The Jeff West Leaflet

A Historic Guide to the Wall Paintings of All Saints, Shorthampton

Our parish is called *The Parish of Charlbury with Shorthampton.* Most parishes with names like this are recent amalgamations, the result of rural depopulation and the need for the Church to concentrate its resources in the towns and suburbs where most people now live. This is not the case with Charlbury and Shorthampton. They have been part of the same parish for over a thousand years.

In Anglo-Saxon times, churches were fewer and parishes far larger than they are now, with minster churches staffed by several priests serving a number of scattered communities. In West Oxfordshire there were minsters at Charlbury, Shipton-under-Wychwood, Minster Lovell, Eynsham and Bampton. The minster church at Charlbury, which was probably founded in the mid-seventh century by the Irish missionary bishop St Diuma, covered Cornbury, Finstock, Fawler, Chadlington, Pudlicote, Chilson, Shorthampton and Walcot as well as the town itself.

During the 11th and 12th centuries these larger parishes were divided up into the smaller units familiar today, each under the patronage of the local Lord of the Manor. Unusually, the minster parish of Charlbury remained intact, probably because the manor of Charlbury was held by the Church, initially by the Anglo-Saxon bishops of Dorchester – whose diocese stretched from the Thames to the Humber – and then, until the 16th century, by Eynsham Abbey. In the event, Finstock and Fawler did not become separate until 1860 and Chadlington not until 1963. Too small to be given independence, Shorthampton remains part of the original parish to this day.

The mission of Anglo-Saxon minsters was not concentrated in a single building and subsidiary burial grounds and chapels were often provided. In the case of Charlbury, chapels were built at Chadlington and Shorthampton and are first referred to in a document of 1296. By then, the chapel at Shorthampton had been in existence for at least a century.

Although the landscape around Shorthampton would have been more open in the 12th century, it would in some ways have been quite familiar, with a cluster of buildings around the church and mixed arable and pasture along the slopes of the Evenlode valley and up to the edge of the Wychwood Forest. This runs along the high ground to the south (now above the B4437) and was a Royal Hunting forest since before the Norman Conquest. Evidence of medieval strip cultivation can be seen either side of Catsham Bridge, now cut through by the railway.

The church itself, however, would have looked quite different. Smaller than the present building and certainly narrower, it may have consisted of just a single cell. It was probably rendered, painted white and thatched. Evidence for this early building consists of the **tub font (C)**, the 12th-century **round-headed window (1)** and the **blocked north door (G)** opposite the present entrance. Internally, this door recess now forms part of a box pew and has a row of hat pegs. Outside, the line of its round-arched head can be traced in the stonework on either side of a modern pilaster buttress. The blocked 12th-century door high in the west wall is probably the original north door which was moved to this position in the 18th century to give access to a west gallery. Later it was blocked up when the gallery was taken out. Internally, the plaster was lime washed and lined out in red to give the impression of carefully cut stonework. Some of this lining out can still be seen in the reveals of the **round-headed window (1)** the earliest evidence of wall-painting in the church.

A new chancel must have been added early in the 14th century, for that is the date of the arch, but it was in the 15th century that the most spectacular changes were made.

The south wall of the nave was extended by some six feet to accommodate a new nave altar and a wide 'squint' was created so that those kneeling could see the priest celebrating mass at the main altar. The remains of a **piscina** and **credence shelf (B**) can be seen in the south wall of the nave.

The new roof was carried on stone corbel heads; a monk (representing Eynsham Abbey), a priest and three lay people. At this time, the interior was decorated with a series of wall paintings:

The Legend of the Clay Birds (5), seen in the 'squint', shows the Blessed Virgin holding the infant Christ and one of his brothers in her arms. Just to the right of this, above where the altar would have been, there are at least two phases of painting. The earlier apparently shows the sweat of Jesus falling as great drops of blood during the Agony in the Garden (Luke 22.44); the later painting, **Christ in Majesty (6)**, with his arm raised in blessing. This iconography suggests that the new altar was a 'Jesus' altar, dedicated to the cult of the Holy Name. The Feast of the Holy Name was celebrated on 8th August. Still recognized in the Book of Common Prayer, it was a devotion popular in 15th-century England. It emphasized the humanity of Christ, his kinship with us and the generosity of his passion. This would explain the way that the painting of the Legend of the Clay Birds has been treated. The story is one of a number of folk tales about Christ's childhood in the 'so-called' gospel according to St Thomas.

Several of these tales are not at all Christian in character and have never been accepted by the church as part of scripture. In the Legend of the Clay Birds, the five-year-old Jesus playing in the mud after a great rain modelled twelve clay sparrows. Reprimanded by his father, Joseph, for working on the Sabbath, he commanded the birds to fly, which they did, "crying out and praising God". The Shorthampton artist was probably unaware of the legend in its original context and used it to make an orthodox theological point. By introducing the Virgin and one of Jesus's brothers into the picture, he was emphasising Jesus's humanity through his membership of a human family.

The Christ Child's delight in making mud pies is wholly recognizable human behaviour, familiar in children throughout history. The idea of the birds taking wing can be seen, not as a miracle, but as a way of making the point that in Jesus's fully human life – in his openness and obedience to God – the nature of God himself is revealed as the creator and sustainer of everything that lives.

Above the chancel arch was a **'Doom' painting (4)**, illustrating the salvation offered by Christ through the Church. Elsewhere, the 15th-century paintings are all of saints, recognizable fellow Christians with whom the congregation could identify, or "*kind neighbours and of our knowing"* as Julian of Norwich expressed it.

On the north wall were **St Leonard (now lost),** a sixth-century Frankish nobleman who was the **patron saint of Eynsham Abbey, St Frideswide of Oxford** and an **unidentified bishop (3).** This could be Thomas Becket, St Thomas of Canterbury, who is the archbishop most commonly pictured in English churches. However, in view of the local connections of his two companions, it is perhaps more likely that this is Edmund Rich, St Edmund of Abingdon, the former Oxford don. Edmund came from a religious family; his father went on to become a monk at Eynsham Abbey, which provides a link to Shorthampton, while two of his sisters were in turn prioress of Catesby Priory in Northamptonshire.

At the age of twelve, Edmund himself was sent to school at Oxford and became one of the first academics at the fledgling university. He was a notable teacher, preacher and ascetic who – on being appointed Treasurer of Salisbury Cathedral in 1222 – instead of taking the opportunity to profit from the appointment, divided his income between the poor and the building fund for the new cathedral. He was unwillingly elected Archbishop of Canterbury in 1234 and attempted, but failed, both royal and papal abuse of church wealth. He retired in self-imposed exile to the Cistercian Abbey at Pontigny where he died in exile in 1240 and where his shrine is still venerated.

In the reveal of the south window is **St Sitha (Zita) (7)**, another 13th-century saint who was a servant in the household of a Tuscan family at Lucca for 48 years. Initially despised and abused for her piety, she eventually won the respect of both the family and her fellow servants, so much so that in her old age she was spared domestic duties and spent her time in prayer and pastoral work.

To the east of the door (on the right as you enter) is **St Loy (Eligius) (8)**, the patron saint of metal workers, including blacksmiths, which is why he is shown shoeing a horse. He lived in the early seventh century and was a goldsmith who became royal moneyer and then a leading courtier at the Frankish court. He used his position to free slaves, found monasteries and build churches. In 642 he became Bishop of Noyon, where he helped to convert Flanders to Christianity.

In a church dedicated to All Saints, it is worth noting (though it may be no more than coincidence) that all the saints depicted have a number of characteristics in common. Many different types of people have been recognized as holy by the Church, including warriors and martyrs, yet all the Shorthampton saints are prayerful men and women distinguished by their practical good works.

Their temperament may reflect the character of the monks at Eynsham who, as patrons of the parish, will have chosen the examples to put before the congregation as it is a very humane scheme, fittingly centred on Jesus and his family.

The west wall, on the other hand, must have followed a rather different programme, since the one remaining fragment – low on the north side – seems to be a **dragon's wing (11)**. This must have been part of a larger painting cut through by the former west gallery. We do not know what the subject matter was; possibly St George, or possibly the Archangel Michael, God's champion contending with the dragon (Revelation 12).

The Protestant reformers of the 16th century at first concentrated their attack on the abuse of images, not images themselves. But 'abuse' proved difficult and contentious to identify and in 1548 all images were ordered to be destroyed.

Churchwardens were told to whitewash over wall paintings and put up biblical texts in their place. By 1584 – over 25 years into the reign of Elizabeth 1 – the government's injunctions had still not been fully carried out. The Archdeacon of Oxford found that the "chappill" of Shorthampton was still not "comelie and decentlie trimmed with scriptures". Texts were subsequently put up and were found when the wall paintings were restored in 1903. The faded panel over the door is the Creed, while the late-17th-century/ early-18th-century cartouche on the west wall contains King Solomon's prayer at the consecration of the temple in Jerusalem:

"Now My God, let, I beseech thee, thine eyes be open, and let thine ears be attent unto the prayer that is made in this place." (2 Chronicles 6:40)

At some stage, perhaps in the late 16th century or early 17th century the walls may have been panelled and the nave filled with tall box pews. The evidence for this is the way in which the hood mould over the chancel arch and the bowl of the piscine (point B in the south wall) have been crudely cut back to allow something to be placed against them, enabling them to survive in better condition than those higher up. There was certainly a west gallery which seems to have survived at least until 1810, when the vicar reported that the chapel could seat 100 people, at least 20 more than it can today.

We have already noted the **reused 12th-century door (point G)** which would have given access to the gallery from an external stair. Equally, the sill of the window at the west end of the **south wall (point H)** was raised to allow the gallery floor to be built against it.

1820-24 The chancel, bellcote and porch were rebuilt. The gallery was probably taken down at this time and the present box pews, pulpit and reading desk installed; all the joinery in the church is plain 18th-century or early-19th-century work.

The east window (point F) has been described as providing the loveliest of altar pieces – green fields and the good earth. In 1903 the building was carefully repaired by the leading London architect John Belcher on the strict understanding that its character should "remain exactly as before".

One exception was the exposing and cleaning of the wall paintings which were discovered during the course of the repair work. This restoration was paid for by Vernon Watney of Cornbury Park (see the memorial tablet in the chancel), a keen local historian who was using Belcher for other work on the estate. The 1919 brass war memorial tablet was designed by Belcher's partner J.J. Soass.

As it has done for at least 900 years, the church of All Saints, Shorthampton still serves the people who live and farm nearby. It provides a place where the people from Charlbury can find refreshment and peace and a sense of the nearness and accessibility of God. However, in more recent years it has gained a wider role, serving the many visitors who now walk, run or ride in the countryside. One passer-by was moved to quote T.S. Eliot in the visitor's book:

"...You are not here to verify,

Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity

Or carry report. You are here to kneel

Where prayer has been valid."

Plan of the Church

1. Twelfth-century ‘Lining out’ in red
2. St Frideswide (2), the 8C Mercian princess who became a nun and founded what is now Christ church Cathedral in Oxford.
3. St Leonard is now lost, but we can still see St Edmund of Abingdon (if the attribution is correct), a contemplative academic who helped to build a cathedral but was unable to reform the church as he would have wished.
4. Doom Painting (two paintings visible)
5. The Legend of the Clay Birds shows the Blessed Virgin holding the infant Christ and one of his brothers in her arms.
6. Christ in Glory, The agony in the Garden
7. St Sitha (Zita), quietly devoting her daily life to pray and good works.
8. St Loy (Eligius), another practical man who spent his time doing good works, Metalwork and building
9. Creed over the door
10. King Solomon’s prayer
11. Part of a Dragon’s wing

A. Site of former altar
B. Piscina and Credence shelf
C. Font
D. Pulpit
E. Reading Desk
F. Present altar
G. Site of external stair