THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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ST ANDREW'S CHURCH

Winterborne Tomson, Dorset

Front cover: Interior looking east
Left: Interior looking east in 1942 (drawing by HFO Wilkins)

Winterborne Tomson, Dorset

ST ANDREW'S CHURCH

by Christopher Dalton (Church and architectural historian, writer on buildings and bells, architectural photographer and lay canon of Hereford Cathedral)

HISTORY

Winterborne Tomson is a tiny hamlet on the northern of Dorset's two Winterborne rivers. The name, from the Old English, implies a stream which is dry except in the winter; but in practice both these Dorset chalk streams normally run all the year round. The suffix Tomson, first known to occur in the 13th century, refers to a one-time owner called Thomas. Hutchins's *History of Dorset* (3rd edition, Vol.1, p.195) records that by 1316 the Manor of Winterborne 'Thomaston' was held by the Chaumpayn or Champaigne family. By the end of the reign of King Edward III (1377) it had passed to the Hussey family; and it was de la Lynde Hussey who, some three centuries later, sold the estate to William Wake whose son became Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1750 Winterborne Tomson was bought by the Spencers and in 1773 by the Bankes family; the Hooper family has been here since 1922.

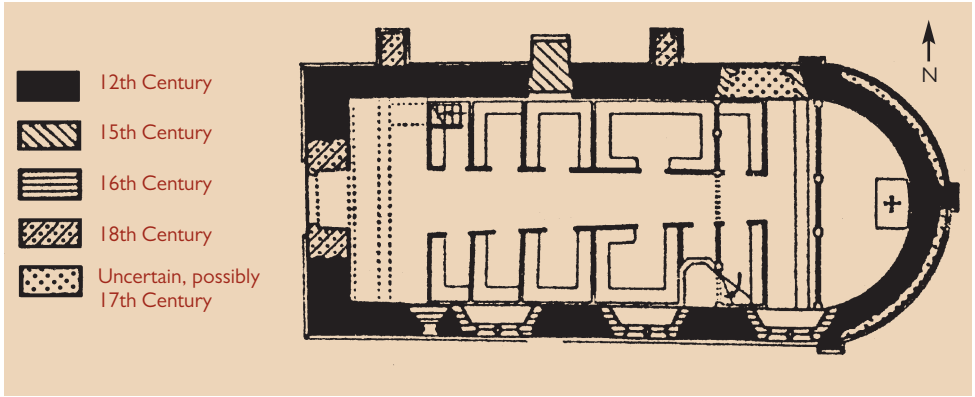
Tomson House, not many yards east of the church, is an interesting early-17th-century stone house dating from the Husseys' time, with ornamental plaster ceilings.
A short distance away in the other direction is Anderson Manor, a fine house of similar date but built of brick. It can be seen behind trees as one looks westwards from the church door.

Below: Exterior from the south (Neil Skelton)

THE CHURCH

St Andrew's church is of special interest for at least three reasons. The first is that like North Marden in Sussex, Nately Scures in Hampshire and Little Tey in Essex, it is a single-cell Norman church with an apsidal east end (the only Norman apse in Dorset), unaltered in plan since it was built in the early 12th century and implying that Winterborne Tomson had a small population throughout the Middle Ages. The second is that it contains a compact but rich collection of old woodwork, all of oak bleached over the years to a beautiful pale colour, and unaltered since the early 18th century, when most of it was made – at the expense of the then Archbishop of Canterbury. Thirdly, the church was rescued from semi-dereliction in the 1920s and repaired with great care by an outstandingly sensitive architect, A R Powys, who lies buried in the churchyard.

The walls of the church are built of a mixture of flint, some of it knapped, lime mortar and many different kinds of stone. The geology of Dorset has given the county a rich variety of building stones, varying from the dark brown Heath-stone found in the area near Wimborne Minster and the green sandstone found in North Dorset, to the golden-coloured limestone found in the west of the county, the paler stone from round Marnhull and Todber, and the silverish grey limestone from the Isle of Purbeck. Nearly all these kinds of stone, and others besides, can be seen at Winterborne Tomson, partly built in bands alternating with knapped flints (especially on the south side), partly random, and with squared stone quoins. The roof is covered in mellow handmade red tiles with – typically of this district – a few courses of stone slates at the bottom, all carefully worked round the curve of the apse. A few of the ridge tiles are thought to be late-mediaeval survivals. The walls have a marked lean, especially noticeable inside, due partly to the thrust of the roof, which formerly had no tie-beams, and partly to the fact that they were built with a batter – in other words they taper towards the top.



Although still largely Norman, especially on the north side, the walls show signs of repairs, patchings and partial rebuildings over the centuries. The only remaining 12th-century features are three characteristic shallow buttresses round the apse, a square-headed doorway, built of huge pieces of Heathstone but later blocked and filled with a buttress, on the north side, and possibly the elliptical-headed window (now blind) placed curiously low in the south wall. Above the blocked doorway is a crudely carved corbel head of uncertain date but clearly ancient.

Interior looking west (Christopher Dalton)

Interior looking east (Christopher Dalton)

INTERIOR

In a late-15th- or early-16th-century building campaign the church received its present roof. This is of the wagon type, which is more common in Devon and Cornwall than in Dorset, and has oak ribs with plastered panels in between and little shields on the wall plates. In an arrangement that is almost certainly unique in a mediaeval English church the roof is neatly curved round the apse, with the ribs set radially and provided with finely carved bosses where they intersect. The walls were apparently raised by about two feet (0.6m) at this time, which partly explains why the ancient window mentioned above now looks so low in the wall. At the same period the present font (since reduced in size) was installed, a window (since blocked) of Purbeck stone was provided in the north wall, and an oak screen with a moulded and panelled rood-loft was made. The screen has gone but the loft, with traces of the original colouring, has survived by being moved later to the west end to serve as a gallery; and the general form of the screen can be discerned from mortices in the underside of the moulded beam now against the west wall.

The three large square-headed windows of vaguely Tudor appearance on the south side, made mostly of Todber stone and which flood the interior with light, are indeed now the only windows in the church. They were attributed by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (Dorset Vol. III, p.5) to the 16th century but, judging from their detail, they are surely 17th century at the earliest. In their present form they quite possibly date, like the square west doorway and the added buttresses on the north side, from the next (and most recent) building campaign when the church was entirely, and very charmingly, refitted at the expense of William Wake, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1716 to 1737. From his time date the box pews, the pulpit, the simple screen, the communion rails and matching table, the cover for the font and the studded west door. All this woodwork is of excellent local craftsmanship in oak, with fielded panels and shaped iron hinges in the pews and pulpit, and twisted balusters in the communion rails and table. It is lent an extra quality by lime, sunlight and wear over the succeeding two and three-quarter centuries.

The box pews become bigger towards the front, indicating the relative importance of the families which would have occupied them. The pulpit has a sounding board – more of an ornament than a necessity in this compact and intimate church little more than 40 feet (12.2m) long and 15 feet (4.6m) wide – and the simple screen has a curved piece cut out of it at one end to save the preacher from having to duck when climbing into the pulpit. Immediately below the pulpit is the clerk's pew. The pews east of the screen were provided no doubt for the parson, and for the communicants to move into at the 'Prayer of Humble Access' in the Holy Communion service of the Book of Common Prayer. The gallery, which as already mentioned was formed from the old rood-loft, was probably provided at the same time, either for those who were unable to rent a box pew or for musicians who accompanied parts of the service, or for both.

Clear glazing in the windows in the 18th century manner had to be provided anew in 1931 because the old glazing had gone, but the iron saddle-bars are original. The uneven plastered and limewashed walls inside contribute to the unspoilt atmosphere. In the miniature weatherboarded cote hangs a single small bell

dated 1668 and probably cast by Anthony Bartlet of Whitechapel. Music is provided by a 19th-century reed organ brought here from Winterborne Zelstone.

Incorporated in the stone-flagged floor are the indent for a former brass in a pew on the north side; a memorial to John Morton (1654) on the south side and another to James Ainsworth who died aged only 10 in 1849. James was the son of James and Marianna Ainsworth who died in 1875 and 1866 respectively; they lived at Tomson House and are commemorated by a brass plaque on the north wall. The other plaque, its somewhat fulsome inscription in lettering beautifully cut by Reynolds Stone, was erected in 1962 to supplement the delightfully modest stone in the wall outside, cut by George Churchill, which reads 'This church was restored by A R Powys who is buried here 1936'. Powys' grave is marked only by a border. Nearby is a solitary and now anonymous table tomb, its sides built of mellow red brick like the churchyard walls. A thatched cottage to the south and a farmyard which adjoins the church immediately to the north complete the rural scene.

THE REPAIRS IN 1929–31

By the 1920s the farmyard had evidently spread into the church which was said to have been disused for worship since 1896 and according to one account 'given over to donkeys, dogs, pigs and fowls'. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, which had long been keeping an eye on the building, was worried at its worsening condition and by 1929 had decided that it must do something about it. At the Society's instigation a faculty was applied for and granted in that year for the repair of the church and its return to religious use.

The cost of the work, optimistically estimated at £250 but which eventually rose to almost exactly three times that sum, was met by the SPAB. This was made possible by the sale (for £1,000) of a collection of Thomas Hardy's manuscripts held by the Society, of which Hardy had been a member for 47 years. More than half of the proceeds, which were to be spent on the repair of Dorset buildings as a memorial to Hardy, went to Winterborne Tomson, the deficit being made up by a substantial but unsung donation from Lord Esher. The work was supervised by the architect Albert Reginald Powys, who served as Secretary of the SPAB for 25 years; and it is really to him that the survival of this lovely church is owed – its survival moreover in such wonderfully unspoilt condition.

Powys, one of a family of 11 children, was born in 1881 in Dorchester nearby, where his father the Rev Charles Francis Powys was curate of St Peter's church. However, he spent his boyhood at Montacute where his father became vicar in 1885: a place better suited to the development of his love of old buildings would be hard to imagine. He was responsible for the rescue and sensitive repair of many churches and other buildings.

Powys' builders at Winterborne Tomson were S Clarke and Sons of Sturminster Newton and the work carried out is recorded in detail in the archives of the SPAB. Hidden repairs to the roof structure were the main item, for which riven oak laths were supplied by Lintott Brothers of Stedham in Sussex. An inscription on one of the new rafters recorded the work, and that it had been paid for by the Thomas Hardy Fund. The softwood floors in the box pews were so badly decayed that there was no alternative to removing them, revealing the stone paving underneath. Likewise new seats had to be provided in all the pews. The old glass having been lost from the windows, new leaded lights in crown glass were made by Lowndes and Drury of Fulham, London. New weatherboarding to the belfry was provided, with the delightful feature of ventilation holes in the form of St Andrew's crosses. The repairs were completed in 1932 and the church was rededicated on 8 May by Dr G B Allen, Bishop of Sherborne.

Since 29 March 1974, St Andrew's has been in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. Repairs have been carried out first under the supervision of Mr Ronald Phillips and then, after his retirement, by Mrs Penelope Adamson – daughter of John Macgregor, who was A R Powys' partner, by the builders A E Griffin & Son of Bere Regis. The roof covering was relaid in 1984. Since Mrs Adamson's retirement in 1998 the church has been repaired under the supervision of Mr Philip Hughes. Services are still occasionally held here, normally at Advent, Whitsun and for Harvest Thanksgiving.

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the national body that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that the church is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 330 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

NEARBY IS THE TRUST CHURCH OF
St Mary the Virgin, Tarrant Crawford
3 miles SE of Blandford

Right: Interior looking west (Christopher Dalton)
Back cover: The font (Christopher Dalton)