

*A Guide To  
St. George's Church  
Ruishton*



**25p**

## CHURCH AND VILLAGE

When, on the eve of the Reformation, the builders left unfinished a fine west Lower for St. *George's* Church, the origins of Christian worship in Ruishton were lost already in the distant past. It is likely that the spread of the Gospel to the communities of the vale had begun as early as the 8th century with the foundation in Taunton of a Saxon minster church; likely as well that its missionary priests had come to Ruishton long before the Conquest to establish here a chapel or preaching-place. The site they chose was probably that on which the present church stands, overlooking the rush-grown river lands that had given the village its name.

Other associations, formed early, were to shape the history of that first church and the village it served. About 878, the year the sun was eclipsed, Alfred the Great gave Ruishton to the bishops of Winchester, land soon after to form part of the great manor of Taunton, acquired by them in 904. Not that their hold on this new won territory was always secure: parts of the manor fell for a time into secular hands and later in the 10th century the powerful Bishop Ethelwold was forced to reassert the claims of Winchester upon the land of 'Risctun'. But thereafter the bishops held the manor with scarcely a break until 1822, and dominated the economic life of the vale.

The manor churches were theirs as well, until granted to Taunton's new Augustinian priory on its foundation in about 1120. It may have been the canons of the priory, serving Ruishton like the minster priests before them, who inspired the building of its new church in the 12th century. That church, represented still by Norman remains at the south door, was probably the first to bear the dedication to St. George, a saint whose great popularity at that period coincided with the departure of the Third Crusade.

Before long, however, the needs of their own community distracted the Prior and canons from care of the parishes around and complaints of neglect arose, complaints even that some had died without benefit of the last rites. In 1308, therefore, agreement was reached which gave responsibility for several local churches to the Vicar of St. Mary's Church in Taunton, while the Prior undertook to find a resident priest for Ruishton and Stoke St. Mary 'which are sufficiently close to each other'. In token, perhaps, of a special affection for the church at Ruishton, the Prior was given leave to send 'certain worthy brethren of his cornunity' to assist at the mass on Sundays and other solemn occasions.

Nothing records the men who served as parish priests at this period, although their home, 'le preistes howse', is later mentioned in a manor survey, as is 'le Church— howse',

forerunner of the village hall. Nicholas Bassley was priest in 1531, and four years later John Stotte was receiving from the Prior a yearly stipend of £6 13s 4d.

Building and rebuilding slowly transformed the Norman church, until by the 16th century only one major addition remained to be made. As the Middle Ages ebbed away and the River Tone nearby carried 'all maner of marchaundyses' to the prospering town, an ambitious west tower was begun, intended to equal any that Somerset could show. But before it was complete the dissolution of the priory had intervened, leaving St. George's Church without its ancient patron, and the tower without its crown.

Although the ensuing years of religious change have left little trace in the history of Ruishton, the bishop's later efforts to keep discipline among clergy and people are more fully recorded. A parishioner in 1577 was suspected of usury, another attended church while excommunicated and quarterly sermons had not been preached. A dispute over tithes which reached the Court of Chancery in Elizabeth's reign was matched by an argument no less heated which disturbed the churchyard in 1616 after pigs and sheep had been 'rooteing upp the graves'. The church was out of repair in 1605, the new Book of Common Prayer nowhere to be found, and in 1629, Richard Harding was serving as parish priest without the bishop's licence: more than that, he preached and kept school with as little right.

The Civil War and its aftermath in turn left their mark. A Parliamentary army marching to Taunton's relief in 1645 found 'scarce a rnan...in a whole Village, so barbarously had the Enemy unpeopled the Country'; and in the same year Robert Proctor of Henlade was threatened with death for refusing the oath of allegiance. He died soon after his release from imprisonment in Orchard House. It was little wonder non—conformity found allies in Ruishton and its neighbours: in 1669, large conventicles were reported at Stoke St. Mary and Creech St. Michael, and 16 years later at least 11 villagers were implicated in the Monmouth Rebellion.

There were remarkable men to match the times, among them Timothy Batt who was appointed minister of St. George's Church soon after the Restoration. He brought to Ruishton a reputation both for his preaching — 'silver—tongued Batt' he was called — and for his saintliness, but in 1662 was ejected from the living for his Puritan views. He survived long after into blind old age and borrowed his dying words from St. Paul: 'I have fought a good fight I have finished my course, I have kept the faith'.



Service once a month by 1742, and a building of comfort—able, cluttered appearance fitted the calmer mood which settled on the village in the 18th century. A pulpit placed well down the nave dominated the church's interior, while box pews crowded round and hat pegs lined the walls. From his pew in the south aisle the squire looked on, and in the gallery at the west end the village musicians were sole masters. Candles to light their singing and strings for the bass viol were items of regular expense for the churchwardens, whose accounts survive from the late 18th century.

A school endowed in 1742 taught the village children to read, but not to write, and attempted to impart 'the principles of the Christian religion'. But as the influence of the Anglican Church ebbed low, it was more often the example of unruly times which prevailed: a vestry in 1768 reported 'several enormous Crimes' in the neighbourhood, and in 1841, 500 and more of 'the veriest ruffians and blackguards' gathered to watch a brutal prize fight, close by the inn at Blackbrook which Thackeray knew.

The evangelical movement had reached the village by 1822 with the registration of a house for non—conformist worship. Anglican revival soon followed, and by 1851, an average of 100 people attended Sunday service in the morning, as many as 170 in the afternoon. Drastic restoration of the church in 1866 swept away the gallery and box pews, removed the pulpit from its commanding position, and filled the church with respectable Victorian benches brought from the Savoy Chapel in the Strand. But not everyone was happy to bid farewell to a colourful past: the minstrels objected to the newfangled choir.

Change more rapid than ever before has come to Ruishton in the 20th century. A motorway now borders the parish on its western side, and in the north, the River Tone, which in 1505

caused 'grete floodes and downyng of the medews", has recently been tamed by flood—prevention measures. New houses have risen in large numbers, and the population has grown accordingly. St. George's Church, no stranger to many centuries of change, stands reassuring and impressive in the midst of this transformation, focus for the life of a modern village, and for its worship.

## A Tour of the Church...

### Interior

At the south door, a column and capitals and the fragment of a *zig—zag* arch are conspicuous reminders of a church which stood here late in the 12th century. Subsequent alteration obscures the extent of the Norman work, but the tiny chancel and the south wall of the nave are, perhaps, further remains of the 12th century church. That building may have been a simple rectangle; it may quite possibly have been cruciform in plan: in either case its modest proportions were soon outgrown.

One striking feature of the church, the mis—alignment of the chancel, may have resulted from the northward extension of the nave in the century which followed. Certainly, the nave had reached its present size by the 14th century, when the rood stair behind the pulpit was built. This staircase, rediscovered in 1866, gave access to the rood loft surmounting the chancel screen. All trace of the screen has gone, except, perhaps, for the fine medieval panels incorporated in the reredos. But in the tiny window that lights the stair, two watching angels have survived the passage of the centuries, depicted in the church's only medieval glass.

No period left so clear a mark on this building as the 15th century. New windows for nave and chancel shed light through the lofty church, illuminating the wall painting, now vanished, whose remains were uncovered in the 19th century. There was a new porch also, an arcade and chancel arch, and an unusual double squint to allow those in the south aisle a view of the priest.

The history of the south aisle is difficult to determine. It *seems* at first sight typical of the late medieval Perpendicular style. But its east window provides a rare and beautiful example of much earlier workmanship, dating from the late 13th century. That this window represents part of the aisle's original fabric and has not been reset from elsewhere is suggested by one piece of evidence: a piscina in the south wall, another discovery of 1866,

appears to have been partially blocked to allow the insertion of a Perpendicular window nearby. The 15th century, then, may simply have remodelled an existing structure. The piscina marks the aisle as the ancient site of an altar, dedicated perhaps to the Virgin Mary, whose guild or brotherhood apparently flourished in Ruishton shortly before the Reformation.



The **font**, dating from about 1380, is of exceptional quality, its octagonal bowl richly carved and supported by panelled shafts. A Flemish painting of the 16th century, ‘The Presentation by the Magi’, was stolen from above the font in February, 1981. Gift of the Anderdon family in the 19th century, it originally formed an altar—piece.

The **pulpit** was given by the Sommerville family after the Great War and replaced an 18th century predecessor which may have found its way to the neighbouring parish of Thornfalcon.

The **organ** was built by George Osmond and given in 1913 to the memory of Edwin and John Thorn. Both were natives of Ruishton who, like many in the villages of Taunton Deane, sought better fortune in America.

The **royal** arms over the south door were rescued from the front of the singing gallery during the Victorian restoration. They were those in use between 1603 and 1707.

The church **plate** includes a fine Elizabethan chalice and cover, the latter bearing the date 1574.

## **Exterior**

Chief glory of the church is its **tower**, built of the blue has stone which marks the character of this area, and which, like the Monkton sandstone used elsewhere in the fabric, came from local quarries. Even in a county famed for towers, its design is strikingly elaborate, incorporating ham—stone friezes, canopied niches, and an array of angel busts. It was

planned or under construction by 1533 when Richard Gode of West Monkton left 20d 'to the byldynge of the tower of Ryston', and despite a recent suggestion that no crown was ever

intended, it probably stands unfinished. The letters T and M over the west door are memorial, perhaps, to an unknown benefactor.

There has been a tower clock at least since the late 18th century, although the present mechanism was made in

1882 by Smith's of Derby. Two of the tower's bells were cast in 1747 by Thomas Bayley of Bridgwater; another of 1781 was the work of Thomas Pyke of the same town, while the ring of six was recently completed with the addition of three bells made in 1955 by Taylor's of Loughborough.

Standing near the entrance to the church are the remains of a fine large cross, thought to date from the early 15th century, and bearing on panels around the shaft what may be the emblems of the four Evangelists. The figure of a mitred bishop or abbot, his hand raised in blessing, looks down from the corner of the south aisle nearby. It is probable that he, like a similar figure found at St. James's Church in Taunton, originally formed part of the cross.

Pause at the churchyard gate by the vaults of the Proctors and Anderdons: their names are written in the history of this place through many generations and their descendants live here still.