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## CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

Avon Dassett,  
Warwickshire



*Avon Dassett, Warwickshire*

# Church of ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

*by Geoff Brandwood (Architectural historian who has written widely on Victorian and Edwardian churches, and is chairman of the Victorian Society)*

## History

The main street in Avon Dassett winds through the village and up a steep escarpment before emerging at the top of Fenny Compton Hill. On the right, set among many fine large trees and overlooking the road, stands the church of St John the Baptist. It is a stately edifice erected in 1868–69 to replace a much humbler structure which had become dilapidated, and testifies to the strength of mid-Victorian church building and restoration activity. The interior is particularly impressive and does considerable credit to the architect, Charles Buckeridge of Oxford (1832 or 1833–73), who was nearing the end of his short life when it was built. Buckeridge's biographer, Andrew Saint, suggests it 'is perhaps his most elegant single work'. The church was consecrated on St John the Baptist's day, 24 June 1869.

The place name Avon Dassett is thought to derive from the small stream that rises near the village and flows into the Cherwell at Banbury: Avon is a common old English river name simply meaning 'water'. The 'Dassett' element is more problematic but is probably from the old English *deor cete* meaning 'deer wood or shelter'. There has been a church here for a long time – apparently from before 1086 since a priest is mentioned at Avon Dassett in Domesday Book. It is clear there

was a stone church in the 12th century because parts of it remained until the rebuilding by Buckeridge and an illustration of it in about 1820 survives.

Unfortunately little is known about the circumstances of building the new church but it was doubtless linked to the arrival of a new rector, the Revd A B Webb, in 1867. A major patron was the wealthy vicar of neighbouring Farnborough, the Revd C W Holbech, whose seat was Farnborough Hall. He provided most of the stone and gave the ring of bells. The Holbech family had purchased the manor of Avon Dassett in 1744. The living was amalgamated with that of Farnborough in 1933, and with other parishes in later years. Problems with maintenance and the consequent financial difficulties led to the church being closed in July 1983. It was taken into the care of The Churches Conservation Trust in August 1989 and repairs began soon afterwards, initially under the direction of Tim Ratcliffe of Rodney Melville and Partners of Leamington Spa.

In 2007–08 a major programme of stone repairs was carried out on the tower and spire to address two main concerns, namely the general level of stone decay and cracking in the tower. The local ironstone had become quite crumbly in places, in particular the

pinnacles and lucarnes on the spire. Replacing the decayed stone brought back integrity to the construction and appearance of the spire. The cracking in the tower was stitched together with stainless steel ties and the voids in the walls were grouted.

## The Architect

Charles Buckeridge was born in 1832 or 1833 and was articled at an early age to an unknown architect. In 1854 he was admitted to the Royal Academy School of Architecture and was working in George Gilbert Scott's office. Scott must have thought well of him since he passed jobs on to Buckeridge, notably buildings at Ascot Priory, Berkshire, where he was in complete charge in 1863. His first known work is a school at Didcot in 1856, the same year that he set up in practice in Oxford. This move may well have been prompted by the opportunity created after G E Street shifted his office from there to London. The decision certainly paid off as Buckeridge was able to create a busy practice with particular emphasis on church work, especially in the dioceses of Oxford and Llandaff. In 1869 he moved back to London from where he was better able to

pursue his successful career, but died suddenly of heart disease on 1 September 1873 aged only 40. His commissions passed to J L Pearson, the great church architect, who was a good friend. Another work by Buckeridge is the church at Radway, only a few miles from Avon Dassett, of 1865–67. Also in Warwickshire he extensively rebuilt the church at Harbury (1871–73) and made a design for that at Newbold Percy (1870; the church was actually built by Pearson in 1881–82).

## Exterior

Like several buildings in the village, St John's is constructed of attractive brown Hornton stone. It has a nave and chancel and, on the north side, an aisle and a north chapel. At the west end stands a prominent tower and spire, rising to 125 ft (38 m), with big plain spirelets at the corners of the tower. The large west window with intersecting tracery appears to be the east window from the old church. Other details, such as the two-light belfry windows with their plate tracery and the tall windows in the ground stage, are all derived from the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages – and specifically from the end of the

## *Interior*

13th century, a period much loved by the mid-Victorian architects of the Gothic Revival. Buckeridge makes much of the spire, placing interestingly-detailed lucarnes (spire-lights) between the spirelets, and embellishing the upper parts with two bands of pierced trefoils. The stair projection near the south-east corner has some character too, beginning rectangular, turning semicircular and finally dying into the tower in a half cone.

The rest of the building continues stylistic themes of around 1300, including a porch with large-scale details such as the outer arch with its stout semicircular shafts and big chamfer in the outer order. In the windows of the nave, chancel and aisle are various tracery designs ranging from one light in the west part of the nave to three lights for the east window. As this is the most prominent window when seen from inside, it is given the richest treatment – foiled main lights with two sexfoils and a smaller trefoil above. The bays of the nave and chancel are marked by buttresses. The rise of the land to the east is emphasised in the handling of the string-courses on the chancel and by the fact that the east window is much shorter than the south-west window in the chancel. This rise is exploited inside to dramatic effect.

The immediate impression is that the interior is much bigger and bolder than one might expect from outside. The eye is drawn past the strong piers of the Norman-style arcade, down the lofty nave and on to the altar set high up, nine steps above the floor of the nave. This emphasis on the east end was noted by *The Builder* when Buckeridge displayed his designs for the church at the Architectural Exhibition in London in 1869, and the magazine had general praise for his 'conscientiously wrought-out early Gothic designs'. The old stonework of the previous church seems to have been reused; but apart from the west window, the only details to have survived are the medieval tomb recess and grave cover (see below) and part of the impost of the east respond of the north arcade – visible above the pulpit and retaining traces of medieval red and black paint. Unlike a medieval church the walls are of bare ashlar stone but are not unattractive and look well especially on a sunny day.

The north aisle is deliberately out of character with the rest of the building. It is a powerful three-bay composition in the late-12th-century style and was used because it mirrored what was there before. A report in *The Builder* after the consecration in 1869 says that the arcade is a 'restoration' of the old

## *Fixtures and Fittings*

one. This may be the case but, if so, the retooling is so extensive that we must be forgiven for not realising it; only the unrestored piece of impost mentioned above is convincing. The arches are pointed and have a small chamfer. The tower arch is very tall and has shafts with interesting foliage of a French character in the capitals. The arch to the chancel and that to the organ chamber from the chancel have some similarities to the tower arch but without the rich foliage.

Victorian church-builders were keen to ensure that the chancel, as the focus of the building, received richer treatment than the rest. This can be seen at Avon Dassett in a variety of details – the triple wall-shafts to the roofs carrying fancy French foliage, the increasing elaboration of the tiles (made by Godwins of Lugwardine, Herefordshire) towards the altar, the richer roof than in the nave, and even the way the candle-brackets on the walls become even more elaborate as the sanctuary is approached.

The furnishings of oak, well-designed and made, were put in at the Victorian rebuilding. The desk on the pulpit is actually dated 1869.

### **Tomb recess and effigy**

The most significant survival from the medieval church is a large, cusped ogee arch decorated with ballflower and set in the north wall of the chancel. It dates from about 1330. Beneath it is the forest marble effigy of a deacon dating from the late 12th or early 13th century and therefore one of the earliest medieval funerary effigies in the country. The figure is carved in fairly low relief on a tapered slab and, though recumbent, is represented as if standing beneath a round-arched canopy with an architectural top in the form of a town or large building. The figure is tonsured and is shown dressed in vestments – cassock, alb, dalmatic, maniple, stole and amice. The right hand grasps a scroll. At the feet is some stiff-leafed foliage in the centre of which is what appears to be a bird, or perhaps a wyvern, biting at a leaf. The slab forms the cover of a low tomb-chest, apparently the original, with simple columns at the corners and centre.

When the tomb was dismantled for conservation in 1991 an earlier base going under the present wall was discovered.

This suggests that it is in its original position and that the later arch above was made to fit it in the 14th century, presumably when the chancel was rebuilt. This in turn points to the person commemorated being someone of special importance to the church, almost certainly the founder, since the place occupied by the tomb is that traditionally reserved for founders. He has been identified on no certain evidence as one Hugo, who is recorded as rector of Avon Dassett in 1232. The fact that he is represented as a deacon does not necessarily discount him as the rector. Until 1274 deacons were allowed to serve as incumbents. Hugo may, indeed, have died before attaining priest's orders. Other identifications of the effigy are William Giffard, steward of Roger, Earl of Warwick (recorded as holding land in Avon Dassett in 1175), or his nephew and heir Andrew Giffard, described in the records as a clerk, who died in 1220.

#### Stained glass

High up in the west window is a little glass from the medieval church. It consists of the small figure of a bishop with old glass quarries surrounding it.

The east window is by Clayton & Bell and shows colouration typical of this prolific firm

of stained glass artists. St Mary and St John flank the crucified Christ who appears fully clothed. At the sides of the window are figures of St John the Baptist and St Paul with censuring angels above. A window in the north aisle contains two angels which may be the work of Powell & Sons. It dates from about 1900.

#### Reredos

This is a most prominent item – a tall, rectangular panel bearing a cross within a vesica shape which is surrounded by the alpha, omega, chi-rho and IHS symbols set in quatrefoils. The material is Purbeck marble.

#### Font

This is octagonal and also of Purbeck marble, with an oak cover.

#### Later monuments

A number of wall tablets at the base of the tower pre-date the Victorian rebuilding. None is of particular distinction though that to Anne Freckleton (d.1733) carries a fulsome character reference so typical of the time – 'Virtue adorned her mind and religion her practice'. That to Robert and Elizabeth Green speaks of his 'surviving the long and affectionate partner of his bed only a few

months, having filled with unsullied probity and unremitting diligence the important task of High Steward to the Right Honble. Lord Willoughby de Broke near half a century'. The old church contained a number of monuments to the Woodward family, Lords of the Manor from 1550–1744. Only one (to Richard, d.1739) survives. The best of the post-medieval monuments is one of the most recent. It is an embossed bronze wall plaque in the chancel to Captain Cecil Boyle who was killed in the Boer War in 1900. It has good Art Nouveau detailing and as such is a great contrast to the adjacent High Victorian candle-bracket.

#### Bells

The five bells were cast in 1869 for the rebuilt church by William Blews & Sons of Birmingham. The original Victorian wooden bell-frame and fittings remain intact.

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