

The Friends of Friendless
Churches and The Ancient
Monuments Society:
St Leonard's Church, Spernall,
Warwickshire

by

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We continue our occasional series on redundant churches for which we are responsible with this essay on the former church at Spernall which has been ours for twenty-one years. I should like to dedicate this history as my own personal appreciation of the work of Ronald Brunskill. I thought hard about which church to describe and thought in the end St Leonard's would fit the bill. Uniquely among the twenty-eight churches which fall to our care, the small but delightful building at Spernall is owned at present not by the Friends of Friendless Churches but by the Ancient Monuments Society (although all bills are met by the Friends). How better to celebrate the role of Ron Brunskill who uniquely among the officeholders was both Chairman of the AMS and Chairman of the Friends. In its own very understated way St Leonard's also symbolises the breadth of Professor Brunskill's vision. It is vernacular in origin, both in form and materials (apart from the chancel of 1844) and speaks of the voluntary efforts of the local people who dug the stone barely a hundred yards from the site and built the double cells with their own hands. It is the sort of 'natural simple weatherbeaten' building which moved both A.W. Pugin and Ron Brunskill. Both Societies were privileged to have had Ron as Chairman. He combines a studious diligence, a stability and strength of character with a smiling positive-minded temperament. This humble offering on a humble

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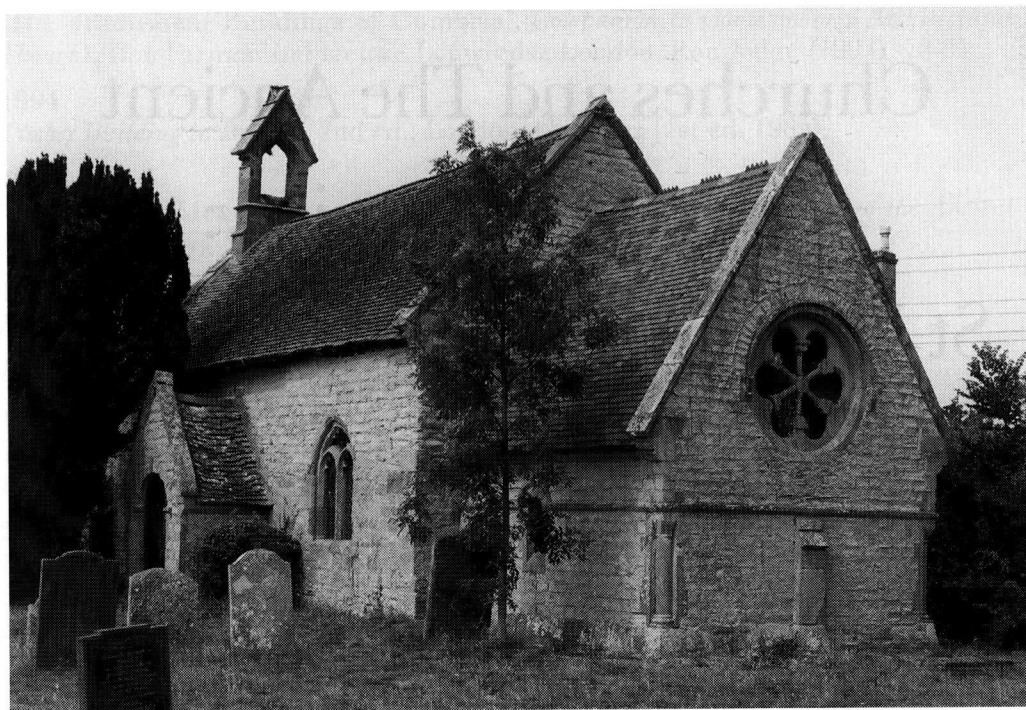


Fig. 1

A general view of St Leonard's prior to the recent rebuilding of the porch and the felling of the self-sown tree

building is offered with heartfelt thanks and affection.

St Leonard's (Fig. 1) lies just south of Studley in Warwickshire, to the east of a Roman Road now known as the A453. The River Arrow flows nearby. As the property is now tenanted, internal access is not possible but the exterior is easily seen by those visiting the churchyard which surrounds it. There is some local confusion over the spelling of the name and you will still find references to Spernal.

HISTORY

Far and away the most thorough account of the parish is that compiled by the Alcester and District Local History Society in 1984 (see references). The Society has traced the first documentary mention of the church to the 1190s when the Canons of Studley Priory, who then possessed Coughton Church, were given the right to bury all non-freeman in Spernal parish. As Dugdale relates, plague obligingly swept away all the non-freeman shortly afterwards, but this added bonus was followed by a dearth of income for the lord of the manor who then disposed of their lands to freeman who enjoyed independent burial rights. This led to a long-running dispute with the nuns of Cookhill who held the right of presentation to



Fig. 2
The interior of the chancel
showing the twelfth century
chancel arch as it appeared
in 1968

Courtesy, English Heritage

Spernall church from 1228 until the reign of Henry VIII and who had the right to bury freeman (in the nearby but now wholly lost priory of St Giles). The first rector is mentioned in 1240 – by which time some of the existing fabric at the church seems to have been constructed. The partly retooled, partly reset, chancel arch shown in figure 2 is by general consensus datable to the twelfth century. The small lofty west window looks late thirteenth century (Fig. 3), but there are touches of eighteenth century Gothick about it which may imply recutting. Of roughly similar date are the somewhat desultory fragments of medieval glass (Fig. 4) preserved in the upper tracery of one of the northern lights in the nave. Earlier commentators referred to the head of the Redeemer but this is now blackened out with only the hand raised in blessing and the multi-coloured halo surviving. More recognisable either side are quarries showing floral stems and, beneath them, the remains of canopy tops.

Fig. 3
The west window as in 1968
Courtesy, English Heritage

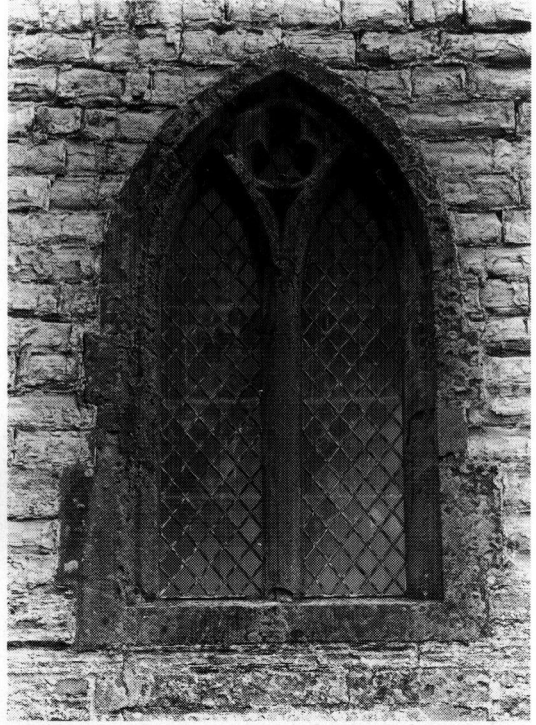


Fig. 4
The remains of the medieval glass

The nave itself, massively overstructured for its footprint with a clear ‘batter’ to the internal face of the walls has a pre-Gothic austerity. Apart from the west window the other recognisable features are the late-fourteenth-century eastern tracery to the north and to the south. Changes began to multiply from the eighteenth century. It was then that the north-west corner of the nave was rebuilt in brick (see Fig. 5); a curious choice of material to our mind, but one which has softened and weathered over the years. It lies in the least visible section of the church concealed behind the Georgian Rectory. It was this sort of unselfconscious juxtaposition of materials which inspired the philosophy of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings a century later. At Spernall the choice was dictated no doubt by parsimony but with S.P.A.B. it became a matter of philosophy – a deliberate move away from using stone which might be seen to feign the older ashlar and rubble of the medieval building. The village of Spernall was well-known for the production of stone, brick and plaster so no doubt it was local pits that produced the masonry. This is oolitic limestone (blue lias) but there is a marked disparity between the variegated green and occasional pink of the nave and the much cooler, almost silver grey of the nineteenth-century work on the bellcote and chancel. As we have found to our cost the stone is notoriously friable and it was ever thus. At least one sturdy block of stone to the north is inscribed ‘T.C. 1732’ a clear reference to localised repairs by the long-serving Thomas Chambers (on whom see below).

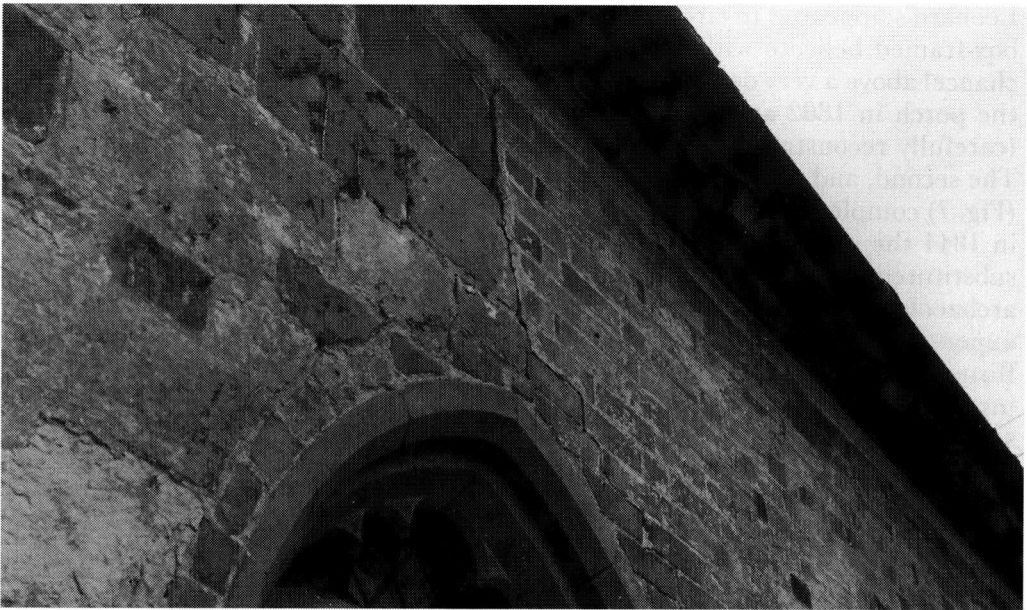


Fig. 5

The juxtaposition on the south side of the nave of the medieval stonework and the eighteenth-century brickwork

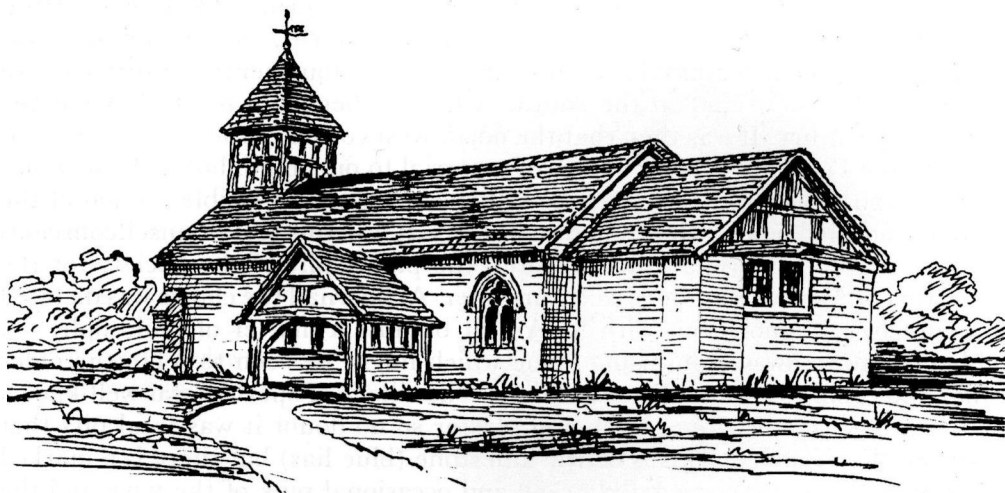


Fig. 6

The church as shown in a drawing of c.1830

The view of the church taken from the south-east in the collection of the Birmingham Reference Library, the Aylesford Collection, (Fig. 6) shows how St Leonard's appeared in circa 1830. There is a substantial timber-framed porch, a box-framed bellcote with pyramidal cap and half-timbering to the gable of the chancel above a very domestic window. There is reference to the reconstruction of the porch in 1802 and of further rebuilding in 1847. The present appearance (carefully reconstructed by ourselves in 1998) no doubt dates from that period. The second, and rather more engaging drawing firmly dated September 7th, 1850 (Fig. 7) completes the radical picture of the changes carried out in the 1840s. For in 1844 the chancel was completely demolished and a new Neo-Norman design substituted at the expense of local people and the Church Building Society. The archaeological eye seems to have been wholly absent for the rebuilding was at the expense of all the ledgerstones on the chancel floor recorded in 1820 by the Birmingham antiquary William Hamper. Among the losses was the melancholy inscription to Dorothy Fortesque who is recorded as being 'virgin, wife, mother, saint in heaven all within a year'. Two delightful Neo-Classical tablets, then of course commemorating people still fresh in the memory, were transplanted and rehoused on the new chancel walls. Figure 8 shows the one to Thomas Chambers of 1802 whose connection with Spernall could not have been more intimate. He was patron of the church and his wife Mary was the daughter of the Rev'd Thomas Allen the Rector. In his ninety-one years he presented five incumbents. Among his fifteen children were two clergymen and one son, William, who became an Admiral in the Royal Navy. The eldest, Thomas, when he was Curate at Radway, married Mary Miller, the daughter of the renowned eighteenth century gentleman architect,



Fig. 7

St Leonard's in 1850 after the rebuilding of the chancel, the porch and the bellcote

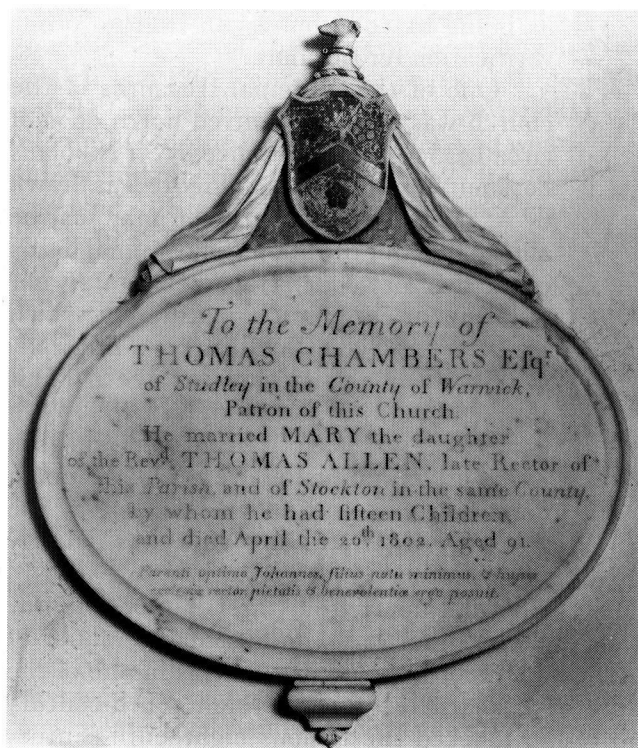


Fig. 8

The monument of 1802 to Thomas Chambers in the chancel

Sanderson Miller. He in turn was Rector of Spernall from 1763 to 1799, his brother succeeding him as Rector at his death. He served for another thirty-seven years. The family held the advowson to Spernall from the early eighteenth century, their home being Garcott Hall at Studley.

St Leonard's escaped very lightly from the years of the full-blooded Gothic Revival. The two westernmost windows in the north and south aisles were replaced in 1857 but apparently in replica. An internal dado in pine followed in the 1870s and of roughly the same date was a simple stone pulpit. The last two were overlaid in 1935, at a time when Victorian was at the lowest point of appreciation, by rather conventional work carried out by the Bromsgrove Guild. It is a surprise to find that the woodwork to the pulpit with its characteristic vine leaves is no more than a carcass to the stone bowl which remains underneath. Even more surprising is the survival of some of the Victorian dado panelling beneath its 1935 successor although in the years when the church was abandoned it fared very badly from a suffocating lack of ventilation which led to serious rot. However none of this work of the 1870s

or the 1930s is anything other than minor. Just as insignificant is the font of 1935, very simple and so gauchely carved that the sides are uneven in width.

The report of the Council for the Care of Churches of 1971 refers to the nave roof as being of 1884 but I can find no other verification for this date.

One of the principal treasures of the church was the four-centred north door of circa 1535 rightly mentioned by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. This is shown on Figure 9 as drawn by A. E. Everitt in 1850. You may just be able to pick out the human and animal heads in the swirl of wooden tracery. Certainly not visible is the enigmatic signature 'I.P.' which has been ascribed to 'John Parker'. Tragically at the time of a particularly savage attempt at illegal entry at the church in 1994 both heads were snapped off as souvenirs and have not been found. Just above this same north door a sundial was added, paid for by the Rector, in 1818, but this has wholly disappeared.



Fig. 9
Drawing of the north door of c.1535
by A. E. Everitt of 1850

The non-architectural history of Spernall apart from the Chambers family previously mentioned, centres on the Throgmortons who owned the manor of Spernall from 1441 until 1934. Dugdale records their coat of arms in one of the church's windows. Perhaps more of a 'character' was the eighteenth-century incumbent Henry Teongue who gently mocked the famous eighteenth-century

garden at Leasowes, Halesowen laid out by William Shenstone where he felt the symbolic philosophising had got out of hand. He lampooned the: 'fourty five mottos full of odd twists neatly inscribed on fourty five plinths'.

His amusing diaries have been published and the entry on Spernall in *The Churches of Warwickshire* published by the Warwickshire Architectural Society in 1847 records an unusual life –

he served as naval chaplain from 1675-1679 on board HMS 'Assistance' 'Bristol' and 'Royal Oak' during which time he kept a diary: this manuscript was long in the possession of a family in Warwickshire till being purchased at a sale being published in the year 1825 in eight volumes. The author appears to have been a man of eccentric character and jovial habits: and the diary is an amusing and very miscellaneous production. Many songs and poems are interspersed throughout it; some of them showing considerable talent. His son, who was Vicar of Coughton, probably officiated for him during his absence from England. He died on 21st March 1690 and was buried at Spernall but no monument or stone was placed over his remains.

That the outside world did impinge on the life of the squire, parson and labourers of Spernall is evidenced by the various collections taken during church services at St Leonard's recorded in *Warwickshire People and Places* by John Burman in 1936. The sum of eight shillings was raised in 1703 for the relief of the Protestants of Orange, seventeen shillings and six pence in 1793 for French clergy refugees fleeing the Revolution, seven shillings in 1796 'for the release of persons confined in Warwick jail for small debts', two pounds twelve shillings and sixpence in 1798 'for the service of the Government', a princely twelve pounds one shilling and sixpence in 1801 'collected for ye poor', three pounds eight shillings in 1808 for the relief of British prisoners in France, two pounds two shillings in 1815 for the relief of families 'of the brave men killed and wounded in the signal victory of Waterloo', one pound nineteen shillings in 1827 for 'the relief of the manufacturing classes in the United Kingdom' and three pounds eight shillings and sixpence in 1828 (and again in 1834 and 1836) 'for the enlarging and building of churches and chapels'.

CONSERVATION

St Leonard's was declared redundant in 1972. The Diocese of Coventry (which had taken over responsibility for Spernall from the Diocese of Worcester in the nineteenth century) applied for planning permission to convert the building into a house but was refused. The reaction of the ecclesiastical authorities was swift and to the point. In 1976 they applied to demolish the building completely. We in the Friends and the AMS were appalled to learn of the threat and we went beyond lodging a formal objection to destruction to express an interest in taking on the challenge of ownership. Normally the building would have gone to the Friends of Friendless Churches but at that time the Friends were facing too many financial challenges and in light of an unexpected financial leeway at the AMS it was agreed that St Leonard's would pass to the Ancient Monuments Society, the only church that we have ever owned. (All the costs of insurance, maintenance and repair are now met by the Friends as the latter's finances have immeasurably improved in the

interim.) Formal transfer took place on 29th August 1980. As a Grade II* listed building we could have applied for grant aid but as the building's condition was more sorry than serious we raised the £4,000 necessary for immediate repairs from our own resources. This work chiefly involved the reconstruction of the collapsed south eastern section of the nave shell, the reroofing of the chancel and the suppression of the ivy.

Barely three years later we were approached by the highly talented artist, Nicholas Jones who was looking for a studio 'for the working of wood, plaster and stone'. Although employed by the College of Art in Birmingham, his studio was then based at home and the neighbours were beginning to mutter. We were delighted at his approach and fronted an application for planning permission to convert the church to the new use. As the pews had already been moved to the nearby church of Morton Bagot and all other fittings were compatible with the introduction of the new use we felt his presence on the site would help to deter the increasing risk of burglary and vandalism. He moved in in 1983 and has been there ever since producing a very varied corpus of art, some of it religious as for All Saints Church, West Bromwich, some of it as in the statue to the Vietnamese Boat People commissioned by the Houses of Parliament, for a prestigious client, and a lot of it strongly architectural and mysterious in character. His signature works are of exquisitely crafted boxes with doors slightly ajar and a sense of mystery interlaced with menace inside.

The building has just emerged from a further programme of repairs (the improvements to the drainage should be complete by the time this volume of *Transactions* is published) supervised by William Hawkes ARIBA. The total cost was something like £25,000 which financed careful reconstruction of the porch and bellcote using as much as possible of the existing stone and the reroofing of the north slope of the nave. The cost of this was borne by the Friends of Friendless Churches. Repairs have been accompanied by archaeological assessments of the building. Two of the more interesting finds have been a layer of ash and clinker under the suspended nave floor (from the casting of the bells?) and the presence of a layer of thatch on top of the nave walls concealed from view by the oversailing eaves of the roof and the raising of the internal face of the walling higher than that of their external equivalents.

St Leonard's is safe, continued testimony to the skills of designers and craftsmen of the twelfth century onwards, redolent of the piety and worldliness of the generations of rural folk who worshipped there and now offering shelter to a major creative talent.

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