

**A HISTORY OF THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS BRANSTON by
A F Deverill - 1966
A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALL SAINTS CHURCH BRANSTON by
Chris Taylor - 1995**

EARLY ORIGINS

Like so many village churches, All Saint's Church, Branston, has been built and reconstructed over many centuries. Indeed, its history is pre-Conquest with 2 churches being recorded in Branston at the time of the Domesday survey. In this respect, the south-west corner of the nave with its stones arranged in bold "long and short work" is typical of Anglo-Saxon workmanship and may be deemed to be the oldest part of the church still visible. It is further speculated that Walter de Aincourt who had his chief 'seat' at Branston and was a kinsman of Remigius, the first Norman bishop of Lincoln, may have influenced the building of the next oldest part of the church, the tower, with the Norman work on the West Front of the Cathedral providing doubtless inspiration.

The earliest documentary reference to the church relates that around 1190 a Robert Patricius, or Partridge, with the consent of his wife Agnes gave to the church one acre and a half of land situated upon the Holme, so that a light would be burnt in the church for their souls on the altar of St Peter and St Paul.

William D'Aincourt gave more substantial lands in Branston to the Priory of Thurgarton (near Southwell) and as can be seen from the list of the Rectors of Branston this Priory consequently held the Advowson (right to select and appoint the priest) of Branston from 1227 until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536. The King then gave the patronage of the church to Charles Duke of Suffolk, which was later transferred to a number of different families.

CHURCH POSSESSIONS

In 1781, it was recorded that the church had a pulpit, a cloth, a cushion, a common prayer book, a great bible and a book of homilies. In the chancel also there was a table, a chest containing a pewter flagon and a silver cup for communion, two pewter plates and a linen cloth.

Bells:

All Saints' has a peal of 6 bells hung in a steel framework which was erected as part of the 1895 restoration to the belfry and spire; before that time, the bells would have been in a wooden frame.

The oldest bell is now rung as the fifth, and is 15th century or possibly earlier. Three others, the third, fourth and sixth (tenor) were added in 1595, the second in 1893 and the treble in 1895 during the belfry restoration.

The two 19th century bells were made by the well known Taylor's of Loughborough foundry, while the earlier Elizabethan bells came from a Nottingham foundry.

The four oldest bells are inscribed as follows:

No 3 "God save our Queen, 1595"

No 4 "God save his Church, 1595"

No 5 "Gabriel." An announcing bell.

No 6 "IHESVS BE OVR SPEDE,"

The two 'new' bells rung as numbers 1 and 2, are as follows:

1. "We Praise Thee O God"

2. "Ring Out An Endless Alleluia"

There were many special occasions for the ringing of the announcing bell. In Branston it is recorded that the bell was rung for baptisms, confirmations, banns, marriages, vestries, and funerals. A strict code of ringing was particularly observed for funerals, with three tolls of the bell for a male person, two for a female, and one for a child. In addition, in Branston, it was the custom to toll the bell in simple strokes after the knell to indicate the deceased's age.

At the time of the six bells being hung and ready to ring together, a Branston Church Society of Bell Ringers was established. The rules were strict: ie a member failing to turn up half an hour before service times on Sunday without giving due notice was fined sixpence - a substantial sum in the late 19th century.

Lighting:

Branston was one of the first country churches to be lit by gas, for when the present Branston Hall was built by the Melvilles they installed gas made in their own gas works into the Hall, and laid a pipe to the church.

The Church Clock:

In 1888 a new church clock was installed and inaugurated to mark the 50th Jubilee of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne the year before. The donor Arthur H Leslie Melville was formally thanked for "his generous present the new service of a clock which was long needed among us and is highly useful." The gift was deemed to have been made to the parish, rather than specifically to the church, hence any repairs to the clock, according to the vestry minutes of March 1902, are to met by the parish council! It has an hourly strike mechanism employing the tenor bell in the tower.

THE WRAY MEMORIAL AND VAULT

The monument was erected before Sir Cecil Wray's death in 1736, and consists of an obelisk of mottled marble with Coats of Arms attached. The Wray Vault below the floor of the church close by the memorial was discovered when the installation of a new heating required excavations to accommodate the hot water pipes under the flooring. It was expected that only the coffin of the two Wrays would occupy this vault, but in fact there were seven others. There were four coffins containing the remains of adults, two of boys, seven and eight years old and three of infants - one of only 27 days. The adults were Sir Cecil Wray, his wife Dame Mary, Lord Vere Bertie, (an enormous coffin) and his wife Lady Vere Bertie. Of the boys, Henry Leslie Melville, aged seven, died on 24th December, 1810, and William David Leslie Melville, aged eight, died in May 1839.

From the untidy arrangement of the coffins it seems fairly reasonable to suppose that the other coffins had been removed from other parts of the church at some time. This would probably be when the north aisle was built in 1876 or when the original heating installation was put in.

Originally the coffins of Sir Cecil Wray and his wife would be laid very squarely in the centre of the vault. Instead, they had been pushed to one side to make room for the others. All were untidily laid on bricks on the floor whilst that of Sir Cecil appeared to have slipped to one side!

RECTORS OF ALL SAINTS

The Curtois Family

Rector	Instituted	Vacated	Patron
John Curtois MA	1680	1719	Sir Thomas Meres, Knight
John Curtois MA	1719	1768	Rowland Curtois and William Carleton, clerk
Peregrine Harrison Curtois L.L.B.	1768	1814	Elisabeth Curtois of Branston
Peregrine Curtois L.L.B.	1814	1847	The said Peregrine Curtois
Atwill Curtois B.A.	1847	1868	The said Atwill Curtois
Peregrine Curtois L.L.B.	1868	1891	The said Peregrine Curtois

For 211 unbroken years there was a Rector of the name of Curtois holding the living of All Saints, Branston. John Curtois was the first, being Rector from 1680-1719 and is buried in the chancel. A staunch Royalist, he preached in Branston on the Sunday following the death of King Charles II, a memorial sermon which aroused considerable comment in the neighbourhood. Three Sundays later he preached the same sermon in Lincoln Cathedral where there were many anti-royalists present, and on leaving afterwards he was mobbed by the crowd.

As rectors the Curtois family were owners of the tithe and when this was converted to several hundred acres of land in 1765 they became virtually landed gentry. Consequently, they built a very large new Rectory in 1765, now converted into flats and known as Hainton House.

In 1842 the income for the Curtois family from the living was the considerable sum of £677 per annum, rising in 1891 to £680. It is therefore not surprising that during Peregrine Curtois' Rectorship of 33 years, 1814 to 1847, he was able to build Longhills Hall in the Italian style at the still substantial cost of £40,000. As Rector of Potterhanworth at the same time, Longhills was a very convenient residence being midway between the two parishes. Rev Peregrine Curtois also erected an extension on the north side of the church chancel in 1836 'for the sole purpose of educating children of the parish of Branston in the principles of the Established Church', which is now used as a vestry.

The fifth Curtois Rector was Atwill who restored the church in 1860. He carved and erected the fine choir screen which was destroyed in the fire of 1962, his daughter, Ella Rose, carving the eight panels which were later inserted into her father's screen.

FIRE OF CHRISTMAS 1962

On Christmas Day, a disastrous fire destroyed much of the church. After the morning service and Holy Communion, everything was left in order, with no other services to follow on that day. As it was a cold Christmas day with few people around it was not until about 8.15pm that the fire was discovered when sufficient heat had been generated to break the chancel windows and let in air, causing the fire to burst into flames. It is thought that the fire started through an electrical fault in the organ casing, and that it would have been smouldering for some hours before it was noticed.

Within a short time the fire services had arrived from Lincoln, but by this time the fire had swept under the chancel arch and along the nave roof and had reached the floor of the bell chamber in the tower at the other end of the church. An indication of how close the church was to total disaster can be visualised when it was later discovered that even the bell ropes - at the far end of the building from the source of the fire - had been burned through.

It was not until the early hours of the morning that the fire was out, and when daylight came, an assessment of the damage was possible. Through the undaunted and in many cases courageous efforts of parishioners, all the church plate, the contents of the safe and vestry, the lectern, and many other movable items had been removed whilst the fire was raging.

All the chancel furnishings were totally destroyed including the very fine carved altar, the communion rails, and the oak pews. The beautifully carved choir screen built by Atwill Curtois was damaged beyond repair, whilst the carved panels though badly charred at the back were saved and now form part of the new organ casing.

Most serious of all was the destruction beyond repair of the chancel arch which was very badly splintered through the cold water from the firemen's hoses being played on to the almost red hot stone.

An emergency meeting was held the next morning to consider how to continue church life. Help came from the trustees of the Methodist Chapel, who placed their premises at the church's disposal and the services on the next Sunday were held there. Afterwards the Church Hall was prepared for use as a temporary church, and services were held there until the following Easter.

In the restoration of the church from 1964-66, the architect, George Pace, MA, FSA, FRIBA of York, tried to put into effect the following liturgical and architectural policy:-

- All parts of the building and its furniture and fittings which could be repaired were to be repaired using the best conservation methods and techniques.
- Where work had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair the new work was designed so as to be of the 20th-century, but to be so disciplined as to take its place naturally with the earlier existing work.
- All new works to be as anonymous as possible, avoiding all stunts, cliches and gimmicks. The work was to be of the 1960's, but it should age gracefully and not appear merely a sad reminder of a short-lived passing fashion.

The restoration by George Pace with the necessary rebuilding of the chancel walls and arch, resulted in the now striking modern chancel arch, whilst the wide east window, the gift of Major Abel-Smith, was designed by Keith New, who also designed and made the stained glass in some of the nave windows at Coventry Cathedral. Whilst the original roof was destroyed, they were able to make plaster casts of its charred angels, which were gilded and added to the present roof.

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