

THE HISTORY OF NETHEREXE CHURCH



No fantastic stained glass windows, magnificent screens, electricity, gas or water.

Just a simple stone church set in the midst of fields close to the banks of the River Exe.

Lit by candles and heated by the warmth of its congregation.

DEDICATION

This booklet is dedicated to the memory of Ralph Alford of Netherexe (4.7.1911 – 2.4.1998) who collected much of the material upon which it is based. Some of his own carefully typed personal memories from his file 'Notes on Netherexe church' have been reproduced in this text. Ralph is buried in the Netherexe churchyard.

INTRODUCTION

Although Netherexe is a tiny parish - just over a square mile in size and with a population that now numbers less than fifty – people have been living and farming in this part of the Exe Valley for at least 5,000 years.

Archaeological discoveries in the parish of Netherexe include leaf-shaped and barbed-and-tanged arrowheads and Neolithic flints, including scrapers. Analysis of crop marks has revealed the existence of a Neolithic cursus and a long mortuary enclosure located just to the east of Netherexe Barton. The cursus probably dates from about 3,000 BC and is one of only about 200 discovered in the whole of the British Isles. Although relatively small compared to some, it is at least 188 metres long and 23 metres wide. The purpose of a cursus is still the subject of much debate but is most likely to have been either ceremonial (celebration of the solstice) or agricultural (an enclosure for herding livestock). Two Bronze Age bowl barrows, lying in an approximate east-west alignment, are situated about 100 metres apart on low lying land north of Green Lane.

The church stands not far from an Anglo Saxon Harepath which came from the direction of Crediton, across the River Exe via a ford at Fortescue and on to Dolbury at Killerton. The Harepath, which means 'the way of the warriors' or 'army path' is one of many ancient pathways in the region that were constructed or refurbished during the time of King Alfred the Great of Wessex to enable his troops to be moved quickly from place to place to repulse the Viking invaders during his reign (871 to 899 AD).

Although situated on the flood plain of the River Exe, by an ox-bow lake, the church building has never been known to have been flooded over the last four generations, even during the disastrous flooding that occurred in the Exe Valley in 1960.

Ralph Alford recalls; *"The ox-bow lake outside the northwest gate was always known as the Pike pond. It is said that some very large Pike were caught there and according to Colonel Hill the pond was at one time used by the monks to catch fish. The pond was much larger when we were boys than it is now.*

The way to the church from the village was by way of the kissing gate at the north east corner of the church field. Inside this gate, which was often very muddy, there was a long path beside the hedge, with a chestnut paling fence and a gate at the end. Then in fathers time a gravel path ran across the field to the gate on the northwest corner. Horses and traps and hearses used a track which ran down from Green Lane (known by the locals as Greenaway) which ran down beside the wire fencing and the old garden wall and turned right at the bottom across to the church. There was a line of Beech and Hornbeam tress along this track - all except one have now gone".

THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

The church is dedicated to St John the Baptist. The original dedication was unknown until Mark Mardon, who looked after the churchyard and cut the grass with a scythe told Ralph Alford that *“during the restoration (of 1907) the stonework was removed from the blocked up arch on the south wall and behind this there was an indication that the church was dedicated to St John the Baptist”*.

It is likely that an Anglo-Saxon chapel stood on the site and that the church was originally founded shortly after the Norman conquest of 1066 by the De Crewes (Crewys or Cruis) family in about 1125. Mark Anthony Lower (1813-1876) wrote that the Crewys family is a “west of England family so ancient that an old distich asserts” that “Croker, Crewys, and Coplestone, when the Conqueror came, were at home.” The stone font in the church is the only visible remnant of the original Norman church on the site.

The earliest written record of the Netherexe church is dated 1214 and involved correspondence with Sir Richard de Cruis regarding the chaplain, when the church was connected to the St Nicholas Priory in Exeter and joined to Brampford Speke.

The church was largely rebuilt in the late 1400’s, the great age of English church building, becoming what you see today: a simple stone structure, comprising of a chancel and nave with a continuous roof, south porch, and vestry. The church is constructed of volcanic trap rock extracted from the Raddon Quarry near Thorverton. The area around Exeter had many active volcanoes 200 to 300 million years ago and the deposits of lava which erupted from those volcanoes are found all around the city. Many of the old buildings and bridges in this part of the Exe Valley are constructed from the distinctively coloured volcanic stone from the Raddon Quarry.

King Henry VIII, on 20th March 1543, leased the rectory of Netherexe to William Sharland, Gentleman, which had previously belonged to the dissolved Priory of St Nicholas in Exeter. Henry Borough of Broadclyst later acquired the rights, along with the rights of nominating the Chaplain of Netherexe. Henry Borough passed it on to a charitable trust known as “The eight men of Broadclist”, who owned it until 1916, when it was purchased by Viscount Hambleton and Mr W Wyndham. Viscount Hambleton was otherwise known as Mr W.H.Smith, founder and owner of the bookstores, who also built the ‘model’ farm at Rewe Barton.

The single bell in the turret was cast by John Pennington of Exeter in 1676. His bell foundry was in Paul Street, now part of the Harlequins shopping centre.

A charity board (date unknown) hangs in the church, with the inscription “Emal Warren Stoke Canon gave 1L payable out of Millhayes in Upex to ye poor of this parish to be distributed yearly on St Nicholas day in linen cloth”

A paragraph written by George Oliver in 1840 in his book ‘Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Devon’ gives a detailed description of the condition of the church at that time:

“From Brampford Speke we proceeded to Netherexe, which ... in truth has been a perpetual Curacy, independent, for at least 400 years, of any other parish. The small Chapel, with a turret containing a single bell, lies in a secluded situation, within a spacious burial ground. To the manifest injury of the

fabric, interments have been multiplied under its walls. Entering by an acutely pointed south porch the first object that attracted notice was a very low Font, but without any pretensions to beauty. Several of the ancient oak pews were remaining; but some vandal had been introduced to smooth, or more correctly speaking, to hack down every vestige of carving on the sides, before he overtopped them with his elm boards. In the Chancel we observed the lower moulding of the Piscina, which had been blocked up. After finding by measurement the interior length to be 34 feet and a half, by nearly 15 in width, we hurried away from the dismal scene, through miry and watery roads, muttering "O Matre vili, filia vilior".

What George Oliver and his friends were muttering in Latin is, to a Victorian academic, a rib-tickling play on words based on a passage from Horace's Odes. The literal translation of what Oliver muttered in 1840 is "Oh cheaper daughter of a cheap mother". Before visiting Netherexe, Oliver had visited Bramford Speke church and was only slightly less unimpressed by what he had seen there.



Netherexe by William Spreat, about 1860

Westcountry Studies Library

In April 1890 one Joseph Stokes, a haulier, appeared in court at Exeter charged with breaking into Netherexe church on 28th February 1890. The robbery was discovered by the sexton on the 2nd March and Stokes was arrested following information received from John Alford of Rewe, who said that he had been approached by Stokes on the Friday before the robbery and that Stokes had asked him for some hot water to make tea and had also asked for some tobacco. In his evidence Stokes (also known as Joseph Groves) said; "It took me seven hours to break into the church, from nine o'clock until four, and I had to get an iron bar from the churchyard to burst open the door". He was found guilty by the jury and sentenced to six months hard labour.

Inside the church is a credence table erected in memory of Francis Christopher Hill, who was responsible for the restoration of the church that took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was during this restoration that the bowl of the font was restored to its original position from a farmyard in the neighbourhood.

During 1906 – 1907 more extensive restorations were undertaken, funded almost entirely by Francis Christopher Hill's eldest son, Reginald Hill. A vestry was added to the north side of the church, exterior walls were repaired, some interior furnishings replaced and the building and bell turret were cleared of ivy. The roof was replaced and oak ceiling trusses installed. Prior to the restoration the internal ceiling of the church had been made of plaster and was painted blue with gold stars.

The church was re-opened by the Lord Bishop of Exeter on July 20th 1907. The church itself was too small to accommodate all those who wished to attend the reopening and additional seating was provided outside the west door. A newspaper report from the time states that after the service those present "sat down to luncheon on the lawn adjoining Mr Hill's shooting box whilst an orchestra from the band of the 4th Battalion Devonshire Regiment played selections of music".

Lieutenant Colonel Reginald Hill died on the 1st June 1971, aged 97, and his memory is honoured by the dedication of a memorial tablet in the church.

In 1961 the church was designated a Grade I listed building.

THE CLERGY

During the eighteenth century Episcopal visitations by the Bishop were carried out every three years and the practice emerged for the bishops to circulate a series of printed questions among the clergy in advance of their visit. The 1779 return for Netherexe provides a fascinating insight into the life of the parish clergyman at that time and answers given to the questions are transcribed below:

The Revd the Minister of Netherexe:

(Regarding residence, curate and lecturer): There is no parsonage house. I reside at Rewe, an adjoining parish.

(Regarding other benefices): I enjoy the Rectory of Chilfroom in the County of Dorset and Diocese of Bristol.

(Regarding divine service at other churches): I serve the Cure of Rewe, & attend about noon Sir Thomas Acland's Chapel. Having my Lord - 7 daughters and a teeming wife, I get what I can with propriety.

(Regarding frequency of divine service): On the 1st & 3^d Sunday in every Month once a Day. The Stipend will not allow of more frequent attendance, being but £10 per annum out of the Barton of Netherex, a Queen Anne's Bounty of £8 per annum and a little Glebe of £15 per annum. Before I attended, the service was twice on ye first Sunday of every month; but the late Bishop thought it better if I would consent, to divide it: - after which, I mentioned to the Bishop, that I had promised to serve it once every Sunday, as Mr Martyn, who presented me, had promised £50 towards raising another Queen's Bounty, Sir Thomas Acland having promised also £100. But Mr Martyn died without fulfilling his promise; so that as ye salary is not increased, ye duty continues ye same. I mentioned this particular, as I knew not, whether the late Bishop had not put down the duty in his book and as once a day.

(Regarding frequency of communion): Four times in the year - Christmas - Easter - Whitsunday and Michaelmas; before I came, it was never administered about 8 or 10 communicants.

(Regarding catechising of children): I begin the Sunday after Trinity, as being the most leasurable time in the country, between hay & corn-harvest.

(Regarding the glebe terrier): I have never thought it necessary to have one; because by the donor's will, a copy of that will is always kept open in Broad Clist Church, as it relates to a charity given to that Parish, and which your Lordship, I suppose, will have particularly specified by Mr Acland Rector of that Parish. If your Lordship thinks it necessary, one shall be procured.

(Number of families in the parish): About 10.

(Regarding papists, dissenters and meeting houses): None

(Regarding charity): The Parishes of Netherex & Cadbury have the benefit of alternately placing a pauper in one of the alms-houses at Broad-Clist, with an allowance of 1s 6d per week; which I believe is now duly applied.

(Regarding priest's orders and institution): Taken Priest's Orders ye 21st Septbr 1766 Institution for Netherex ye 12th Aug: 1769. Direction James Bryett at Rewe near Exeter.

Ralph Alford recalls one of the parish clergy from just prior to the First World War, Rev.

E.V.Apthorpe: "I well remember Mr. Apthorpe, he lived in Rewe rectory. He was a very gentlemanly man with a pleasant word for everybody – he was the real gentry, as the locals would put it. He rode around the parish on a patent green bicycle which had a seat slung on springs from a triangular frame, which made it more comfortable".

The Netherexe parsonage house

"And as for the parsonage house it hath beene downe to the ground as a thing quite ruined for many years". So wrote Richard Andrew, warden, in the Netherexe Terrier (a list of church property) of 1679. It is thought that the parsonage building, known to have existed in 1605, was situated next to areas of land that were called 'Presse Parkes' in 1679, now the fields named Higher Priest Park and Lower Priest Park to the north of Green Lane. The parsonage building had completely disappeared by 1745.

Bibles and prayer books.

One bible dated 1822 and now missing is said to have been given by the Hill family. Two were given by Clifford Martyn Young in 1844. The bible in use was given by Miss Caroline Swete in 1916. A prayer book of 1967 commemorates Lily Cook who spent a lifetime of service to the church.

MEMORIALS IN THE CHURCH, THE CHURCHYARD AND AT REWE WAR MEMORIAL

MEMORIALS IN THE CHURCH

Thomas Cole

The memorial tablet to Thomas Cole was originally from a grave within the church. It reads:

Here lyeth the body of Thomas Cole of this parish, Gent, who departed this life the twelfth day of May
A.D.1684.

Here lyeth also the body of Susanna his wife who departed this life the twenty second day of February 1714.

Mary Young

William Clifford Martyn was a descendent of Martin de Tours, a general officer in the army of William the Conqueror. He died in April 1770 and left part of his property, which included the old manor house (now pulled down), the barton, advowson, and manorial rights of Netherexe, the manor of Black Torrington, besides personal property in Exeter and elsewhere, to a cousin, Peter Young. The memorial reads:

To the memory of Miss Mary Young the beloved daughter of Peter and Salome Young, who died Oct 18th 1771
in the 11th year of her age

Also

Of Thomas Martyn Young, son of the above named Peter and Salome who died Aug 6th 1817 aged 63 years.
The poor man's friend.

Francis Hill

Francis Hill, born in Netherexe in about 1766 was the father of Christopher Hill, who is not mentioned on this tablet, but appears on an adjoining memorial. In 1841 and 1851 Francis was living at Netherexe House with his surviving children – his wife Mary had died in 1819 - and he described his profession as a 'landed proprietor'.

In memory of Francis Hill who died 15th June 1855, aged 89.

And seven of his children

Ann died 27 Janry 1824, aged 19

Francis died 6th March 1834 aged 26

John died 3 April 1842, aged 30

Henry Richards died 9th April 1845 aged 27

Dulcibella died 6 Janry 1847 aged 36

Elizabeth died 14th Janry 1848 aged 32

Sarah died 15th March 1860 aged 58

And are buried in the adjoining churchyard

Also to the memory of

Mary his wife

Who died March 1819, aged 45

Who with three of their children are buried
at Butterleigh

Christopher Hill

Christopher Hill, son of Francis Hill, was born in 1814 in Halberton. In 1847 he married his second wife, Anne Ellen Moxhay, at Trinity Church, St Mary, Kensington and they lived in Aldgate and Wanstead from where Christopher carried on his profession as a wine and brandy merchant, employing several workers. Following the death of his wife in 1863 he continued to live in Wanstead, supported by several servants including Jane Bullman from Upexe and Charles Pretherick of Silverton, until his own death in 1890.

In memory of
Harriet, wife of
Christopher Hill
Who died 30th April 1844 aged 28
Also of Ann Kingwell her sister
Who died 9th May 1842 aged 28
And of Anne Ellen
The second wife of Christopher Hill
Who died 16th April 1863 aged 52
And also of
Christopher Hill
Who fell asleep March 3rd 1890
In the 77th year of his age
RIP
Also of Mary Ford
Widow of the above
Who died Dec 1st 1902 aged 53

Francis Christopher Hill

Francis Christopher Hill, son of Christopher Hill, was born in Aldgate on 27th September 1852 and baptised on the 26th December 1852 at St Mary, Whitechapel. He was educated at Honington, near Thetford in Norfolk and lived most of his life in London. In 1875 he lived with his wife and children at Colville Terrace, Kensington and by 1881 was living at the Shooting Box, Wanstead Park. In 1881 he described his profession as a 'Gentleman', living on 'income derived from lands (dividends etc)'. He died on June 24th 1892, St John the Baptists Day. The inscription on the Credence table reads:

To the Glory of God
And in ever loving memory of
Francis Christopher Hill of this parish
Born September 27th 1852, who entered into rest
Saint John Baptists day 1892 in his 40th year
RIP
The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God

This credence table is erected by his widow
and children to complete the restoration of
this church so reverently and carefully
commenced by him in 1890 and as the fittest
memorial for his loving care of this parish

Reginald Francis Hill

Reginald Francis William Hill, the son of Francis Christopher Hill, was born on the 18th December 1874 in Colville Terrace, Kensington, London, and baptised on the 23rd January 1875 at All Saints, Kensington and Chelsea. Educated at a boarding school in Uppingham, Rutland, he was Lieutenant Colonel of the Devonshire Regiment and served in the Boer War. During the First World War he was for a time in command of the East Lancashire Regiment and during the Second World War he commanded the Henley-Oxfordshire unit of the Home Guard. Kelly's Directory of 1923 noted that he was 'Lord of the Manor and chief landowner' of the parish of Netherex. He died, age 97, on the 2nd June 1971 at his home in Henley-on-Thames.

To the Glory of God and in memory of
Colonel
Reginald Francis William Hill
Eldest son of Francis Christopher
And Mary Elizabeth Ann Hill
Born 18 December 1874 . Died 2 June 1971
Benefactor of this church
For many years

Christopher Hill (died 1847)

In memory of
Christopher Hill
Who died 9th Janry 1847 aged 68
Also of Mary his wife
Who died 8th June 1844, aged 73
Also of Mary Ann Snell Hill
Their daughter
Who died 18th March 1870 aged 60
And of Ann Snell
Sister of the above Mary Hill
Who died 28th December 1849 aged 79
Also of Captain William Burgess H.E.I.C.S
Brother in law of Mary Hill and Ann Snell
Who died February 10th 1850 aged 79
And of Robert Currie
Late of Newcastle on Tyne
Who died May 21st 1853 aged 49

Fred Alford

The hymn board is dedicated to the memory of Fred Alford, died 1984, brother of Ralph and Ken Alford. The Alford family were farmers in Netherex during the 19th and 20th centuries. The last members of the family to farm here were Fred, Ralph and Ken Alford who collected many of the wagons, carts and other exhibits now on display at the national collection at the Alford Galleries in the Tiverton Museum of Mid Devon life.

MEMORIALS IN THE CHURCHYARD

There are many graves and memorials in the churchyard – these are notes about a few of them:

The oldest memorial in the churchyard is the square stone standing against the outside of the vestry wall, to **Thomas Cole**, dated 1684. The stone was removed from inside the church during the 1907 restoration. At the time of Thomas Cole's burial, an Act was in force that required all deceased persons to be buried wrapped only in wool: "upon pain of the forfeiture of the sum of five pounds to be employed to the use of the poor of the parish where such person shall be buried". In order to encourage the woollen manufactures of his kingdom, Charles II had introduced the Act in 1667 and although difficult to enforce and fallen into disuse, it was not repealed until 1812. An affidavit dated 26th January 1714 still exists, which certified that a Joan Smith was buried in woollen at Netherexe churchyard.

The tall grave with the urn on the eastern side of the churchyard is a Grade II listed memorial to Peter Young's descendent **Clifford Martyn Young**, who inherited the estate following the death of his father in St Helier, Jersey in 1827. In 1844 Clifford placed the Netherexe House and 350 acres of farming land up for sale, but he died before the sale was completed and the house, its contents and the land were put for auction. The executors entered into a contract with a gentleman named Bastard "for several thousands of pounds" but shortly afterwards rumours started to circulate that the will was not valid and Mr Bastard refused to complete the contract on the grounds that title was not good. The resulting court case was heard in 1851 at the Crown Court, with the Lord Chief Justice presiding. The judge dismissed the appeal, with costs, and decreed that the purchaser should pay interest on his purchase money from 25th December 1845 when the purchase money ought to have been paid according to the terms of the contract, together with all costs of the suit.

The grave of **Anne Vavasour** is situated in the southwest corner and is fenced off from the main churchyard. She was the wife of a Lieutenant General in the Army, Sir Henry Maghull Mervin Vavasour, 2nd Baronet (1768 to 1838). Sir Henry inherited his title at the decease of his father in 1813. The Vavasour family seat was at Melbourne House, five miles from Pocklington (East Riding of Yorkshire), where there is a chapel for Wesleyan Methodists and another for primitive Methodists. Anne Vavasour died on 7th June 1845 during a visit to Netherexe and her grave was always known to local people as the Roman Catholic Grave.

A grave on the south side, close to the wall of the church, lies north to south and without a headstone. Ralph Alford noted that "*The old men said that it was of a lady who was buried thus at her own request, so that she could hear the lesson read by the parson at the lectern just inside the window. When the graves were levelled just after the war I tried to get the mound preserved but it was too late, it was gone before I could prevent it*".

Ralph Alford also recalls "*an unusual occurrence took place in about 1975. About 20 feet inside the south gate to the churchyard a pile of human ashes appeared, just tipped down in a heap. It caused some speculation amongst the locals as to what it meant. The mystery was later solved. The ashes were of Sir Cyril Fox, the well known archaeologist and historian. The undertakers had dumped the ashes down instead of scattering or burying them. Sir Cyril Fox had a liking for Nether Exe and would often come and visit the church*".

THE REWE WAR MEMORIAL

The war memorial at Rewe stands at the junction of Green Lane with the A396. It carries the names of the four villagers of Netherexe killed during the First World War:

William Poole enlisted in the Devonshire Regiment in 1908, when he was 19, then joined the Dragoon Guards as a transport driver and achieved the rank of Lance Corporal. He died age 29 on the 6th May 1918 and is buried at Bideford Cemetery.

John Poole, William's brother, was serving as a private with the 5th Battalion of the Dorsetshire Regiment when he was killed in action in Flanders on 26th September 1916. He was just 17 years old when he died and is commemorated at the Thiepval Memorial at Somme, which is a memorial to the missing of the Somme battlefields. It lists 72,194 officers and men of the UK and South African forces who died before 20th March 1918 in the Somme sector and who have no known grave.

William and John Poole's father James Poole died in Barnstaple in 1965, one hundred years after his birth in Dolton.

Ernest Dewdney, the son of Thomas Dewdney, a farm labourer, joined the 2nd/ 7th (Cyclists) Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment. He died aged 23 on the 17th December 1915 and is buried in the churchyard at Netherexe.

Frederick Snell of the Royal 1st Devon Yeomanry was the son of William Snell, a shepherd, and his wife Bessie. Born in 1897, Frederick died on the 10 April 1915 aged 18 and is buried in Rewe churchyard.

SERVICES AND EVENTS AT THE CHURCH

Services are held at the church six times a year, to mark the major Christian festivals. August sees the annual horse show in the fields around the church and we open the church to offer quiet sanctuary from the activities and competitions. Cream teas are on offer in aid of church funds. The dates and times of all the services and events at the church are published on the Netherexe Mission Community website at: www.netherexe.org

VISITING THE CHURCH

Netherexe lies about ½ mile to the west of the village of Rewe, which is situated six miles north east of Exeter on the A 396 from Exeter to Tiverton. The church is located in a field bounded by the Exe Valley Way. It is marked with a + between Netherexe Barton and the River Exe on OS Explorer Map 114.

We are obligated to keep the church door locked at all times except during services and on the church open day. The church can only be reached by walking across a large pasture. When visiting, please be sure to wear appropriate footwear and do please follow the Country Code:

Follow all signs / Leave gates and property as you find them / Protect plants and animals and take your litter home / Keep dogs under close control / Consider other people. Thank you.