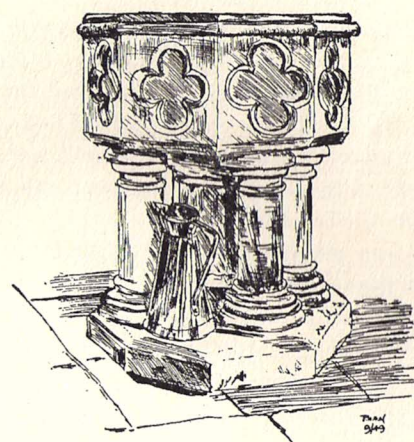




The church in 1896, showing the low chancel arch, oil lamps, six candles on the altar, old banners, etc. (*The arch was raised in 1912*)



The church in 1921



*Font of
St. Margaret*

*The font which
replaced the saxon
font removed c. 1850*

The north aisle contains a Norman doorway which was rebuilt into the present wall in the thirteenth century; it is probable, therefore, that the north aisle is the site of the previous church.

There is a recessed tomb projecting into the north wall. It contains no figure, and certainly has not possessed one since the late sixteenth century. The workmanship around the tomb is very poor, and almost looks like the work of the nineteenth century, which is unusual since it was constructed in the time of Edward I when the purest and most refined work is found. There is a nail-head ornament on the flat cusped arch, and a very crude conventionalized carving above. The pinnacles flanking the recess are equally badly carved. The terminals of these and of the arch appear to be seventeenth-century restorations.

The tomb may have been the old Easter Sepulchre, in which the cross was placed on Good Friday and then removed to the altar with great ceremony on Easter Sunday. It was used to house a heating stove before the present heating apparatus was installed. It now contains various pieces of carved stonework from the exterior of the building: a seventeenth-century cannon-ball, and a lead-filled skull. (The stories attached to the lead-filled skull are many; some say that the hot lead was poured in through the

victim's eye-sockets, others say the victim was a nun, whose white-habited ghost is said to haunt the church and village. It is more probable that the lead ran into the skull by accident, but there is no record of a fire which might have caused the lead to melt.) In one of the window-sills are portions of old bells containing inscriptions which were removed when the bells were recast.

The north aisle roof, like the south aisle, was originally lead covered, but was stone tiled in 1840.

The vestry screen was placed there in 1896 when the vestry was built. It was then that the ancient squint was discovered and restored with a new wooden lintel to replace the old rotting one. The ornate and embellished squint in the south aisle is modern.

RESTORED CHAPEL IN THE SOUTH AISLE

On 4th September 1949, the Lord Bishop Suffragan of Malmesbury dedicated a chapel at the east end of the south aisle, as a memorial to the fallen of the two World Wars.

The original altar which stood in this position must have been considerably higher than ground level, as is indicated by the height of the window and the piscina.

The present altar is in oak, which tones with the new altar rail, and both were made from timber of pews no longer in use, and were worked in true medieval fashion by two village craftsmen, who prefer to remain anonymous.

The furnishings are of a pleasant blue, and the reredos curtain is suspended from a wrought-iron rod. The altar cross and candlesticks are in cast pewter and match with the pewter vessels restored for use in this chapel. The kneeling mats and carpet were made by a local disabled ex-serviceman.

The architect has drawn attention to the excellent stone floor in this part of the church, now visible since several pews have been removed.

The names of those who were killed in the 1939-1945 war have been added to the plaque containing the names of the 1914-1918 dead, which is erected on the south wall immediately below the piscina.

The restored chapel is dedicated to St Catharine of Alexandria, and is used for weekday services.

THE BELL-TOWER

The bell-tower is situated at the west end of the church, and is a low squat tower built in the Norman style. Although constructed at the end of the eighteenth century, the tower tones extremely well with the ancient fabric of the rest of the church. So squat is the tower that the ringing is done from the ground floor; there is space only for the bell chamber, a ringing chamber is not possible.

There is no evidence of any earlier provision for the bells, but it is not improbable that a small bell turret stood over the east or the west wall of the nave. In 1553 it is recorded that Stratton Sci [*sic*] Margrette possessed three bells.

In the old days the bells were not only used for calling the faithful to worship—they told of the passing of a villager, were perhaps used for curfew, and were also used for warnings, when the peal was reversed and rung from the lowest to the highest tones.

Of the present bells, No 7 is the oldest, dated 1669 and cast by Edward Neale of Burford, and is engraved with the Royal Arms. Until 1931 there were two older bells, one made by Roger Purdue of Bristol in 1622, engraved with the Prince of Wales's feathers; and another also made in 1669 by the same Edward Neale of Burford. This bell was inscribed with the Royal Arms inside a square, and also with the names of the churchwardens, T. Reade and T. Jackson. Both bells were recast and rehung, but sections containing the old inscriptions may be seen in a window-sill in the north aisle.

The tenor bell, which is over three feet in diameter and weighs over eight hundredweights, was cast in 1816 by G. and G. Mears of London. The N in the spelling of London has been omitted and there is a flaw in the inscription of the date.

Two bells were added in 1909 as a memorial to Albert Barnes, who was churchwarden for many years. Again, in 1931 two smaller bells were added and the whole peal tuned and rehung with new fittings. The treble bell has the inscription 'The children gave me', and was actually hauled into the tower by the then Sunday School children. There is also a smaller bell still hanging in the tower, which was originally rung immediately before services, and is locally known as the 'ting-tang', but is not now used.

The peal of eight bells is frequently rung by visiting teams of bellringers. Nowadays the Stratton bellringers have amongst them several lady ringers, and as early as 1924, Mrs Ferris (then Miss N. Moulden) rang in a peal of Minor, with 5040 changes. The church also possesses a set of hand bells. The church records contain frequent entries of 'beer for the bellringers'.

The tower was originally topped with a flagstaff, over which ruled a gilded weather-vane in the shape of a cock, both of which were blown down in a storm in 1938. Nowadays the tower appears to be lower than it actually is, due to the great height of the two trees, planted forty years ago, on either side of the churchyard gates.

(In the spring of 1949 the two trees were removed, the effect of the removal being a better view of the tower, which does not now appear to be so squat.)

THE CHANCEL

The chancel is perhaps the least pleasing part of the church. It is an early nineteenth-century structure and has no great historical treasures or interest; of the earlier chancel we have no records, except that it is obvious from the exterior walls that much of the old masonry was re-used. The upkeep of the chancel is legally the liability of the Warden and Scholars of Merton College, Margaret Oxford, who have held the rectorial rights of Stratton St since Robert de Merton gave them to his College in 1308.

The steep timbered roof is the finest feature, and the painted and gilded shields on the beam ends are interesting. Those over the sanctuary are painted with symbols, such as the Cross and Crown, whilst upon the others are painted the arms of various families connected with the parish: the de Lacey family arms with three swans' heads; the Archer family arms with three arrow heads; the arms of Merton College with its red and blue chevrons; and one combining the arms of the dioceses of Gloucester (crossed keys) and Bristol (three crowns), which were united under one bishop for many years. The missing shield used to portray the arms of the Kemble family, with three heads, each with the tongue protruding.

The windows are modern copies of the Gothic style, and are mostly on the south side, the one over the priest's stall having been transferred when the vestry was built in 1896, and the organ removed from the south aisle.

The choir stalls, altar, reredos, priest's desk, processional cross, and chancel furnishings are all modern, and the mural paintings of the angels on the east wall were done during the last half-century or so.

The large monument dated 1748 was replaced in the wall at the time of rebuilding. Although no plans or records appear to exist of the old chancel, it was obviously shorter than the present one; the line of vision of the old north squint would place the altar near the present steps leading up to the sanctuary.

Owing to the chancel step being out of square, the impression is gained that the chancel is not square with the nave, but appears to incline to the north by almost two feet. This is so with many chancels, and the traditional reasons given are that the evil spirits lived in the northern direction, and the other that the plan of a church represents Our Lord upon the Cross, with His head inclined to the right.

THE WINDOWS

When John Aubrey the Wiltshire antiquarian visited Stratton in 1625, he made the following report: 'In the north wall is an old niche, but without any monument. In a window on the south side is a picture of St Katharine with her wheel, and another, broken in the first columnne, which I suppose to be the titular Saint of this church.' These old glass windows of St Catharine and St Margaret have long since disappeared, probably at the time of the Commonwealth; all the present glass is modern.

Of the actual construction, the west window in the south aisle is a single-light trefoil-headed lancet with a flatly-pointed inner arch. Originally, all the three windows of this aisle were alike, but one was widened and a two-light window inserted in the fourteenth century, and the other in the nineteenth century. The original windows of the north aisle differed from those of the south, having trefoil inner arches. Again, only one window is left with a single lancet light, as on the south side; the altera-

tions were made in the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. The window in the priest's vestry originally stood in the wall now replaced by the vestry screen in 1896.

The subject matter of the modern glass windows is interesting. The main east window shows the Crucifixion as centre piece, supported on either side by the Last Supper and the Resurrection (Breaking of the Tomb). Above them are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet (alpha and omega). The window on the north side of the sanctuary shows the Nativity (with angels) and the Epiphany, that on the south side showing a further picture of the Resurrection morning and the Ascension. The window at the east end of the south aisle depicts St Alban, the first British martyr, who was a soldier, and forms part of the war memorial. The window in memory of Frederick Day, a missionary priest killed in China, portrays St Margaret and St Philip the Deacon, showing that both parts of the original large parish shared in the commemoration. A window in memory of Elizabeth Langrey (1882) shows the Resurrection, and the single-lancet window nearest to the font is a memorial to a former vicar, the Rev. Septimus Crawhall (1899), and pictures the Good Shepherd.

The wall memorials are few. In the chancel is an alabaster to one Thomas Reade, dated 1748, whilst in the north aisle is one to William Jones who lost his life 'in 1837 in the calamitous fire at Southampton'. At the west end of the north aisle, removed from its place at the opposite end, where are the family vaults, is an alabaster monument of Catherine Hedges or de Lacey; also a brass (removed from its stone which is now part of the belfry floor) to the same family. Also in the north aisle is a tablet to the Rev. Wallinger Goodinge and his wife.

In the south aisle are two modern brasses and above the door are interesting seventeenth-century wooden and canvas memorials, with painted skulls, crossbones, and hour-glasses. One records the gift of £200 by a William Hedges, while the other two are in respect of the Kemble family and have been removed at some time from the north aisle.

Many of the stones which were apparently part of the north aisle floor now form the floors of the belfry and the porch.

CHURCH PLATE AND EMBROIDERIES

Amongst the altar furnishings and church plate, Stratton St Margaret possesses two treasures, an Elizabethan chalice and an antique frontal.

Both the red and the white festal frontals are excellent needlework. The embroidered portions of the white frontal originally formed part of an Italian priest's vestments, and were brought back from Italy by the wife of a former vicar, Mrs S. Crawhall. The work appears to be that of the early seventeenth century. The white satin background had perished and the embroidery has been remounted by Messrs Mowbray. In 1926, when the Church Congress was held in Cheltenham, this frontal was one of the main items in an Exhibition of Ecclesiastical Art. Also, for use with this frontal, there is a super-frontal of excellent antique lace, and another, recently presented, of Indian silver-thread embroidered work.

Records show that 'in 1553 there was left for the Parish of Stratton See Margaretts a Chalice weighing 16 oz. and the same quantity of silver was taken for the King's use'. It was presumably the silver of this chalice which eventually went to make up the Elizabethan silver chalice. This priceless cup was in bad repair in the middle of the nineteenth century and its use was discontinued on this account, and it was condemned as past repair. The highest offer for it at the time was 4s. 6d., which Mr C. W. Barnes the churchwarden declined, and had it repaired at his own cost and returned it to the church in 1892. The cup is of very ancient shape, and has been confirmed as Elizabethan work by authorities on antique plate. Its date is about 1570-5, as the shape and details decide sufficiently well in the absence of any hall-mark. It is furnished with a cap or cover, common to chalices of its date, which no doubt at one time served as a paten. This same chalice has recently been repaired and silver-gilt lined by Messrs Mowbray, who have valued it as priceless.

Also amongst the church plate, there is a pewter set of communion vessels, which was returned into the custody of the church in 1923. The chalice and paten are comparatively modern and were probably purchased for use when the Elizabethan cup and paten were condemned. The alms dish and flagon are old—seventeenth century. These old pewter flagons are rarely found,

and those that are in existence usually date from the time of the Civil War.

When the Elizabethan silver cup came into use in 1570 or 1575 it probably formed part of a complete silver set, including a silver flagon and alms dish. Where are they? The date of the pewter flagon and alms dish suggests that they were given by King Charles I. When the King was compelled to take up arms against Parliament, the Colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, private gentlemen, and churches, gave up their silver to be melted down for the King's service. The Vicar of Stratton St Margaret was the Rev. Christopher Jole, instituted in 1634, later deprived by Parliament. He was a Royalist and probably used his influence with the parishioners. Pewter vessels were presented by the King to parishes which gave up silver to his cause, so this old flagon and alms dish bear testimony of the loyalty of Stratton to its King. The alms dish now shows signs of having been used as a common plate for some time.

The church also possesses another small silver Elizabethan chalice of exquisite workmanship, less than two inches high, dated 1602, which was presented to the church, together with a silver-gilt Elizabethan paten, by Mr F. Cripps-Day in 1932. At the same time Mr Cripps-Day gave two small pewter vessels and a pewter paten, all of early date.

The rest of the church plate consists of the silver paten and flagon in present use, a mother-of-pearl baptismal shell, and a brass alms dish.

Unlike many antique treasures which are carefully locked away from public view, the altar frontal and the Elizabethan chalice are in constant use at Stratton St Margaret, making a factual link between today's worshippers and those of four hundred years ago.

(In September 1949, the old pewter vessels were restored for use in the restored St Catharine's Chapel, as a part of the war memorial.

The chalice has been partly remodelled, and one of the patens fits it as a cover. The two small pewter vessels presented by Mr F. Cripps-Day have similarly been restored, but not remodelled.)

THE REGISTERS

Although the most modern part of the church, the vestry contains one of our most valuable assets, the Parish Registers. Almost as important are the parish records of Churchwardens' Accounts.

The Registers of Baptisms, Burials, and Marriages date from 1608, but three pages are missing from the Baptism Register for the years 1684 to 1698; and the Register of Marriages is defective for approximately the same dates. The early registers are written on parchment, and the quaint spelling and arrangement makes the contents difficult to understand. Strangely enough the handwriting of the seventeenth-century vicars is easier to decipher than those of the eighteenth century. The Registers contain the receipt for their custody by the Secular Registrar appointed by Oliver Cromwell, and the notation by the Rev. Christopher Jole when he returned as Vicar at the Restoration.

It is from these parish records that we are able to deduce population figures for the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Stratton, and estimate to what age they normally lived and the size of their families. It was these registers which helped the Commissioners of George III in 1800 to record the increases in population. It is worth noting that in that year, Stratton St Margaret, with the tithing of Upper Stratton, consisted of approximately 300 men and 280 women, of whom 310 were employed in agriculture, 37 only in commerce and manufactory, the rest presumably being the womenfolk in the homes and the gentry who did not work.

We can only surmise from some items in the Registers:

1645, Margaret, the wife of John Butler, was buried Oct. 30th, at night; Margarrett the daughter of John Butler was buried Oct. 31st at night; John Butler was buried Nov. 2nd; the wife of William Richman was buried Nov. 22nd. She died in John Butler's house.

What happened in John Butler's house in October 1645? Was it stricken with the contagious plague?

Other items give us an intimate insight:

1647. Widdow Humphrey buried on 21st Nov. She was supposed to be an hundred years old

—a ripe old age for the seventeenth century. An illegitimate child was recorded as:

John filius populi [son of the people], Anne Heath being mother.

March 13th, 1633 records the burial of Samuel Fowler, Vicar of the parish, one of the few vicars to die in office.

It is interesting to see that some old Stratton names have survived and some of those in the earliest registers are still familiar today: Horton, Chamberlaine, Barrett, Wicks; whilst others have disappeared altogether: Kemble, Beams, Richman, Tuggy.

In addition to the Registers there are the Account Books of the churchwardens. From these we are able to discern what sort of music the church enjoyed:

Reeds for clarinet 1s. 6d., Bass viol bow 7s.

We know how the bellringers refreshed themselves:

Beer for bellringers 2s., 2 quarts of beer for the bellringers 1s.

The churchwardens handled the Poor Law Relief:

Relieved man and woman with pass 1s.

Nothing seems to have been outside their jurisdiction. They handled the Parish Rate—in 1846 a sixpence in the pound rate brought in £140; they handled the education:

1844, Paid Mr Povey for teaching, 1l. 5s. 0d.

They paid the road cleaner; they acted as pest exterminators, and the amounts they paid for sparrows destroyed is shown in many places. In 1835 appears an entry:

Paid Ingram for going in search of the murderer of a child, found in a drain on the Swindon Road, 2s. 6d.

and again,

Jury men and constables' expenses, 10s. 6d.

Also in the records are rare Briefs, or copies of appeals made in Stratton for various charities: collections for the victims of the Plague of London in 1665; for the sufferers in the Great Fire in 1666; for the liberation of Christians captured by the Turkish pirates; for the Irish Protestants in time of persecution; for helping the inhabitants of Ludgershall and other Wiltshire villages to rebuild their homes after disastrous fires.

There is the record of the trust by which John and William Barrett in 1663 gave to the church the Old Church House (now demolished, opposite the 'Jacob's Ladder' on Churchway) and two acres, three and a half roods of land for a fabric fund to be controlled by the churchwardens.

To all these records, various incumbents have at different times added their own personal notes, making the already valuable information more understandable and interesting. Even the place for Vestry Meetings was somewhat unusual—the Crown Inn.

More than anything else, our parish records prove that the Church has not been a mere ornament but a living organism, the Parish Church itself a priceless heritage, ours to use and to treasure and to maintain for future generations.

A PRAYER

O Everlasting God, with whom a thousand years are but as one day, and in whose name are treasured in this Thy House the memorials of many generations; grant to us, whom Thou hast made members of Thy Church in this parish, such measures of grace and wisdom, that we neglect no portion of our manifold inheritance, but may guard and use it to Thy glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ST CATHARINE'S CHAPEL

The decision to dedicate to St Catharine the memorial chapel that has been restored in the south aisle is a happy one. When John Aubrey the seventeenth-century antiquarian visited the parish church, he commented on the fact that there were only two stained-glass windows, one to St Margaret, the patron saint of the church, and another in the south aisle which showed St Catharine. It is quite likely that the original chapel was dedicated to St Catharine of Alexandria, since the two saints, Margaret of Antioch and Catharine of Alexandria, are often found coupled together.

It was the voices of these two saints that Joan of Arc heard telling her to carry out her great works. An old vellum book with Roman characters, written in the reign of Stephen or Henry II, gives the legends of St Catharine, St Margaret, and St Juliana. These legends of the lives of the saints or martyrs were usually recited or sung to people in churches on the days when the feasts of the saints were celebrated, and in an age when, through ignorance of the laws of nature, many ordinary occurrences appeared as supernatural. It is, therefore, not surprising that St Catha-

rine's story contains several miracles. The legend was translated from some ancient manuscript in Greek, about the beginning of the tenth century, and has been handed down in several forms.

Some legends say that Catharine was the daughter of the Emperor Constantius; this would make her the sister of Constantine the Great; others say she was the grandchild of Constantine. Although authentic history is silent, at least all the legends agree that Catharine was of royal birth.

Catharine at the age of twenty had no father or mother, but had armed herself with the Faith, and upbraided the pagan Emperor Maxentius for his heathenism. She was brought to court, sentenced to prison and the torture house, but her judges would not condemn her to death, so the Emperor had them all burnt. Each time Catharine was tortured, the angels came and ministered to her wounds. When Catharine refused to marry the Emperor, he had a machine made by which to tear her to pieces. Some legends say that the machine had four wheels, others say only two, or even one. In any case, the wheel was a new kind of torture and was full of knives and spikes. Catharine prayed for deliverance, and an angel came like a thunderbolt from heaven, shattered the wheel in pieces, the fragments killing over four thousand heathen—the first 'catharine wheel' was certainly a firework. Catharine was afterwards taken to the city gate, where she was beheaded. Several miracles are recorded; from Catharine's severed neck flowed milk and blood to bear witness of her purity. Angels carried away her body to Mount Sinai, and a stream flowed from her stone coffin, a stream which cured all kinds of diseases.

The first record of the introduction of St Catharine into England appears in 1030 A.D. when Geoffrey de Gorham, Abbot of St Albans, wrote a play called *Ludus Sanctae Catharinae*, incidentally the first record of a theatrical play. This provides another small link with the restored chapel, for the window in the east end of the south aisle portrays the first British martyr, a Roman soldier St Alban, to whose honour the abbey, of which Geoffrey was Abbot, was dedicated.

The Feast of St Catharine found no place in the calendars of the 1549, 1552, or 1559 Prayer Books, but was restored to the Black Letter or Minor Saints' list in 1604, with 25th November

as her feast-day. Her symbol is an eight-spoked wheel, with prongs on the rim.

The spelling of Catharine's name (as distinct from Catherine, which comes through the Latin) is due to the derivation from the Greek word *katharos* meaning 'virtuous and maiden purity.'

It is fitting that a chapel which is being restored as a memorial to soldiers, sailors, and airmen who fell in crusades against evil in 1914 and 1939 should be dedicated to St Catharine of Alexandria, whose story, together with that of St Margaret of Antioch, the patron saint of the parish church, must have been very familiar to those soldiers who crusaded against the enemies of Christianity in the East during the eleventh century.

ST MARGARET OF ANTIOCH

The parish church is dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch. This dedication is not mentioned in documents until about 1294, but this is at a time when many churches were being dedicated to St Margaret, probably due to the stories about her that the Crusaders had heard.

It is about this time that Margaret, the Queen of Edward I, held Stratton in her dowry, so the name may have been added in honour of the Queen's patron saint. Or the rebuilt church in c. 1280 may have been ready for use on St Margaret's day—20th July.

Of St Margaret herself very little is known. History says that she was a maiden of Antioch in Pisidia c. 304 and was martyred under Diocletian. This much is probably true. Tradition says that she was the daughter of a heathen priest and was brought up as a Christian by her nurse. When she refused to give up Christianity, she and the nurse were reduced to tending sheep. There she was seen by the ruler Olybius, who, attracted by her beauty, wished to marry her if free-born, or to buy her if a slave. Margaret replied that she was free-born but a servant of Jesus Christ and she rejected his overtures.

She was imprisoned, when the Devil appeared to her in the form of a fierce dragon, which swallowed her; thus some stained-glass windows show her issuing from a dragon's mouth. Later she was tortured and beheaded.