

The Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin

The present building only dates from 1869, having been presented to the parishioners by Richard Benyon, Lord of the Manor, to replace the existing church which, due to the rapidly increasing population, was too small. However, even that church was not the first on the site, Christian worship having been practised there since Saxon times. It is believed that some five churches have followed one another. In the ninth century the Danes overran this part of the country. It is possible that when they reached Mortimer, the church, which would have been a wooden structure, was destroyed by fire. It was probably rebuilt, again of wood, before the Norman Conquest so that it was the Normans who built the first stone church on the site.

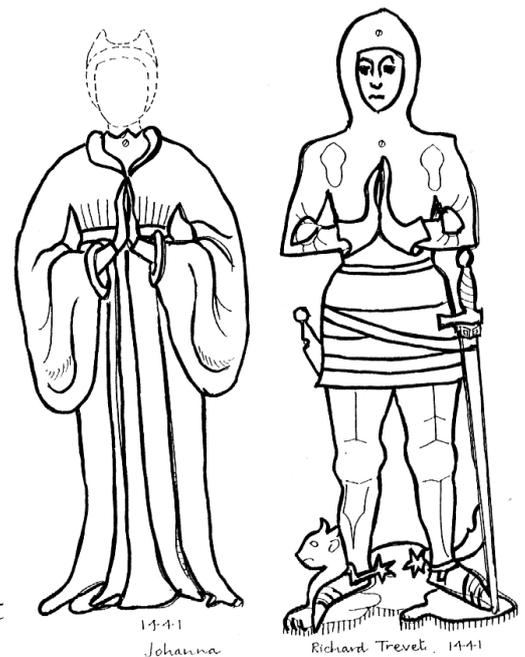
In 1348 the church and its property were taken into Edward III's hands and retained by the Crown until 1444 when it was given by Henry VI to Eton College.

The church pulled down in 1866 was probably 15th century. In 1849 the Archaeological Institute dismissed it thus: "*A poor church much modernised throughout - the pillars are plain, chamfered with moulded caps and the north doorway has Norman shafts.*"

A pair of small brasses dated 1441 survive, commemorating Richard and Joan Trevett. Richard was keeper of the Manor for the King. Usually, separate brasses of husband and wife signify that they are buried in separate graves, but the widow died a few weeks after her husband and was probably buried in the same or an adjoining grave. The head of her effigy is unfortunately lost. The churchwardens' books show that the old church had been much altered, galleries having been pulled down and rebuilt and aisles added.

When parish churches were despoiled in the reign of Edward VI, St. Mary's seems to have escaped, for there is no list of church goods. The Reverend Dawson, vicar, left by his will dated 1588 money for the repair of the bells - apparently the Crown Surveyors had left more than one bell. In 1681 the church was wainscotted at a cost of £30 and painted for £8 5s. In the same year a glazier was paid 10s 6d for mending the church windows.

Church and school are at the heart of village life and churchwardens' records dating from the year ending 1683 provide some interesting sidelights on village celebrations; for instance, the bellringers were paid 10s to celebrate the Duke of Marlborough's victory at Blenheim in August 1704, with the comment "*two days rejoicing*". Similarly, payments were made to the bellringers throughout the years at the time of the accession of successive sovereigns to the





Old St. Mary's church

throne and later for their coronations. The poor rate set yearly is recorded with the names of those who paid it.

In 1681 a fire at the home of the then churchwarden and parish clerk, Nicholas Prince, destroyed church records dating from medieval times. He probably had the records and the Communion Plate in his home rather than the church for safe-keeping. The Communion Plate "*melted into a lump*" and was sold off for £1 7s. A new Chalice was purchased for £6 2s.

In 1710 two sundials were purchased for £1 10s. One is still in the churchyard immediately facing the entrance. It bears the inscription:

"James Parsons and William White, Parish Wardens, Mortimer, 1709. Stephen Lamport fecit."

In 1845 it was proposed to remove the gallery pew and provide additional space for parishioners by enlarging the south aisle. The north gallery was also taken down and replaced '*behind the pillars*'. In 1853 the church was enlarged again, but in what way is not stated. On the floor at the west end of the present church is a broken font from the old church. It was retrieved from the adjoining farm where it was said to have been used as a drinking trough. Could this be the font shown in the churchwardens' accounts in 1711 as '*New Christening basin, 10d*'? It was during the building of the present church in 1866 that the stone cover of the tomb of Aegelward, son of Kypping, was found.

The lack of records for the early centuries is a source of disappointment to local historians. However, the Englefield Estate papers deposited in the Berkshire Record Office, meticulously record details of the building of the present St. Mary's Church, which was designed by Richard Armstrong. The Clerk of the Works, William Rhind, submitted weekly accounts listing every halfpenny spent and the workmen's hours. The cost of pulling down the old church is recorded as £55 2s 8d and materials to the value of £500 were re-used in the present church. The weekly accounts run from 15th September 1866 to 13th August 1869 and the Deed of Ordinance was "*Signed and Published in the Church of Stratfield Mortimer on the 5th July 1869*".

The organ was given by Frances Dobson in 1896. On it is a small plate in memory of the Dobson family. The vestry, by E. Swinfen Harris, was added in 1896.

Robert Gould

Robert Gould was vicar of Mortimer for twenty years. Soon after his arrival in the village in 1859 he made a list of his parishioners with some intriguing comments. Here are a few extracts with original spelling.

“... The Street: Farmer Lane, a very curious character, brother to Gentleman Lane whom the farmer keeps. Farmer Lane jobs for Burnham the baker...”

“...Near Butlers Lands Farm: William Eggleton & Ux (sister to Keep in Drury Lane) One child an illegitimate of sister. W.E. works on the line. These people are ranters. Old Keep, father, lives with them. He calls himself a Presbyterian but goes nowhere and is nothing...”

“...The Silchester Arms kept by Jos. Coggins, a very decent man...”

“...Longmoor: Daniel Cassell & Ux & 12 children. 3 are deaf and dumb. Ux deaf and dumb...”

“...Five Oaken: Towards Ufton is a single cottage occupied by James Beech, Ux & 3, turf cutter, a crippled man, never comes to a.m. Church... (A later note)... 3 Children of somebody. Jimmy is in the Union. Ux works at Goulds...”

“... Wokefield Common: Fred Barefoot & 4 saweyer. F.B. Goes to Church & to Holy Com. & also to Camp Meeting...”

“...Goddards Green: The Widows Cottages - Old widow Englefield 97, Widow Mereweather a very tidy old body, Widow Englefield a wondrous old dame of nearly 94...”

“... Wharf Road: Mr. Izod, Ux & 2. Nickless & Ux. Bowl Turner...”

“...Carpenters Arms. Spratley & Ux. Keeps a swizzle...”

“...At the corner of a plantation belonging to Eton College is a group of dwellings called Groves Corner. Geo Nation, Jas Parsons, Geo Sumpter, Wm May...”

“... West End Road: Wm Love Ux & 6, pig killer and carpenter. All live in one miserable little room with one bed in it...”

The following notes will help in reading the above:

Ux = uxor = Latin for wife

The Silchester Arms was later The Jackdaw.

Goulds, probably Hill Farm, Kiln Lane.

The Union = workhouse

Wharf Road = Victoria Road

Swizzle = beer house.

