



St. James The Great Parish Church

North Wraxall

The village of "Werochesalle" is recorded in Domesday Book. 1085, as having 27 inhabitants and 2 mills and being worth £6 to Godfrey, the Lord of the Manor. A church probably existed around this time, of which the porch with its Norman arches and chevron moulding is the only remaining feature. The central niche over the inner archway probably contained a figure of St. James the Great to whom the Church is dedicated. The present statuette (of St. James as a pilgrim) dates from 1850.

The earliest Rector recorded, Geoffrey de Brokenbergh, was instituted in 1318 during the reign of Edward II. He and his successor, Robert de Brokenbergh, were related to the Lord of the Manor, John de Wrokeshale, who had the presentation of the benefice.

A chantry has already been founded before the end of the thirteenth century by Sir Geoffrey de Wrokeshale. This was either a sequestered portion of the church or a separate building close by. It was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and to All Saints - (the double dedication suggested that there may even have been two) - and is believed to have occupied the site of the present Methuen Chapel. A separate chaplain was paid a stipend to say masses and prayers for the soul of the founder and his family once every third week. This chaplain was not necessarily ordained and the last recorded chaplain in 1540, one Thomas Spencer, was only 12 years old.

Part of the income of the chaplain came from the endowment of chantry lands which may have included Chantry Wood near Ford and the fifteenth century Chantry Cottage which stands just South West of the Rectory and is distinguished by an octagonal finial at its gable end. Henry VIII suppressed all chantries in 1545 and their incomes and properties passed to him.

The nave, chancel and tower of the church were rebuilt sometime in the thirteenth century. Alterations were again carried out in the seventeenth century by Sir William Button who excavated a large vault under the north aisle, and in 1797 by Paul Methuen who railed off a family chapel over the vault and placed in it a large altar tomb of white marble. The ceiling of the chapel is adorned with 40

painted shields. Other memorials to the Methuen family are found in the four north windows which depict:-

1. The women at the sepulchre and Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene.
2. Moses striking the rock and Moses and the brazen serpent.
3. Coats of arms of the Methuen and Cobb families.
4. Six shields of the Cobb, Methuen, Mildmay and St. John families

The west and east windows of the north aisle were given respectively by Richard Bennett and John Welmesley of Lucknam.

The east window formerly contained the picture of a Knight Templar and a recumbent lady as recorded by John Aubrey, who also noted the presence in this aisle of the stone monument of a cross-legged knight said by local people to be Geoffrey de Wraxall.

It would seem that the chancel once lay at a lower level than the nave, following the slope of the ground, as the priest's door, now blocked up, is partially buried. The chancel, separated from the nave by a perpendicular arch springing from the walls, contains a triple lancet east window with stained glass bought in 1844. The three medallions in the central lancet depict the Nativity, Crucifixion and Ascension. The painting over the Jacobean altar depicts John the Baptist preaching to crowds by a lake and is almost certainly by a late seventeenth century Flemish painter. It was given in 1846 by John Howell who was born in 1776 in Manor Farm (now Lower Court Farm) and became a merchant in London, travelling to Belgium to buy lace.

The two single lancet windows in the north wall of the chancel were re-opened and glazed in 1850 by Calcraft Neeld and Grace Cecilia Wyld in memory of their father, Thomas Wyld, who was Rector here from 1830-1866 and started the village school in 1832. The two windows on the south side of the chancel date from the fourteenth century. That nearest the altar has a piscina in its sill and contains nineteenth century glass depicting the baptism of Jesus with, on either side, instruments of the Crucifixion. The second window behind the Rector's stall, has a glass showing the Annunciation.

A carved wooden pulpit, once painted, rests on a stone base. It and the surrounding board above it date from the reign of James I. Behind it are the remains of ancient steps which would have led to a rood loft.

The church was re-roofed in 1989, when a medieval doom painting was discovered on the wet-facing side of the chancel arch. The right-hand side of the painting (which would have depicted Hell) has been almost completely obliterated by earlier replastering, and the central part (Christ and Angels) is obscured by the barrel-vault of the nave. The figure of Christ is, unusually, represented here by an eye within a sunburst. The left-hand part, representing the New Jerusalem is crudely executed, using few pigments and simple drawing. In the lower part, the figure of St. Peter can be clearly seen, holding the key of Heaven and greeting the souls of the blessed, two of whom, a crowned king and queen, can be seen to the right.

Representations of the last Judgement were commonly painted on chancel arches in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, using the Secco technique - pigment applied to dry plaster using a fixative such as egg or size (on the continent the Fresco technique predominated, introducing pigment on to wet plaster).

The basic style of the painting is a strong reminder of the simple faith that was taught to congregations in the early middle ages.

On the south wall, three panels were found showing the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. All are in poor state owing to the dampness of the wall and repeated replastering, but are thought to date from the eighteenth century when churches were required by law to display these.

Traces of even older writing are just visible beneath the bottom left-hand corner of the Lord's Prayer.

The south windows of the nave were both glazed in 1878 by the then Rector, Francis Harrison, who was incumbent for 41 years. The Larger three light window has elaborate tracery at its head and is surmounted by a gable springing from the eaves.

The single manual organ was built by Sweetland of Bath in 1877. At the time, the organ loft was removed and the present position adopted

A narrow arch at the west end of the church leads to a square tower. The two lower stories date from the thirteenth century but the third, with four two-light windows and four corner pinnacles, was added in 1840 for use as a belfry. Until 1553, three bells were hung, but the Lord Protector Somerset deemed only one were to be necessary. It is thought that the other two were sold to pay for church repairs, and the remaining bell was recast in 1765 by T. Bilbie and inscribed with the names of Thomas Foard and Joseph Oriel, Churchwardens.

The octagonal stone font dates from the fourteenth century. The corner of the church in which it stands is known as Danes Corner, as tradition associates it with the burial there of two Danish soldiers killed in battle.

The patrons of the living are Oriel College, Oxford, who took it in exchange for Tortworth in 1859. The Rectory is a very large house a few hundred yards south east of the church - an old building much extended in Victorian times.

There has not been a resident Rector since 1956, and the benefice is now united with the neighbouring parish of Colerne. The former Rectory has been divided into four private dwellings. The parish includes the neighbouring hamlets of The Shoe, Upper Wraxall, Mountain Bower and Ford, where there is a daughter church built in 1896.

The church is not just a place of history, beauty and peace, but the home of a flourishing congregation and the focus of many activities in the community. It remains today what it always has been, a witness to the love of God as shown to us in Jesus.