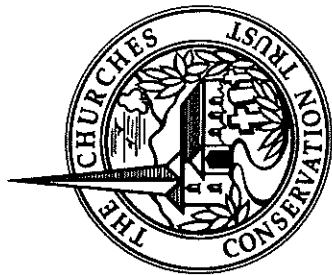


SUTTON MALLET CHURCH, SOMERSET



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SUTTON MALLET CHURCH,
SOMERSET.**

Many years ago Christians built and set apart this place for prayer. They made their church beautiful with their skill and craftsmanship. Here they have met for worship, for children to be baptised, for couples to be married and for the dead to be brought for burial. If you have time, enjoy the history, the peace and the holiness here. Please use the prayer card and, if you like it, you are welcome to take a folded copy with you.

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SEAVINGTON, St. Mary. 3 miles east of Ilminster, off A303.

SUTTON MALLET CHURCH, SOMERSET

by *Mark McDermott*

Introduction

Sutton Mallet lies between the southern slopes of the Polden Hills and the flat expanse of King's Sedgemoor, and the road which runs southwards past the churchyard connects the village with a network of Sedgemoor 'droves'. Farming is the main feature of the local economy and the soils of the area include keuper marl on the higher ground and alluvium and peat in the low-lying 'moors'.

The Polden ridge may be prehistoric in origin and in the Roman period connected the Fosse Way at Ilchester with ports on the river Parrett. In Saxon times Glastonbury Abbey owned a large estate on the Poldens, within which Sutton was the 'southern settlement'. The 'Shapwick Project' was begun in 1988 to investigate a theory that the estate may have had Roman, or even earlier, origins and had a scattered settlement pattern which was reorganized in perhaps the 10th century into a number of nucleated villages, including Shapwick, each with its associated open-field system. By 1086 (*Domesday Book*) Sutton was held from Glastonbury Abbey by Roger de Courcelles; but from at least 1200 the sub-tenants were members of the Malet or Mallet family who continued to hold the manor until the 17th century.

King's Sedgemoor is an extensive wetland (part of the Somerset Levels) which formerly flooded in winter but provided common grazing in the summer. It was the scene of the defeat of the Monmouth rebellion at the battle of Sedgemoor, less than two miles from Sutton, in 1685. A reference in 1572 to 'Sutton Mallet alias Veny Sutton' indicates the fenny nature of the landscape. As a result of the 18th century drive for agricultural improvement the King's Sedgemoor Drain was cut in the 1790s and Sutton received its 'allotment' of the common pasture which was then enclosed, although the fields on Sedgemoor are separated by 'rhynes' (drainage ditches) instead of hedges.

The Medieval Chapelry

The origins of Sutton church are uncertain but it is clear that in the 15th century it was a dependent chapelry of Moorlinch church. The chapelry may already have come into existence by 1262, when Moorlinch church was referred to as having several unnamed outlying chapels, but a supposed reference in 1191 is unreliable.

Glastonbury Abbey was the patron of the living of Moorlinch and from 1262, when the abbey also 'appropriated' the living, the vicar was granted an income from the tithes and other revenues but the abbey kept the remainder. Little is known of the chaplains who assisted the vicar. He evidently needed their help, for John Soone, vicar of Moorlinch in 1437, complained that the abbey allowed him too small an income to support both himself and the two chaplains he considered necessary to serve the four chapelries of Sutton, Stawell, Chilton Polden and Edington. In 1449, however, two 'parochial chaplains' are named, each in connection with two of the four chapelries, those of Sutton and Stawell being served by Matthew Benet.

The Post-Reformation Period

After Glastonbury Abbey was dissolved in 1539 the king became the patron of Moorlinch church, although the patronage subsequently passed through other hands, and the right to the rectorial tithes also passed to a succession of lay rectors. The relationship between Moorlinch and its chapelries continued and the appointment of a curate to serve Sutton and Stawell persisted or recurred. In 1575 the curate of the two chapelries was accused of neglecting his duties, in 1633 another curate was said to be so frequently drunk that some of the congregation attended church elsewhere, and in 1666 yet another curate was in trouble for conducting a clandestine wedding ceremony. It was also alleged in 1633 that the vicar himself only conducted services at Sutton infrequently and that when he did he sometimes added his own idiosyncratic embellishments to biblical events and denounced other preachers who used sermon notes and quoted chapter and verse for their statements as cheats and hypocrites! Examples of faithful service by the clergy were less likely to be recorded, however.

Sutton's medieval chapel was largely demolished in the 1820s but it was described by Edmund Rack in the 1780s as a small aisleless building, 'very mean . . . a dark dismal looking place . . . very dirty and much fitter for a stable than a place of worship'. The windows and doors were 'mostly very small', the pulpit was 'wretchedly mean' and the seating consisted almost entirely of old oak benches, although Rack did approve of the oak communion table.

The tower at that time contained three bells but was only 32 ft. high. Much of this tower, including several late-medieval Perpendicular-style windows, was incorporated into the rebuilt church, and other identifiable fragments of the old church are a reused Perpendicular window in the apse, 17th century communion rails (which were painted blue when Rack saw them), and the two remaining bells, one dated 1657 the work of Robert Austen II and the other cast by Richard Purdue I in 1607. There is also the base of a medieval cross in the churchyard and until the church's redundancy the plate included an Elizabethan communion cup made by '1 P' in 1572.

Piecemeal repairs to the earlier church are referred to in the Sutton Mallet chapel wardens' accounts which survive from 1775; but the inhabitants of Sutton also had to contribute to repairs to the parish church at Moorlinch, responsibility for which was shared between a churchwarden for Moorlinch and an 'outwarden' representing the chapelries. Baptisms, marriages and burials would have taken place at Moorlinch initially, but the font (erected in 1827) and gravestones (the earliest inscribed date seems to be 1849) indicate that Sutton had acquired baptism and burial rights by those dates. Separate registers for Sutton date from 1781 (previous entries were made in the Moorlinch registers), which may indicate when the transition took place, although there were no gravestones or inscriptions to the dead at Sutton at the time of Rack's visit.

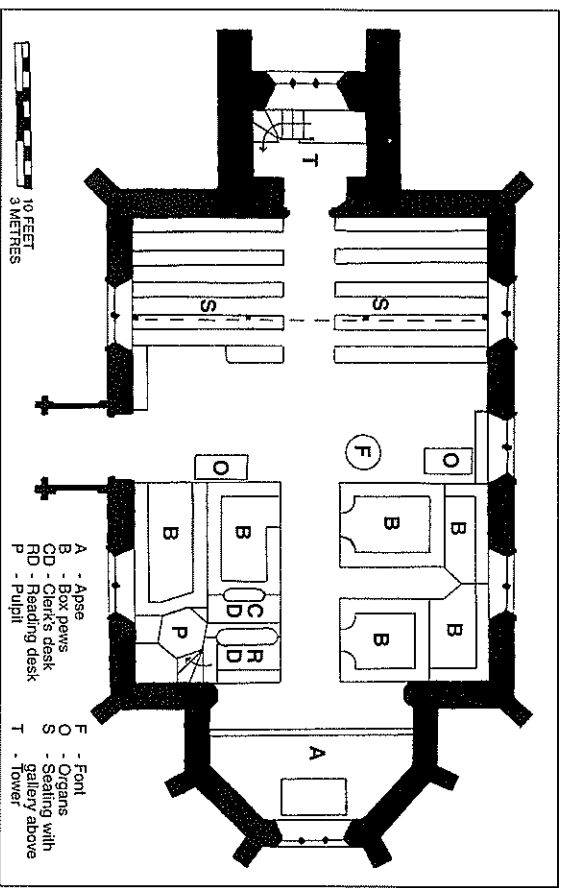
The Rebuilding

In 1826 a vestry meeting at Sutton approved a recommendation from the Taunton architect, Richard Carver, that the church, which had leaning walls and a decayed roof, should, with the exception of the tower, be demolished and replaced by a building of different proportions which would improve the accommodation for the

congregation. It was also agreed to invite William Stagg, a carpenter, to tender for the work, which was carried out in 1827 (the date inscribed on the porch). The contract cost £360, but additional costs included £4 10s. to a Mr. Chapple who erected the font. Carver was paid £20 for supervising the work, but a payment of £72 10s. for a 'Plan for Building and adding to Tower', recorded in 1832-33, may have been the fee for his overall scheme rather than an additional plan relating specifically to the tower, although the completion of the top of the tower is recorded in that year.

Visual evidence confirms that the original tower was retained and enlarged. The original west-facing windows appear to be in situ (although the accounts refer to repairs, including new mullions, to one of them), but the tower was heightened and straight buttresses were added on the west side to support an arch which carries the western parapet. The tower thus gives, on three sides and at parapet level, the impression of being a solid square structure (the original tower was rectangular) and the earlier windows in the north and south walls seem to have been repositioned centrally to complete this impression. The pedimented parapets are uncharacteristic of a medieval church, however, and the heightening of the tower has left the bellry windows at an unusual level.

Carver also reused an earlier window, with Hamstone tracery, in the east wall of the polygonal apse, which presumably replaced a rectangular chancel. He designed the south porch and the windows for the nave in a sympathetic mock-Perpendicular or, more strictly, mock-Tudor, style. The porch was built of thin blocks of ashlar, presumably to reduce its scale; the remainder of the building was rendered externally, although the recent removal of the rendering has exposed the rubble stone beneath, which includes blue lias limestone.



The interior

Like its predecessor, Carver's nave has no side aisles but it is wider and has a plaster ceiling in place of the exposed roof of the earlier nave. The eastern half of the nave is occupied by high box pews, each one traditionally allotted to a particular farm. Beyond these, in the south-east corner, are an hexagonal pulpit and, beneath it and completing a three-decker arrangement, a reading desk and a desk for the parish clerk (who would have led the responses). A passage between the box pews leads to the apse within which are the reused 17th century communion rails. Opposite the south door are the font and two organs, that to the north having superseded the American organ near the south door. At the west end of the nave is a gallery, below which are simple pews (some of which have been removed) for the humbler members of the congregation. Hat-pegs on the walls and candle-holders on some of the box-pews provide further evocative reminders of the past.

Evaluation

Carver's work at Sutton predates both the 'high church' movement and the increased understanding of medieval gothic architecture which developed during the Victorian period, when church restoration was at its peak. A century ago the church was described as having been built in a 'debased' style, but if viewed on its own terms it has a particular charm which can now be appreciated more easily. More important historically, perhaps, is the interior which encapsulates the Georgian approach to church services: the shallow apse allows little room for elaborate ritual and a robed choir, and much of the interior is filled with high box pews, some of the seats of which face away from the altar. These in turn are overlooked by a three-decker arrangement of pulpit and desks, whilst at the west end is a gallery which would have housed the singers and church band. At a later date some pews were removed and organ music was introduced; but proposals to get rid of the box pews came to nothing (perhaps because of the cost of replacing them) and Carver's work had removed the justification for drastic restoration of the building.

Recent Changes

By the end of the 19th century only Sutton and Stawell remained dependent upon Moorlinch, which had lost control of Edington, Chilton Polden and another former chapelry, Carcott. Stawell has retained its church to the present time, but that at Sutton was closed for regular worship and taken over by The Churches Conservation Trust (then called the Redundant Churches Fund) in November 1987. It remains a consecrated building in which services are still occasionally held.

*Photographs by Christopher Dalton.
Inside back cover: Drawing by Buckler 1838, reproduced by kind permission of Somerset
Archaeological Society.*

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