



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



ST ANDREW'S OLD CHURCH

Holcombe, Somerset



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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Holcombe, Somerset

ST ANDREW'S OLD CHURCH

by Lella Raymond

Happily secluded and little affected by the present times, Holcombe church has been left on its own since the village moved a mile (1.6 km) away, with a new St Andrew's in the main street opened in 1885.

A Saxon church once stood here, but the present building is a small, unassuming, partly Norman construction in shell grey, serenely placed against deep woods, hiding a stream, and green hills. The church is built mainly of coursed rubble from the Pennant quarry on the very spot where it now stands. It has slate roofs with moulded freestone ridges. The name Holcombe derives from 'hollow' or 'deep combe'. In Old English, Somerset means land of 'summer farm dwellers'.

Appropriately this little church is approached through a farmyard. The visitor opens the farm gate, expecting to see a little rural church down over the field, and is taken aback by the great Abbey of Downside rising proudly on the far side of the valley. The farm track, however, curves down to the church.

Front cover: Interior looking east (Christopher Dalton)

Left: The south door (Christopher Dalton)



EXTERIOR

Holcombe lies beneath the eastern escarpment of the Mendip Hills and hard by the Fosse Way. The great Roman military highway, which bisected Britain from Lincoln to Exeter, enters Somerset south of Radstock (now the A367 becoming the A37) through Stratton-on-the-Fosse, passing by Holcombe and over the Mendips to Ilchester. From the 17th century the Forest of Mendip was known for its coal mines and the area of Holcombe was intensively mined. Early in the 18th century the coal was horse-drawn, but later was carried by canal on the Somersetshire Coal Canal and the Kennet and Avon Canal.

As the track descends, Downside Abbey, its great vaulted church a majestic work of the late 19th century, with a tower second only in height in the county to the crossing tower of Wells Cathedral, is lost to view.

To the left of the swing gate, a rough uncultivated mound in the field is said to be the burial site of victims of the Black Death or plague (1348–49) which started in the western counties, also claiming the rector of Holcombe. (Locally this is still known as ‘the plague church’.) From the gate into the churchyard, the path to the porch lies between two lime trees.

The earliest notice of the church 'is to be found in the acts of Bishop Reginald (1174–91) creating the prebends of Holcombe, White Lackington and Timberscombe, in the cathedral Church of Wells.' (*Victoria History of the County of Somerset*, ii, 132, *Religious Houses*.) However, the south porch holds fascinating evidence of antiquity. The cut stone is Douling limestone, as used for Bath, Wells and Glastonbury. The gable incorporates a recut Norman arch, with a zigzag around it and short rolls inserted at intervals in the hollow beneath the hood. Above the arch, in place of the keystone, is a 16th-century carved angel with wings outstretched and arms folded. The chevron at the apex of the gable could have been carved from the tympanum. It will be seen that the shafts are decorated with spiral fluting, which may have been reset as the fluting does not quite fit, and have scalloped cushion capitals in the Norman style. The eastern cushion capital includes an inverted inscription, on a block of oolitic limestone, which ante-dates the 12th-century capital cut from the same stone. Scholars have been at pains to decipher this inscription. It has an introductory cross and a likely chi-tho (the Christian symbol) in the second line. The conjecture is that the first line reads ‘+ protr’ or ‘+wrotr’ (p possibly an Anglo-Saxon w) which might record Wrotard, Archbishop of York and his attendance at the Exeter Council of Easter 928, with the possibility that he consecrated the church on his journey from or



to the north. The fourth line with the word ‘petra’ may refer to stone or Peter. None the less, it is recognised as ‘... a fascinating inscription, tantalizingly incomplete. Although the Holcombe stone may be Anglo-Saxon as always previously assumed, it could be Celtic. Its presence possibly exposes the existence of an early Christian church, and its significance, not least as the only possible Anglo-Saxon inscription in the county of Somerset, should not be overlooked.’ (Sally M Foster, University of Glasgow, from *Medieval Archaeology*, Vol. 32 (1988).) The walls of the porch are blind, with plain stone benches each side, one inscribed ‘D C 1743’. The inner doorway has continuous quarter-round moulding round a four-centred arch. The door itself is a fine mediaeval example.

The L-shaped graveyard includes the later extension to the west and north-west beyond the close-set original north wall. A further extension to the north was opened in c.2000. Although Holcombe St Andrew new church in the main street of the village now provides for the devotional needs of the parish, this churchyard is still in use as a burial ground. A monument of five lambs marks the grave of

five very young children from two families, drowned at the end of the 19th century when the ice gave way on a local pond. Another young child is also commemorated. At the back of the church against the north wall in a dark and obscure place is the tomb of the Scott family, in which are buried the father, mother and brother of the Antarctic explorer. The tomb also records:

And to the memory of Robert Falcon Scott C.V.O. Captain Royal Navy son of the above who in returning from the South Pole with his Companions was translated by a Glorious Death March 1912.

Later that year the special expedition discovered them and erected a cairn, surmounted by a cross, over the tent in which they perished.

Somerset is renowned for the splendour of its pre-Reformation towers. Fine square towers with windows of vertical lines were developed in the Perpendicular style towards the end of the 14th century, following the Black Death which caused a shortage of skilled craftsmen for the earlier, more elaborate Decorated style.



Though on a modest scale, Holcombe is in this evolving mode, with Shepton Mallet, late-14th century; Isle Abbots, 1480; St Mary's Taunton, 1488 and Huish Episcopi, c.1505. Here at Holcombe the west tower is in two stages, the upper slightly set back from a narrow moulded string course. It has no buttresses but a carved plinth at the base. The windows are small; one two-light window on the west side with a small rectangular one above, and three belfry

windows in the upper stage. The parapet is straight with little crocketed pinnacles at the angles. A low stairway in the north-east corner of the tower gives access from within to the upper stage. It has a tiny unglazed light on its north wall. The rest of the outside of the church is simple and plain with two-light windows and four small buttresses, one at either side of the north-east and south-east angle of the nave and chancel, and two at each side of the east wall.

INTERIOR



The south porch (© Crown copyright. NMR)

Left: Exterior from the south-west (Edward Heath)

The charming unrestored interior has late-Georgian furnishings, neat and in good order, reflecting the quiet Hanoverian composure of its parishioners. The box pews on the north side of the nave are high and of three panelled tiers. Some have seats on three sides and others face east only. Those on the south side are benches of single panels, the front bench being L-shaped round the clerk's desk, which has a door. All are made of deal and painted grey, and two have wooden candle stems. On the north wall are two rows of simply carved hat pegs for the men. Around the walls are monuments from the early 18th century.

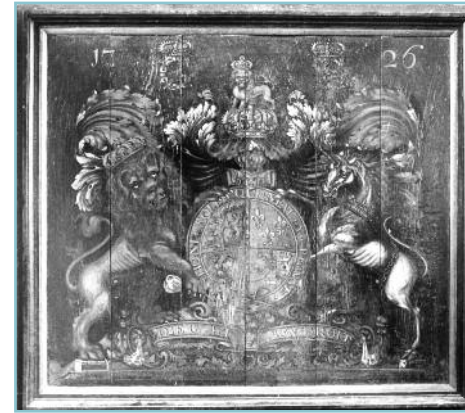
The almost semicircular chancel arch has continuous moulding. Above are the royal arms of George I (1714–27) on wooden boards in a moulded frame dated 1726. To the right, in the south-east corner, is the pulpit. A simple structure, it was originally Jacobean and is modelled in the late-Georgian style. It is half hexagonal with two panelled tiers, the upper ones decorated with unadorned lozenges (diamond shapes). The seat in the pulpit is set back in a rough stone recess of the south wall, which could indicate remains of a rood altar, possibly destroyed at the Reformation, or a former and more enlarged window. The pulpit carries a reading desk supported by two twisted iron scroll brackets. Another narrow reading desk alongside the pulpit steps is also of reused Jacobean panelling.

*Right: The royal arms of George I, dated 1726
(Christopher Dalton)*

Below: Interior looking west (Christopher Dalton)

The small east window in the chancel retains its Georgian iron casement and a recess marks the place of a blocked window in the north wall. On either side of the east window are two round-headed panels of the Ten Commandments, and above the window are those of the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. All are well painted in gold lettering on black and signed by Joseph Emery, painter, Wells, 1817. The plain beamed roof is probably late Victorian

or 20th century. One shallow step onto a wooden platform marks the sanctuary, upon which stands a 19th-century oak altar, with three cusped arches in the front. Within the sanctuary is a fine oak chest, with strap hinges ending in fleurs-de-lys, and three former locks. The singularly plain altar rails are also 19th century, as are the unremarkable stalls, which hold wooden candle stems.



The tower arch is semicircular with a narrow chamfered moulding. The west gallery has a row of turned balusters, and is probably earlier than the pews. It is reached by a straight flight of wooden steps from the base of the tower space. Here too is the small door to the stairway leading to the upper part of the tower.

The church is paved throughout – porch, nave, chancel and tower – with stone flags. There is no organ, and the font was taken to the Victorian church, built in 1884–85, when it opened. Probably Norman, the base is an inverted font with traces of cable ornament, and the upper shallow bowl is also of an early date.

The belfry has two bells, both cast in Bristol, the treble in c.1425 and the tenor a century later. At times, when a service is held here, the deep bell from the great tower of its neighbour the Abbey of Downside ringing the hours of divine office can be heard together with the mellow notes from the neat unpretentious tower of St Andrew's Old Church.

The church had not been in regular use for many years and had until redundancy served as a cemetery chapel. With the exception of some defective rendering on the tower the building was generally in good repair. The church vested in what is now The Churches Conservation Trust on 1 August 1987.

Initial repairs, carried out under the late John Keeling Maggs, included the re-glazing of the nave and tower windows (the old glazing had been lost and the windows covered with Perspex), overhaul of the rainwater disposal system and minor repairs to the external masonry.

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the national body that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that the church is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 330 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF
St James, Cameley
10 miles NE of Wells off A37

The Blessed Virgin Mary, Emborough
5 miles NE of Wells off B3139

St Mary, Hardington Bampfylde
3 miles NW of Frome off A362

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