

The Friends of Friendless Churches: St John the Baptist Church, Papworth St Agnes, Cambridgeshire

by

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On 7th October 1993 Dr Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, Founder, Honorary Director and inspiration of the Friends of Friendless Churches, died. Following the drawing up of a Working Agreement between the Friends and the A.M.S. in 1980, it had always been understood that, after his death, the A.M.S. would provide a home for the Friends in St Ann's Vestry Hall. The reality of the partnership between the two, which retain their constitutional and financial independence, has been made stronger by the appointment of Matthew Saunders as Honorary Director, a post he will occupy in addition to the Secretaryship of the A.M.S.

In the light of the closer liaison between these societies it is appropriate that the Transactions should publish regular items on the work of the Friends and, in particular, accounts of the churches that they own.

We begin the series with an essay on a building that certainly would have been destroyed had not Ivor Bulmer-Thomas had the courage to step in and take it on.

Papworth St Agnes, a sister settlement to Papworth Everard, site of the famous heart hospital, lies a short distance west of the A14 between Huntingdon and Royston. The hamlet centres on a minute village green occupied by a small communal bakehouse with a lofty chimney. The church lies further to the east off a road which leads to the Rectory, a late essay in 'Georgian' of 1847.

The church of St John the Baptist (apparently once dedicated to St Peter) stands on a medieval site but is substantially a mid-nineteenth century rebuild, the tower dating from 1848 and the remainder from 1854. At least one doorway of fourteenth century date, the tower arch of c. 1530 and the four gargoyles below the tower parapet

may all have been reused from the demolished building. The reconstruction of 1530 had been paid for by Anthony Malory who in his will, probated in 1539, provided for "my carcas and body to be buried in the chancel of the sayed church of papworth annes on the north side of the same chancel". He was joined there by his son, Sir William Malory of Papworth who died soon after 1584. Although the identity of the author of *La Morte d'Arthur* has yet to be confirmed (through the researches of his descendant, Mrs Sheila Malory-Smith) it is possible that Thomas Malory of Papworth, for whom Anthony was the fourth son, and the writer were one and the same.

It was another family with a longstanding connection with Papworth which rebuilt the church from 1848. This work was paid for by the Reverend John Hanson Sperling, M.A. of Trinity College, Cambridge, a well known Ecclesiologist, whose family still live in the Rectory. The 'Notes on Cambridgeshire Churches' of 1827 states that at that time the church consisted of "a west tower and nave, both Perpendicular". The chancel already had been demolished and the chancel arch filled in.

What makes Sperling's rebuilding so striking is the chequerwork pattern of ashlar and fieldstones mixed with flints and cobbles. As the Council for the Care of Churches stated in its report, the west tower is a common East Anglian type with three unequal stages marked externally to correspond with the tower space, the silence chamber and the belfry (Fig. 1). The ground floor has a fifteenth century doorway on the west side with a four-centred head framed by continuous mouldings and a square outer frame with moulded label and blank shields in the spandrels. Over this is a three-light window with flamboyant tracery which sets the style for the rest of the church. Three of the four bays of the nave on both north and south sides are filled with three-light windows with various flowing tracery designs. As so often in High Victorian design, careful attention was paid to all detailing, from the hinges on the door to the lionhead gutters (some of which did not survive the period of dereliction). It seems certain that Sperling was his own designer, guided by the form of the medieval building.

By comparison the interior is plain. The nave is a single vessel undivided by aisles and the most individual element is the multiple moulding of extraordinary depth to the windows and doors, made more curious by the mixture of stone and colour-washed plaster.

Some monuments have been re-sited from the older church, particularly a black ledger slab inside the west door to William Hayes (died 1673) and Daniel Hayes, his brother (died 1704), both Rectors of the church, another to Henry Sperling, Rector (died 1821) signed by the famous John Bacon, and another to the four children of Henry Piper Sperling (who died between 1822 and 1836) by Wills of New Road, London. The most interesting artistically is that of 1747 to Thomas and Elizabeth Rushforth, a pedimented tablet of veined marble with flanking pilasters and a cartouche of arms on the shaped apron (Fig. 2).

At the time when we took over the church the much weathered medieval font, a square bowl set on a cluster of four thick colonnettes, lay ignominiously in the

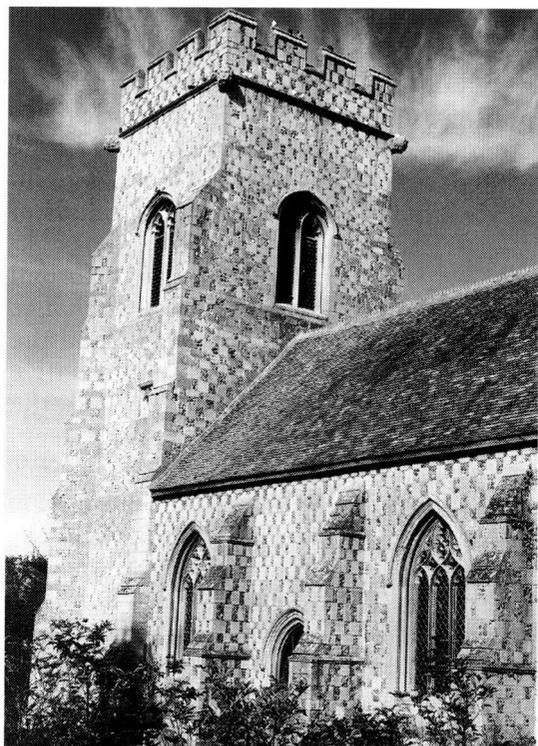


Fig. 1
St John the Baptist, Papworth St Agnes
in 1994



Fig. 2
St John the Baptist. The monument of 1747 to
Thomas and Elizabeth Rushforth.
The cartouche at the base was damaged whilst
the building was derelict.

churchyard. We have brought it back in from the cold.

Both Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and the Council for the Care of Churches noted at the time of redundancy the important set of stained glass windows, all dating from 1854 and probably also the work of Sperling (assisted by William Wailes). In anticipation of demolition, the Church Commissioners removed the glass and the majority of it was sold. One panel that found its way to the Stained Glass Museum in Ely Cathedral was brought back in 1993 through the work of the Friends of Papworth St Agnes Church.

I first saw the church in the late 1970s when it was the subject of a formal proposal for demolition by the Church Commissioners. There seemed little chance of saving it in the face of what seemed to be indifference in the village, and the conclusion by the Council for the Care of Churches that there was little alternative to demolition. But the authorities had reckoned without Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, the Friends of Friendless Churches, and the revival of interest within Papworth itself. The Ancient Monuments Society lodged an objection to the Draft Redundancy Scheme and I drove Ivor to see the church. Its condition was appalling, as the Royal Commission photograph shows (Fig. 3). The tiles had fallen off the roof and the appearance was one of total abandonment. Nothing daunted, the Friends decided that demolition could not be contemplated and approached the church Commissioners with a view to securing the building by taking on the challenge and the burden of ownership. Following negotiation, the freehold was conveyed on 5th December 1979 (with the exception of the churchyard which remains in use). The Friends spent about £25,000 on the work of repair and consolidation, much of it obtained through generous grant aid from the Historic Buildings Council (the predecessor to English Heritage) and the local authority, South Cambridgeshire District Council. It is now fully repaired, re-listed as Grade II*, and serves as the local community centre.

The true heroes of Papworth alongside Ivor are the local Friends. There are no more than twenty households within the hamlet but the great majority have come together to form the Friends of Papworth St John Church. They clear out the gutters, they remove the guano from the roof space, they use the building for services and gatherings, and they are bringing back some of its original character, most obviously by reintroducing the window and by installing new sanctuary rails in memory of Dorothy Honeyborne. Their fund-raising efforts have even extended to a sponsored parachute jump. Particular thanks go to David Noble and John Elstone.

Papworth sums up what the Friends are about. In the light of our dogged refusal to accept demolition and our willingness to take on the risk of direct ownership, we saved the building from demolition even after a Scheme providing for its total destruction had been published. But Papworth also epitomizes the relationship between a national organization, even if one of modest size, and local people. Churches like Papworth are preserved not just for dry scholarly reasons but because they are the physical heart of a community which would suffer a grievous loss of identity if they were flattened.

If you are in the area do make a point of visiting. The church is of course kept

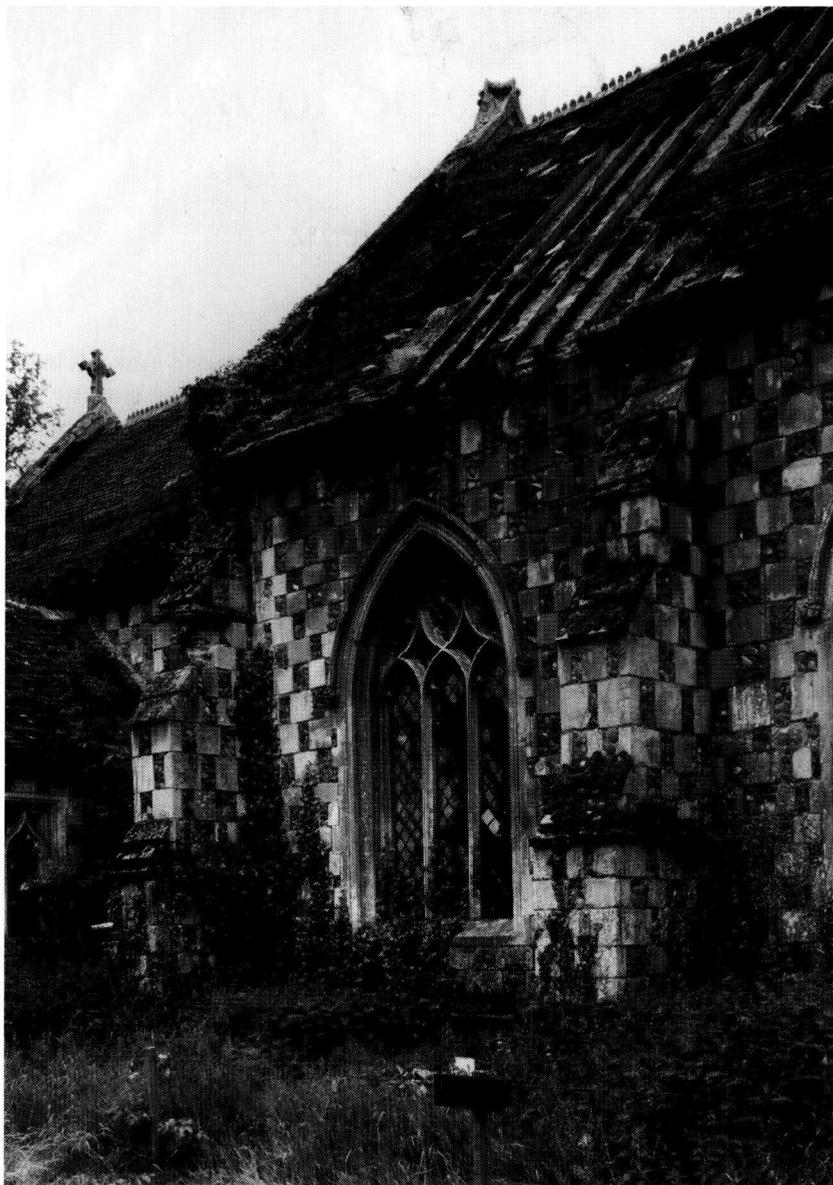


Fig. 3

St John the Baptist. The church in dereliction in 1977
Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

locked but it is the exterior which offers the main reward to the visitor, whilst it is possible to glimpse the reinstated stained glass by peering through one of the north windows.

