

# **A Short History of St. Andrew's Church Chew Stoke**



by

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*Incorporating previous work by  
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**St. Andrew's Church, Chew Stoke  
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## Foreword

*This brief history has been put together by Derek Hollomon, Chair of the Bilbie Society, building on two previous versions, most recently one produced by Eddy Cooke with the support of the Rev. Prebendary John Ruffle and previously by the Revd. Ben Howarth.*

St. Andrew's Church was built towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when most Chew Stoke residents were involved in farming and would have attended the Roman Catholic Latin Mass. Each subsequent generation has left its mark on the fabric, through alterations, improvements and repairs, reflecting changes in the character of the village community as well as the priorities of those who have used, enjoyed and worshipped in the Church.

This pamphlet therefore places the history of the Church within the context of the changing character of the village and its inhabitants over the generations. We hope you will enjoy your visit to our Church and appreciate the beauty and peace it offers.



## A Brief History of Chew Stoke

We believe that the first organised settlement in Chew Stoke was established in Roman times although evidence has been found of extensive human occupation of the area spanning thousands of years from the Upper Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods. Archaeological excavations on *Pagans Hill* at the north end of present day Chew Stoke revealed an octagonal Romano-Celtic temple, erected in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD on an iron-age site and other buildings have been identified, including dwellings, which support this thesis. The temple was gradually abandoned after the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and during the Saxon period the settlement moved to an area where two streams came together, and which is still at the village centre. The Domesday book (1086) provides a picture of “Chiwestoche”, adjusting to the Norman occupation, as a wooded area with arable and grazing land. The word “stoche” suggests the presence of a stockade, probably to protect cattle from thieves and wolves. Some land was held by a Norman knight, Simon de Burcy, but a large part of “Chiwestoche”, including a mill, remained in the ownership of a Saxon noble man, Baldwig, no doubt in recognition of services to King William. Much later Chew Stoke came to the St. Loe family whose coat of arms can be seen on the ornate south front of the old Rectory, now Church House.

In mediaeval England a pilgrimage was a way to purge your sins. One route from Bristol to Wells and Glastonbury brought pilgrims though Chew Stoke, which today is reflected in *Pilgrims Way*. Traders also used the route, and shops and places to stay appeared to provide for travellers, especially along *The Street*. Plagues were very much feared and travellers could transmit infection from towns to rural areas. Chew Stoke would not have escaped the notorious “Black Death” (1351), which probably claimed the lives of at least a third of the population. Coupled with many poor harvests in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the population of Chew

Stoke would have fallen, although those surviving would have benefited from a labour shortage through higher wages.

Prosperity increased during the 15<sup>th</sup> century allowing the community to provide resources for building a stone church tower. The English Reformation and the break with Rome (1536) brought change to the lives of villagers who still had to attend church. Although many could not read the English bible or Book of Common prayer, at least services were conducted in a language they could understand. More seriously, villagers could no longer rely on nuns from the nearby small Benedictine nunnery (near the present Lakeside Woodford Lodge) for help with education, for support in illness and alms to alleviate poverty. The poor continued to suffer despite the introduction of poor relief in 1601, which was sporadic in rural parishes largely because of a lack of suitable accommodation. It was not until 1722 that all parishes were expected to adopt the workhouse system, and, although it is not clear how quickly the Overseers of the Poor responded, in

1777 the Chew Stoke workhouse, on the site of the present Church Hall in *Church Lane*, had 12 inmates. This closed around 1834 after which inmates were relocated to a new, large workhouse in nearby Clutton. The map shows the area around Chew Stoke as it was in 1750.



William St. Loe, who lived at near-by Sutton Court, was an influential member at Queen Elizabeth's court but died under somewhat suspicious circumstances in 1565. The St. Loe estates passed to his third wife, the celebrated Bess of Hardwick

whom he had married six years earlier. Already the owner of Chatsworth House, she displayed her wealth as the richest woman in England after the Queen, by building Hardwick Hall. When Bess died in 1608 the St. Loe estates passed to a son from her second marriage, Sir Charles Cavendish, and then to his son, William. This William was a royalist and a great soldier. During the Civil War he commanded troops in Northern England and was appointed first Duke of Newcastle by Charles I as a reward for his support. Chew Stoke did not escape involvement in the English Civil war in the 1640s. Fighting in and around Bristol was intense on account of Bristol's strategic importance as England's second city, and as a port for the import of gunpowder, which was in short supply.

Chew Stoke supported the Royalists, influenced no doubt by the owner of Chew Stoke estates, the Duke of Newcastle, who supported and fought for King Charles. There is also evidence that some villagers remained Catholic sympathisers. Nearby Chew Magna supported the Parliament so that the war caused separations within families and between friends as well as tensions between the villages.

The Duke of Newcastle maintained his connection with Chew Stoke, and the local school records suggest that he created two holidays each year, one to mark the execution of Charles I, and another to celebrate the Restoration. School records show that these holidays were still observed long after the Duke's death.

17<sup>th</sup> century rural children had few opportunities to obtain an education and it was not until 1718, after sufficient money was raised by the then Rector, Mr Paine Snr., from subscribers who are listed on boards (shown in the photograph) in the church, that Chew Stoke Charity School opened in a converted house on what became *School Lane*. Initially there were 20 boys taught by one master, but numbers gradually increased and the school was rebuilt on the same site in 1856-7. However most children were expected to work to provide some income, and so the Sunday





change ringing, also for bells. Edward probably learned clock making from Edward Webb, who was making clocks at the Old Clock House (now *Rectory Farm, Pilgrims Way*) and who also had a small iron smelting furnace. Edward worked as a boy in a village smithy, and it seems taught himself bell founding. With money from his father, a weaver, and the Webb family, who subsequently became linked with the Bilbies through marriage, Edward cast his first bell in 1698; it is still rung in this church. Three generations of Bilbies continued the business during which they cast at least 550 bells and made countless clocks. By the end of the century the business was in decline due to their failure to adapt to changing production methods. The business closed in 1815 leaving the Bilbie family almost destitute.

The Bilbies had a big impact on village life throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century by providing employment. To move heavy bells by cart Edward improved the track that is now *Bristol Road*, and constructed the bridge over the stream, which soon became a turnpike road. Travellers no longer used *Pilgrims Way* causing some businesses to suffer. The Bilbies lived and had their foundry, clock house and workshops in the triangle bounded by *Pilgrims Way, Bristol Road and Blind Lane*. Many of these buildings have since been converted to houses. It is not known where the bells were cast, but probably on the southern side of *Bristol Road*, where James Bush, the Bilbies' bellhanger and casemaker had workshops. Some of these workshops were incorporated into a house (now *Orchard House*) around 1780. In the longer run, the Bilbies' legacy is that Chew Stoke is well known today, at least in clock making and bell ringing circles.

After the end of clock making and bell founding, farming remained the main source of employment for more than half of families. The 1851 census records 28 farms in the parish and a population of 819. Following repeal of the Corn Laws (1845), poor harvests and cattle plagues, agriculture experienced a serious depression. By 1871 the population had fallen to 696, some houses were



empty, and the number of scholars halved as children as young as six were required to work. Families moved away in search of work, and only 36 surnames recorded in the 1851 census remained in 1871.



The Church before 1863.

The two World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had an impact on village life and the dead of the two wars are commemorated on the two war memorials in this church. In World War II, 42 children and three teachers, who had been evacuated from Avenmore school in London, were accommodated in the village while some women came to work with the Land Army. The wars also started to change social relationships and hierarchies. For example, when meetings were held after the first World War in the Church Hall of which the Rector Mr. St. Clair Waldy disapproved, he switched off the electricity from a generator at the Rectory. Ex-servicemen however reacted by erecting the Recreation Centre, quickly named “The Hut”, at what is now the entrance to *Orchard House*. It served as the village hall until demolished in 1960 to make way for road improvements.

In 1957 a royal visit marked the opening of Chew Valley reservoir which enhanced the attraction of the area and extended available leisure activities. Chew Stoke expanded slightly with the influx of residents from the Chew Valley Lake area.

Milk produced in the Chew Valley area supported two dairies in Chew Stoke, bottling milk for delivery over a wide area. Both closed in the 1970s. Small business units replaced Fairseat Dairy offering a range of services to villagers. The larger Mendip Dairy site (*Chew Lane*) was redeveloped as a factory manufacturing cool display cabinets, which employed around 200. The factory

closed in the 1990s, and was replaced by a health centre and around 35 new houses, along appropriately named *Dairy Way*.

Road improvements in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed families of professional and managerial workers, especially from Bristol, to move to Chew Stoke, beginning a trend that has shaped the village today, and reduced the significance of agriculture in the parish; in 2017 it included just five farms.

This brings the Chew Stoke story up to date, a vibrant and varied community with a wide range of expertise, ready to adapt to future challenges.

## The Church

St Andrew's Church is a small church in the perpendicular style dominated by its three-stage tower. It is a Grade II\* listed building. It was built during the end of the fifteenth century when the Chew Stoke estate belonged to the influential St. Loe family, whose coat of arms is built into one of the south facing windows.

This building probably replaced an earlier structure as records show that there was a Rector, Matinus Harvey in 1420, and two richly carved Saxon stones are built into the wall around the door frame of the Gardener's shed.



The church has diagonal buttresses, panelled parapets with statue niches in the centre of each side, a panelled stair turret with quatrefoil frieze and a big spirelet. The features of the church that are likely to remain in visitors' minds include the tower, the "swarms" of wooden and stone angels, the unusual lectern of an

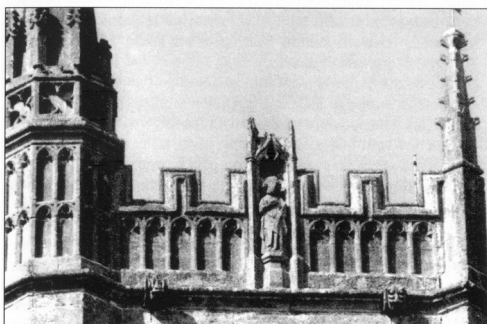
eagle clasping a crystal and the bright and cheerful white painted interior.

## The Tower

The tower is the only part of the original Gothic perpendicular church that remains unaltered although it was restored in 1900. It has a striking tall spirelet on the staircase turret, and together with the panelled parapets and the tracery around the bell openings, is seen as one of the loveliest in Somerset. The figure of St Andrew, to whom the church is dedicated, can be seen in the east facing parapet.



The ground floor of the tower, now used as the bell ringing chamber, opens onto the nave through an arch with two broad wave mouldings. On the walls are two boards listing monies subscribers gave towards the erection of the charity school in 1718. Heading the list is the Rector, Robert Paine who gave £150 (about £13,000 in today's money). The tower has two upper chambers. The upper chamber is the belfry which contains evidence of the fire that gutted the church around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The combination of candle flames for lighting and debris from birds' nests



The Tower Parapet - East Facing.

*The figure represents St. Andrew.*

would certainly create a high fire risk. The lower one is largely unchanged, and was the ringing chamber until 1908. It contains pencilled records of the death of Queen Victoria, some parishioners, and signatures on the door frame of some of the ringers.

The tower staircase shows much sign of wear and tear and is not open to the public. At the base of the tower is a small door from which, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, after bell ringing, the high-spirited ringers could leave the Church after quenching their thirst with cyder, without disturbing the congregation. This avoided conflict with the extreme protestant clergy of the time. At a later period, the door was closed off by the Rector to prevent the ringers sneaking out after ringing to go to the pub rather than attending the service.

## The Church Interior

A Royal Coat of Arms can be seen above the south facing door in the church which marks Chew Stoke's longstanding Royalist connection.

Probably because of the fire that gutted the church in the mid-nineteenth century after a period of Georgian neglect, the Victorian restoration by John Norton and enlargement in 1862-3 wrought havoc with the original interior. He cut



through the wall and added a north aisle and chapel, and rebuilt the walls and nave arcades.

Only the south aisle, and the Lady Chapel dedicated to St. Wilgefortis, a Portuguese Christian princess who it is said disfigured herself to avoid marrying an unbeliever, were unaffected. There are said to be 156 angels including many wooden angels on the restored roof and stone angels on corbels and walls. There is a story that one wooden angel missing from above a window in the south aisle was removed on the order of the Rector, because it had the face of the devil. Another version of the story suggests that the face was carved in the likeness of the contractor, who delayed paying wages: to the workmen the contractor must have seemed like the devil.

The chancel floor was raised during the renovation, so the altar had to be raised, hiding part of the stained glass window behind.

The pulpit, pews, reredos and font all date from the restoration. The lectern is unusual, not only because the wooden eagle is perched on a lump of quartz crystal, but because no church lectern has an eagle with folded wings. The chunk of wood to which the brass stand holding the bible is attached appears to be made from a piece of domestic furniture, possibly donated by John Ellershaw, who was Patron of the Living, and whose son, also John, became Rector in 1869. No-one knows the



origin of the crystal held in the eagle's claws. The eagle and crystal stand on an orange marble column. John Ellershaw Snr.



also donated the inscribed carved chest just inside the door from the porch.

The original vestry was in the lower portion of the tower but was moved to its present location behind the organ after the restoration and the installation of the new organ in 1883. The altar rails as well as the screen separating the chancel from the vestry were carved by a local craftsman, Edward Gillard. Edward ran a village shop until it was gutted by fire in the 1920s. He left Chew Stoke after the fire and never returned to live, although records show that he was the organist in the 1930s.

In the north aisle is a striking mechanism from a clock once housed in the belfry, and which chimed out the hours. Its maker is unknown. Alongside is a bell cast by Edward Bilbie that could not be retuned when the other bells were tuned in 1996; this acts as a memorial to the Bilbie family of bellfounders. A plaque on the wall nearby lists these bellfounders.



In 2012, in the north aisle, a toilet and small kitchen were built, reflecting the needs of the congregation, and facilitating the use of the Church for concerts and other events.

## Three Oak Chests

The Church furniture includes three chests. The oldest “poor man’s chest” is in the north aisle, and is probably Elizabethan, although the decree requiring churches to have secure chests to



ensure safe custody of alms for the poor dates from Henry VIII. The chests had three keys so no one honest person recommended by the parish could access the contents by themselves; but the keys were lost long ago and nothing of value is kept in it now.

The carved chest just inside the south door reflects the long connection of the Ellershaw family with Chew Stoke. Although John Ellershaw was Patron of the Living, he had other interests and was a key figure in creating the Yorkshire Post newspaper in 1886. His son was Rector from 1869 to 1894, and his son, Edward, commissioned the chest around 1930, probably as a memorial to his own son who was drowned with the Titanic in April 1912. The chest was made by Mercer Weaver, a local craftsman and member of the Church choir, and bears the Ellershaw coat of arms granted in 1884. The village memorial to those killed in the first World War hangs above this chest.

The third chest, located in the Lady Chapel, is a memorial to John Perry, aged 16, who was tragically killed when struck by a falling tree in a storm in January 1962. John was well respected and a Senior Chorister and server in the Church; his family still live in the parish and contribute to the life of the church.

## **The Organ**

The original organ was installed in 1844: there is a plaque commemorating this on the north wall outside the vestry. It must have been an interesting instrument as the organ was combined with a barrel organ, which provided church music if an organist was unavailable. Joseph Leech, author of *Rural rides of a Bristol Churchgoer* writing in 1845, says of the organ, "There is a rude organ loft and a little instrument you may grind or finger. It was located in a loft in the tower and did not survive the fire in the mid-nineteenth century".

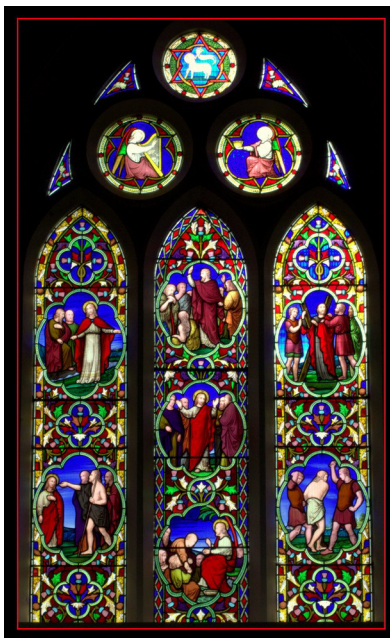
In 1883 a new Vowles two-manual organ replacing the original instrument was installed to the north of the altar and apart from the conversion of the manual bellows into a system driven by an electric motor, the present organ remained unaltered until 2017. It was then completely overhauled and its musical range enlarged.

## Stained Glass Windows

The stained glass windows at either end of the church are both Victorian. The West window in the tower depicts various stages in Christ's life, and was donated by a London goldsmith named Matheson to commemorate the restoration of the church in 1863.

The scenes in the East window depict six events in the life of the disciple Andrew, to whom the church is dedicated. These include:

- The calling of Andrew and Simon to follow Christ. *St. Mark Chapter 1 Verses 16-18*
- The feeding of the five thousand. *St. John Chapter 6 Verses 5-13*
- Andrew and Philip being told of the impending crucifixion. The words "Now is my soul troubled" is clearly reflected in Christ's face. The fourth person comforting Christ may be Lazarus, whom Christ had recently resurrected from the dead. *St. John Chapter 20 Verses 19-20*



- Andrew spreading the gospel and inviting people to join the Christians.
- The martyrdom of Andrew traditionally in Patras 70 AD.

The St. George window on the south side of the church was donated in memory of those who lost their lives in World War II. Their names are listed on a plaque below the window.

## The Bells

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century the English attached the bell to a wheel allowing it to swing a full circle, rather than through a small arc needed just to toll the bell. With a rope around this wheel, ringers can hold the bell upright at its balance point sufficiently to allow it to change position in a sequence with a neighbouring bell. This created the art of change ringing, which quickly became very popular, and which creates a form of music unlike any more conventional melody.

Church bells are part of our cultural heritage, and in Chew Stoke we have a peal of six in F sharp. They are currently rung from the ground floor some 18m below the belfry, and compared with bells in other churches they are light in weight, with the heaviest around 550 kg.

<b>Bell Number</b>	<b>Cast by</b>	<b>Approx. Weight kg</b>
Treble	John Taylor	225
2	Thomas Bilbie	225
3	Thomas Bilbie	235
4	T. Mears	295
5	Edward Bilbie	380
Tenor	Llewelyn and James	550

The original bells may have been cast by the Bilbies, but because of wear and tear, only three of the original bells are still being rung. The number five bell cast in 1698, is the oldest Bilbie bell still being rung today. The bells were retuned and rehung on a steel frame in 1908, and retuned again in 1996, when a new bell was cast by John Taylor of Loughborough to replace the one displayed in the north aisle. There is also a mechanism invented by a Gloucestershire parson, which allows the bells to be chimed by one person. A plaque on the wall outside the ringing chamber records its donation in 1908 by the widow of the Rector of Claverton.

## **Lighting and Heating**

Before 1900 the Church was lit by candles, and some pews still have holes that supported the candelabra. The experience can be re-lived by present day congregations attending the annual candle-lit carol service. Candles were replaced by electric light supplied by direct current from a generator in the Old Rectory (*now Church House*), and driven by a noisy paraffin-fuelled engine, supported by acid accumulators. The supply was erratic, and this form of lighting gave way to more reliable oil lamps. It was not until the 1950s that mains electricity reached the Church and the present lighting system was installed.

Prior to the installation of mains electricity, heating was provided from a furnace in a cellar beneath the vestry, and warm air distributed through underfloor ducts to all parts of the church. The furnace burnt coke from the Chew Magna gas works and, as was common in many churches, the person who worked the organ bellows also stoked the furnace. The system was probably not very effective as it was augmented in extreme weather by paraffin heaters. Today the church is heated by various electric heaters, including tubular elements beneath the pews.

## The Church Outside

There is a cast iron gate incorporating a lamp at the south east entry to the churchyard; the commemorative plate states, "This lamp was erected by public subscription in commemoration of the Jubilee of Queen Victoria 1897"; the lamp was given its Grade II Listed status in September 1960.

In the porch is a stone effigy of a woman holding an anchor. It was transferred in 1951 from the nearby Walley Court which was demolished to make way for Chew Valley lake. Tradition suggests that it was given by Queen Elizabeth to the then owner of Walley Court, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, a navigator and founder of an early colony in America. It may have come from the nearby nunnery on its dissolution when ownership passed to the crown.



Another feature in the churchyard is the Moreton cross, listed grade II, which stood at a crossroads in the hamlet of Moreton, now under Chew Valley lake. Only the base of the cross was present when the demolition of the hamlet began, but its shaft was recovered from a wall in a nearby cottage and, after repair, the cross was set up and rededicated on its present site. The Webb monument in churchyard, south west of the church, dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century is also listed grade II. The old font was removed from the Church

during the Victorian restoration. The Church inventory shows it to be 14<sup>th</sup> century but It may be Saxon, and so certainly older than the church itself.

The yew trees are at least 700 years old which adds to the evidence that a Church existed on the site before the tower was built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In early mediaeval England yew was used to make bows, but being poisonous, yew trees were planted in churchyards to prevent them from being grazed by farm animals.

The oldest feature in the churchyard is a pair of Saxon decorated stones built into the surround of the doorway to the gardeners' shed in the north wall of the churchyard. One shows intertwined ribbon animals, the other a plant ornament (see picture on page 9). They suggest that there was probably a building on this site long before the present one.

## History of the Rectory

Lady Pope House (now *Church Farm, Church Lane*) was the residence of the Rector until construction of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Old Rectory (now *Church House, Pilgrims Way*) but retained its name long after the Reformation.



The Old Rectory, at the end of Church Lane, opposite the church hall, is believed to have been built in 1529 by Sir John Barry, rector 1524–46. It has since undergone some substantial





renovations, including the addition of a clock tower (now demolished) for the Rev. W. P. Wait and further alterations c.1876 for Rev. J. Ellershaw. The building has an ornate south front with carvings of shields bearing the coat of arms of the St. Loe family, who were once chief landowners in the area.

The large New Rectory (*Pilgrims Way*) was built in 1870; one story is that the Old Rectory could not accommodate a visiting Bishop and his staff but local rumour also suggests that it was too small to accommodate all



the Rector's children or that his wife did not feel that the it was large enough. The New Rectory was occupied by Rectors until 1945, when it was sold to a Wills family member who gave it to Winford Hospital to be used as a children's convalescent home as memorial to his late wife. Subsequently it was used as a nurses' home, but now is in private use, and has been divided into a number of apartments.

After 1945, the Rectors reoccupied the Old Rectory until 2009 when it was sold and the Diocese bought a modern, warm and comfortable bungalow to provide a 'House for Duty' for the priest appointed to the united benefice of Chew Stoke and Nempnett Thrubwell.

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Photographs for the previous version of the pamphlet were provided by Peter Lloyd-Jones and Philip Walker and have been used again here. Stephen Hoddell has provided additional photographs for this version.



