

A Guide to the Church of St. George, Damerham

The Parish Church of Damerham forms part of a group of four village parishes called Western Downland, in the Diocese of Salisbury; the other three are Martin, Rockbourne, and Whitsbury. This United Benefice was formed in 1984 and there is one Rector for all four parishes, living in a modern Rectory, seen across the meadow from the Church.

Early History

Damerham Church, dedicated to St George, is a very ancient building certainly dating from the early Norman period and possibly in existence in Saxon times when King Edmund of the West Saxons, who reigned 939-946, held estates in Damerham, then called Damerahamm, a place of the Judges. He left these estates to his wife, Aethelfleda, who is said to have been a native of the village, and on her death she left them to Glastonbury Abbey, the most famous and supposedly the most ancient monastery in England, possibly going back to Roman times. Damerham is mentioned in Domesday Book (1086) as being held by Glastonbury and it was so held until the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. For part of this time the Church of St George was collegiate and important as a collecting centre for the wool clip from the Abbey's estates. On the hill, just above the Church, is Court Farm with its Tithe Barn where the tithes (not money but produce) were collected on behalf of the Abbey. After the dissolution the Bishop of Sarum obtained the Manor of Damerham (1574). It was confiscated by Parliament in 1646, but at the Restoration Sarum recovered the estate.

Architecture

The present Church, dating back to Norman times, is 89 feet in length externally and consists of a NAVE with NORTH and SOUTH AISLES, a TOWER at the south-east corner of the nave (a very unusual position), a CHANCEL, and a south PORCH. The early Norman Church, consisting only of NAVE and CHANCEL, was built prior to 1090 and the TOWER was added soon afterwards. The round arches of the NAVE and the arch at the entrance to the TOWER are dated by experts at about 1090. The tower arch is particularly worth noticing owing to the unusual arrangement of the three different coloured stones (sandstone ashlar).

Similar stones are built in layers in the buttress at the south end of the west wall (seen from the inside of the Church). The two shallow buttresses on the outside of the west front also belong to the early Norman Church. At that time the ceiling of the nave would have been flat, with tie beams resting on stone corbels; several of these corbels, of simple type, remain where the tower joins the nave, with further identical corbels on the north wall of the nave.

Between 1100 and 1150 the NORTH AISLE was added, but it was re-built in the 15th Century, and the nave arcade, now consisting of three bays with two semicircular arches and one pointed, has been much restored at various periods.

The CHANCEL was completely re-built between 1160 and 1210, with north and south aisles or chapels added and the remains of their arches are still evident (the blocked north arcade is best seen from outside the Church). There is no clear evidence of when the aisles or chapels ceased to

exist, but the latest date is fixed by the windows which belong to the mid-15th Century.

Before the Black Death reached southern England in the autumn of 1348 Damerham was receiving the wool from most of the Manors under the Abbey of Glastonbury and it is thought that the profit from this market may have been used to build the SOUTH AISLE to the nave, which was constructed between 1300-1348. The south doorway and Holy Water Stoup, now without its bowl, are contemporary.

Between 1380-1450 the CHANCEL ARCHWAY was re-built to accept a Rood Loft, reached by an archway high up in the south wall of the nave, access being by a staircase or ladder. Of the same date is the archway to the tower from the south aisle which, on the tower side, also contains some coloured sandstone ashlar.

The greatest period of alteration to the Church was during the second half of the 15th Century, not long before the upheaval of the Reformation ended Church building for a time. In this period the Church was re-roofed with the present noteworthy BARREL ROOFS

to nave and chancel. The wooden bosses in the ceiling are worth inspecting; those in the PORCH, built about 1500, are of leaves; those in the NAVE include grotesque heads, roses and intertwined twigs; those in the CHANCEL show mostly flowers, but many are missing. In about 1450 the great WEST WINDOW was erected. This is one of the glories of the Church, fortunately still glazed with plain glass admitting plenty of light; the top contains painted glass. The CHANCEL WINDOWS belong to the mid-15th Century and two still have Georgian leaded glass. The east wall of the Chancel was re-fashioned at this time, but the present coloured glass dates from the 20th Century.

Very few alterations appear to have been made to the Church after 1500 until Victorian times, when all the interior fittings were removed apart from the pulpit which is from the 17th/18th Century. The Church may have had a Norman FONT, or perhaps a Saxon one survived, but a plain Victorian font now stands near the south door. The pews date from 1859, at which time a west gallery was removed. Many Churches were 'restored' during the Victorian era, but luckily St George's escaped drastic treatment.

In 1925 a new EAST WINDOW above the Altar was given in memory of Sir Eyre Coote, Bt., then the owner of West Park estate. The theme, which is unusual, illustrates the words of the BENEDICITE (used sometimes in Morning Service) - 'O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord Praise Him and magnify Him for ever'. Many details can be seen of the natural wonders of the world, as well as various animals, birds, fishes and insects, from butterflies to whales, from owl to Old English sheep-dog. Also in recent times the plainsong tapestry round the organ was worked. It is uncertain what it depicts but the Cathedral Organist believes it is a setting of the Gloria.

In 1992, after the organ was moved, the War Memorial Chapel was created in the North Aisle, for which the altar, cross, candlesticks and commemorative kneelers were made by Church and

Royal British Legion members. In the same year new lighting was installed.

Bells

There are six bells, rung at ground level beneath the tower. The following information is entirely attributable to the Rev. H.W. Moule, a former Vicar and himself a ringer:-

There were originally three bells hung on a primitive wooden frame, which was in use until 1937, in the wooden top storey of the tower. Two were added in 1666. The fourth bell bears the inscription:-

OUR THREE BECAME FIVE
WHEN FEW ELSE DID THRIVE

It is probable that the original three bells had all become cracked and were needing repair when these two new trebles were presented. The three were then re-cast, so making a ring of five. The tenor bell, weighing just over 8cwt, bears the inscription:-

I WAS CAST IN THE YEARE OF
PLAGUE WARRE AND FIRE
1666

- referring to the Great Plague, the war with Holland, and the Fire of London. Later the second and fourth became cracked and had to

be re-cast yet again. They now bear dates 1803 and 1739 respectively. In 1937 a new treble bell was presented to the Church by Mrs E.T. Hibberd of South Allenford Farm, inscribed:

I TELL OF ALLENFORD'S GRATITUDE

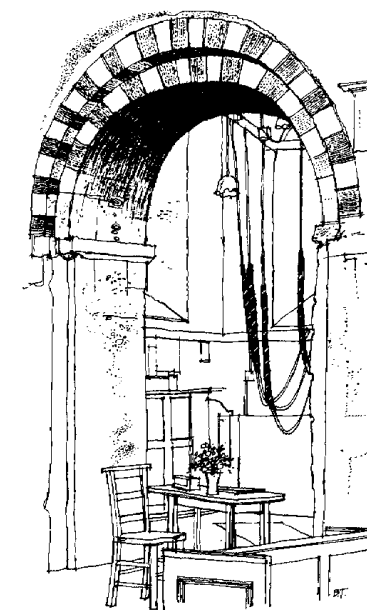
This bell makes up the present ring of six. It was cast by Mears and Stainbank of Whitechapel, who also tuned the existing five and hung the whole on a new oak frame made by a local craftsman, Mr E.C. Tillier of Greenbank, Damerham. The new frame rests on a corbel or shelf of reinforced concrete of great strength going right round the tower, which also greatly strengthens the structure. The wooden construction on top of the tower (seen from outside) roofs the bells.

St. George

There are few Churches with this dedication and it is rare for it to be as early as the 12th Century. St George is rather a shadowy figure, but was a favourite saint with Glastonbury Abbey where an altar was dedicated to him 1322-1535. It was during the Crusades that he became popular as the symbol of Christian Knighthood. The tympanum, which is the figure



View from the East



The Norman Arch

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immediately above the main door of the Church, shows St George slaying a Saracen at the battle of Antioch, 1098, and this carving has been assigned to the reign of Richard the Lionheart (1189), although it may be of the earlier Norman period as the elongation of the horse is found in other Norman carvings.

The dedication of the Church is not likely to be later than the tympanum and may be earlier. The tympanum has not always been in its present position: in 1916 it was discovered under the ivy on the Old Vicarage wall, over what appears to be the old door of the house. No one knows the age of the former Vicarage (still a residence), or how, or why, the stone was placed there. Possibly, when alterations to the Church were in process, this carved stone was lying with other unwanted pieces of masonry and removed to the Old Vicarage, as there were a number of other stones built into the Old Vicarage which must have come from the Church. One of these is the stone with the three horses' heads, believed carved about 1540, which can now be seen beneath the first pillar on entering the Church. This stone was in the Old Vicarage's cellar wall until 1949 when it was cut out and placed in its present position.

Outside the Church

Above the entrance to the South Porch is another carving, dating from the second half of the 12th Century, which probably represents Christ in Glory. From the circular patch above the original North door, which exactly fits, it seems to have been moved from there when the North door was blocked in the 19th Century and if this was so it assigns the date of that wall to the 12th Century. On the external walls are several simple carvings which look like sundials without the shadow finger. They are usually called 'Mass-Clocks', which showed the time of the Service before there were written or printed notices. Also outside are the remains of the 'Preaching Cross' about which little is known. Both the upright stone and its base were moved from a former position at the beginning of the small lane leading to the South door of the Church, which in early times was the way

from the village. There is a feeling of antiquity about this great stone, which is said to date from between 1380 and 1450.

Further Points of Interest

On the NORTH WALL, are the remains of some mediaeval wall paintings. In the Middle Ages these paintings were the 'books' of country people, who could not read or afford the great expense of a hand written volume. Nearly all these paintings were erased or plastered over at the time of the Reformation as being 'superstitious' and there may be further paintings under the plaster. In the CHANCEL, just inside the Sanctuary rails, is the tomb, inscribed in Latin, of a former Vicar, Henry Pincke, who in 1723 was almost



View from the South

certainly the last person to be buried inside the Church. His coat of arms is on the paten used at Holy Communion. On the ALTAR stands the Cross, signifying to us the whole meaning and purpose of the Church. It is the only exotic furnishing in the Church, all the other fittings from Norman times onward being English. It comes from Italy, reminding us that the Church of God, although very familiar and homely to us all, is yet truly Catholic and spread throughout the world.