

ST. JAMES' CHURCH, ASHMANSWORTH

This little church on the Hampshire Downs at the north end of the Winchester Diocese has an intriguing history reaching back into the 10th century. It also has a singular charm as its small white, weatherboard bell tower is sighted above the high banks and hedges of the lane that winds down towards the Bourne Valley. Sadly, the old bells no longer ring out over the scattered village - because they must be re-hung before they can even be chimed. (It has, up to now, seemed unlikely that adequate funds will ever be available for full circle ringing). Indeed, this situation is a part of the dilemma facing this small parish, a dilemma created, strangely enough, by a generous bequest from one of its parishioners, Miss Annie Taylor.

This bequest led the Parochial Church Council to call in experts to advise on what might be done to restore and make safe the bell tower, to preserve and improve the remains of the wall paintings as well as to repair the effects of sheer age on the church as a whole; which has inevitably taken place despite the devoted attention of church wardens and parishioners over the years. It needs little imagination to recognise that this survey revealed a call for restoration work with costs far exceeding the value of this bequest.

The earliest extant reference to Ashmansworth is found in the Charter of King Athelstan the Victorious (925-940) and it is certain that a Saxon church stood on this site of the present building which itself belongs mainly to the 12th century and at that time was mentioned in the general confirmation of his manors by Edward I.

It remained among the possessions of the Bishopric of Winchester until 1649 when it was sold to Obadiah Sedgewick who on his death left it to his son "together with the piece of "guilt" plate with the cover which the King and Queen of Bohemia gave unto me". (One suspects some link here with Ashdown House built by the first Lord Craven for Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia, daughter of Charles I). In the late eighteenth century, Ashmansworth passed to the Herbert family, represented now by Lord Carnarvon who has made his lovely park and garden available in 1972 as part of the effort to raise money for the restoration of the church.

Both the chancel and the nave of this little church were built in the 12th century; the roof of the nave is over six hundred years old and the curious moulded beams with their carved bosses are said to have been brought from Winchester Cathedral. The chancel roof is less spectacular. On the 27th February, 1960, the ceiling fell down just before a wedding was to begin. Unfortunately, funds at that time only allowed the ceiling to be recovered in soft-board. A sad example of inevitable penny wisdom that it may now be possible to repair.

At the west end are two miniature galleries, one ostensibly labelled "The Earl of Portsmouth", the other for the Rector. But how these probably portly gentlemen, and their families, hoisted themselves aloft remains a mystery.

The chancel arch is very small as is usual in early churches, but this led in the Middle Ages to openings (squints) being made on each side which add greatly to the charm of the church. The alinery, or locker, on the north side of the chancel was uncovered in 1887 and the basin of a pillared piscina was found built into the wall.

A piece of moulded stone which has Roman features in it is at the foot of the quoin at the north east angle of the nave and was probably brought from Silchester after the city's destruction. Consecration crosses are clearly visible on either side of the nave.

The Wall Paintings are extensive and, although they are in poor condition due to the poor heating systems used in the church and to the bad condition of the outer walls. Expert opinion suggests that every effort must be made to preserve them from further damage. The earliest paintings, around the chancel are of the 13th century and are devoted to the life of Christ. There are later paintings (15th and 17th century) on the north and south walls of the nave.

Expert opinion was also called in to examine the Bell Tower - because church architects

had reported it as "approaching the time when it should be entirely removed or properly reconstructed. It would be most unsafe to attempt to ring the bells". The tower houses three old bells, one being inscribed "God be my Guyd 1598". The bell frame is of oak, the king-posts, cills and some braces are mediaeval showing that a ring of bells existed in the church in the middle ages.

Inspired by the enthusiasm of the experts and by the great opportunity that now exists to bring the beauties of this small church to life again (or at worst to prevent further decay) those who use and love it are tackling the task of raising at least £3,000 in addition to the original bequest.

The heritage of a community must also be its legacy to future generations. In Ashmansworth our task is not only the preservation of a charming inheritance from the past but the beautification of a house built to the Glory of God.

I wish to thank all the people who have helped with the production of this booklet. Its readers cannot really appreciate the research that has gone into its preparation.

The enthusiasm of the bell experts, mural experts and historians made me decide to launch an appeal on a world-wide basis as I felt that St. James, Ashmansworth, belonged as much to people outside England as it did to the people living in the surrounding district.

Our Patron, Lord Carnarvon, has given us every help and has lent us his home and garden, Highclere Castle, on the 15th July, 1972, to help raise funds to restore Ashmansworth Church and make it safe for future generations. (Overseas visitors should put this in their diaries as a date not to be missed if they happen to be in England at the time).

You will appreciate that the money required is no mean sum. To restore the murals, the bells and the vital parts of the Church will cost thousands of pounds. Last year, our Rector, The Rev. John Lewis, went to America on an exchange trip with The Rev. Johnson of Bernardsville, New Jersey. This young American said that at no time in his life had he felt nearer to God than in the little Church at Ashmansworth.

Charles Fane
Ashmansworth Manor

Contributions should be sent to our Fund Treasurer:-

Colonel Hamilton,
Plough Cottage,
Ashmansworth,
Near Newbury,
Berkshire

and cheques made out to: ASHMANSWORTH CHURCH RESTORATION FUND