORTHLEW



WELCOME

St Thomas of Canterbury Church stands at the heart of Northlew in West Devon and has been a place of worship, solace and celebration for centuries.



The church is open daily for personal prayer and reflection and to enjoy its history and architecture.

Services are usually held on Sundays at 9:30 and visitors are always welcome.

We hope you enjoy your visit.

The Friends of St Thomas' Church Northlew

THE EARLY CHURCH AND RESTORATION

The chief land owner of Northlew recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 was Britric. It is likely there was a church at this time but no trace of it remains. It would have been much smaller, constructed of wattle and daub and with a thatched roof and was probably on the site of the tower, with a similar footprint.

However, a number of Norman features are visible today including the west doorway, the tower windows and the font. A major rebuild and extension of the building took place in the 15th century, funded by local benefactors such as William Kelly. The barrel roof with carved ribs and bosses was added along with over sixty carved oak bench ends.

Unfortunately, Northlew Parish Church suffered a period of neglect for over three hundred years when there were no resident Rectors, and the building became very dilapidated.



The church before restoration in near ruin in the early 1800s. The stonework was crumbling and ivy was growing over the roof. Sheep and cattle grazed in the churchyard.

Thomas England was appointed Rector in 1847 and documented the poor state of the building, overgrown with ivy and with a leaky roof, in urgent need of restoration. He was a prolific writer and recorded the history of the church in great detail. His letters and entries in the logbook show his increasing frustration with the slow progress of restoration and the lack of support from his parishioners. However, he persevered and achieved much of the groundwork that his successors were able to build on so effectively.



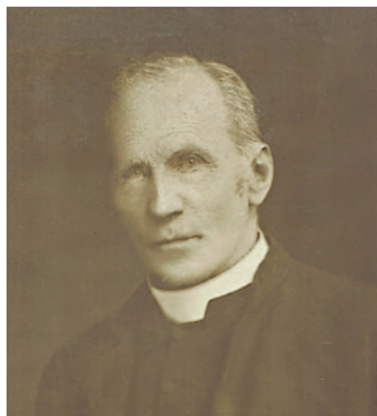
Revd England died in 1881 after thirty-four years in post and is buried in the old churchyard. His gravestone reads *With Christ, which is far better* - a fitting and heartfelt epitaph.

Samuel Asher Herbert succeeded England on his death and in the next three years wrote hundreds of letters, raised money and engaged Medley Fulford from Exeter as Architect. Herbert oversaw the restoration of the church but unfortunately the work was unfinished when he died in 1885. It was hurried on so his burial service could be the first to take place in the restored church. His grave is also in the old churchyard.



Revd Samuel Asher Herbert
Rector of Northlew 1881-84

Herbert's work was continued by *John Worthington* who was in post until 1919. He spent some time wiping out the heavy debt (nearly £800 or about £84,000 today) left after the reopening of the church before he could continue the restoration.



Worthington took an active interest in the village school. He was involved with the Northlew Band, the Victory Hall and the Men's Social Club. He oversaw the renovation of the Village Cross, the installation of the church clock and the Henry Willis organ. The new vestry was dedicated to him in 1909 and one of the bells is hung in his memory. His grave in the old churchyard rather modestly describes him as the *Unworthy pastor of this parish for 33 years.*

Canon *William Romaine Hervey* took over in 1919 at the end of the First World War until he retired in 1938.

During his tenure the Rood screen was rebuilt and finally completed in 1929. He was also very interested in the history of the church and wrote a book *The place where the devil died with cold: History of the united parishes of Northlew & Ashbury* which contains a wealth of information about the church and village life. Hervey's writings formed the basis of a booklet by H C Geipel (Rector from 1960 to 1969) which was sold to raise funds for church maintenance and repair. Much like this one!

THE LYCHGATE AND CHURCHYARD

The 15th/16th century lychgate is the roofed gateway to the old churchyard, the place where the body is laid until a procession is formed and the priest begins the burial service. The earliest marked graves in the old churchyard (God's Acre) are from the early 1700s. The graveyard was extended twice in the last century. The first (northern) extension was consecrated in 1909 and the land for the second extension was donated in the 1950s by a parishioner, Fanny Smale. A third extension is planned for the near future.

The churchyard is a haven for wildlife and supports a wide range of plants and animals. It is carefully managed with this in mind by volunteers, leaving an area of grass unmown during the growing season.



There are three Grade II listed headstones in the old churchyard, each made of slate. This one near the porch is for Elizabeth Wood who died in 1751 aged 21. It features an hour glass and a skull and crossbones and warns us all:

Reader prepared be, death may call for thee



THE TOWER, PORCH AND STOCKS

The west tower is Norman, made of rubblestone - rough, unsquared local stone, laid in irregular courses. It has three stages. The bottom houses the ringing chamber and the west door. The middle section contains the clock mechanism while the top section is the belfry with square headed slatted openings. The upper half of the tower was probably rebuilt in the 15th/16th century and the parapets and pinnacles added - note that the stonework on the top half of the middle section is different from the bottom half.

The west doorway has a pointed arch with a double head and one order of (modern) colonettes and there are original window lights in the south and east sides. These days the church is entered through the porch on the south. The carved roses of the 15th/16th century roof have been restored and the floor paved with slates. The coats of arms of the Kelly and Trecarrell families can be seen on the pillars above the door. They were prominent benefactors, funding many of the changes in the 1500s.

The old village stocks are on the left. They had two purposes. One was to inflict a punishment for certain misdemeanours and the other to make an example of individuals as a deterrent or warning to the community.



The west doorway



The south porch

THE BELLS

There are six bells, with five installed in the late sixteenth century. They were rehung in 1925 when the first (treble) bell was given in memory of John Worthington, Rector of Northlew 1885-1919.

The second and third are each engraved J P & Co 1772, a founders based in Loughborough. The fourth was made by the same company and inscribed *Peace and good neighbourhood*.

The fifth bell carries the name Edward Watkins C W & P & Co 1772 while the sixth (and largest at 35 inches) was installed twenty-seven years later. It states rather ominously: *I to the church the living call, and to the grave I summon all. J P 1799*.

In days gone by, Northlew bell ringers were the champions in Devon, competing against other parishes. Prize ringing was very competitive, with the bells rung in English full circle style. The prize went to those who struck the bells in the neatest and most regular way. These days the bells are rung at Christmas, weddings and on other special occasions.



The first bell was made by John Taylor and Co and is 25.5 inches in diameter

The floor of the bell ringing chamber is made from rare Barnstaple glazed and embossed clay tiles from the 15th/16th century. The central tiles are well worn by the feet of bell ringers, but some closer to the walls have survived with designs including the Tudor rose and fleurs-de-lys.



THE CLOCK

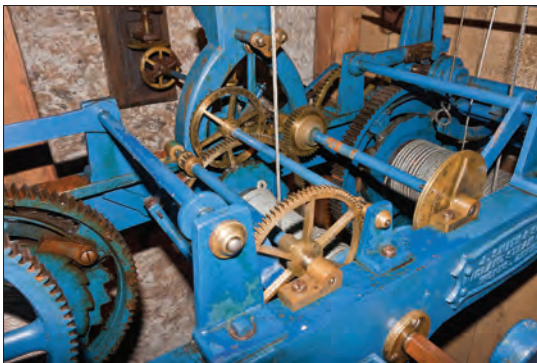
The clock, was made by John Smith & Son of Derby and was given in memory of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria and erected on 22 June 1897.

The company was established in 1856 and is still operating today. It installed the Cathedral Clock at St Paul's in 1893 and more recently the unusual DNA clock in Redcar Hospital, based on the double helix.

The inscription on our clock face reads *Pereunt et imputantur* meaning *They perish and are imputed*. It refers to the hours that pass by and are set down against us if we waste them. There is a similar inscription on the Astronomical Clock in Exeter Cathedral.

The clock is wound by hand twice a week which involves clambering up a ladder and through a small hatch, working as quickly as possible to avoid being deafened when the clock strikes - every quarter of an hour..

Like many others, our clock face uses IIII rather than Roman numerals IV for four o'clock. Some say it gives better visual balance with the VIII on the other side, others that it helps avoid confusion with VI which is rather close by (and upside down).



THE NORMAN FONT

The font dates from about 1150AD and is the focal point as you enter the church. It stands just outside the ringing chamber, testament to the hundreds of Christening services that have taken place over the years.

The font sits on a modern double stepped plinth and is supported by four slender colonnettes. In the centre is a sturdy round pedestal formed from two courses, directly beneath the lead-lined circular bowl.

Curiously there is no functioning drainage hole in its base, so it's a matter of bailing out - rather than draining out - the water after each baptism.



The font was removed from the baptistry and seriously damaged in Cromwell's time, but later rescued by Thomas England, the Rector appointed in 1847. It was found broken and filled with rubbish in the south-west corner of the church. He organised repairs and its reinstatement and in 1870 records celebrating the return of

“the most venerable Font firstly on finding the missing portion of the pedestal when it was set up and a baptistry rearranged then cleaned & strengthened when its interesting character appeared”



If you look carefully you can see the original 19th century repairs to the south and north faces of the font and the south eastern colonnette.



THE NAVE, CHANCEL AND ALTAR

The 15th century granite pillars in the north and south aisles do not match. In the south arcade they are monoliths, made from single pieces of stone and their capitals have elaborate four-roll moulds. The pillars in the north aisle have cup capitals and are each made of more than one piece of stone.



The bench end on the front pew to the south of the nave is carved with a W for William Kelly - presumably this was the Kelly family pew for open services, its closeness to the pulpit indicating the importance of the family. William died in 1534 just before the bench ends were installed in 1537.



The Epiphany window in the east wall, through the central doors of the rood screen and past the choir stalls was the gift of Jacquetta Harriet Woolcombe. The elaborate stone reredos behind the altar was erected in 1894 in her memory.



The Epiphany window depicts the arrival of the shepherds and wise men to worship the baby Jesus in the stable

THE ROOD SCREEN

The ancient rood screen, defaced and broken in the time of the Puritans was condemned as unsafe in 1810 and the Rural Dean ordered it to be repaired or removed. The screen was restored by Herbert Read of Exeter after the plans of F C Eden, a London architect. It took most of the 1920s to complete at a total cost of £1,549.

The central portion was the first to be completed, dedicated by Bishop Maude of Kensington in July 1923 as a War Memorial. The date is carved above the pulpit.

The north bay (Rutleigh Chapel) was dedicated in 1927 in memory of Rectors Herbert and Worthington. The screen here is a different design with square heads.

The south bay was completed in 1929, commemorating Herbert and Emily Woollcombe whose family estate was in Ashbury.

Above the central portion is the crucifix and figures of Mary Magdalene and John - and, on the very top of the cross, a traditional pelican brooding over her young, guarded by two angels.



The *rood loft*, or gallery, is reached by the original narrow spiral staircase behind the locked gate. The steps are worn by centuries of worshippers who have climbed the 'Hill of Calvary' to be nearer to God.

THE NORTH AISLE AND RUTLEIGH CHAPEL

The barrel roof and the carved lintels over the windows are the work of 15th/16th century, installed when the church was enlarged, although much of it restored in the 1850s. The roof bosses show grapes and vines, and rows of carved oak angels, many with wings, stand either side on stone supports along the wall plates. There are 28 in this aisle.

The stained glass window features the Resurrection and is dated 1890:
To the Glory of God and in memory of John & Mary Phare, and Ann Joanna their eldest daughter, the beloved wife of Michael Caine.

The Rutleigh Chapel at the eastern end of the aisle was once in the care of William Kelly and his family from Rutleigh Manor who had paid for its construction. Here the family honoured Jesus, his blessed Mother and the Saints. The original altar has now disappeared and the piscina walled up but Kelly is remembered by the two medallions in the window and the WK with the Kelly arms on one of the pillars.



The Chapel houses a memorial to the twenty-two parishioners who lost their lives in World War I. Northlew lost the greatest proportion of enlisted men in any community in the UK

THE SOUTH AISLE AND PELLEW WINDOW

The Pellew stained glass window in the south wall is the work of George Kruger Gray (1880-1943), an English artist also remembered for his designs of coinage. The window was installed in 1927 (MDCCCCXXVII) to commemorate John and Grace Pellew and their sons Henry, John and Albert. The Pellews were an active Northlew farming family.

The window has four lights, each featuring a different Saint.

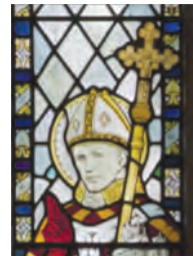
On the left *St Joseph of Arimathea* is carrying the Holy Grail and his staff, which - it's said - he planted in the ground at Glastonbury. It took root and grew into the Glastonbury thorn. There is a thorn tree in the old churchyard.



In the base is a symbolic ship carrying the Grail to Glastonbury within a wreath of thorn. In the border is a device from the arms of Jerusalem with five crosses, as well as the Grail, and scrolls with the initial J.



St Thomas Archbishop of Canterbury the Martyr is Patron Saint of Northlew and holds the church in his left hand with his Archbishop's cross. His right hand is raised in benediction and he is wearing the Eucharistic vestments of an Archbishop.



In the base are the arms of Becket next to those of the Diocese of Canterbury and gashed with the sword with which he was murdered. In the borders of the light are the Chancellor's purse, the Archbishop's mitre and the initial T.



St Brannock Abbot and Confessor was an early missionary said to have come from Wales before settling at Braunton in North Devon. He established a community there and became its Abbot. He was the first in the area to clear the land and drive the plough, and fittingly holds a spade.



In the base of St Brannock's light are a harrow and the Abbot's crozier and in the border croziers, spades, mitres and the initial B.



St Augustine Archbishop of Canterbury has a mitre and is wearing a cape over his monastic habit. In his left hand he holds the Gate of St Augustine's Priory at Canterbury and in his right, his Archbishop's cross.



In the base are the arms of St Augustine impaled with those of Canterbury while in the border are crosses, mitres, palliums and books and the initial A.



The huge oak chest just outside the Holway Chapel is 16th/17th century and for many years was the safe for deeds, Royal documents and church records. It had three locks which had to be opened by three people to gain access. The Rector kept one key, and the two wardens or custodians held the others.

The south aisle leads through the rood screen to the Holway Chapel, home to our rare Henry Willis pipe organ and the very narrow priest's doorway.

THE HOLWAY CHAPEL AND PIPE ORGAN

Our organ is considered to be a Rolls-Royce of the organ building world. It's a rare example of a St Cecilia Scudamore organ made by 'Father' Henry Willis who was responsible for more than half the cathedral organs in Britain including Exeter and St Paul's. The Scudamores are small pipe organs specially designed for village churches to replace the harmoniums in use in the mid 1800s.

The organ was originally built for King's College Hospital Chapel in 1859/60 but it was later replaced with a larger one when the Chapel was pulled down. Northlew was fortunate to acquire their Scudamore in 1889 and Henry Willis himself supervised its installation.

It's a much-loved instrument and is used every week. Although generally sound, it became rather tired and needed a thorough overhaul to restore the worn action and the original patterns on the pipework. Specialist organ builder Michael Farley undertook the renovation and artist Alison Henham restored the intricate pipe decoration and the casing.

The organ was restored in 2024 following a fund raising campaign. The Holway Chapel was redecorated in its absence, uncovering three early memorial stones that had been hidden from view for years.



Richard Phillips was Rector of Northlew from 1570 to 1607. His beautifully carved memorial tablet is on the east wall

CARVED TUDOR BENCH ENDS

Carved bench ends are a distinctive feature of many churches in Devon and we are fortunate to have over fifty well preserved examples.

Fortunately, they don't appear to have been seriously damaged during the Reformation and have not been removed or reused since. They have survived here for nearly five hundred years.

The bench ends were carved from ancient oaks in Tudor times when the church was remodelled and extended. One is dated 1537 and the work was funded by local land owners and benefactors such as William Kelly of Rutleigh Manor. The identity of the original makers is unknown, but they are likely to have been local craftsmen.

The church was restored in the late 1800s after a long period of neglect and decay. Renovation of the carved ends was under the direction of Harry Hems, a renowned ecclesiastical sculptor and carver from Exeter. At that stage many of them were repaired and the five at the head of the north aisle were replaced.

Most of the carvings are of religious emblems relating to the Passion and Crucifixion and the glory of Jesus, but some are dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury, our Patron Saint.



A separate leaflet about the bench ends is available.



Text: Molly Atkinson, Val Welsh
Photography: Allan Welsh

FRIENDS OF ST THOMAS' CHURCH

Not surprisingly, time has taken its toll on the building and damage to the tower, roof and drainage need urgent attention. The church is Grade I listed and repairs and maintenance are costly.

Friends of St Thomas' Church Northlew (FOST) depends on donations and grants to conserve our church and churchyard for future generations. Every gift helps us preserve this important part of Northlew's cultural and spiritual history for future generations.

Donations can be made securely by mobile phone using the QR code below and you can Gift Aid your contribution at the same time.

FOST news is published every two months and includes articles on the history of St Thomas' and information about church activities. Printed copies are available locally or you can receive an email version by contacting the FOST Secretary at jackie.ann.ellis@btinternet.com

Thank you for your support.

FOST is a Registered Charity Number 1070123

