

BRIEF HISTORY OF ALLERTON CHURCH

Welcome to Allerton Church, which has been at the centre of our village community for over 950 years



EARLY HISTORY

There has probably been a Saxon settlement here since the 7th Century, when the Isle of Wedmore was still an island surrounded by salt marshes. It is not known when the first church in Allerton was built, but during Saxon times, the Isle of Wedmore was associated with Glastonbury Abbey: *“In the year of grace 705, St Wilfred, Bishop, gave to Abbot Berwald the Island of Wedmore, which had been given to him by King Kentwine of the West Saxons”*. The original name for the village was Alwarditon, after Aylward, Abbot of Glastonbury from 1027 to 1053. It was probably him who built the first chapel here shortly before the Norman Conquest, but a churches of that period were built entirely of wood, and no traces remain.

After the Norman Conquest, Allerton was held by Ralph de Conteville, a foster brother of William the Conqueror, whose family were to maintain possession of it for over 400 years. The manor is mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086); there is no mention of a church, but that is not conclusive - the Domesday Book was a tax survey, and churches did not pay taxes.

MEDIEVAL PERIOD



Pope Adrian IV, who confirmed the Dean of Wells's jurisdiction over Allerton Chapel in 1176

In 1144, several parishes on the Isle of Wedmore, including Allerton, were assigned to the newly-established Dean of Wells. This was resisted by the Bishop, and it took letters from the Pope in 1157 and 1176, and from the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1388 to uphold the Dean's rights. The oldest portions of the current church were built during this time, probably around 1200. This was a simple one-room building with narrow lancet windows, a paved floor and a porch. This building now forms the current nave. Most of its original features have been covered by subsequent renovations, but the window to the west of the current porch and the old font date from this period.

THE ALLERTON COPE



The Allerton Cope – detail showing an angel

in 1498, John Gunthorpe, the Dean of Wells, purchased Allerton from the de Conteville family and when he died, bequeathed it to the Dean & Chapter, under whose jurisdiction it would remain until 1866. The chancel was added during this time, and John Gunthorpe probably also owned the embroidered cope found in a chest in the church in 1858. The cope is made of satin weave silk (probably Italianate) and decorated with English medieval embroidery using silver gilt thread and coloured silks. It is now on display in Taunton Museum.

16th TO 18th CENTURY

In 1638, the large window to the east of the porch was added and biblical texts were painted on the interior walls (these were removed during Victorian renovations). Over the entrance door, in black and red letters, was written: *“Keep thy foote when thou goest to the House of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifices of fooles for they consider not that they do evil”*. Near the pulpit was *“Curse not the King, no not in thy thought: and curse not the rich in the bedchamber: for a bird in the air shall carry thy voice and that which hath wings shall tell the matter”* Do these stern exhortations reflect the temperament of the Puritan rector at the time, Matthew Law, who served Allerton from 1622 to 1672?

Later, new texts, of a strikingly milder tone, were added, such as *“Blessed be the man that provideth for the sick and needy, the Lord deliver him in time of trouble”*,



Ralph Bathurst, Rector of Allerton 1672-1679

possibly by Law's successor, Ralph Bathurst, a man of milder disposition? Bathurst studied medicine at Oxford and served as a physician there during the Civil War. He was a strong Royalist; six of his thirteen brothers lost their lives in the service of Charles I. After the Restoration, in 1663, he served as Chaplain to King Charles II, before coming to Allerton.

Throughout this time, except for a brief spell during the Civil War and Parliamentary period, the Dean of Wells continued to draw rent (£40 per annum in 1650) from his land holdings in Allerton, and the Church records are full of legal deeds about tenancies, rents and disputes with the local farmers. A document from 1687 records a decree that *“in consideration of the perversenesse and unkindnesse of severall of the tenants of the Church, the Dean and Chapter shall be at liberty to grant reversions and estates for more than six lives, and without the*

consent of the tenant in possession". By the 18th Century, these rents came to be enjoyed by absentee rectors, and Allerton, like many country parishes, was served by ill-paid curates. .

19th CENTURY

Inevitably, under these arrangements, things declined, and it was not until the arrival of the Rev. James Coleman in



Interior of Allerton Church before the 1859 restoration. Note the ornate wooden pulpit, box pews, the old font, the Royal Arms above the arch, and the clear glass windows

1858 that matters were taken in hand. He was clearly a man of exceptional energy and ability. Within a year of his arrival, the Church Vestry voted in favour of a major rebuild. Work began on Ascension Day 1859. It took 19 months, and cost £1340, almost double the original estimate. The north aisle and vestry were added, the roof was repaired, and a bell turret added. The gallery at the west end was removed. It was originally intended that the carved oak pulpit and lectern would be repaired and retained, but in the event, these also went, to be replaced by Victorian substitutes. The old font lay in the churchyard for years, until it was reinstalled in 1945.

Whatever one may think about the Gothic Revival style so beloved of the Victorian clergy, there is no doubt about Rector's opinion about his new church. He described its opening on 30th August 1860 in the Parish magazine: *"it is now the best building in the Parish... its good proportions strike the eye, whilst there is harmony in its details which is often noted"*.

Coleman was also instrumental in the building of the Chapel Allerton Schoolroom, as well as the new Rectory, now a private house.

MODERN TIMES

In 1891, the vestry was enlarged and the present organ installed, but since that time there has been little change to the building. The bell tower was refurbished in 1985, when the second bell was recast and rehung. A kitchen and toilet were added to the vestry in the 1990s.

On the south wall of the nave is a fine stained glass window memorial to the three men of Allerton killed in the First World War, probably made by Morris & Co of London, founded by the pre-Raphaelite artist and designer William Morris.

The wall hanging in front of the south door in the chancel was made by six ladies of the Parish in 2014. It depicts the Creation of the Heavens and Earth, as told in Genesis, and is executed in a variety of materials and techniques, including embroidery, applique and patchwork.

CHURCHYARD

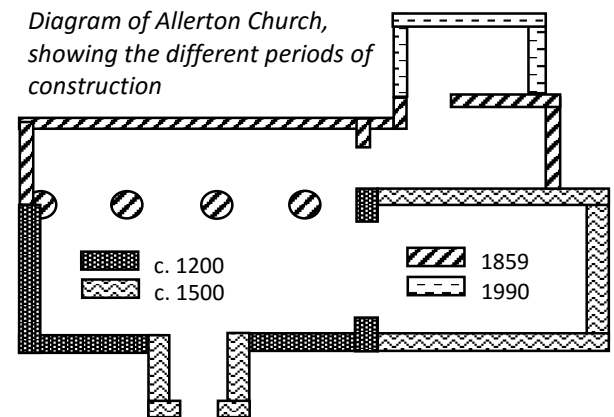
In the Middle Ages, the churchyard would have used for markets, fairs and Ecclesiastical Courts. The large triple-plinth cross in the churchyard dates from this period. The base and shaft are original, but the head was replaced in 1860, the original having disappeared long before.

Regular burials in Allerton churchyard started in the 1660s (before this they had taken place in the mother church in Wedmore). The early gravestones are now crumbling, but some inscriptions were recorded by the indefatigable Rev. Coleman. In 1641, Andrew Westover,

a former churchwarden, was buried under the floor of the central aisle; his tombstone was later moved to the churchyard. There is also a gravestone to Priscilla Wall, who farmed 15 acres in Allerton, in 1668. Her inscription (now lost, but recorded by Rev. Coleman) read: *Heere Lyeth the body of Priscilla Wall widow. Was here buried the 27th of January Ano 1668 . Why standst ye Here and Gaze on me, as I am now so shalt ye be"*.

There are three yew trees in the churchyard, the oldest estimated to be at least 500 years old, the other two were planted in 1893 and 1897 respectively, to celebrate the marriage of the Duke of York (later George V) and the sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's accession.

The large cylindrical stone on the roadside at the southwest corner of the churchyard is a Hundred Stone, one of stacked five stones that for a thousand years marked the community meeting place of the Bempstone Hundred, an administrative division reaching back into the Dark Ages, which included Allerton, Wedmore, Mark, Weare and Badgworth. The stone was moved to its present location by the church in around 1850.



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Thank you*