

BHO: British History Online

Ashurst: Church

CHURCH.

The church at Ashurst, begun before 1200, (fn. 1) remained a chapel of Steyning parish (fn. 2) until the 16th century. It was called a parish church in 1533, presumably in error; (fn. 3) similarly, the chaplain mentioned in 1548 (fn. 4) was described in the early 1550s as rector. (fn. 5) In 1574 Sir Thomas Shirley, lord of Wiston manor and therefore a landowner in the parish, (fn. 6) presented an incumbent to what was described as the rectory or free donative of Ashurst. (fn. 7) The appointment was resisted by the vicar of Steyning, resulting in a period of strife which still continued in 1579. (fn. 8) The opposition, however, was clearly abortive; Shirley's appointment of a successor in 1581 was apparently not contested, and the living remained a rectory thereafter. (fn. 9) Since 1952 it has been held in plurality with Steyning vicarage. (fn. 10)

After Sir Thomas Shirley's death in 1612 the advowson of Ashurst descended with Wiston until 1649, remaining with the earldom of Thanet after the sale of Wiston in that year until the late 18th century. John Covert of Hascombe (Surr.) presented for a turn in 1637, and William Squire in 1681. (fn. 11) In 1796 Sackville Tufton, Lord Thanet, sold the advowson to Thomas Ellis of Southwark (d. 1805), whose son, the Revd. James Ellis, presented himself in 1806. (fn. 12) In 1821 Ellis sold the advowson to Magdalen College, Oxford, the purchase money apparently being provided by another party. (fn. 13) In 1946 the college gave it to the Chichester Diocesan Board of Patronage. (fn. 14)

In 1379 the priest serving Ashurst received £3 a year from the revenues of Fécamp abbey, owners of Steyning rectory. (fn. 15) The chaplain who served Ashurst in 1449-50 similarly received, for that year at least, the income from the tithes in Ashurst of Fécamp's successor Syon abbey. Although described as a portion, (fn. 16) they were presumably the tithes of the whole parish, except for the great tithes of Heath Barn, which later belonged to Magdalen College. (fn. 17) In 1579 Sir Thomas Shirley's presentee was apparently enjoying the tithes, (fn. 18) as later rectors also did. (fn. 19) A late 17th-century rector was said to have redeemed them from an unfavourable composition. (fn. 20) They were commuted in 1843 for £406; at the same date Magdalen College's tithes were commuted for £14. (fn. 21) The living had been valued at £268 net c. 1830. (fn. 22)

A clergy house existed in 1475. (fn. 23) In 1615 there were a rectory house, two orchards, a garden, and other land besides, making 6 a. in all; (fn. 24) the land presumably occupied the same site around the house as the glebe recorded later. (fn. 25) The present house, called the Old House and no longer used as a rectory, is basically 17th-century and is timber-framed. In 1680 it had at least 12 rooms including service rooms. (fn. 26) It was largely rebuilt in 1720 at the then rector's expense, (fn. 27) with a five-bayed, two-storeyed south front. (fn. 28) Further remodelling took place in the late 18th century and early 19th, (fn. 29) when the staircase and most of the interior decoration were renewed. The black mathematical tiles with which part of the building is faced are probably of that date too, the tilehanging being of c. 1900. (fn. 30)

Before the dissolution of Steyning college c. 1260 the parish was served by canons from Steyning, (fn. 31) and in 1563 it was served by a curate of Steyning. (fn. 32) Other clergy variously described between the 14th century and the 16th as rector, (fn. 33) vicar, (fn. 34) minister, (fn. 35) or chaplain, (fn. 36) presumably also had the status of assistant curate. The incumbent appointed in 1574 did not reside in 1579, but served through a curate. (fn. 37) Beda Goodacres, instituted in 1581, was deprived as a puritan in 1605 (fn. 38) but later briefly recovered possession of the living. (fn. 39) Incumbents in the 17th and 18th centuries often held Ashurst together with preferment elsewhere: other livings in Sussex, the mastership of Steyning grammar school, a prebend of Canterbury cathedral, or the post of domestic chaplain to successive Lords Thanet. (fn. 40) Rectors were non-resident in 1640 (fn. 41) and often in the 18th century, (fn. 42) but resident in 1662, 1724, 1729, and c. 1801. (fn. 43) Edward Wilson,

instituted in 1719, held the living for 64 years, but from 1763 or earlier served through his son as curate, who afterwards succeeded him as rector. (fn. 44)

In 1724 there were two services on Sundays and communion four times a year for 20 or 30 communicants. (fn. 45) From 1836 until the mid 20th century incumbents were all connected, as alumni, former fellows, or otherwise, with Magdalen College, Oxford, two having served as college chaplain. (fn. 46) T. N. Blagden, rector 1836-65, never resided at Ashurst and served through curates, dying on his other living of Washington. (fn. 47) Congregations of 180 in the morning and 140 in the afternoon were claimed on Census Sunday in 1851. (fn. 48) By 1868 communion was being held monthly; c. 75 then attended the morning service and c. 100 the afternoon one. There was weekly communion by 1903, when outlying parishioners went to Partridge Green church in West Grinstead or Bunton chapel in Ashington. (fn. 49) In 1983 only a morning service was held on Sundays, with evensong at Steyning.

The church of *ST. JAMES* (fn. 50) is built chiefly of flint rubble with freestone dressings and stone-tiled roof; there are also small areas of sandstone rubble and tile-hanging. It consists of a chancel with south vestry, nave with south aisle, south porch, and southwest tower with shingled spire. Although much restored in the 19th century, most of the building dates from the later 12th century and earlier 13th. The aisle and the lower walls of the tower may have been the original undivided nave and chancel. A north aisle, with an arcade of three bays, was added c. 1200, and the west end of the old nave was heightened to form a tower early in the 13th century. The north aisle was extended eastwards in the mid 13th century. In the 14th century the north side of the tower may have become unsafe or even have collapsed, necessitating the partial rebuilding of the west end of the aisle where it lapped the tower and the insertion of a buttress against the arcade pier on which the tower rested. There was also a late medieval reconstruction of the roofs of the nave and aisle under a single crown-post truss; it was possibly at the same time that the functions of nave and aisle were exchanged.

The south chancel chapel later belonged to the owners of Eatons manor and was called the Eatons chancel. (fn. 51) What may have been a medieval chancel screen was said in 1724 to have been destroyed by the parishioners during a vacancy. (fn. 52) New pews, none of which survived in 1983, were inserted in 1794, segregating men from women, (fn. 53) and shortly before 1835 the church was said to have been so thoroughly repaired as to alter its appearance completely. (fn. 54) Its condition later deteriorated, so that in 1875 it was described as almost a ruin. (fn. 55) It received a major restoration in 1877, two thirds of the cost of which was met by local landowners; the architect was G. M. Hills. The tower and part of the south wall were rebuilt, the outer walls generally stripped of roughcast, and the porch replaced, some timbers being re-used. Inside, a west gallery and other woodwork were removed and the roof opened up. (fn. 56)

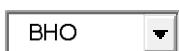
Most internal fittings are 19th-century, but the font has a square 13th-century bowl of Sussex marble decorated with arcading on one side and carried on five columns. The church also possesses a vamping horn, i.e. a loudspeaker trumpet formerly used by the parish orchestra: dated 1770 and 3 ft. (1 metre) long, it is one of only eight known in England. (fn. 57) The plain wall monument to Sarah Wilson (d. 1798) is by Flaxman. (fn. 58)

The three bells are of 1606, 1719, and 1772. (fn. 59) None of the plate is earlier than late 17th-century. (fn. 60) The registers begin in 1560. (fn. 61)

Pages 81-82

A History of the County of Sussex: Volume 6 Part 2, Bramber Rape (North-Western Part) Including Horsham. Originally published by Victoria County History, London, 1986.

This free content was digitised by double rekeying. All rights reserved.

Citation:  A P Baggs, C R J Currie, C R Elrington, S M Keeling and A M Rowland, 'Ashurst: Church', in *A History of the County of Sussex: Volume 6 Part 2, Bramber Rape (North-Western Part) Including Horsham*, ed. T P Hudson (London, 1986), pp. 81-82. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/sussex/vol6/pt2/pp81-82> [accessed 26 September 2023].

Footnotes

- 1. Below.
- 2. *V.C.H. Suss.* vi (1), 241; *Cal. Inq. Misc.* iii, p. 351.
- 3. *S.R.S.* xli. 64.
- 4. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/86/20, f. 24.
- 5. B.L. Add. MS. 39327, f. 239.
- 6. Above, manors and other estates.
- 7. B.L. Add. MS. 39327, f. 239v.
- 8. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/23/5, f. 44.
- 9. B.L. Add. MS. 39327, ff. 239v. sqq.
- 10. *Crockford* (1955-6 and later edns.).
- 11. *V.C.H. Suss.* vi (1), 262; B.L. Add. MS. 39327, ff. 241-3.
- 12. B.L. Add. MS. 39327, ff. 243, 247-8.
- 13. Ibid. ff. 250-2; Dallaway & Cartwright, *Hist. W. Suss.* ii (2), 265.
- 14. W.S.R.O., Par. 11/16/2.
- 15. P.R.O., E 106/11/2, rot. 2, m. 2.
- 16. Ibid. SC 6/1037/9, dorse.
- 17. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/25/3 (1635); *ibid.* Par. 11/6/1; *ibid.* TD/W 7.
- 18. *Ibid.* Ep. I/23/5, f. 44.
- 19. e.g. *ibid.* Ep. I/25/3 (1635).
- 20. *Ibid.* Par. 11/1/1/1, pp. 35-6.
- 21. *Ibid.* TD/W 7.
- 22. *Rep. Com. Eccl. Revenues*, 266-7.
- 23. P.R.O., SC 6/1035/12, rot. 6.
- 24. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/25/3 (1615).
- 25. e.g. *ibid.* TD/W 7.
- 26. *Ibid.* Ep. I/29/11/41.
- 27. *Ibid.* Par. 11/1/1/1, p. 48.
- 28. B.L. Add. MS. 5673, f. 30.
- 29. Horsfield, *Hist. Suss.* ii. 245; the incumbent mentioned died in 1806: B.L. Add. MS. 39327, f. 243.
- 30. Cf. W.S.R.O., Par. 11/7/4, p. 35.
- 31. *V.C.H. Suss.* vi (1), 241.
- 32. *S.A.C.* lxi. 112; cf. *S.R.S.* xli. 64; B.L. Add. MSS. 39327, f. 239; 39362, f. 7.
- 33. *S.R.S.* xli. 64; B.L. Add. MS. 39327, f. 239.
- 34. *S.A.C.* liv. 153; B.L. Add. MS. 39327, f. 238; P.R.O., E 106/11/2, rot. 2, m. 2.
- 35. W.S.R.O., Par. 11/9/1, p. 23.
- 36. P.R.O., SC 6/1037/9, dorse; W.S.R.O., Ep. I/86/20, f. 24.
- 37. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/23/5, f. 44; cf. B.L. Add. MS. 39362, f. 7.
- 38. B.L. Add. MS. 39327, f. 239v.
- 39. *Ibid.* f. 245.
- 40. *Ibid.* ff. 241-3; W.S.R.O., Par. 11/1/1/1, pp. 35-6.
- 41. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/22/1 (1640).
- 42. *Ibid.* Ep. I/22/1 (1762); *ibid.* Par. 11/1/1/1, p. 36; B.L. Add. MSS. 39362, ff. 9-10; 39461, f. 145.
- 43. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/22/1 (1662, 1729); Ep. I/26/3, p. 12; Edwards, *Brighton Rd.* 72.
- 44. B.L. Add. MS. 39461, f. 145; W.S.R.O., Par. 11/1/1/2, front flyleaf.
- 45. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/26/3, p. 13.
- 46. *Ibid.* Par. 11/1/1/2, pp. 65-6; B.L. Add. MS. 39327, f. 243; *Crockford* (1947).
- 47. B.L. Add. MS. 39362, f. 11; *ibid.* Par. 11/1/1/2, front flyleaf.
- 48. P.R.O., HO 129/86/2/9/14.
- 49. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/22A/2 (1868, 1903).

- 50. The medieval dedic. is unknown; it had been forgotten by the 19th cent., and the present dedic., assumed from the 16th-cent. mention of St. James's ale, was introduced before 1911: *S.A.C.* xii. 104; *Chich. Dioc. Kal.* (1873), 86; *Census*, 1911. For St. James's ale, above, local govt.
- 51. B.L. Add. MS. 5698, f. 175; W.S.R.O., Par. 11/4/9.
- 52. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/26/3, p. 12.
- 53. *Ibid.* Par. 11/4/9.
- 54. Horsfield, *Hist. Suss.* ii. 245.
- 55. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/22A/2 (1875).
- 56. *Chich. Dioc. Kal.* (1879), 73-4; cf. F. W. Steer, *Ashurst Ch. Guide*, pls. 1, 2, 4.
- 57. Steer, *Ch. Guide*, 2 and pl. 5.
- 58. *S.A.C.* xcvii. 85.
- 59. Elphick, *Bells*, 252-3.
- 60. *S.A.C.* liv. 214; cf. W.S.R.O., Ep. I/26/3, p. 12.
- 61. W.S.R.O., Par. 11/1.