

The Parish Church of
St Andrew's
Todber



A Church Guide

The Benefice of Stour Vale

St Andrews, Todber, is a charming compact church standing on the edge of an anciently quarried hill overlooking the lowlands of Marnhull, Manston and

Margaret Marsh. Although having all the characteristics of antiquity, the Todber Church you see today was extensively rebuilt in the late 1870s by the Marchioness of Westminster who at the time, owned most of the land in the Parish of Todber. The restoration retained most of the original tower and much of the original oak chancel screen was reused, however all the remaining building is Victorian from foundation to roof.

Not much is known of earlier church buildings which will have stood here since late Saxon times. The original building standing at the time of restoration was not in use and in a pretty ruinous condition but seems to have given evidence of three dates or periods of its existence. The Nave was Early English, simple and primitive in its form and decoration, the small windows being cut out of the green stone from Shaftesbury. The Chancel of later date was in the Perpendicular style, with more spacious windows in Todber or Marnhull stone.

There were also traces of a far earlier period in two most curious fragments of what was apparently an old Saxon Cross, the larger stone having formed a quoin at the South West corner of the old Nave, being therefore slightly weather worn on two of its faces but the mortar had preserved the old Saxon vine carvings on the other sides in a perfect state. The carvings may represent the Tree of Life, or a vine branch, a bunch of grapes being clearly discernible on the small fragment. The remains of an old small round headed Saxon window were also found at the time of restoration seeming to indicate that a small Saxon church building was here in earlier times.

The Rector at the time of restoration was anxious that the pieces of Saxon Cross should be properly preserved and had them mounted in a modern cross in the positions they were believed to have occupied. The cross was installed in the churchyard as it was felt that there was insufficient room in the small church interior. Fears about excessive weathering of the stones has resulted in the cross being moved to the inside rear of the church in modern times.

The church is set in an ancient churchyard surrounded on all sides by walls and a hedgerow which even at the time of restoration was already ancient. Curiously, at that time the churchyard did not contain any graves. This is probably because of the very shallow soil that lay over solid rock in the churchyard and because Todber was originally attached as a chapel to Gillingham where all burials were performed and from 1636 subsequently attached to East Stour and then Stour Provost.

Burials in the churchyard did not begin until after 1880 when the then incumbent, Revd. W. H. Whitting, proposed that burial should be allowed

so as to relieve pressure on Stour Provost Churchyard. On site quarrying for the foundations of the new church building and the dumping of soil excavated for the foundations into the resulting holes now meant that sufficient depth of soil was available to permit graves to be dug without excessive labour.

It has not been possible to find out what the original dedication of this Church was or which Patron Saint it was most likely named after. The date of a former rebuilding of the Chancel is marked by some old glass which had been carefully replaced in the head of the East window, showing what is thought to be the Arms of the Carent family ("argent three torteaux, each charged with three chevrons")

This is exactly as they appear on the old tomb in the Toomer aisle at Henstridge Church where it appears that the Carents possessed lands in Henstridge, Marnhull, Todber and Fifehead during Edward. III's reign, and a William Carent rebuilt the Chancel in the reign of Henry VII. Eventually Todber was ceded to the family of Filiol of Marnhull and then it was apparently purchased by King's College, Cambridge.

During the 1879 rebuilding the existing tower was retained intact but strengthened by two well proportioned buttresses at the S.E. and S.W. corners, the base of the tower forming the porch and entrance to the Nave. The north wall of the Nave was extended to provide more space while the Chancel retained its original proportions. A restored chancel arch of Bath stone and facing wall provides a visual continuity between the new stonework of the Nave and the original Chancel.

A small Vestry has built on the North side. One of the old early English two light windows in the North wall of the Chancel was replaced with beautiful stained glass by the noted firm of Lavers, Barraud and Westlake of Engel Street, London, representing The Good Shepherd feeding his sheep, and bearing his Cross, with the legend "I am the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep". An engraved brass plaque fixed on the wall below thus explains the object of the memorial window:

"To the glory of God, and in memory of Richard Prat, M.A., of Merton College, Oxford, for 17 years Curate of this Church and Stour Provost, this window is erected by his old parishioners and friends. He was called to his rest Feb.17 A.D.1878, aged 58"

The window and brass plate originally cost £181, a significant sum which had been raised by a subscription in the two parishes, with some help from neighbouring clergy. The other windows in the Chancel are of green tinted cathedral glass; the rest of the windows in the Church are plain leaded glass. The encaustic tiles in the Chancel were made by Carter's at the Poole Pottery Works.



The Altar is formed of an old bevelled stone found in the original floor. From its size and mouldings it can be supposed that it was an old Altar stone. This is now supported on massive oak pedestals. The altar is backed by a Reredos which is an old sounding board which overhung the pulpit prior to the restoration and with its rustic trefoil and vine leaf carvings looking appropriate in its new position.



A 15th Century Piscina having an octagonal bowl and moulded corbel was reset into a rectangular recess with hollow chamfered ogee-head and fleur-de-lis finial on the South wall of the Chancel.

The old oak pulpit was extensively restored in 1878, being a simple but elegant construction of the Carolian period. The old oak chancel screen was rebuilt from the existing screen under the supervision of a master joiner, a Mr. R. Dean.

The old existing octagonal Font with plain sides, hollow chamfered under on an octagonal stem with roll moulding, was used again and mounted on a modern stone step standing in an open position near the door. It is surmounted by an oak cover which was at least partly paid for by a small surplus from the fund for the memorial window mentioned above.

One of two existing bells was recast at the time of restoration by Nears and Stainbank, of Whitechapel. It's old inscription showed it to have been originally placed there in 1736, when a Mr. Thomas Hiscock was Churchwarden. The restored bell bears the names of Mr. Herbert Andrews, and Mr. Charles Barnes, the then Churchwardens. The other bell, which was found to be sound and good, was of about the same date, and bears the following inscription: "Mr. James Hatcher, Ch. Wdn., 1737". (The 'W.C.' trademark on the old bell indicated that it had come originally from the same foundry at Whitechapel, where the new one had been recast).

A 17th Century royal arms painted on a lozenge shaped wood panel is mounted on the north wall of the Nave. It is monogrammed 'C.R.' and bears the legend 'Fear God – Honour the King'.



During the excavations of the Church foundations, three nearly perfect skeletons were discovered at the depth of about three feet within the walls. Two were in the Chancel, possibly of former Rectors before the amalgamation with Stour Provost 150 years ago; and one just to the East of the South door, possibly of some former landowner. Their bones were not moved, but covered again with earth in the spot where they lay. There were indications of other graves in the Chancel; but they were not disturbed.

All the major works and a number of repairs and refurbishment of interior furniture were paid for by the Marchioness of Westminster. A Mr. G. Hiscock was the principal builder and architect employed in the restoration, A number of local farmers, tenants of the Westminster Estates, were volunteered to haul stone and other materials to the site often in danger of damage to their wagon wheels from the heavy loads.

One old Rector of Todber, Mr. Roger Clark, seems to have been buried at Marnhull in 1665. It is of this aged Rector that the following account is given in Walker's "Sufferings of the Clergy at the time of the great Rebellion". We read that a troop of horse surrounded the house at midnight to take his son but he managed to escape out of a window and got away. "Then the doors being opened, they took the said. Roger Clark, the father, and bound him neck and heels, at the age of 70, till the blood came forth of his eyes, and carried him immediately afterwards to Sturminster Newton Castle, in Dorset; and not confessing anything of his son's design, they burnt his fingers with matches, of which torture he was about half a year recovering".

The wonder is that he survived such barbarous treatment at all and, if the above date of his burial correctly infers, lived so many years after it. (The exact date of his imprisonment is not given in 'Turning Points of English Church History', by Rev. E. L. Cutts, from which this interesting account is taken).

Today, St Andrew, Todber is one of eight parishes in the Benefice of Stour Vale, administered by the Revd. Jan Salter who resides in the Vicarage at Kington Magna. The other seven churches in this benefice are also well worth a visit and can be found in Stour Provost, Stour Row, East Stour, West Stour, Fifehead Magdalen, Kington Magna and Buckhorn Weston.



Pattern Of Services - St. Andrew's Todber

The normal pattern of services at St Andrews throughout the month is as follows:

1st Sunday 9.00 am Holy Communion
2nd Sunday 10.30 pm Morning Prayer
3rd Sunday 10.30am Service at East Stour Church
4th Sunday No service
5th Sunday Benefice Service (Rotated around the parishes)

References and Further Reading:

Salisbury and Winchester Journal - August 23rd 1879

'Turning Points of English Church History',
by Rev. E. L. Cutts - British Library

'The History and antiquities of the County of Dorset',
by John Hutchins, ed W Shipp & J Whitworth Hodson
Pub. J.B.Nicholson and Sons 1873

'Dorset: Thomas Hardy's Country'
by Arthur Mee Pub. Hodder & Stoughton 1939

'The Buildings of England: Dorset'
by J Newman & N Pevsner Pub. Penquin 1972

'An Inventory of Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset'
by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England)
Pub. HMSO 1972