

ST BENEDICT'S CHURCH GLASTONBURY



GUIDE FOR VISITORS

Brief History

The church was originally a chapel dedicated to St. Benignus, who was a great friend and disciple of St. Patrick and who became his successor. The chapel was founded in 1091, when the monks of Glastonbury took the relics of a holy man named Beon or Beonna from Meare to be added to the collection at Glastonbury Abbey. At his last resting place an oration was delivered and, after a liberal offering, a church was built on the site on exactly the same east-west axis as the first wattle church in the Abbey grounds. Unfortunately the monks confused Beon the hermit of Meare with Benignus the successor of St. Patrick, and the dedication, around 1100, was to St. Benignus rather than St. Beon.

Around 1500 the Norman chapel was completely rebuilt in the perpendicular style with a clerestoried nave and embattled west tower by Abbot Richard Bere (1493-1524), a learned and cultured friend of Erasmus. Bere's monogram can be seen over the north porch, which also contains a little window used by lepers to receive the holy sacrament, and on one of the unique roof corbels (see below).

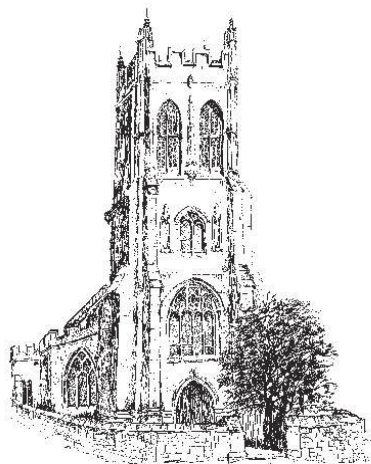
After the Dissolution, the Abbot's country mansion and estate in the hamlet of Sharpham (near Street) passed into the hands of the Dyer family; Sir Edward Dyer, the Elizabethan poet, was born there. Therefore Sharpham became the 'big house' of the parish, and the side chapel of the church, which is now occupied by the organ (installed in 1873 and rebuilt in 1927), became The Sharpham Chapel. This was then no longer used for liturgical purposes but for family burials, and was fitted out with a family pew.

The next notable family to live at Sharpham was the Goulds. Under the tower by the west door there is a fine monumental slab which was originally on the floor of the Sharpham Chapel. This slab commemorates Sir Henry Gould, Chief Justice of the Queen's Bench in the reign of Queen Anne. Judge Gould was the grandfather of the novelist Henry Fielding who was born at Sharpham Park in 1707. The register from this time is unfortunately missing, but there is little doubt that he was baptised in St Benedict's as there is a record of his sister's baptism here in the following year.

By the time Phelps, the Somerset historian, had visited in 1836 and noted that repair work had been carried out, the church had become generally known as St Benedict's (also St Benning's) through usage and convenience. Then in 1862, under the architect Benjamin Ferrey, who also designed the town's market cross, more substantial restoration work was carried out. This included the removal of the oak box pews and the gallery, and the reseating of the church in pitch-pine, together with the refurbishment of the chancel. The latter was given new altar rails, choir stalls, and lectern. Around the same time a chapel in the south aisle was built by the Reverend Allnutt, in memory of his two daughters who died aged 3 days and 14 years. It was finished as a Lady Chapel by Prebendary Townsend and was dedicated in 1953.

In the late 1880s, following the launch of an appeal, extensive restoration and enlargement was carried out under the architect, J.D. Sedding and local builders Messrs Merrick and Son. The south wall was completely taken down and rebuilt with matching arcade, and a new south aisle was added. The north wall was also rebuilt and the rest of the fabric restored. The nave and aisles were re-roofed, new floors were laid, and all vaults were filled in. A heating system was installed and considerable work was done on the tower, including new pinnacles.

Visitors will note that a far more recent refurbishment and modernisation has taken place, including a levelled floor for full disabled access, a new heating system under new wooden flooring, and state of the art seating and audio-visual screen projection facilities. All these features are designed to render our lovely church to be at the same time a well-equipped and multi-purpose facility for the community and an all-embracing place of prayer, worship, and spiritual education for today's and tomorrow's Christians, particularly those from our Junior School just opposite.



The Roof Corbels

These unique features date from the late 15th century, when the penultimate Abbot of the Abbey, Richard Bere, enlarged the church. His stamp is seen in several of the corbels, and his initials over the north porch.

The photos start with the first corbel on the south of the nave, over the pulpit, and continue clockwise.



1. Eve and the serpent, who tricks her into eating fruit from the forbidden tree.



2. St Benignus: the first saint to whom the church was dedicated at the end of the 11th century, although it should perhaps have been dedicated to Beonna the hermit.



3. The Arms of Glastonbury Abbey: Christ seated in His mother Mary's lap, symbolically the "Throne of Wisdom". The very first church at Glastonbury, which according to legend was founded by Joseph of Arimathea, was dedicated to Mary.



4. The Arms of Joseph of Arimathea: the Glastonbury Thorn and the two cruets, said to contain the blood and sweat of Christ, and which, according to legend, were brought to Glastonbury by Joseph.



5. Mercury's wand or caduceus: the instrument of Mercury, Roman god of messengers and travellers. It may allude to Abbot Bere as envoy to Rome in 1503.



6. Abbot Bere's monogram: the initials of Abbot Richard Bere; their position opposite the Mercury corbel may be significant.



7. The Pelican in her piety: the Christian symbol of self-sacrifice, in which the pelican vulns, or wounds, itself to feed its chicks.



8. St Benignus: this depicts St Benignus walking over the moors, perhaps in search of St Patrick, but meeting the devil and pushing him into the mire.



9. Jesus' five sacred wounds: the marks in Christ's nailed feet and hands, plus the wound from the legendary spear of Longinus, the canonized Roman centurion.



10. The Dove: the traditional Christian symbol of Love and Peace as the embodiment of the Holy Spirit descending upon Earth.

The Windows and Other Features

Until the time of Queen Victoria very few people could read or write, so Bible stories were depicted in stained glass windows which everyone could understand.

All of the stained glass windows date from the Victorian era, except for the fine west window, a gift from the Browning family, designed by E Liddall Armitage, installed in 1959 and dedicated in September 1960. It depicts Jesus addressing his followers beside the lake.

The two windows on the main part of the south aisle were donated by members of the Holman family. Starting from the right the first window contains three panels:

1. Joseph of Arimathea holding a staff from which the Holy Thorn is growing. Slips of this tree - which can still be seen in bloom at Christmas - have grown into mature trees in the Abbey, outside St. John's Church, and on Wearyall Hill. Also, a cutting is growing in the churchyard at the west end of the church.
2. St. Paul.
3. Dorcas, who was raised from the dead by Peter. (Acts 9:36 - 43). Note her sewing in one hand and her other arm shaped as though to carry children; also the basket of loaves in the bottom right hand corner.

The other window contains three panels: faith, charity and hope.

Of particular interest are the windows in the south transept, depicting the wedding at Cana and the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which were dedicated by Anne Porch to the memory of her husband Reginald, a colonial administrator who died in India in 1886. Anne and Reginald were the parents of Montague Porch, who was Jennie Churchill's third husband, and so Winston's father-in-law.

The Lady Chapel at the head of the south aisle contains four lovely windows. They show the four Gospel writers and their trades or professions:

1. Matthew the tax collector. The angel with a scroll reminds us of the opening genealogy to the gospel which the Angel has inscribed on the scroll.
2. Mark, who came from the family of Ezekiel, was the first to write a Gospel. The lion in the corner symbolises Ezekiel's vision of "a lion at his feet".
3. Luke, who was not a disciple and to our knowledge never saw Jesus. He was however commissioned to research the life of Christ. Luke's gospel begins with Zechariah the priest, who would have made sacrifices according to the law. This would have included an ox, as seen beside him.
4. John, who has a young face with no beard. Beside is the eagle to symbolise the carrying of the gospel to all, reminding us of his Gospel's opening words: "In the beginning was the word".

In the window above the main altar we are reminded of the fundamentals of the creed: Christ incarnate of the virgin Mary, crucified while the ladies kept their vigil, and risen again according to the scriptures with the two Marys addressed by the angel.

The origin and date of the crucifix on the wall above the chancel are unknown, whilst the font is understood to be medieval. The bust of St Benedict in the north aisle is recent, by local sculptor, Richard Field.



General Information

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St Benedict's Vision and Mission

We are a fellowship of followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, seeking to share the love of God among ourselves and with those around us. We are stewards of the sacred space, hallowed by centuries of prayer, which is enclosed by our church building.

Our vision is of a living church, sustainable for future generations. We see our building being used not only by ourselves, but also by diverse groups and individuals for both sacred and secular purposes. We envisage that those entering our building will be touched by its particular holiness, thereby being led by the Holy Spirit to a deeper awareness of God.

Our mission is to proclaim and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all we say and do. We will serve God in prayer and worship, and by opening our doors in hospitality to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of the community. In believing this is God's purpose for us, we trust Him alone to provide the grace, love and growth that we need.

As you leave the church, please remember all who worship here.