



# ST THOMAS'S CHURCH

THURLBEAR, SOMERSET



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

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THURLBEAR, SOMERSET

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## ST THOMAS'S CHURCH

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THURLBEAR, SOMERSET

by TOM MAYBERRY

### INTRODUCTION

The village of Thurlbear lies four miles south-east of Taunton at the point where the lias limestone of the Blackdown foothills gives way to the keuper marl of the Vale of Taunton Deane. An unfinished Iron Age hill fort on the wooded summit of Netherclay Hill, a mile (1.6km) west of St Thomas's church, provides early evidence of human activity in and near Thurlbear, and fragmentary Roman remains have been found in the neighbouring parish of Stoke St Mary. But the most conspicuous archaeological monument in the district is the Norman fortress at Castle Neroche, three miles to the south. There, from a commanding spur of the Blackdown Hills, the Count of Mortain may for a time have controlled the great West Country estates acquired by him at the Norman Conquest.

Despite its proximity to Taunton, Thurlbear has always been an isolated place, with a small and scattered population, and an economy based largely on agriculture. More than half of the 949 acres (384 hectares) which anciently made up the parish lie within the Vale of Taunton Deane, an area famous since the Middle Ages for its fertile soil and the prosperity of its mixed farming. Other land, south and east of the church, is heavy lias clay, where woodland and pasture have long predominated. Stock rearing, dairying and arable farming were all recorded in the mediaeval period. In the 1780s, when the historian Edmund Rack visited the parish, he found only flax and turnips to diversify the pasture and meadow land. But a century later grain crops were also noted, and teasels were grown occasionally for use in finishing cloth produced by North Country cloth mills. Small limestone quarries existed for centuries on the eastern side of the parish, providing not only a ready source of building stone, but raw material for numerous limekilns which flourished locally until the 1930s.

The remarkable Norman church of St Thomas lies near the centre of the parish on a little-used minor road. East of the church, the land slopes down into the hollow of the hill from which the village derives its name (Thurlbear evidently means 'the hill with the hollow'), and beyond that is

rising ground covered by Thurlbear Wood, an ancient woodland now partly managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. To the south is the late mediaeval manor house, and to the north are the tithe barn (evidently Tudor) and the village school, opened in 1873. Until 1885 a thatched Tudor rectory stood immediately opposite the church, but in that year it was replaced on a slightly different site by the present Old Rectory.

## MANOR AND PARISH

When Domesday Book was compiled in 1086, the de Montacute family held the manor of Thurlbear from the Count of Mortain. The de Montacutes were to be lords of Thurlbear for most of the Middle Ages and may have been responsible for building its church. Though their home was elsewhere and their estates were widespread, Thurlbear was never entirely forgotten by them. Soon after the foundation of the Augustinian priory in Taunton about 1120, Richard de Montacute gave the prior and canons a piece of land in Thurlbear 'near the place called Therlessa', the first of several such gifts. William de Montacute added the church itself to the possessions of the prior and canons before his death in 1270, while his son, Simon de Montacute, gave them the right to choose the rector. Simon was among the



*Exterior view of St Thomas's church from the south-east, by J Buckler, 1837. The view shows the chancel's late mediaeval windows before their removal. The thatched Tudor rectory is also visible. (COURTESY OF THE SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY)*

greatest of his family, winning military honour during the campaigns against the Welsh and responsible in 1296 for raising the siege of Bordeaux. It was to him and his heirs in 1314 that Edward I granted the right to hold 'a yearly fair at their manor of Thurlbere ... on the vigil, the feast and the morrow of St Thomas'.

With the dissolution of Taunton Priory in 1539, its property at Thurlbear came into the hands of the Carvanyells, a merchant family of Taunton. By the end of the century, their place had been taken by the Portmans of Orchard Portman who acquired not only the priory estate but the parish as a whole, and who, by widespread land acquisition in Somerset, Dorset and London, became one of the wealthiest families in England. Both the family and their mansion at Orchard were tragically involved in the Civil War sieges of Taunton in 1644–45, and the sufferings of the Vale at that time were also shared by the people of Thurlbear. The memory of hardship did much to foster the rise of local nonconformity: in 1669, 42 villagers were reported to be attenders at nonconformist meetings.

Distinguished men, such as the scholar and antiquarian Dr Edmund Archer, were sometimes appointed to serve as curates in Thurlbear during the 18th century. But their congregations were small, and in 1776 only 10 parishioners regularly received Holy Communion. Of clerical rectors there was hardly a sign before the appointment of Charles Russell in 1768. Russell, a friend of the diarist Parson James Woodforde, was an amiable and neglectful man whose infrequent visits to Thurlbear ceased altogether long before his death in 1833. Revival followed in the Victorian period and by 1851, when the total population was 212, an average of 60 people attended Sunday service in the morning, and as many as 90 in the afternoon. The greatest influence for change in the parish came from the Revd William Lance, a man of strong and saintly character and an early leader of the High Church movement in Somerset. He was appointed curate in 1860 and during the 25 years he remained at Thurlbear the church bell rang daily for morning prayer, and the fortnightly communion services were sung whenever possible. His successor, the Revd HFB Portman, became Thurlbear's first permanently resident rector in 1885, and was a revered and patriarchal figure in the area until his death 39 years later.

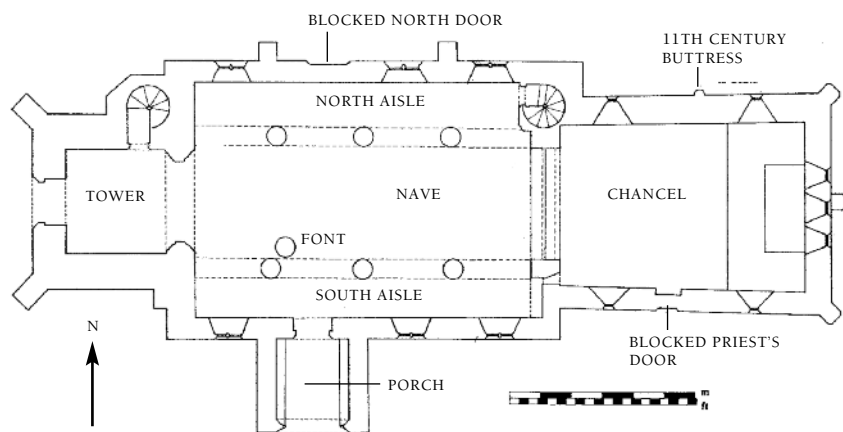
In 1944, following the death of the Fifth Viscount Portman, the family lands round Taunton were sold to the Crown Estate Commissioners, who have remained chief landowners in Thurlbear to the present day. The Portmans at first continued as patrons of the living, but in 1950 their historic link with the parish was finally broken when patronage was trans-

ferred to the Bishop of Bath and Wells. The civil parish of Thurlbear was amalgamated with Orchard Portman in 1933. The ecclesiastical parish survived until 1984 when it was joined with its neighbours to become part of the united parish of Staple Fitzpaine with Orchard Portman, Thurlbear and Stoke St Mary.

## THE CHURCH

St Thomas's church is a building chiefly of the 11th to 15th centuries, and is exceptional over a wide area of the West Country for the quality and extent of its early Norman features. It possesses Norman arcades of memorable simplicity and beauty, and remains today the earliest surviving aisled church in Somerset. Why so ambitious a church was created at Thurlbear is not known. It is possible that the manor had a special significance for its medieval lords, the de Montacutes, or for their Domesday overlord, the Count of Mortain. It is even possible that the church was in origin a minster or mother church, though later documentary evidence for such a status is lacking.

The church consists of a west tower, nave with north and south aisles, south porch, and chancel, and is built of locally-quarried blue lias limestone with dressings in Beer stone (from east Devon) and Ham stone (from Ham Hill near Yeovil). Most of the exterior walls have long been rendered, though rendering on the tower was removed in the 19th century. The nave, aisles and chancel are enclosed under a single Welsh slate roof.



Plan of St Thomas's church, Thurlbear (Tom Mayberry)



Exterior view of the north wall of the chancel, showing the 11th century buttress and lancet window, and the remains of the corbel table. (TOM MAYBERRY)



North aisle arcade

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

## NORMAN ORIGINS

The church was probably built in the second half of the 11th century as a two-celled structure consisting of a chancel and nave without aisles. The 11th century chancel has survived, its early date suggested by the column-like buttress on the exterior of the north chancel wall. West of this buttress, at eaves level, are the remains of a corbel table of similar date, and below that is a lancet window, the Beer-stone head of which is original. The remaining chancel windows are Victorian reconstructions, those in the north and south walls being set in the original window embrasures. The original window arrangement at the east end is not known. The 11th century chancel arch, which may have been almost four metres wide, did not survive the Middle Ages. Nor did the chancel vaulting, the former existence of which is suggested by the reuse elsewhere in the church of light-weight 'tufa' stone. The vaulting is an indication of the lavishness of the work at Thurlbear, as is the exceptional quality of the chancel masonry, visible, for example, on the north side of the chancel arch.



Exterior view of St Thomas's church from the south-west, by S G Tovey, 1846. The landscape setting has been romanticised

(COURTESY OF THE SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY)



The tower

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

The nave was enlarged by the addition of aisles in the first years of the 12th century, and was given two remarkable Ham-stone nave arcades. Tall cylindrical piers, with scalloped capitals and spurred bases, support four bays of unmoulded arches. The 12th century nave had high-level clerestory windows, but these were blocked when the aisle roofs were raised in the later Middle Ages. The west front of the Norman church, in line with the

present tower arch, may have contained an elaborate west door: three pieces of arched Ham stone, ornamented with Norman billet moulding, were recently discovered in rebuilt nave walling, and are possible fragments from such an opening. The plain font, though heavily reworked, is likely to be of 11th or 12th century date.

### THE CHURCH IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

About the second half of the 13th century St Thomas's church underwent major changes. The corbel tables visible high up in the north and south aisles evidently date from this period, and were originally exterior features of the church. They probably indicate the re-roofing of the nave, and it seems likely that new aisle roofs were constructed at the same time. The aisle roofs were at a lower level than today, and only later were they raised up, reusing the old timbers, to create a simpler roof profile externally. Ease of maintenance was probably the motive. Thirteenth century carpentry is very rare in parish churches and the aisle roofs are thus precious survivals.

Work in or about the early 14th century gave the chancel east wall three Beer-stone buttresses, and created the arched recess which survives at the east end of the south aisle. The recess, which was formed behind a side altar, caused major structural problems and may have led to the collapse of the Norman chancel arch. Before the end of the 14th century other structural problems forced the rebuilding of the two westernmost bays of the nave arcades: the repairs can be identified from the silver-coloured Beer stone reused by the masons. The building of the tower followed about the mid-15th century, and soon after its completion four bells cast in Exeter were provided, each of them bearing a Latin inscription. The bells still hang in the tower today and are remarkable for being one of very few surviving pre-Reformation rings of four bells where all are the work of a single maker. The tower finally reached its present form about 1530 when it was given a fine west window with an elaborate transom.

Other 15th century changes to the church included the addition of a churchyard cross, the building of a south porch and the partial rebuilding of the wagon roof of the nave (the six easternmost bays of the previous roof structure were retained, possibly in order to preserve an existing celure or canopy). Important new arrangements were also introduced at the entrance to the chancel. The church gained a chancel screen (now lost) as well as the surviving staircase giving access to the rood-loft over the screen. An altar in the north aisle was displaced by the building of the staircase, and was probably repositioned nearby: a white and red brocade pattern painted



on the masonry at the north side of the chancel arch may mark the new site it was given. The corresponding altar in the south aisle remained in place, and about the 16th century a squint was cut for it, piercing the recess which had been created behind the altar some 200 years earlier. The two distinctive ventilator windows at clerestory level are also likely to date from the 15th century, and may have been made necessary by the increased use of candles and incense in the later Middle Ages. The ventilators, which are best seen from the aisles, incorporate earlier carved stonework, possibly from sedilia (seats used by the priest and his assistants during Mass). One of the ventilators has an iron fixing, evidently for a shutter.

By the end of the Middle Ages the entrance to the chancel was dominated by an oak-boarded tympanum painted with a crucifixion scene. It was set up over the screen and rood-loft about the early 16th century, and the fragments of it that remain are a very rare survival. They are not readily visible from ground level, but include a section of Christ's right arm and part of an apricot-coloured frame. Both the nave and chancel were given square-headed windows in the early 16th century, six of which, variously adapted and reset, survive in the nave.

#### THE GEORGIAN AND EARLY VICTORIAN CHURCH

When Edmund Rack visited Thurlbear in the 1780s, he found a church 'on the whole kept cleaner than many others', though he noted that the damp north wall was green with mould. There were four box pews, two of them large and made of 'fine panneld oak', as well as a panelled pulpit with a crimson cushion. These fittings were probably of the late 17th or 18th centuries, and parts of them were evidently reused as seat backs for the present Victorian choir stalls. The nave roof when Rack saw it was ceiled (as probably were the aisle roofs) and the exterior of the tower was protected by a white rendering. A drawing of 1846 shows part of the mediæval screen resited across the tower arch, as well as some benches of unknown date. In 1853 an anonymous visitor found whitewash over the whole of the church interior, including the benches, pulpit and reading desk, and considered that at Thurlbear the lime-brush had 'exercised despotic sway'. Unornamented commandment boards hung in the chancel, and the eagle lectern (now lost) appeared to be mounted on the pedestal of a garden sundial.

*The nave, looking west, by S.G. Tovey, 1846. Part of the chancel screen is shown resited under the tower arch.*

(COURTESY OF THE SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY)



## RESTORATION

By 1861, the church was suffering from severe structural problems, and the restoration undertaken that year was an urgent necessity. The badly-leaning piers of the south arcade were taken down and rebuilt on new foundations, while the stonework of both arcades was repaired. New pews were installed in the nave, as was an oak pulpit. Restoration of the chancel evidently took place at about the same time, and chiefly comprised the installation of a wooden chancel arch and of Norman-style lancet windows. The crucifixion scene in the east window, by an unknown maker, is probably of similar date. Before the end of the century, the remains of the mediaeval screen beneath the tower arch were replaced by a Victorian screen of neo-Norman design.

Structural cracks were discovered in the tower following the explosion of a land mine near the church in 1941. The repair work which followed was completed in 1956, and in 1983 the mediaeval bells were rehung in a new wooden bell frame built within the former ringing chamber. Further extensive repair of the building, carried out by The Churches Conservation Trust between 1989 and 1996, included the removal of the failing plaster which ceiled the roofs of nave and aisles, replastering of internal walls, repair of the tower and re-rendering of external walls. Major structural repairs, particularly at the east end of the nave, were also undertaken.

## MEMORIALS

Of the few memorials which the church contains, the most interesting is the stained glass of the west window (maker unknown). It was placed there by Major William Surtees Altham in memory of his wife Henrietta Moulton Barrett who died at Stoke Court, Stoke St Mary, in November 1860. Henrietta Moulton Barrett's life mirrored in many ways that of her elder sister, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, both women growing to middle age under the influence of a father who forbade all thoughts of marriage on threat of disinheritance. Part of the window depicts the story of Rachel and Jacob, a subject evidently chosen by Major Altham as a parable of his long courtship and his wife's early death. Their graves are in the south-east corner of the churchyard. A tablet on the north wall of the chancel commemorates an 18th century rector, Thomas Haydon (d.1754), and Edmund Rack in the 1780s recorded that an inscribed slab in the chancel floor marked the burial place of John Colby, gent (d.1689), Robert Bryant (d.1729), and their families.

## THE CHURCH TODAY

By the early 1980s, the small congregation of St Thomas's church found the maintenance needs of the building increasingly burdensome, and on 1 November 1988 the church was declared redundant. It was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) and repair of the fabric, under the direction of Mr John Schofield, began in the following year. The work revealed much about the early development of the building and confirmed its status as one of the principal Norman parish churches of the West Country.

## SELECT LIST OF SOURCES

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*Somerset County Gazette*, 10 December, 1853 (description by anonymous visitor).

Somerset Record Office, Taunton: Thurlbear parish collection (D/P/thurl); HB Walters' description of the bells (DD/SAS/CH 16/2), copy of Edmund Rack's survey of Somerset (A/AOW 23/10).

I am particularly grateful to John Schofield, whose unpublished report on the church forms the basis for the architectural description provided here, and who has been generous in discussing the building with me. For other help I offer my thanks to Dick and Carol Marsh, Mark McDermott, Bill and Ethel Board, Bruce Cleaver, the Revd Geoffrey Cooke and the Revd Keith Powell.

*Front cover: Exterior view of St Thomas's church from the south-west* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

*Back cover: The nave, looking west* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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