



REDUNDANT  
CHURCHES  
FUND

THE CHURCH  
OF ST DENYS  
LITTLE  
BARFORD

50 pence



Little Barford is a hamlet on the north-eastern edge of Bedfordshire. It lies two miles south of St. Neots, on the B1043 road to Tempsford and on the east bank of the River Great Ouse. The place-name, formerly often spelt 'Berkford', is thought to derive from the Old English *beorcford*, meaning 'birch ford'. 'Little' was added to distinguish it from Great Barford, a village some 4½ miles further up the river.

**History:** At the time of Domesday, Little Barford consisted of two manors, which were eventually joined together about 1400. The larger manor had belonged to the Benedictine Abbey of Ramsey almost continuously from the 11th century; the joint manor continued to do so until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. In 1799 Little Barford was sold to John Williamson of Baldock. His daughter Sara married the Revd. William Alington; and the entire parish, with the exception of the church and churchyard and the power station, remains in the possession of the Alington family to this day.

Little Barford's most famous son was the poet and dramatist Nicholas Rowe who was baptised here in June 1674, became Poet Laureate to King George I in 1715, died in 1718 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. The timber-framed cottage in which he is traditionally reputed to have been born was dismantled three centuries later and re-erected at Glatton, near Peterborough.

**Setting:** Standing on a slight knoll near the river, with only one house nearby, Little Barford church seems surprisingly remote, considering that the power station is close by to the north, the Great Northern Railway main line

less than half a mile to the east of the Great North Road under a mile to the west. A gravelled drive between park railings leads from the House and hamlet to the churchyard.

**The Building:** The earliest known mention of a church here is in a papal bull of Pope Alexander, dated 1178, confirming that it belonged to Ramsey Abbey. Part of the building which stood then survives still: its most significant feature is the south doorway, an excellent late Norman piece, dated about 1160-70 by the authors of the Victoria County History. At this period the church probably consisted of nave and chancel only, though it may also have had a narrow north aisle.

Early in the 14th century much was done to the building in an undistinguished but agreeably rustic manner: the north arcade, tower arch, chancel arch and the impressive font date from this time. In the mid-14th century a chapel was added on the south side of the chancel and some work was probably done in the chancel itself. From this phase only the chapel arcade survives, albeit much renewed in the 19th century.

From the mid-15th century two important features remain: the oak rood screen and an unusual carved piscina, both of which are now in the vestry. In the late 15th to early 16th century the nave walls were heightened to form a clerestory and the tower was built or rebuilt. Parts of the pews in the nave and north aisle probably date from this time also. Nothing major was then done to the fabric of the church until the 19th century, though some repairs and re-furnishing are known to have been carried out in the 17th century. At some uncertain date the 14th century south chapel was pulled down and its arches were built up.

The churchwardens' accounts survive from 1779 and show that in 1823-4 some £48 was spent on repairs to the church ordered by the archdeacon. Ten years later further work was carried out, no doubt paid for by the Alington family. The east wall of the chancel was then repaired in brick and given a large new window, and the old oak south porch was removed.

Following the death of the Revd. John Alington, who had been both rector and squire since 1822, the Revd. Nathaniel Royds arrived in 1864 and was to be rector here for 42 years. In 1869 he set about 'restoring' the church. First

the chancel was rebuilt and re-fitted to the designs of a prominent Victorian architect, Arthur (later Sir Arthur) William Blomfield (1829-1899). The old arcade on the south side was rebuilt and partly opened up and a new vestry and organ chamber were added on the site of the former chapel.

By 1871 restoration of the tower, nave and north aisle was in hand, at a cost of £400 borne by William Alington. No architect was employed; the contractor was Osborne of St Neots.

The building now consists of tower, nave, north aisle, chancel and south vestry and organ chamber. The walls are built of local ironstone and cobble; the windows and other external features are of limestone and the arches inside are of a soft, pale grey material known as clunch. The Victorian eastern parts of the church are richly designed, furnished and decorated inside, in marked contrast to the relative simplicity of the western parts.

With the decline in the population of Little Barford, from its peak of 189 in 1881 to 49 in 1971, the use of the church declined also — although the building was maintained in good condition — and on 14th November 1974 it was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund for preservation. The Fund has carried out a modest scheme of repairs (including redecoration) under the supervision of the late Frederick C. Levitt of Biggleswade, the contractor being J. T. G. Godman of Southill. The ecclesiastical parish has been joined to Tempsford but occasional services are still held in Little Barford church.

Built in the late 15th to early 16th century, the west tower is of three stages with an embattled parapet. The belfry has Perpendicular-style windows fitted with pierced wooden boards of traditional pattern. In the ground stage is a large west window, again Perpendicular in style but largely renewed in 1871. The tail of the weather-vane appears to be in the form of a dragon's mouth.

The south face of the nave shows an unusual variety of windows at different levels. The top pair and the matching pair in the north wall are the clerestory windows belonging to the late 15th century heightening of the nave. The large Perpendicular window on the left is probably of slightly later date. To the right of the doorway is a window in 14th century style but

## EXTERIOR

## INTERIOR

now dating entirely from 1871. The last — and smallest — window is something of a mystery; the surround, although Norman in style, is clearly of no great age. However the carved hood-mould, with the addition of stops carved into heads (said to have been found in the churchyard), resembles that on the Norman doorway and appears to be of equal antiquity. If, as has been claimed, the window was not made until 1834 (to light the reading desk), the carved hood-mould must have been moved from elsewhere.

The fine late Norman south doorway has an arch carved with lozenge design and a hood-mould with a kind of dog-tooth ornament. The lintel is a Victorian renewal. One of the stones on the left of the doorway bears a scratch dial and to the right projects a large holy water stoup. Much of the masonry in the lower part of the south wall of the nave is probably Norman.

The presence of a simple Norman window (undoubtedly genuine) in the west wall of the north aisle suggests that a narrow aisle formed part of the Norman building, and that this was widened when the present arcade was built in the early 14th century. In the east wall of the aisle is a larger single-light window of uncertain age, unblocked in 1871. Both square-headed windows on the north side, and the doorway, were renewed in 14th century style at the same time.

Rebuilt on the old foundations with the old materials — so it is claimed — the present chancel dates from 1869-71. The east window, a triple lancet in Early English style, is pure Victorian but the two 14th century-style windows on the north side probably resemble their predecessors and contain some old stonework. The south vestry and organ chamber were added at the time that the chancel was rebuilt.

Tower: To mark the Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887, the west window was provided with stained glass by C. E. Kempe. In the middle light is a figure of St Michael the Archangel. Of the four bells the treble (smallest) is a crude production, apparently dated 1718, by an unknown local founder. The second bell was cast in 1681 by Richard Chandler II of Drayton Parslow and the third in 1661 by Christopher Graye of Ampthill. The tenor bell of 1759 is by Joseph Eayre of St Neots. The bell frame, of king-post construction with curved braces, probably dates from the early 16th century and many of the

bell fittings are likewise older than the present bells. The unusual pitch-pine ladder to the first floor of the tower no doubt dates from the 1871 restoration.

Nave and north aisle: The north arcade of three bays is simple in design, with octagonal piers, moulded capitals and double-chamfered arches, and is not very accomplished in execution. Like the tower arch and chancel arch it dates from the early 14th century. On the stonework of the tower arch and the west respond of the north arcade are several doodles scratched in the chunch, including the initials 'R P' and the date 1682.

With its large octagonal bowl resting awkwardly on five pillars, the plain but striking font probably dates from about 1300. In the aisle the two stone roof corbels, carved into heads, are perhaps of Norman origin.

The restoration work completed in 1871 involved the complete renewal in pitch-pine of the nave and north aisle roofs, the replacement of the north and south doors, the re-plastering of the walls and the tiling of the floors. However, most of the pews on the south side, and two at the back of the north aisle, are old with plain heavy ends. The seats were renewed in 1871 when the remainder of the pews were copied from the old ones but in softwood instead of oak. The chest dates perhaps from the 16th century but has been much repaired and altered.

On the nave floor is a monumental brass, consisting of two small figures and an inscription to Thomas (1535) and Agnes Peryns.

The iron and brass lectern is a splendid Victorian piece, given by the Revd. Nathaniel Royds in 1867. The Bible on it is 19th century. The pulpit, a curious affair of brass, iron and stone resembling another lectern, was given in 1871 by a tenant farmer on the estate. Above are three pieces of oak which probably belonged to a previous pulpit; they are inscribed 'W : MERRIDEN . A : M . RECTOR 1684'. The carved oak hymn numbers board is 20th century.

In the Norman window at the back of the north aisle is a stained glass portrait of St Denys, the patron saint of this church, made in 1871 possibly by Heaton, Butler and Bayne. The glass in the east window of the aisle is

also of 1871, this time by Clayton and Bell; and in the 1920's the north-west window was filled with stained glass as a memorial to members of the Royds family. The brass plaques on the north wall commemorate members of the Alington family.

In the chancel the only pre-Victorian feature is the 14th century south arcade, of two bays with a quatrefoil-shaped pier and finely carved capitals and bases. The arches are largely Victorian, as is the screen-wall (erroneously attributed to G. E. Street in *The Buildings of England* Bedfordshire volume) filling the eastern bay. This wall is pierced by a large quatrefoil, which opens into the vestry, and a trefoiled doorway with a carved angel beside it to greet the priest as he entered.

Almost all the chancel fittings were, like the chancel itself, designed by Sir Arthur Blomfield. The roof is divided into boarded panels which, on the eastern half of the roof, were painted with angels on a starred background by Heaton, Butler and Bayne.

The east window, with richly carved rere-arch, is filled with stained glass by Clayton and Bell. Depicting the Crucifixion and other gospel scenes, this glass was given by William Alington. The mosaic and tiled reredos was made by the firm of W. B. Simpson. There is encaustic tiling to either side of it and on the floor. Blomfield's design for the large oak altar is preserved in the Bedfordshire County Record Office.

On the south side of the sanctuary are a credence, in the style of a 14th century piscina, and a stone sedilium. The oak stall, with poppyheads, opposite does not correspond with the other furnishings. The altar rails, with iron standards exquisitely worked into flowers, were provided shortly after the re-opening of the church in 1871. Blomfield's chancel stalls in varnished pitch-pine have long arcaded fronts, intricately carved. The low iron screen and gates at the entrance to the chancel were likewise designed by Blomfield.

Several crosses, some apparently mediaeval writing and various other graffiti are scratched in the clunch of the chancel arch responds. The elaborate iron brackets with bowls were provided to hold oil lamps. The 20th century embroidered banner shows St Denys holding a church. A large leather-bound prayer book is dated 1837.

Two 15th century features displaced when the chancel was rebuilt were re-positioned in the vestry. One is the carved and traceried oak rood-screen formerly in the chancel arch, which was curtailed to make it fit its present position. The roses painted on the lower part are an original feature but were re-painted in 1869-71 by the rector himself. The other feature preserved here is a piscina, unusually designed to project from the wall with openings on two sides. The smaller opening is intricately worked into a miniature ribbed vault. Above the piscina are two pieces of alabaster (there were formerly four) carved with flowers: these are perhaps of 17th century date and presumably belonged to a former monument.

The organ, which probably dates from about 1840, was rebuilt and enlarged by John Nicholson of Worcester when it was given to this church in 1876.

Among the items of communion plate belonging to the church (but at present kept at the bank) are a beautiful cup, made by 'H B' of London in 1571, and a fine Victorian set of cup, paten and flagon made by J. Keith of London in 1865. The registers date back to 1661 and are deposited along with other books and papers relating to the church in the County Record Office in Bedford.

In the churchyard (which is still in parochial ownership) are few tombstones older than the 19th century. However there is an attractive pair with carved cherubs near the south doorway, to Edward Peck (1730) and his wife Mary (1722). Near the gate are the remains of a mediaeval cross, consisting of an octagonal base with a square hole for the missing shaft, and prominent nearby is the parish 1914-18 War Memorial.

I am indebted to the staff of the Bedfordshire County Record Office, particularly Christopher Pickford. Among the Little Barford books and papers now deposited there is a marvellously informative *Rector's Record Book* begun about 1785 and kept assiduously by the Revd. Nathaniel Royds. My other principal sources have been:

Three newspaper articles (*Northampton Mercury*, 20th May 1852; Anonymous, November 1871; *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 5th October 1900).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## REDUNDANT CHURCHES FUND

Letter from the Revd. N. Royds to his successor (April 1915).  
Churchwardens' account book, 1779-1866.  
Archdeacons' visitation books.  
Glebe Terriers.  
Sir Stephen Glynne's *Church Notes* (31st January 1863).  
Faculty for chancel (1869), in Cambridge University Library.  
*Victoria County History* for Bedfordshire, Vol. II, pp. 206-9.  
*Lysons's Bedfordshire Illustrated* (1813).  
Kelly's Directories.  
Pevsner's *The Buildings of England* volume including Bedfordshire.  
Ekwall's *The Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*.

As you will have read in the text, this church is now in the care of the Fund. This body was set up by Parliament in 1969 to preserve Church of England churches no longer needed for regular worship but which are of historic or architectural interest. The Fund's main income is provided by Church and State but the constantly increasing number of churches entrusted to it (193 in May 1985) means that its resources are severely stretched. Contributions from members of the public are therefore gratefully received and if there is no money box in the church or the keyholder is not available, please send any contributions you feel unable to make to the Fund at the address shown.

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Inside front cover — north arcade  
In text — piscina  
— chancel ceiling  
Inside back cover — vestry  
Back cover — exterior

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