

# **The Church of St. John the Baptist Wasperton**



**Guide to the Church**

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## THE VILLAGE

Wasperton Village was built on the site of a very ancient settlement dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, which was the subject of a recent major archaeological excavation. A book has since been published, 'WASPERTON a Roman, British and Anglo-Saxon Community in Central England' by Martin Carver, Catherine Hills and Jonathan Scheschkewitz, giving full details of the dig and its findings. An extract from this book states:

'Here there were people who were culturally Roman, British and Anglo-Saxon, pagan and Christian in continuous use of the same graveyard and drawing on common inheritance. Here we see the beginnings of England and the people who made it happen - not the kings, warriors and preachers, but the ordinary folk obliged to make their own choices: choices about what nation to build and what religion to follow.'

Wasperton was in 'The Domesday Book' and has changed little in size from then until today, with a minimum population of 90 and a maximum of 292; indeed, although the buildings are much changed, the village footprint has altered little since a village map was produced for the then owner in 1686. A history of the village, entitled 'Wasperton Chronicle' has been written by a former resident, Victor Oubridge. Both this and the book mentioned above are available from the Public Library.

Having been, since Anglo-Saxon times, mainly under the auspices of the monks of Coventry, it passed through a number of private landlords, until bequeathed by the last one in 1755, Dr Richard Rawlinson, a Jacobite, to St John's College, Oxford, where he was a Don. He was also a 'non juring bishop' which signified that, although an ordained Anglican priest (and bishop), he refused to swear allegiance to the Hanoverian Monarchy.

St John's College still own some land and farms in the village to this day. There has never been a resident lord of the manor which was probably why the vicar for nearly fifty years (1834-83), the Reverend Thomas Leveson Lane, took it upon himself to rebuild the church. The village was largely populated by farmers and their employees.

## THE CHURCH

The Church of St John the Baptist at Wasperton, and its predecessors on the same site, have been visible symbols of community life in this quiet corner of Warwickshire for many centuries and, inevitably, the present building has drawn to itself, and reflects today much of the history of an ancient parish and its residents. The Church is not, however, on the same site as the ancient graveyard mentioned above.

Although there are remnants of previous structures, what Pevsner describes as 'characteristically tooled walls', the main structure of the present building is no older than 1822 but a church has stood here at Wasperton from at least as far back as 1279, when the Manor of Wasperton and the Lordship of Heathcote belonged to the Benedictine Monastery at Coventry; some 180 acres to the east excepted, which belonged to Thelsford Friary, dedicated to the Order of the Holy Trinity for the Redemption of Captives. Then a building here was a chapel of Hampton Episcopi (now Hampton Lucy), and the first recorded Vicar of Wasperton was Geoffrey de Hulle, who was inducted on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September of that year.

The earliest representation of Wasperton Church is on the estate map mentioned above of 1686 which shows on the present site, a chancel and a nave with a bell tower at the west end. This is similar to a drawing from the Aylesford Collection showing the church in 1820 with the nave which was rebuilt in 1736 and what looks like a late medieval mullioned Gothic window in the chancel. There is a small turret superimposed at the west end.

Prior to 1736, the Church had fallen into disrepair and probably the nave only was rebuilt in rectangular form. The entrance to the nave of the new building was at the west end. Inside there was a gallery with two rows of seats over the west entrance.

As one approaches the Church by the pathway from the road, one can see that the sandstone of the chancel and of the nave have different finishes. According to Pevsner, Sir George Gilbert Scott, the architect, retained at least part of the walls of the 1736 church, altering them to accommodate the 14<sup>th</sup> century style windows we see today. However, mindful of the 1820 drawing showing a late medieval chancel it seems likely that the outer walls of that part of

the Church were completely replaced. The demolition of the chancel and restructuring of the nave took place around 1838. The south aisle was the last part to be completed probably in 1843.

The bell turret over the nave contains two bells, one attributed to Henry Bagley of 1683 which perhaps once hung in that early bell tower. The other bell is dated 1817.

Behind the Church, in the 1820 drawing, can be seen a cottage which was probably the vicarage house of the time. It was appropriately described by the surveyor John Nichols in 1822 as 'very small and mean and not fit for the accommodation of a family'. However, sometime previously a much more substantial vicarage stood there, as evidenced by a Terrier of 1585 as well as a sketch on the estate map of 1686. By 1838, the cottage had been replaced by the building now known as 'Cedar House', which can be seen just to the west of the Church, and which remained the vicarage until sold in 1939.



*Wasperton Church about 1820. Reproduced by courtesy of Birmingham Public Libraries Local Studies Department (Aylesford Collection)*

As mentioned above, the rebuilding of the Church was commissioned and paid for by Thomas Leveson Lane at a cost of about £3,000, to the plans of Sir George Gilbert Scott, one of his earlier church designs. Significantly, immediately prior to his Wasperton commission, Scott had designed the Martyrs' Memorial in St John's College, Oxford, which happened to own most of the village. Lane also paid for the Vicarage, the school (now village hall) and the two cottages next to it, all at his own personal expense. Lane was inclined to support the growing tendency to high Anglicanism, led by the Oxford Movement, perhaps a tradition to which Dr Richard Rawlinson would have subscribed, and this is reflected in the interior of the Church, details of which follow.

The church, as we see it today must be a rare example of co-operation between, arguably, the two greatest exponents of the Victorian Gothic revival; Scott, designer of the Albert Memorial, St Pancras Station and Hotel, the Foreign and Colonial Office, Edinburgh Episcopal Cathedral and numerous other architectural and restorative works on cathedrals and lesser buildings. The other was designer of two of the windows, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, who was the designer of most of the interior of the Palace of Westminster and much of the exterior and more locally, St Chad's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Birmingham, as well as many stained glass windows and whose influence in this regard was enormous and extended to John Ruskin and William Morris. We are fortunate, in this little village church to have the work of two such significant figures of their time. Sadly, Pugin was dead by 1853 so any further collaboration with Scott must have been very limited.

## THE NAVE

The entrance to the Church is through a pine porch on the north wall, the windows of which contain some 16<sup>th</sup> century glass of yellow foliated design.

Inside the Church itself the attractive roof beams of the nave and the fine carved oak roodscreen are particularly noticeable, as is the general 14<sup>th</sup> century style of architecture adopted by Gilbert Scott, himself a great promoter of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic revival. The actual introduction of a roodscreen into the Church, is, itself, an indication of Lane's Catholic inclination, as so many were destroyed or modified at the Reformation. The corbels supporting the roof are of angels, except for the pair at the east end, carved in the shape of a bearded man's face on the south wall, opposite a woman's face on the north wall. Sadly, we do not know the significance of these faces or who they might represent. All the fittings in the Church are of oak.

Immediately to the left of the door, the list of Vicars of Wasperton, beginning in 1279 (although some of the later dates are suspect), proclaim the unbroken history of the benefice for nearly 750 years. Next to this is an interesting brass eulogising one 'Honest Henry Collins', who died on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1664. Although his burial on the following day is duly recorded in the church register, nothing more, unfortunately, is known of him or his family.

Next to Henry Collins' brass, we come to the memorial tablet to the Rev Gilbert Filkin. He was vicar of Wasperton from 1786 to 1791. He was also Assistant Curate and schoolmaster of the Grammar School at Hampton Lucy.

The next plaque commemorates the Rev Thomas Welch and his wife Anne. Thomas Welch was the Vicar of the nearby parish of Moreton Morrell but from 1774 he lived at Wasperton House and also became a Curate at Wasperton. The Rev John Morley, the Curate at Hampton Lucy, tells in his diary how Welch and John Lucy, later to become Rector of Hampton Lucy, quarrelled in the Talbot Hotel at Wellesbourne, Welch giving Lucy a black eye! Morley does not disclose the cause of the quarrel but it was apparently patched up a few days later. Morley subsequently became Vicar of Wasperton.

Before leaving the north side of the nave for the chancel, the pulpit is of particular interest. Elaborately carved, it incorporates five Flemish panels, c.1600. The subjects are 1) Hagar and Ishmael; 2) Jacob wrestling with the Angel; 3) Baptism of Our Lord; 4) Adam and Eve in the Garden; 5) Abraham offering up Isaac. The oak lectern has carved lion emblems and figures of the four evangelists at its base. The pulpit itself is 19<sup>th</sup> century.

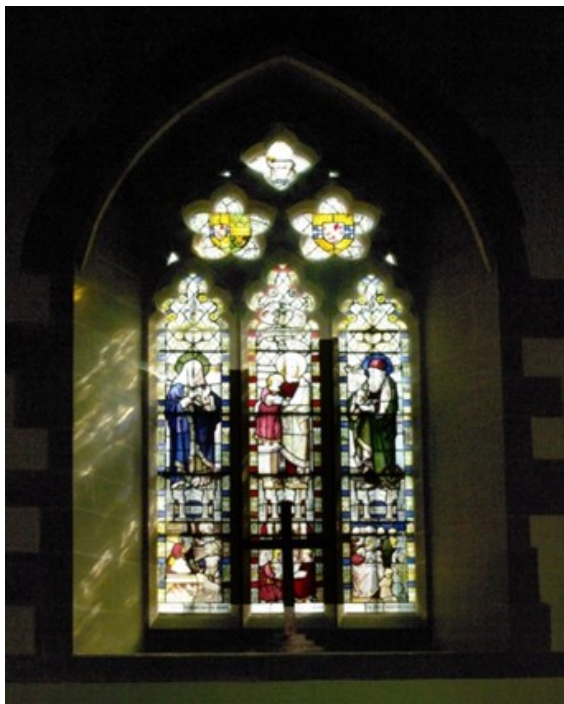
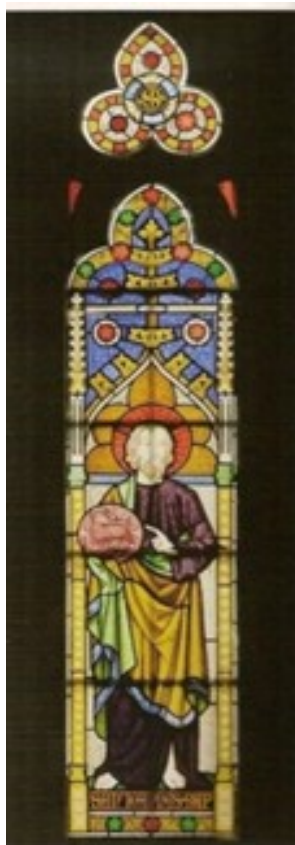
Interestingly, the chancel is very slightly out of line with the nave. It was the practice in some medieval churches to do this as a reminder of Christ's head lolling to one side on the Cross. It seems unlikely that the original Church was built like this, being a mere chapel type of structure, so one must assume that Gilbert Scott was responsible, in line with what he saw as appropriate for the Gothic revival. Before entering the chancel, it is worth noting that, at this stage of his career, according to the Victorian Society on a recent visit, Scott was very much influenced by Pugin, and, in a write-up on the church, the chancel was described as 'Puginian' in design.



***Pugin east window***



***Pugin window  
south aisle***



***Thomas Garner window  
east end south aisle***

## THE CHANCEL

Passing through the splendid carved oak rood screen, dated 1845, one should pause to examine the rather beautiful carving on the right hand door of the screen. It appears to be a representation of St John the Baptist, carrying a lamb and staff as also depicted in the Pugin window in the south aisle. Take a moment to see the faces carved on the lecterns behind the doors; on the north side, the two heads appear to be those of a king and a bishop, while on the south they resemble, possibly another cleric and maybe a green man - his head is covered with acorns!

Into the chancel itself, we can see, above the choir stalls on the left, a memorial tablet to Anne Morley, the daughter of the previously mentioned Rev John Morley, who was Vicar from 1791 to 1814. He lived at Hampton Lucy, where he was, like Gilbert Filkins before him, also Curate and schoolmaster.

The large stone figure of St Cecilia over the archway beyond the choir stalls reminds us that this was once the location of a pipe organ until, infested with woodworm, it had to be removed in 1959. The organ recess now serves as a vestry. Small carved angels and floral carvings serve as corbels within the chancel as in the nave.

The communion rails dividing the chancel from the sanctuary are particularly fine. They are of wrought iron and of late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century origin. They may have been in the previous Church of 1736.

In the sanctuary itself, to the left, can be seen the brass memorial to Thomas Leveson Lane, the builder of the Church. Although pastor of the parish for nearly 50 years, he was attacked by some for his supposed Roman Catholic leanings, of which, as has already been said, some evidence exists in the Church. Particularly noticeable is the bright blue starlit sanctuary ceiling, very much the fashion at the time and reminiscent of many medieval churches. The tiles on the altar front and floor are Minton, again a very much Puginian feature. Lane's alleged sympathy with the 'Puseyites' was strongly condemned in the *Warwick Advertiser* of January 1845. Pusey was one of the founders of the Oxford movement. Lane's use of A.W. N. Pugin for two of the windows in the Church was also in accordance with High Anglican leanings; Pugin was, in fact, a Roman Catholic.

It should be remembered that this was the time when John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman led a Roman Catholic Revival in England, himself a convert from the Anglican communion and the Oxford Movement.

Also of note in the chancel, on the north side, as typical of Gothic churches, are the sedilia and lavabo.

It is worth noting that at this time, Lane was accused of refusing, on New Years Day, 1845, to read the burial service over a woman named Bradshaw from the house now known as The Elms, then Bradshaws Farm. Although her grave had already been dug, he refused on the grounds that, as a Unitarian, she hadn't been baptised according to the rites of the Church of England.

Whatever the truth of this matter, it is known that Lane had a curate named Alfred Drayman, who came to Wasperton in 1845 and who, a few years later, had his licence revoked by the Bishop of Worcester. Wasperton was then in that diocese. This revocation was confirmed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This was for preaching a sermon of which, according to the Archbishop, 'the whole tone and spirit were so thoroughly Romish that no sophistry could persuade me that it could be consistently preached by a Minister of the Church of England'

Leveson Lane's incumbency at Wasperton coincided with the period of the parish's greatest prosperity, the population reaching its highest figure of 292. Lane eventually died suddenly of a heart attack at his vicarage in 1883 at the age of 81.

Continuing the tour of the Church, the stained glass of the east window was executed by J. Hardman of Birmingham to a design by Pugin (see page 8). The Church possesses a book of his work which is kept on show and in which his two windows in Wasperton Church are illustrated. Sir George Gilbert Scott was a great admirer of Pugin's work. The window depicts 1) 'The preaching of St John the Baptist' 2) 'The death of St John the Baptist' 3) 'The Baptism of Our Lord by St John'. Pugin's sketches were known to have been made at the vicarage and preserved for some time in the Church, but their eventual fate is not known. The Minton tiles on the altar front and sanctuary floor were intended to be a match for the window.

Before leaving the chancel, one may notice two other memorials to Vicars of Wasperton on the south wall. George Hancox followed John Morley. Before leaving the chancel, one may notice two other memorials to Vicars of Wasperton on the south wall. George Hancox followed John Morley and was Vicar from 1814 to 1821. He was also assistant Curate at Hampton Lucy where he lived, like John Morley, at the dispensation of the Bishop, On account of the unfitness of the then Vicarage House at Wasperton'. Hancox's memorial plaque, along with several others must have been brought from the previous Church.

The brass memorial below that of Hancox is for Rev Gray Granville who was Vicar just prior to the First World War from 1900 to 1913.

## **SOUTH NAVE WALL AND SOUTH AISLE**

Back in the nave we may notice, behind the carved oak lectern, a brass memorial to Ellen Gill, installed by Leveson Lane to commemorate a loyal family servant, probably his housekeeper, who died in 1858.

On the short south wall are two similar tablets. One is to Mary Steward and the other to the Holdens. Sometime before 1826, Mary Holden had married Henry Edward Steward who became a Curate at Wasperton in 1822. Shortly after her marriage, Mary's father, Hyla Holden, who was a Deputy Lieutenant of Warwickshire and a Justice of the Peace, with her mother, Rebecca Holden, came to live at Wasperton. But the Stewards left Wasperton in 1833, the year before Mary died, and the upper tablet was erected to her memory, presumably by her parents.

The window in the east wall of the aisle is a memorial to the Stewards erected by their children, perhaps as their contribution to the new Church. The subjects are 'Joseph', 'The Blessed Virgin Mary' and 'Our Saviour with a little child'. The coat of arms to the right is interesting for it is the same as that of the Stewart family of Suffolk who were connected with the Scottish Royal House of Stewart, including the Earls of Murray. The window is to a design by Thomas Garner, another Victorian Gothic Revivalist and pupil of Scott. He was born in Wasperton, his father's tomb is on the left of the church porch; he was born at Wasperton Hill, a farm on the north side of the A429. He was probably a friend of the Steward family.

To the left of the window can be seen another brass memorial to Thomas Bradbury of Handsworth who died in 1822. The burial of Thomas at the age of 16 is recorded in the Church register but the name of Bradbury is otherwise unknown in the parish during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as is the story behind this memorial.

Below the aisle window on the east wall may be seen the 17<sup>th</sup> century oak framed parish chest with strap hinges and lock plates.

On the south wall of the aisle are the memorial tablets and the Rolls of Honour of those who lost their lives serving in both world wars.

Further along are a photograph and a small plaque presented by the Officers and Crew of the minesweeper, H.M.S Wasperton which has now been de-commissioned. On the south wall opposite the entrance door is the other Pugin window, representing St John the Baptist, also executed by Hardman and illustrated in the Pugin book in the Church.

## THE CHURCHYARD

Much of the history of Wasperton is carved upon the gravestones in the churchyard. The older stones are to the south of the Church and the two oldest of all in the angle of the chancel and south aisle. They mark the graves of Sarah Seeley, 1673 and John Seeley, 1685. The Seeleys of Heathcote Farm and their descendants, the Oldhams have lived in the parish until modern times and many are buried in the churchyard. The last to be buried here was Miss Mary Rosalind Oldham, who died in 1976 at the age of 92.

Besides the Oldhams several other farming families, whose names are inseparable from the history of the parish, are represented here. Chief among these are: the Bradshaws of Bradshaw's Farm from 1683 to 1820; the Archers of Manor Farm (now Manor House Farm) from 1762 to 1875 and the Garners of Wasperton Hill from 1803 to 1918.

There are some ancient box and yew trees in the churchyard and a number of pines.

## **GIFTS TO THE CHURCH**

From time to time the Church has received ancient plate and documents of historical interest. They include a silver gilt chalice and paten of 1571, but nothing is known of the donor; also a silver gilt flagon of 1753, given anonymously in 1758. There is besides, a silver gilt alms dish given by Thomas Leveson Lane in 1842. There is a further ornate silver gilt chalice believed to be of German origin and considerable age and a Sheffield plate paten whose donors remain anonymous.

The Church possesses a Bible of 1701, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Book of Homilies and a Prayer Book presented by Dr Richard Rawlinson, mentioned above, in 1742. Dr Rawlinson was a famous benefactor of the Bodleian Library as well as St John's College Oxford. He was Lord of the Manor of Wasperton when the Church was rebuilt in 1736 and in 1755 he bequeathed the Manor to St John's College. St John's College still owns most of the remaining farms within the parish, mainly on the other side of the A429 but very little within the village proper. The above books are kept in Warwick Record Office, together with the old Church Registers, which date back, almost unbroken, to 1538, the time of the Reformation.

The church has also received many gifts during the past century, including a silver chalice and paten in regular use. Some of these are recorded in the Gift Book which can be found, together with a Visitor's Book, just to the left of the doorway on leaving the Church.

## **WASPERTON VILLAGE HALL**

Originally built as the Village Schoolhouse in 1843, at the expense of Thomas Leveson Lane, Vicar from 1835 to 1883, the Hall was renovated fairly recently, providing an excellent community centre and has been the subject of continuous improvement ever since - on going. It still remains the property of the Diocese under the general supervision of the Church.

It is available for hire and committees are being set up to explore its potential.

David H Hunt  
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