

## St Andrew's Church

### Curry Rivel

#### Church Guide

### St. Andrew's Church Curry Rivel

#### Exterior

There was a church in Curry Rivel at the time of the Domesday survey in 1086. However, the village lay between two ancient monastic houses, so there may well have been a church on this site long before the Norman Conquest. In its present form the Church dates from around 1500, a prosperous period when many churches in south Somerset were enriched and enlarged.

The entrance porch was evidently meant to catch the eye with its upper story and generous use of the more expensive limestone from Ham Hill (above Montacute). The upper room would have been used to store documents. It could have been heated with a charcoal brazier and used, even in winter, as a place to prepare candidates for confirmation. At ground level on the right hand side, worshippers on their way in would have dipped their fingers in the holy water 'stoup' and made the sign of the Cross. Before the Reformation, the porch was where children were presented for baptism before being taken to the font just inside the door. It was in the porch that couples exchanged vows before having their marriage blessed in church. Here too, in an age when many could not write their name, a handshake that concluded a deal or bet between neighbours was felt to have more force.

This particular porch has intriguing details in the stonework, best seen at a distance of a few paces. Over the top of the arch is a bagpiper. Bagpipes were used to accompany dancing in an age when we were known abroad as 'the dancing English'. On either side of the porch are two other musicians, playing respectively a tenor viol and a shawm (a kind of oboe). The latter was recreated in the 1970s by a local carver to replace the original which had decayed. Dancing in churchyards before gravestones was not unknown and might even have flowed into the church, then uncluttered by pews. In the absence of a parish hall, St. Andrew's would have been the meeting place for various social activities.

An ornamental frieze runs across the front of the porch, just above the entrance arch. The portcullis family badge (left-centre) points to a devout and generous lady - Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of the reigning King Henry VII - who held estates in the neighbourhood.

Westwards toward the Tower, the first of many carved figures project from below the 'embattled' roofline; they are known simply as 'grotesques', providing variety and amusement, and the row continues all around the church. They may also, although the carvers would not have realised it, represent the pre-Christian folk memory of fantastic and magical creatures which would give some protection against the hostile force, material and spiritual, that were apt to emerge from the mists and storms driving down from the north. The Church stands on the northern edge of the village. The creature nearest the Tower probably appealed more directly to people of the Tudor age: it is a pug-nosed dog with a

chain around its neck - the sort of dog used on West Sedgemoor, a mile to the north, to startle wildfowl from the reeds towards the waiting hunters.

The Church is dominated at this point by the Tower, rebuilt in 1861 using the same blue lias and hamstone as before and to almost exactly the same design. The statue on the south side is that of the Patron Saint, St. Andrew the fisherman. At the top, a stone pig looks out from each corner. These are examples of 'hunky-punks' (creature squatting on their hunkers) that adorn many towers in south Somerset. The small lower window lights the ringing chamber. The tall upper window, filled with 'Somerset tracery', lights the bells themselves, a very fine peal of eight tuned to E flat. The oldest bell dates from 1610 and the heaviest -the 'tenor'- weighs 15cwt.

In 2002 an old, partly decayed access door in the north wall of the church was discovered behind plaster. Its use dates from the era during which processions, within and outside the Church itself, were an important part of the liturgy. The door had been blocked up sometime after the Reformation and -following a considerable fund raising effort- was reopened for use in 2006. It now provides convenient access to the Church for wheelchair users and to the Old School Room, situated to the north of the church, within the churchyard perimeter. The door itself is a worthy addition to this fine Church, with its metalwork all hand-crafted and the English oak planks that were shaped by a parishioner -Malcolm Cotterill- who also made the churchyard gates. The original medieval door is preserved within the Church, in the North Chapel.

At the east end, the Sanctuary was shortened in the 18<sup>th</sup> century so that the wall, with the great east window and its tracery, is not original.

Regarding the grotesques, it is known that, even in this rural area, air pollution has accelerated the decay of these entertaining carvings; cleaning and application of a protective lime-based poultice to save the remaining figures for the centuries to come is estimated to cost more than £ 600 each.

## Interior

### The Nave

This, the main body of the Church, is impressively large and light. Its size has little to do with the population of the village during the reign of Henry VII. It has much more to do with the determination and goodwill of a few wealthy people who had it rebuilt much as we see it today. If we can imagine it without pews, we can understand better how it could have been used, when not required for worship, for various social gatherings and can appreciate better the elegant hamstone arcade whose bases are now hidden by the seating.

The pews themselves are Victorian but many of the carved ends are thought to be Elizabethan, decorated mostly with architectural motifs. Two show the same lady's head with ear-warmers and one -on the north side- has the Latin initials standing for Jesus Saviour of Mankind. The pews towards the front were evidently reserved for 'the better sort' -gentry and farmers- who paid rent for their seating and slipped their visiting cards inside the little brass frames. Searchers prepared to get down on their knees may still find pegs on which gentlemen could put their top-hats during divine service. The kneelers, each one different, were made by ladies of the Parish in the 1980s.

There are fragments of 15<sup>th</sup> century glass in the top lights of the windows.

Behind is the Tower with its boldly coloured west window, probably of German glass and unlike any you are likely to see in any other Somerset parish church. The very fine tower fan vault must have survived the 1861 rebuilding. It has been suggested that this vault -and indeed most of the building as we see it- may have been designed by the master-mason who created the great vault under the central tower of Wells Cathedral. Each side of the tower arch is an imposing carved head.

The Victorian pulpit is of hamstone with Byzantine colonettes. The front of the Nave was originally separated from the Chancel by a carved wooden Screen, of which only the two side sections remain. The Screen, and the roof timbers throughout the Church, would have been brightly painted. A walkway along the top of the Screen, reached by a stairway in the north wall, played a significant part in the liturgy of Holy Week. Above this and framed by the great Chancel arch would have been suspended a life-size Crucifixion scene of carved and painted wood. Standing back, it is possible to make out an unusual element that still survives, namely a carved stone head at the very top of the arch. It would have been easier to see in its original colours. This carving -perhaps the best piece of ancient artwork now in the Church- may be interpreted as representing God the Father, always near.

#### The North Aisle

Before the Reformation, the north door, together with the west door under the tower, were chiefly used for the processions. During the unblocking of the doorway in 2005 a long slab below the sill was discovered, which proved to be a gravestone incised with the figure of a priest holding a chalice and wearing Mass vestments. The centre of the slab had been deliberately scored, obliterating part of the incised surface. Incised gravestones, dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century, are rare and the way this one had been subsequently desecrated is still more extraordinary. It has been re-laid in the north-west corner of the North Chapel.

The north-east window (nearest the Screen) has good Victorian glass and some older. The three kings depicted have strong local connections. Ine, King of Wessex, founded Taunton and must have passed through Curry Rivel on his visits to Muchelney Abbey, two miles east. Alfred, 200 years later, went into hiding at Athelney, six miles north-west, until his forces were strong enough to defeat the Danes. The third is, of course, King Arthur.

#### The North Chapel

Though the window tracery was 'modernised' when the Church was rebuilt at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, this is late 13<sup>th</sup> century and the oldest part of the building. From then on for 500 years, this was the burial place of leading families -de Lorti, Jennings, Trevilian, Speke, Alford and Powell. In each wall a projecting pedestal may once have supported a statue of the Blessed Virgin to whom the Chapel was dedicated. A second projection has been hacked off flush to the wall. This, and a vertical fragment of hamstone in the west wall of the Chapel, were discovered when plaster was scraped off as part of restoration in 1915. These small discoveries are of interest since they indicate the site of a door at the west end which would have given private access from the Manor House which has now disappeared. In 1915 also, the floor was lowered to its original level and a fine oak ceiling constructed.

After the two big Jennings monuments -one described as being in the Chancel and the other at the east end of the North Chapel- visitors are likely to be intrigued by the recesses in the north wall and the effigies they contain. Each recess has an elegant canopy of blue lias carved with a floral pattern. The knightly effigy is thought to be that of Baron Henry de Lorti I (died 1242), or of his grandson Henry de Lorti II (died 1321). The overall length, including the missing feet, proves that the effigy was originally elsewhere, perhaps on the south side of the Chapel. Chain mail fits closely round the head, a loose surcoat over the armour is cut well back over the shoulders as if to allow full movement of the arms and the right arm stretches across to grasp the sword hilt. The crossed legs have no particular significance. The effigy rests on the tomb chest of the person for whom the recess was made. The bones inside are thought to be those of Lady Sabina, née Revel, whose family -originally from Revel in south-west France- gave their name to Curry Rivel. At the time of writing the first edition of this brochure, in 2007, the family was represented by Alan Revell, who then lived in the Midlands. The three small effigies may represent de Lorti children. Lady Sabina was the wife of Henry de Lorti I.

The word 'Curry' comes from the language akin to Welsh which was spoken in these parts before the Roman invasion and until English came to predominate in the time of King Ine (7<sup>th</sup> century). In the case of this village, 'Curry' probably means 'stream' and suggests why the village was established here, on a safe dry ridge but with plenty of water - hence nearby Water Street.

The larger of the two recesses (14<sup>th</sup> century) towards the east may be an 'Easter Sepulchre', a focus of devotion during Holy Week. In the north-west corner of the Chapel is the incised grave slab found under the north doorway. Strangely, the top of a similar slab is at present to be seen on a window-sill of the North Chapel. The names of the two priests represented on these slabs have yet to be identified on the list near the main entrance.

### The Chancel

Before the Reformation this was the centre of worship and domain of the Priest. People stood in the Nave -there may have been a few benches for the elderly- to hear Mass, following it chiefly by the position and gestures of the Priest, since few could understand Latin. For whatever reasons, the east end was 'ruinous' in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was then shortened by about 12 feet, thus removing the head of the cross that had formed the ground plan of the Church. This explains why there are no sedilia for the clergy to sit on briefly during Mass and why there is no piscine in which to wash the sacred vessels or aumbry for the reserved sacrament.

The great east window is an 18<sup>th</sup> century version of late-gothic 'Perpendicular'. It contains some 15<sup>th</sup> century fragments in the top lights and some significant heraldic panels, including the arms of Beauchamp and Warwick and a roundel of 12<sup>th</sup> century glass from Canterbury Cathedral, a gift from the daughter of Dean Farrar. The chief virtue of the window is to let the daylight flood through the areas of plain glass.

The window on the south side of the Altar has panels engraved in 1987 by Laurence Whistler, perhaps the most skilful exponent in England of this difficult art. The engravings can only be appreciated by stepping into the Sanctuary and standing close to the window, where visitors will find a printed description.

The Altar rails, organ case and choir stalls were all designed by Stephen Dykes Bower and installed in 1956. The little cupboard in the south wall with its original linenfold door was probably not for sacred vessels (normally kept near the altar) but for precious books.

The Jennings tomb, a massive monument, carries the effigies of father and son, who died in 1625 and 1630 respectively. They lived in the big house at Burton Pynsent, a mile to the west, which was later owned by William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham. As well as the family mourners, there are effigies of still-born infants, snugly tucked in at both ends of the monument.

The late-Victorian two-manual organ was originally in the North Chapel. When moved to its present position, a two-foot stop was added on each manual. Recent cleaning and regulating has produced a much brighter sound. The organ now comprises 678 speaking pipes.

The area now occupied by the organ originally had an altar to the east end. In Victorian times, it provided seating for the top people of Curry Rivel and was known as the Drawing Room. The east window (1913) is difficult to see properly. It comes from the workshops of C.E. Kemp. Prefiguring the presentation of the Child Jesus, it shows the prophet Samuel brought to the Temple by his mother Hannah. Below the window, a memorial inscription records the death of a very young naval officer, killed by the explosion of a cannon on board his own ship.

#### The South Aisle

The Font is in its traditional place near the door. Its eight sides symbolise resurgence, a fresh start. Beside the door, rather high up, is a touching memorial to the Pitt family's Nanny. The lozenge-shaped hatchment nearby is that of her employer, Lady Hester Pitt, wife of William Pitt the Elder who inherited Burton Pynsent. The royal arms of Stuart over the door and the Tudor rose spread liberally around on pew ends are reminders that churches were a good vehicle to tell everyone, after a period of political uncertainty, who was now in charge.

The Curry Rivel tapestry behind the Font, stitched to celebrate the millennium, shows local landmarks and life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Burton Pynsent Monument erected by William Pitt the Elder, a kiln for drying withies, a teasel (grown as a crop and used for carding) and herons and willows.

Beside the entrance door on the east is a list of Rectors and Vicars (there is no longer any practical difference between these titles). The old Somerset family of Speke is represented several times and also on the War Memorial on the north wall. The two Rectors who held office very briefly in 1348 and 1349 probably died of the Black Death, which killed two-thirds of the Somerset clergy.

#### The Old School Room

To the north of the church, within the perimeter of the churchyard and on grounds donated by St. Andrew's, lies the Old School Room, formerly the Village School, also known as 'Parish Room'. It was built in 1828 at a total cost of £127 8s 4d, raised from public subscription. Following its closure in 2005 due to safety concerns about the roof structure, a

volunteer committee raised funds and obtained grants for repairs and further upgrading of the building. The refurbishment of the roof and its main parts (hall, kitchen and toilets) was completed in mid 2012. It is available again for regular use, including hiring out for meetings, classes and events, as well as –following its rededication by the Archdeacon of Taunton in January 2013– for Church Services.

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