

# **The Parish Church - An account of St Mary the Blessed Virgin, Great Houghton**

**By Andrew Behrens, incumbent priest from 1987 to 1994**

The history of each Church and building has its own particular story to tell; of the strange chances and changes that caused the building to be erected; and the particular sequence of events that results in this building surviving.

Like most of the villages of Northamptonshire, Great Houghton was blessed with a medieval church; indeed with a very grand one, as far as we can deduce. Although Northamptonshire is known as a county of “squires and spires”, this part of the county has few spires on its older churches. Travelling down the Nene from Northampton, Higham Ferrers and Raunds are the first ancient spires to be seen, although there are towers a plenty, and grand ones. Earls Barton, Whiston, Cogenhoe, Little Houghton, Brafield, Ecton and many others. Great Houghton similarly boasted a tower until 1753. The Church was described as “consisting of a chancel, body, and two aisles, with an embattled tower in the midst”. There exists a contemporary drawing of this building which would indicate that it was of considerable proportions. We know that there were shrines to Our Lady and Saint John the Baptist, as well as other shrines to which offerings were made. The “tower in the midst” is an interesting feature unusual in villages of this county. There is some evidence to suggest that the present tower and spire stands on the same site as the previous one, and if this is so, then the nave and aisles of the old church would have been to the west of the present tower, in what is now the garden of the old rectory. If this is so, then that would explain the dip in the ground level there, for the stones of the demolished church would have made an excellent quarry for new building at the time - most obviously the Old Rectory itself. The removal of the stones in the foundations would have left just the depression as we now see.

To return to 1753, the Rector of Great Houghton was one Theophilus Goodfellow, who seems to have been a man of far sight, determined to knock down the then very decrepit church and build a new one. It is his vision that we have to thank for the gem of a church that this village now boasts.

It is perhaps worth a thought that had Theophilus Goodfellow lived today, he would doubtless have been prevented in this action by conservationists - the very same conservationists who now seek to preserve the present building! Today he would have been called a vandal, yet we hail him as far-sighted for having lived two and a half centuries ago.

The Church was dedicated to The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a not uncommon dedication in England. The theory that has been advanced that churches with this dedication were on a pilgrimage route to Walsingham is improbable, but the honour in which our lady was held in England in the Middle Ages gave rise to the name “Mary's Dowry” for this country. There are far more churches in England dedicated to Our Lady than to any other saint. There is no mechanism in English law for a church dedication to be altered, and therefore this dedication remains in law to this day. However the Church has come to be commonly known as “Saint Mary Blessed Virgin”.

The building of the Church is but a building - the church in any place is the people who are

the Body of Christ. The building in which they meet, like the Church itself, is a living entity, and in consequence is constantly changing. The complete history can never be written, only the history up to the present. Even since 1754, the church has changed considerably. In 1842 a gallery was installed, and in 1875 it was removed. Some of the changes we may now applaud, and others regret. But for as long as the Church remains alive, it will continue to change to meet the needs of the present generation. Some of the changes to come may meet with universal approval and others will not.

Conservationists need to remember that churches have always been built not to be the heritage for the future, but to give glory to God and serve the Church of the present. That they have become part of our heritage is consequential upon that. If heritage becomes the prime consideration, not only does the true purpose of the church disappear, but also heritage itself may be the ultimate loser.

So what of the building we have now? This was written in 1994, and the reader but ten years hence may well find this hopelessly out of date. What the present author can give can be no more than a “snapshot in time” of the church.

To see a church at its best, it must be seen in use. It is then that its true purpose is apparent. Yet many seek out a church when it is quiet, and in the silence make their own secret communion with God. Who is to say that the blessing that they receive is no less real than for those who join in the worship of the Christian community?

You approach the church down a brick path, past the graves of so many past residents of our village. None is more poignant than that of the children of Phoebe Chapman, five of whom died within the space of a week in 1857(?). As you come nearer the church, you pass the place where the ashes of many more recent parishioners lie: you may see flowers placed here by those who love them still.

The building is a simple shape - what is sometimes called a “preaching box”. There are no unexpected corners, no chantries, and no Lady Chapel. Yet the very simplicity of the design enhances the proportions of the building and focuses concentration on its primary purpose, that God and mankind may be one in Holy Communion. It witnesses to the continued hope that mankind may live in union with God's intention, that there may be peace on earth and that all mankind may live in harmony, brotherhood and mutual care.

You enter the church through the porch, a more recent addition (1875). Sadly this strikes a discordant note with the rest of the church in having a far too steeply pitched roof. It also, in common with other parts of the Victorian alterations, has carving in a very soft stone, now badly crumbling. The gable cross on the porch is a recent replacement for one which came down in gales in 1989. It has yet to weather in!

The windows of the church also present an unusual sight. In fact, the only window to have survived in anything like its original form is the west window in the tower. It is worth making the diversion to see this window from the outside; the inside of it is not visible from within the church. The others are described very charitably by Pevsner as “painful”. Without doubt the older rectangular leading of a single light is more attractive than what we now see.

Inside the church, the focal point is the Altar. At the time of writing, the present arrangements have only recently been made permanent. In 1754 a small Communion Table would have

been provided, and the floor was stone throughout at the lower level of the Sanctuary. In 1910 an extra step was provided in marble, new oak panelling installed, and a new (much larger) Altar erected. This was in conformity with the tastes of the day. Present trends prefer a smaller Altar, free standing in the Sanctuary, in fact, much closer to the original Georgian plan.

The worship of the Church indicates three focal points in the sanctuary; the Altar, the Lectern and the Presidential Chair. The Chair is a fine piece of oak carving in a rustic style. Notice the carving on the seat back, and should your exploration of Great Houghton take you to the "Cherry Tree" public house (as well it might), you will see a very similar carving on the door of a corner cupboard. It was (and still is) a common practice for pieces of carving originally made for one piece of furniture, later to be salvaged and used again in another! Elsewhere in the the Church there is another fine oak chair used often by bride and groom at weddings. The lectern, as a piece of furniture is unmemorable, yet it serves the purpose of pointing us to the Word of God in the Scriptures.

The east wall of the Sanctuary contains a fine painted glass window by Dix of the Crucifixion, and on the panels each side of the window, swags made up of the instruments of the passion, the things that were used in the crucifixion of Christ. Above the pulpit is the memorial to the builder of this church, Theophilus Goodfellow, containing the inscription "Crux Christi, Salus mihi", "The Cross of Christ, my salvation". The east wall of the Sanctuary speaks of the devotion of the builder of the church to the Cross-of Christ.

The window to your right is of particular interest, being one of the few contributions to the church from the second half of the twentieth century. It is the work of Roy Coomber, and commemorates the silver jubilee of Great Houghton Preparatory School, next-door neighbours to the church.

Turn round to face west. Above the door to the vestry hangs another crucifix; this is so that the Priest standing at the Altar may be constantly reminded of Christ who died on the Altar of the Cross. There is another crucifix beside the pulpit. There is a long tradition that there should be one near a pulpit, but within sight of the preacher, to remind him that he is there simply to preach Christ crucified, and not his own pet theories!

Above the Crucifix on the west wall of the church are a set of organ pipes. These are a fake! Behind them is a loudspeaker which is driven by the "Mighty Wurlitzer", an electronic organ dating from the 1960s and doing very well to have survived for so long.

Before the Wurlitzer, the musical accompaniment was provided by a small organ, which dated from 1901 and before that by an American Organ, an instrument similar to a Harmonium. In the earlier days of the church, there was a selection of instruments, played in the gallery to accompany the singing.

Singing the praises of God has been a fundamental part of divine worship since long before the days of Jesus on earth. There is a warm welcome to all visitors to share in the worship of the Church in Great Houghton; the times of services are on the notice board by the gate. The notice board itself is a fine piece of local workmanship, crafted by Mr Robert Hollowell of Cogenhoe, and a memorial to Mr Martin Shaw, late of this village.

Many of the furnishings of the church and churchyard are memorials - the fine bench beside the porch in memory of Mrs Ralph and Mrs Bater, mothers of two people connected with the prep school, the Church and the village. Many of the trees, shrubs and plants in the churchyard are memorials to past worshippers and residents. Not visible except at worship are modern sets of vestments in memory of the late Joan Astell, whose family owned land in the village, and the cupboard in which they hang in memory of the late Ben Irons, for sometime churchwarden of this parish.

In a church the past is made present, for all are alive in Christ. We join the company of the Saints and Angels and of all worshippers, past and present, and never more so than when we join in obedience to the command of the Lord to “do this in memory of me”. It was for this purpose that the Church was first built, and it is in continued obedience to this command that the Church continues to breathe life into the building which otherwise would be no more than a heap of stones - an attractive heap, but a heap none the less!

The congregation in this generation, no less than their predecessors, seek to keep this a living Church, and hope that all visitors are able to share in the beauty and the peace of Christ here.