



St. John the Baptist, Pewsey

Pewsey comes from "Pevsigge" (little island), a reference to it being on the banks of the Avon where the stream divides, and has a history going back to Saxon times. In 880AD King Alfred the Great presented land at "Pevsigge" to "the Warden of Chaddar for the great service he had rendered" and then in 901AD he bequeathed part of his Pewsey estate to his eldest son Edward and the rest to the monastery of St. Peter at Winchester (Hyde Abbey).

Later in 946AD Alfred's grandson Edmund gave his part of Pewsey Manor to the same monastery. The Saxon settlement of Pevsigge was small but, even so, it almost certainly had a church built of wood and thatch on the present site high above the often flooded valley.

Pewsey Manor remained in the hands of the Monks of Hyde Abbey until the Dissolution in 1549, when it passed into the hands of the Protector, The Duke of Somerset. By the 17th century it had passed to Charles, Duke of Somerset (The Proud Duke) who built Somerset House in London, and then to his daughter the Duchess of Northumberland. Little is then known until 1776 when Pewsey Manor was sold to Joseph Champion, a land dealer, who immediately sold it to the Trustees of London's St. Thomas's Hospital in whose hands it then remained.

Returning to the church, the Normans who were great church builders, would have replaced the original wooden structure with a new one of stone. It was larger, possessing a nave chancel and two aisles. It possibly also had a small apse at the east end. Of this original Norman building the present arcades of pillars and arches remain, as does the south aisle.

The Domesday Survey refers to Pewsey as follows:-

The church itself holds Pevesie. In the time of King Edward it paid gold for 30 Hides (a hide varies between 60 and 150 acres). The land is 24 carucate (caruca, a plough) of this land there are three carucates and six serfs. There are 46 villains (villagers) and 24 coscets (tenant farmers) and one border for 10 carucates. There are seven mills paying £4. 5. 0. And 15 acres of meadow. The pasture is one mile long and as broad. Of the same land a Thane (an administrative official, often an Anglo-Saxon) holds three hides all but one virgate, and he could not be separated from the church. Ernest de Hesding holds two hides of the King which the Abbott gave to a Thane in the time of King Edward, who, however, could not be separated from the church, It is worth thirty shillings; the demesne of the Abbott is worth £26. It is now worth £28.

In the 13th century the chancel collapsed and was completely rebuilt. During this same period 1230-1250 AD the chancel arch was added and the westernmost part of the south arcade. A century later the nave roof was rebuilt and a clerestory, with windows formed, the south aisle windows and the tower were also built about this time.

No further alterations were made to the church until the 17th century when the south aisle roof was rebuilt. In 1861 the south chancel aisle (the chapel), was added. The east end wall and window being moved to almost same level as the chancel's eastern wall. The Chancel south wall was replaced by the arches and its windows and door rebuilt into the chapel south wall. At this time the church was filled with pews and galleries of all shapes and sizes.

Early in the 19th century only one service was held on a Sunday and the parishioners requested another. This was promised them on the condition that the church roof was sealed to keep out draught. The work was carried out at a cost of £200 and the lower flat ceiling remained until the major restoration of 1869.

This restoration, the greatest the church has ever undergone, took place in 1889-90. The architect was Mr. C. E. Ponting of Lockeridge and the builder a Mr. Wiltshire of Swindon. The decision to rebuild was taken in May 1888 during the incumbency of Canon B. Bouverie. He was a great benefactor to Pewsey and out of his own pocket paid the lion share of the cost of this particular restoration (£1554). The Vestry promised £723 to get the work started and Mr. Wiltshire's tender of £2605 was accepted. During the restoration, which removed the galleries and box pews, the North Aisle was extended northwards, the present north porch added and the Organ Chamber/Clergy Vestry built. The roof timbers over the Organ Chamber were a gift of the Earl of Radnor and had previously formed the roof of the Refectory of Ivychurch Priory near Salisbury, a priory founded by Henry II. After years of neglect the priory was pulled down in 1888 and the roof timbers being sound were re-used in this church. September 1889 saw the nave roof completed and the north aisle remodelled. By the spring of 1890 the restoration was complete and the church largely as we see it today.

The Exterior

Pewsey churchyard is surprisingly small, a feature accounted for by the fact that, in the middle of the last century, the road running from north to south was laid down, and coming past the church as it does, took a good half of the churchyard. In 1863 the present cemetery in Wilcot Road was opened and since then most local burials, apart from cremated remains, have taken place there. However the old churchyard around the church must have been used over and over again during its long history.

On the South side of the churchyard is the Manor (now flats), a comparatively recent building but on an ancient site. The original Manorial seat is thought to have been here and from time immemorial a path has existed from this house to the church. King Alfred on return from one of his victories over the Danes used it to reach the original wooden church. On September 14th (Holy Cross Day) he is said to have announced from the church door that this day was to a holiday for the people of Pewsey forever, as a mark of his visit, for a good Harvest and for his victories. Most legends are founded on some fact and it is clear that for a very long time the Monday closest to September 14th was kept in Pewsey as a holiday. At the end of the last century Pewsey Feast as it is known locally was incorporated into a Carnival which still thrives around that week of Holy Cross Day.

Various external features of the church are of interest. High on the Western side of the tower can be seen a lamb, a feature often found in churches dedicated to St. John the Baptist, for he was the first to describe Christ as the Lamb of God. On the tower stair turret's side is a scratch sundial, probably medieval, a Mass Dial can be seen on the chancels south-east buttress. A benchmark on the tower tells that it is 373 feet above sea level.

A feature of the churchyard is the memorial to the men of Pewsey who fell in two world wars. In the eastern wall of the tower can be observed the sanctus bell, the present bell dates from 1754 and replaces a much earlier bell that would ring at the consecration in the Mass.

In addition the tower has a peal of six bells of varying ages and with varying inscriptions:-

1. Robert Wells Aldbourn fecit 1792
2. Thos. Glass and Wm. Summersett, Ch. Wardens. A (bell) R 1735.
3. Tho. Neate, Gent "Prosperity to this place" (fleur de lys)
4. + sanc :te:Ge or (+ in a circle standing for Jesus Christ).
5. + Anno Domini 1620 R (bell) P.
6. "God send peace" Mr Robert Pye Mr William Munday Ch wardens Abra' Rudhall Bell Founder 1709 (40 inches). This latter is probably a heartfelt plea. England was at war with France at this time. The fourth bell was probably cast in Salisbury and the rare initial + occurs also on a bell at Winterbourne Gunner and at Nether Crene in Somerset.

The bells were last restored in 1961. The tenor weighs in at about 12 cwt. - Treble 3 cwt.

Canon Bouverie in his little book on Pewsey written in 1890 refers to the first bell as follows:- "My informant told me that he had heard his grandfather say that he remembered when the first bell was given to the parish. In order that it might be long remembered, before raising it into the tower, it was buried upside down in the churchyard to the brim. It was then filled with strong ale and every man, woman and child in the parish was invited to dip a cup and drink to the health of the bell, after which it was raised to its place."

The Interior

Stand under the tower and look up, observe the splendid tracery of the ceiling standing here as it first left the masons chisel in the 15th century. See how beautifully the design spreads to meet round the circle. This opening is left so that the bells may be raised or lowered through the ceiling.

The font is Norman, 12th century, probably the oldest thing in the church. It was moved to this spot from the North door in 1889. The font cover is modern and was carved by the late Canon Bouverie, (Rector 1880-1910) after he had retired, as a memorial to the men of the parish who fell in the 1914-1918 war. Most of them had been baptised in this font. Their names are recorded in stone on the south wall, also carved by Canon Bouverie.

Passing down the steps notice the first arch on the right. It is different from the other arches of the arcades, and is likely the same period as the Chance arch. Possibly a bell turret stood at this Southeast corner of the original church, and this corner became unsafe. At any rate it was rebuilt from the tops of the pillars upwards.

The font of the earliest stone church would have stood here under the arch, and on the side of this arch will be noticed the remnant of a bracket, perhaps used or standing the chrism (anointing oil) on. In the west wall of the south aisle is a small cupboard space, probably for storing the chrism between baptisms.

No one quite knows the age of the clock. It was here in 1670 for Church Records record that in that year, one John Wacrum was to be paid £1. 2shillings per annum to look after it. No doubt it was made by some clever local Blacksmith. Until 1939 the mechanism was in the Ringing Chamber of the tower, but in that year for some reason the clock ground to a halt and it was not to strike the hours over Pewsey again until 1982. In that year it was lovingly restored by Joe Barrett and placed in a new frame presented by Fred Smith. But why no face? It was built before the time of faces on Church Clocks, in the quiet pastoral setting of Pewsey in the 17th century the locals would have been content to hear what hour of the day it was.

At the crossing of the aisles turn and look at the magnificent 15th century tower arch and look up at the nave roof (19th century).

Going towards the north door, on the right see the Alms Box. The lock of this came from a convict settlement at Port Arthur, Tasmania.

In the west side of the western most pillar opposite, there is a recess, now glazed, on which at the time of the 1989 restoration, were found the remains of some goose feathers, there are some there still. If you look carefully you will see that the stonework has been cut into above the recess, and it is quite likely that there was once a little shrine here. It is fairly common on the continent to find in churches dedicated to St. John the Baptist, similar shrines containing feathers and it perpetuates the story (which is of course only legend) that when Zacharias, the Baptist's father, saw the Archangel flying away, after tell of his son's forthcoming birth, he clutched at him, and a few feathers came away in his hands. In the Medieval period it was quite possible that this was regarded as a relic and one can guess that maybe some crusader, was sold the feathers as genuine, came home and presented them to his church.

Now proceed to the chancel arch. This is the second to be built here. On the south side of the arch is a Hagioscope or Squint, cut to enable one to observe the altar in the chancel which in the middle ages would have been behind a massive screen across the chancel arch. Looking through it, the line of sight falls far short of the present altar position, which indicates that the earlier chancel was shorter than the present 13th century one.

At the north side is the upper set of steps that led to the Rood Loft above the screen. The lower steps which would have been of wood are long gone. Most of these old screens were torn down at the Reformation.

Pulpit and Lectern date from 1861 and were designed by G. E. Street.

Going into the south aisle, look up at the Jacobean roof, placed here sometime between 1600 and 1700. It was restored in 1949.

Enter now the chapel, built in 1861 as an organ chamber. The Reredos behind the Altar was originally over the main chancel altar, the bas relief pieta (The Blessed Virgin Mary mourning over the dead Christ) was carved by Canon Bouverie who had made a sketch of a similar pieta Michael Angelo in the chapel of the Albergo dei Poveri (almshouse for the aged poor) in Genoa. Above the south door is the monument to Catherine wife of Richard Harding one of the Grooms of the bedchamber of Charles II and Keeper of the Privy Purse in the Kings service, he died in exile in Holland two years before the Restoration.

Moving into the chancel observe over the vestry door a monument to Joseph Townsend Rector here for 52 years, 1764-1816. The monument is by Westmacott. Townsend was a remarkable man, among other things a well-known authority on geology, his portrait appears in John Phillips' memoir of William Smith the compiler of the first geological map of England.

Notice the Altar rails, they are of mahogany and come from the rails of the Spanish three-decker, San Joseph, boarded and captured by Commodore (afterwards Lord) Nelson in 1797, off Cape St. Vincent.

Inside the Sanctuary on the south side is an early two-seater sedilia (seat for clergy) and a Piscina, originally used for washing sacred vessels after mass. On the north side is also a small fragment of the earlier stone reredos.

The present altar and reredos were carved by Canon Bouverie in memory of his father and mother the late Early and Countess of Radnor.

The east window also remembers a part of the same family, a previous Pewsey Rector, the Rev. the Hon. F. P. Bouverie, his wife and children. He served this parish between 1816 & 1857.

Memorial Plates and Registers

The registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials are almost complete and date from 1568. They are kept in safety for us in the County Archives at Trowbridge [now moved to the WSHC in Chippenham]. The oldest names that appear are Pen, Oram, Amor, Ashen, Pyke, Edney, Hailstone, Godman, Crab and Zeelwood.

We also possess the Churchwardens Names, Accounts and notes going back to early in the 17th Century. These old registers give some insight into the life of a flourishing village during 400 years of its history. In 1633 the then quite large sum of £13 9s. 10d. was paid for the building of seats. In 1670 we read that John Wacrum was paid £1 2s. 0d. to keep the clock and bells in order. In 1671 however the Clerk was abated 10s that year for not ringing the clock bell. In 1638 a curious note concerns John Baron and Edward Crosdale who have changed their wives' seats forever. In 1710 we read that the singers, owners and possessors of the gallery agree to pay the Clerk 2d. a year to clean the seats. A year later Thomas Stratton was in the stocks for four hours and Thomas Poulton fined 10s. for allowing illegal tipping.

There are numerous memorials around the church mostly dating from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. On one tablet to Richard Hooper we read, "Death in a good old age ended my earthly pilgrimage. The time will come to rise and then I hope to be with Christ, Amen."

The old church plate consists of a chalice and paten dated 1685, a chalice paten, two flagons and an almsdish which were re-cast and remodelled in 1876 from original altar vessels presented by Hoby Stanley (Rector) and his wife Phillippa in 1732 & 1750.

John Wesley preached in this church on October 2nd 1764, an event which he himself records in his famous journal under that date.

Recent Restorations

Churches do not last forever. More than a hundred years have elapsed since any major work has done to the fabric. Work in recent years has included a new vestry floor, re-roofing of the tower, a new boiler, installation of a voice enhanced system, construction of a semi-circular dais in front of the chancel step and installation of a nave altar, creation of a meeting area in the North Aisle (known as the Church Room), the insulation and re-slating of the Chancel, Chapel and Vestry, and the restoration of the organ - efforts speaking of a lively responsive Christian family in this place and an even wider number of kind parishioners.

Text extracted from an information pamphlet available from the Church