



STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

BRIEF HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

The church of Cleeton St. Mary stands in the glorious landscape of the Shropshire Hills, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, bounded on both sides by SSSI's (sites of special scientific interest), home to curlews, and under the gaze of Clee Hill.

As you approach the village from the road the spire is visible ahead and leads you on. The church sits in the centre of the village, indeed it is the centre of the village as, before the building of the church, Cleeton was a small hamlet of scattered farms and squatters cottages situated further down towards Bromdon.

These buildings of Cleeton St. Mary were commissioned as an act of philanthropy by George Pardoe, a local landowner, who, at the same time, commissioned a school building, the alms houses and a vicarage. As such, Cleeton St. Mary is a rare example of a rural nineteenth century endowment of this scale, the majority of which were built in expanding industrial areas. This is also a testament to the unique combination of the rural and industrial nature of Clee Hill and its surrounding villages.

Prior to the 1870's development, workers dwelt in what were known as squatter's cottages built and occupied by workers on the hill. The land owners apparently allowed the workers to stake a claim to a home and one acre of land if they could build a chimney in one day, a tradition akin to the neighbouring Welsh tradition of ty unnos.

The area has a long history, with archaeological evidence showing occupation and habitation on and around Clee Hill beginning with a Roman hill fort on the top of the Clee hill. Over time people were drawn by the rich resources available including quarrying and mining for coal and iron, stone for building (Dhustone), wood for timber and charcoal (for domestic heat and industrial smelting processes), lime kilns, brick and tile making. These activities increased in the late 19th Century.

The church is the centre of the most complete complex in Shropshire of church, school, almshouses and vicarage built over a short period of time by a wealthy patron and as such has a high social, heritage and cultural value. This endowment created a geographic and social centre to the village and the community, indeed it created the identity of Cleeton St Mary as it now stands. In design, the collection of buildings, built close to one another, served the community in both a sacred and secular sense from infancy through to old age.

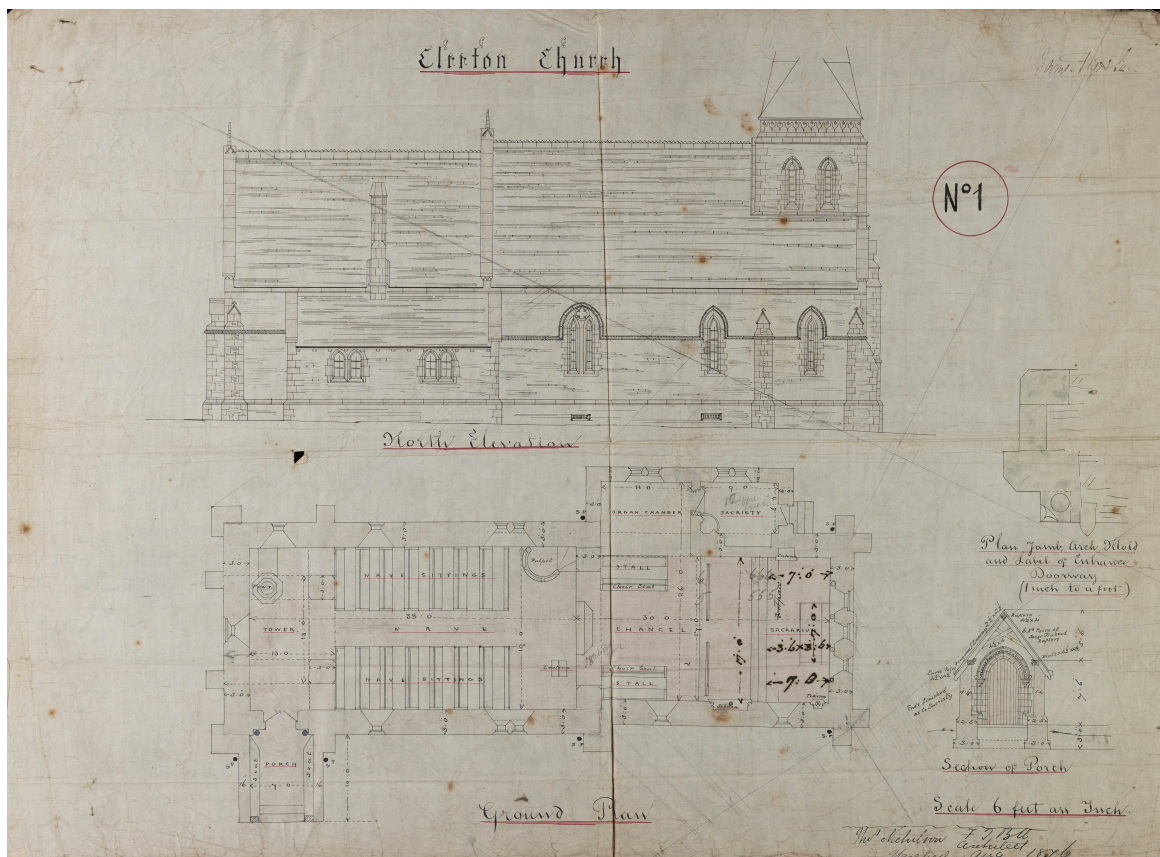
The land around the church and the village is ancient common land with grazing rights attached to the older houses in the community. Entitlement to use of the common land enabled a way of life based around working with the landscape. This interaction forms a strong relationship and attachment, both between the members of the community and the lived environment that still continues.

As industry developed on Titterstone Clee along with employment came an influx of people to live and work, and in the byproducts of the industry - for example transport to take finished products away. A branch railway line, The Ludlow and Clee Hill Railway, was formed solely to transport minerals from Clee Hill, and Titterstone Clee. The line was built in 1864 and was in use until 1960.

Prior to the establishment of St. Mary's, the residents of Cleeton belonged to the parish of Bitterley. This meant an arduous journey over the top of Clee Hill and back again to attend church services. This was undertaken in all weathers and for many, who also had to take this journey to work, it meant no rest on the sabbath.

With the need for a local church clear, St Mary's was commissioned initially as a chapel of ease. It was designed by Thomas Nicholson, an architect from Hereford who had already designed other churches. In terms of phasing; the school opened first in 1872 then the design of the church was commissioned which, along with the vicarage was opened in 1878; by 1883 the almshouses had also been built. A tablet below the west window of the church states that he undertook these works, "in humble gratitude to Almighty God for recovery from a dangerous sickness".

Below: Thomas Nicholson's Design for St. Mary's, Cleeton



Description.

Cleeton St. Mary is a grade II listed building (of special architectural and historic interest) and is a category D listing on the Heritage at Risk list.

Nicholas Pevsner famously said that Cleeton St. Mary Church was, "of no architectural interest". He may have been referring to the outside, as it is relatively plain, but surely this is because it could not compete with the beauty of the surrounding landscape and, rightly, should not distract from the view up to Clee Hill. The internal layout of the church though is highly original. The west end, that encloses the tower and spire, has been described as being like a narthex, an early Christian element, in the Gothic style.

The church is particularly lucky that the original architects drawings and specification of works still exist and are held in the Shropshire Archives. There are three beautifully drawn plans and a nine page document outlining the working method and specific details for mason, carpenter, joiner, tiler, smith and founder, plumber (for guttering), painter and glazier - it also gives precise information for the various sources of materials used for the building.

Of particular interest is the first paragraph of the specification of works that states that the stone for building the church would be free of charge on the condition that the builder procured it from the nearby quarry, which was within one hundred yards of the church, and to "unbar, quarry and saise" the stone, that is to do all of the necessary work to transform the stone from its natural state to a state ready for building purposes. In addition to this, oak timber for the carpenters and joiners was also free, it was to be found, "lying about in various places in the neighbourhood of the site". It is a useful insight, too, into how much more woodland was still standing in the late 1800's. This working method in a rural, isolated village having the skills and knowledge to use your own resources was vital.

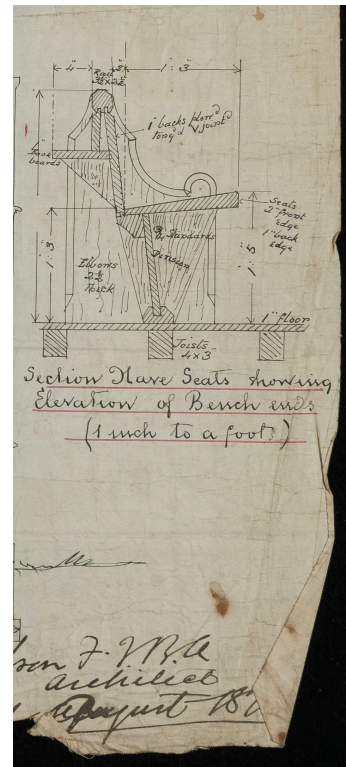
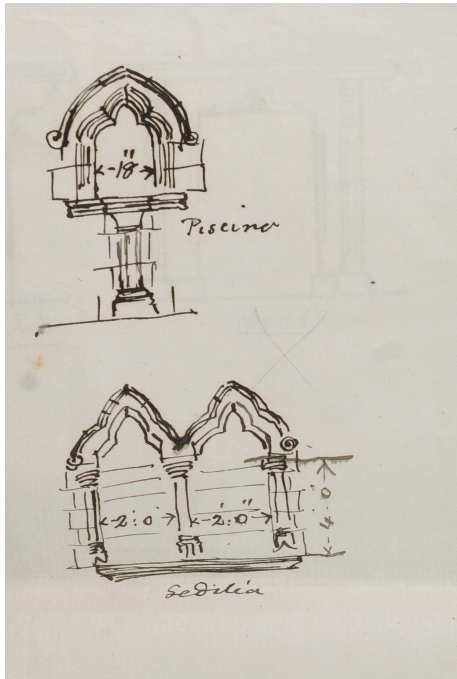
Dressed stone for more decorative purposes such as the windows and doorways, crosses, the sedilia and piscina were to be made from Luston Stone from the quarries of Mr Peaslett at Luston, near Leominster.

The porch and alleys and spaces in the nave were laid with best quality 6" black and brown Shropshire squares, interspersed with 20 dozen of Godwins glazed and patterned encaustic tiles and the chancel floor to be coloured red with Godwins encaustic tiles from the Withington Works (an example of these patterned tiles is in the V&A Museum.) . Godwins were renowned producers of encaustic tiles, located in Herefordshire they based many of their tiles on medieval prototypes and because of this authenticity were used by architects such as George Gilbert Scott , the great Gothic Revival architect, and G. E Street, particularly in their ecclesiastical work.

The carpenters and joiners used the local oak (apart from certain specified items to be made from Fir or Red Deal) which they had to saw and thickness from the round and cleave the shingles for the spire. The instructions are to cut the timber on the quarter, a specific grain direction that provides more stability to the timber - it is also more difficult, time consuming and leads to more waste, so no expense was spared.

The roof was covered with Knowbury brick roofing tiles, the ridges with Bridgwater tiles from Colthurst Symons & Co.

Below are some images of the church interior, the oak communion rail supported by 6 ornamental gilded metal standards, though the gilding has worn off and been repainted at some point, with Godwin tiles on the altar steps. A close up of another of the tiles, sketches from the margins of the builders specifications drawn by Thomas Nicholson and a detail from the architects plan showing the construction of the pews in the nave.



Also note worthy is the painted scripture above the altar windows, from Lamentations 1:12, “Is it nothing to you all ye that pass by”, lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem. The lettering is interspersed with a decoration of ivy boughs. The combination of some water damage and lack of lighting mean that many people, including locals, have not noticed it. The smoke marks at the top of the window arches suggest that this was lit by candle light.



The design and decoration of St Mary's are in the tradition of Gothic Revival and this High Church influence seems to have grown out of George Pardoe's education at Oxford where he studied Tractarian philosophy.

The churchyard also features three, unusual, cast iron grave markers that are thought to have been cast in nearby Ironbridge,

Statement of Need.

In the last year to eighteen months tiles have fallen dangerously from the roof to the churchyard below; rain has been leaking through the roof causing water damage to the encaustic tiles and the pews; large holes are visible in the roof where whole rows of tiles are slipping as the battens are failing. The churchyard immediately surrounding the church is taped off for safety reasons and a small area within the church is also sectioned off.

Cracks are visible in the masonry that require support and repointing.

General maintenance has previously been carried out in the tradition of the building of the church, by local farmers/craftsmen. Unfortunately, it has reached a stage where this is no longer possible and the cost of today's materials and labour can no longer be borne solely by the church. As a consequence the church is in the process of actively seeking grants from various funding bodies.

In the short term this requires a complete reroofing and other structural work. In the longer term the church requires work to make it fit for purpose as both a sacred and secular space for the 21st Century. This will entail introducing running water, providing toilet facilities and improved heating so that the building can host other events such as concerts.

There is a long held, local tradition that the churches provide rest and refreshment for pilgrims and travellers. Today this is represented by a regular stream of walkers and hikers who can make hot or cold drinks and in hot weather find a cool place to sit and recover. Many of these visitors are walking The Shropshire Way and exploring The Shropshire Hills. The Shropshire Hills National Landscape organisation states that over 10 million people visit the Shropshire Hills every year; the volume of staying visitors has increased and their contribution to the economy has risen by 19.7%.

In this context we intend to develop and formalise this by developing a pilgrim's way in conjunction with other local churches. It is popular now for tourists and campers to experience an overnight stay in a church.

The church is now used for regular social events including a weekly knit and natter group attended by up to twelve members of the community, a bi-monthly coffee morning on a Saturday that attracts locals and passers-by and are also arranged to coincide with local events such as the annual Clee Hill Run, where participants and onlookers both found rest and refreshment in the church.

The importance of these social gatherings has become increasingly vital. Many of the population of Cleeton St Mary are retired, some widowed and it is known that isolation and loneliness are increased risk factors in the deterioration of mental health. It also fulfils the criteria for Shropshire Councils drive for "Healthy People" that supports Shropshire residents to take responsibility for their own health and well being. Local people have commented that the weekly meeting gives them something to look forward to.

The strong local tradition of rural crafts is also reflected in the interest in crafts within our community which we hope to develop through research into and experience of local crafts. Encaustic tile making is a critically endangered craft; the last remaining professional tile makers are Craven Dunnill Jackfield at nearby Ironbridge Gorge. We already sell our crafts - knitting, crochet, card making and lino cuts celebrating local scenes, at the local markets both to raise money and awareness.

It should be noted that the village has in the past successfully raised the necessary funds for replacing the shingles on the spire and it is only because of unfortunate faulty workmanship that this work needs to be done again.

There has been an increasing demand for burial plots in the churchyard either through family connections or because people have passed by or spent holidays in the local area and want to be laid to rest in the beauty and peace of Cleeton St Mary. In response to this the PCC are actively investigating acquiring further land to accommodate the demand.

To paraphrase A Shropshire Lad, we fully intend to keep the beacon burning, "from Clee to heaven".

