

ST CUTHBERT'S CHURCHES IN OBORNE

INTRODUCTION

There are two churches dedicated to St Cuthbert in Osborne. In fact, that is not strictly true. All that now exists of the earliest extant church, known as Old St Cuthbert's Chancel, is just within the parish of Castleton, although it was, until it fell into disrepair and the then Bishop recommended that a new church be built about ¼ of a mile to the north, the parish church of Osborne.

St CUTHBERT'S CHANCEL.

Found on the A30 between Milborne Port and about ½ a mile east of Sherborne. It is currently maintained by the Redundant Churches Fund and is open for visitors who can buy a small, informative guidebook inside. Parking is a problem, however, although there is a small layby next to my cottage, Church Farm Cottage, and I am happy for visitors to the chancel to use this provided they park as considerably as possible so that we and our visitors can share the space.

This building can, I suppose, be regarded as the jewel of Osborne.

It would certainly appear to be the oldest extant building in the village. It would not, though, appear to have been the first church in Osborne. *I have taken much of the account of the early years of the chancel from J. Hutchins: "History and Antiquities of Dorset" Vol 4 3rd ed. 1870.*

A bull of Pope Eugenius III, 1145, mentions the vill and tithes of Woburn, and a chapel there, together with the church of St Mary Magdalen, near the castle. In another bull of Pope Alexander III, reciting and confirming the possessions of the Abbey at Sherborne, in 1303, the manor of Woborne, with the chapel of the said vill, and lands and tithes there are mentioned.



The church at Osborne was anciently a chapel of ease to the mother church of Sherborne, but is not mentioned in the Valor of 1291. It does appear, though, in Dean Chandler's Register of 1405. There, it is styled a chapel, dependent on the church of Sherborne, and dedicated to St. Cuthbert, and "it is there said, that the Abbot of Sherborne had the privilege to collate and induct a parson to it on a vacancy." Hutchins reports that there is a tradition in the parish that the ancient church stood in a field near the centre of the village adjoining the parsonage, and now belonging to the rector, but that becoming ruinous it was taken down, and the late church erected by an abbot of Sherborne. It is difficult to know exactly what part of the modern village is referred to in this tradition. Hutchins believes that it was probable "that this church was one of the ancient chapels mentioned in the account of Sherborne, and was rendered parochial, and the chancel added by Abbot Myer and the sacrist Dunster. The churchyard is surrounded by the parish of Sherborne, to which, before the destruction of the original church, it probably belonged."

Although only the chancel now remains, we have some idea of the appearance of the original church. Inside there is a framed reproduction of a drawing made by John Buckler in 1802 and found in the British Museum. This gives an excellent impression of what the church would have looked like before it was largely destroyed in 1860. *A copy of this can be found on this site in David Andrews' booklet.*



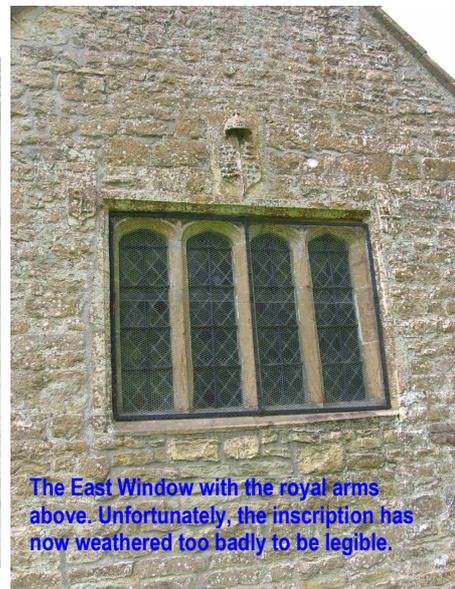
John Buckler's drawing 1802

According to the description in Hutchins it was a small slated building of one aisle and contained nothing remarkable. The roof was ceiled and the floor laid with ancient figured tiles, with the sword and keys, arms of France and England quarterly; also a single griffin and other arms defaced. Some of the tiles were rescued during the restoration work in the 1930's and are displayed within the chancel. The footings of the nave can be traced for some 35 feet west of the existing building and apparently some experts have thought that these suggest there may have been a tower at the western end. Buckler's drawing, however, gives no indication of this.

The chancel would appear to have been added by an abbot and sacrist of Sherborne in 1533. This is indicated by two inscriptions that can still be seen. Over the east window it reads: "Orate pro bono statu dompni Joh'is M. abbatis de Schirborne anno Domini M CCCC XXX III". Over the north window there is "Orate pro bono statu dompni Joh'is Dunster sacriste de Schirborn qui hoc opus fieri fecit anno Domini ..." Hutchins states that, judging from these inscriptions, "it appears probable that the chancel was added by John Dunster, sacrist of Sherborne Abbey in the time of Abbot Myer, whom Leyland calls the last abbot save one.



The north window where the inscription is more visible - if not in this image!



The East Window with the royal arms above. Unfortunately, the inscription has now weathered too badly to be legible.

Just outside the west end of the chancel one can see a stone slab on which a simple and rather crudely carved cross can be noted. My neighbour, who wrote the first history of Osborne, and to whom I am greatly indebted for a lot of information, claims that this is part of the original floor of the nave and that it is believed that beneath the slab lies the body of

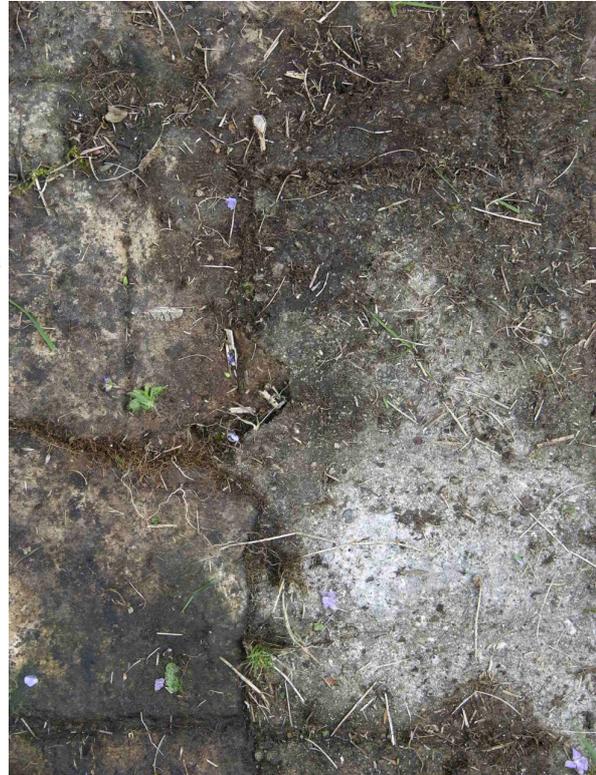
John Dunster. However, one reason for being uncertain about this claim is the contemporary report of the burial of John Dunster which was announced by the bells of the Abbey in Sherborne. It is described in Hutchins as: "At the foot of the pulpit stairs near the entrance into the chancel, is a flat stone. Upon which the figure of a cross in three steps is carved, and a moulding round the edge, but appears never to have had any brass fixed upon it, nor any inscription."

The chancel is now well looked after by the Churches Conservation Trust and is still used for Evensong once a year on Trinity Sunday, following a tradition started by the rector, Rev Alan Williams, who worked so hard to restore and renovate the building in 1936, as well as an informal Carol Service by candlelight just before Christmas.

One feature will surprise the modern visitor. Hutchins states: "the old churchyard, containing about a quarter of an acre of ground, adjoins the turnpike road from London to Sherborne, and commands a beautiful view of Sherborne Park and lodge, and of the ruins of the old castle.... within an iron railing within this churchyard are interred the remains of Mr Goadby..." What is left of Mr Goadby's tomb can still be spotted in what appears to be a farmer's field to the south of the present boundary of the churchyard, which is now considerably smaller than suggested by Hutchins. Sadly this tomb was preserved in quite good condition until relatively recently. Mr Goadby was a publisher, founder of the Sherborne Mercury which has since become the Western Gazette. He wished for a fir tree and a variety of perennial flowers to be planted upon his grave. The headstone read:

In Memory
Of Mr Robert GOADBY
Late of Sherbourne, printer, who departed this
Life, August 11, 1778, aged 57
Death is a path that must be trod,
If Man would ever come to God.
The fir-tree aspires to the sky,
And is clothed with everlasting verdure;
Emblem of the Good, and of that everlasting
Life, which God will bestow on them.
Since Death is the gate to Life, the grave
Should be crowned with flowers.

Here also lies RACHEL, his wife, who died
March 30, 1798.



Possibly the slab described by Hutchins, now outside the west door, where it is possible that John Dunster is buried. Something of the carving referred to is still visible

Because the remains appear to lie outside the churchyard, this has given rise to speculation that Mr Goadby had in some way fallen foul of the church, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support such a theory. The problem is identifying the original boundaries of the churchyard and why there is no evidence, apart from what is left of Mr Goadby's tomb, of any other graves in the field which, presumably was once the churchyard. When, one wonders, was the current fencing erected? It is possible it could have been at the time the railway embankment, which now obscures the beautiful view described by Hutchins, was built.

It seems that during the 18th and early 19th centuries the church was grievously neglected. So much so, in fact, that by 1860 the Archdeacon reported that nothing less than complete rebuilding was called for. The new church, also dedicated to St. Cuthbert, was built about a quarter of a mile to the north which is where the main cluster of houses now lies.

The 1911 edition of Kelly's Directory of Hants, Wilts, Dorset, IoW & Channel Islands states that the old chancel was being used as a mortuary chapel.

The old chancel fell into complete disrepair until the 1930's when the Rev. Williams, set about raising the funds to rescue it from its then current function as a fowl house and restore it. As you will see in the following newspaper articles and letters, the nave had deteriorated to such an extent that it was beyond rescue, and some of the stones were used in the construction of the new church.



The tree now planted where Robert Goadby's grave is, to replace the original structure that was destroyed when the trees around it grew too large. The fence marking the churchyard boundary is in the foreground, and in the background can be seen the railway embankment.

A LITTLE DORSET CHURCH

OLD ST CUTHBERT'S AT OBORNE

A Renovation Scheme

To the editor of the *Western Gazette*

Sir, Travellers by road or rail between Sherborne and Templecombe may have noticed that scaffolding has been erected at the west end of the Old St Cuthbert's Chancel at Osborne. This shows that the second stage in the preservation of this ancient structure has been commenced. The west wall, which leans badly, is being re-erected and the turret, with its 14th Century bell, restored. This will cost about £50. More than half this amount is in hand. When this is finished there will still remain the repair of the barrel roof and ceiling. For this another £50 will be needed. The work is being carried out under the guidance of Mr A. R. Powys, of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings.

The funds have come in very slowly, and I am anxious to see it completed. I have been told that this preservation is waste of money, but I cannot feel that it is right to allow a consecrated building, which was regularly used by Osborne parishioners between 1533 and 1861,

to fall into ruins. Will those to whom the little building is familiar help me to carry out the preservation? Every Trinity Sunday (which this year falls on June 16th) an open-air service is held at 3 p.m. in the little graveyard, and by that date I trust I may receive sufficient assistance to relieve me of the present financial burden. Donations may be sent to me, the Manager of the Westminster Bank, Sherborne, or given at the collection on June 16th.

Yours faithfully,
ALAN WILLIAMS
Osborne Rectory
Sherborne.

There was a chapel of ease to Sherborne Abbey on this spot in 1405, according to Dean Chandler's Register. It was dedicated to St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, who died in 687. In 1533 the present chancel was added by John Dunster, sacrist of the Abbey, in the time of Abbot Meyer. Tradition has it, that John Dunster was the first Rector of Osborne, and was buried at the entrance to the chancel, if so, his tomb has recently been uncovered and repaired. The nave contained four windows and a porch. Four window heads were discovered in the Rectory garden in 1931, and have been removed to the south side of the chancel. The nave was pulled down in 1861, and some of the stone forms part of the new church situated half a mile up the valley. The site of the nave was used as a burial ground until 1914, so the foundations of the building are lost. The chancel contains an oak pulpit, altar rails and altar table, all of the date of 1639. The altar table was used in the infants schoolroom.

From *Country Life* – September 11, 1942.

THE SMALLEST CHURCH?

Sir, - I have often heard that the church at Osborne, near Sherborne, Dorset, is the second smallest in England. Recently you published a picture of that at Culbone, but Osborne is smaller. It is 21ft by 12 ft., and was built in 1533 by the last Abbot of Sherborne. It was a fowl-house in 1931, and has recently been restored by the Rector, the Rev. Alan Williams, with the approval of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings. It has a typical country wagon vault on oak rafters.
F. R. Winstone, Bristol.

From *The Western Gazette* November 1947.

OSBORNE

LATE REV. ALAN WILLIAMS
(AN APPRECIATION)

An Osborne correspondent writes: The death of the Rev. Alan Williams revives memories of his five years as Rector of Osborne, 1931-1936. He was the ideal parish priest, having a close and personal contact with all his parishioners, a welcome and constant visitor to sick and old people, ready always to join in the joys and sorrows that go to make up village life. Although getting on in years when he became Rector, he had a great capacity for work, and at once undertook the raising of funds and restoring of Old St Cuthbert's Chancel. This he completed and it was reopened by Dr. G. B. Allen, then Bishop of Sherborne. He also com-

menced the annual service held there every Trinity Sunday and in June 1936, he celebrated Holy Communion in the Chancel, the first time for 75 years. He interested donors to give the three beautiful east end windows by the well-known artist, Mr Christopher Webb, in the Parish Church at Osborne. He further beautified the church by the altar ornaments and fittings, and his love and care for ancient things was shown by his having the 16th century register bound and transcribed at the British Museum and obtaining a fireproof safe to keep it in. It was largely through his effort that the village school was retained when so many small schools were closed in Dorset. He had a great interest in all activities connected with the parish and many are grateful to have known him and shared his friendship.

The Western Gazette May 1937

A DORSET CHURCH

RESTORING ST. CUTHBERT'S, OBORNE

SMALLEST OCCASIONALLY-USED CHURCH IN ENGLAND.

The holding of the annual Trinity Sunday services at St. Cuthbert's, Osborne, on Sunday provides opportunity for reference to the restoration – now almost completed – of this, the smallest occasionally used church, and one of the smallest churches in England.

Largely through the instrumentality of the former Rector, Rev. Alan Williams, and with the approval of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, this notable old building – which had become disused, but which it was felt should not fall into further disrepair – has been restored to such a condition that it ought to stand for an indefinite period.

Altogether, about £175 has been spent on the restoration and practically the entire cost has been met. The remainder of the scheme consists of the preservation, for exhibition in the chancel, of the best of the ancient tiles which have been found during the excavations in the nave of the old church, and the restoration of the old font, the remains of which have been found in a neighbouring garden.

About £10 or £15 will cover the cost of the completion of the whole work, and subscriptions will be gratefully received by the Rev. Alan Williams, who is continuing his interest in the scheme.

The work has been excellently done by Mr. Stainer, of Sherborne, and much interest and help have been given by Messrs. C. W. Pike and C. N. Chester (the Churchwardens), Mr Wilfred Cheeseman, who is acting as caretaker, and others.

Any who wish to inspect this interesting example of ancient architecture may do so by obtaining the key from Mr Cheeseman's house nearby.

Services have been held at St. Cuthbert's on Trinity Sunday, for the past seven years. Sunday's services were conducted by the Rev. W. M. Askwith (vicar of Sherborne) in the afternoon, and by the Rev. Alan Williams in the evening, the Rev. W. F. Carpenter (rector of Osborne and Poyntington) being present on each occasion..

From *The Western Gazette* Friday, August 13, 1937

AN OLD DORSET CHURCH

ST CUTHBERT'S CHANCEL AT OBORNE

"SAVED FROM COMPLETE OBLITERATION"

The restoration of the Chancel of Old St Cuthbert's Church at Osborne, near Sherborne, the little sanctuary, so familiar to travellers on the London-Exeter Road, has been practically

completed, under the advice of the late Mr A. R. Powys, of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings.

The work has cost £176, of which £132 was received in donations, the remainder from service collections, visitors' box, etc.

The Rev. Alan Williams, of Clatcombe House, Sherborne, until recently rector of Osborne, who was responsible for the restoration work, states: - (1) The placing of the best of the XV century tiles in cases to be cared for in the chancel. These were discovered when clearing the site to expose the foundations of the nave; (2) the putting together of portions of the broken font, which were found in an adjoining garden. The cost will be about £10.

In 1936 the late Mr John Rickman, who gave his young life this year in the cause of freedom in Spain, unearthed in the British Museum a book of drawings of Wilts and Dorset churches by John Buckler and his son, John Chessel Buckler, in 1802. A copy of these was made by Miss Mary V. Williams at the Museum and is hung in the chancel.

We now know, continues Mr Williams, the size and appearance of the XIV or XV century nave, which was allowed to fall down in 1861, when the present less beautiful church was erected further up the valley. In the wall of the surrounding glebe, a carved XVII century plinth of Ham Hill stone was unearthed. The drawing of the church from the S.W. showed that it was the top of a tablet on the west wall of the nave. The rest of the tablet with its inscription was destroyed.

"Each year on Trinity Sunday since 1931 services have been held in the chancel. What further use can be made must be left to future rectors of Osborne – but at all events a consecrated building hallowed by the prayers and worship of many generations of Osborne folk, has been saved from complete obliteration."

I recently found the extract below on Google Books from a 19th century work by a Reverend James Nightingale, "The Church Plate of the County of Dorset. With extracts from the Returns of Church Goods by the Dorset Commissioners of Edward VI

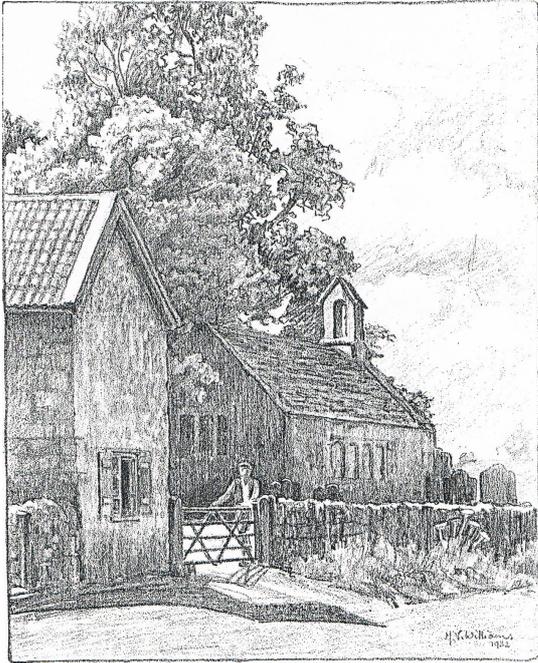
The Parish of Osborne. – One Chalice of silver. To the church's use there is appointed the said Chalice. Sir John DuNSTER, vicar. Robert Dowle, Walter Appleby, churchwardens ; Thomas Dowle, Thomas Rychemond, parishioners.

(John Dilnster was sacrist of Sherborne Abbey in the time of the last Abbot but one, John Myer. He built the chancel of Osborne Church in 1533. This is recorded in a black letter inscription over the north window – " Orate pro bono statu dompni Joh'is Dunster sacriste de Schirborn qui hoc opus fieri fecit anno

Domini " Another inscription is found over the east

window for the " bono statu" of the Abbot, with the date 1533. Osborne was a peculiar of the Dean of Salisbury. The first incumbents after the Dissolution are styled Vicars. The name of John Dunster occurs in 1546, and he still held the vicarage in 1552. " He probably lies buried under the flat stone at the foot of the pulpit stairs, which tradition says covers the remains of the builder of the church." The chancel of this church alone remains, and a new church has been erected on a different site.)

A Further Selection of Pictures of Old St Cuthbert's Chancel



Drawn by Miss M V Williams in 1932 after the Reverend Alan Williams had restored the chancel

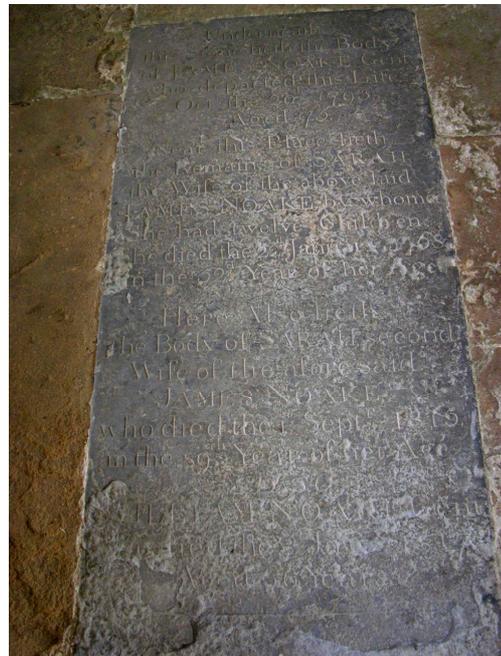


Some of the tiles found during the restoration and now on display in the chancel.

*Extracts from "Mediaeval Sherborne" Joseph Fowler
MA FGS 1951
copied at SDFHS

Leland ("Itin" vol 2 p27) tells us that, when he visited Sherborne soon after the Suppression, he found Dunster living in the town, and that the ex-Prior brought him to the library of the monastery. or to wherever the remaining books were stored at that time, where the King's antiquary made a careful note of them. Dunster may then have been living with his friend, John Capel, when Leland visited him, in the messuage in the cemetery, near the Almshouses. He survived Capel by seven years. – his burial being thus recorded in St Mary's Parish Register – "Dominus Johannes Dunster sepultus, November 11, 1570", a day on which the people of Sherborne heard the great bell of St Mary's tolling for the late Prior of the monastery.

(St Mary's churchwardens' Account 1569-70 "Rynging of the greate bell at the deathe of Master Dunster")



One of the memorial slabs in the chancel; this one is for a James Noake and his family.