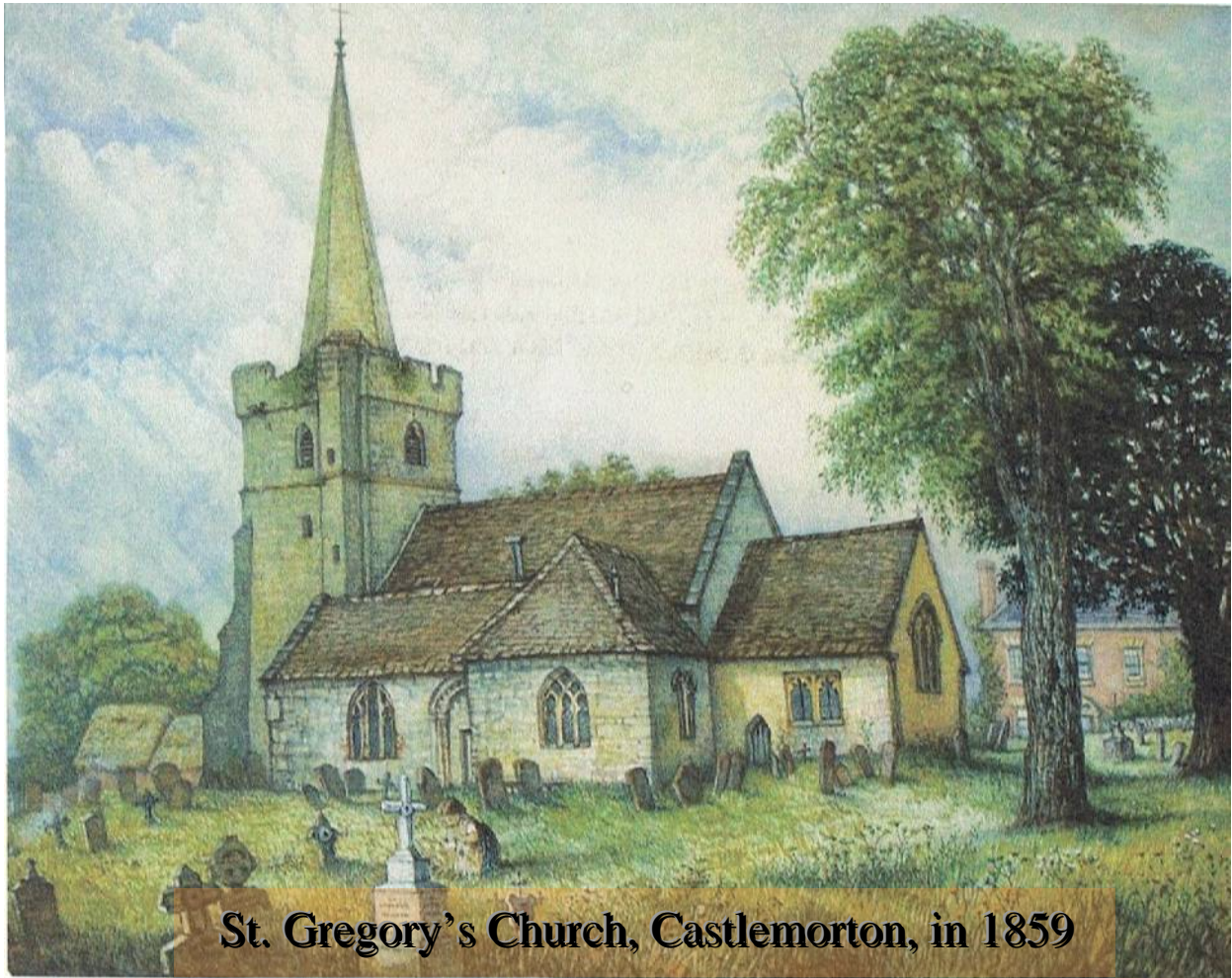




St Gregory's Church Castlemorton



❧ **A Short Note on its Long History** ❧

(a work in progress!)

St Gregory's Church, Castlemorton

St Gregory's Church, a Grade 1 Listed building, is a fine if understated example of an English country church in which the varying architectural styles of the past nine centuries blend seamlessly to reflect the continuity of the generations that have built and nurtured it. This short note will hardly do justice to the stature and the place in the community of this wonderful building but aims to give the visitor at least some perspective on the church's history and its finer or more interesting points. It is hoped that it will encourage others to ponder the efforts that have gone in to the church's making and the lives of the many generations that have lived under its watchful gaze.



In the Beginning

It is to the the two small round headed windows set in the north wall of the chancel and the church's two Norman doorways, one with a tympanum depicting the Lamb and Cross, that we look for a clear physical indication of the 12th century origins of St Gregory's. At that time it would probably have had the simple form of chancel and nave with the arcade, aisle, south transept (Lady Chapel), porch, tower and spire being contributed successively by later generations to make the form of building we see today. However, when looking for written record of its origins, Castlemorton is not mentioned in the Domesday Book, being at that time and for many centuries after a part of the manor of Longdon, so it is there that we must turn for any early administrative records of St Gregory's evolution.

Saintly Dedication

In fact Longdon was the mother church for St Gregory's from at least the 12th Century through to the late 19th Century when, in 1880, Castlemorton was established as a separate ecclesiastical parish. Up to that time St. Gregory's had been a chapel subordinate to Longdon and it is therefore likely that the church's original dedication followed that of Longdon, to St. Mary, Mother of Jesus. It is not known when the present dedication to St. Gregory was made but there is significant evidence from an interesting archaeological find to corroborate the notion regarding the original dedication. This comes in the form of a reported finding during an archaeological investigation on the outskirts of York in 1848¹ of a mediaeval vessica seal bearing the inscription – "*S. Comune C'todi Capelle be Marie de Mort Folliot.*" - meaning



‘Common seal of the keeper of the Chapel (Morton Folliot being the former name for Castlemorton). This earlier dedication is now commemorated in the recently reworked tower arch screen with etching that aims to link the new facilities with the ancient fabric and history of the church. There has though never been any explanation of how the seal found its way to York. Of course York was and remains the second most important ecclesiastical centre in England after Canterbury, so perhaps it would not be surprising if our chapelkeeper had visited the city in the course of his career which might of course have been somewhat set back by losing this most important administrative item! The common seal² was used to give the mark of authority on legal and other matters to do with civil affairs as well as those of the church, the two being inextricably linked through the power and status of the church in mediaeval times.

¹ The Archaeological Journal of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol 4 published 1848

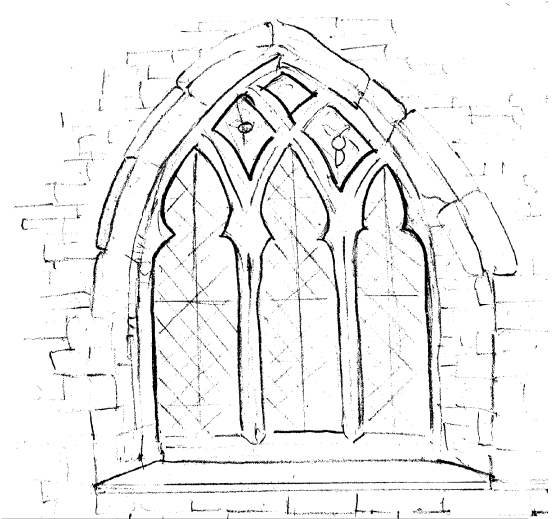
² An introduction to medieval seals by John Ashdown-Hill

A Papal Intervention

The Manor of Longdon, of which Castlemorton was counted a part, was subject to some interesting and well documented administrative transactions in the early 14th Century when, fire having damaged Westminster Abbey, Pope Boniface VIII agreed to the monks' appeal for funding by the appropriation of a number of manors, including Longdon, to help finance its rebuilding. As noted in a very detailed article published in the transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society³, this appropriation is particularly well recorded. The evidence shows that it took nearly four decades before the matter of appropriation - the transfer of ownership of the manor and hence its revenues - was settled and despite a strong rearguard action by successive Bishops of Worcester, the monks of Westminster finally won their case but then only after Papal intervention. Documents of the time show that in return the Vicar of Longdon had to support a priest to celebrate the daily office of Our Lady in Longdon Church and a deacon and sub-deacon as well as two more priests for Chaceley and the Chapel of Morton Foliot (Castlemorton). It is interesting to note that even in the present age the influence of those times is still felt as the appointment of vicar to St Gregory's remains subject to the patronage⁴ of Westminster Abbey, and Chaceley has as its patron the vicar of Longdon.

Amazing Glazing

One of the most notable aspects of the architecture of St Gregory's, a church of modest size and limited means, is its range of window types. From the small round headed chancel windows of the Romanesque or Early English period to the late 19th Century stained glass in the chancel east window and in the lady chapel, every



Lady Chapel- South Window 14th Century

³ R M Haines - Appropriation of Longdon Church to Westminster A of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society Vol 38 (New Series)

⁴ Patronage - an historic element in the Church of England carried over from the pre-Reformation Church. Each parish has a patron who in the event of a vacancy exercises the right to present a candidate for the benefice of that parish.

intervening architectural period is represented to some extent.

Something Borrowed

Perhaps it is because of the relative poverty of the parish throughout most of its existence that alterations to the church building have tended to be piecemeal. Sometimes this has been by enterprisingly picking up cast-offs the prime example being the two niches set high in the north wall of the nave either side of a 15th Century window. They seem excessively ornamented compared with other features in the building and are reputed to have been ‘rescued’ from Little Malvern Priory after the Dissolution. Another cast-off to note is the pulpit dated 1858 by W Butterfield, brought to Castlemorton in 1873 from a chapel of ease at Smethwick.

A Tale of Three Fonts



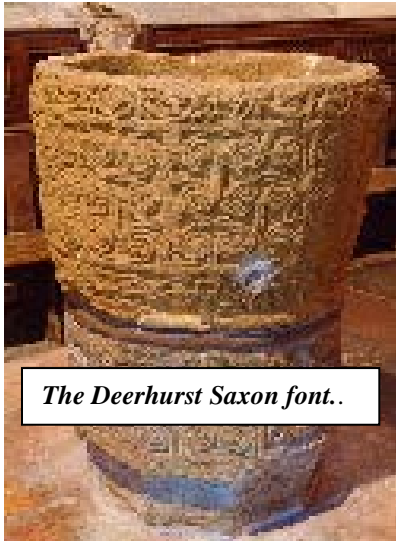
Perhaps the most interesting cast-off, or at least that with the most interesting story to tell, is the font by the south door which although of no great antiquity causes us to ponder the effect of the Reformation on the church building or more particularly its contents. In fact this font originally stood in Deerhurst church having been made for that place in the period of the Restoration⁵. Its acanthus leaf decoration is typical of that period and was one of many fonts being

reintroduced into churches following the end of the iconoclastic puritan period which had seen a systematic removal and destruction of paintings, glass and statuary in churches and cathedrals across the land. The zealots of the puritanical period fortified by Parliament which ordered that such idolatrous or papist items were ‘*to be taken away and abolished*’ (1641), or reinforced later with an order that they be ‘*taken away,*



The original mediaeval font might have looked something like this.

⁵ Restoration – the period 1660 – 1700 following the return of the monarchy (Charles II) after the interregnum of the Civil War



defaced and utterly demolished' (1644), saw to it that many mediaeval or earlier fonts were cast out of churches and broken up. This is likely to have been the reason why what we assume is St. Gregory's church's original font sited in the Lady Chapel is in fact only half a font being just the remaining lower half of the original font that was likely to have been rescued and placed back in the church post Reformation. So too at Deerhurst, in 1653⁶, the original font, of the Saxon period, was removed from its proper place and broken up with

the pieces being dispersed. Then, in the late 17th Century when the puritan period was past, the monarchy restored and communities given freedom to repair their churches after a century or more of neglect and destruction, a fine newly crafted font was commissioned and installed at Deerhurst. An account⁷ copied below then picks up the story and tells how the dispersed parts of Deerhurst's Saxon font were discovered and reunited at Deerhurst church and how in the transaction Longdon was provided with a 'perfectly new font':

The following account of the modern history of the font has been given to me by the vicar (the Rev. Geo. Butterworth).² "Its return to Deerhurst came about in this way. Miss Strickland, of Apperley Court, discovered in the year 1870, in a garden close to the Severn, a mile-and-a-half from Deerhurst Church, an upright carved stone, used as a kind of rustic ornament to the garden. It fortunately struck her that the ornamentation of the stone exactly resembled that of the font, and that it was probably the stem of the ancient font, the bowl of which was, at that time, in Longdon Church. Miss Strickland brought me round to her opinion, and we then asked Longdon to give us up our old font; Longdon most graciously complied, Miss Strickland giving in exchange a perfectly new font.

It seems that a final part of the deal was for the somewhat impoverished church at Castlemorton, at that time still subordinate to Longdon, to be given Deerhurst's now surplus Restoration period font.

⁶ William Haines was accused at Gloucester Consistory Court 'for that in the yeare 1653 he caused the Font to be pulled down' Gloucestershire Archives, GDR 210 and R. Bryant with M. Hare, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, X, The Western Midlands (Oxford, 2012), p. 163

⁷ From the *Transactions* of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society - On the Saxon Baptismal Font in Deerhurst Priory Church, with notes upon other Early Fonts by A. E. Hudd 1886-87, Vol. 11, 84-104

The Civil War - A Smashing Time was had by some.

It is known that the troubled times of the Reformation and the Civil War saw other acts of destruction or removal. There are some fragmentary remnants of stained glass borders incorporated in the chancel South

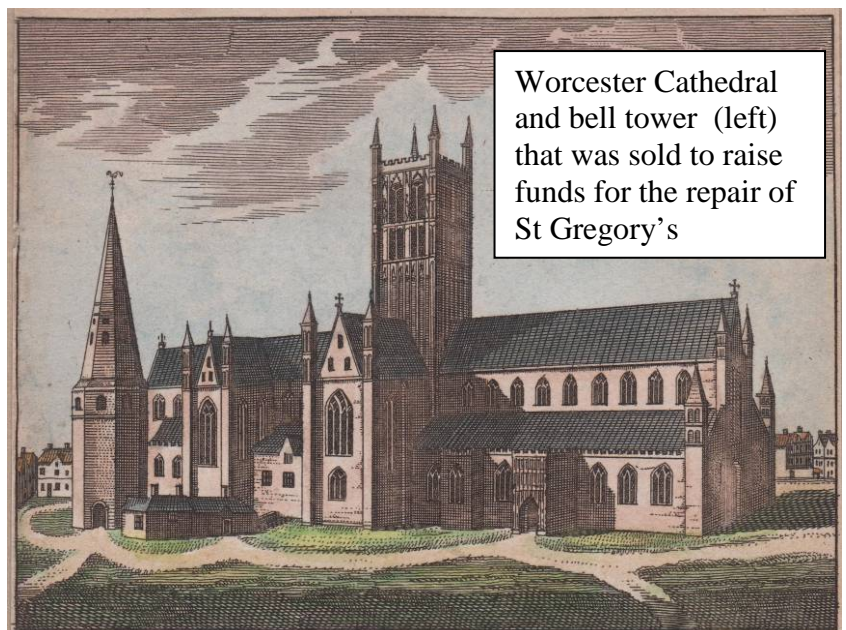


window, no doubt part of a larger expanse of such glazing possibly from the East Window which would have been an obvious target for destruction by the puritans. These remnants were removed from the East Window and placed in their present position when the East window was fitted with stained glass in 1899. The altar rails are dated 1683 -1684 and are likely to have been erected to replace rails possibly removed and destroyed in puritan times. A rood screen was erected at

the same time and is shown in the drawing overleaf to have timber decoration in the same style as the surviving altar rails. The screen was later removed during another period of 'reformation' this time that more benign one of church building and restoration in Victorian times.

As well as the work on altar rails and rood screen, 1683 might also have been the date of a larger scheme of repair and improvement following damage to St Gregory's suffered during Civil War skirmishes. These repairs were funded through an order of Parliament⁸ made in 1647 for repairs to certain

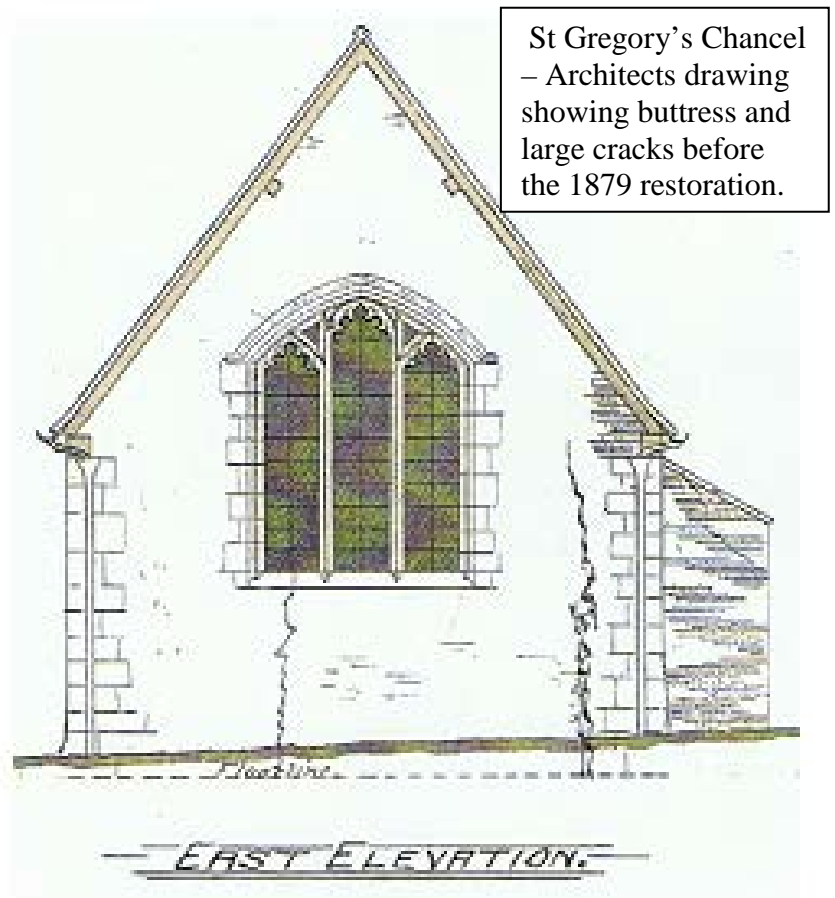
almshouses and churches (Bedwardine, Dodderhill and Castlemorton) from the sale of the 'leaden steeple' - a bell tower that had stood next to the Cathedral since mediaeval times. The sale of the lead and Irish oak timbers raised £617 4s 2d. for the purpose.



⁸ House of Commons Journal Volume 5: 25 October 1647', *Journal of the House of Commons: volume 5: 1646-1648* (1802), pp. 342-343

A Victorian Makeover – The 1878 Refurbishment

In later years there was never a surfeit of funds to allow a major reworking of the building in the manner of that seen locally at St Peter's, Bushley, where with the support of a wealthy patron the mediaeval church building was entirely replaced in 1856. Similarly at St. Mary's, Longdon the mediaeval nave and chancel were replaced in their entirety in the late 1700s and the chancel reworked yet again in the late 1800s. Such was the national zeal for rebuilding at that time that it must only have been the relatively poor financial position of Castlemorton and the lack of resident wealthy families that St. Gregory's avoided such a loss of significant mediaeval features when it too was given a makeover in 1878 – a clear example of the virtue of poverty! Nevertheless the 1878 refurbishment saw some major changes to the look of St Gregory's as well as repairs to the basic structure, the need for which is amply illustrated by the architect's drawing of the chancel at that time:



Comparison of the two pictures opposite - a pen and ink drawing dated 1874 (by F W Carpenter) made before the 1878 refurbishment, and a photograph, albeit a recent one - give an indication of some key features of the 1878 refurbishment: removal of plaster from the walls, reworking of the box pews (but using largely the original timbers to make the open pews we have today), the repositioning of the font and the disposal of the rood screen. Interestingly, from correspondence dated 1878 between the vicar, Reverend Lefroy, and architect, Mr Ewan Christian, contrary to our views of Victorian era architects, we can see that it was the vicar



St Gregory's 2012



St Gregory's in 1874 before the 1879 restoration.

rather than the architect who was determined to remove the rood screen, the latter urging but failing to convince the vicar to retain it.

As timeless as an ancient village church such as St. Gregory's might seem, it is obvious that nothing has stood still for long. The changes made in the Victorian era, which as well as the 1879 refurbishment itself, also saw the placing in 1819 of a three-decker pulpit which was later removed in 1873 as fashions in preaching changed, and a gallery for musicians and singers, put up in 1724, being removed in 1879, all to be replaced by the Nicholson organ. The organ has subsequently had a markedly itinerant existence being first positioned where the pulpit is today then being moved to the SW corner of the nave in 1932 and then in 1962 moving to the NW corner. The Lady Chapel, in the south transept was reinstated in 1908 the space before that having been used as the vestry. The final major development of the church building in the 20th Century took place in 1983 when the bell ringing chamber was created in the tower. Which leads us to

The Bells! The Bells!

Until 1983 when the ringing chamber was created at first floor level above the then vestry, now kitchen and lavatory, the bells were rung from the ground floor. Originally, the peal consisted of four or five bells cast by Rudhall of Gloucester⁹ with one added or replaced in 1795 and two replaced and a sixth being added in 1896. Following a very successful Golden Jubilee fundraising effort the bells and frame were overhauled and the bells rehung in 2002 under the direction of Arthur Berry of Malvern. By all accounts they are now one of the best peals in the county and are rung regularly. The bells are inscribed and have weights as follows:

1. *Llewellyn and James, Bristol, 1896, 3-0-8*
2. *Abraham Rudhall I, Gloucester, 1695, 3-2-8*
3. *Abraham Rudhall I, Gloucester, 1695, 3-3-0 (welded 2002)*
4. *Llewellyn and James, Bristol, 1896, 4-0-16*
5. *John Rudhall, Gloucester, 1795, 4-3-12*
6. *Llewellyn and James, Bristol, 1896, 6-3-18 in A (868Hz)*

⁹ From the 1804 Rudhall catalogue

..... **Something New**

From more recent times the discerning eye (and ear) might notice the generally good state of repair of the building which has seen major work to the nave and Lady Chapel roofs, the spire and its weathervane, areas of masonry and to the bells - all this due to the efforts and much to the credit of the congregation who alone have responsibility for gathering the funds and organising such work. This is contrary to a widely held misconception that such public buildings are maintained by funding centrally from Government or the Church of England and explains the constant need for fundraising activities in the community. Just to stand still St. Gregory's needs an income of about £25,000 every year to cover routine costs such as the vicar's stipend, insurance, heating and lighting, churchyard maintenance, running repairs etc. It was therefore a bold step for the Parochial Church Council to embark on a project '*The Bare Necessities*' costing in the region of £60,000 to provide a lavatory and galley kitchen. These facilities were seen as an essential requirement for the building to be able to meet the changed expectations of 21st Century society and to encourage a wider use of this important landmark heritage building. In this the PCC has been supported by a strong and successful fundraising group working in the village community whose invaluable efforts have made the project possible.

And Finally

Whatever you reason for stepping inside these ancient walls it is hoped that these words will have helped provide a context in which to ponder the history of the building and that of the community it serves. From that perspective the recent changes made to the building can be seen as just another adaptation of St. Gregory's the like of which it has seen from age to age throughout its long life. Such work in maintaining and adding to the building is a joyous one and a reflection of a continuum of human endeavour and existence in which we all have a part to play-

a work in progress!



*The 'Bare Necessities'
- Before and After*

