

# The Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Pilton, Barnstaple

The Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Pilton (the oldest in Barnstaple and District), is a Priory Church, having been founded by King Athelstan—925 to 940.

The original Church of the monks consisted of the present North Aisle, which still retains its distinctly early-English character, as seen in the arches. Against the ancient pillars, too, four corbels will be noticed, each of which probably indicates the site of a small Altar placed there by one of the Trade Guilds of the time.

The present Church was dedicated by the Bishop of Exeter, Bishop Bronscombe, 1259. The Priory buildings adjoined the East and North sides of the Tower (rebuilt in 1270), which probably accounts for the high windows in the North Aisle. Pilton Priory was a cell of Malmesbury, and provided at least two of their Abbots. The beautiful Priory Seal is in the possession of the British Museum, and an impression of it can be seen in the Church Vestry. (This and other interesting relics, will be shown on application to the Verger.) The Priory was dissolved in 1533. There is still a list of the Priors in existence, dating from 1200 to 1527.

The Priory was connected with St. Margaret's Leper Hospital, which stood at the lower end of Pilton Street (where part of St. Margaret's Terrace now stands). The oldest Deed in existence that concerns the Hospital is dated 1189, and is the grant of a garden by William Taillour to the Lepers of the Blessed Margaret of Pilton.

The Hospital had its own Seal, which unfortunately has been lost. A copy of it however is on the window in the Raleigh Chapel, to the memory of the late Townshend Hall, Esq. To this day, a Lay Prior, Brother and Sister, are elected from amongst the oldest communicants of the Church, and yearly payments are made to them.

The following features of the Church are of particular interest:—

The Altar is Elizabethan, made between 1570 and 1600. Restored in 1987 in memory of the late Dr. David Barlow of this parish, it has sliding panels, recalling the custom of the early days of the Refor-

mation, when the communicants stood or sat round the Altar and the panels could be adjusted to the number present. The Jacobean Altar rail stretching across the full width of the Chancel and Chapel has a book-seat, a feature which is seldom seen.

Separating the Chancel from the Nave is a very fine Rood Screen, the upper part of which has received some very rough treatment. We are told that it was made and painted in 1430 the original colouring being gold, vermilion and blue. At some time—possibly in Cromwell's day—it was covered all over with white paint. Restored in 1988, the elaborate Queen Anne Coat of Arms, now at the west end of the North Aisle, was at one time over the Rood Screen.

The Pulpit is of stone and dates from about the late Tudor period (about 1550). It will be noted that it bears Tudor Rose carving in the covered portion above the pedestal. A curiosity is the iron arm and hand, holding an hourglass. The sounding board over the pulpit is Jacobean.

The Font itself is not remarkable, but the spiral cover and the canopy are fine examples of fifteenth-century work. It is apparent that the cover has at some time received rough treatment, but is still remains a very remarkable piece of carving. On the canopy, the linen pattern can be seen—rarely found in Devon. At the side of the Font is an iron staple, to which formerly was attached a chained Bible. Canopy and Font cover renovated in 1989.

There are a few pieces of ancient glass surviving from old windows, and these have been preserved in the tops of the windows in the North Aisle.

There are two Piscinas, one in the South wall of the Chancel by the side of the Altar, and the other in a similar position in the Raleigh Chapel which now holds an Aumbry. The remains of a Holy Water Stoup were discovered about 50 years ago just inside the S.W. door, and in the outer wall of the S. Porch in a Benitier, for receiving gifts of food for the benefit of the lepers. There is said to have been a leper-squint at the East end of the Church (now hidden by a monument), and there appears to have been one in the West wall, but it is uncertain whether this large hole was actually a squint or served some other purpose.

The door at the right of the Altar led into a small Chapel, dedicated to St. Agnes; leading from this again, was a chamber in which lived in the year 1329, a recluse named Alicia. This door, however, was blocked up during the last century.

The entrance to the Vestry is very fine, and a few remnants of its original beautiful decoration can still be discerned in the vaulted roof. This doorway was an entrance from the outside into the original Priory Church.

The Parclose Screen, between the Chancel and the Raleigh Chapel on its right, is an example of beautiful carving of the Tudor period. The letter R will be noticed, standing for Raleigh. The Chapel was established as a Perpetual Chantry in 1320 and we find in Bishop Stapledon's Register, under date 9th January, this entry: "A Perpetual Chantry to be celebrated in the Parish Church of Pilton for the Souls of William de Raleghe, Knight his progenitors and successors, and the souls of all the faithful dead." This Chantry was removed to Raleghe Court some few years later, but the Chapel has retained its title of the Raleigh Chapel. The Raleigh family took its name from Ralega, mentioned in the Domesday Book, and continued til 1365, when the sole heiress married John Chichester. Many of the Chichester family are buried in the Chancel or the Raleigh Chapel.

The oldest memorial is a stone slab in the Chancel, dated 1493, inscribed to the memory of Richard Chichester. In the Raleigh Chapel is an imposing monument to Sir John Chichester and his wife, erected in 1581; whilst on the North side of the Sanctuary is the monument to Sir Robert Chichester, who died in 1627, his two wives and their children. It is said that he died as a result of a fall from his horse on Pilton Bridge, and it will be noticed that a real spur is fixed to the heel of his boot. Another interesting monument will be seen on the South Wall. This records that Christopher Lethbridge had his erected during his own lifetime to the memory of himself and his family. He died in 1713, and left an endowment of 10s yearly for the upkeep of the monument and that portion of the roof that covers it. Many other old stones and tablets will be noticed, in a state of good preservation and with easily decipherable inscriptions.

One curious feature of the Church is that nothing is straight and nothing upright. All the pillars and the pulpit on the South side are leaning and the Screen, also, is leaning to the right, to match with the great Pillar dividing the Chancel from the South Chancel Aisle. The Chancel and the Nave are by no means in a straight line, and the Chancel roof is much out of line with the Arch.

For many years, as in all churches at the time, the singing was led by a band of music, and in the Vestry can be seen a pitch-pipe which for 150 years was used by the Parish Clerk to pitch the note. In the year 1843, the first organ was placed in Church—a Barrel-Organ, which was later converted into a Manual. This was replaced in 1898 by the present organ, a particularly fine instrument, on which about £800 was expended in 1948 to put it in good order. Further work was completed in 1991.

There is a very fine peal of eight bells, reckoned to be the best peal in N. Devon. Six were placed in the tower in 1712; the other two in 1853. The tenor bell weighs 25 cwt. 18 lbs. The bells were overhauled in 1947, at a cost of over £600 and re-hung in 1969/70 for £3500.

The clock is extremely unusual as there is no face, the time being told only by its hourly striking. It was made in 1713.

The Churchyard has been in use for many hundreds of years. Part of the ground which was diverted at the time of the Dissolution, in Henry VIII's reign, was in 1867 regained for its original purpose.

In the words of the late Revd. W.H.M. Bagley (incumbent of the Parish for many years): "We can see how those who have worshipped in this Church, or on this spot, for nearly a thousand years, have planned and built; how they beautified and embellished and loved the House of God. We know that they have left us a goodly heritage, a Church wherein we may worship the same God and Saviour whom they worshipped; a Church whose very stones cry out and tell us of the love of God, of the hope of eternity, which stirred and encouraged their hearts during their short day, often full of trial and sorrow, here on earth. Of many of them it could be said, and it may be said again of this generation, 'Lord they have loved the habitation of Thy House and the Place where Thine honour dwelleth.'"

M.D.