

ST LEONARD'S CHURCH

Chesham Bois
Buckinghamshire



CHURCH GUIDE

GENERAL HISTORY

While Amersham and Chesham both appear in the Domesday Book of 1086, the earliest references to Chesham Bois are c 1200. By that time Chesham had been divided into three manors, one of which was Chesham Bois, held by William de Bosco, or Boies. William's surname probably derived from the great woods which then crowned the hillside.

In 1215, the year of Magna Carta, he presented William de Risemberghe, or Riseborough, to the Vicarage of the Chapel of St Leonard of Chesham - the church of Chesham Bois. (St Leonard of Limoges died c 559 and is the patron saint of prisoners, especially those of conscience.) Legally the church belonged to that part of Chesham Parish Church appropriated to the Abbot of St Mary Pré, Leicester, who endowed it with tithes so that it was financially independent. Following a disagreement in 1213, William de Bosco and his successors obtained the right to nominate the chaplain, subject to the Abbot's formal approval. As a "donative of peculiar jurisdiction", the incumbent was not subject to the local bishop, and the patron had the right of both presentation and induction (actual possession) to the living. With modifications over the years, this right was thereafter exercised by the Lords of the Manor of Chesham Bois until sold in 1880 by the Duke of Bedford to the Peache Trustees, the present patrons.

The chapel acquired the right of burial in the 14th and 15th centuries, being first referred to as the Parish Church of Chesham Bois in 1470.

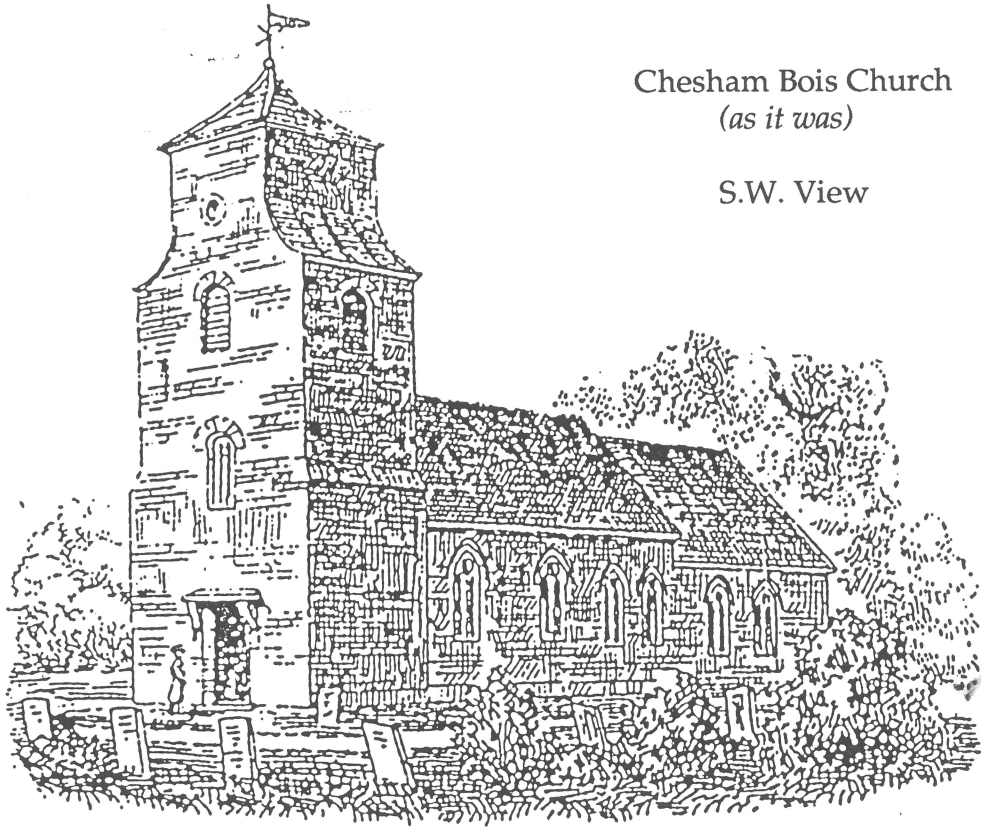
The first registers, now deposited, like all the old church records, in the Diocesan (County) Archives in Aylesbury, date from 1562, 24 years after Thomas Cromwell's decree. The first marriage entry is of John Cheyne to his second wife Joice; the Cheyne family became Lords of the Manor in 1445, Sir Thomas Cheyne being a noted Lollard (follower of the Reformer, John Wycliffe) who was imprisoned in the Tower of London earlier that century because of his beliefs. The Cheynes remained Lords of the Manor until the family line ceased in 1728, and as such paid all church expenses!

THE BUILDING

The original 13th century chapel, made of local flints with chalk dressings, is now the chancel and measured some 20 feet by 14.5 feet. The south wall, as far as the doorway, dates from the 14th century, when the chapel was enlarged; this wall, like those of the chancel, is "battered", ie. thicker at the base, to avoid the need for buttresses. The north wall of the church originally ran along the line of the pillars.

During the 17th century a tower was built on the walls at the west end, containing three bells; a gallery was also built, and enlarged in 1823 so that it covered half the nave. A vestry (subsequently the organ chamber) was added in 1841, incorporating a 14th century window.

In 1881 the church was largely reconstructed, having fallen into decay, the tower being demolished together with the gallery. A north aisle was



Chesham Bois Church
(as it was)

S.W. View

added, the 14th century windows being incorporated into the new north wall, and the 13th century chancel arch, small, much deteriorated and lacking foundation, was replaced and re-erected over the south-west entrance gate to the churchyard, until decay caused its removal in the middle of this century. The remains can be seen today at the edge of the car park. The roof was boarded with deal in place of the original stained oak and the whole building tiled. In 1885 a new tower was added on the south-west corner of the building.

In 1911 the church was extended at the back and a new clergy vestry built, both following the style of the existing building. The tiles to the north aisle roof, which because of the shallow pitch were letting in rainwater, were replaced

with slate. Further structural changes this century were a choir vestry (1955, extended in 1969 to form the Birkett Room in memory of Alvan Birkett, Rector from 1945 to 1964) and the north door (1961).

INSIDE THE CHURCH

Starting in the sanctuary, the east window with its three pointed lancets was damaged by air raids in 1940, and was restored in 1948 using a mixture of original 14th century glass, late 15th century glass given by the Salmond family and modern glass.

The three chancel windows retain their Early English (13th century) arches, but

much of the glass is modern. Two have shields of the Cheyne family (formerly in the East window) with dates and initials; in the quatrefoils are the initials XC and IC, the Greek and Latin abbreviations for Jesus Christ. The other window shows the Sower and Ruth and was installed in 1913. All three windows were restored in 1948 in memory of Thomas Fitzpatrick, Rector from 1906 to 1923, and members of the Salmond family.

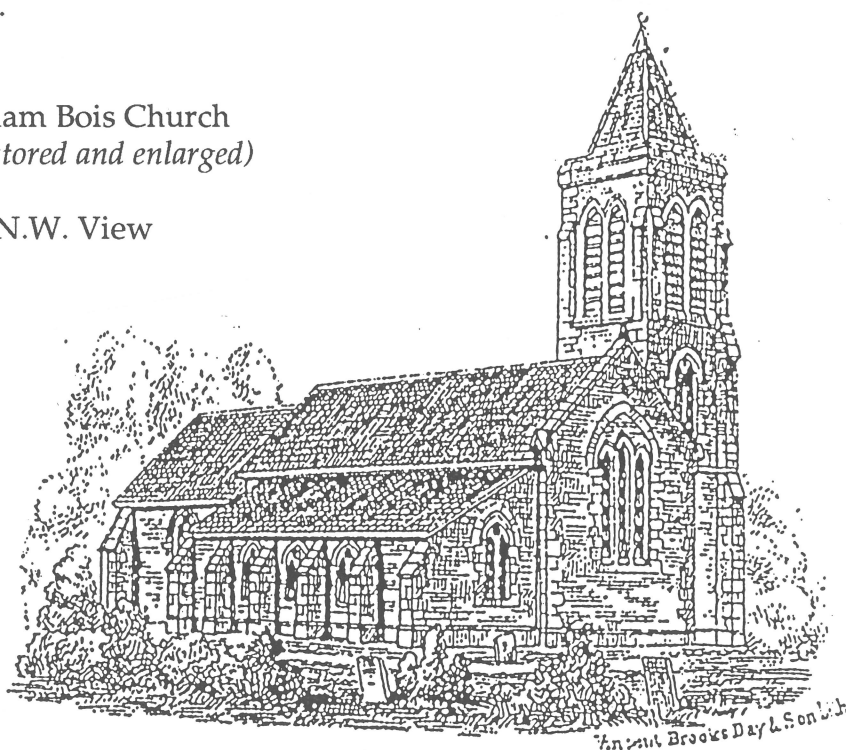
The Holy Table is oak, late 17th century, with five supports twisted in clusters of four and apparently carved out of the solid. The panelling behind was put up in 1967. The two chairs in the sanctuary are made from four 15th century pew bench ends taken from the old west gallery and from oak panelling formerly in the chancel. That panelling had, by 1881, become "a refuge for scores of bats"! The faces which decorated the chairs were destroyed, probably in Cromwell's time, and replaced with carved oak leaves; the ornamentation on the back edges has also been replaced with plain caps.

The Rector's stall is likewise made from oak from the original pews and panelling; next to it is a handsome 17th century studded leather chair. The communion rails are Jacobean, taken from the west gallery, and have twisted balusters and "poppyhead" ends.

The floor of the sanctuary includes some ancient burnt clay tiles probably dating from the 13th century, together with four tombstones in black marble from the 17th century, three relating to the Cheyne family. The tomb on the north side of the sanctuary is that of John Cheyne, who died in 1585, and has a top of Verona marble and sides of clunch display panelwork with coats of arms of the family and the Insignia of the Order of the Garter of which John Cheyne was a Knight. John Cheyne was one of the Reformers and his nephew probably the son of Richard Grafton, printer of the "Great Bible" of 1539. The Cheynes had considerable influence, another local family member (according to the inscription on her tomb) marrying the

Chesham Bois Church
(when restored and enlarged)

N.W. View



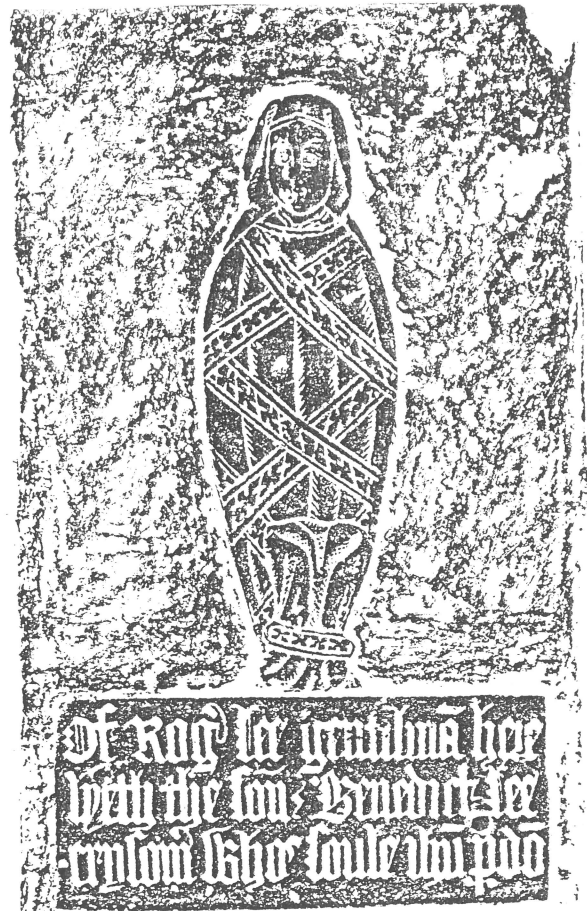
Earl of Southampton and Lord Chancellor of England, dying in 1574 and being buried in the vaults at Titchfield, Hampshire.

A wall plaque above John Cheyne's tomb records his generosity (in Latin!); on the opposite wall is a memorial to Thomas Clarke, Rector from 1767 until his death in 1793, who trained many of the leaders of the Evangelical Revival.

The choir stalls, of oak, were installed at the time of the 1911 extension. The Allen electronic organ was installed in 1985, replacing a Gray and Davidson pipe organ dating from 1865 and purchased second-hand in 1919.

On the floor of the chancel are brasses of Elizabeth and Robert Cheyne (who died in 1516 and 1552 respectively) which show the contrast between pre and post Reformation styles. A third, rare, brass is of their grandson, Benedict Lee, a chrysom child (ie. buried wrapped in his baptismal cloth) who died c 1542, and which is believed to be the only brass in existence with the word "chrysom" in the inscription.

The roof of the chancel and nave has curved wind braces and moulded arch trusses supported by stone corbels, those in the chancel dating from the 15th century. The centre corbels on each side of the chancel depict the Cheyne shields supported by angels; there are heads of bishops in the south-east and south-west corners, and heads of a monk and of a bearded man (St Leonard, perhaps?) in the north-east and north-west corners. The nave corbels generally show angels carrying shields, but the bearded head re-appears in the north-east corner; towards the rear are fishes with the word in Greek, "Ichthus",



Monumental Brass,
Chrysom Child
(Benedict Lee)

whose letters stand for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour", and on the south side of the church the Agnus Dei (Lamb with flag) and pelican feeding its young, a symbol of the Church.

Moving down from the chancel, the Puritan iron hour-glass holder on the south wall was originally at the preacher's right hand, being set by him at the start of his (long!) sermon. The pulpit is early Jacobean oak, hexagonal and ornamented with strapwork and openwork. It now stands upon its sounding-board canopy, the carved oak panel which originally connected the two serving as the back of the Rector's stall.

The three windows in the south wall of the nave as far as the doors are similar to those of the chancel in style, but all contain 20th century memorials. The first shows St Birinus (whose mission in 634 resulted in the baptism of the West Saxon king in the River Thame) and St Frideswide (at whose priory the diocese was seated in 1546) with the diocesan coat of arms above. The second depicts St Cecilia, patron saint of music, and St George, with the Scout badge above, and the third shows Mary, Martha's sister, and Phoebe, Paul's helper in Cenchrea, near Corinth.

The handsome oak entrance doors were hung in memory of George Lawrence, Rector from 1923 to 1945; he was responsible for building the Parish Centre, Glebe Way, in 1937. The tower contains three bells; the treble and No. 2 bells are said to have been cast out of one, but there is no inscription on the treble. The No. 2 bell is inscribed "Chandler Made Me 1705" and the tenor bell is inscribed "Christina and Giselda 1947" in memory of two children of the Hanbury-Sparrow family killed in World War II. This replaced the former tenor bell cast by John Kebyll in 1460 which became cracked, and is now in Amersham Museum; the Kebyll bell is inscribed in Latin "St Andrew Pray For Us" - was the church ever dedicated to St Andrew?

The pitch pine pews are a product of the 1881 restoration, added to in 1911, and replaced old high pews; the colourful kneelers were woven by church members in the 1960's.

On the south wall beyond the entrance doors is a board listing the incumbents since 1215. There is a gap in the list from 1418 to 1521 and, during the Civil

War, a Mr Whitby (probably a Presbyterian or Independent minister imposed by Cromwell's officers) took the place of the rightful Rector, John Howe. Five former Rectors are buried in the churchyard: Thomas Clarke (1767-1793), Charles Blackman (1843-1868), Joseph Matthews (1868-1892), Thomas Fitzpatrick (1906-1923) and George Lawrence (1923-1945). Four others from the 17th century, Robert Hearon, Philip Edmunds, Holland Brandreth and John Howe, are apparently buried there, but no gravestones remain. Another Rector, the Hon Lowther Barrington (1830-1839) was a nephew of the Duke of Bedford who built a new Rectory in North Road in 1833; that building was sold and the existing Rectory built on the glebe field in 1983.

Towards the back of the church, the two windows in the south wall were filled in 1949 with figures of the four Evangelists, with their emblems and, above, the diocesan and county coats of arms. The window at the back of the north aisle depicts St Leonard and St Hugh of Lincoln with the Lincoln coat of arms (Chesham Bois was in the diocese of Lincoln until its transfer to the diocese of Oxford in 1845). These windows were given by Ernest Blankley (whose initials figure above St Leonard); he also gave the quatrefoils of the windows in the north wall, showing the Implements of the Crucifixion.

The west window, designed like the east window by Martin Travers, depicts Our Lord's appearances after His Resurrection, and was given in 1947. Of three cinque-foil lights under a four-centred head, it now contains very little of its original 15th century tracery. Either side of the window are panels,

which probably surrounded the Holy Table before the 1881 restoration, detailing the Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed and Ten Commandments.

The windows of the north wall include three stained glass memorials, inserted in the period 1970 to 1980. The left window illustrates the text "Suffer little children"; the centre window shows Caedman, who was an uneducated 7th century herdsman bidden by God to "sing the beginning of created things", whose songs allegedly became the first English poetry, and the right window depicts Mary seated at Jesus' feet with Martha in the background.

The font, like the lectern, is 20th century and replaces a marble font given by the Rector of Amersham in 1882 which became damaged. In the Birkett Room is a striking marble bas-relief of the Last Supper. The church plate includes an Elizabethan silver chalice, 18th century Irish silver chalice and paten and a pewter alms dish, 19th century flagon and 20th century chalices and patens and a memorial collection dish.

THE CHURCH TODAY

Whilst buildings are important, they are nothing without people. This lovely church has been a centre for worship and witness by Christians for eight centuries. Today's congregations are their direct descendants. Archbishop Temple described worship as "quickenings the conscience by the holiness of God, feeding the mind with the truth of God, purifying the imagination by the beauty of God, opening the heart to the love of God,

devoting the will to the purpose of God".

The gospel proclaimed by the Reformers and other Christians of the past is still God's power to save. That gospel we proclaim today, bringing faith to those in doubt, encouragement to the anxious, strength to those who are tempted, comfort to those in sorrow, hope to the aged and inspiration to the young.

We invite you to share with us in this rich heritage of faith and worship. Information about Sunday services and week-day activities is on the notice boards in the porch. For further details, please telephone the Rectory (0494 726139).

May God richly bless you and go with you throughout your life.

*Michael Tagent
November 1992*

This guide draws on material from several sources, notably the "Records of Buckinghamshire" (Buckinghamshire Architectural and Archaeological Society, 1889) and previous guides by William Lempriere (1923) and L. Elgar Pike (1970).