

WELCOME TO ALL SAINTS CHURCH



Lopen

INTRODUCTION

The original chapel of Lopen is believed to date back prior to the 12th century. Priests came from the Minster Chapel at South Petherton to take services. The parish was severed from South Petherton in 1574 when Lopen acquired burial rights, although its links were maintained. When, in 1904, the last resident incumbent Rev. Robert Phelps Billing died, the benefice went back to South Petherton, only to be united with the Seavingtons when its incumbent retired. Several years later, Lopen was absorbed into a joint benefice of Merriott with Dinnington and Hinton St. George, the other parishes in the Lopen Valley.

AT THE SOUTH PORCH

The only part of the original chapel which remains is a window, reset in the south porch. If you put your hand through, you can feel the chamfer which would have been on the inside of the building to allow more light in. It was incorporated into the porch as part of the late 19th century "restoration" and paid for by public subscription and a gift of wood from Lord Poulett, the Lord of the Manor. Some windows, the chancel and its roof were entirely replaced then, but everything else was erected in the 15th century, which saw a great deal of building activity.

AT THE FONT

The English Heritage Monuments' Record puts the octagonal font as being "possibly of the 13th century" but nothing else is known. The area west of the lias stone slabs on which the font stands was subject to an investigation by our local archeologist Alan Graham when, in 1999, that end of the nave had to be re-floored. It was excavated to the top of the natural clay surface, 280mm below the bottom slab. On top of the clay was a thin layer of mortar - probably the earliest floor - and on top of that a whole series of layers, suggesting a long period of use and re-flooring. Cut into this was the western end of a grave and a post-hole, 250mm across, together with a number of stones, one of which looks to be the end of an octagonal shaft. On the northern side there was an original foundation, wider than the existing outer wall, and evidence of a very early rebuilding that would have increased the width of the chapel by approximately a foot.



IN THE NAVE AT THE PULPIT

The considerable building activity of the 15th century continued in the 19th, because the small church failed to meet the standard of the day - able to seat one third of the parish population at any divine service. By 1831 the population had risen dramatically, doubling in fifty years to a peak of over 500. Two years later the North Transept was erected to redress the balance.

During the 1886 refurbishment the vicar, Rev. Billing, masterminded the reseating of the church, acquiring pews from a distant church and having them brought by carter from Martock station. Adaptation of the pews to fill the space available proved rather difficult and was not entirely successful, leaving a "hole" at the junction with the transept.

IN THE NAVE AT THE PULPIT CONTINUED



From 1876 onwards, on the concrete slab under the left-hand run of pews stood a large circular victorian "Gurney" stove with a metal chimney running straight up through the roof. It must have been uncomfortably hot for those sitting near and something of a fire hazard. Electricity came to the village

in 1936 but it was not until 1960 that the stove was replaced with tubular heaters under each pew in the nave. The wiring was strung from the walls at seat level and was rather obvious. In 1999 the installation was condemned as unsafe and a generous parishioner paid for its replacement. Opportunity was taken to hide the cables in underground ducts and to make a separate circuit to enable the chancel to be heated.

AT THE NORTH TRANSEPT

Even with the addition of the transept, the church was still unable to seat the large congregation, therefore galleries were added at the north and west ends. The north gallery provided an additional 100 seats and was accessed from an outside stone stairway through the door high up on the left. However, they were too late, and by 1900 the population had slipped back as fast as it had risen and the gallery was no longer needed.

Several further alterations were made at this point. The pulpit, where the lectern now stands, was moved to the opposite side of the chancel arch and rotated to enable it to fit the space. Between 1874 and 1886 there was another spate of building. Part of the nave, including most of the windows and buttresses and the south porch, were rebuilt and the chancel restored.

THE WEST GALLERY AND PIPE ORGAN



In Victorian days, a harmonium which was gifted by the Denman Family, provided music. This was replaced by the current pipe organ built by Vowles in 1946 as a thanksgiving for the end of WW2 and placed on the gallery. The organ was overhauled by Osmond and Co in 1962. It is a modest single-

manual instrument with an 8' open diapason, 8' gamba, 8' stopped bass and 4' flute. The organ was rebuilt in 2020 by Lance Foy Organs.

THE ROMAN MOSAIC

In Autumn 2003, a Roman villa with mosaic floor was discovered near Hinton Mill at the south end of the village. It proved to be of national importance and our village History Group decided to reproduce part of it as a reminder and an educational tool, using the techniques employed in Roman times and involving

villagers in its production. The resulting panel, featuring the canathus detail of the original, has been set in the floor near the north door. Originally, the colours that made up the elaborate design were all from natural stone available locally. All of the blues through to the light creams and whites are blue lias which is still found near Charlton Mackrell. The yellow browns come from Ham Hill stone and the more local oolite. The exception is the red that could have been made from cut natural terracotta tiles possibly also locally made.



IN THE CHANCEL

There is a lot of the 15th Century in the chancel although, over the years, much of it has undergone alteration. The ceiling is an unusual, plastered wagon ceiling, so-called because of its covered wagon appearance with timber 'hoops'.



Behind the northern pier to the chancel arch, the stone stair to the pulpit was cut off when the north transept was built, leaving its remains stepping into the wall and, ghost-like, disappearing in to it. It was usual to bury people in the church itself and Lopen shows evidence of this. In addition to the grave at the west end, we know there are nine burials in vaults continuing into the first 60 years of the 19th Century. Beneath your feet are two gravestones of the 17th and 18th Century. Alas their inscriptions are almost gone.

On either side of the Altar there is a recess which the Record Office describes as 'statue recesses'. However, in Victorian times they bore wooden inserts listing the Ten Commandments. Their removal in the late 1990s revealed a jumble of hamstone on the right and a plastered wall with what is believed to be an 18th Century inscription on the left. The condition is poor and the only recognisable word is 'UNFEIGNEDLY' which is only found in the 'Remission of Sins' absolution.

The Chancel is a mine of memorials and gifts of enhancement relating to parish worthies. Most of them contain note of their origin, but in general the attributes are hidden away. What does show are the stained glass windows commemorating members of the Denman family who occupied land in the village continuously for over 100 years. There is also a window in memory of Henrietta Billing, the Vicar's widow, whose will established a charity devoted to maintaining worship at Lopen Church.