

St. Peter's Through the Ages



The village church is an essential part of any rural community. There has been a church in Great Haseley for at least eight hundred years, and probably much longer. Most of the inhabitants of the village were baptised, married and buried here. The gravestones in the peaceful churchyard, many of them made by the Cooper family of stonemasons, display names that have been familiar for generations: Cooper, Cross, Shrimpton, ...

St Peter's is "an impressive church for a small village" (Pevsner and Sherwood), and very beautiful. It boasts two fine doorways dating from about 1200, a glorious thirteenth-century chancel thought to have been built by the same master mason who created Merton College Chapel in Oxford, a Saxon font, a Jacobean pulpit, and some of the best nineteenth- and twentieth-century stained-glass windows in the country. The six bells date from the time of the Civil War, and one of them bears the inscription Honour the King. In the north or Rycote aisle (on the left as you enter) there is the sixteenth-century altar-tomb of William



Barendyne or Barentin, overlooked by a copy of his family jousting helm (the original used to be in the Tower of London, but is now displayed in the Tournament Galleries, Leeds).

The manor lands of Great Haseley, originally part of the great royal manor of Benson, belonged for centuries to the royal family and their close allies. In 1066 the owner was Edward the Confessor's wife Edith. In 1467 Edward IV gave the manor to his queen Elizabeth Woodville, who in 1478 granted it to the Dean and Canons of St George's Chapel, Windsor. Since then they have been the patrons of the living (shared with the Bishop of Oxford since 1988), and in recent years we have been invited to an annual service at St George's at which prayers are said for the parish.

In 1542 Henry VIII persuaded Windsor to appoint as Rector the noted poet and 'father of English local history' John Leland, who had composed verses for Anne Boleyn's coronation a few years earlier. As the richest of the livings belonging to Windsor, Great Haseley attracted high-fliers, many of whom never resided in the parish, but employed curates to do the work. One of the few who did live here, in the Old Rectory, was John Harding, one of the translators of the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible.



The father of Sir Christopher Wren, Rector from 1638, rarely visited Great Haseley, since he was also Dean of Windsor and Rector of East Knoyle, but he did install the bells. Bruno Ryves, another Dean after the Restoration, donated the splendid silver communion set, now housed at Windsor (and on display at our annual visit). From the early eighteenth century the living was formally annexed to Windsor, and filled by a number of absentee Rectors, some of whom were Bishops and even Archbishops.

Thomas Delafield, born in Little Haseley in 1690 and later Vicar of Great Milton, gives a lengthy account of our church and village in his hand-written *Notitia Hasleiana*. Of the village he says: 'It hath a good Air, and a pretty cleanly Scite, being founded on a Natural Rock, and is (in short) an Healthful and agreeable place of Habitation.' Delafield is buried in the churchyard.

The church was falling into disrepair, but things changed when Walter Long, a cousin of the Blackall family which had dominated the village for a century, inherited their properties. In association with the Rector William Birkett, the Earl of Abingdon (from Rycote), and the Oxford Architectural Society (which promoted the ideas of the Oxford Movement, and was particularly keen on St Peter's), Long repaired and reordered the church in the 1840s. The architect chosen was John Macduff Derick, a pupil of Sir John Soane, architect of the Bank of England, and an early convert to the principles of the Gothic Revival.



The Birkett family installed the stained-glass windows in the Chancel, designed and made by Hardmans of Birmingham. Later in the century the partnership of Bodley and Garner renovated the south (Latchford) aisle, and the flooring and choir-stalls in the chancel. Bodley also designed windows (made by Burlison & Grylls) in both the south and the north aisles.

Henry Ellison, Rector from 1875 to 1894, had founded the Church of England Temperance Society in 1862, and was very concerned to provide wholesome activities for the village people. Birkett had already built a girls' school, and later an infants' school, to supplement the existing boys' school.



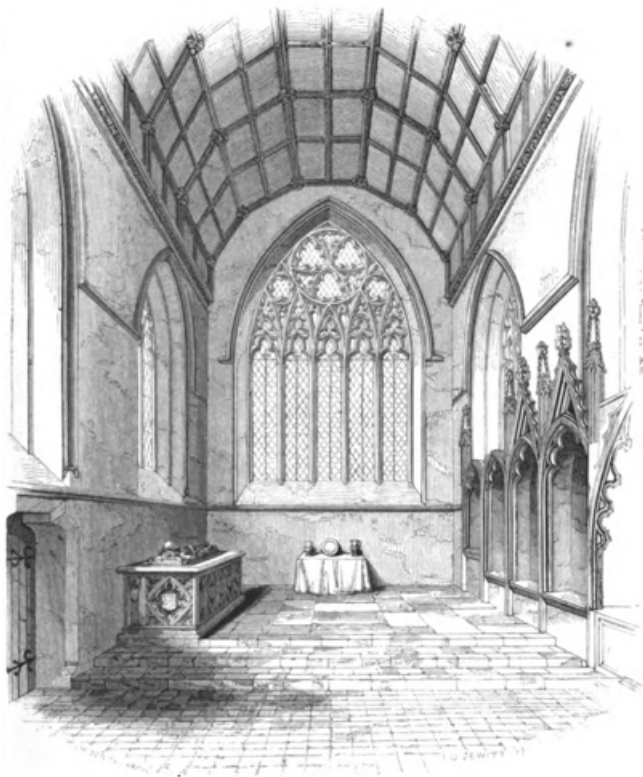
Ellison quickly developed a Community Plan, and launched a village magazine, and by 1883 he could list nineteen village clubs and activities. In 1892 he built a Village Institute.

During the First World War many of the men were away on active service, with eighteen giving their lives. Two reminders in the church are the memorial plaque for Roger Gelderd-Somervell, of Haseley Manor, and the entrance doors, given by the Rector, Gilbert Edwards, in thankfulness for the safe return of his son Gerald (who won an M.C. in the East African Campaign).

Between the wars a last major refurbishment of the church was carried out by the Muirhead family of Haseley Court. Lionel Muirhead was a High Churchman and hymn-writer, and he funded the fitting-out of the Lady Chapel in the Latchford aisle, in honour of his parents. The work was entrusted to Geoffrey Webb, a pupil of Ninian Comper; and after Lionel's death in 1925, his widow installed Webb's splendid Jesse-Tree window in his honour. The same team then remodelled the high altar, surrounding it with curtains in Comper's favourite rose-coloured silk, and four gilded angels.

In recent years St Peter's has hosted not only Tim Suter's magnificent Christmas carol services, but visits from the world-renowned choirs of Magdalen College and Merton College. And on one Sunday in May each year the church family spills out from its ancient setting to hold an outdoor Rogation service at Field Farm, Rycote Lane.

Provided by Toby Garfitt.



Illustrations from
1840 "Memoirs of Gothic Churches".