

The Saxon Church of St. Swithun at Headbourne Worthy



On 8th January, Peter Finn talked to the group about the history of St Swithun's Church in Headbourne Worthy. The church is a Saxon building and Peter estimates it was built in 1043 during a European-wide enthusiasm for building stone churches to commemorate one thousand years since the birth of Christ. But why was it built on such marshy ground surrounded on three sides by streams? It is possible that the land had been sacred hundreds of years before the stone church was built. The ancient roadway between Winchester and London ran alongside the site and Peter believes it may have originally been a pagan Saxon place of worship.

When the church was first built it was a simple barn-like building with thick 2ft 5in walls. On exterior west wall was a monumental rood depicting Christ on the cross, Mary and St John. The figures were larger than life size and must have been an impressive sight for travellers along the ancient road.

Many enhancements were made in the thirteenth century. The shape of the building changed significantly with the addition of a tower, the extension of the chancel and the rebuilding of the south wall to include windows and a door. Inside the church a font was installed as well as a Jesus altar, sedilia and piscina. The bells that are still used today were added to the tower between the 14/15th centuries. The costs of these improvements were probably met by the patrons (the Mortimer family) as the parishioners themselves could not possibly have afforded to pay for them. Another addition was a brass memorial plaque dedicated to John Kent, who died in 1434. It was placed in the floor of the Chancel.

In 1425 the titles and estates of Edmund Mortimer passed to his nephew, Richard Plantagenet and then to his son King Edward IV. Thus the village of Headbourne Worthy and the church became royal property and remained so until the reign of James I. In the early 16th century the west porch was built in order to protect the rood. Originally this was a two storey structure with the rood only visible in the first floor.

The Tudor period saw a downturn in the fortunes of the church. The rood was mutilated, the high altar and Jesus altar were destroyed, the piscina and sedilia were removed and the wall plastered over. Luckily there was no further damage during the Civil War but in general the church suffered a long period of absent clergy, neglect and decline.

In 1846 the churchwardens decided that repairs were needed and around £80 was paid out to complete the work required. Preservation continued under the leadership of Reverend Slessor who was the incumbent for 44 years from 1861. Luckily he was keen to preserve the existing building rather than follow the fashion for rebuilding in the Victorian Gothic style. The repairs made by Slessor cost over £1,000. His successor, Reverend Storr, also had to focus his energy on preserving the building as a survey revealed that the foundations were slowly giving way to the flow of water. Tonnes of liquid concrete, gravel, steel and large stones were all used to firm up the foundations. The cost of the work was again very expensive and Reverend Storr and his churchwarden W Barrow Simonds Jnr worked tirelessly to raise the necessary funds.

It is thanks to the efforts of these men that the church is still standing. Further repairs have been necessary in the last one hundred years but nothing on the scale of the work completed between 1861 and 1910. The building is grade one listed. Changes in the twentieth century included the joining of St Swithun's Church with St Mary's Church under one rector, the installation of a balcony, alterations to enable the bells to be rung again and the restoration of the organ.

Peter was thanked for giving a highly interesting and informative talk. If you missed the talk or would like further information about its history please read Peter's excellent book *The Saxon Church of Saint Swithun at Headbourne Worthy*.