

## St. MARY THE VIRGIN, FITTLEWORTH

This little country church, set on its hill, reflects the life of Fittleworth parish. Here is the continuing story of many generations of a worshipping community. The earliest part of the building now standing is the tower, solid and enduring, dating from the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, and probably part of the original church. It is a Grade I listed building. At that time such a church existed because there was a dispute in the King's court between Simon, bishop of Chichester, and Richard de la Lye over the patronage rights. Within this tower is a recess, which seems to have been a seat for the bell-ringers.

There is a fine peal of bells, often attracting visits from teams of ringers. Two of these bells are medieval and bear inscriptions. The older, about 1350, is called *Sancta Catarina*, and shows a medallion with a sprig of three leaves; the other is inscribed *Sancta Toma Or*, and carries a coin and a lion's face. In January 1885 the bells were increased from two to four and from four to six in August 1885 by Canon Arthur Simpson, the incumbent (1876-1900), who was well known for his work on bell tuning. He used No 5 bell for much of this work. Unfortunately it no longer sounds quite as good as perhaps it did in his day. Canon Simpson had a considerable reputation as an expert on bells and change-ringing. There is a memorial to him on the chancel wall.

The clock was installed in 1897 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. There is a plaque outside on the west wall of the tower.

Next in age is the beautiful chancel, an elegant Early English building of fine proportions. Like the tower, this part of the church is built of sandstone, the masonry beautifully worked and elaborately moulded. From the outside the

blocked-up priest's door on the north side can be seen, as well as three rows of Horsham slab stone roofing. Several neighbouring churches have complete or partial roofs of this stone, which is most attractive, but a heavy burden on the structure. The three lancet windows at the east end are plain but bold. The glass in these, though Victorian, is good, with rich colours which add to the general effect. There are three similar lancets on the north side, the most westward one is a 'low side window'; formerly there was one on each wall, but the other was destroyed when the vestry was built on the south side. Such windows are a common feature of smaller churches, and various explanations are given of their purpose. One popular one, with no solid foundation, is that they were for lepers, excluded from the building, to watch the services. A more likely use was for ventilation, especially when many candles were burning. So such windows had no glass but were fitted with wooden shutters. The internal sill was flat, about three feet from the floor, and could be used as a seat.

The glass in the first window in the Chancel, is the most recent in the church, and is worth special notice. It illustrates the 'Te Deum' and is in memory of George Kruger Gray, who designed the coinage of George V. Mr. Gray lived at Three Chimneys, in the village. He also designed the small plaque which is on the wall by the south door. This was given by a London school evacuated to Fittleworth during the war.

On the north wall of the chancel there is a small brass, with a coat-of-arms. This is in memory of Stanley Lee, who died in 1628. Just to the east of this brass is an aumbry, or cupboard, now hidden by panelling. Aumbries are used for storing the sacred vessels, or more often, to hold the Reserved Sacrament. Within the sanctuary there is also the ancient piscina. The name means literally a fish-pond,

but it came to be used for a wash-place, and in churches the piscina is for cleansing the Communion vessels after use.

Moving down into the nave the contrast between the old work and the new can be seen clearly. All this part of the building dates from 1871, and though in an imitation of the old Gothic style it is very inferior artistically. At this point it is suggested that visitors should look at a set of four water-colours, hanging on the back wall of the church. They were painted by the then rector's son, and show the interior and exterior of the building as it was in 1870, and (most interestingly) how it looked when the old nave was pulled down and the chancel and tower stood with a gap between them. The interior view shows that the nave had a timber frame, a gallery, and box-pews, which must have been very quaint but hardly made for a family feeling in the congregation. The picture of the exterior reveals that formerly there were no windows in the roof, such as now present an unusual and picturesque feature. These dormers were inserted to provide extra light in what is still a dark interior.

Just why the old nave was destroyed seems uncertain. The claim was made that more accommodation was needed, presumably to replace the old gallery, and so a north aisle was added. It may well be that the removal of the gallery exposed structural weaknesses, or increased them, so that complete rebuilding seemed necessary. Anyway, such drastic 'restoration' often took place in the nineteenth century.

There are two porches, that on the north side dating from early in the 16th century. In early times porches played a considerable part in the social life of the community: they are still the place where official announcements must be displayed. At one time baptisms and weddings began in

the porch; sometimes school was held in it, or business done. In the south porch (see photo) there is a single great slab of stone, which at one time would have covered the grave of some important person. It bears on it a cross, and is probably nearly 900 years old. It was found built into the wall of the former vestry. Also, in the gable wall of the modern vestry at the south-east end of the church, there can be seen a very old cross, possibly pre-Norman. Between the two porches stands the font, where membership of the Church starts. This font, which is 14th century, is eight-sided, with rosettes carved on it. In the north aisle hangs a large painting on canvas depicting the royal arms of the reign of George III. The small shield in the middle bears the white horse of Hanover. The lion's face is almost humanly benevolent.

A number of stained-glass windows reflect the varying tastes of the last hundred years - reference has already been made to two of these windows and three others are the work of C. E. Kempe, whose figure drawing was usually excellent, even though the colours may be weak. Especially attractive is that at the end of the north aisle, which is now a side chapel. Kempe windows can be recognized by his mark, a wheat-sheaf, which can be found in the border. Inside the south door is an old oak chest which formerly belonged to Mr. Kempe. At the other end of this aisle is another fine old chest, dated 1615. Visitors often remark on the candlesticks in the pews, a relic of the days before electric lighting. These are now used only on Christmas Eve and at a special service for the Epiphany, when candle-light in an otherwise dark church adds an air of mystery and warmth.

Fittleworth is a lovely parish with a great variety of scenery: hills, woods and commons, and the river whose crossing by the old mill was the origin of the first settlement. It includes two separate hamlets. One is Little Bognor, with a

group of old cottages and what was once Crowsole Mill, where at one time members of the congregation of what is now the Evangelical Free Church were baptized in the mill pond after a series of open-air services at Hallelujah and Amen Corners. The other hamlet is Bedham, set on a wooded ridge to the north, with wide views in many directions. Several of the houses here began as cottages for charcoal burners. One isolated cottage, Brinkwells, was for some years the home of Sir Edward Elgar, who occasionally played the church organ, and composed some of his work here.

It is a common feature of the parishes in this area that they should form long and fairly narrow strips which included meadow and pasture, arable and woodland, supplying all the needs of a medieval community.

The churchyard offers a view of all this, and its trees provide a sheltered and beautiful setting for the church. Amongst them is one fine yew near the south door, about 1000 years old. A new yew was planted in 2000 to commemorate the millennium. In the churchyard are many fine tombstones of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

The church itself suggests something of this variety, and the growth of the village through the centuries, with its building from different periods, and a succession of gifts, old and recent, to mark the continuous affection of the people: for example, the 15th century font, the 16th century plate, and very recent enrichments by local craftsmen like a new bishop's chair to replace the one which was stolen, needlework cushions and a hymn board. The Communion plate includes a chalice dated 1568, and a paten of 1670, and others of various dates in the 19th century. The oak screen which shuts off the tower was a gift from the Wyld family at Churchwood. Near one door hangs a list of the incumbents, beginning in 1372 and resuming after a long

gap in 1513. After 1868 the status of the incumbent was raised from vicar to rector, which at that time still meant something, since a rector received the tithes.

The registers of the church start in 1581. All but the most recent are kept for safety in the archives at Chichester.

Three pieces of village history may be of interest. Reference has been made to the dispute over patronage in 1200, and Richard de la Lye. That family (the Lees) continued until 1589 - Lee farm, a lovely old house with a stone roof and a dove-cot, preserves its name. Then the manor was sold to Thomas Stanley, whose brass you may have looked at. There has been a prebendal stall of Fittleworth in the cathedral since 1204. The first known holder was Archbishop Arnobaldus, appointed in 1338. He illustrates one of the scandals of the later Middle Ages, that system of pluralities by which important clerics were enriched by incomes from many sources for which they did no work; we cannot suppose that an Italian archbishop ever visited Fittleworth, let alone served its church. Then, too, a group of old cottages at Hallelujah Corner were once the *White Horse* inn, where a royal spy was involved in a near riot one evening in 1531 at the time when the whole country was in a state of unrest due to the Reformation. There is a book; written by Lady Maxse, called *The Story of Fittleworth*, in which can be found many of the things that happened during the 800 years or so in which the people of this place have passed lives, mostly peaceful and useful, with their parish church the centre of their activity. In the church the worship of generation after generation of ordinary people has created an atmosphere of prayer and peace. We hope you will want to add a prayer of your own before you leave it. Pray for yourself and your friends; pray for the whole Church throughout the world; pray for the needs of all men, and add a special prayer for this parish, its people and its priest.

