

The Friends of Friendless Churches: St Andrew's Church, South Huish, Devon

by

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In celebration of the working agreement which came into force in 1993 between the Ancient Monuments Society and The Friends of Friendless Churches it is intended to include articles about the churches owned by The Friends in successive editions of the Transactions. The series began in volume 39, 1995, with a piece on St John the Baptist church at Papworth St Agnes in Cambridgeshire and continued in volume 40, 1996, with St Mary the Virgin, Llanfair Kilgeddin in Gwent. In 1997 it was the turn of the old church of St Peter at Wickham Bishops in Essex and in 1998 we stay with churches of the medieval period with a close look at South Huish.

The old ruined church of St Andrew at South Huish lies in that area of the South Hams between Salcombe and Thurlestone. This part of Devon is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and, winding one's way to St Andrew's through circuitous narrow lanes hemmed in by luxuriant hedges, one can see why. The ruins themselves lie on the road signposted to Thurlestone Beach, which belongs to the National Trust and are among the most visited of the properties owned by The Friends. They group romantically with an eighteenth-century house to the north-west and Court Barton to the north-east, a farmstead converted to thirteen timeshare units in 1981.

There is also a North Huish in South Hams but this is nowhere near its southern counterpart and if it has a role in our current story it is because that church is just as friendless as St Andrew's was in the early 1970s. At the time of writing (August 1997), North Huish, despite its Grade I listing and its substantial medieval fabric,

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was redundant and on the market (1994 sale price, £10,000).

One of the earliest written descriptions of South Huish, of 1841, gives the dry facts:

it consists of a nave about 39' long by 16' wide, a chancel 20' by 15' and an aisle on the south, 39' by 10'; a porch covering the south door, and an ancient square tower at the western end without battlements. There is also a projecting north aisle (transept). The nave opens to the south aisle by three low arches resting on columns formed by four shafts with intervening hollow mouldings and having octagonal capitals. The roof is open and ribbed having bosses of oak carved in foliage at the intersections. The windows have three lights with cinquefoiled heads and tracery above in Perpendicular style. There are remains of a chancel screen of the sixteenth century. The pulpit is modern. The pews are modern, built in the old oak benches which are carved in trefoiled panels. The font is of stone, ancient, octagonal, and without ornament, on a cylindrical column and square plinth.

By that stage the church was barely twenty-five years from abandonment and the controlled ruination that befell it from the late 1860s.

The foundation appears to have been Norman but the earliest section of the present building, the nave and chancel, dates from the early-thirteenth century, even if the bulk of the window tracery, in local granite, is fifteenth-century. The great tower itself, which once rose to four stages, is difficult to date (the windows being modifications) but is almost certainly of the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries (Fig.1). Its western doorway, with a four-centred arch, is fifteenth-century as is the Perpendicular window above. The remains of the north transept, known as the Hope Chapel, are the least well preserved sections of the building although still datable to the same period.

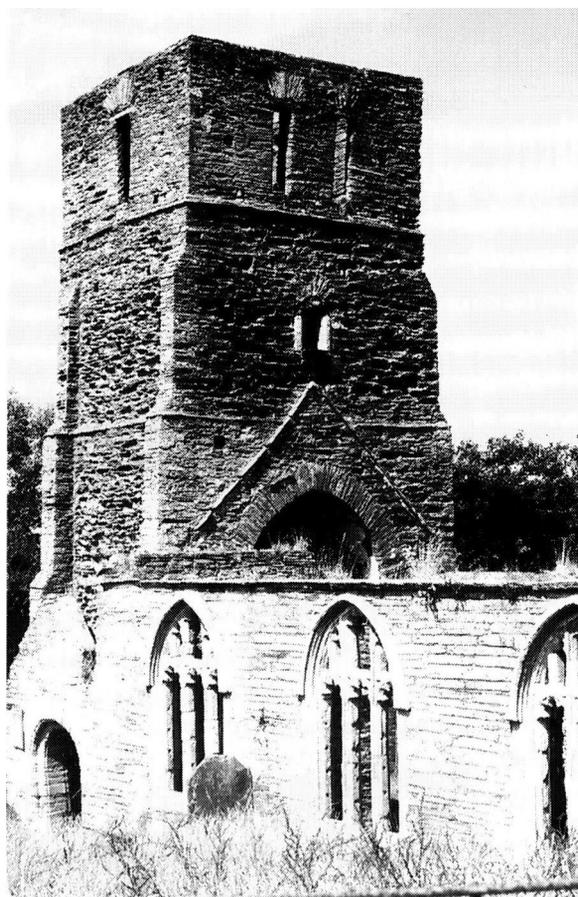


Fig. 1

St Andrew, South Huish

General view from the south taken in 1994. The most recent conservation campaign has reduced the natural growth at the head of the wall

One of the most intriguing sections is the fourteenth-century south porch (unusual in following the alignment of the south aisle rather than projecting from it) which survives virtually intact save for the roof. On its east side near the inner doorway can still be seen the remains of the holy water stoup where those entering the building would make the sign of the cross. Over the arch itself is a bracket for a now lost image. Along the sides are stone benches, but the rarest survival of all are the traces of a flue on the western face. Several authorities agree that this was for lighting the Easter Fire on Holy Saturday, probably also doubling for the warming of water for the font in the winter months. The outer entrance to the porch has a round-headed doorway in dressed rubble of a standard South Hams type but its counterpart giving access to the church has a four-centred chamfered stone head which blocks a former window opening in the wall above, indicative of the modifications which were necessary to accommodate the new porch.

Other surviving features of interest include the rounded recess in the wall at the junction of the north transept with the chancel which probably gave access to the rood loft stair and the priest's door at the east end of the south aisle. Canon Hoskins in his account of the church explains the purpose of the latter as spelt out in the *Sarum Manuale*:

when the body was brought into the church for a funeral the psalms were begun. At that point the rector or vicar left his stall at the south-west end of the chancel by the priest's door and went to the grave where the sexton or grave-digger was waiting with his spade. The priest took the spade and opened the ground with two cuts in the form of a cross. Leaving the grave-digger to complete the task, he returned to the chancel while the psalms were still in progress. Medieval graves appear to have been quite shallow, and the grave would be ready when the funeral party came out of the church for the interment.

The priest's door also served to give clerical entry and exit into the chancel other than through the south porch which mostly was reserved for the congregation. That so little else remains in the way of fixtures and fittings is explained by the fact that the building was rescued by The Friends after a century of controlled and uncontrolled ruination.

The first dramatic sign of trouble came in 1866 when a window was blown in during divine service, narrowly missing the priest in charge, the Reverend F. R. Hole. The vicar of Marlborough with South Huish (and also of West Alvington with South Milton), the Reverend Alfred Earle (later Archdeacon of Totnes, Suffragan Bishop of Marlborough and finally Dean of Exeter) called a meeting at St Andrew's on 8th November 1866, 'to take into consideration what steps should be taken to provide fitting church accommodation for the parish'. The decision was to abandon St Andrew's and put up a new building on a different site. However, as Miss K. M. Clarke records:

this scheme met with great opposition in the parish, as the people did not want to lose their church where their forefathers for so many hundred years had worshipped and whose bodies lay in the old churchyard. There was a strong feeling that the graves might be desecrated. The Archdeacon told them that if they wanted to keep the church they must collect £300 themselves. The population of Hope and Galampton

was well under 400 and many of these of course were children. There were no rich people in the parish but about a dozen farmers, the rest being agricultural labourers whose wages were not very high in those days, fishermen at Hope and two or three small shopkeepers at Galmpton.

Not surprisingly, that financial challenge was too daunting, although the raising of money for the new place of worship went ahead with alacrity. By March 1867 the Vicar had secured the promise of the gift of a site in Galmpton for a new church from the eleventh Earl of Devon, the principal local landowner, whose ancestors had held the manor of Galmpton from 1463. He was also able to report that a sum of £367 had already been guaranteed towards the cost of building the new church. This included £100 each from the Earl and the vicar, £30 from the Bishop of Exeter and £50 from the Lord Justice of Appeal, Sir George J. Turner. Within a fortnight the ratepayers had been told that it would not be necessary to levy a Church Rate to meet the remainder of the cost, 'as all the ratepayers had come forward generously' and apparently voluntarily. This was in spite of the fact that the new Church of Holy Trinity at Galmpton, consecrated in 1869, and built to the designs of Richard Coad, a former assistant of Sir Gilbert Scott, cost in the end over £2,000.

Within two decades St Andrew's had been deliberately unroofed and in the interim a slow and melancholy dispersal of fittings had begun. Indeed, some records indicate that the pulpit and the holy water stoup were removed as early as 1844, apparently to Salcombe church, although this is now doubted by Canon Hoskins. The stoup can still be seen in the porch of that church, where it is recorded as being presented by Miss Elizabeth Jennings. It is a simple granite monolith placed on a wooden triangular ledge and attached to the wall by a utilitarian strap.

The new church at Galmpton provided a safe haven for a number of items, including a simple granite font with waterleaf base, a memorial to the Lidstone family, the four bells (recast in 1914) and, most importantly of all, a remarkable assemblage of shattered remains from two fifteenth-century reredoses, representing scriptural scenes from the life of Our Lord. These were found in the spring of 1867 within St Andrew's when the mid-sixteenth-century blocking of the lower part of the east window in the transept was dismantled. The discovery was written up in the 1872 *Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural and Archaeological Society*, and again in a paper by Miss E. K. Prideaux in the same Society's third series (volume 3, part 3). The sculptures were put into the safekeeping of that selfsame Society in 1914 but are now on display in a glass fronted cabinet in Galmpton church, whither they were translated in 1975 (Fig.2).

The small mid-seventeenth-century altar table and the silver chalice and cover paten of the late sixteenth century are in St Clement's Chapel in Hope Cove. The chancel screen was sold in May 1870 to Mr W. R. Ilbert for twenty guineas and he rehoused it, repainted in its medieval colours and rebuilt in two tiers rather than continuously, within his private chapel at the great sixteenth-century house of Bowringsleigh at West Alvington.

In October 1874 the Vestry Meeting resolved that Lord Devon, who had given the land for the new church as well as a handsome donation, should 'have such



Fig. 2

Holy Trinity, Galmpton

The remains of the fifteenth-century alabaster reredoses from South Huish

bench ends and bases from the old church as he might wish, with the understanding that they might be used in some church or consecrated building?. He appears to have taken up the offer and resited the fifteenth-century woodwork in the chapel at Powderham Castle. The most spectacular example of architectural salvage was the last, or at least the last to be authorised. This was the dismantling of the three-bay fifteenth-century arcade dividing the nave from the single, south, aisle in 1886. The columns and arches went *en bloc* to Dodbrooke church at Kingsbridge to divide the nave from that church's new north aisle. The churchyard there retains a single free-standing granite column said to have been ejected from the church. Was this displaced when the arcade from South Huish was installed? The very last act of placing in safe keeping was the removal of an oak lintel from the south face of the tower in 1978 for rehousing in Kingsbridge Museum. By that stage St Andrew's was the responsibility of The Friends of Friendless Churches but we must go back a decade to discover why.

It came as no surprise that by the late 1960s the condition of the church was

appalling. There was a great crack at the top of the tower and ivy had smothered almost the whole of the shell, dislodging even granite carvings. A structural assessment of 1970 prepared for the then rector, the Reverend Canon J. P. Hoskins, the first historian of the building and its constant champion, prepared by Body, Son and Fleury (later Fleury Manico) referred to an interior 'overgrown with elderberry, grass, brambles, nettles and sundry other verdure and generally littered with fallen masonry and dirt'. Since the parish felt unequal to the challenge, the problem was passed to higher authority, and the ruins were declared redundant in 1971, the law recognising the reality of the situation some century after the parishioners had abandoned the church. The prognosis looked gloomy. At that stage the ruins were listed only as Grade II, even if they were treated, mistakenly, as if they were a scheduled ancient monument. Now listed Grade II* (in July 1995), a welcome vindication of our efforts, the outstanding interest of St Andrew's has been recognised. In 1971 this had not been accepted. The Diocesan Advisory Committee for Exeter declared itself willing to accept demolition, whilst the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches and the Church Commissioners refused to recommend or accept vesting of the ruins with the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust). Once a church has been made redundant it faces three possible fates – demolition, vesting with the RCF or new use. As the last clearly was impossible, the real prospect of destruction loomed. There were efforts to convey the building to the local landowner but these came to nothing. The constitution of the Redundant Churches Fund prevented its being acquisitive. It had to accept that the decisions to vest, and indeed to de-vest, were ones for the Church Commissioners alone. However, Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, then Chairman of the RCF, was not one to accept such a decision lying down, and he therefore recommended to the Executive Committee that The Friends of Friendless Churches, of which he was Honorary Director, should accept a long lease on the ruins, to consolidate them and prevent their being demolished. A fine little row followed over the refusal of the Church Commissioners to allow the RCF to make any contribution towards these costs, but they did in the end confirm the transfer of the ruins on a 999 year lease, which was signed on 22nd March 1976.

Ivor and The Friends moved rapidly to arrest the alarming decay and secure a situation where the 'Danger' notices which had greeted the visitor could be removed. Major building campaigns followed in 1976-8, 1985-8, and 1994-5. The contractors for the first phases were Dart & Francis of the Ecclesiastical Art Works of Crediton, with C. F. Piper & Sons of Liskeard for the later stages. The architects in charge were C. R. Harrison, Robert Ind and Edward Barnaby, all of Fleury Manico, although Mr Barnaby, who was responsible for the majority of the work, executed most of it after he had set up in independent practice. Some grant aid was forthcoming, for example £1,836 from English Heritage in 1985, but the bulk of the money came from the internal resources of The Friends.

Anyone visiting the ruins today is likely to come away with some sense of alarm at the dramatic nature of the stone decay on the tower – a *locus classicus* of its type. Fortunately, we have arrested some of the processes which have prompted it,

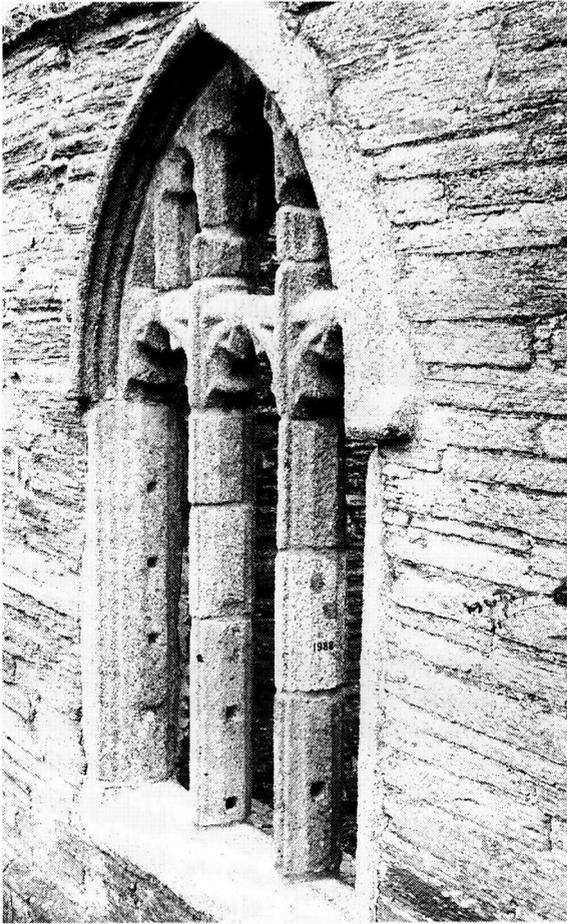


Fig.3

St Andrew, South Huish

One of the granite windows to the south aisle, which The Friends reconstructed in 1988, re-using fallen stone wherever possible

The work to the shell has involved the reinstatement of fallen sections of masonry particularly in the south aisle where the date '1988' has been discreetly carved. This is so far The Friends' only exercise in anastylosis, or the re-erection of fallen masonry (Fig.3). More granite fragments lie in the base of the tower awaiting decisions over any further reassembly. Ivor Bulmer-Thomas took particular delight in the reintroduction of a stone altar in 1985 giving a focus to the annual open air service, which has been held in the church every August since the repairs were complete, re-establishing a tradition which had ceased only in 1933 when the brambles and nettles had finally taken over. We have avoided stone replacement wherever we can and there are one or two areas where we have used SPAB tile

and the most recent inspection by English Heritage, in 1994, came to relatively sanguine conclusions. The tower is constructed in two different stones – the lower sections in a very soft blue-grey slate, which has suffered extensive erosion from wind-scouring, scooping out the surfaces of the stone to leave the mortar standing proud. This is partly a result of the friable nature of the stone itself, but also the hardness of the mortar previously used (we have of course only employed the softer lime mortar in our own works). However, the walls at the base of the tower where this stone is used are very thick (2'8") and although, given the lack of a roof, erosion is taking place on both the inner and outer surfaces we are assured that the stability of the tower will be maintained for many more years. The upper stages are in a firmer green stone, apparently a form of limestone schist, and this has weathered much better. The pressure on the lower storeys has also been reduced by the removal, with permission, of the upper 8' of the tower where the severest cracking had occurred. The all-enveloping ivy has been killed off.

repairs as an alternative.

The 1994-5 building campaign also encompassed the repair of certain of the tombs, which in the absence of conservation work by the heirs at law who are in theory responsible, had started to collapse. The earliest of the tombs records a death in 1729 and those buried in the churchyard include Edward Gilbert, a civil engineer of Falmouth (1861), and Mary Laskey, 'wife of William, son of the Reverend William Laskey, Rector of Braton and daughter of William James, late Commander of the Portland Falmouth Packet, who came on a visit to her daughter at Hope, and departed this life July 27, 1841 age 68 years'.

The 1994-5 campaign, which cost £9,000, of which £2,000 was raised in an appeal to members, has left the ruins in their best physical condition for 130 years. We shall have to return to the task in the medium term and keep a careful watch on the tower in particular, but do visit when you are next in this magical part of the south-west. The ruins are permanently accessible and you may well be joined there, not just by visitors and local people, but by the barn owls which have been spotted nesting in the tower masonry and by the sheep which tend the churchyard for us (and are corralled by the fencing which you will find lying on the ground when not in use).

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