THE CHURCH OF ST GEORGE HATFORD

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY
&
SHORT GUIDE OF THE CHURCH

HATFORD'S TWO CHURCHES

HOLY TRINITY & ST GEORGE'S

Hatford is but a small village of some 90 people. Mentioned in the Doomsday Book, Hatford translates as 'a ford beside a headland or hill'. Visitors coming from Oxford leave the main road to drive through Pusey and Gainfield and will see the 19th century church of Holy Trinity standing prominently with its tower. On arrival in the village, however, visitors soon realise that the church is now a private residence. The conversion has been tastefully done, the graveyard has not been disturbed and its gate bears the name Church House.

South side of St George's church

Only a few yards away, between former Rectory and the Manor House, set back from the road behind its own churchyard is a low building with no tower, but undoubtedly a church. It consists of a chancel and a nave of but one aisle, making it narrow in comparison with the 67 feet of its length. This is Hatford's ancient parish church of St George, and Mr Bill Baylis who lives at the nearby Manor House will delight in telling visitors how such a small village came to have two churches. St. George's Norman Church which is 'chapel like', having no tower or spire, stands on the site of a much earlier building, dating from Saxon times. Early English architecture is interspersed with original Norman craftsmanship which is rather resplendent in the fine, carved doorway on the south side, the nave and chancel arch.

The move from St George's to Holy Trinity took place in the year 1874, but the story began earlier with a piece of typical 19th century nepotism when a certain Mr Francis Paynter purchased the advowson, that is, the right to be patron and appoint the Rector of Hatford. In 1825 he appointed his son, or perhaps grandson, the Revd Samuel Paynter, aged 24 and only just old enough to be a priest in the Church of England.

The Norman font in St. George's probably witnessed the marriage in April 1555 of Anne Dudley the widowed Countess of Warwick, to Sir Edward Unton of Wadley House. She was the daughter of Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset and niece to Jane Seymour, a onetime Queen to Henry VIII.

After a few years, Samuel moved on, but kept his interest in Hatford and in due time inherited the advowson and became the patron himself. In 1864 he appointed the Revd George Burder James, aged 34 and energetic, who found himself Rector of a church which had been neglected, with the roof of the nave in need of costly repairs. The two clergymen, the new Rector and the ageing patron, discussed this together and conceived the idea of building a new and grander church for Hatford. They proposed to abandon St George's altogether, arguing that it was an inconvenient building and too small for the parish. In his enthusiasm Samuel Paynter declared himself willing to pay the entire cost of building the new church. Some of the Rector's fellow clergy and friends in the deanery urged him to be cautious and to investigate the possibility of restoring St George's, but he was not to be persuaded. The Bishop of Oxford was prepared to give his approval and the parishioners of Hatford were delighted with the prospect of having a fine new church at no cost to themselves. A London architect was appointed, plans agreed, builders engaged, again from London, and the project went ahead rapidly.

The Mausoleum at St George's

Restored window

Visitors are often particularly interested in a recessed tomb on the north side of the chancel which has a recumbent figure once thought to be Geoffrey Chaucer whose family had associations with Hatford.

However, it has a face of austere innocence, as admittedly do many that are carved in stone, and its mouth can scarcely be imagined chuckling at a bawdy story like the Miller's Tale. Chaucer is surely buried in Westminster Abbey, where a great writer and racy raconteur cannot be said to be out of place.

Tomb once thought to be that of Geoffrey Chaucer

East facing window above the altar

The land for Holy Trinity was given by Mr Sydney Bouverie Pusey of Pusey House and his wife laid the foundation stone on 22nd July 1873. Mendip stone to face the building was brought by rail from Bristol, unloaded at Challow Station and transported to Hatford by a local farmer's horses and carts. Four bells were installed in the tower and a clock was added by public subscription, the only item not paid for by Mr Paynter, who spent altogether well over £3,000. Within ten months the building was completed and on Thursday, 7th May 1874, it was consecrated in the name of the Holy Trinity by the Bishop of Oxford, the Rt Revd Dr J F Mackarness.

Hatford, then, had its new parish church and St. George's was left derelict, eventually losing the nave roof and the bell turret. While the new school was being built, in 1876, the teacher held her class in the chancel for a month. One of St. George's bells was taken for the school and the other went to St Paul's Church, Finchley, in North London.

In 1890 Samuel Paynter had an enormous and grandiose tomb erected in the west end of the old church and there his wife and his daughter were re-interred. The inscription refers to:
'Eliza, the beloved wife of the Revd Samuel Paynter, who died 28th December 1844, aged 41 years. Also Ann, the youngest daughter of the above, who died on 26th June 1890, in her 44th year.'
What is the explanation of the apparent discrepancy in the figures? Perhaps Miss Paynter had 'reduced' her age while she was alive and was allowed to remain 43 when she was dead.
Samuel Paynter himself died at the age of 91 and was interred
there early in 1893, leaving money in trust for the maintenance of St George's as a noble setting for his family tomb.

Holy Trinity continued to be the parish church until 1938, when the benefice was united with Stanford in the Vale and Hatford no longer had a Rector to itself. Holy Trinity was suffering as St George's had done nearly a hundred years earlier, except that nobody could criticise it for being too small, because the congregation dwindled to a very few. The building was dilapidated and needed extensive and costly repairs. It had no doubt been badly shaken during the war when some stray German bombs fell on Hatford and destroyed the nearby off-licence pub. Like other Victorian churches, it was difficult to heat, and people complained that it was always cold, until finally the heating system broke down completely. So it came about that Holy Trinity in its turn was abandoned, the last service was held there in August 1971, the Archdeacon came and declared it deconsecrated and the diocese of Oxford sold it to become 'Church House'.

South side of St George's with view of the east end

The year 1971 thus found Hatford with two abandoned churches and its people were expected to look to the lovely parish church of St Denys' in Stanford in the Vale, admittedly not too far distant.   Then it was that a small 'ginger group' led by Bill and Helen Baylis, insisted that Hatford still had St George's and begged that it should be brought back into use.   They had to be importunate, but their persistence was rewarded when, after an interval of 96 years, services were again held in the chancel of the old church on Sunday, 19th December, and Christmas Day 1971.

The chancel arch

The altar, previously a vestry table, and its rails had been brought from Holy Trinity and the Norman font had been restored to its original home. Over the course of the next four years the nave of St George's was completely restored, using as much as possible materials which were available locally. The roof timbers came from some redundant farm buildings and many of the tiles from the Lodge which used to stand by Shellingford crossroads. The windows were fitted with new frames and the bell was reclaimed from the school which had long been closed. When this work was completed and the nave restored to use, St George's stood as a monument to the courage and faith of its people who had rescued it, as well as of its builders of centuries long before.

The Norman Porch

St George's carries the signs of other rebuildings in the past. One window appears to be Saxon, while the chancel arch is a fine example of Norman work, as is also the south door in the nave, once hidden by a porch but now clearly visible from the road.   Most of the building is in a simple Early English style.