ST. MARY’S CHURCH
ELMBRIDGE
WORCESTERSHIRE

A SHORT HISTORY AND GUIDE

Following the visit to the church in 2000, Mike Wall of Worcestershire & Dudley Historic Churches Trust, offered to try and write a simple guide and history of this fascinating and very picturesque church. In doing this he had much encouragement from the parishioners and he would like to pay a special tribute to Dr Godfrey Pidsley for his help generally. His thanks also go to Michael Shaw for his sketch of the south doorway. He hopes this small effort may be of interest to both the parishioners and many visitors to the church.

Introduction:

St Mary’s Church, Elmbridge is situated on a hillside with superb views over the surrounding countryside. Although not having a tower, you are aware of it from quite far off.

The village, somewhat scattered now, has its small centre around the church. The name seems to have derived from the Old English ‘Elma-hrycg’ or ‘a ridge of elm-trees’. The name gradually corrupted from Elmerige in 1086, to Elmrugge in 1213 and eventually Elmbrugge c.1370. The manor with that of Wychbold, was held for some time by the Elmbridge family until the early 16th century when the last of that line, Anne, married Sir John Dannet of Dannet Hall, Leicestershire. They settled in Elmbridge and one of their descendents, Frances, married Edward Bookey. They sold the manor in 1769 to John Penrice in whose family it remained until late 19th century when it passed to the Corbett Trustees. The manor of Purshall gave the name of the owner of the manor from the 14th until the 18th century. The hall still exists to the north of the church.

Tour of the church.

Today, the church has a nave, north aisle and western bell-cote. There is no porch or division between the nave and the chancel by an arch as is usual. The south doorway is a good example of Norman work with two orders with zig-zag decoration on the arch and an outermost order of trapeze, believed to be unique in the country. This doorway was re-set during the 19th century re-building which preserved the original Norman piers and plain capitals within. The segmental arches of the three-bay arcade have been rebuilt in the 19th century with double chamfer. The responds (or half-columns at each end of the arcade) differ; the one to the east is original but the western one has been renewed at some stage in the late mediaeval times.
All the windows and the stone bell-cote are Victorian. The windows are a mixture of single or double lancets but the east window is much more elaborate echoing the early 14th century with shafts each side, ball-flower and cinquefoil tracery above the three cuspet lancets, the centre one being the tallest. The roof is supported by fine foliated corbels, the ones to east being angels on a larger scale. Clearly they do not fit the arcade on the north side!

The floors are of 19th century tiles of good quality, those within the sanctuary being more elaborate. The glass is also of good quality. The east window is by Ward & Hughes, but probably designed by William Forsyth in 1872. It shows the Good Shepherd, Christ blessing the children and in the centre the Ascension. The window to the south of the sanctuary, St Mary the Virgin, is by an unknown artist, but may also be by Ward & Hughes. The north aisle east window is by Herbert W Bryans and shows St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist. It was donated in memory of the Revd John Herbert Lee Booker in 1905. You can see the Bryans signature of a running greyhound in the bottom right-hand corner. The glass in the War Memorial window of 1920 on the north wall shows a knight kneeling before the altar. It is by John Hardman’s factory in Birmingham. The remaining windows are plain.

The font is by William Forsyth showing various well carved Biblical scenes – ‘The Baptism of Christ’, ‘The Baptism of the Euruch’, ‘Christ Blessing Little Children’ and ‘The Presentation in the Temple’. On the narrow edges are carved lilies, both open and in bud. The columns supporting the central stem are carved with foliated capitals. Originally there were to be two scenes, the total cost of the font being £40; somewhat later it was decided to carve all four sides for an additional £20.

The wooden seating is from the 1872 restoration but the reading desk and stall date only from 1963 in memory of the Revd Ernest A Bevan, and given by his widow. It is by Pancheri & Son of Bromsgrove, but similar schemes before the Second World War were not proceeded with due to hostilities. The reredos and panelling each side are also by Pancheri but the high quality alter rails with pierced gothic tracery and the communion table date from 1938 in memory of Constance Kate and Katherine Egerton Lee Booker. Also in 1938 the old heating system was replaced by the present radiators and a coal-fired boiler. This boiler gave trouble in the 1950’s and was replaced in 1956. There is a splendid chest, studded and panelled with the usual three locks (one for the vicar and one for each of the chapel-wardens). On the south wall near the door is a large map showing the ownership of the land within the parish for the purposes of calculating church rates. From the rent charge tithe awards, 1841, still kept in the parish, it would seem that the largest landowner was George Penrice with 217 acres. Mary Wakeman with 169 acres, Thomas Wilson with 140 acres and Richard Williams with 132 acres were others. Lord Shrewsbury had only 100 acres, but he held much more at Upton Warren. The rates were based on ‘1d. For each Mich Cow, 4d. for every Calf, 1d. for every Lamb scarred, 1d. every fleece, 8d. for every hogshead of cider or perry’.
The purshall Chapel. In the north-east corner of the church is preserved the old altar rails which had been kept in the attic at Purshall Hall since 1643. At this date, the ordinance of the Lords and Commons (not an Act of Parliament as Charles I refused to sign them) was passed ordering all churchwardens and priests to remove the altars and rails and lower the floors of the sanctuaries. The chapel warden of the time was Edmund Purshall and it was he who stored this valuable item of furniture for the future use. Used they were anyway during the time of persecution of the Roman Catholics and it is known that the priest, John Bayham, used them secretly until he retired in 1750. The altar and rails were presented to the church in 1946 by Mr Norman Tailby who had bought the Hall. They were re-dedicated by Dr Cash, Bishop of Worcester in 1952, having been repaired by Mr Pancheri. The rails are of interest as they are pierced balusters, not the usual turned ones. Similar rails can be seen in Castlemorton Church.

Charities. There is clearly painted board on the north wall showing the charities; so many of these in other churches are in poor condition and are hidden away. The Dannet family gave £4 per annum for repairs to the church, Edward Brod of Stone gave 3/4d to the poor, Mr Fouch Bourne gave 40/0d to the poor and William Norris who in 1702 erected a charity school at Cutnall Green in Elmley Lovett Parish to enable 15 poor children to read, write and cast accounts. £11 per annum extra was allowed for. Additionally there is a framed photocopy of a deed dated 1734 relating to a bequest of £55 from Sarah Penrice chargeable to Gately Farm in the parish.

Monuments. These are few, but of considerable interest. Near the Purshall Altar is a wall tablet to the above mentioned Edmund Purshall who was 96 when he died in 1685. The Purshall arms are above the frame which is supported by garlands and the tablet curves down via a pair of graceful volutes to end in a wreathed skull with bat’s wings. The latter was a common sign of death.

On the south wall is a brass plate to John Dannet of Elmbridge Hall, 1752, his wife and children. His brother-in-law, Edward Bookey who died in 1774 seems to have been a wine merchant and was ‘buried in a cave near this place’, presumably the vault underneath the Sanctuary – it is inscribed so on the step. Not surprisingly there are two monuments to earlier members of the Danner family in Dodderhill church.

Also on the south wall is an elaborate tablet to members of the Penrice family, George and his wife Sophia (died 1820 and 1834), and their four sons George (1860), John (1827), Henri Couchman (1820) and Edward (1878). The style is clearly high Victorian and it is known to have been carved by William Forsyth in 1782. There is a much earlier Penrice monument in Dodderhill church. (Notes: There is a splendid chest tomb in Dodderhill churchyard to representatives of most of the above families – Edward Penrice 1808, Ann Dannet 1788 and Edward Bookey Penrice 1841).
The Organ was installed in 1956 by the wife of the Vicar, Revd W.P Hughes. It came from Mr Snell of Kidderminster at a price of £450. It was re-built by Mr Trevor Tipple in 1990 at a cost of £8,100.

The Bells. There are two of them, one inscribed ‘W B 1750’ indicating that it was cast by William Brooke of Bromsgrove. The other bell has no inscription.

THE OLD CHURCH.

The 1676 Inspection, ordered by Bishop Blandford shortly before his death, found that ‘The Chappell and Chancell out of repair, not kept cleanly & decent, the windows much broken, no byer (bier), no ersecloth (hearse cloth or covering), no book of homilies, no Communion Carpet, no table of degrees of marriage. The fence round the chapel-yard much decayed’. Clearly much needed to be done, though several presentments by chapelwardens seemed to indicate that the church was in good repair! In 1684 inspection, it stated ‘Belonging to Dodderhill. The Curate hath £10 per annum and the bottoms of the seats want bricking. Presumably the floor beneath the seats was loose and decayed. The Curate mentioned, Edward Phillipps succeed his father as Vicar of Dodderhill the next year.

We are fortunate in that Peter Prattinton, who toured the length and breadth of Worcestershire in the early 19th century, left us with a full description and sketch of the church; the latter is framed on the west wall. From this sketch, dated 1828, it would appear that the general shape of the church is much the same today, but all details differ. There was an attractive wooden bell-turret with a ball-finial over the west gable of the north aisle and heavy buttresses especially to the east, probably correcting some movement long ago. Several windows were without any tracery. They were apparently fitted with cast iron frames, quite normal in those times. There was a blocked window to the north-east of the aisle and further west, near the bell-turret, a blocked doorway.

Within, according to Prattinton’s account, the ceiling was plastered and covered, but the floors had been recently re-tiled. Several dormer windows had lately been removed, only one still remaining, to the south-east to light the gallery. St Andrew’s church in Droitwich still has some dormer windows and a plastered ceiling. The pulpit and nearby reading desk seem to have occupied the same relative positions as today, and they, together with the Communion rails, table and chest had lately been re-painted to resemble veined oak! There were two aumbries (or recesses in the wall as cupboards) each side of the Communion table and on the other side of the rails (presumably the congregation side) several forms for the Sunday school children. The above mentioned gallery was erected by Mr Norris for his schoolboys.

The nave and north aisle were separated, as today, by three semi-circular arched arcades. The respond seems not to have been restored. The font, probably of Norman origin (..as large as a
brewery furnace, according to an old man he met) had lately been discarded and replaced by a wooden post hollowed out to receive a pewter bowl. The latter item would be very rare today. The ancient south doorway was protected by a stone porch; he accurately describes the outer order (the trapeze) as ‘several fluted cones’, perhaps more accurately.

**Restoration and Re-building.** In the vestry minutes for December 13th 1850, we find that a petition has been requested to the Ordinary (i.e. Bishop) to ‘...rebuild a portion of the said chapel and take down the present vestry.’ The west end seems to have caused them some concern and we can conclude that perhaps beneath the wooden north-west bell-turret, there was a vestry. Mr John Smith of Westacre, Droitwich was consulted and he advised that ‘...the west end of the Chapel be taken down and rebuilt.’ By 1870-72, the church seems to have become in such a bad state that nothing less than a complete rebuilding would be necessary. It is believed that John Smith may have been responsible for a considerable amount of the design especially the windows and the font. Forsyth charged £110 for the east window, £84.9s.11d for the work on the stone pulpit (with carvings of the Evangelists) and lectern (both replaced), £75 for the marble reredos with an alabaster cross and marble inlays, columns and carving (also replaced), £60 for the Penrice tablet, £20 for the altar rail with wrought iron stand (replaced) and £5 for the angels supporting the roof. Much of this was paid for by the local landowners including Revd John Amphlett (£94). More work was carried out in 1874 at a cost of £60 including painting of the interior, lining, painting texts and ribbons, vine trails etc, now all gone.

From the Bishop’s survey of 1922-1928, we learn that a tortoise stove and an Alexandre harmonium were in use, now both gone.

**HISTORICAL ITEMS.**

For most of its history, the church was a chapelry of St Augustine’s, Dodderhill. The latter parish has since been sub-divided into Elmbridge and Wychbold, the latter having a new church in 1889. The fact that it was a chapelry was an inconvenience. A petition from the Vicar, Edward Phillips, Mr Dannet, Mr Broad, Conveys Purshall and the Chapel warden Phillip Hanbury in 1686 to the Bishop asked if they could allow burials in their churchyard and not to have to convey bodies to Doderhill ‘...a great way distant Elmbridhe Chappel by reason of which distance and the badness of the ways and weather, often body’s have been kept beyond our time, very few or none have ventur’d to accompany ye-corps to ye grave.... The precedent had been set as Edmund Purshall (according to his tablet) ‘...being ye first ye that was interred in this church, at least for many years...’ was buried in 1685. This was part of the legacy of a long standing dispute resolved in 1637 to the effect that Elmbridge was a Chapelry of Dodderhill. The churchyard was in any case enlarged twice. First in 1883 when the Guardians of the Poor of Droitwich Union under the authority of the Consecration of Churchyard Act of 1867 and the School Sites Acts of 1841 and 1849. The Droitwich Union seems to have owned the land and before the extension way ready, several poor cottages on the site were demolished. These were, according to Prattinton ‘...miserable hovels (which were called Poor houses)... One
was propped up and the Parish Clerk whose wife was paralysed and bedridden, lived in one. It was enlarged again in 1948, 600 sq.yds were donated by Margaret A Booker of the Manor House.

Matters were not improved in 1872 when the church authorities, seeking better facilities now their church was being rebuilt, sent a memorial to the Bishop ‘...the Vicar of Dodderhill has had no fixed curate and services have been performed morning or afternoon without prior notice (and thus annoying and inconvenience). In six months Holy Communion has been administered only once. No visitors to the sick or poor and not for many years has the Vicar visited the Sunday School or even encouraged it, and no clergyman for six months anyway....spiritually destitute...’ This was cleared up by February 7th 1877 as then an Order in Council separated Elmbridge from Dodderhill and constituted a perpetual curacy.

The Second World War had one effect on Elmbridge Church. In November 1940, the PCC did not think it necessary to take out stained glass windows as they considered the risk of an air attack minimal. Only a few weeks later the Revd Sterry Cooper reported that on November 30th 1940, two 500lb bombs were dropped, one exploding immediately, the other with a deadly delayed action fuse, exploded exactly 12 hours later. There were no human or animal casualties and very little damage to property. However, some months later, it was discovered that the blast had loosened masonry on the bell-cote, and the War Damage Commission paid £28 towards repairs.

Since separating from Dodderhill, Elmbridge Church has joined with Rushock and in 1975 with Elmley Lovett and Hampton Lovett to form the Four Square Group of Parishes.

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