

St Nicholas Church Kemerton with Charles Brazier

# ALOOKAT

# St Nicholas Church Kemerton

with Charles Brazier



2006

THE FRIENDS OF ST NICHOLAS CHURCH

# First published 2006

## Copyright © Charles Brazier

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission.

Designed by Ian McLeish Picture transfer by Ben Ford Jacket printed by Sircombe Print, Tewkesbury Text produced at Chapel Graphics, Kemerton Electronic version by Richard Bennett 2013 Edition 2 printed by Solopress 2019

## Foreword

For a while now I have been interested in stained glass windows in churches. I won't put it any stronger than that, I am certainly not an expert on the subject, but when visiting any church I feel drawn to any stained glass there might be.

I began to get the impression that very few of our own congregation ever took much notice of our lovely windows here at St Nicholas. So I decided to write an article about them for our parish magazine in the hope that some people might be interested enough to use it as a guide to view the windows.

But before I got around to doing it I was asked to give a talk on the subject at the AGM of The Friends of St Nicholas. This led to a request to put it all into print. And so here I am, but this way I can go into a bit more detail than I could have in the magazine.

I am not a trained writer, nor a historian, so I've decided to write this as 'a letter to you' telling you about some of the things I have managed to find out about our interesting windows at St Nicholas. I hope that you will receive it and read it in the same way.

# Dear Reader

First I think a little history of the Church might help.

In the year 680 the Diocese of Worcester was formed when the Great See of Lichfield was divided up. This covered an area from Staffordshire to the Bristol Channel.

Then in 1541 the Diocese of Gloucester was created out of the Worcester Diocese. This covered the same area as the county, which included Kemerton and Bristol. The first Bishop of Gloucester was John Wakeman, who had been the last Abbot of Tewkesbury.

In 1625 Godfrey Goodman was made Bishop of Gloucester, a position he held until 1655, and in the middle of all this he made himself Rector of Kemerton - for 17 years. I've heard of parish priests becoming Bishops and retiring Bishops taking a parish, but this seems a bit unusual. But then one must remember that these were troubled times in the Church of England. Also during his time as Rector he gave the 'Advowson', or 'Living' of Kemerton "to the Mayor and burgesses of the City of Gloucester, in trust, to present to his nearest of kin, or in default, to a son of the Mayor of Gloucester or of the Senior Alderman". This actually meant Bishop Goodman's next of kin. And so for the next 200 years we had two more Godfrey Goodman's and a John Goodman and other members of the family as Rector of Kemerton.

Then somewhere along the line the Advowson was granted to St Bartholomew's Hospital in Gloucester, but with the Goodman clause still in it.

## The Revd Thomas Thorp

In 1839 when the Living of Kemerton became vacant again the Bishop of Gloucester, at that time Bishop James Monk, overrode all ownership and wishes, and gave the parish to one Thomas Thorp, who was aged 41.

The Reverend Thomas Thorp was a tutor at Trinity College

Cambridge. In 1836 he was appointed Archdeacon of Bristol by Bishop Monk, who then was anxious to find him a Living in the diocese.

It has always seemed a bit odd to me that he should give him a job in Bristol, which was just about as far south in the diocese as one could get, and then give him Kemerton which was about as far north in the diocese as one could get. But on reflection I think the Bishop knew the Archdeacon very well and knew just what he was doing.

Thomas Thorp was a member of, and had become President of a movement in Cambridge called The Cambridge Camden Society, a Tractarian movement with aims of restoring church architecture and also restoring qualities lost in the worship of The Church of England.

It would seem Kemerton was a prime example of neglect, the church building and the church spiritual were both in a bad way. The chancel was boarded up and used as a store, the mullions and tracery of the windows were crumbling, and the roofs of the two aisles in danger of falling.

Because of his Bristol duties Thorp enlisted the help of a friend and fellow member of The Camden Society Robert Suckling as curate, to be the man on the spot. The Bishop of Ely had refused Suckling ordination because of his Romanish views.

## The Rebuilding

They started by clearing and using the Chancel and cutting the tops off the tall box pews and turned them all to face one way. But the Archdeacon was advised by the architects he had engaged that the church would sooner or later have to be rebuilt. He decided it would have to be sooner, and so after taking up residence in the village in 1844 he started an application of faculties and then had to raise a considerable amount of money.

There were many objections to his plan to overcome but eventually work started on replacing the nave, chancel and south aisle.

The old church had been a narrower and lower building, so the new south aisle was extended by eight feet to the south.

It would seem that most of the funds for this part came from



The church from the north prior to 1846

Thorp's friends in The Camden Society who took a great interest in the project, and also considerable influence.

The 19 October 1847 was the day of celebration when the completed work was re-consecrated in a most elaborate service. The Bishop's arrival the previous evening was met by a multitude of parishioners who escorted his carriage by torchlight to the Rectory. They had probably never seen a Bishop before. The next morning there was a great procession to the church. It included 150 clergy plus many dignitaries, guests and parishioners. They must have been a bit crowded in there.

Besides the re-consecration of the church a new piece of churchyard was to be consecrated. However, during the service it started to rain and the rest of the proceedings were very soggy indeed. A very large marquee had been erected on a nearby lawn in which 800 people were to take lunch at the Rector's expense. It is said that "by now the rain was very heavy indeed, but the Bishop made his speech, which was well received"

The next morning the Bishop held a Confirmation Service at which

he confirmed 64 persons.

The Archdeacon then had another round of bitter exchanges with the opposition before he could start rebuilding the north aisle. This was completed and marked with another special service in October 1849.1 read that this stage of the work was paid for by three people, Captain John Hopton, his wife Mrs Hopton and Thomas Thorp himself, who each put up over £1,000. That was a lot of money in the 1840s. And so the church was rebuilt.

The architect, Richard Carpenter, had drawn up plans for a new tower, with a spire, but this was never done, and so the high roof of the nave makes the present tower look a little on the short side.

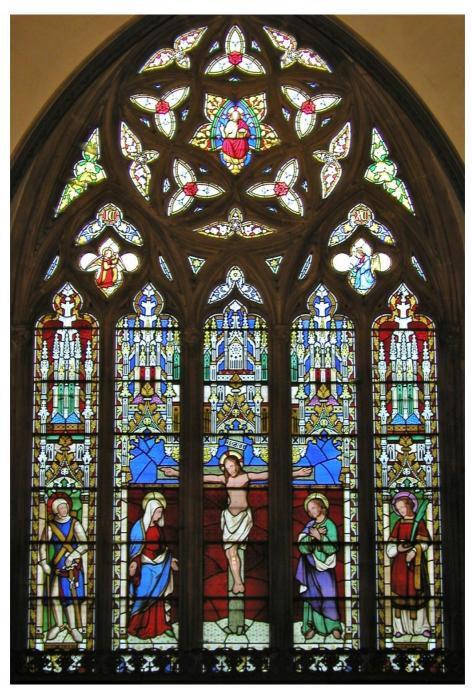
Now let's have a look at the windows; the old church didn't have any stained glass windows.

Because of the time factor the task of providing the windows for the new chancel and south aisle was divided between two artists -Thomas Willement and John Hardman of Birmingham. The north aisle was built with plain glass in the windows.

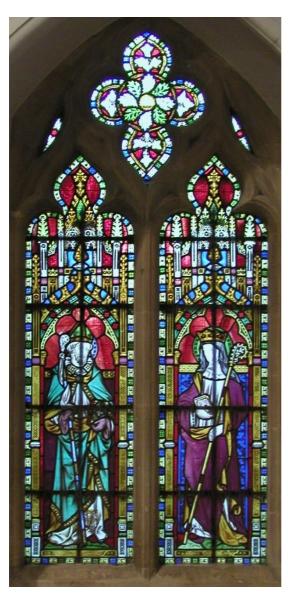
#### The Windows in the Chancel

The main east window in the chancel is of five lights, or divisions. The stone tracery in this window has been described as "of a very high standard", but personally I think that applies to all the windows. This window is actually longer than is visible because the reredos covers about two feet of the bottom. The amount of art work in this window, and some of the others, is amazing - every square inch seems to have been covered.

The theme of this window is "that the disciple shall suffer with his master". In the centre we have Christ's crucifixion, and at his feet his mother Mary and St John. On the right outside light is St Stephen the first Christian martyr, and on the left is St Alban, the first martyr of England. It is not widely known that for a short time after the rebuilding, the dedication of the Church was changed to St Alban, but this did not go down very well with the locals and after a lot of protests it was changed back to St Nicholas. This window is by Thomas Willement.



The main east window in the Chancel

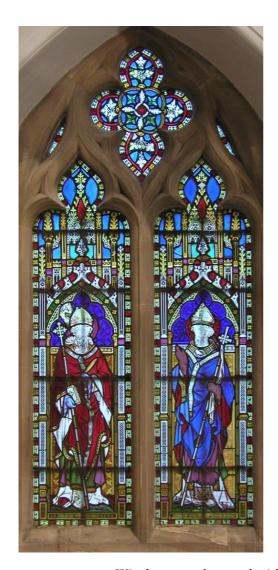


Windows on the north of the chancel

The side windows in the chancel are by John Hardman. There are three two-light windows and a single-light window. The two-light window in the north wall depicts St Wulstan the good and brave Bishop of Worcester 1062 -1096, and St Etheldreda. This shows the influence of The Cambridge Camden Society because Cambridge was in the diocese of Ely, and St Etheldreda appears in the Ely coat of arms. She was an East Anglian saint.

Now in the others we have St Ambrose and St Augustine of Hippo, and St Gregory the Great and St Augustine of Canterbury. St Ambrose, St Augustine of Hippo and St Gregory are three of the four Great Teachers, or as sometimes called, The Latin Doctors. The fourth one, St Jerome, we shall come across later. The single window is of St Nicholas.

Kemerton's church is one of about 400 churches in England dedicated to St Nicholas. The artist has

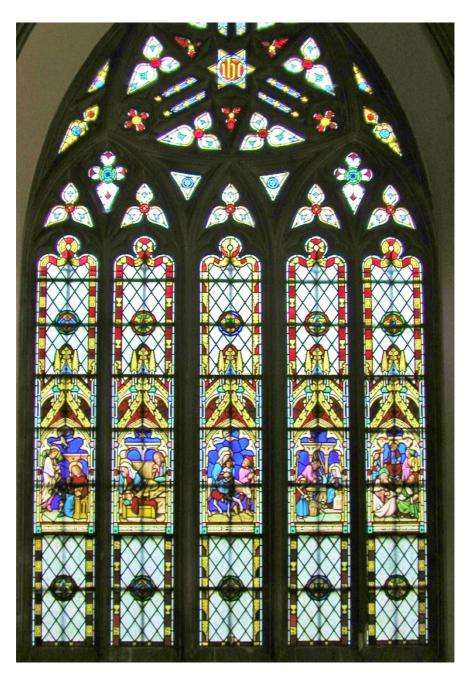




Windows on the south side of the chancel

included in this window some of the stories attributed to this saint.

The three boys raised to life from the butcher's brine tub, and the three bags of gold given to the three girls as marriage dowries, have become the pawnbrokers' three brass balls, the symbol of their trade.



The main window at the east of the south aisle

The Windows in The South Aisle
The lovely five-light window at the
east end of the south aisle by Thomas
Willement is called "The boyhood of
Christ". The scenes are The
Annunciation, The Holy Family, The
Flight Into Egypt, In The Carpenters
Shop and The Young Jesus In The
Temple. I think this is my favourite
window, and one thing I like about it
is the 3D effect you get if standing
between the two front pews, all due
to the blue glass.

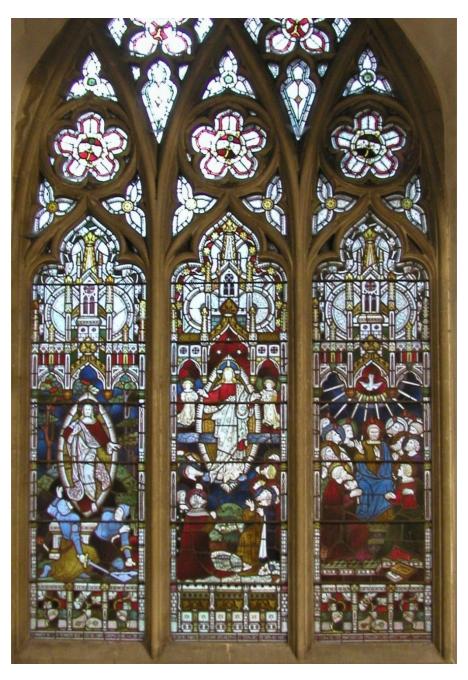
The windows in the south wall are decorated but not pictorial.

The small window behind the font carries the Willement monogram and depicts Jesus being baptised by John in the Jordan. This lovely little window was a gift to the church from Mr Carpenter, the architect and his wife.

I enjoy being in the church on a summer's evening when the setting sun shines through this window, sending streams of colour right up the church.



The window in the Baptistry



The main window in the Lady Chapel

The Windows in The Lady Chapel

Now if we go over to the north aisle the three windows we see are all memorial windows.

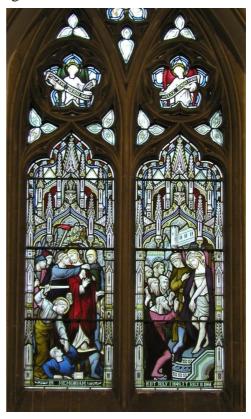
The three-light east window is to the memory of Archdeacon Thomas Thorp, and was installed in 1880 by Disney L. Thorp, who was either a younger brother or a nephew, I'm not sure. To my mind this is the best window in the Church, it has a strong message. It is by Clayton & Bell and was made and put in by Powells.

The depictions in this window are The Resurrection, The Ascension and Pentecost.

The two two-light windows in the north wall are scenes of Christ's Passion and Trial, and Jesus being taken down from the Cross.

The left window again installed by Disney L. Thorp is in memory of Robert Disney Thorp and Johnson Thorp. Robert Disney Thorp died in 1849 and I feel sure he was the Archdeacon's father as he was 31 years his senior. Johnson Thorp was a brother who died in 1861 aged 60, his address given as Regents Park, London. They are both buried by the side of the Archdeacon outside the south side of the chancel.

The only lady member of the family I have found mentioned is Mary Ann Thorp, who was 64 when she died in 1875 and has her own grave next to the others.



Memorial windows in the north aisle

The other window is a memorial to The Revd William Hopton and his wife Anne.

The Hopton's story is very long and complicated, but briefly, in the 1580s one Conon Parsons and family came to Kemerton, and in 1589 bought Nether [or Lower] Court. Over the years the Parsons family became very influential in the district, but about 1820 they changed their name to Hopton in order to inherit a large estate in Herefordshire. So William, who was the ninth and youngest child and the fourth son of John and Deborah Parsons, became a priest and in old age retired to Kemerton where he became the assistant to the Rector. The Revd John Goodman, from 1832 to 1839. He died at the age



Memorial windows in the north aisle

of 91 in January 1841 and his wife died in 1850. So William was born a Parsons, became a parson and died a Hopton.

I can find no record of who was responsible for these two windows but I think it would be a fair guess that they too are by Clayton & Bell and put in by Powells. Now we come to the last memorial window, which is in the ringing chamber at the bottom of the tower. The left side of this two-light window is in memory of Jerome John Mercier who was Rector of Kemerton following Thomas Thorp from 1878 until 1901. He is depicted as St Jerome with the Rector's very handsome features.

Now this is the bit that interests me, when the church was rebuilt, those responsible for the windows omitted St Jerome from the Four Latin Masters. How were they to know then that years later there would be a Rector called Jerome who was so loved by the Parish that a window would be erected in his memory and would give the opportunity



Windows in the ringing chamber

to include St Jerome? This was put in during 1903.

The right side is of St Anne, and was a gift from The Revd Jerome's widow, Mrs Anne Mercier and was dedicated on her seventieth birthday on 11 May 1912.

St Anne is said to have taught the Blessed Virgin Mary to read. This window is by William Pearce of Birmingham.

## Rectors in the early 1900s

The Revd Jerome was so respected that the parishioners and friends also erected the Angel in the churchyard to his memory.

The Revd G. L. Mallett followed Jerome as rector but only lasted one year before he died. Then Mrs Anne Mercier bought the living from St Bartholomew's and installed her son, The Revd J. A. B. Mercier, who was affectionately known as Alec. He was here until 1933.

## The Organ

In 1950 to celebrate the centenary of the rebuilding of the church it was decided to move the organ from the north east corner, in the chancel, to the north west corner of the church, and to enlarge it.

My first glimpse of Kemerton church was of planks down the church and the organ half built. When I arrived in the village a few weeks later it was complete.

This proposal had completely divided the congregation and there was a bit of an atmosphere, which thank goodness soon blew over. I mention this because I have sometimes wondered what the outcome would have been had the window to the left of the north door, which is still of plain glass and now behind the organ, been chosen as the Mercier's memorial window instead of the one in the tower. I think that could have been interesting.

Well, that is about all there is to say about the windows except to say "that there can be very few churches that can boast that they have a set of windows that depict Christ's life from the Annunciation, through his boyhood, his Baptism, Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost. In fact as interesting a set of windows that you will see anywhere."

## Other points of interest

There are a few other things in the church that are worth a mention. The lovely painted reredos behind the High Altar was painted by Miss Gwendoline Hopton, daughter of Captain Charles Hopton of Upper Court, Kemerton. It was completed and dedicated at Christmas 1912.

The paintings are copies of part of the lovely frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli which cover the walls of the chapel in The Riccardi Palace in Florence.

Sadly, the following summer Miss Hopton, who was a keen cyclist, was involved in a fatal accident at Beckford, with a bolting horse and carriage.

I still remember the late Stedman Devereux telling me how as a young man he took his turn at holding the paints for Miss Hopton.

A much more detailed description of the reredos can be found on the church bookstall.

The very nice stone altar in the Lady Chapel and the Aumbrey built into the wall for the safe storage of the Reserved Sacrament are a memorial to the Revd William John Tooth who was Rector from 1942 until 1959. They were placed there in 1961 by the parishioners. The altar is used for weekday communion services.

The other thing of interest is the brass corona hanging in the nave, that holds lighted candles at Christmas and other festivals. This is the only one left of three identical coronas made by John Hardman of Birmingham, when the church was rebuilt.

Visitors sometimes ask about those stone-carved heads situated at the top of the columns supporting the chancel arch. There are four; two on the nave side and two on the chancel side.

There is no documentation about these, but there is a story that has been handed down the generations. It is that they are a product of the stonemason's sense of humour, and are likenesses of the then Rector, Archdeacon Thorp, the two churchwardens, and the parish clerk. The one with the whiskers is said to be the Clerk.

There are also two others, a bit lower down on the nave side. The one by the pulpit is of a winged angel, and the other one over the hymn board is quite clearly a lady, but who I don't know. I wish there was something to tell us.

I wonder how many people have walked around the outside of the church and seen the carved heads each side of some of the windows. There are Bishops, Kings, Queens, and other assorted people. Well worth a glance.



 $The \ Ven. \ Thomas \ Thorp \ BD \ Camb., \ Rector \ of \ Kemerton \ 1839-1877$ 

## Archdeacon Thorp

I would like to say a bit more about Archdeacon Thomas Thorp because I don't think Kemerton realises how indebted we are to this man. Yes, he gave us a new church building, but more than that he gave us a dignity and quality of life and worship that I like to think has been maintained. Under his leadership Kemerton had the first surplice-clothed choir in any rural village Church, and they sang Choral Evensong every day of the week, in fact one national newspaper even said that Kemerton had a choir to rival St Paul's - well perhaps St Paul's wasn't very good that year. I have discovered that in 1850 "each member of the Choir received three shillings per quarter".

He provided the choir with top class choirstalls to sit in, even complete with misericords. You may have noticed that the boys' treble stalls have now been converted into the altar rails.

The activities in Kemerton were being watched by many and I think it is fair to assume that the Archdeacon's influence was felt beyond the parish boundaries.

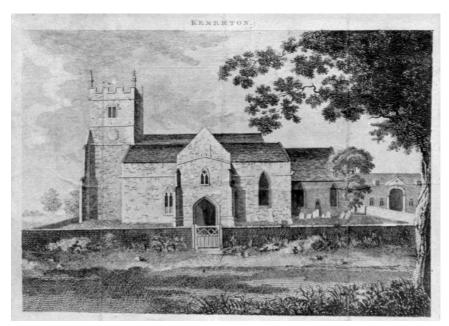
He was also responsible for the building of the school, which served the community for over 100 years, and no doubt maintained a steady supply of choirboys.

Thomas Thorp was a generous man and took a keen interest in the



The relief sculpture by Walter Smith

young. Young boys with obvious talent were helped to get apprentice-ships, and one young lad in particular, who showed a talent of art, was sent to a London art school at Thomas Thorp's expense. Walter Smith later made a name for himself in the U.S.A. and then came back to England and is buried in this churchyard. We have one fine example of his work hanging in the ringing chamber. It was done while at art school and is a sculptured likeness of the Archdeacon, and is well worth seeing.



South side of the old church showing the porch and room above

Archdeacon Thorp died in February 1877 at the age of 79, but even then his generosity hadn't finished. In 2003 we had the top of the tower re-leaded and the craftsman taking the old lead off discovered an artefact left by the man who had put it on. This was a round disc of lead about three inches in diameter inscribed on both sides, which reads;

"Rev. J.J. Mercier [Rector], Leonard Baldwyn [organist] Surplice Choir and Choral Service. W. Smith and F. Nind [Churchwardens] A. Grizzelle [Parish Clerk] 1879."

## The reverse reads;

"Tower Restored, Bells Rehung by bequest of the late - Archdeacon Thorp B.D. Kemerton AD 1879"

So at the time of rebuilding he didn't get his new tower with a spire but for our sake he made sure that the old tower was made safe and the bells restored.

The more I learn of this man the more I am reminded of those words at the start of St John's Gospel "There was a man sent from God". Well perhaps that sounds a bit strong but somehow I don't think Bishop James Monk should get all the credit for sending Thomas Thorp to Kemerton.

If you want to pay your respects to this great man, and you haven't already done so, then go and have a look at the memorial to him at the left of the High Altar.

When the Revd Jerome Mercier arrived in Kemerton he must have considered himself a very lucky man, not only did he inherit a new church building, but everything was a 'going concern'. All he had to do was keep it going and improve it, and this he seems to have done.

St Nicholas doesn't have a lot of visible ancient history - well, we can't have it both ways, but history we do have. We can trace our Rectors back to 1242. Everyone seems to agree that the best part of the old church was the south porch, which had to go because it was in the way of the widened Church. It had a groined roof with fan tracery, but above it was a small room, most likely its origin was a priest room, which has had various uses, including a school or teaching room.

In 1648 a baby boy by the name of Robert Pool was born in there. His parents came from Tewkesbury, which probably helps to explain the situation. But being born in church doesn't seem to have done Robert any harm because he came back 94 years later for his funeral. It is most likely that it was in that little room that the monks copied the Wickliffe Manuscripts that are now kept in the Royal Library in Vienna.

There are so many questions that I would like answers to, for instance, those great slate slabs at the east end of the north aisle which the Lady Chapel Altar now stands on, they are monuments to all the Parsons family. The question is how long have they been there and were they brought in from a vault or something - if so where was it? Also, if you pick up the carpet strips in the north aisle, you will find

memorial tablets to all sorts of people including past Rectors going back many years. Well, perhaps one day we will try to sort them out.

But I have rattled on a lot longer than I intended so I will close this letter with

God's Blessing and my best wishes

Yours sincerely,

Charles Brazier



#### CHARLES BRAZIER

Charles Brazier has lived in Kemerton for most of his life. Born in 1928 in Worcestershire, he went to school in Cutnall Green. On leaving school he joined the garden staff of a large country house, before serving in the Royal Air Force from 1946 to 1948.

Arriving in Kemerton in 1950 he then spent 43 years helping to create and maintain The Priory Garden with Peter Healing, a garden much loved by visitors.

A member of St Nicholas congregation since 1950, he has been bellringer, churchwarden and sacristan. He has written a number of pieces for the Parish Magazine, and now turns his literary skills to a concise description of the parts of the church that interest him.