

## A history of St Benedict's

### What's in a name?

Not so much, perhaps, if one considers the number of different names our church has been blessed with over time. Bearing in mind that 900 years have passed since the church's founding, 'St Benedict' is a relatively recent name for the church, perhaps only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century emerging triumphant over the original dedication to Benen, Benin or Benignus, the 5<sup>th</sup> century Irish saint who was St Patrick's successor as Bishop of Armagh and who stands by his great teacher's side, together with St Dunstan, in the Great Seal of Glastonbury Abbey.

### The founding of the church

Even so, the facts are clouded by the introduction of another similar sounding holy man, Beonna, the Hermit of Meare, whose bones, according to the 14<sup>th</sup> century chronicler John of Glastonbury, were exhumed and transported by boat to Glastonbury in 1091 at the behest of the monks, (who conveniently overlooked or were at least undecided about whether they did or did not belong to Benignus!), so that the sacred relics might lie in the Abbey with those of St Patrick. It was for their safe deliverance over the waters that, within a decade, a chapel was built and dedicated to Benignus near the landing stage by 'Madelode Street' where the boat had drawn up, at the time when, with the town's population increasing, there was a need for another place of worship - and priest - to help the rector of the mother church of St John's.

### Bere makes his mark

This small, dark chapel remained as it was for several hundred years before Richard Bere 'the Builder' (1494-1524), penultimate Abbot of Glastonbury, scholar and cultured friend of Erasmus, decided to put his stamp upon this modest shrine, funding (out of Abbey money) and overseeing the complete transformation and enlargement of the church, providing an embattled west tower, a north aisle and a clerestoried nave adorned by ten unique roof corbels, several of which bear a pictorial allusion to the great man's influence and status; one depicts Mercury's wand or caduceus, a reference to Bere's role as an emissary to Rome around 1500, another the mitred abbot bearing a staff sprouting green leaves and pushing the devil down into the mire as he crosses the levels in search of St Patrick.

### The Abbot's signature

Bere's monogram is seen on another corbel (as it can also be on the outside of the church above the north porch), while a fourth features the Arms of Joseph of Arimathea, a favourite of Bere's, containing as it does the two cruets said to contain the blood and sweat of Christ, which invited a fanciful re-labelling and re-attribution to the Abbot as the 'Bere Jugs'! The arms were also seen, before they were weathered into oblivion in the 1960s, on a battlement immediately above Bere's initials on the north porch.

### The flood

The next significant date for the church seems to have been 1607 when St Ben's was threatened, like the rest of the buildings of what was now widely called 'Benet Street', by flood water after a breach of the sea wall at Huntspill.

### The famous families of Sharpham

For the next three centuries St Ben's lived under the watchful eye of a series of local, wealthy families, beginning with the Lords of Sharpham (Sharpham House was another of Bere's buildings) - Dyer, Gould and Fielding - and through them the church can boast the baptisms of two important men of English literature, Sir Edward Dyer, the Elizabethan poet, and the novelist Henry Fielding, whose grandfather was Sir Henry Gould, the eminent Chief Justice of the Queen's Bench in the reign of Queen Anne. They and their families were accorded their very own space and family pew in the 'Sharpham Chapel' at the north-east end of the church, now occupied by the organ.

## **A vicar of its own**

In 1844, with Glastonbury's population rising, the church was granted its own separate benefice, whose area included, for reasons of the rate income, parts of the town as distant as Silver Street, Bere Lane and the Abbey House.

## **The Allnutt Chapel: beauty out of tragedy**

In 1862 the church, by now known as any of St Benedict, St Benignus or St Benning, underwent considerable restoration work – in particular to the chancel - and changes, including new pews and a gallery, under the architect Benjamin Ferrey, the designer of Glastonbury's Market Cross. Also around this time a chapel in the south aisle, paid for by a heartbroken Rev Allnutt, was built as a memorial to his two daughters who both died young, one at 14 years the other just 3 days, whilst he himself was in turn later commemorated by his widow who put in the stained glass windows of the four evangelists.

## **Disaster averted**

All continued without incident until the January of 1885 when the congregation narrowly escaped a major catastrophe, with the displacement of a roof beam during a service. The church was immediately closed and members of two local families, the Austins and the Holmans, stepped forward to fund not only the repair to the roof and the tower, but also an enlargement in the form of an impressive new arcaded south aisle, with new flooring and heating throughout.

The work was finished within the year by Christmas Day and there followed great rejoicing at the official opening early in 1886, the Queen's Jubilee Year, with the local paper waxing lyrical over the generosity of the benefactors, the design of architect, JD Sedding, and the craftsmanship of the builder, Merrick, describing how 'for many years it had been evident that the sickle of time had not been idle!' and extolling the pinnacles 'of chaste design'! In addition there were now two extra bells in the tower, a new pulpit and a new Vicarage House, built on Holman land nearby, which would serve the Rectors of St Ben's until 1962, when the town's two parishes again became one.

## **Victorian windows**

1887 saw the installation of some fine stained glass windows in the south transept (courtesy of the Porch family) and the south aisle (the Holman family, long-standing benefactors of the church), featuring the miracles of the Wedding at Cana and the Raising of Lazarus, plus depictions of the good widow Dorcas, of St Paul and of St Joseph of Arimathea, and representations of the virtues Faith, Hope and Charity.

## **A vicar's vestry**

In 1914 another Merrick was engaged to add a vestry to the north-east corner of the church, and there were, amongst other changes described by the local paper, fine wooden screens erected around the north porch and the provision of 'thirty inverted burners with hollow phone defusing gloves' - all the work being done for £600!

## **A light to the west**

The largest, most recent and arguably the most impressive of St Ben's stained glass windows was installed in the west window in 1959, bought for the church by the Browning family and designed by the eminent artist E Liddell Armitage, whose work can also be seen in Glasgow Cathedral. Thanks to recent reordering this splendid scene is illuminated from within for all to see after dark.

## **Recent times: repair, re-ordering and a vision**

In 1970 an appeal enabled considerable refurbishment to be carried out to the ailing fabric of the church and, most recently in 2010, in answer to the congregation and PCC's vision for the church to fulfil a role of 'Welcome, Hospitality and Education' to the local community, an ambitious programme of reordering was begun, with the first phase, the upgrading of the vestry into a kitchen facility and the installation of toilets, being made possible by the sale of the 1950s church hall and the land around it.

Financed by the sale of another church property and completed in 2013, the second phase, which involved the replacement of the pews with chairs, the levelling of surfaces within the church, new flooring, a modern underfloor central heating system and the installation of state of the art audio-visual equipment, has transformed the church into an inviting, usable and flexible space for different community groups – and, importantly, the children of St Ben's School.

## **The Blenheim Bechstein**

The most recent addition to the church two years ago, which has seen St Ben's become an increasingly attractive concert venue, was a fine Bechstein grand piano, generously donated by the relation of a member of the congregation.

The piano, whose early life was spent in the glorious surroundings of Blenheim Palace but which now occupies pride of place in the south transept, has a fascinating link to the stained glass window immediately behind it, which was set up by Anne Porch in memory of her husband Reginald, a victim of fever while working as a colonial administrator in India in 1887.

The connection arises through Reginald and Anne's son, Montagu 'Monty' Porch, the Glastonbury man who became one of the most famous men in the country in 1918 when he married Jennie Churchill, Winston's socialite mother. We know that both Jennie and Monty played the piano, so it is almost certain that they themselves ran their fingers over the keys of the fine instrument that now stands elegantly by the memorial to Monty's father.

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