



## Churches

Aston being a royal estate, and head of a deanery make it likely that there was a very early church. There can be little doubt that it was already in existence at the time of Domesday (1086). The north and south walls of the nave date from the late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The church dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul is a comparatively large building of flint with stone dressings. It has a nave with chapels on the north and south sides, a chancel, a south porch and a west tower. There is a deeply splayed Romanesque window, nearly above the south doorway, which is in its original position. A similar one, now in the north wall of the north aisle, together with a plain Romanesque doorway, were moved from their original position in a part of the north wall of the nave that was demolished in 1874. They are now exactly opposite their former position.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century a new doorway was made in the south wall of the nave, the chancel was rebuilt and the font installed. A three-storied tower, the north and south aisles and a south porch were built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The 15<sup>th</sup> century saw more changes, the clerestory was built and a new window installed in the north wall to let in more light. In the 1520s the chancel was said to be in a ruin and the church neglected. In 1739 Richard Belson had private family pews installed near the pulpit. At some time prior to this the west gallery had been built; this was probably to house the musicians and singers. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the church was again neglected and repairs were needed. A new door was then made on the south side.

By the early 1800s part of the medieval parapet of the tower had collapsed causing damage to the roof. This led to the decision by a vestry meeting in 1811 to commission Isaac Stone of Thame to do the necessary repairs. He undertook to take down the spire and part of the tower and rebuild it using the best of the materials. He made a new oak roof covered with lead and a new parapet with stone pinnacles. The cost was £415 5s 4d, the original estimate had been £331 5s, so just as today things always cost more than expected. In 1831, the medieval roof was replaced with a flat ceiled one. New pews were installed in the nave and south and north transepts and other repairs carried out after a bequest of £300 by the vicar John Holland in 1843. At the same time the chancel was renovated and the vicar, Robert Williams, paid for a robing room. During the course of the work a monument to Lady Cecil Hobbee was discovered. After the improvements the

Bishop reopened the church on the 6<sup>th</sup> January 1850. In 1856 a new east window was put in. A thorough restoration of the church was carried out in 1884, costing around £779. The south wall of the south aisle was rebuilt, the roof was repaired and the walls refaced. The west gallery was also demolished and the seating rearranged. During the course of the work the old altar stone was discovered and replaced in its original position. It was later placed on stone pillars when the Reverend Hickes refurnished the chancel. In 1880 a decision was taken at the vestry meeting that the church should be insured, a payment of £1 4s was made for £1500 of cover. The churchyard was extended in 1915, after Sir William Plowden donated land and the vicar gave part of his garden. Mr Henry Clerke-Brown gave the wooden fencing. Electric light was not installed until 1954.

The tower contains a ring of six bells, which are rung from the ground floor. There is also a sanctus bell. One bell is dated c.1450 and three of the bells date from 1625. Another small bell is dated 1730. In 1752 new bell ropes were bought at a cost of 5s 10½d and in



*St Peter and St Paul's church Aston Rowant after its restoration*

1759 £4 4s was paid to hang the fourth bell. In 1769 £2 9s was paid for a new wool stock for the fifth bell. The sanctus bell was recast in 1835 and is hung only for chiming. Mr White of Appleton restored the bells in 1873. Around the same time, John Warner and Sons recast the fifth bell. The money, £42 5s, was raised by subscription. A treble bell, cast by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, London was hung in 1975. It was the gift of Roy Pink in memory of his wife Elsie Amy. In 1978 the bells were re-hung on a new hardwood frame and the oldest bells were retuned. Like many villages they rang in the Millennium.

Mr Taylor presented the church with a new clock in 1876. The church had previously had a clock as payments were regularly made for winding it. In 1733, £1 was paid for a year for looking after the clock and in 1812 it was repaired for £7 10s. The church also had a weathercock as in 1789, 3s 6d was paid for taking it down. The organ was erected in the north aisle in 1874. Over the centuries various texts and images were painted on the walls of the church. In 1732, £3 7s 6d was paid to paint the King's arms. Mr Chapman was paid £2 6s for painting three verses in 1790 and Mr Cooper, in 1819, was paid £4 15s for writ-

ing on the church. Presumably prayers and texts from the bible were inscribed.

The church was evidently not a wealthy one as an inventory in 1553 showed four great bells, a sanctus bell, a hand bell, a tablecloth and two towels and a chalice without a cover. There seems to have been no early silver. It now possesses a silver chalice dated 1841, some plate, dated 1843 and a paten dated 1844. There are several brasses in the church including a 14<sup>th</sup> century one to Hugh Le Blount and 17<sup>th</sup> century ones to the Thornehill family. Several members of this family are buried under the floor of the south chapel. The only tomb is the 13<sup>th</sup> century one of Lady Hobee. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century memorial tablets were put up to most of the landed gentry and vicars of the parish.

After the mid 1500s the vicar was usually resident in the parish. Ralph Skinner, who was vicar from 1629 to 1648 lived in a substantial house, which had three bedrooms and three other rooms. In 1665 tax on four hearths was paid. The Rectory was mentioned again in the visitation of 1738. The visitation is a report made by the Archdeacon on the state of the church, the number of communicants and on the registers, which were copied and sent to the Bishop. The vicar Matthew Hawes said he lived constantly in the



*The former Rectory in Winter*

Rectory. In 1761 it was let for some time, as the vicar was non-resident. John Holland was appointed vicar in 1795 and by then the Rectory was said to be in a very bad state. He had the Rectory rebuilt about 1808. It was made of chequer brick and slates and was enlarged twice in the 1870s retaining several Regency features. The present building is a substantial two storey house, now privately owned.

The earliest information we have about church attendance and services is the visitation of 1738. The vicar reported that there were no Papists, no Quakers and no Dissenters except two Anabaptists who had no meeting house. He said there were none who professed to disregard religion but too many who absented themselves from church. He

performed a service twice daily every Sunday except when he also had to preach at his chapel in Stokenchurch. There were no persons unbaptised who frequented public worship. Communion was administered five times a year when there were usually fifty or more communicants. He also said that the vicar and churchwardens gave the money given at the offertory to the poor.

John Newborough from Thame was appointed vicar in 1761. He appointed a curate, who conducted only one daily service and held communion just three times a year. The churchwardens thought the parish was neglected and complained about the vicar being non-resident and also the lack in the number of services. When John Holland was appointed in 1795 things improved and it was said, if a sermon was being given, up to three hundred might attend. In the religious census of 1851, one hundred and ten were said to be attending in the morning and two hundred and five in the afternoon. There were available ninety five free seats and one hundred and thirty five other sittings suggesting the church was almost full in the afternoon. However there was a tendency by vicars to inflate these figures. There were also fifty eight Sunday scholars in the morning and forty two in the afternoon.

The Wilberforce visitation of 1854 shows there were two services daily, at 11 am and 3 pm. In the morning the congregation was eighty and one hundred and seventy in the afternoon. The Sunday school, supported by subscription, had about sixty scholars who attended both daily sessions. In the 1870s there was said to be a renewal of church attendance and congregations were growing larger. The vicar was holding evening schools and bible classes. At a special meeting of the vestry held in the church it was suggested that the children be moved from the gallery to seats in the chancel, in order to leave the gallery free for parishioners. The harmonium was also moved. This in-



*Farewell party to Reverend Martin & family in 1954, Col. & Mrs Clerke-Brown on right*

crease in congregations led to a need for expansion and the consequent building of the Chapel of Ease.

St. John's, The Chapel of Ease, at Kingston Blount was consecrated in 1877. The lord of the manor, A.H.Clerke-Brown, gave the site for the church. This piece of land was originally the place where the Stokenchurch Road entered the village. The subscribers raised over £861 for the erection of this red brick building. Some of the larger subscrip-

tions came from A.H.C. Brown Esq., the Late Bishop of Brechin, Rev. E.J. Gardiner, Rev J. Ashurst, Mr. Fletcher, Mr. Hill, Henry Hamp, Mr. Newman, T. Hobhouse Esq. and The London Church Building Society. There were many smaller subscribers, together with over £30 raised on the day of opening. Many gifts for inside came from



*St. John's Chapel of Ease, High Street, Kingston Blount*



*Interior of St John's before redundancy*

*Before conversion to a private house*

the ladies in the area who made some of the internal furnishings.

The original building consisted of a chancel, nave, north porch and central bell-cot. In 1887 the south transept was added at the expense of Henry Hamp. Mr Hamp was a generous benefactor and he gave £1000 of Canada stock for the future endowment of the chapel. Trustees invested it on his behalf, he was to have the proceeds for life and then it was for the chapel. Oil lamps lit the church until 1945, when electricity was

installed. It is known that a special service was held there on peace day in 1919 and in 1921 a cross was erected in the churchyard as a war memorial. After the chapel closed the memorial was moved to Aston churchyard. The last Sunday service at the chapel was held on Palm Sunday, 1968. The church was used as a store but has now been converted into a private house.

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries two of the prominent families, the Belsons and the Piggotts were Roman Catholic. The Willoughby family, who were lords of the manor of Aston and Kingston at this time, may also have been Catholic as John Willoughby was granted a pass to travel in 1614 as long as he didn't visit Rome. Six women from Aston parish were known to have been fined around this time for being papist. A church census taken in 1676 showed no Roman Catholics and there was only one in 1768 and two reported in 1823. In 1970 a Roman Catholic Mass was celebrated in Aston church, this was the first for over four hundred years.

Although the visitation of 1738 reports no dissenters and only two Anabaptists, there had been non-conformity previously, as it is known that meetings were being held in Kingston in 1669. The leader of the non-conformists seems to have been Richard Chitch and his house, amongst others, was used for meetings. Apparently they received the support of John Clerke, lord of the manor so it was considered to be very difficult to break up the dissenters. By 1759 it appears there were no dissenters with only one Anabaptist in 1768.

In 1811 the vicar reported no dissenters but by 1814 he reported that there were a few (whom he called Methodists) in Kingston Blount who met at each other's houses or at the chapel in Chinnor. Converts were organised into a society in 1817 and the chapel was built the same year on a plot of land given by the minister of Chinnor, John Paul. The land was at the top of Park Lane, the road running up by the Cherry Tree. In those days it was called Chapel Lane. By 1834, many of the poorer classes attended the service, although farmers, tradesmen and their families also attended. In 1851 there were one hundred and fifty free sittings and at the afternoon service ninety six attended and twenty five in the evening. A Sunday school was held and thirty six attended in the morning and twenty eight in the afternoon. It is probable that the congregation included people from Crowell and possibly Oakley. There was also a divine service on Thursday evenings. In 1861 a new Congregational Chapel was erected in Kingston Blount on a site, called Filbees Close, which was offered by John Brown in exchange for the old site. This chapel has been converted to a private house.

There was also a Primitive Methodist Chapel in Kingston Blount by 1860. The Anglican curates were holding Sunday school and evensong in the village, largely no doubt, to counter the strong non-conformity influence. However, the Primitive Methodist cause grew. In 1870, they commenced a lease of the small 'cottage' chapel, which continued in use until around thirty years ago. The date over the porch (1859) is probably the formation of the society, for the 'cottage' chapel was erected after land was acquired in 1870 from Mr Eustace for £40. It is known from the records that they intended to try and borrow £150, at an interest rate of five percent, from Mr Hamp, the grocer, to finance the project.

This 'cottage' chapel was erected as part of a row of terraced cottages by James Eustace, and apart from the distinctive chapel porch, it was indistinguishable from other cottages. It was so constructed, it is said, so that if the cause failed, the chapel could be converted into an extra dwelling without difficulty. In 1968 the Methodist congregation vacated the little chapel and on Easter Day, they held their first service in the redundant Church of St. John. However, the condition of the fabric of this chapel together with the problems of inadequate heating in winter meant that it could only be a temporary home

and the last service was at Christmas 1969. The Methodists then began to worship at the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Crowell.



*Methodist Chapel, Kingston Blount*



*Congregational Chapel, Kingston Blount*

In 1833 two labourers cottages in Aston and one in Kingston were registered for worship by the Mormons and the census of 1851 shows that a dwelling house in Aston Rowant was used as an Apostolic Baptist Church. In the morning the attendance was eighteen and twenty six in the afternoon. The house was a labourer's cottage and was not solely for the purpose of worship. There are no further reports of Mormons after 1866. James and Amy (née Britnell) Loader were Mormons, who lived on the estate of Sir Henry Lambert, where James was head gardener. They and their family of thirteen children had been Church of England, but in the early 1850s they started attending meetings held by the Elders of the Church of the Latter-day Saints. They decided to give up their job and follow their religion. They set off for Utah taking most of their children, leaving England on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1855 on the ship 'John J. Boyd'. Unfortunately James died on the long journey but Amy lived on until 1885. When she died she had seventy five grandchildren and thirty four great grandchildren.

### *Parish Registers*

The registers for Aston Rowant survive from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The burial registers particularly, contain some interesting snippets. We learn that in 1582 a female traveller from Norfolk was passing through the area and she died in the house of widow Hester of Chalford. The woman died of plague and the hamlet of Chalford became infected. This led to eight deaths there, including a girl from Tetsworth and the woman traveller. There were further outbreaks of plague in 1606 and 1609 and smallpox in 1698. A wandering pauper, Thomas Chandler, a cobbler, died of plague and was buried in 1700.

In 1667 a young traveller was buried who died suddenly at Kingston and in 1681 Martin

Smith a drover from Worcestershire died suddenly and was buried at Aston. There were some interesting soldier burials. In 1643 an unknown soldier described as 'some soldier of the parliament party' was buried. In 1685, William Stafford's funeral was held. He was described as an 'Oliverian soldier', a rebel against king and church until his death. Christopher Crook of Kingston Blount was buried in 1703; he was a member of Queen Anne's guard. The only other soldier mentioned was the father of Thomas Lowe of Chalford found in the baptism registers in 1814.

In 1693 Anne Littlepage, a maiden, was buried. She had lived to the age of 99 years and 5 months. However one year later a centenarian, Alice Basset died aged 104. On March 26<sup>th</sup> 1686 the vicar's wife, Mary Reynolds was buried. She was described as the parent of twelve children.

In 1673 the baptism register shows 'Katherine, daughter of Joan, a poor traveller'. This child was baptised at birth the same night, because she was near death. Similarly in 1686 'Margaret, daughter of Thomas Griffin, a travelling cobbler, who was usually in the area of Thame and Margaret his wife, was baptised being in danger of death. She was born near Chalford'. In 1703 the baptism register shows Mary, daughter of Alice Burnham, who was born from a bed of shame at Kingston Blount. In the same year Janet, the Ethiopian maid of Edward Bradford of Kingston Blount was baptised.

A number of gypsies are noted in the registers. The names were Buckland, Boswell and Smith. There were also two sets of convict parents. Clara Collins was baptised in 1827. She was the daughter of John and Leah and John was described as a convict. In 1838 Lucy North had a son baptised who had been born in 1817. She was described as the wife of Joseph, a convict. One of these convicts was known to have been a poacher.

For a few years in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the burial registers gave occupations. These tell us that in addition to the expected occupations the parish had a surgeon of Thame, named Loader. Also Thomas Bennett, senior, was buried in 1694; he too was a physician and surgeon as was his son John who died in 1708. Andrew Croke, a London bookseller was buried in 1674 and another person from London was buried in 1713. He was Stephen Day of the City of London, distiller.

The strangest Christian name to be found is a member of the Wakelin family who was named Marshalalalhad. He died aged fifty nine at Kingston.

### *Churchwarden's Accounts*

We are very fortunate that the churchwardens accounts survive for the parish from 1731. The only earlier information known is that in the 1520s the churchwardens were behind in their accounts and the church was neglected probably because there was only a curate in charge. There were two churchwardens elected each year, one representing Kingston and one Aston Rowant and Chalford. They were elected at the vestry meeting held on Easter Monday and served for a year. In the 1800s they were meeting in The Red Lion at Kingston. They were probably quite glad when their year was up as they had numerous responsibilities. One of their duties was to take care of the church. They were responsible for everything within it, except the chancel, which was the responsibility of the vicar. They arranged for all the repairs and the cleaning and had to keep the churchyard tidy. Another responsibility was the behaviour of the vicar including making sure he carried out his duties properly. They ensured that the bells were not rung without due cause and that peace was kept within the church. Another job was to make sure people came to church on Sundays and holy days and to see that those over sixteen years of age went to communion at Easter. Bread and wine had to be obtained for communion and in 1765 four bottles of wine cost 16s. Usually they got through four to six bottles a



year. Another responsibility was to provide the facilities and allocate the pews for worship. Little is said about this in the accounts except for in 1828 at special vestry meeting the vicar, John Holland certified that the seat in the church used by the vicar's servant from time immemorial, now by favour was permitted to be made use of by Mr Gardener's family of Kingston Stert and Mrs Dorrell of Kingston. However it was with the direct understanding that present or future vicars could reclaim it.

At the vestry meeting each year the church rate was set. This varied considerably from year to year depending on how much money was needed for repairs etc. In 1751 the rate was 4½d in the pound, whilst in 1795 it was only ¾d. However after the big bill for the repair of the tower in 1811 the rate was increased to 5d. The rate was levied on real property whether it was owned or leased and was based on the amount of land held. Obviously the major landowners, the lords of the manor, were contributing the most. In 1868 it became no longer compulsory to pay the church rate and in 1876 a change to a subscription was made. Presumably this was voluntary. Obviously one other vital job for the churchwardens was to keep the accounts and present them at the end of the year.

These accounts make for interesting reading giving us a good insight into not only church life but also life in the parish generally. The bell ringers were always paid, the rate was 2s 6d for each ringing. The bells were rung when there was a Coronation and also each year on the anniversaries of the Coronation and gunpowder plot. Other special events warranted the bells, for instance they were rung for Admiral Vernon in 1741, when he captured Puerto Bello in the Caribbean. The ringers were usually encouraged by ale, as were other workers at the church. There is often an entry for beer for the workers, 2s was entered in 1733. The churchwardens were also responsible for paying for prayers, 1s being the usual amount. In 1741 a prayer for the royal family cost 1s and in 1765 a prayer for the princes, presumably after George III had his third son, also cost 1s. In 1793 there were prayers for a feast and for a good harvest. In 1797 the church rate was 4½d in the pound, obviously needed to pay for all the prayers that year. Amongst others there was 2s for Admiral Duncan's victory, 2s for Nelson's victory and prayers for feast days and thanksgiving. In 1773 the parrotter was paid 2s for a prayer. The parrotter, we believe, refers to the apparitor, who was the Dean's messenger. He delivered proclamations, decrees, special prayers and bibles and prayer books to all the parishes. It was obviously thirsty work as in 1793 they paid 1s 1d for half a pint of wine for the parrotter.

The churchwardens' responsibility for the fabric and repair of the church can be seen by some of the bills they paid for. In 1761 the plumber's bill was £8 16s for two years. In 1773 they paid £2 16s 3¾d to the glazier, 16s 1d to the blacksmith and regular similar amounts to carpenters, masons and bricklayers. In 1789 new strings were bought for the bass viol at a cost of 6s. Perhaps the viol accompanied the singers in the church. Washing the vicar's surplice was another expenditure and in 1785, £2 12s 6d was paid for a year for winding the clock, washing the surplice and a new broom. In 1846 Eliza Rixon is being paid 3s 6d for cleaning the church. That same year the church is buying sea coal from London, presumably for heating, at a cost of £1 15s for fifteen hundredweight. By 1861 coke was being brought in by the carrier Mr Hatton who was paid 7s 6d for cartage of twenty eight bushels costing 14s. In 1850 they were employing a beadle. His salary was £2 and they paid 1s for a staff for him. It is not clear what his duties were.

The overseers were responsible for the poor but in emergencies the churchwarden could step in. For instance in 1742, 3s 6d was paid for a coffin and laying out a beggar child and 13s 9d, was paid for burying Phyllis Crook. Money was given to people passing through the village; in 1805 6d was given to a traveller in distress. Money was

also given to people with a pass. This refers to vagrants, poor people subject to removal orders who were being sent to their place of settlement, usually their birthplace. Usually their route was entered on their pass and they were provided with poor relief en route. A lot of travellers passed through Aston Rowant because it was close to the London Highway and their deaths often appeared in the parish burial register. In 1738 money was given to two women with a pass and to seven slaves with a pass. It was still being paid some seventy years later as in 1807, 2s 6d was given to three cripples with a pass, these could be local people who had been given permission to beg in the locality.

Money was also regularly given to soldiers, seamen and slaves. In 1733, thirteen seamen received 6d, fourteen men who were slaves, 3s 6d, 2 poor seamen and sixteen slaves from Turkey 6d. Soldiers and seamen needed money because when they were discharged at a port, having fought for their country, they were given no financial help to get home and had to beg their way there. We don't believe that all these Turkish slaves were passing through Aston Rowant but it was like a charity collection. It was called a brief, and was like 'this weeks good cause'. It was generally addressed to the minister and churchwardens and was read from the pulpit. A collection was then made at the church door and the funds given to an authorized travelling collector. The reference to Turkish slaves is believed to be for ransoming Christians from Turkish slavery.

The churchwardens were also responsible in the early days for ridding the parish of vermin. Many thousands of sparrows were killed and paid for at a rate of 1s for four dozen. 1s was paid for each polecat and 4d for three hedgehogs. Today we often see on our walks the ferreters trying to rid us of our present day pest, the rabbit. Of course in those days rabbits were not regarded as vermin but as food and were even farmed, hence the need to kill polecats.