

..The history of St. George's Church, Ruishton



Ruishton village and its Church

The spread of Christianity in our region is likely to have begun as early as the 8th century with the foundation in Taunton of a Saxon Minster Church. It is thought that missionary priests from this church had come to Ruishton long before the Norman Conquest, to establish a chapel or preaching place. The site they chose was probably where our present church stands, overlooking the rush-grown river lands that gave the village its name.

In 878 AD (the year the sun was eclipsed) Alfred the Great gave Ruishton to the bishops of Winchester. This land was then acquired by the Great Manor of Taunton in 904 AD, although their hold on this new territory was not always secure. For a time parts of the Manor territory fell into secular hands and in the 10th century the powerful Bishop Ethelwold was forced to reassert the claims of Winchester upon the land of "Risctun". Thereafter the Bishops held the Manor with scarcely a break until 1822, dominating the economic life of the vale.

In 1120 AD the Manor Churches were granted to Taunton's new Augustinian Priory. It may have been the Canons of the Priory (serving Ruishton as the Minster priest had done) who inspired the building of a new church in the 12th century. This new church was probably dedicated to St. George, a saint popular at that time. Its Norman remains can still be seen at the south door.

Before long, the Prior and Canons became distracted by the needs of their own community. They failed to care for the Parishes which had been established. There were complaints that people had died without the benefit of the last rites.

In 1308 responsibility for several local churches was given to the Vicar of St. Mary's Church in Taunton. The Prior undertook however, to find a resident priest for Ruishton and Stoke St. Mary

“which are sufficiently close to each other”. In token perhaps of a special affection for the church at Ruishton, the Prior was given leave to send certain worthy brethren of his community” to assist at the mass on Sundays and other solemn occasions.

No records exist of the men who served as parish priests at this period, although their home “le preistes howse” is later mentioned in a manor survey, as is “le churche-howse, a forerunner of the village hall. Nicholas Bassley was priest in 1531, and four years later John Stotte was receiving from the Prior a yearly stipend of £6 13s 4d.

Building and rebuilding slowly transformed Ruishton’s Norman church, until by the 16th century only one major project remained. As the middle ages ebbed away and the River Tone nearby carried “all maner of marchaundses” to the prospering town of Taunton, an ambitious west tower was begun. The new tower was intended to equal any other tower in Somerset. On the eve of the Reformation however, the dissolution of the Priory had intervened and the builders left our fine west tower unfinished. St. Georges Church was left without its ancient patron and the tower without its crown.

The years of religious change which followed the reformation seem to have had little effect on the history of Ruishton. There are records however of the bishop’s efforts to keep discipline among the clergy and the people. In 1577 a parishioner was suspected of usury (lending money with excessively high interest), another parishioner attended church while excommunicated and there are also records of quarterly sermons not being preached. A dispute over tithes which reached the Court of Chancery in Elizabeth’s reign, was matched by an argument no less heated which disturbed the churchyard in 1616, after pigs and sheep had been “rooteing upp the graves”. The church was out of repair in 1605 with the new Book of Common Prayer nowhere to be found. In 1629 Richard Harding was serving as parish priest without the bishop’s licence: more than that “he preached and kept school with as little right”.

The Civil War and its aftermath also left its mark. A Parliamentary army marching to Taunton’s relief in 1645 found “scarce a man.....in a whole village, so barbarously had the Enemy unpeopled the Country”; and in the same year Robert Proctor of Henlade was threatened with death for refusing the oath of allegiance. He died soon after his release from imprisonment in Orchard House. It was little wonder that non-conformity found allies in Ruishton and its locality. In 1669 large conventicles (secret religious meetings) were reported at Stoke St Mary and Creech St Michael and 16 years later at least 11 villagers were implicated in the Monmouth Rebellion.

Timothy Batt was appointed minister of St George’s Church soon after the Restoration (of the Monarchy). He gained a reputation for saintliness and his preaching earned him the title “silver-tongued Batt”. In 1662 however he was ejected from the living (dismissed) because of his Puritan views. He lived into blind old age and borrowed his dying words from St Paul: “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith”.

A calmer mood settled on the village in the 18th century. By 1742 the church was a building of comfortable cluttered appearance with a service once a month. The appearance of the church was dominated by the pulpit, placed well down the nave. Box pews gave a crowded feeling and hat pegs lined the walls. The squire had a pew in the south aisle and the village musicians led the singing from the gallery at the west end. The churchwardens accounts from the late 18th century survive and list as regular expenses, strings for the bass viol and candles to light the singing.

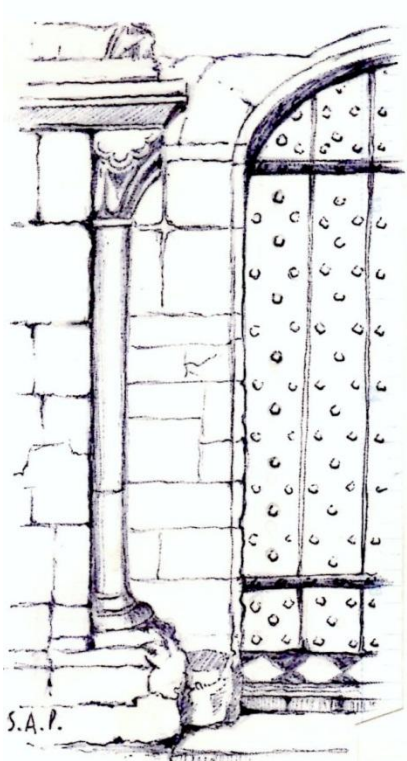
A school was endowed (gifted) to the village and in 1742 the village children were taught to read but not to write. They were also taught “the principles of the Christian religion” although the effectiveness of this teaching is questionable as in 1768 vestry records report “several enormous

Crimes” in the neighbourhood. In 1841 more than 500 of “the veriest ruffians and blackguards” gathered to watch a brutal prize fight near to the inn at Blackbrook. An inn which records show was known to Thackeray.

By 1822 the evangelical movement had reached the village and a house was registered for non-conformist worship. An Anglican revival soon followed and by 1851 St George’s Church records that an average of 100 people attended the Sunday morning service and as many as 170 in the afternoon. In 1866 a drastic restoration of the church was undertaken. The gallery and the box pews were removed and replaced with respectable Victorian benches brought from the Savoy Chapel in the Strand. Needless to say, not everyone was happy with the changes: the minstrels objected to the “new-fangled” choir.



During the 20th century the village of Ruishton was transformed. Large numbers of new houses were built and the population reached around 1400 residents. The new school built in 1975 enabled pupil numbers to increase to 140 children aged 5-11yrs, in 5 classes with a preschool unit taking children from 2 ½ - 4yrs 10mths. The M5 now borders the parish on its western side and flood prevention measures reduce, to some extent, the “grete floodes and drowning of the medews” which are recorded in 1505.



The increasing of the rural population however has not had a significant effect on the reducing congregations in local parish churches. Thus the combining of resources became necessary and by 1944 the Rev Boyle had become vicar of the United Benefice of St Georges, Ruishton and The Church of the Holy Cross, Thornfalcon.

The beginning of the 21st century saw further changes for St George's Church. In 2008 under the ministry of the Rev. Ian Aldersley, St George's Church became part of a United Benefice, not only with The Church of the Holy Cross, Thornfalcon but also with St. Michael's Church, Creech St Michael. A new Rectory for the Benefice was built at Creech St Michael enabling the diocese to sell the Vicarage at Ruishton. Some of the funds raised were used to build a parish meeting room and toilet on the site of its old vicarage garages. In 2011 the Rev. Rebecca Harris became Ruishton's first female Rector.

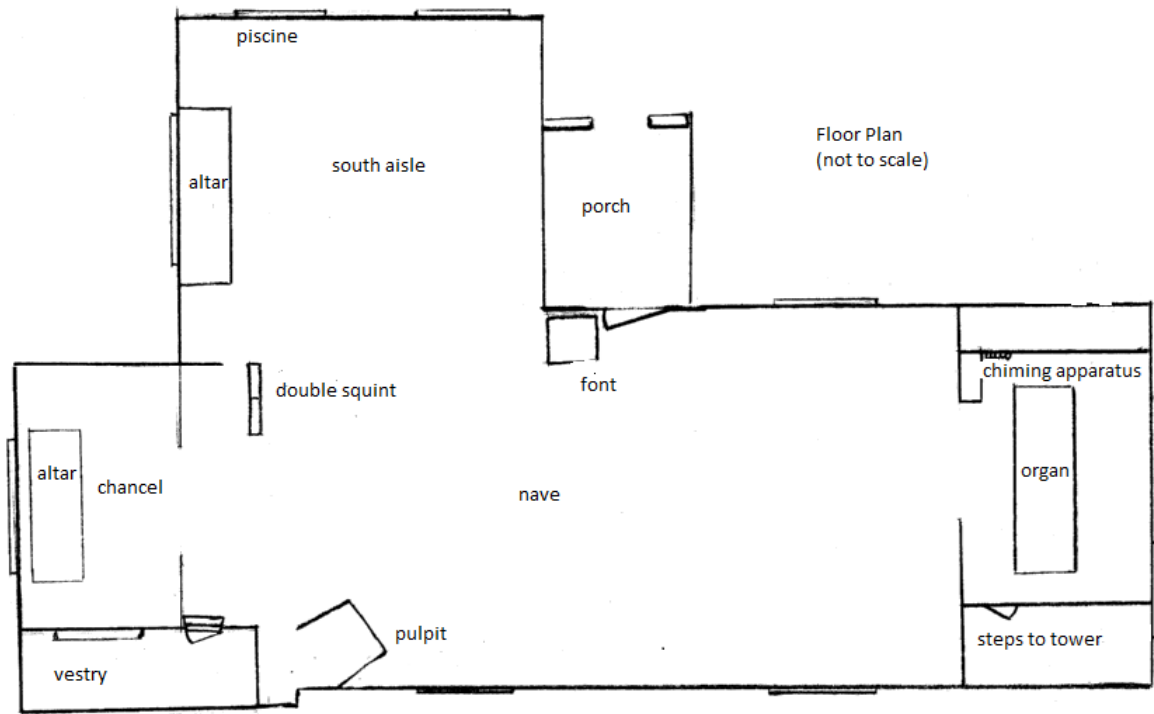
For approximately twelve hundred years the Christian message has been preached in and around Ruishton. Over the centuries buildings have come and gone and many different people have had varying degrees of impact on its evolving community. It is quite remarkable that through rebellion, war and an increasing secular society St George's church holds fast to those same principles and values.

A Tour Of The Church

Entering by the **south door**, there is a **column** and **capitals** (shown here) and the fragment of a **zig-zag arch**, the remnants of a church which stood here late in the 12th century. Subsequent alterations to the building obscures the extent of the Norman work, but the tiny **chancel** and the south wall of the **nave** are perhaps, further remains of the 12th century church. That building may have been either a simple rectangle or a cruciform shape, in either case it soon became too small for the community it served.

One striking feature of the church, the mis-alignment of the chancel, may have resulted from the northward extension of the nave possibly in the 13th century. Certainly the nave had reached its present size by the 14th century, when the **rood stair** behind the **pulpit** was built. This staircase (rediscovered in 1866) gave access to the rood loft surmounting the chancel screen. All trace of the screen is gone, except perhaps for the fine medieval panels incorporated in the **reredos** (the carved panels behind the altar). The only medieval glass to have survived the centuries is in the tiny window which lights the rood stairs. It depicts two watching angels.

The 15th century left a very clear mark on this building. New windows for the nave and chancel allowed more light into the lofty church. This would have illuminated the wall paintings which were uncovered in the 19th century (now vanished). There was also a new **porch**, an **arcade**, a **chancel arch** and an unusual **double squint** which allows those in the south aisle a view of the priest.



The history of the **south aisle** is difficult to determine but it may also have been remodelled in the 15th century. At first sight it is typical of the late medieval perpendicular style, with a rare and beautiful **east window** which probably dates from the late 13th century. There is a **piscine** in the **south wall** (uncovered in 1866) which appears to have been partially blocked to allow the insertion of a perpendicular window nearby, probably in the 15th century. The piscine marks the aisle as the ancient site of an altar, dedicated perhaps to the Virgin Mary, whose guild or brotherhood apparently flourished in Ruishton shortly before the Reformation.

The **font** (shown below) dates from about 1380 and is of exceptional quality. It has an octagonal bowl richly carved and supported by panelled shafts.



In the 19th century the Anderdon family presented a 16th century Flemish painting to the church. It had originally formed an altar-piece and was titled “The Presentation by the Magi”. Unfortunately it was stolen from its place above the font in 1981 and never recovered.

The **pulpit** was given to the church by the Sommerville family after the Great War (WW1). The inscription describes the relief of a mother whose sons had returned home safely when so many sons had not. It replaced an 18th century pulpit which is thought to have found its way to our sister church at Thornfalcon.

The **organ** was built by George Osmond and given to the church in 1913, in memory of Edwin and John Thorn. Although born in Ruishton, they had, like many others, sought better fortune in America.

On the wall, left of the organ are six ropes, each of which is connected to a **bell** in the belfry. The bells of St George’s have been unringable for some years but this **chiming devise** enables them to be chimed.

The **Ellacombe Chiming Apparatus** was purchased and installed with three additional bells in 1955. The manufacturers description is as follows;

“This apparatus would consist of an independent chime hammer for each bell together with the necessary guide pulleys, cords, rubber grips and chiming rack, the latter incorporating a ratchet and pawl arrangement which enables the hammers readily to be placed in or out of gear as required and also permitting rapid adjustment of the hammers to suit changes in atmospheric conditions.”

The **royal arms** over the south door was originally on the front of the singing gallery. This was removed and re-sited during the Victorian restoration of 1866.

The church **plate** (silver) includes a fine Elizabethan chalice and cover, the latter bearing the date 1574. These are currently on display in the “Created in Somerset” Exhibition at the Bishop's Palace, Wells.

Outside the Church

The chief glory of this church is its **tower**. It is built of the blue lias stone, typical in this area and is likely to have been quarried locally. Even in a county famed for its church towers its design is strikingly elaborate, with ham-stone friezes, canopied niches and an array of angel busts. It was planned or under construction by 1533, when Richard Gode of West Monkton left 20d (approx 8½p) “to the byldynge of the tower of Ryston”. Despite a recent suggestion that no crown for the tower was never intended, it probably stands unfinished. The letters T and M over the west door are memorial, perhaps to an unknown benefactor.

There has been a tower **clock** at least since the late 18th century although the present mechanism was made in 1882 by Smith’s of Derby.

Originally the tower housed three **bells**. These were replaced in 1897 and we do not know the reason for this. By the 1950's we know that the bells had not been rung for some time. It could well be that the austerity of the war years led to a desire to hear the bells ringing again because in 1953 an extraordinary fund raising campaign began and in 1955 the church was able to install a new steel bell cage with three new bells along with the recasting of the three existing ones. The tower therefore holds three bells cast in 1954 by Taylor’s of Loughborough, two bells cast in 1747 by Thomas Bayley of Bridgwater one cast in 1781 by Thomas Pyke of the same town.

Unfortunately by the end of the 20th century an inspection had found the bells too heavy for the tower and all ringing had to cease.

Standing near the entrance to the church are the remains of a fine large **cross**, thought to date from the early 15th century. It has panels around the shaft which may bear the emblems of the four Evangelists. The figure of a mitred bishop or abbot, with his hand raised in blessing, looks down from the corner of the south aisle nearby. It is probable that he, like a similar figure found at St James’s Church in Taunton, originally formed part of the cross.

We hope that you have found this tour of St George’s interesting. Please visit us again and experience not only the centuries of history but also the peace and tranquillity of God’s house.

This guide was originally written in 1981 by Tom Mayberry and illustrated by Shirley Pippin.
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