

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LANDRAKE PARISH CHURCH

We think of the River Tamar as marking the boundary between Cornwall and the rest of England, but back in the time of the Saxons the River Lynher was more of a boundary between Saxon England and the Celts. Villages to the east of the Lynher had Saxon name derivations (eg, -ton) while the majority to the west of the Lynher were Celtic in origin (eg, Tre-). This being the case, the village of Landrake, standing close to the lowest crossing point of the river, was an important route centre. Sites chosen for a church in earlier times were often on top of a hill. Everyone could see it and it would be above all other buildings. It had to be in a position which could easily be reached by local people, and often it was a place of refuge from enemies as well as a place of worship.

The earliest reference to the present church in Landrake was in 1018 when King Cnut granted land to Bishop Burghold for his life and then to pass to the Holy Germanies. This marked the connection with the priory at St Germans, whose monks were responsible for taking the services in Landrake.

Landrake is also mentioned in the Exeter edition of the Domesday Book of 1086 which states that there was a wood and wattle church of Saxon origin at Landrake.

About 135 churches were built in Cornwall under the Normans but many traces of their work remain unrecognisable today due to enlargement or rebuilding.

Landrake Parish Church, dedicated to St Michael and All Angels, (although old maps show it as St Peter's Church) is no exception. A few years after the Domesday Book the original church was rebuilt with stone. The South Doorway, and the main aisle of the Nave up to the Sanctuary are Norman.

This first stone church was probably in the form of a rectangle with pillars at the sides. The Font, of granite, is probably the oldest part of the present day church and is dated as about 1100. It has some very early designs on it.

The building of the 100ft Tower which is in three stages, buttressed on the square and finished with battlements and pinnacles commenced during the late 14th century taking nearly fifty years to complete. Perhaps this long building programme was due to the Black Death that hit the village around that time. The vicar in 1361 was John Brimboyt. He became a victim, together with sixty eight other people from the village. Nearly every family lost two members to the Black Death.

Sometime in the 15th century complete rebuilding began around the old church to make it like it is today. The original north wall was removed and the church was enlarged. Larger windows replaced the original and narrow lancet type Norman ones along the southern wall. The South Transept (St Erney Aisle) was added.

The stone used to build this church together with other Norman stonework in the district such as St Germans Church came from the nearby Tartan Down Quarry at Landrake. This stone is of a dark blue or grey green in colour. Stonemasons and their workers must have settled around the church, cutting the large sections of stone which were brought from the quarries down West Lane.

The plague hit the village again in 1593 when 59 people were buried at Landrake, all but 8 being buried in the month of August. Approximately half the incumbents in Cornwall died during the plague.

The South Porch was added in the 16th century. It is said that official business was carried out in this porch as a sign of trust, being on church land. The Parish Council used to meet in the Vestry up until the beginning of this century. Today there is a chest at the back of the church in which the Parish Council keep some of their records.

In 1877 the church was restored at a cost of £1658 while earlier this century more restoration work was carried out. The Tower Screen was added in 1908. The internal woodwork of the Tower being replaced a few years before in 1904. This work cost £272 and to pay for this, three of the four bells were sold for their metal content. Today, one bell is all that remains.

There has been a Clock in the Tower since 1671. The present one was built by Richard Almond of Devonport in 1848. It is wound up by hand every three days - and it strikes the hour. The clock has one face on the north side of the Tower.

Landrake Church would have had a Rood Screen at sometime. This screen would have separated the Nave from the Chancel. There is no record of how wide the Screen Loft would have been - in the South Transept there are some steps that would have led up to the top of the Rood Screen, notice the doorway high up in the Chancel. It is possible that singers or musicians would lead the worship from the top of the Rood Loft.

Beside the organ is a board giving the names and dates of the incumbents since 1269 with Sir Peter being the first. (The title Sir was often given as a courtesy title). A few of these incumbents are worth a mention...

In 1554 John Laurens was appointed vicar. Great changes were happening around that time with the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-39) and the break with Rome. Then when Mary became Queen of England she saw as her work the restoration of the church to Rome. But with Elizabeth becoming queen and Mary's execution in 1558 there was a great turn around again. Vicar Laurens, who was for returning to Rome, was deprived of the Living.

1662 saw the Prayer Book Rebellion. The vicar of Landrake was a leading Puritan in Cornwall called Jasper Hicks. He would not accept the new Prayer Book and was subsequently deprived of his benefice (together with about fifty other Cornish incumbents). He had been vicar of Landrake for nearly thirty

years. After his ejection he lived on an estate in the parish. He obviously didn't 'mend his ways' because his successor, Philip Wynell, fined him £40 for holding services in his own house. He died in 1677 and was buried under the Porch of Landrake Church.

The 1727 Terrier for Landrake Church, a sort of inventory, recorded that the vicar received part of the Tithes due. Other people receiving Tithes would have been the landowners of the Parish. These Tithes, which were 1/10th of the marketable goods, included fleece, lambs, ("to be sent to the churchyard every Mark's Day, 25th April"), month old pigs, geese, honey, coppice wood and beans.

Most of these Tithes would be used by the vicar for the benefit of this Living and parish. It is also recorded that when Vicar Robert Jope died in 1632 he possessed 50 lambs worth £8, a mare, colt, 2 geldings, corn standing in the carts worth £50, £7 of timber, books and pewter worth £6.13s 4d, 2 feather beds, 3 bedsteads and £40 in gold.

Like many villages, Landrake can boast famous or well to do persons. In the alcove in the north wall of the Sanctuary is one of the oldest medieval Brasses in Cornwall. It is of Edward Courtney who 'died ye first day of March anno 1509'. He was the second son of Sir William Courtney of Powderham Castle near Exeter, descendant of royal blood. Edward married Alice Wotton, heiress of John Wotton of Wotton Manor in Landrake, Alice died in 1533. Wotton is found on all old Cornish maps..

Sir Robert Geffery, the 'Dick Whittington' of Landrake was a local boy living at Tredinnick Farm in this parish. His baptism is recorded in the register on the 24th May 1613, He went to London and became an eminent East India merchant. Later he became a member, then Master of the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers. In 1673 he was knighted, then in 1686 became Lord Mayor of London. When he died in 1703 at the age of ninety one he remembered his village. On the south wall of the South Transept is a clause from Sir Robert Geffery's will relating to what he left to the school master and the poor of Landrake and St Erney. Today we have the Sir Robert Geffery's School in the village. It is a voluntary aided school. Half the governing body are from the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers in London. The village hall erected in the 1930's also bears his name. The Chalice used in the church during Communion was a gift from the Ironmongers' Company in memory of Donald Richards, a former vicar of Landrake with St Erney.

Earlier this century there lived in the Barton, the Solomon Browne family. As was common in those days, when someone died from an affluent family donations were often given to the church and memorials erected. The Pulpit in Landrake Church, together with other gifts to St Erney Church were given in 1920 in memory of the Solomon Browne Family.

At the end of the last century, one of the major landowners of this parish after the Earl of Mount Edgecombe were the Littleton family of Brightor, Landrake. In 1895 the Reredos, the alabaster carving behind the Altar, showing the

prophets and angels, was given to the church in memory of the family. The writings on the Reredos are The Lord's Prayer, The Creed and The Ten Commandments.

Two of the three stained glass windows were erected in memory of former vicars of this church. The East Window, above the Altar, remembers Thomas Hunt Ley who died in 1866. He was vicar of Landrake for forty six years. The picture on the glass shows the Crucifixion. The other window, on the South Wall of the Nave is in memory of the Rev T A Walton who was vicar between 1931 and 1958. St Michael is depicted on this stained glass.

The South Window in the Chancel is in memory of Emily Mercy Buller Browne (1834-1887) formerly of the Barton, Landrake. The stained glass depicts the Easter morning scene when the women went to anoint our Lord's body only to be met by angels who said, "Why seek the living among the dead? He is not here, He is risen".

The oldest Slate Memorial is to be found on the South Wall of the Sanctuary. This was formerly part of one large monument. It shows the carved figure of a man and woman kneeling at prayer before desks upon which lie open books. The man is dressed in Elizabethan costume with a ruff and wears his hair long. The woman has the head-dress and costume of the same period. The inscription reads: "Here lyeth the body of Nicolas Wylls, Gentleman, who departed this life the second day of October 1607". His wife, Ebote, who had died in June of the same year was also buried in the Sanctuary. On the memorial are four verses of poetry together with the Arms of the Wills and Gifford families (Crest - a cock's head holding a sprig of three leaves in the beak). The Gifford's were a well known family in South Devon.

In 1987 the Organ was restored and improved and now is one of the finest instruments in South-East Cornwall. The church was extensively redecorated in 1991 and the ceiling bosses painted by members of the congregation. The choir stalls were removed in 1992 and the chancel carpeted in order to provide space for the music group and to allow dance and drama to be used in the context of Sunday worship. In 1995 the church was rewired and new lighting installed.

St Michael's Church has been the centre of Christian worship in Landrake for over eight centuries and as we are now in the twenty-first century continues to be a place where the local Christians can join together in joyful Christ-centred worship of Almighty God.

Frank Stevens

There is a grave in the Churchyard with the name Richard James Slemen, Son of W and A L Slemen, lost on the Titanic, 14 April 1912, aged 35

C W