ST MARY'S

Compton Dando

To help support this beautiful church.

Whilst there is no doubt that a Christian Church has existed in Compton Dando since the 12th century, the Church as we see it today is of 14th century origin, much restored during the last two hundred and fifty years.

The Tower

The medieval tower at the western end of the Church has a staircase, turret and a belfry with five old bells dated 1617 (2), 1618 (2) and 1624 (1). One smaller bell dated 1930 was hung at a time when the old bell frame was renewed and the existing bells rehung. A weather vane tops the tower. It is a strange creature, once jokingly referred to by a former Archdeacon as a "Dando Bird". It was apparently erected in 1757, as an entry in the churchwardens' accounts for the year reads 'Paid Lennerde James for the Whethercock, £5.5.0.' Another entry reads 'Paid Bilbie for mending the clock £4.14.6.' So the tower has boasted a clock on its eastern side for many years, although there would seem to be no record of its installation.

The Church

Within the Church the restoration of the fabric and the replacement of furnishings are more apparent. The wall of the north aisle was rebuilt in 1820, the structure having previously leaned outwards on that side, (as the Church had no proper foundations only the 'natural earth'). In 1840 the vestry was added to the Church and some time towards the mid-19th century an organ was acquired from the Lady Chapel of Exeter Cathedral. In writing about the Church Mr Edward Malins says of the Organ 'it has only two manuals but despite Victorian restoration has managed to keep certain flute stops which must be at least two hundred years old'. The stone screen towards the north aisle and vestry was erected in 1875. A new stone pulpit and lectern were placed in the Church in 1883 at a cost of £89. It seems that plans for further restoration were then considered and shelved constantly over a period of many years as the total costs were beyond the means of the Church Estate. However in 1901 the carved oak Altar we now see was purchased. It was

designed and carved by Mr Harry Hems of Exeter and in 1905 plans were accepted for extensive alterations to the chancel. This work was carried out during the next three years and included the raising of the chancel arch and the sill of the east window, the replacement of the window glass, a new roof to harmonise with the roof of the nave, the flooring of the chancel with tiles, new steps and Altar rail, new oak choir stalls and a new reading desk. The total cost of this work was £742.

The interior corbels supporting the roof of the chancel were left as plain square blocks during the work in 1905-8. As one of the projects to mark the Millennium in 2000 the Church Estate Trustees arranged for these corbels to be carved by Derek Carr of Timsbury. they now display St Mary and St John above the altar and the arms of Bath Abbey and of the diocese of Bath and Wells in the corners above the chancel arch.

In 2009/2010, at a cost of £27,000, a ringing floor was put in the tower and under it a modern kitchen installed. Funds were raised by the church congregation, the Community Association and the Church Estates Trust.

The Windows

The present stained glass East Window was placed there in 1963. It will be seen that it is dedicated to the unknown founder of the Church Estate. The stained glass window in the north east

dates from 1878 and is typical of the Victorian era. The glass in the west window is much older. The shields in the corners are said, by tradition, to have come from City of London churches and it has been suggested that they were brought to Somerset when the City churches were being rebuilt after the Great Fire.

Memorials

There are several memorials on the Church walls, one to Jerome Harvey is dated 1637 and lists the beneficiaries of Parish charity. On the South wall, by the south door, is a list of Vicars of the

Parish, beginning with Richard Cumin in 1198. In all there are fifty two names.

Another memorial on the South Wall is dedicated to the Branch Family and dates to 1731. This was restored and conserved in 2012 with funds from the Church Estates Trust.

The Millennium Cross

Another project of the year 2000 was the placing of a cross, carved in Romanesque style from English oak, on the north wall of the nave. The cross was made and donated by John Sheridan and carved by a local craftsman, Ashley Sands. It shows a guardian angel, a triangle as a symbol of the Holy Trinity, and doves as symbols of 'Peace and Love'. The arms of the cross show rural scenes of the village. At the base of the cross we have a delightful design of village houses and the church taken from a drawing done by Sophie Stenner during the last year of the old Millennium.

The Popham Estate in Compton Dando and District 1806

This large-scale map, displayed in the South Porch, was made for General Edward Leybourne Popham as part of a survey of his widespread lands and property in Somerset and elsewhere. The original map at a scale of 13.3 inches to one mile measures 78 inches x 63 inches (198 cm x 160 cm) and is now in the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton. It has been reproduced by the Compton Dando Community Association to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 2012.

The Font and Antiquities.

The square font is said to be of Norman origin. It is interesting to read in the journals of the Rev. John Skinner, a 19th century vicar of Camerton, and a considerable antiquarian, an account of his visits to Compton Dando in 1826. He writes:-

July 19 1826. The fine old stone font is thrown about as rubbish in the stableyard belonging to the Vicarage; and a painted wooden thing put up in its stead. I wonder the Bishop when he has visited the spot did not order it to be reinstated.

And again in August of the same year:-

We left the Hunstreet or Parkway a little beyond the Park enclosures and turned off towards Compton Dando: as I had previously engaged to breakfast with Mr Pope, the resident clergyman, and visit Knoll Hill above the Church, where I picked up some pieces of Roman Pottery not long since. (We found his Mother and Sister and a young lady on a visit to them, with Mr T Boodle in the breakfast parlour at eight o'clock; and this meal concluded they obligingly accompanied us on our exploratory perambulations.) First of all we took in the objects nearest to home, that is to say the Church and the Roman Altar on the North East buttress; (which Mr Richardson - the Rev. B.R. of Farley Hungerford - had never seen) then the original font of an Anglo-Norman design now lying in the Stable yard of the Parsonage, it having been used by former vicars for a trough to catch water; and an ugly pained basin stands substitute instead in one of the pews of the Church. But another more ancient stone memorial caught my attention, at present placed under the pump in the same stable yard of the Parsonage; it is sculptured on two sides with Runic scrolls and interlaced work, such as I have recently noticed at Caister near Peterborough and in the Isle of Iona; and there is little doubt but it formed part of a highly ornamental cross, which probably stood in the Church yard, and was demolished by the Iconoclasts after the Reformation. It must have been originally part of a shaft which stood upright and afterwards was hollowed out and placed horizontally for the purpose it is now employed in.

One wonders if that same font we see today is that same font which lay about in the stable yard. Certainly the Rev. John Skinner's sketch bears a very strong resemblance to the present font. Perhaps its reinstatement was ordered and the old font was restored and replaced in

the Church. One hopes so, although no reference can be found to any such work having been carried out. As to the Saxon cross, which would have been one of our greatest treasures, it has vanished without a trace. The foundation stone for the new vicarage was laid in 1849 and the house was completed in 1850, (in 1997 this house was sold by the Diocese). It is easy to imagine that ancient stone cross being carried away with the rubbish when the old house was demolished.

Mention must be made of another ancient stone, the ledger stone which stands at the back of the Church to the right of the door to the tower. This stone was found in the churchyard and is thought to be the lid of a tomb dating from the 13th century, an opinion expressed by the secretary of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments in 1938. The most likely translation of the wording on the stone seems to be 'Roger the Norman lies here. Our God Have Mercy'.

Church Comforts

It is interesting to observe that there was no form of heating in the Church until the middle of the 19th century. Services were very long in those days with sermons lasting over an hour! In winter time thick and voluminous clothing must have been essential to maintain the circulation of all who attended services. However in 1830 the Vicar, the Rev. Richard Boodle, wrote to the Feoffees, or trustees, of the Church Estate requesting that a stove be placed in the Church.

He writes:

'the work of Mr Thomas Boodle the present curate and the ladies of his family was attended by much personal suffering to themselves and the children by remaining too long in a cold Church without fire' and again 'A stove in the Church is also desirable, more particularly in a coal country where the poor as well as the rich are accustomed to warm houses and good fires at home'.

He also requested that a vestry should be built, writing that

'The Parish vestry Meetings for want of an appropriate room are necessarily held in the Church, and the house of God is therefore frequently the scene of Parish squabbles and brawls. This ought not to be'.

His efforts were not in vain for a vestry was built in 1840 and as reference can be found of alterations to a flue pipe in 1846 it seems safe to assume that a stove was installed at about the same time.

In the year 2000 the comfort of worshippers was greatly improved by another Millennium project whereby long cushions were provided for the pews in the church.

More recently the central heating has been updated and more radiators and an eco friendly boiler have been installed.

A Mystery

The oldest part of the Church however was not Christian but pagan. Built into the buttress on the North East corner of the Church there used to be part of a Roman altar. This has been the subject of much discussion with many attempts having been made to both preserve it and also to remove it. In the sixties it was enclosed in a glass case but this caused more problems than it solved and so the case was removed. The ravages of time and acid rain were causing much damage and in 1996 the Parochial Church Council reluctantly accepted an offer of the Bath Preservation Trust to remove it and restore it. The altar stone, for that is what it is, is now displayed with two others, possibly part of a set, in the Roman Baths Museum in Bath. No one knows how a pagan monument became part of a Christian Church and how it came to Compton Dando.

The Churchyard

One cannot write of the Church without some mention of the Churchyard. The lych gate forms a most pleasant entrance to the Churchyard. It was built in 1915 to replace an older lych gate which was virtually destroyed in 1899 when a great branch of from an Elm tree growing on the Glebeland fell across it. The

dominant tree in the Churchyard is a Cedar of Lebanon planted in 1850 by John Wilson Pedder, son of the Vicar. It grows in close proximity to the North wall of the Tower.On the Southern side of the Church a row of Lime trees flanks the path. An entry in the register reads ***'Dec 13th 1748 were planted fifteen Limes on the left hand side from the Churchyard gate as you come to the Vicarage house'****. The grass beneath them is carpeted with snowdrops. A Yew tree (also planted in 1742) and some handsome Hollies grace the Churchyard. The Churchyard was extended in 1942 and again in 1950 by taking part of the Glebeland known as Culverhayes.*

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EPILOGUE

For those of us who live in the Parish of Compton Dando it is good to know that our Parish Church has stood firm down the ages and that the upkeep of the fabric and furnishing has, for the most part, been in safe hands.

We may not always approve of what has been done or of the antiquities that have been lost to us, but down the years clergy, churchwardens and latterly parochial Church councillors have done what they thought to be best and they have done it to the glory of God.

We have fared better than most rural parishes thanks to the unknown founder of the Church Estate, but inflation has played havoc with the income of such estates and the future will depend on what the parishioners are prepared to do for their Church.

Stand on the bridge over the river Chew, itself built in medieval times, and look across the fields to the Church of St. Mary the Virgin to its tower and fine cedar proudly silhouetted against the setting sun.

"A Church has occupied this site for over eight centuries. Long may it stand".

Guide Price £1.00

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