

A Brief History of The Church of St Lawrence



Location

The Church of St Lawrence stands within an extensive churchyard at the high point on the south side of the village of Lydeard St Lawrence. The first indication of there being a church in the parish was in about 854 when the parish was given to the Bishop of Winchester by Aethwulf, King of the West Saxons. In 1127, William Gifford, Bishop of Winchester and founder of Taunton Priory, gave the church to the Priory. By 1151 the church was a fully-fledged benefice with tithes.

The present church building is believed to be the third on the present site, the first being a Saxon church which later gave way to a Norman one which, in turn, gave way to the present building. It is of traditional design with a Somerset tower built of local red stone.

The village of Lydeard St Lawrence is a large rural village covering about 3 square miles, lying among the lanes south of the Minehead road. The parish includes the surrounding hamlets of Westowe, Pyleigh, West Leigh and Chapel Leigh.

History of the Building

The Chancel belongs to the Decorated period (1300s) and the Nave, tower and North aisle to the Perpendicular style (1400s). Two bells were hung in 1524, and a third in 1548. In 1783 a new tenor bell was purchased and, in 1785, a fifth bell was installed.

The weathercock dates from about 1500. Some 200 years later, the first clock was put into the tower. A new clock was purchased in 1790, and the weights used by the present (faceless) clock are from this one. These weights have now been replaced with

an electric mechanism, and the handsome casing made by Paul Yeomans who lives in the village.

In 1795 the church paid for two men to serve in the Navy.

The year 1870 saw a great restoration of the church. The richly-carved 14th Century oak barrel roof had to be completely renewed, and the stone tracery of the windows in the North aisle was renewed in identical form. The old square box pews were replaced and the usable wood went into the making of the present pews.

The walls were plastered with a thick layer of lime mortar which apparently covers many old memorials to Lydeard St Lawrence families, including the Venns, the Malets, the Sydenhams, the Hancocks and the Sellecks.

The oak communion table was renewed and has subsequently been renewed again – the 19th Century communion table now being housed under the tower. The restoration cost £1,575.

In 1880, new roofs were placed on the two porches, and the two bells were re-cast. All five bells were re-hung at a cost of £332. 17s. 4d.

In January 1980 the PCC embarked on the sizeable project of having the whole of the outside of the tower repaired and re-pointed.

The Bells

In 1980 following the tower repair and repointing project, the interior of the bell tower was renovated, and a new bell-frame installed with the existing five bells retuned, and a sixth treble bell added. This work was completed in 1983.

Also in 1980 the existing five bells were augmented to make a ring of six bells and the old wooden frame and bearings were replaced. The wheel and clapper, which can be seen on the interior church wall, are from this period of restoration.

In 2004 the existing ring of six bells had two additional bells installed, making a ring of eight bells in the key of F.

In 2006 another bell was added to allow the following choices: ring of eight bells in the key of F, plus the use of the back six, and also a light ring of six bells in the key of G. There are only about eight towers in the world that have this option.

The oldest bell is the fifth, which was cast and hung in 1717, the next oldest is the tenor, cast in 1785.

The tower has an active band of bell ringers who ring regularly for church services and special occasions.

The North Aisle

Entry is by the original 15th Century oak door. The North aisle was added in about 1500. There was a window in the West (rear) wall, but this was blocked up in 1771 so that Fives could be played against the wall outside.

Looking at the arches, the Western-most capital is carved with a design often found in pub names, a fox and goose. Next, four heads thought to be Henry VII (reigned 1485-1509), Margaret Beaufort (his mother), the Bishop of Winchester (the figure facing the door, with the Winchester coat of arms) and an unidentified face. Bishop Fox became the Bishop of Winchester in 1500, so perhaps the fox is a play on his name. The next pillars are carved with an ivy design, and a Celtic triple plait.

The Nave

Built about 1450, the South porch door is contemporary. On either side of the cross-aisle can be seen linen-fold panelling and mediaeval carving. The pew ends on either side of the Nave are early 16th Century.

By the window nearest the screen is a piscina, where the communion vessels were washed. This is all that remains of a chantry chapel, dedicated to St Lawrence.

The wooden eagle lectern was presented by Sir Joseph Trutch, a former Governor of British Columbia.

The Pulpit: the lower two sections of the Jacobean pulpit were removed (thought to have been made into a dining table), and the top portion set on its existing stone base.

The squint, cut through the wall beside the pulpit, enables the Communion Table to be seen from the North aisle.



The picture shows the south wall clear-glazed window allowing in natural light, and reminding the congregation of the world for which they pray and the beauty of the countryside in which this church is set. Photograph courtesy of Adrian Smith, taken on the Third Sunday before Advent, 6th November 2016.

The Chapel

Traditionally referred to as 'The Lady Chapel', the screen dates from about 1500 and once supported the 'rood loft' or walkway, which enabled someone to attend to the light which was kept burning before the rood or cross which was positioned there.

On the inner face of the screen can be seen part of the Letter to the Romans, chapter 13 verse 13: 'let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy.' On the Nave side of the screen, the coats of arms date from about 1620, and are those of Queen Anne of Denmark and her son, the Prince of Wales, the future King Charles 1.

The archway from the Chapel into the Chancel (where the organ now stands) is a fine one. The demi-angels holding scrolls as the capitals of this arch have had their faces mutilated.

The Chancel

This was built about 1350. The small two-light window in the North wall contains fragments of 15th Century glass. Inside the altar rail can be seen a piscina and stone seats.

The Font: notice the upside-down font. The story behind this is that a baby named John Venn was Baptised in it. He grew up to be a notorious Roundhead, and was one of those who signed the death warrant of King Charles I. The parishioners were so disgusted, that they up-ended the font so that their children should not be Baptised in it! The nearby window may date from the previous church (c. 1280).



A view of the interior looking East, including the Rood Screen and the Pulpit.



The Pulpit is considered to be Jacobean

Today

Re-wiring of the church was undertaken in 2004, and re-decoration re-carpeting of the interior in 2010. The interior has recently been redecorated and re-carpeted. In 2013 the sound system was updated, and comfortable pew cushions provided.

A children's corner is also available, with books, soft toys and art materials to occupy energetic and enthusiastic children.

The thriving village school is not a Church school, but the Church maintains good links with the school through Good Work Assemblies at the end of each term, a Harvest service and a Christingle service to which parents and governors are invited.

The story of St Lawrence (or Laurence)

He was one of the seven deacons of Rome and, like the original seven appointed with Stephen, had responsibility for the administration of the church. Despite having no legal standing, the huge church of Rome had in fact accumulated a large amount of property and a fund out of which were maintained widows and orphans, girls vowed to virginity and a wider circle of poor and needy persons. The Roman State had no system of social security and the church's pioneer work in bringing organised relief to those whom society ignored, was one of the things which impressed and moved converts. When the Bishop of Rome was martyred, Lawrence is said to have cried out, 'Father, where shall the bishop go without his faithful deacon?' The Bishop replied, 'In two days, you shall follow me', and so it proved, for the deacon was in turn arrested.

It was intimated to Lawrence that his life would be spared if he surrendered to the Prefect of the City, the church funds of which he was the administrator. Lawrence asked for time to collect the money and spent the night distributing the funds to the poor, asking each recipient to be present in the forum the next morning. When the Prefect asked where the treasure of the Church was, Lawrence gestured towards the great crowd of paupers and exclaimed, 'There is the treasure of the Church, the poor whom she loves and feeds in the name of Christ'.

Refusing to accept that this was more than a subterfuge, the Prefect had Lawrence tortured to exact from him the real hiding place of the missing funds. Traditionally, Lawrence suffered by being roasted on a gridiron – which is his emblem in art – and his last words were said to be, 'You can turn me over now. This side is done.'

Lawrence's Feast Day, which we celebrate, is the 10th August. He was martyred in 238AD.

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