

This is an extract from “The CHURCH RAMBLER” written in 1876 as a series of articles on the churches in the neighbourhood of Bath for the Bath Herald by Harold Lewis.

St Mary the Virgin, Saltford.



SALTFORD is a wayside station on the Great Western Railway well hated no doubt by through travellers whom melancholy fate condemns to “Stopping” trains, and Saltford hill is equally well hated by unskilful drivers on the road to Bristol.

But the village itself lies off to the north of road and rail and has no animation thrown into it except for the week preceding the one great day in its calendar, the Bath Regatta on Saltford Reach. The roads are rough and stony and the first building you pass after leaving the station is a mill of stunted build and dilapidated appearance.

You come up into the centre of the village and you find that the village inn is no more than a cottage with a sign hung out on its walls, but, on the opposite side of what in a larger place would be considered the market square, is a drinking trough above which some donor has placed a tablet whereon are carved the beautiful words with which our Lord greeted the woman of Samaria at the well – “Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again, but whoseever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”

No more appropriate inscription for a drinking fountain could be found, but I think the lively interest in the welfare of the people of Saltford would lead to an improvement in the state of the village, would clear the village pound and the little patches of green from the miscellaneous assortment of old tins, panchards and refuse which showed them to be the general rubbish heaps, would improve the narrow rough lane which is the only way to the church and would teach the living more respect for the graves of their ancestors than to allow them to be overgrown with nettles.

It was a bleak and cheerless day when I visited Saltford and I do not wish to lay too much stress upon which a certain combination of circumstances may have produced upon an individual, but it did cause a strong feeling of regret in my breast that while some chapel – all honour to it – stood with its doors invitingly open on the main street, the way to the parish church should be up an evidently neglected by-path.

Yet the natural position of Saltford is delightful. Standing upon what the Americans call a bluff you look down commandingly upon the broad meads and beautiful valley through which the Avon winds its way to the sea. Running along in from of the prettily wooded slopes on the Kelston side of the river the line of the Midland Railway can be traced for a long distance, and on the other side is the Great Western main line, so there is no lack of animation which the passing train imparts to the landscape, at least in the opinion of the town bred observer.

Few rectories, even in this pleasant land, enjoy a finer prospect than this, which is bounded in one direction by the smoke of Bristol and in the other by the hills which shelter Bath.

The church itself consists of a chancel, nave and tower, to which the vestry has been added, but it was restored in 1851 on very utilitarian principles and I cannot say there is much in it to interest the archaeologist beyond on or two good Perpendicular windows. Another of these has suffered a curious fate. At some period of its existence its tracery has been destroyed, and when the time came to repair it instead of restoring it in accordance with the windows beside it the builder calmly carried up the mullions and made a square top to the window – an exact copy of the sill inverted, so that in effect he has let a stone gridiron into the wall.

The tower has been “mended” also and presents no particular point of interest. It contains only one bell, with the inscription:-

PERROT FENTON. CHURCHWARDEN, T. MEARS OF LONDON. FECIT 1820.

Within the church we have a flat ceiling, old fashioned pews and a western organ gallery wherein are placed the singers and the school girls, the latter of whom are not particularly attentive to the service. The walls are covered with plaster but the chancel arch seems to show traces of Early English work.

The font is one of the most interesting in the neighbourhood. It is heptagonal in shape with seven angels' heads at the base of the shaft. At the south-east corner of the nave is a well preserved tablet of freestone with the following inscription cut upon it in rude letters-

HEARE LYETH
THE BODY OF
LAMOROCK FLOWER
WHO DECEASED THE
6 DAY OF APRIL 1639
FLOWERS THEY WAR
NIPT IN YE SPRINGE
BUT FLORISHING NOW
WITH CHRIST THEIR KING

Cut round the rim like an inscription round a plate, so that some of them are upside down, are the words-

ROBERT FLOWER WHO DECEASED THE 15 DAY OF JULY 1632

There are other monuments in the church and churchyard to members of the same family who have for long generations occupied the ancient manor house, adjoining the churchyard and said to have been built by one of the Rodneys who were lords of the manor of Saltford from the reign of Edward I to the end of that of Elizabeth.

There is a record in the church that it was restored in 1851 by private subscription, and by a grant from the Diocesan Church Building Society; under this are the names of the churchwardens at the time, Lamorock Flower and J. Randle Ford.

I see that at the Easter vestry, 1876, Mr Lamorock Flower was chosen Rector's churchwarden for the twenty-third time, so that after the lapse of two centuries the same family retaining the same curious Christian name still holds a respected and honourable position in the parish – a worthy cause for pride for it shows that each man in that long line of ancestors has honestly done his duty in his day and generation.

The following inscription on a white marble tablet in the nave will be of interest to many readers who know and respect the old Major, who still resides at Saltford and every year gallantly joins the training of the N.S.Y.C. :-

THIS TABLET WAS ERECTED BY THE
QUEEN CHARLTON TROOP OF THE NORTH SOMERSET
REGIMENT OF YEOMANRY CAVALRY;
IN AFFECTIONATE REMEMBRANCE OF
MARY, née NAGLE (DESCENDED FROM THE ANCIENT
BARONS OF NAVAN, AND THE NOBLE HOUSE OF DESMOND),
THE WIFE OF MAJOR FRANCIS HAVILAND, R.F.P.,
LATE OF THE 2ND REGIMENT OF DRAGOON GUARDS O.R. QUEEN'S BAYS.
SHE WAS BORN IN IRELAND, 1ST MAY, 1799,
DIED AT SALTFORD, 8 NOVEMBER, 1870.
BELOVED EVERYWHERE.

There is also a tablet in the church to the memory of Benedictus Marwood Kelly, Admiral of the Blue, in her Majesty's service, erected by his widow in affectionate remembrance of a beloved husband. The lady who erected that tablet still lives in the village; and just above the churchyard there is a new school, with this inscription over the doorway:- "Rebuilt by Juliana Kelly, 1874."

The same lady does much to assist the poor and the aged, beside many other things she distributes coal during the winter, and in the summer gives a treat to young and old in the field in front of Saltford house. She visits the people in their houses, and in fact does everything in her power to promote their welfare.

Two monuments to the memory of the former ministers show two remarkably long incumbencies. The first is inscribed "To the memory of Rev. Haviland John Hiley, who was rector of this parish 42 years; and also to the memory of Eleanor his wife, both interred near this place. They were eminent examples of the Christian faith and exact in performing their duty to God their neighbour and themselves. He died Sept. 27, 1754, aged 65 years; she, Feb. 13, 1770, aged 82."

There is another long inscription to the memory of the Rev. Thomas Slater, A.M., rector of this parish 34 years, the vicar of Keynsham 35 years; he died August 2nd, 1788, aged 68 years," and several members of his family. These two incumbencies carry us over a long period, from the year preceding the Treaty of Utrecht to the commencement of the trial of Warren Hastings.

The church is in sad want of ventilation, for though the congregation was by no means crowded I found the atmosphere most oppressive, added to which was the fact that the heating apparatus was foul, and that now and again a volume of smoke escaped from the floor of the chancel some distance from the stove.

In connection with this I am constrained to make a remark respecting the use of the chancel. Legally we know very well that while the parish is charged with the reparation of the rest of the church, the preservation of the chancel is the duty of the rector, because in the olden time that part of the church was used by the priest alone.

Personally I like to see a surplice choir seated there now. But that is neither here nor there to those who deem the arrangement incompatible with their principles, but I think I may urge without involving questions of doctrine that the chancel should only be given up to the minister's family or to the squire.

Is it desirable that the portion of the church nearest the Communion table, the portion towards which the attention of the people is directed throughout the service, should be occupied as it is in many places by the servants?

This is not the arrangement at Saltford, but as the reading desk and pulpit stand between the nave and the chancel, the sole occupants of the chancel with the exception of a few little girls were a parish clerk and a man who attended the stove. The proceedings of the former as he paced the church before the service began, and repeated the responses in a much louder tone than the minister spoke, and with an intonation which the congregation could not imitate, were all equally unpleasant.

In the demeanour of both himself and his companion there was a sense of self-importance, the natural result of their position, which was altogether unseemly and as objectionable as the sacerdotalism engendered by excess in another direction.

The service was taken throughout by the Rev. William Clarke Welsford, M.A., of Exeter College, Oxon, who has been Rector of Saltford since 1854. The hymn book in use is Davies and Baxter's Psalter and Hymnal. The season was Lent, and the sermon was appropriately chosen to direct the mind to that solemn meditation for which the Church sets that period apart. The text was Isaiah lviii. L – "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgressions and the house of Jacob their sins."

Like the adjacent manor of Keynsham Saltford was annexed to the honour of Gloucester and held thereof in the time of Henry III and Edward I by the family of Bayouse. They were succeeded by the Bassets, and then the Rodneys, of whom I have spoken. Afterwards it passed to the Brydges family, that of the dukes of Chandos and remained with them till the dispersion of all their property in this neighbourhood about a quarter of a century ago. The patronage of the living is now vested in Mrs Welsford.

On a flat stone in Saltford churchyard is to be seen the following inscription:-

Stop Reader and wonder! See as strange as e'er was known,
My feet dropt off from my body, in the midst of the bone,
I had no surgeon for my help, but God Almighty's aid,
On whome I always will rely, and never be afraid:
Tho' here beneath Intred the Ly, Corruption for to see:
Yet they shall rise and reunite to all Eternity.

FRANCES FLOOD

APRIL 1, 1723

The tradition in the parish is that the poor woman came to the Rector's barn suffering from some disease in the feet, and did not leave until they dropped off and were buried, as the inscription tells, while she departed on the stumps like the knight in the ballad of Chevy Chase, of whom the bard sang –

For Witherington I needs must wail,
As one in doleful dumps,
For when his legs were smitten off
He fought upon the stumps.



Transcribed by Phil Harding for Saltford Environment Group, June 2016