

A Short History of
STRATTON ST MARGARET
PARISH CHURCH
and other articles on
the Village
(*Illustrated*)

By

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with an introduction by
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That ye may tell it to the generation following. Psalm xlviii.13

INTRODUCTION

The history of the old churches of England is the history of the country itself. Those who delve in the registers and records of the Church are doing a great service to the nation ; for, by so doing, they unearth some of the priceless details which add the living touch to history.

We who live in Stratton are fortunate in having not only an interesting past but a historian who is full of enthusiasm and never ceases to search for further knowledge. The thanks of all Strattonians, and indeed, all historians, is due to Mr Fuller for all the time and talent he has given in presenting our local history to us in readable form. His enthusiasm is so infectious that not a few others have begun to take a new interest in our church and the history of Stratton.

I sincerely hope that this booklet will be well and widely read not only by the older inhabitants, but also by the many younger people who inherit this priceless piece of England.

The Vicarage
Stratton St Margaret

G. R. FOOKS

*Tell ye your children of it, and let your children tell their children,
and their children another generation. Joel i.3*

NOTE BY THE COMPILER

These articles, which are a description of the Parish Church and others on the village of Stratton St Margaret, appeared in the Parish Magazine during 1947, 1948, and 1949. They are reproduced more or less in the form in which they appeared, except that a list of the Vicars of Stratton has been added, and minor inaccuracies have been corrected. I am aware that the same information is given in different articles, but without drastic revision this could not be avoided.

In reading any such series of articles, it must be remembered that they are as accurate as possible at the time of writing, but like all history they may have to be revised when other information comes to light.

In due course I hope to compile a fairly comprehensive history of the parish, and I shall be glad of any old photographs of the village, newspaper cuttings etc. that anyone may be able to loan me.

If this booklet does nothing more than interest some in the heritage we in Stratton possess, especially in our parish church and in all that is connected with it, then my time will not have been wasted.

The drawings have been done by one of the younger parishioners, Mr Philip Nethercot, whilst Mr W. Bramwell Hill and Mrs M. E. Whale have allowed me to use their photographs. Mr Hill gave me many useful suggestions, and the Vicar has given me every assistance by allowing me the use of various documents etc., and also by helpful advice.

Cuddesdon College
Oxford
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F. W. T. FULLER

THE PARISH CHURCH

EXTERIOR

A casual visitor to Stratton St Margaret is apt to miss the church completely, standing as it does in a quiet 'backwater'. There is a pleasant view from the Highworth Road looking across the aerodrome. The church is built on one of the highest bits of natural ground in the area, and may be on the site of some earlier Roman heathen temple. A Christian building certainly preceded the present building.

The visitor approaching our church gets a view of the squat west tower, and the ends of the north and south aisles with their steep roofs. He sees little else. The large trees on either side of the gateway were planted only forty years ago, and their site is outside the old churchyard. (*These trees were removed in the spring of 1949, in an effort to lighten the church and because the roots were causing much damage to the pathway and the drains.*) The churchyard has been extended twice within the last eighty years. The old iron churchyard gates are still in existence at the entrance to the Clays allotments in Churchway.

The building consists of a nineteenth-century tower, a modern vestry and chancel, all of which have been added to the original thirteenth-century building of nave and two aisles. The porch is a fourteenth-century addition.

The exterior of the building is disappointing; any parapets or gables it may have possessed have long since gone, and the windows lack 'labels' (the architect's term for an ornate stone framing over the window). The exterior of the archway of the north aisle doorway is well worth examining; it is a Norman one rebuilt into the present wall about 1280.

The severe and somewhat bleak stone building with its stone roof, when viewed from the South Marston field footpath, shows the lines of Early English architecture at its best—if allowance is made for the addition of the modern chancel.

There is little of interest in the churchyard, except perhaps the tombstones of the seventeenth century torn from their original positions and now against the north wall. The yew tree is quite

old and may have provided our forefathers with staves and bows; it certainly shields the main door of the church from prevailing winds. The old school stood within the shadow of the tower, as also did small thatched cottages within living memory.

The old Elizabethan tithe-barn still stands in Church Farm yard on the opposite side of the road.

Church Street was the first street in the village to have street lamps; it has progressed through the three stages of paraffin, gas, and electricity.

THE SOUTH PORCH

The south porch is a fourteenth-century addition to the thirteenth-century church. The outside doorway is plain with continuous arch mouldings. On the outside walls are traces of small incised dials, a primitive type of sundial or clock.

There was originally a small room over the porch, of which only the newel stairway remains. This room must have been very small and dark. The use of this room can only be conjectured; it may have been a type of priest's vestry, or maybe here is the origin of any learning in the village; this may have been the place where the priest taught the children. The porch carries the original fourteenth-century roof timbers.

The doorway into the church is a mean pointed arch, but is the same age as the aisle wall. Beneath the plaster of the right-hand door jamb is a fourteenth-century holy water stoup. (*An attempt in the summer of 1949 did not find the stoup, but uncovered some interesting thirteenth-century masons' marks.*)

The only stone seats to be found in the whole church are those existing in the porch.

The porch was placed on the south side of the church to obtain the full benefit of the midday sun, because the porch was originally used for various purposes. It was used for marriages, and banns were published here. Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath' tells us in the *Canterbury Tales* that she had taken three husbands 'at the church door'. The first part of the baptism service used to take place here. To the porch the people resorted to transact their business and to discuss the latest news, here notices were proclaimed. A revival of this secular use is seen in the civil notices displayed now.

The floor is paved with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tombstones, amongst them being one upon which is the arms of the de Lacey family, who once held manorial rights in the village. The stones were probably moved from their original positions when the chancel was enlarged and rebuilt early in the nineteenth century.

In 1890, a stone cross was placed over the porch to replace an original one long since gone. This cross was blown down in a storm in 1924, and only the shaft remains above the porch doorway. The rest of the cross is to be found in the south aisle with other broken masonry.

THE NAVE

The interior of the church bears evidence of having possessed considerable beauty and interest, but has been reduced to comparative bareness by misjudged restoration in the past. The old stonework has been scraped (mostly during the nineteenth-century renovations), so that it is difficult to distinguish the modern copy.

The nave of four bays was constructed in the late thirteenth-century (c. 1280) and although it has lost its original richness of colouring, the glow of gilding, and the vividly painted murals, the beauty of line and noble proportions remain. The nave arcades are unusual and particularly graceful with slender cylindrical pillars, having richly moulded capitals containing nail-head and dog-tooth design, with a particularly small abacus mould. The 'bell' of the cap is very graceful and well-formed. The bases of the pillars are moulded and each pillar base is of varying design, one on the north side with angle tongues to connect it to the square block under. The arches are pointed and of two orders of chamfers.

Originally the roof was steep pitched and the same height as the roof of the aisles, but was raised in the sixteenth century when the present clerestory and roof were built. The roof is of the cambered tie-beam form. It is still lead covered.

The arch at the west end is a copy, and was built at the same time as the tower in the early nineteenth century, but there may have been a west doorway in this position. The small light high

above the lectern was discovered when the chancel arch was raised.

In medieval times the people stood in the nave for services. Later the old-fashioned box pews appeared; the church records quote various private box pews.

There might even have been a West Gallery, since it is clear from records that Stratton possessed a church orchestra, and the usual place for such musicians was a gallery in the west end. The present pews are late eighteenth century. The pulpit, which probably replaced the old 'three-decker,' is dated 1848, and was constructed at Bath. Opposite the pulpit, where the lectern now stands, was the old reading desk and lectern combined—the marks are still visible on the floor and wall. This was removed and converted into the screen across the belfry archway. The present carved wooden eagle lectern was placed in the church in 1896 in memory of a former vicar, the Rev. I. S. Crawhall. Above the lectern and pulpit originally hung two old banners.

The litany desk and the churchwardens' wands are modern.

NORTH AND SOUTH AISLES

The south and north aisles are of the same date as the nave—late thirteenth century. At the east end of the south aisle (where is now the war memorial) there is evidence of the existence of a side chapel. (*Since the writing of this article, the old chapel has been restored as St Catharine's Chapel.*) The altar was much elevated, since the east window is high and the piscina with quatrefoil bowl and shelf and trefoil arch in the south wall, has its bowl 4 feet 7 seven inches above the present floor. The piscina was for washing the holy vessels used at the Communion service, and the custom was to drain away the holy water after the priest had washed them. The water ran away through the small hole in the bowl of the piscina and drained into consecrated ground. The site of this early side-chapel later housed the organ until the present vestry was built.

The present octagonal font was placed in the church about a hundred years ago, when the then existing Saxon font (dated c. 1280) disappeared completely. The Children's Corner was constructed by public subscription in 1937.



A bleak photograph of the church immediately after the extension of the churchyard in 1896