

Abinger and its Church

Compiled in 1967 by RJ du Bois

Abinger: The First Inhabitants

Abinger has been called the Oldest Village in England. Mesolithic hunters sheltered below the crest of the hill from the Arctic winds coming from the then not so distant ice some 7,000 years ago. There is evidence of the life they led in a meadow a few hundred yards from the church where a small hut covers the excavated site of a pit-dwelling and contains a rich store of worked flints, including weapons and tools. The pit dwelling is probably part of a prehistoric village. Excavations on the surface near two ponds, fed by natural

springs, one near the Church and one 100 yards away, disclose many prehistoric artefacts. The neighbourhood of water on high ground in prehistoric times was the natural habitation site of ancient man, both for defensive purposes and as a means of killing game, watering at the pools.

Dr. L. S. B. Leakey, who excavated the site in 1950 with Sir Edward Beddington-Behrens, believes the dwelling to be the oldest humanly made and preserved dwelling in the United Kingdom.

Domesday and the Normans

A nameless Saxon is recorded as holding the Manor from King Edward but at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, William Fitz Ansculf held Abinger (then Abinceborne) with its Church and Mill. About 14 years after the Survey it was decided, probably by Fitz Ansculf, to add to the fortifications of the manor by the addition of an earthwork surrounded by a moat so dug that it was fed by a nearby spring, which feeds it to this

day. This is one of the finest examples of a Motte in Britain. [A Motte was a relatively primitive structure consisting of a mound surrounded at the summit by a wooden palisade inside which rose a square wooden tower for use as a look-out as well as for defence.] It formed part of the early Norman Motte and Bailey Castle and was excavated under the direction of Professor Brian Hope-Taylor in 1939.

The Manor

The present Manor house is of 17th-century origin, though with later addition, and occupies the site of the Bailey and earlier Hall. It is

scheduled as a property of historical interest, and was built by John Evelyn, the Diarist, and friend and apologist of Charles II.

Recent History

On 3rd August 1994 at 8 a.m. a flying bomb exploded near the Church. The blast brought down the belfry, the roof of the nave and parts of the wail. The organ and almost all the furnishings were destroyed. Only the 13th century chapel remained more or less intact. It is the only church in the diocese of Guildford that suffered serious bomb damage.

and fire caused extensive damage to the tower, the roof and some of the furnishings. The church was once again restored as it was and the opportunity taken to install concealed lighting.

The restoration of the Church was entrusted to F. Etchells, Esq., F.R.I.B.A. who, from old etchings and photographs, was able to reconstruct it. The Church was lengthened by about ten feet to house the present organ. Unfortunately, a Crusader's old stone tomb was broken up during reconstruction. It lay beneath the surface beyond the outer wall of the main Church. The walls were rebuilt with the same material and in the same way - rubble between sandstone and plaster. The average thickness is about four feet.

Since 1959 the parish has been linked with the Benefice of Christ Church, Coldharbour. The incumbent is therefore Rector of Abinger and Vicar of Coldharbour.

In June 1964, the church suffered a second disaster. During an exceptionally heavy thunderstorm, the tower was struck by lightning

The patrons of the living and Lords of the Manor for the last 350 years have been members of the family of John Evelyn, the diarist.

Features of Interest

The east window structure in the chancel was built in the last century. The other windows are new but follow the patterns of the originals, except for the west window. The three-eight window near the pulpit is a copy of a 15th century window previously there. The glass in the present east window, which was given in memory of John Coe, was designed in 1967 by Mr. Laurence Lee, A.R.C.A. His description of his design is:--

The Cross is depicted as a 'living tree', riven by lightning and distorted by age, but still having life within itself and bursting out with new life. The concept is St. Paul's—life through death—decay and suffering transformed into resurrection and joy. This is the doctrinal aspect. Artistically, there is a basic complexity in the Cross theme contrasted with simple open shapes which might be thought of as landscape—earth, cornfields, lakes (all rather happy); or again as a butterfly's wing. The flickers of white falling from the extremities of the Cross pass down back into the earth and rise again in the centre mass of light.

Under the altar are two memorial stone slabs, one to the memory of Thomas Crawley, M.A., Rector of Abinger and chaplain to Charles II, who died in 1685, and his wife, a daughter of Dr. Gabriel Offley, a former Rector; the other to Robert Offley, M.A., Prebendary of Durham and Rector of Abinger, who died in 1743. The wall memorial to Mrs. Elizabeth Ronzier, who died on 17th June, 1785, was taken from a coffin under the floor.

In the South porch, near the altar and by the font are three fine 15th century English alabaster reliefs, given by Sir Edward Beddington-Behrens. That by the font depicts the beheading of John the Baptist (a favourite "scene" of the mediaeval Mystery Plays which inspired the Nottingham alabaster trade).

The fine bronze relief of the Crucifixion in the chapel, signed by Justin (probably the French artist. Justin Matthieu, died 1864) was given in memory of Edwin Waterhouse.

During extensive repair, in 1857, the singers' gallery at the west end was removed and a barrel organ was installed (with two barrels, each having ten tunes), to replace the band. In the 1946 restoration, the choir was restored to the west end on a platform, with an electronic organ to replace the pipe organ.

Lord Champion's Order of the Bath banner hangs in the chapel. All the furnishings are new

except for three 17th century chairs, a prayer desk of the same date and the brass ornaments in the chapel.

Amongst the silver belonging to the church are a chalice, paten and flagon made in 1736 and given by the Countess of Donegal who owned Abinger Hall.

The cross and candlesticks on the main altar were given in memory of John A. Gibbs and his son, and those in the chapel in memory of Walter Selwyn Orpen.

In 1857, a Jacobean "three-decker" pulpit was removed and its replacement which had beautiful Renaissance carved panels was destroyed in 1944. The present pulpit is a war memorial to the scholars of Abinger Hill School who died in the 1939-45 war.

The beautifully carved chest in the chapel was originally in a church in Normandy and dates from about 1525. It was given by Celia Shepperd, daughter of Alan and Irene Carr and granddaughter of Robert and Eva Boxall who brought it from France in 1900.

The font belongs to the last century and contains a marble bowl taken from an earlier font. The lych-gate was built in 1880. There are three bells in the tower, two of which are inscribed "William Eldridge made me, 1674".

The list of rectors (on the wall by the font) dates from 1286 when, on 28th April, Richard Fulvenne, son of Reginald, was instituted. There is an old house in the parish, on the Sutton Abinger road, which is still named Fulven's Farm. In 1645, the rector, Anthony Smith, was deprived for his royalist sympathies. He is said to have spoken against the Parliamentarians in Church and in the Hatch.

The Church registers go back to 1559, the first entry being the record of a baptism: "Lawrence Dayre, Son of Matthew Dayre was baptized the xxiii day of April, 1559". There are many interesting records, such as that of the burial of "John Marsh, a noted travelling hog-ringer" on 12th July, 1730: and that of the baptism on 29th April, 1758, of "Samuel, base born son of Jane, the wife of Robert Lane who was transported 3 or 4 years ago".