



All Saints' Church Pitsford

A brief history and guide

by

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All Saints' Church, Pitsford



Little is known about the earliest days of the Church in Pitsford, or of the village itself before the Norman Conquest. Traces have been found of Roman and Dark Age settlements, notably the tumulus at the top of the village near the A508. The village is mentioned by name in the Domesday Book, as *Pitesford* and as *Pidesford*, referring probably to the ford between this village and Brixworth. Pitsford was inclosed with Boughton by Act of Parliament in 1756, under which the rectory was endowed with 195 acres of glebe land, sadly disposed of by later generations.

The site of the present church building can not be dated exactly, as there are no known records of its consecration, some time early in the 13th century, when the first Rector, Peter de Heresfield, was presented to the benefice by Godescall de Maghelin, who then held the advowson, or right of patronage. The first Rector took up office in 1218, and the present Rector is the 48th.

It is likely that before 1218 the spiritual needs of Pitsford were met by the churches already in existence at Brixworth and at Boughton. The monastic church at Brixworth dates back to the middle of the 7th century, while the church of S John the Baptist on Boughton Green was first constructed in Anglo-Saxon times. William the Conqueror gave Boughton to his niece, the Countess Judith, and one of her tenants was the Abbey of S Wandrille, near Bayeux, to which she left the village in her will.

It is possible that the Abbey may have been involved in founding the new church in Pitsford. The Pitsford font shows Norman or Breton influences in its design. Possibly the earliest fragment of this first church is to be seen in the South porch, over the magnificent mediaeval doorway. The tympanum is drawn on the front cover of this History. Neither the doorway nor the tympanum are in their original site, having been moved in 1867 when the church was greatly remodelled. Old photographs show the original porch with stone benches on either side, and some of the carved stonework in different positions. Fortunately the ancient wooden door was retained, with its early zoomorphic iron strapwork.

The age of the tympanum and what it actually depicts are the source of much speculation. It shows a figure, dressed in a kilted coat of mail, armed with a massive broadsword, in mortal combat with a great and snarling beast. Below the beast are two further creatures, in the likeness perhaps of dragons, and behind it appears a rather odd conical object, covered with horizontal rows of scales, which Pevsner curiously suggests is intended as a tree, although it has no branches.

Behind the warrior lies a pair of wings, fastened together, as if laid aside for the battle, suggesting that the warrior figure is an angel. Certainly the scene represents a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil, a warrior angel confronting a beast of mythical proportions. The carving belongs to a period after the Norman Conquest when Christian art in England was strongly influenced by the surrounding Anglo-Saxon and Viking civilisations, to which the Normans themselves belonged.

It is just possible that the tympanum may be a fragment of an earlier, pagan culture. Odd fragments of another building have been incorporated into the present church, notably in the Lady Chapel. It is more likely, however, that the tympanum depicts S. Michael the Archangel, locked in combat with the devil on a high place, represented by the tall conical object behind the beast. Legends of such a battle were widespread in Norman Europe, and anyone who has seen Le Mont Saint Michel in Normandy, or Saint Michael's Mount in Cornwall, will recognise the reference to the story.

An intriguing possibility is that the detached wings which lie behind the figure are intended as a representation of Revelation, Ch. 12, verse 14, where the Blessed Virgin Mary is *given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness*, as Saint Michael and his angels fight against the devil, who prepares to devour her Child as he is born.

The Church has been known at various times in its history as "S. Mary's, Pitsford" - and it might even have begun as "S. Michael and All Angels" if this interpretation of the tympanum is correct. The present dedication of "All Saints" has been established from surviving pre-Reformation wills, where the church is named in bequests. The Lady Chapel, also named, appears to have been a Chantry dedicated to S. Mary. It is almost certainly this that brought about later confusion as to the proper name of the church.

Almost as intriguing are the fragments of other buildings incorporated into the walls of the Church, especially in the Lady Chapel at the East end of the 14th century North aisle. These include a fine corbel, high up in the wall, in the shape of a bearded face blowing a great wind; and an intriguing fragment of reddened stone, apparently once part of an altar, now serving as a shelf to the left of the later, wooden altar.

The oldest part of the church which still stands on its original site is the tower, its walls immensely thick, as the recessed opening for the narrow window reveals. It contains several ancient bells, and one more modern acquisition, providing a ring of six.

The older bells include three made by James Keene, bellfounder of Woodstock, one with the inscription *SYM ROSA POLSATA MONDE MARIA VOGATA* (When I am rung I am called Mary, the Rose of the world). This bell and one other (*GOD SAVE THE KING*) with Keene's initials bear the date 1632. There are two further bells of 1683 (*GOD SAVE THE KING*) and 1698, the latter bearing the inscription *HENRICUS BAGLEY ME FECIT* (Henry Bagley made me).

The tower itself dates from the late 13th century, and is largely unchanged, with interesting and attractive stonework particularly to be seen on the outside. The floor has been re-laid, using memorial stones taken in 1867 from the old chancel; and a few memorials which apparently once were to be seen attached to the outer walls of the former chancel are now indoors, on the walls of the tower.

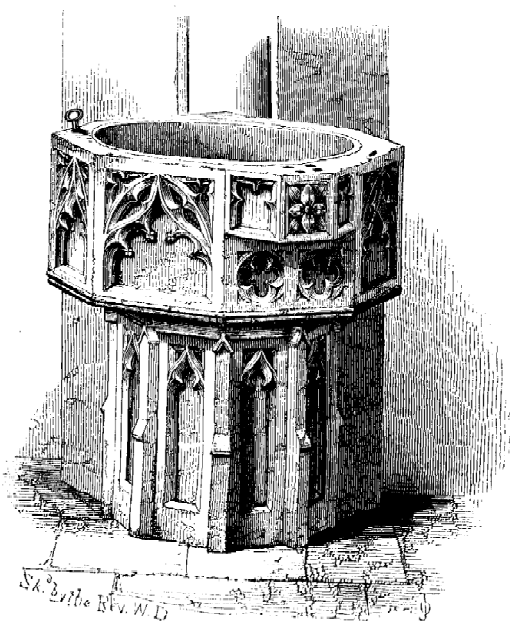
The North aisle is practically all else that survives of the mediaeval church. It ran parallel to the former nave and chancel, which together were of equal length with the North aisle. There was an opening from the old chancel into the East end of the North aisle, which thus formed a separate chapel. There is a piscina in the East wall, sadly restored in the 19th century without its tiny drain, needed to wash the sacred vessels after use at the nearby altar.

There is a mortuary arch in the North wall of the aisle, indicating that once the aisle may have been a chantry chapel for a benefactor, where a daily mass was once said for the soul of the departed founder laid to rest under the arch. There may once have been an effigy or slab covering the grave, now long-vanished.

The chapel serves nowadays as the Lady Chapel, and includes a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary given by the sisters of Holy Family Convent, housed in Pitsford Hall until 1989. The only original windows in the church are those in the North aisle, at its East and West ends. The East window has been handsomely reglazed in recent times in memory of a former church treasurer.

The original moulded string course survives and runs around the aisle, and there is a pointed North doorway facing the fields where much of mediaeval Pitsford once stood. In the East end of the aisle is to be found the vestry, incorporating the lower part of the 15th century rood screen, which separated the nave from the chancel in the mediaeval building.

THE FONT, which appears in F A Paley's work of 1844, *Illustrations of Baptismal Fonts*, is of great beauty and interest. It belongs to the Decorated period in the 14th century, and is remarkable for the stone projection on one of its eight sides, rare in this country, but not uncommon in Normandy and Brittany. The remaining seven sides traditionally represent the Seven Sacraments of the church, Baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation, Matrimony, Absolution, Holy Orders, and Anointing. The seven sides of this font bear canopied panels, which may once have borne depictions of the Sacraments.



*The font in 1844
depicted by F A Paley*

Paley depicts the font lacking a base, a deficiency remedied in the 19th century by the addition of a modern base platform of good and sympathetic design. The lead basin is intact and the tiny drain is still functional.

The plate (now held for security in a bank vault but in a more innocent age “in a wicker basket under the Rector’s bed”) consists of a handsome silver chalice and paten set of 1560, a paten of 1635, and a paten with a matching flagon given in 1870 by the Rector, the Reverend Granville Sykes Howard-Vyse, in memory of his late wife, Lily-Anne. The Rector lived at Boughton Hall, being a member of the Howard-Vyse family, which owned much of the two villages, and the right to appoint the Rector in both villages.

Granville also became Rector of Boughton, in the days when pluralism was still permitted. He employed assistant curates in Pitsford to maintain the spiritual life of the parish, and it is likely that during the half-century of his office the ancient Rectory at Pitsford, dating back in part to the 13th century, became dilapidated. When the Reverend John White was appointed Rector in 1892, the mediaeval house was demolished and he took out a mortgage to build the striking new house on the same site, where he himself continued for the next half-century, until his death in 1941. The house was sold by the Diocese of Peterborough in 1979 when Pitsford ceased to be a separate parish in its own right.

The registers of the parish, now held at the County Record Office at Wootton Hall, begin in 1560. The first volume contains all entries until 1723 (apart from some omissions). All other historic documents belonging to the church are now also held with the registers, for safety and for expert preservation. A wealth of history is to be found amongst these papers.

By the middle of the 19th century the church was in a very poor state of repair. Two early photographs of the interior show it to have been rather dark, cramped with tall pews, and the entrance to the rather mean chancel obscured by a large pulpit. The church was a sell, which had been severely mutilated, with window tracery cut out, a blocked doorway, the vestry a lean-to against the tower, and a low, flat roof placed over both nave and aisle, and the West gallery which then existed. Surviving photographs reveal the church as a jumble of various shapes and sizes. The decision was taken to improve matters.

In 1867 the church was substantially rebuilt, as were many churches during the last century. Such a radical alteration to the fabric of a mediaeval building would be unthinkable today, but to the practical mind of a generation which was busily restoring and building churches all over the country, to cope with the huge growth in population brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the wholesale rebuilding of impractical or decayed churches was thought to be necessary, even an improvement.

The former church at Pitsford was smaller than the present building, but even so when the national religious census was held on 30 March 1851 it held 115 in the morning and 164 at the afternoon service. The new church, designed for a growing village, would hold many more in the new, simple pews for which no charge was made to users. (In the past, pew rents formed a part of the Rector's income from his parish.) A board set up over the South door records a grant made for this purpose by the Incorporated Church Building Society, which continues to this day here and nationally to assist in the restoration and extension of parish churches.

In the new church, the chancel was greatly extended, with the high altar as the focal point of the principal service of Holy Communion, and provision was made for a choir, to sit in the chancel below the altar. The mediaeval rood screen which had previously cut off the chancel from the nave, obscuring the people's view of the altar, was not replaced in its original position. Those who take a close look at its panels, now part of the vestry, will see the holes cut by mediaeval villagers, to enable them to watch the service at the old high altar, especially the elevation of the consecrated elements.

Although to the modern mind the loss of so much of the mediaeval church is a great loss, it has to be remembered that the old building had become severely dilapidated. By contrast, the 1867 restoration has produced a church of great beauty, so much in keeping with what remains of the mediaeval past that visitors often do not realise quickly - if at all - that most of what they see was constructed last century.

The North aisle, which was retained and repaired, sets the pattern for the 1867 church. A South aisle of equal size now parallels it, with a spacious and lofty nave set between, supported on graceful pillars with capitals exquisitely carved in the 1930s, and the symbols of the Twelve Apostles carved above. (A guide to these symbols appears as the centrefold of this History.) The new chancel complements the new nave and South aisle, providing a church of fine symmetry and proportions, all done in the style of the 14th century. The steeply-pitched roofs of the nave, chancel and porch are covered by Collyweston stone slates, renewed between 1990-94.

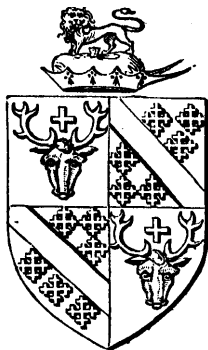
Also in 1994, the wiring and lighting first installed some fifty years before, which had become dangerous, as well as inadequate by modern standards, were replaced, and sympathetic spotlighting now reveals the full splendour not only of the tall arches of the nave, but of the fine wooden roof which they support.

Former Rectors of Pitsford include Robert Skinner BD, whose father also served as Rector of Pitsford. He received his first education in neighbouring Brixworth, and went up to Trinity College, Oxford, in 1607 at the age of 16. He succeeded his father as Rector in 1628, was appointed Bishop of Bristol in 1636, and in 1641 was translated as Bishop of Oxford and Rector of Green's Norton.

Skinner was imprisoned in the Tower in 1641, and deprived in 1643 of Green's Norton for his opposition to the government. At the Restoration of the monarchy he was restored to his bishopric, and appointed Bishop of Worcester in 1663. He died in 1670 and was buried in Worcester Cathedral, where he was commemorated by a marble slab.

In 1980, as part of the pastoral reorganisation of the parishes of the Church of England, a Pastoral scheme was approved by Her Majesty in Council, under the 1968 Pastoral Measure. The benefice of Pitsford was united with that of Boughton, under the care of one parish priest as Rector of the new benefice of Pitsford with Boughton.

A new Rectory was purchased for the united benefice in Humfrey Lane in Boughton. The Pastoral Scheme came into effect on 19 June 1988 on the appointment of the first Rector of the newly-created benefice, cementing the many links between the two parishes which have existed down the centuries.



Arms of HOWARD-VYSE



Snow
February 2005

This History was produced in conjunction with the continuing programme of restoration of Pitsford Parish Church which now needs funds to restore much of the interior woodwork of the church. If you would like to assist in any way, please contact the Rector, who will be very pleased to hear from you.

Details of how to donate to All Saints' Church appear on our web site.

Donations are invited to cover the cost of producing this History of the Church.

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