

## *West Thorney Part II: The Church and Memorials*

St Nicholas Church dates originally from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, though only the font and two small windows in the chancel survive from that period, and principally from the 13th century, when the massive, low tower and the side aisles were constructed and the chancel lengthened. Nave and chancel are continuous, though formerly divided by a wooden screen of which finely carved remnants from the 14th century are remounted at the back of the nave. The building now appears disproportionately long and narrow since the side aisles have been removed, probably the north aisle first and the south in 1608 when the church received a major reconstruction: the parish register records that "This yeare was the church & chaunsell reedified & beautified". Traces of the former arcade can be seen in the north wall of the nave. The church was thoroughly restored again in 1885, with a sensitivity unusual at that period, retaining much of its clear and simple Early English character with its large lancet windows.

The walls are of random rubble, composed largely of flints but also including many other types of stone - a local geologist, David Bone, has calculated that no less than 15 different stones can be seen at Thorney. The dressings are of Caen limestone, an excellent and popular building stone imported from Normandy which is well represented in the coastal plain and even a good deal further inland.

There may have been a wooden chapel here before the Norman Conquest, dependent on the priests of Bosham Minster. The stone church was probably built by William Warelwast, bishop of Exeter 1107 - 1137, and successor to that Osbern to whom Edward the Confessor gave a portion of Bosham Minster's rich estates, including Thorney, and who was then made bishop by the Conqueror. Warelwast is known as a builder and founder in his own diocese, responsible for rebuilding Exeter Cathedral in the Norman style, and he also turned his attention to his outlying Sussex possessions, where he refounded the old minster of Bosham as a college of priests with himself as dean. The bishops of Exeter remained the ultimate overlords of Thorney until the Reformation, and their patronage doubtless accounts for the comparative grandeur of the church in this isolated parish. In 1273 Bishop Bronescombe of Exeter visited the Island in person. Not surprisingly there was friction with the bishop of Chichester, who in 1327 managed to obtain from the Crown recognition of his rights of visitation. (He was only partially successful at Bosham, where he gained control of the nave but the College priests hung on to the chancel.)

The benefice was a rectory, independent of the mother church of Bosham, doubtless from its institution in the 12th century, though names of rectors are known only from 1308. In 1291 the rectory was assessed at £20 and decreased in value in the later Middle Ages. There is evidence from the 14th century of a parsonage, garden and grazing rights as well as 64 acres of glebe, which would be farmed by agents or tenants of the rector. In periods of absentee or pluralist incumbents the parsonage would be occupied by a curate who carried out all the day to day work; perhaps he was allowed some of the *small tithes*, which included geese, pigs, calves, sheep, hemp, flax, pigeons, milk, eggs, cheese and fish, according to the Nonae Roll of 1341. The 19th century rector C P Lyne, whose family vault lies beneath the nave, at least lived in Emsworth for the 36 years of his incumbency, and does not seem to have neglected his duties on the Island though he kept a curate. By 1870 a substantial new parsonage had been built in the traditional plot south to south-west of the churchyard, and henceforth incumbents resided on the Island.

The history of the advowson, the right to present a rector to the living, is complex, following the subdivisions of the manor; both might be inherited but were also commonly bought and sold as investments by people who had little or no personal connection with Thorney. As little as one sixth could be acquired, and three, later two, families presented to the living in rotation; this was a valuable possession, allowing the family to provide a living for a younger son going

into the Church. In the 19th century the advowson was all in the hands of the Revd C P Lyne, and from him passed to the squire Frederick Padwick and remained with the manor.

During and after World War II the rector continued to live in the parsonage and shared his ministry with RAF chaplains. In 1980 the parish of Thorney was combined with that of St John the Evangelist, Southbourne, and administration is now shared between Southbourne and the Army chaplain.

### The Memorials

These follow the pattern of Thorney's history.

The small number of older monuments inside the church reflects the lack of resident landlords and clergy on the Island over long periods. The oldest are the ruined mediaeval tombs that now stand outside the south wall, but were originally inside the church and were left outside when the south aisle was demolished; they are of the 13th century, and probably represent the family of Richard and William de Thorney who then held the manor, but may also include clergy. Thereafter there is a long gap until the late 18th century. Families of just two clerics are represented. One is a curate, Mr Anthony Fosbrook, who served the church for over twenty years before his death in 1793; he spent much of his time on the Island and even owned property there. The second is the Revd Charles Phillip Lyne, rector from 1833 until his death in 1869, who resided nearby in Emsworth. The one other family represented, between 1796 and 1845, is the Harfields who had made their way from farmers to gentry and had obtained a portion of a manor which entitled them to burial inside the church. Robert Harfield was tragically drowned in the wadeway in 1796, and his wife put up this apt and warning epitaph for him:

*Time swept by his fast flowing tide  
My faithful partner from my side,  
And you of yours deprived may be  
As unexpectedly as me.*

The few 20th century monuments commemorate the five men of Thorney who lost their lives in the first World War, and more strikingly the dramatic change when the Island was taken over by the RAF in 1930: a young airman who died in 1938; a list of units of the Air Force and the Royal Artillery that have been stationed here; an engraved window given by the Air Sea Rescue Unit; and the pulpit sculpted by John Skelton donated by the Air Navigation School.

The churchyard is noteworthy in three respects.

First, the yard has been in continuous use from at least the 12th century until the present day; most ancient and well-used churchyards became overcrowded and had to be closed in the 19th century, and the situation at Thorney reflects the low population of the Island.

Secondly, there is an unusual number of handsome carved headstones of the 18th century; ordinary parishioners were only beginning to afford a stone memorial at that period, and only a fraction of the most prosperous even then. These were the tenant farmers and yeomen who profited from the excellent agricultural soil of Thorney, and the export trade with London that was beginning to be organised from Emsworth and Prinsted; Craswellers and Harfields emerge as the two principal families. Their headstones are near the church on the south and east sides - the most popular positions, and their decoration follows a general pattern observable in English churchyards: stark emblems of mortality in the early 18th century - skull, bones, coffin, followed by gentler references to death - the heart pierced by a dart, the hourglass (time is running out), sometimes *winged* (time flies), and the classical down-turned torch; the emphasis changing by the end of the century to more hopeful emblems of salvation - angel, crown, trumpet, sunburst and clouds of heaven, palm. In the 19th century, memorials become plainer - clerics, both evangelical and high church, were beginning to dislike the old symbols, some of which they said might as well be pagan, and by the mid 19th century the sign of the cross (in abeyance since the Reformation, regarded as superstitious and associated with Rome), and the Jesus monogram IHS began to reappear. The outstanding and only grand tomb at Thorney is the family monument of the Padwick family,

the first local squires Thorney had known: a chest tomb surrounded by iron railings, with inscriptions from 1829 to 1909. It was Frederick Padwick who joined the Island to the mainland in 1870.

Lastly, there are the Service graves which are a major interest of Thorney. They are in a northern extension of the churchyard which was opened for those who lost their lives in the Battle of Britain, and unusually holds not only British and Commonwealth but German airmen.

The section of World War II graves represents the following:

- 29 men of the Royal Air Force (concentrated mainly in 1940 - 1942)
- 21 men of the Royal Canadian Air Force (mainly from 1942 - 1943)
- 2 New Zealanders
- 2 Australians
- 2 British soldiers
- 21 German airmen (mainly 1940 - 1941)

The British and Commonwealth headstones are standard War Graves Commission design, with engraved Latin cross and Air Force or regimental badge, and inscription giving name, rank, age and date of death. These bare details, impressive in themselves, may be supplemented by epitaphs chosen by the families which are more personally moving. The German headstones are of slightly different shape and bear a small engraved cross modelled on the German Iron Cross decoration, with the name and date of birth and death. There is also a shared cenotaph with similar inscriptions in English and German.

The other section contains Service graves from 1952 and commemorates 38 members of the Royal Air Force and 4 of the Army. They include one woman, an RAF officer buried next to her husband who was in the Royal Artillery; they died together when their light aircraft crashed in 1995. These memorials are of the same general design as those of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, with slightly different head and similar inscriptions and badges.

All the Commission headstones are in Portland stone, a popular English stone with a long tradition and much used in the old churchyard.

This orderly, peaceful area with its fine view across the sea to Bosham is a moving memorial to the last phase of Thorney's history, and its place in our national annals.

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Selected Sources:

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