

The Church of St John the Evangelist



W. H. Barton, Photographer, Clifton.

KEN CHURCH, SOMERSETSHIRE.

A Brief History of the Parish Church

There is evidence which suggests that there has been a church on the site of St John the Evangelist, Kenn, since pre-Norman times. Most of what can be seen today is, however, the result of the major rebuilding work which took place in 1861. The vestry records show that the whole fabric of the church, with the exception of the tower, was deteriorating.



South east view of Kenn Church, 1828, by J.C. Buckler

In 1860 discussions (sometimes heated) and fundraising began. A local rate of 6d was levied, public subscriptions were collected and a bank loan was arranged. £796 14s 0d was raised, but the cost of the works came in at nearly £1000. The deficiency of £200 3s 11d was contributed by the incumbent, the Rev John Acres. The rate was later increased, more donations were sought, the incumbent provided the shortfall. Plans to completely raze the walls were altered to fit with the available cash - where the walls were reasonably sound they were included in the rebuilding. Building work went ahead in 1861.

Amongst the older items in the church are two monuments which were built back into the church at the time of rebuilding.

Moved during the rebuilding from the east wall of the chancel to the west wall above the belfry door is a monument to Christopher Kenn, depicting him with

his two daughters facing him and his wife Florence underneath holding in one hand a baby (now vanished) and in the other a book. The Kenn family occupied the Manor of Kenn from about 1150 to the early 1600s; Christopher Kenn was the last. He had no son and the estate passed by the marriage of his daughter to the Poulett family of Hinton St George, near Crewkerne.



The inscription reads:

HEREUNDER LYETH THE BODY OF CHRISTOPHER KENN ESQUIRE WHO DIED 23RD DAY OF JANUARY 1593 AND ALSO THE BODY OF DAME FLORENCE STALING HIS WIFE WHO ERECTED THIS MONUMENT AND BY WHOM THE SAID CHRISTOPHER HAD ISSUE 2 DAUGHTERS MARGARET & ELIZABETH MARGARET MARRIED TO WILLIAM GUYS OF ELMOORE ESQUIER ELIZABETH MARRIED TO JOHN POULET OF GORGHINTON ESQUIER



Moved during the rebuilding from the right hand of the communion table to its current home over the south door is the memorial to Sir Nicholas Staling, Florence's second husband, and the inscription reads:

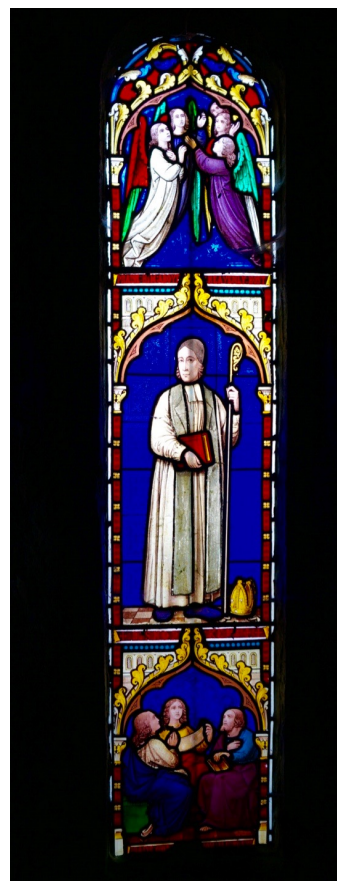
HERE LYETH THE BODY OF SIR NICHOLAS STALING KNIGHT, SECOND HUSBAND TO DAME FLORENCE STALING GENTLEMAN USHER DAYLY WAYTER OF OUR LATE SVERAIN OF FAMOUS MEMORY QUEENE ELZABETH AFTERWARDES TO OUR DREAD SOVEREIGN LORD KINGE JAMES WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE THE 10 JANUARY 1605

Above the tablet is the coat of arms of the Stallinge family (gules, three escallops in bend argent, on a chief of the second a martlet sable).

In the tower, of uncertain age but possibly Norman, is a small window depicting

Bishop Thomas Ken, who held the See of Bath and Wells from 1685 to 1690. He was a descendent of the Kenn family who held the manor for so many years, and was Bishop during the time of the Monmouth Rebellion. There is no record of the Bishop living in or even visiting Kenn. The window was a gift during the rebuilding.

The tower also houses a single bell of rough cast bronze, recently refurbished and rung for every service held here.



The pulpit dates from the rebuilding - the Rev Ommanny preached the sermon from it on May 3rd 1862, and having ascended the pulpit, he gave out as his text the first verse of the 122nd Psalm - "I was *glad* when they said unto me we will go into the house of the Lord."

It has a centre column of stone, surrounded by four marble supporting columns. The central inscription IHS is surround by the words "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world". The four carved medallions are the symbols of the four evangelists; St Matthew, the kneeling angel; St Mark, the Lion; St Luke, the winged ox and St John, the Eagle.



Nothing is known about the altar, but it no doubt predates the rebuilding and is basically a solid wooden table of dowel and peg construction.

The font is of uncertain age, but is very old, and has probably survived from Norman times.

The glazed tiles in the chancel are Minton, laid during the restoration of the church.

The two stained-glass windows, and a memorial window on the south side of the church were donated by the incumbent, the Rev Acres; a stained-glass window containing a figure of Bishop Ken at the west end by Mr J Bell of Bristol; the window at the east end was added later in memory of the Revd Robert Trevor Still, Vicar of Kenn, who built the vicarage. His headstone in the churchyard makes odd reading - "Fortified by the last sacraments of the Holy Roman Catholic Church R.I.P."



The porch is floored with old gravestones. The one immediately inside the porch door commemorates "Elizabeth the daughter of John, Lord Poulett, Baron of Hinton St George who departed this life 28th day of July 1628". The board with the names of those who died in the 1914-18 war is on the left. There is no memorial for World War II as all those who went to fight came home safely. The oak door into the church is very early, having been recased and restored in time for the reopening in 1862.



Going outside there are three features of interest. The first is the Priest's Door, which is seen more clearly outside than in. Pictures of the church prior to 1860 show the door opening onto the churchyard; it was blocked up at the time of the rebuilding. The second is the curious steeple on the tower. This unusual pyramid shape changed during the rebuilding - pictures show that prior to 1860 the roof tapered less, and had two finishes at the base.

Thirdly, the preaching cross stands in the churchyard. It dates from the early 14th century, and was probably surmounted by a Calvary when first made, but now boasts the later cross. The base comprises four octagonal steps topped by a stone block socketed into the middle into which the column fits. The column itself is chamfered to an octagon to match the base and at the same time tapered up to the top. The cross was added when the whole structure was restored in 1920 as a public memorial to those parishioners who died in the Great War.



In more recent times, the Architect's inspection during the quinquennial survey in 1992 found serious faults in the roof structure, which necessitated extensive repairs, estimated at a cost of £20,000.

In the village there was doubtful debate about the possibility of raising such a huge sum of money (the population of Kenn is about 300).

The gauntlet was picked up by the newly formed Kenn Church Restoration fund committee, and the fund raising began. To the eternal credit of the whole village and the committee the target was achieved and work began.

Thus it was, on January 15th 1995, a service of Thanksgiving and Dedication was held in St John's.

During 2011 the Altar Guild raised funds to completely renovate the church fabrics, using a local expert in ecclesiastical embroidery.



More recently still, the belfry stairs and vestry furniture were rebuilt or restored by local craftsmen. The Public Address system has been much improved for the benefit of the hard of hearing (and for services which spill over into the churchyard).



Today our little church is healthy, vigorous and inclusive. Enjoy your visit today, and come again soon. You will be most welcome.

