

The Church of St Nicholas

at

Combe St. Nicholas, Somerset.

A Guide for Visitors

THE HISTORY of THE CHURCH

The first church in Combe is thought to have been founded by Queen Aelfthryth in 970 AD. She was the daughter of Ordgar, Ealdorman of Devon, second wife of King Edgar and mother of Aethelred “the Unready”. The only part of this church still existing is the font near the south porch.

In 1170 a second, Norman, building was founded by Giso, Bishop of Bath. This building survived for only some 60 years. Again, all that remains is the Norman pillar near the north porch. The dedication of the first and second churches is not known.

In 1239 the third church was dedicated to St Nicholas by the Bishop of Waterford in the presence of Bishop Jocelin of Bath. Part of this building can be seen in the lower part of the stonework of the chancel and the lower part of the tower.

In the middle of the 15th century the church was enlarged and partly rebuilt. The north and south aisles were added; the nave arcade, the rood screen and the two external turrets were built; and the tower was probably raised to its present height.

In 1863 the roof and pews were renewed; the floor was tiled and the aisles extended westwards for bays. The original proposal for this renovation proved too costly. A sketch can be seen on the south west wall. It shows the rood screen in its original position.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, some pews were removed from the aisles and from both ends of the nave. In 2011, a servery was installed at the west end of the north aisle. Most of the effort today is directed towards the maintenance and preservation of this beautiful and fascinating church, so enabling future generations to continue the worship of God within its walls.

The Nave

The arcade consists of five bays. These are made of Ham Hill stone in traditional design. It is interesting to note that in the 15th century construction the Norman pillar was retained, even though it was of a different stone and awkwardly placed for the new structure. It may still be seen within the pillar next to the north porch. The image carved on the pillar appears to be a representation of the Green Man, a medieval image usually found in churches.

The arch at the west end of the nave dates from the Early English building of 1239. The pitch pine pews and the roof were renewed during the Victorian renovations of 1863.

A sandstone font, probably pre-Conquest, may be found near the south door. It is a circular, monolithic, hollowed stone bowl with a large circular drain. The top is badly worn, apparently by knife-sharpening.

The North and South Aisles

These were constructed during the 15th century enlargement and were then extended westwards by further bays to their present size in 1863.

The eastern end of each aisle was made into a chapel. Squints (apertures in the masonry) were cut so that the chapel altars could be seen from the nave. This is an unusual feature: it is a more common arrangement to have the squints going the other way, so that people in the aisles can see the high altar.

The chapels were separated from the aisles by the depressed arches and from the choir by paneled arches. The southern chapel, which contains a 15th century piscina, was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is now used as the vestry. The northern one, dedication unknown, now houses the twenty-stop, two-manual organ.

At the east end of the north aisle is a 15th century carved stone font on a 20th century plain octagonal base.

The form of glass decoration in the aisle windows makes the church rather dark, but it is an unusually complete example of a type of Victorian art. In the south-west window of the south aisle can be seen a memorial to the late Dr Neville Campbell (1919-1991) who was churchwarden and a great benefactor of the church. He did much work on the archives of this and other Somerset churches, which may be seen at Somerset Archives and Local Studies, Somerset Heritage Centre, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton.

In the north-west window of the south aisle is a pane commemorating St Nicholas executed, to mark the new millennium, by Captain Chester Read, CBE, FRICS, RN Retd. a local member of the Guild of Glass Engravers.

The Screen

The Rood Screen, now called a chancel screen, dates from about 1471. With its delicate carving, it is a beautiful example of a West Country screen. Pre-Reformation, it would have carried the three figures of the Holy Rood (a cross or Christ crucified, supported by St John the Evangelist and the Virgin Mary).

There would also have been many candles. To attend to these the Rood loft was reached by the stairways in the turrets and the surprisingly small openings high up in the walls.

Medieval screens were often brightly painted. Traces of paint may be seen on the chancel side of this screen, which was removed from its original position during the restoration of 1863. Some unwanted portions were used under the choir arches and on the pulpit. The rest

was burnt! In 1920 part was restored and dedicated to the memory of villagers who fell in the Great War.

The Chancel

Here can be seen more of the building of 1239: priest's doorway, some of the stonework and the fine Early English piscina on the south wall. This has a plain pointed arch and lines of roll-moldings with visible tool marks. Piscinas were used by the priest for the lavabo (washing of fingers before consecration) and for rinsing the chalice. On the north wall is a 15th century limestone credence table (designed to hold the elements of the Eucharist before consecration).

During the restoration of 1863 the Elizabethan paneling was removed. Some of it found its way into a private house. In 1972 the owner donated one piece to the church as a reredos in memory of his wife. Whilst this was being fitted the floor of the sanctuary collapsed, which led to the discovery of three vaults underneath. One vault contained the lead coffins of the son and daughter of the Rev. Frederick Spragge (Vicar 1833-1837). The second held a stone inscribed "Here lieth the body of Mr. Samuel Domet, Vicar of Combe St Nicholas, who died on 25th July 1699".

The third vault was the most interesting. It contained the remains of a number of wooden coffins and a stone stating that here rested the remains of Thomas Grenfield who died in 1671. He was appointed Vicar in 1643 but was removed by Oliver Cromwell and imprisoned in London. Formerly it was believed that he died in captivity, but it is now known that he returned to Combe in 1660 and died in 1671.

Features of the Victorian restoration are the choir stalls and the stained glass of the east window, which depicts scenes from the life of our Lord surmounted by Christ in Glory with St Nicholas and St George on either side.

The altar dates from 1924.

The Tower

There is a peal of six bells. They were re-hung in 1954 to commemorate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and were refurbished and re-hung again in 1993.

Treble: 29 ½" diam. By Taylors of Loughborough, Inscribed "To the Glory of God, the gift of James Coate". 1906. Weight 5½ cwt. To D.

2nd: 32½" diam. By Thomas Bayley of Bridgwater. "My sound is good, my shape is neat 'twas Bayley made me so compleat". Weight 61/4 cwt. To C.

3rd: 32½" diam. Origin unknown. Recast by John Warner of London, 1876. Formerly inscribed "God save the church 1724. Mr Joel Smith. Mr John Tratt. Churchwardens. Tho Wroth fecit". Weight 71/4 cwt. To Bb.

4th: 35½” diam. By Thomas Bayley of Bridgwater. Inscribed "Good ringing yields health and delight. J_Smethersham. Churchwarden". 1760. Weight 71/4 cwt. To A.

5th: 381/4” diam. By Robert Semson (R.S) of Ash Priors. "Ave Maria Gracia Plena" early 16th century. Weight 91/2 cwt. To G.

Tenor: 43” diam. By George Purdew. "Draw neare to God. 1613. G.P". Weight 133/4 cwt. To F.

The lower stage with its diagonal buttresses and lancet windows was built in 1239. It was during the 15th century building extensions that it was probably raised to its present height of 60 feet.

The clock was made by John Baker of South Petherton and bought second-hand in 1845 for £36. Its chimes were restored in 1983 and electric winding installed by public subscription in 2010.

Monuments and Registers

On the wall of the south aisle there is a good marble cartouche of Sir John Bond who died in 1714. On the north wall is a memorial to the owners of Weston Manor, the only people apart from the church to hold land in the parish medieval times. The first name on this monument is Henry Bonner who died in 1680.

The Registers of Baptisms. Marriages and Burials are complete from 1687. Only those in current use are now kept in church. All the others may be seen at **Somerset Heritage Centre in Taunton.**

Saint Nicholas

Visitors may be interested in how the St Nicholas Millennium window pane was engraved. The design shows a renaissance depiction of the Saint based upon Raphael's painting of St Nicholas with the Blessed Virgin Mary, which hangs in the National Gallery. The boys at his feet are representative of the three boys that he raised back to life after a butcher had drowned them in a barrel of brine: hence his patronage of children (which eventually led to corruption of his name to "Santa Claus"). They are each holding three round bags of gold with which he provided dowries for an impoverished merchant's three daughters: hence arose his patronage of both unmarried girls and pawnbrokers. St Nicholas rescued three sailors from certain death by drowning in a storm, and they are shown on the beach with their reprieved ship in the bay behind. His patronage of sailors is thus well founded. In 1087 after his shrine in Asia Minor was ruined by Moslems, his remains were taken to the Greek settlement of Bari, in Italy, and re-interred. From the new site came 'fragrant myrrh', and this gave rise to yet another patronage, this time of perfumers. Hence the herbs, lavender and roses at the bottom left of the engraving.

The work on a pane of glass measuring 46 x 58cms and 4mm thick, mostly on the front but partly on the back to give extra dimension, was executed with diamond and tungsten steel points, and by flexible drill-driver fitted with a variety of diamond burrs.

The Churchyard

The north side of the churchyard, with the main entrance from the road, now reveals the church beautifully. This was not the case before 1875. In that year a row of buildings on either side of the gate (one of them being the "poor house") was cleared away and the ground consecrated.

To the south of the church the land was levelled and consecrated as a burial ground in 1856. Interesting features of this part are the iron grave markers. They were made at two foundries in Chard between 1880 and 1939. Combe has the largest collection of these in the district. There is an extension to the west, part of the Sunday School Wood, church land managed by volunteers as a wildlife area for the benefit of the community.

THE VILLAGE AND PARISH

Combe St. Nicholas has been inhabited from early times. Folk were attracted by the plentiful supply of water. The word "Combe" means valley in Celtic languages. It was applied to the valley of the river Isle by the Iron Age Celts who lived here about 300BC to 700AD.

Before the Celts the Stone Age peoples lived here or passed through (flint implements have been found in the burial ground at Giants Grave Road), and the Bronze Age people built the burial mound on Combe Beacon in about 1,000BC.

During the time of the Iron Age Celts the Romans arrived and built a villa near the source of the Isle at Wadeford. The Celts were followed by the Saxons who gave names to many parts of the parish, such as Ham, Wadeford and Clayhanger.

Recorded History

Combe, as the village was first called, enters recorded history in about 970AD when the manor of Combe Wood came into the possession of Queen Aelfthryth. She is thought to have founded the first known church in Combe.

The manor is recorded in the Domesday Book of 1087. It was bought from the king for 6 marks of gold in 1072 by Bishop Giso of Bath who founded the second church. The village became known as Combe Episcopi.

In 1239 a new church was dedicated to St Nicholas and the village became known as Combe St. Nicholas. From that time the village grew and prospered. The wool trade flourished, bringing with it an increased population. This led to the enlargement of the church during the 15th century.

Despite being peacefully set in the hills of Somerset, the parish did not escape religious persecution and the Civil War. The imprisonment by Cromwell of the vicar, Thomas Grenfield, has already been mentioned.

A number of Combe parishioners are known to have emigrated to America in 1642, sailing from Weymouth and settling in Massachusetts.

The 19th century brought changes. Large areas of common land were enclosed by Act of Parliament in 1814, with allotment of land in 1818; and the coming of the canal, the railways, mills and foundries to nearby Chard brought new occupations and opportunities to the local people. The Church sold the land it owned in 1912.

The present-day parish stretches from Ham in the north to Wadeford in the south, and from Eleighwater in the east to Beetham in the west: nearly seven square miles of wood and pasture land. The population is just over 1,200.

Both the Combe Parish History Group and the Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society have printed books on the history of the local area.

THIS GUIDE has been produced in the hope that it will help you to enjoy the church and see how it has developed with the needs of the parish. The building reflects what the Church has always been, the living community of Christian people who worship and serve God in this place. For hundreds of years generations have made this building the focus of their Christian activities. It is a living Church, serving and glorifying the Living God.

The Other Cloverleaf Parish Churches

To the south across the A30 is St Mary the Virgin, Wambrook, which from before 1215 until 1974 lay in the Diocese of Salisbury. Two miles to the west lies the church of St Andrew, Whitestaunton. The present building was constructed in the later part of the 15th century, probably on the site of its Norman predecessor. To the north, just off the A303, you may find the Mission Church of St Barnabas at Ham, founded at the turn of the 20th Century in an old barn dated 1848.

Of more nearby interest is a map of the villages of Combe St Nicholas and Wadeford, embroidered as a millennium project with illustrations of various buildings. It may be seen in the Combe Village Hall.

A Record of the Known Incumbents of the

Parish of Combe St Nicholas

1297 Willielmus
1315 Henry de Hampton
 John Wynsham
1409 John Marnhulle
1418 Richard Batte
1421 Richard Patricius
1438 Robert Forby
1448 Richard Heycroft
1461 John Person
1484 Nicholas Purveyor

1585 Richard Dampier
 1502 William Bowes
 1519 Richard Philpote
 1554 William Mychell
 1558 Robert Fygyn
 1570 John Wood
 1578 William Ramsay
 1617 Joshua Grenefield
 1671 Thomas Sherwood
 1678 John Rogers
 1694 John Toll
 1695 Samuel Dommett
 1699 Thomas Elliott
 1703 Robert Creighton
 1725 John Dyer
 1730 John Brailsford
 1734 Scroop Beardmore
 1735 Carolus Egerton
 1737 Joshua Allen
 1755 Christopher Tatchell
 1793 Robert Purcell
 1809 John Lukin
 1812 John Lewin Warren
 1833 Fred R. Spragge
 1837 James Ford
 1840 Frederick Luttrell Maysey
 1861 Hans Frederick Hamilton
 1885 John Lemon
 1887 Arthur Cornford
 1896 George Henry Elwell
 1903 James Murray Chadwick
 1907 George Trevor
 1917 Geoffrey deY. Aldridge
 1942 Frank B. Horsey
 1946 William T. Taylor
 1983 Nigel C. Venning
 1989 Philip Regan
 2008 *Tony Woodward
 2010 * Sue Tucker. Val Hoare (Assoc. Vicar)
 2014 Georgina Vye (Assoc. Vicar)
 2018 Ann Kember Rector of the benefice
 *See the benefice notes on the back page.

Recent History of the Parish

The benefice of Combe St Nicholas with Wambrook was created by Order in Council of 28th June 1974 and was held by the incumbent of Combe in plurality with the benefice of Whitestaunton. Combe was absorbed into Chard, St Mary's benefice with the Vicar, Revd. Tony Woodward, being licensed on 20th July 2008 as 'Priest in Charge' of Combe St Nicholas. Following his retirement, the Revd. Sue Tucker was licensed on 24th February 2010.

In 2010 a pastoral scheme was passed for the union of the benefice of Chard, St Mary, the benefice of Combe St Nicholas with Wambrook (and Ham) and the benefice of Whitestaunton (their constituent parishes remaining distinct) with the appointment of Revd. Sue Tucker as the first incumbent of the new benefice. Revd. Val Hoare, who spent most of her curacy with St Mary's, became Associate Vicar when she was licensed in November 2010. Revd. Hoare moved in 2014 and Revd. Georgina Vye was appointed in 2014 as full-time associate Vicar across the Benefice. The Combe vicarage was sold and a house purchased in Chard for the new Associate Vicar.

Village website

For more information do visit the parish church pages on the Combe St Nicholas village website <http://www.combestnicholas.org.uk> which includes a link to the invaluable May 2006 report by the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group.

Friends of Combe Church

For news of events to be held in the church please contact a churchwarden.