

RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Withycombe was probably in the care of the minster at Carhampton until a parish church was built in the 12th century. By 1530 it was dedicated to St Nicholas.¹ There was also probably a manorial chapel in Withycombe as well as one in Cutcombe.²

The parish suffered from absentee rectors, which may have affected church attendance. John Hill was a recusant c.1600 and so were the Southcotts, patrons of the living, but they were not usually resident.³ In the early 19th century several children were not baptised until they were a few years old.⁴ However, there was a brief but marked increase in the number of communicants in the 1840s when the rector was resident.⁵ Even if the same people went to both Anglican services, two thirds of the population attended either church or chapel on Census Sunday 1851.⁶ There was some ill feeling between church and chapel. The school headmistress in 1885 said of a family that as Dissenters ‘perhaps they do not know how to behave’.⁷

CHURCH

The font and some stonework in the north wall probably date from the 12th century although the main part of the church is 13th-century including the massive low south-west tower. The earliest recorded rector was in 1194⁸ when the prior of Bath gave the advowson, which he held possibly because Withycombe was regarded as a daughter church of Carhampton, to Ralph son of William, lord of the manor, for a rent from the church.⁹ After the division of the manor the advowson descended with the first third

¹ F. W. Weaver, *Wells Wills* (1890), 200.

² Above, landownership.

³ *SDNQ*, V, 116.

⁴ Below, this section; SHC, D/P/wyco 2/1/2.

⁵ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/9/1.

⁶ TNA, HO 129/313/2/3/7.

⁷ SHC, D/P/wyco 18/11/1.

⁸ W. Hunt (ed.), *Cartularies of Bath Priory* (Som. Rec. Soc. 7), II, p.130—1.

⁹ Hunt, *Cart. Bath Priory*, II, pp. 10, 130—1.

share. later known as Withycombe Weeke manor.¹⁰ However, probably because the lords were recusants, it was usually held by assignees or trustees for a single presentation in the late 16th and 17th centuries.¹¹ The advowson was presumably sold when the manor was dismembered in the early 18th century. It was left by Barbara Barker (d. 1723), first wife of John Hutton of Yorkshire, to her husband and another in trust to pay legacies and for charitable purposes. John Hutton (d. 1768) was succeeded by John (d. 1782), his son by his second wife, and the younger John's son Timothy who died childless in 1863. The advowson passed to Timothy's cousin James Pulleine¹² whose representatives held it until 1954 when it was transferred to the bishop.¹³

Income and Endowment

The rector exchanged 1a. in Devon for 1a. locally in the 13th century¹⁴ and Robert and Maud of Harpford gave land in Milverton to the rector in 1304—5¹⁵ but it seems to have been given up later. The rectors owed 14s. 4d. a year to Bath priory under the grant to Ralph son of William for which they were sued in the 14th century but the rent had been lost by the 16th century.¹⁶ In 1536 the church was worth £11 1s. gross of which 6s. was the value of the glebe and the rest came from tithes.¹⁷ In 1639 the rectory included two small houses with gardens on its orchard in a cartilage covering 3 a., a 4-a. close and all tithes except from land formerly belonging to Cleeve Abbey

¹⁰ T. S. Holmes (ed.), Register of Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury (Som. Rec. Soc. 9), p. 46; Register of Bishop Bubwith (Som. Rec. Soc. 29, 279); above, landownership.

¹¹ TNA, E331/Bath& Wells/5, 13, 18.

¹² Ibid. 27; SHC, D/D/Vc 88; Rep. Com. Eccl. Revenues (1835), pp. 158—9; www.archives.northyorks.gov.uk, Clifton Castle Archive, accessed 9 Sep 2010.

¹³ Kelly's Dir. Som. (1875—1939); Crockford; SHC D/D/Ord 95/5.

¹⁴ BL, Add. Ch. 12,936.

¹⁵ E. Green. (ed.), Feet of Fines, 1196—1307 (Som Rec. Soc. 6), p. 338.

¹⁶ Hunt, Cart. Bath Priory, II, p.130—1; Holmes, Reg. Bishop Ralph, pp. 68—9; 219; Valor Eccl., I, 222.

¹⁷ Valor Eccl., I, 222.

and the corn tithes of certain fields due to Old Cleeve rectory.¹⁸ In c.1670 the living was valued at £100.¹⁹ By the 1830s the average income was £245 gross²⁰ and the tithes were paid by composition except those due to Old Cleeve, which were paid in kind.²¹ In 1839 tithes were commuted for a rent charge of £241 1s. of which £3 3s. was given to the vicar of Old Cleeve for 28 ½ a., which had paid tithes to him.²²

The rectory house needed repair in 1606 and was rebuilt in 1688, apparently as a double range house with a central entrance facing south-west with stairs between two principal rooms at the front and a large kitchen and service range at the rear.²³ In 1791 the rector had fishponds in his garden and negotiated a water supply with John Fownes Luttrell.²⁴ In 1819 the house was remodelled and enlarged²⁵ and it is possibly at this date that the stable or farm building was removed from the roadside.²⁶ The house was only occupied by the curate in 1827.²⁷ The 6 ½-a. glebe in 1839 consisted of the grounds and adjoining paddock.²⁸ The house was substantially altered again, possibly mid century for Charles Cooke who had a large family and several servants in 1871.²⁹ The dairy was converted to a study, a large bay window was added to the drawing room and a larder and outbuildings were built at the rear. Later a second bay window was built onto the dining room.³⁰ By 1910 it was described as a six-bedroom house in fair repair but damp. After 1980 the house was sold and bungalows were

¹⁸ SHC, D/D/Rg 369.

¹⁹ SHC, D/D/Vc 24.

²⁰ Rep. Com. Eccl. Revenues (1835), pp. 158—9.

²¹ TNA, IR 18/8857.

²² SHC, tithes award.

²³ SHC, D/D/Ca 151; D/P/wyco 2/1/2.

²⁴ SHC, DD/L 2/21/117.

²⁵ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/1/2.

²⁶ SHC, DD/L 291/3; *ibid.* tithes award.

²⁷ SHC, D/D/Rb 1827.

²⁸ SHC, tithes award.

²⁹ TNA, RG 10/2350.

³⁰ SHC, DD/WBF 2/156; *ibid.* A/CFH 4; OS Map 1:2500, Som. XLVII.3 (1904 edn).

built on the land in 1990. Now called Cedar Ford, the former rectory is a stone and stucco house under a slate roof.³¹

Pastoral Care and Parish Life

The first recorded rector was John Taunton in 1194³² and other early rectors were Richard FitzUrse, Arnulph or William his son, and possibly Roger Lovel in 1251.³³ Chaplains recorded in the 13th and 14th centuries may have assisted or served the manor chapels.³⁴ Rector Simon le Sauvage was excommunicated in 1304 but kept the keys of the church. His next appointment was also contested.³⁵ His successor, William of Milverton or William Barbican, was accused of assault c.1320³⁶ and was sued for non payment of the rent to Bath in 1316 and 1329.³⁷ The next two rectors only stayed a couple of years. Reginald Bugwell, appointed 1334 and not yet ordained, was absent at Oxford and later held canonries of Exeter, Wells and Southwell but retained the rectory until 1349 and even received a gift of herring from the manor.³⁸ John Ruspyn, rector in the 1350s, was probably a kinsman of William Ruspyn, rector 1333—4.³⁹ It was possibly at this period that the church was refenestrated. An alabaster image of the descent from the cross in Dunster Castle in 1830 was said to be from a demolished house in Withycombe and might have been in the church originally.⁴⁰

³¹ SHC, DD/WBF 2/156, D/PC/wyco 1/2/2.

³² Hunt, Cart. Bath Priory, II, p.130—1.

³³ SHC, DD/L P17/1/1; BL, Add. Ch. 12,936; Cal. Papal Reg. I, p. 268.

³⁴ SHC, DD/L P32/1/43, P32/3/2, P32/13/1

³⁵ Hunt, Cart. Bath Priory, II, p.122; Bishop Hobhouse (ed.), Bishop Drokensford's Register (Som. Rec. Soc. 1), 154, 187.

³⁶ Cal. Pat. 1317—21, 292.

³⁷ Hobhouse, Bishop Drokensford's Register, 2; Hunt, Cart. Bath Priory, II, pp. 130—31.

³⁸ Holmes, Reg. Bishop Ralph, pp. 46, 68—9, 179, 241; Cal. Papal Reg. 2, 130, 165, 170; Emden, Biog. Reg. Oxford to 1500; SHC, DD/L P32/3/3.

³⁹ Holmes, Reg. Bishop Ralph, pp. 46, 68—9; SHC, DD/L P17/1/32; E. Green (ed.), Feet of Fines 1347—99 (Som. Rec. Soc. 17), 32, 35, 183.

⁴⁰ J. Savage, Hist of Car. Hundred (1830), 446.

In the first two decades of the 15th century there were eight rectors but Stephen Clement served from 1469 until his death in 1505.⁴¹ In 1427—8 and in later years the lord of Withycombe Hadley paid the prior of Dunster for bread and wine to celebrate mass for him in Withycombe church and for wax lights before the image of the Virgin.⁴² The church had 15 a. of scattered land in the 15th century and in 1511 lands at Longcombe and elsewhere.⁴³ That seems to have been exchanged because by 1767 the estate consisted of two blocks of land at Longcombe with Armstrong's house just outside the village, now Orchard Croft, let to raise money for church maintenance.⁴⁴ As a result church rates were seldom levied.⁴⁵

The church spent a lot of money on candles and had four lights, which received bequests in 1530, but only one appears to have been endowed.⁴⁶ The five-bay fan-vaulted screen with carved cornice was installed in the late 15th or early 16th century. In 1532 James Hadley gave money to be put in the mass book, to repair the relics, to keep his anniversaries and for a priest to sing for him and his family.⁴⁷ In 1558 Joan Saffin from Sampford Brett gave her best kirtle to the church for prayers.⁴⁸

Curates were recorded in the early 16th century⁴⁹ and after 1558 rectors ceased to reside and left the parish to curates.⁵⁰ One curate who stayed briefly in the 1570s was John Nicholls, a Welshman who later became a Catholic priest but recanted in

⁴¹ Cal. Pat., 1401—5, 106, 121; 1405—8, 217, 347; T. S. Holmes (ed.), Register of Bishop Bubwith (Som. Rec. Soc. 29—30), pp. 279, 347, 359, H. C. Maxwell-Lyte (ed.), Registers of Bishops Stillington 1466—91 and Fox 1492—4 (Som. Rec. Soc. 52), p. 32; H. C. Maxwell-Lyte (ed.), Register of Bishop King (Som. Rec. Soc. 54), 109.

⁴² SHC, DD/L P32/13/3, 6.

⁴³ SHC, DD/L P32/24/1, 4.

⁴⁴ SHC, D/P/wyco 5/1/1; D/D/Vc 88.

⁴⁵ SHC, D/P/wyco 4/1/2.

⁴⁶ SHC, DD/L P32/24/1; F. W. Weaver, Wells Wills (1890), 200; E. Green (ed.), Somerset Chuntries, 1548 (Som. Rec. Soc. 2), 43.

⁴⁷ F. W. Weaver (ed.), Somersetshire Wills, 1531—58 (Som. Rec. Soc. 21), 13—14.

⁴⁸ M. Siraut, Somerset Wills (Som. Rec. Soc. 89), 199.

⁴⁹ Weaver, Wells Wills, 200.

⁵⁰ SDNQ, XIV, 64.

1580.⁵¹ In 1603 there was no Easter communion, in 1606 no altar cover and the church and house needed repair, and in 1612 there was no parish clerk but the communion cup probably dates from this period as does the bell by George Purdue. Another was cast by William Purdue in 1648.⁵² The screen may have been panelled in the early 17th century. The church house, held of Withycombe Weeke manor in the early 16th century, was let by 1613 as a private dwelling.⁵³ Rector John Uppington was ejected during the Interregnum and the registers before 1669 are missing as are most of the early parish records.⁵⁴ Thomas Collard, appointed in 1670, was resident and rebuilt the house but a successor John Jenkins abandoned the rectory and his family to travel the country with Joan Troyt, daughter of a former rector of Carhampton, by whom he had several children.⁵⁵

Some 18th-century rectors resided including Samuel Rogers (d. 1767) who gave a flagon to the church.⁵⁶ His successor recorded c. 10 communicants.⁵⁷ In the 1780s the parish employed a salaried clerk and a woman to clean the churchyard, which was walled and planted in 1789. The church was roughcast and tiles and a new belfry floor was laid in 1785—6.⁵⁸ It was described as neatly whitewashed but the interior was dirty. There were still carved bench ends, now lost, an old pulpit furnished with scarlet and the screen cornice was gilded and had the singer's gallery above.⁵⁹ Strings for instruments were bought in 1820, the cello was repaired in

⁵¹ New DNB.

⁵² SHC, D/D/Ca 86, 151, 175; DD/SAS CH 16/2.

⁵³ SHC, DD/L P32/55; SDNQ, V, 358.

⁵⁴ F. W. Weaver (ed.), Somerset Incumbents, 472; SHC, D/P/wyco 2/1/1.

⁵⁵ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/1/1 ; D/D/Vc 2; D/D/Cd 108; E. H. Bates and F. Hancock, 'An Inventory of Church Plate', PSAS. 45 (1897), 178.

⁵⁶ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/1/2; Bates and Hancock, 'Inventory Church Plate', PSAS. 45, 178.

⁵⁷ SHC, D/D/Vc 88.

⁵⁸ SHC, D/P/wyco 4/1/2.

⁵⁹ SHC, A/AQP 8.

1848—9 and the bass was strung in the 1850s but an organ was installed c.1874.⁶⁰ A choir was recorded in the 1880s.⁶¹

The tower was repaired in 1804—5 and further major work was carried out in 1811—12 probably including moving the gallery to the west end and providing it with an outside stair. More than £10 was spent repainting the gallery.⁶² The rector, Thomas Bowman was non-resident on health grounds and his curate was the vicar of Old Cleeve who held one Sunday service at Withycombe.⁶³ In 1827 the rector lived in Doncaster, Yorks. but the curate was resident and held one Sunday service alternately morning and evening as he also served Carhampton.⁶⁴ In 1844 there were 30 communicants, rising to 54 in 1848, and communion was celebrated four times a year but some received communion privately. Offerings were used to buy blankets for ten poor people and, although the number of communicants fell sharply in the 1850s, the number of celebrations was seven and in 1853 six pairs of blankets and 11 pairs of sheets were bought with the offerings.⁶⁵ In 1851 there were two Sunday services: in the morning 48 people and 31 Sunday schoolchildren attended but in the afternoon the figures were 111 and 33. it was customary for the churchwardens to allot most of the free seats but the church could accommodate 182 including seating in the chancel.⁶⁶

The church was resealed in 1858 and the pulpit and communion rails were replaced probably about this time. In 1859 the churchyard wall was demolished, the path was widened and iron gates erected, probably after footpaths were closed, which had turned the churchyard into a 'playground' in 1840. In 1882 oil lighting was

⁶⁰ SHC, D/P/wyco 4/1/2.

⁶¹ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/9/2.

⁶² SHC, D/P/wyco 4/1/2.

⁶³ SHC, D/D/Rb 1815.

⁶⁴ SHC, D/D/Rb 1827.

⁶⁵ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/9/1, 4/1/2.

⁶⁶ TNA, HO 129/313/2/3/7.

installed; replaced c.1913 by acetylene.⁶⁷ In 1894 George Govan moved from Cwmbran, Wales, where he was accustomed to four Sunday and full weekday services, to Withycombe where he increased services to three on Sunday and one during the week but often only one or two people took communion and an attempt to introduce four Sunday services in 1903 was short-lived.⁶⁸ It was proposed that the two early 17th and two early 18th-century bells be melted down and recast as a peal of six in 1902 but instead they were rehung in 1903 and the tower restored.⁶⁹ In 1913 the church was re-roofed with oak from Dunster park, the plaster was removed, the rood stair re-opened, a new north vestry was built, enlarged in 1933, and the interior was cement pointed by H. O. Samson and W. B. Colthurst of Taunton. The west gallery was retained until it became dangerous because of opposition to its removal and the priest's door was left blocked. There were usually over 40 Easter communicants and in 1916 a watchnight service was introduced on 31 Dec.⁷⁰ The church lands were sold to Alexander Fownes Luttrell in 1921 and the money was invested in government stock for church expenses.⁷¹ The church collections were still partly used to support a blanket club but also for other charities including Dunster hospital.⁷²

Revd Govan died in 1931 and his successors celebrated communion once a fortnight or less often until 1935 but the organ was replaced in 1932 and a full choir of 26 voices, boys, girls, men and women, attended both Sunday services. There were usually between 50 and 60 Easter communicants until the 1950s when they rose to over 70.⁷³ The gallery was removed in 1935—6 when the tower was restored by

⁶⁷ SHC, D/D/Va 1/7; D/P/wyco 4/1/2.

⁶⁸ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/5/1.

⁶⁹ SHC, D/D/Cf 1902/47.

⁷⁰ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/5/2; D/D/Cf 1912/59; DD/WBF 20/544/5; *ibid.* A/CMY 493.

⁷¹ SHC, DD/NA 18; D/P/wyco 4/1/3; DD/C 360.

⁷² SHC, D/P/wyco 2/9/2.

⁷³ SHC, D/P/wyco 2/5/3; A/CJE 1.

William D. Caröe and Herbert Passmore.⁷⁴ In 1938 the screen was restored by Herbert Read of Exeter,⁷⁵ a new lectern was installed in 1952,⁷⁶ and the wooden reredos was removed in 1961.⁷⁷ A wrought iron statue of St Nicholas by the late Rachel Reckett was installed near the pulpit in 1988 and a sundial over the entrance in 2000.⁷⁸

Church of St Nicholas

The plan of Withycombe church is unusual in having a tower over the south west porch and the external west gallery stairs have survived. Most of the church and tower date from the 13th century although most windows are later medieval. The church is roughcast with a modern slate roof and comprises a three-bay nave and chancel with north-east vestry.

There are two medieval effigies, which appear to have been moved. That of a lady of c.1300, said to be Lucy Malet the younger, has been inserted under a north window flanked by unusual crenellated stone sconces, possibly for lamps or candles and not connected with the effigy. A coffin under the effigy was opened in 1913 but was empty. The second effigy, said to be of Lucy's second husband Thomas of Timworth (d. c.1290), is at floor level in the north wall of the nave.⁷⁹ A stump survives of the churchyard cross.

NONCONFORMITY

⁷⁴ SHC, D/D/Cf 1935/96; DD/WBF 20/544/5.

⁷⁵ ICBS 11125, f. 72.

⁷⁶ SHC, D/D/Cf 1952/1/3.

⁷⁷ SHC, D/D/Cf 1961/6/13.

⁷⁸ SHC, D/D/Cf 1988/12/10; inf. in ch..

⁷⁹ SHC, D/D/Cf 1961/6/13.

Richard Nation's house was licensed for worship in 1820, possibly for Wesleyan Methodists but weekly preaching was suspended in 1834.⁸⁰ However, Bible Christians were said to have had services in the 1830s and Ebenezer chapel was built over the stream in the centre of the village in 1845 for 90. In 1851 50 people attended evening service.⁸¹ The chapel was cared for by Betsy Dent, a poor widow and one of the ministers, Thomas Grills Vanstone became a missionary in China. The congregation shrank, the minister lodged with a farmer in 1871, and the chapel closed for a while in the 1870s.⁸² After Methodist union the chapel formed part of the Kingsbrompton Circuit and services were held regularly on Sundays with a fortnightly midweek service in 1961.⁸³ In 1972 there were concerns over the costs of repair and there was only one regular worshipper. The chapel closed in 1973 and has been converted into a house.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ SHC, D/D/Rm 5; D/N/wsc 3/2/2.

⁸¹ L. H. Court, *The Romance of a Country Circuit* (1921), 84; TNA, HO 129/313/2/3/8.

⁸² TNA, RG 10/2350; Court, *Romance of a Country Circuit*, 83—90; A. G. Pointon, *Methodists in West Somerset: the story of the West Somerset Circuit 1790—1980*, (1982), 57.

⁸³ SHC, D/N/mca 4/3/1; D/N/wsc 3/4/1.

⁸⁴ SHC, D/N/wsc 4/2/24.