

The Missing Churches

Every time I came to read one of the quarterly journals of the Wiltshire Family History Society I marvelled at the beautiful Buckler drawings reproduced from time to time and wondered who John Buckler was and why did he draw all the Wiltshire churches between the years of 1800 and 1810? I discovered this information some time ago by the way of an interesting bit of research I was asked to conduct by my husband, who was then a member of the Society.

In fact, this quest started some four or five years prior to that when he, having just found out that some of his Grant ancestors came from Chitterne, asked me to drive through the village on my way home to Brighton from a visit to Cornwall and have a look around. Perhaps I could take photographs of any significant looking buildings and the churches, he said. According to his research there was a Chitterne St. Mary and a Chitterne All Saints, both very old churches. You can imagine my surprise when having walked up and down the village all I could find was a Victorian church, which stood in a low lying part of the village, on a small plot without a graveyard. I felt definitely cheated: how can a village totally mislay not one but two churches?

Fortunately, one friendly inhabitant explained that there is a field towards the northern end of the village which might have been a churchyard once, because there are a few very overgrown graves in it. I found it and braved several very large sheep and lots of stinging nettles to go ancestor hunting. I did find one gravestone in an 18th century style with the name of Grant on it, but it was difficult to read. I then had to press on to get home and the mystery remained unresolved until May 1993.

During that half-term Roy and I decided to spend a couple of days in Wiltshire, he was doing his research in the Record Office in Trowbridge and I could find whatever amusement I could rustle up for myself. I remembered how puzzled I was about those missing churches a couple of years before, so I decided to find out what happened to them. Those of you who have been doing genealogical research long enough have probably guessed it by now. Those good solid Victorian citizens of old have had both churches demolished to build their nice new one. In Trowbridge I found the petition to the Bishop for permission to demolish: amongst the reasons given was the bad state of repair of both, but especially of All Saints church, as well as the impossibility of squeezing the increased population of the two parishes into either of the churches by the middle of the 19th century. These documents were complete with architect's drawings of both old churches in cutaway sections, the plans of the new one with detailed material listings, costings and even item by item proposals of how they were going to remove and reuse many of the materials from St. Mary and All Saints in building the new church.

I was fascinated but felt upset. The following day we went to Chitterne, visited the cemetery and tried to work out where exactly the church stood. You could still tell from the humps and bumps on the ground. The situation was the same in that field at the northern end of the village, where All Saints was; we walked its walls and felt sad at the loss. I always said that the biggest vandals of ancient village churches were the Victorians, who with the best of intentions and in the name of progress altered beautiful mediaeval windows, threw out box pews and obliterated wall paintings in many churches I have visited. However, this was the first occasion when this vandalism went as far as demolishing not one but two beautiful mediaeval churches, although to be fair, All Saints was

probably close to falling down by then. Ironically, it turned out that the new church did not have enough space round it to use as a burial ground and being in a low lying position and prone to getting waterlogged was unsuitable for burials anyway. This must have been the reason why St. Mary's churchyard ended up as the village cemetery resulting in the preservation of St. Mary's Chancel as the Chapel of Rest.

Having visited the village I became very interested in how exactly those two churches looked as the Record Office only had the architect's drawings, so our next stop was Devizes, and the Wiltshire Archaeological & Natural History Society museum where all the Buckler drawings are kept. There, after all these years, I not only found pictures of my lovely Chitterne Churches, but found out all about John Buckler. He was an architect who lived between 1770 and 1851. He was also an authority on mediaeval architecture, as well as an artist. It was Sir Richard Colt Hoare, Bt. of Stourhead, who commissioned John Buckler to draw Wiltshire's churches in the first decade of the 19th century. Sir Richard was a wealthy aristocrat, who drew his income from Hoare's Bank and from rent on the Stourhead estate, so he spent his life travelling, on antiquarian research and watercolour paintings. None of our ancestors come anywhere near Sir Richard's wealth or exalted state, but I am grateful to him for commissioning the Buckler drawings, or I would not now know what the Chitterne churches looked like.

Back in the Record Office the Ordnance Survey map of the period suggested that there were at least four ecclesiastical buildings in the village. On our actual visit we then discovered that one of them, which was used as a feeding and rest stop for pilgrims, is still part of someone's property and we were lucky that he invited us in and showed us around. The last building, however, we could not trace, so that has either been demolished or converted to a dwelling. Because of the proximity of Salisbury Plain and the fondness of the military for shooting at derelict farmhouses on the outskirts of villages, there might be many other buildings that are not now traceable. But that is another story.

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