

History of Saint Nicholas Church, Great Munden

Great Munden lies six miles north of Ware, eight miles west of Bishop's Stortford and four miles east of Stevenage, although the church stands right on its north eastern boundary, just a short distance from the hamlet of Nasty. An iron gate leads to Mundenbury farm which is adjacent, looking very much like the Rectory, although this was never the case; the Rectory was a substantial Georgian house one mile away in Great Munden. To the north, west and south are open fields.

The first recorded owner of the manor of Munden was Aethelgifu, who mentions it in her will dated 944 A.D. (the will is now in the Scheide Library at Princetown University). Munden is also recorded in the Domesday Book as being in the Manor of Edddeva the Fair, the Saxon wife of Earl Harold and a wooden Saxon church stood on the site. The imprint of the Saxon Apse can still be seen outside the East Window, and the stone shoe of the wooden Saxon cross still lies in the churchyard. The first recorded charter is dated 944 A.D.

The church was rebuilt in 1120 by Conan, a grandson of Anne of Brittany sister of William the Conqueror. Conan also founded the nearby Priory at Rowney in the same parish. Conan rebuilt his new Norman church with stone and flint on the same site and his work can be seen in the lancet window of the north wall of the chancel, the corbels on the chancel arch, and in the walled up north door of the nave. In the Victorian restoration of 1863 a second Norman doorway was found, in the north wall of the chancel, but funds were not available to restore it, so it was plastered over.

Conam married Margaret, daughter of King William of Scotland, and by her had a daughter, Constance, who married Geoffrey Plantagenet, fourth son of Henry II. After Geoffrey's death in 1183 Constance married again, twice, but had no heir, so the Honour of Richmond and the manor of Munden passed to the Crown.

On the accession of Henry III the manor was granted to Gerard de Furnivall, a crusader knight who had been with Richard I at the siege of Acre. From Gerard Munden took its mediaeval name of Munden Furnivall; Gerard died in the second crusade and is buried in Jerusalem and his estates were left to his son, also named Gerard, who was still in his minority. This led to the manor being passed to Lady Nicola de Haye who was a fervent supporter of King John during the baron's



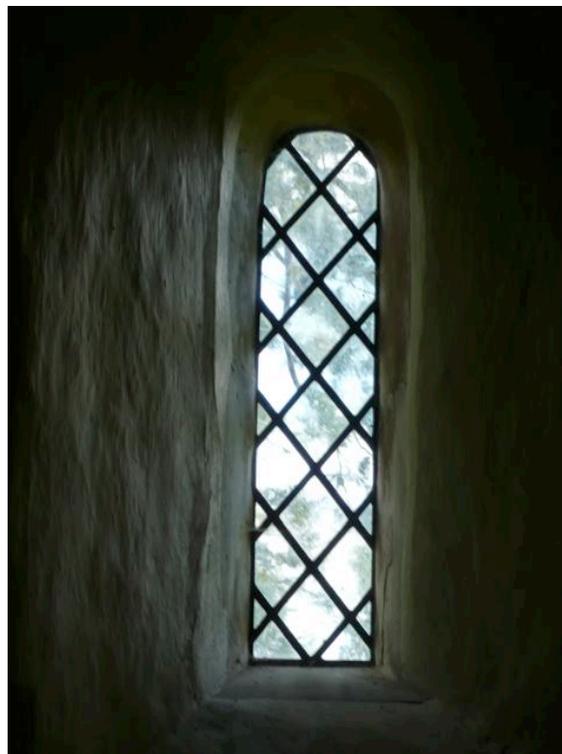
revolt and Henry III granted it to her “for her support at Lincoln (where she held the castle) for as long as it pleases her”. Sir Gerard’s wife, Christina, succeeded in recovering the manor for the family, but in 1264 King Henry III described Gerard the younger as “the King’s enemy”, passing the manor to John de Grey, only to pardon Gerard in 1266, returning his lands on condition of his fidelity. Sir Gerard de Furnivall is remembered today in the Martlett that appears on the new weather vane on top of the tower: the martlett is a small bird and was part of the Furnivall coat of arms. In 1290 Gerard granted a sub tenancy of the church to John de Kirkeby, Bishop of Ely for an annual rent of a pair of gilt spurs.

John left the manor, and St Nicholas, to his brother Sir William de Kirkeby, a knight who served with Edward I against the Scots in 1301. These violent times were not just confined to England’s borders, for the rector of St Nicholas in 1304, one Ralph de Gorham, was the secret organizer of a gang of eight footpads or vagabonds. They unwittingly ambushed and robbed one of Queen Phillipa’s equerries and were hanged as a result, but Ralph de Gorham escaped by hiding behind his cloth.

One hundred years later, in 1411, the Rev’d William Monard had to recourse to Sir William Cogeshale, the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire for assistance in recovering £12 that was owed to him by Thomas Kebbyll, citizen and dyer of London, who was outlawed for the debt, then subsequently pardoned on payment of 60/- damages.

The three bay south aisle (46ft by 11ft) was built by Cecily and Guy de Boys who had married in 1350. They included the stone rederos in the east wall and the ogee arches in which they intended to place their remains. The rederos is a reminder that St Nicholas is a perfect example of an early Catholic church. Fortune smiled on Cicely and Guy, they prospered greatly and built a much bigger tomb for themselves in Lincoln Cathedral, so their early arrangements at St Nicholas were never used. Their daughter and heir, Margaret was not so fortunate, loosing the first two of her three husbands, Robert Dykeswell then Henry Hayward, to early deaths. By Henry she had a son Thomas who held the title until his own death in 1447, when a dispute erupted over the ownership of the manor. The trustees settled the manor on Sir John Fray, Chief Baron of the Exchequer for the annual rent of a pair of gloves.

The tower (11.5ft by 12ft) was built by Sir John Say sometime between 1461 and 1478 when he died. Sir John came to own St Nicholas following his marriage to Sir John Fray’s widow, Agnes and he invested heavily in the church, although it is not clear whether he was spending his own money or that of his wife’s previous



Above: 12th century Norman Lancet Window in Chancel



The 14th Century Piscina at the south east corner of the south aisle. It is adjacent to the rederos in the east wall that once formed the Lady Chapel

Sir John. The tower is not buttressed and rises through three stages to an embattled parapet which has a moulded base course which was replaced in the 1990's along with the eight gargoyles. The 15th century originals had been carved from Hertfordshire clunch and had almost totally dissolved away but replacements were found from the 14th century Bath chapter house which had been demolished in the 1920's and the carvings had lain in a stonemason's yard since then. There is a string course at the head of each stage, and each is set back a little from that below, giving the walls a slight batter. The tower stands on a foundation of Hertfordshire pudding stone and is surmounted by a traditional Hertfordshire short spike, constructed from a single tree mounted on two huge cruciform beams. Sir William also made the chancel arch wider on the south side, thus revealing more of the chancel (22ft by 18.5ft) and installed the late fifteenth century nave roof from which we get our outstanding acoustics. The columns which support this roof have finely carved stone corbels in the nave(44.5ft by 21ft) which depict minstrels and singers, lending weight to the idea that Sir William was more concerned to fill God's house with praise than he was with his own image. The inscription in the south aisle east window when we restored the glass in 1996 and it reads Hanc Domum Gloria Complebo – I will fill this house with praise. The inscription is taken from Haggai, chapter 2, verse 7.

The simple but poetically carved quire stalls in the chancel were the gift of Robert King, rector from 1510-1538 and are marked with his initials.

Good fortune continued to smile on St Nicholas, for on the death in 1570 of Lady Anne Parr, Countess of Essex, the church and manor reverted to the Crown and were leased to Queen Elizabeth's favourite minister, Lord William Burghley, who in turn passed it to his son, Robert Cecil, in 1600, thus committing St Nicholas into the care of Hertfordshires most famous family. On his death in 1612 Lord Robert passed the manor to his son William, Earl of Cranborne, who held it until the lease expired in 1621. William installed the pulpit, creating a platform for the sermons of one of theology's most famous scholars, John Lightfoot.

In 1621 the manor, and St Nicholas, once again reverted to the Crown and the advowson became divorced from the Lordship of the Manor, remaining in King James I hands. By letters patent he leased it to his son, Charles Prince of Wales under whose custodianship the bells were cast in 1621 by John Oldfield of Hertford, while Doctor Samuel Ward was rector. Oldfield's bells ring regularly and they are the last complete set of Oldfield bells still working. Five bells bear his customary legends, two in Latin and three in English:

Jesus be our Spede
Praise the Lord
God save the King.

The tenor was recast in 1881, but preserves Oldfield's Latin inscription, along with the names of the Churchwardens from 1621. A new treble was added in 1882.

John Lightfoot was a Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity at St Catharine's College, Cambridge and was twice rector of St Nicholas, being first installed on 12th September 1636, then ejected during the Commonwealth but afterwards was restored on 13th December 1660. His academic friends at Cambridge referred to St Nicholas as the other Babylon, because Lightfoot preferred this simple church and parish to his more prestigious life in Cambridge, and when he died in 1675 he chose to be buried at Munden. While only a small parish church, three rectors of St Nicholas were Lady Margaret's Professors of Divinity at Cambridge, and many others held senior positions within that university. There is a plaque commemorating John Lightfoot on the north wall of the chancel



The memorial to John Lightfoot on the north wall of the chancel.

In 1687/8 the Rector of St Albans Abbey, the Rev'd Richard Carter, wrote to King James II petitioning for further endowments for the Abbey which was underfunded. James granted the petition, and by Letters Patent on 25th February 1687/8, gave the advowson of St Nicholas to John, Lord Churchill, George Churchill and Thomas Docwra in trust that they should present the rector of St Albans to the benefice of St Nicholas upon it becoming vacant. Five months later the rector of Great Munden, Ralph Widdrington, died and the rector of St Albans, John Cole, succeeded him. The Communion plate dates from this period, the cup being dated 1696, and this is now stored elsewhere in the benefice.

Opposite Lightfoot's plaque is the only piece of Victorian stained glass, The Agony in the Garden, donated by the widow of the Rev'd Dawson who died in March 1863 and who is buried outside this window (facing west like all clergy). He is said to have worried himself to an early grave over the state of the church fabric, exhausted by the difficulty of raising funds for its restoration.

His wife had an inheritance, but had not volunteered help in this matter. Following his death she was filled with remorse and donated this window and found the funds to carry out an extensive restoration, something which would not happen again until 1990. The South Aisle was largely rebuilt using some of the old stones, the work probably being carried out by G & H Godwin



The Agony in the Garden, south wall of Chancel

who restored All Saints Church at Little Munden shortly afterwards. A new organ was installed at this time, being rebuilt by John Warner with the pipes of an earlier organ. During the restoration that was carried out between 1991 and 2000, John Warner Co/Ltd, which is still in business, was called in to refurbish the organ and to raise it to its present position, thus gaining access to the bell tower, which had been previously used as a vestry for the choir since 1870. The ringing chamber floor was raised to its present height at the same time, and the clock floor above which forms the ceiling was made from two oak beams in a cruciform pattern, inspired not by the base of the spire above them, but by the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built by ships carpenters during the crusades.

Three years after Dawson's death the advowson of St Nicholas was exchanged between the Crown and King's College, Cambridge, where it remained until its deconsecration.

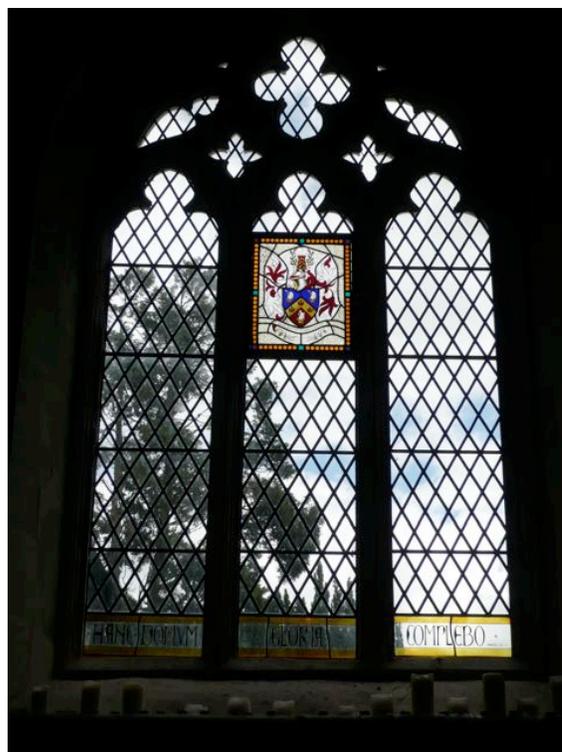
The early sixteenth century porch was on the point of collapse by 1928, and was replaced by the present oak porch which enjoys an Arts & Crafts influence (obviously arriving a little late in Great Munden), and was erected in memory of the Rev'd Alfred George Langdon who had been rector since 1905. The oak seats date from an earlier period, and when we restored the church in 1990, I rescued them from the bonfire and had them re-fitted.

On St Cuthbert's day, March 20th 1995, the Right Reverend and Right Honourable the Lord Runcie of Cuddesdon laid the corner stone for the new vestry that has enabled St Nicholas to open itself to many more uses.

The rent, which one member of the Guard family has to pay to another member of the family (the Church is held in Trust), is now a single red rose, payable on March 15th, my mother's birthday.

St Cuthbert has a special significance in that he is credited with having brought Christianity back to Britain.

Howard Guard. June 2008 ■



Guard Coat of Arms in South Aisle

