

ASHMANSWORTH CHURCH¹

There are many small unique churches throughout the country but there can be few as unique as St. James Church, Ashmansworth, which dates back to the 10th century.

For a long time there has been talk of repairing and restoring the church but the cost was such that it seemed out of the question.

But when Miss Annie Taylor Scull, of Cross Lane Cottage, Ashmansworth, died in 1968, leaving £1,000 to the Village Hall and £1,000 to the church, the Parochial Church Council had the incentive to really consider the possibility of the church being restored. Miss Taylor Scull came from a well-known Ashmansworth and Newbury family. She was a niece of Martha and Bill Scull of The Bakery, Ashmansworth.

In 1913 she joined the Queen Alexandra's Nursing Auxiliary and served in the First World War. She returned to Ashmansworth in 1919 but left soon afterwards to nurse well-to-do old Ladies in London. She returned to Ashmansworth in the late 1930's after the death of her uncle and aunt.

Miss Taylor Scull was confirmed into the Church of England during her latter days and bearing in mind that the Scull family had always been Primitive Methodists, it is interesting that it is her £1,000 legacy that has enabled the Parochial Church Council to investigate the murals and bells and to call in experts who have confirmed that the church must be restored to preserve them.

The church, which is so small that it seats only 55 people, contains some remarkable wall murals and it is deplorable to think that unless money can be found to repair and restore the church it is in danger, like many others of this country's ancient churches of becoming a ruin.

To save the church, a world-wide appeal for funds has been launched. The earliest historical reference relating to Ashmansworth is a Charter of King Athelstan the Victorious (925-940) who gave the Manor to the Cathedral Church of Winchester.

It is included in the list of Bishops' Manor in the "Taxatio Ecclesiastica" and the patronage of the church has remained in the possession of the See of Winton from that time to the present day.

The Churches of Ashmansworth and East Woodhay were united some time previous to the Reformation when they were again separated. They were re-united again early in the 18th century and in 1884 were separated again. Ashmansworth remained a separate parish until 1921 when Crux Easton and Woodcott were joined to it.

It is interesting to note that among the Rectors of East Woodhay and Ashmansworth, Thomas Ken became Bishop of Bath and Wells (1685-1691); George Hooper Bishop of St. Asaph (1703); and Robert Lowth, Bishop of London (1777-1787).

The church was originally dedicated to St. Nicholas and when it was restored, in 1899, fragments of Roman urns and pottery were discovered.

¹ Unknown author, c 1971

There may have been, and probably was, a still older church on the same site, as the present one appears to have been built about the middle of the 12th century. The Chancel is entirely of that date and the nave of the same period, although the only feature of definite date is the 14th century window in the south wall. The nave roof is believed to be over 600 years old and the curious moulded beams with their carved bosses are said to have been brought from Winchester Cathedral.

The almyer, or locker, on the north side of the Chancel was opened in 1887 ••• it was previously locked and plastered over •••• and the bason, or head of a pillared piscina was found built into the wall. A piece of moulded stone which has the appearance of Roman work is at the foot of the quoin at the north-east of the nave and was probably brought from Silchester which was used as a general quarry after the city's destruction.

The church has been so altered by various churchwarden restorations that little remains of the original outside structure.

Parish registers only date back to 1810 for in that year the parish clerk's cottage was burned down and all the early records destroyed.

There is less damage inside the church and during repairs interesting finds were brought to light.

Preliminary scrapings by Mr. Walter Money on the Chancel walls in 1887 uncovered paintings of a very early character under the whitewash.

On the east splay of the eastern-most window is a scroll pattern in red and on the next splay a Saint is shown kneeling in adoration before another male or female figure. Between this and the western Norman window on the northern side are traces of another figure thought to represent St. Anne.

When the church was systematically repaired in 1899 more murals were found. The most interesting is a trellis pattern in red, formed by intersecting lines and traces of two tiers of subjects divided by a border enclosing a scroll pattern in red, can be made out as the original portion of the original scheme of decoration.

Another border above has got mixed up with this one but on the lower tier there appears to have been four schemes inside medallions, two on each side of the arch. The groundwork between them is coloured deep red but the various figures are simply portrayed in outline.

The one on the north side, which has been obliterated, was probably either the Last Supper or Crucifixion. The other medallion represents the "Harrowing of Hell" or the descent of Christ into Lymbus.

He is shown on the north side as a tall figure with bare feet trampling on the prostrate form of a large demon while some small figures kneel in front and behind him. The jaws of hell are outlined by a semi-circle band of yellow lines on the south side. The other medallion on the Chancel arch is in the centre of what looks like the back of a large chair or bedstead, but is more probably intended for a tomb and at least four figures with upraised hands stand by it.

Other murals uncovered include a late 15th century representation of the Doom with hurrying lower limbs of several nude figures; another in a shroud; and two others rising from the tomb.

There are traces of a 17th century version of the Lord's Prayer and also several other traces of early paintings, among them undoubtedly the familiar portraiture of St. Christopher with the wall plate above decorated with a barber pole pattern.

Like many other old and out of the way churches, extensive schemes have been carried out at Ashmansworth during at least three different periods.

At some time Consecration Crosses were found incised in the plaster, two on each side of the nave. The font is ancient and the old hinges and locks for the cover were removed in the 19th century.

The bell tower, which is completely constructed of wood, houses three old bells. One is inscribed "God be our Guyd, L.W.1598"; another Samuel Knight of Reading made Me 1692; and the third R. Wells, Aldbourne, Fecit MDCCLXXX.

A report in 1959 says the timber, mostly oak, has been badly attacked by beetle and much of it is now useless. It is recommended that the tower should be completely removed or reconstructed.

Now an appeal for funds has been launched to save a church that experts say must be preserved at all costs, hopes are running high in Ashmansworth that sufficient money will be forthcoming to save a church that is not only unique in this country but throughout the world.