

A look around the Church - July 2003

The Church was built in 1215 - the year of Magna Carta - which means that in 12 years time we shall be celebrating our 800 year anniversary - a real cause for celebration!

It was built as the chapel for the de Bois or de Bosco family who lived in the Manor House. It was very small - just 20' x 14' - in fact it was our Chancel of today with a wall across, an arch and doorway. Some reports say there were two doorways - I'm afraid we shall never know. Now I can hear you saying, well, where's the Manor House? It was somewhere in the grounds of Chesham Bois House and that's about all I can tell you. I'm sure the people who live in the House now would be able to tell us more because the old Manor House wasn't pulled down until 1812 so the present house is comparatively recent. The old Manor House must have had quite a lot of land - it certainly had a park - where the road Long Park is today.

So here we have this little private chapel and the 1st alteration came about 100 or so years later in the 14th century when it was enlarged. What they did was to extend it down to roughly where the south door is now so it was quite long and narrow and ended on the north side where the pillars are now. But they left the chancel arch and wall - just took the door out and put it in at the end.

The 2nd alteration came in the 17th century by which time it had become a Parish Church with the right of burial and the Cheyne family lived in the Manor House. This time they put in a gallery, perhaps for musicians, and built a tower or belfry which was partly wooden at the end, and, what joy! they put in pews or rather benches because until then the congregation would have had to stand, unless you were very frail in which case you could have sat on the stone benches round the walls - hence the saying "The weakest go to the wall".

There is an engraving in the Birkett Room showing what the Church would have looked like at that time.

So let's look at one or two things which would have been there then. Firstly, there's the pulpit. In 1603 a decree was issued to the effect that all Churches should have a pulpit so ours was duly installed but it's actually upside down now so try to imagine it being the other way up, with the base being the sounding board over the preacher's head. At about the same time the hourglass in its holder was put in and you can just imagine the congregation anxiously watching the sand going through and wondering if they were ever going to get home in time for their dinner! I can't imagine that many of the hourglasses have survived but it's good that we have our holder still.

But perhaps the most interesting of our legacies from that time are the brasses which, although we can no longer see them, are still here underneath the floor - hence the trapdoors. There are two down there and they are effigies of two members of the Cheyne family - Elizabeth Cheyne who died in 1516 and her husband, Robert, who died in 1552. I actually have a brass rubbing of Robert - he's shown in full armour and looking rather gloomy, but when you look at the armour that's not surprising. I haven't got one of his wife but I do have a newspaper cutting showing both the brasses being pointed out by a friend, Pam Wigmore, following some restoration work which had been done.

But perhaps the most interesting brass isn't here any more. So many people took rubbings from it that it was being damaged so it was removed for safe keeping and now resides in a bank vault in Aylesbury. It's of such importance and rarity because it contains the word 'crysom' in the inscription and is said to be the only one of its kind in the country. It's known as the 'crysom child'. Again I have a brass rubbing of it so we can see exactly what it looks like. It's very small only 9½" long and commemorates a baby, Benedict Lee, who died in 1542 and is said to be the grandson of Robert and Elizabeth.

The inscription reads: Of Roger Lee, gentleman, here lyeth the son, Benedict Lee, crysom, whose soule Jesu pardon.

Now the crysom was the oil with which the baby was anointed at baptism and as you can see from the picture the poor little soul was wrapped in a white cloth which was bound round with swaddling bands - presumably rather like the swaddling clothes we read about in the Bible. So the cloth became known as a crysom cloth. The baby wore it for a month after baptism but if he died during this time, as must have happened to Benedict Lee, he was buried in it.

Now the next big alteration to the Church came in Victorian times when they really went to town. By this time, sadly, the building had fallen into a bad state of repair so a lot of work needed to be done. Firstly, in 1841 they put in a vestry (where the pulpit is today) and in 1881 they added the North Aisle - They took down the wall and put the pillars in but they kept the original 14th century window arches and re-set them in the new wall. They took down the old gallery and kept some of the rails which they put in the Chancel - the communion rails we have today. They took down the old belfry tower and discovered there was a west window which had been plastered over when the belfry had been installed. They built the church tower which we have today and finally they removed the old chancel arch and re-erected it over the lychgate where it stayed until the mid-50's I believe. When it finally started to fall down, the stones were used to edge the carpark - there may still be some of them around.

So the Church looked much as it does today, except that it ended just beyond the south door. If you take a walk down the north aisle, the modern stained glass in three of the windows is interesting - they all date between 1970 and 1980 - one commemorates Valerie Pangbourne (whose father was organist for many years) another a choir boy, Julian Brighton, who sadly died aged 14 as a result of an accident, and the third Winifred Alliot - a family well known in the church for many years. In the bottom right hand corner of two of the windows is a little emblem which denotes that they were both designed by the same stained glass studio .

Now apart from all the structural alterations, the Victorians gave us the two hatchments, hanging on the south wall. These commemorate two members of the Fuller family - Benjamin Fuller who died in 1882 and his son, John, who died in 1892. These were constructed after the death of any important person in the parish and were made up of the Coats of Arms of both husband and wife - if the background on the left side was black, that meant that it was the husband who had died so we know from looking at these that the husband had died in each case, leaving his wife still alive. The hatchments would have been hung on the gates of the owner's house for a month or so after death and then removed to the Parish church where they worshipped.

So, who were these Fullers? well, Benjamin lived at Hyde House, Hyde Heath and also at some time at Germains in Chesham and Fuller's Hill was named after the family. He was a J.P. and Deputy Lieutenant for Bucks so an important man and both he and his son subscribed to Chesham Bois school which had been built in 1846 at the corner of Chestnut Lane and Bois Lane. Records show that in 1870 B.Fuller gave £2.2s. and Captain and Mrs.J.Fuller gave £1.1s. - quite a lot of money in those days. Both of them, together with members of their family, are buried in the churchyard - in the big flat-topped tomb just to the left of the lychgate - thanks to Gary and Claire Glover-Wright for removing the ivy so that we can now see the inscriptions.

Now we come to the final alteration to the main structure of the Church. By 1911 it had become too small for the growing population of Chesham Bois - the railway had come to Amersham! So they pushed the whole church back - so to speak - notice the difference in the construction of the pillars - the earlier ones are ridged

but the 1911 ones are solid columns and also the window arches of the north aisle are different - the plaster work around the later ones is somehow more symmetrical and geometric than the earlier ones, The vestries were put in at that time, the old vestry became the housing for the organ pipes and gas lighting was put in.

Finally, in 1969 the Birkett Room was built in memory of Alvan Birkett, a former Rector.

Before you leave the Church, look at the List of Encumbants - what a wonderful title! The first one was probably a monk from Monks Risborough and there was quite a French influence in the names until 1393 when we get plain John Martin. The entry for 1650 is quite important - this was during Oliver Cromwell's time and Mr. Whitby was probably a Presbyterian or Independent Minister imposed by Cromwell's officers, and then in 1661 (by which time Charles II is on the throne) we've gone back to a Christian name - John Howe.

Our Parish registers go back to the 16th century and the entries are very varied-
1592 - Ales Anby a lame mayd was buried.
1615 - James Moore of Yorksher, vagarant buried.
1710 - Samuel, the son of Elizabeth Derbyshire a travelling woman was baptized.
1741 - Thomas Richardson burid of the small pox.
1742 - David Buttersfield and Anne Johnson (Quakers) married.
1784 - Joseph Williams, a Black poor was baried.

(some of the spelling is fascinating!)

Just before we end, I'd like to tell you about a grave in the churchyard - right at the far end, almost under the hedge. It's in memory of a 2-yr.old girl, Christina Hanbury-Sparrow who was killed when a V1 (or 'doodle-bug') fell in the garden of her home in Chestnut Lane in 1944 and also her step-sister, Gisela, aged 19 who died in 1945 during one of our bombing raids on her home town of Dresden in Germany. It really does bring home to you the sadness of war. But the two girls are still remembered every time the Church bells ring as their family gave a bell in their memory and it's inscribed Christina and Gisela, 1947. I hope you get a chance to go and look at the little gravestone, and that you've enjoyed this 'Look around the Church'.

All the information came from 'A History of Chesham Bois Church' written in 1952 by Marian Atkinson and Shirley Knight.

'A history of Chesham Bois' written in 1976 by L.Elgar Pike.

'ST.Leonard's Church' written in 1992 by Michael Tagent.