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CHURCH OF ST CYRIAC AND ST JULITTA

Swaffham Prior,
Cambridgeshire



Church of ST CYRIAC AND ST JULITTA

by Lawrence Butler (*Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, formerly Head of the Department of Archaeology, Leeds University, and archaeological consultant to Lincoln, Sheffield and Wakefield cathedrals*)

Introduction

Visitors to Swaffham Prior may be forgiven if they think they are seeing double: two church towers close together and two windmills either side of the Cambridge to Burwell road. The single churchyard rising alongside the meandering village street contains two churches with similar towers, both with square bases and octagonal belfry stages. It is now unusual to have two churches surviving in one churchyard, but before the Civil War this double provision was to be found in six or more Cambridgeshire villages. The increasing problems of repair meant that one church was kept and the other abandoned or demolished. In Swaffham worship alternated between the two churches as the state of the fabric or ritual preference dictated. By the middle of the 20th century St Cyriac's was abandoned with the plaster ceiling falling in, the windows broken and ivy shrouding the walls. Only with the transfer of this church to The Churches Conservation Trust in 1973 has the decline been halted and the church been restored.

History

The dedication to Saints Cyriac and Julitta always raises the question of who they were and why they were commemorated here. A legend dating from the period of the late Roman empire identifies Julitta as a Christian widow of Iconium (now Konya in central Turkey), who took her three-year old son Cyriac to Tarsus to escape persecution during the reign of Diocletian in or soon after AD 304. However she was recognised, accused and tortured on the orders of the local governor. After this Julitta was executed and her son killed. Their relics were saved by other Christians and taken to Antioch for safety. The fame of the child-martyr Cyriac was known in the Latin West after a 4th-century bishop of Auxerre in central France brought some relics to his church, and a 9th-century bishop of nearby Nevers dedicated his cathedral to St Cyriac or Cyr. After this, the cult of St Cyriac spread throughout France, especially in Normandy and Provence. It is likely that this church dedication is a Norman introduction, either by the Scalers or by the Alencon family. There is no evidence of any local relics, though an arm bone of the boy saint was given by King Canute to Westminster Abbey, probably in 1027 or soon after. That king was also a generous benefactor to Ely. Nine English

parish churches have this dedication; all are in the south-west except for Swaffham Prior. Three have the single name, Cyr or Cyriac, and six have a double dedication.

The earliest mention of St Cyriac's church is in 1216. Before that the territory of Swaffham (the settlement of the Swabians – a tribe of western Germany) was divided between two focal points. The larger settlement was given to the monastery of Ely in about 970 and it was often known as Great Swaffham. The smaller settlement is now called Swaffham Bulbeck. The market town of Swaffham in Norfolk has the same place-name origin, whilst Swavesey, north-west of Cambridge, is the island of the Swabians.

At the time of Domesday Book (1086) the Cambridgeshire Swaffhams were regarded as one area but were divided into many small lordships. The monastery of Ely now had only one manor of 700 acres (283 ha), and there were at least six other secular holdings. Both the churches were held by local lords by 1200 if not earlier. It is likely that St Cyriac's is the older foundation being on the higher ground and placed more centrally within the churchyard. It was probably held by the Norman lord Hardouin de Scalers and later passed to Herbert de Alencon. The latter sold it to Ely Priory in 1240 and a vicarage was established some 15 years later. However the village was known as Swaffham Prior early in

the same century because of the prior of Ely's extensive land holdings here; St Mary's was the more populous parish and has the earliest structural evidence for a church of about 1100.

The existence of two churches in one churchyard (or two churches in one village) is nearly always the result of a divided lordship in late Anglo-Saxon or early Norman times. St Cyriac's was always the better-endowed church with plenty of service books and vestments. Small bequests were made for candles or 'lights' and for masses for the dead. In 1450 there were reeves or guardians for the church ornaments.

Early in the 16th century there was a tabernacle and light for St James, presumably housing a statue, and an altar dedicated to St Catherine, probably in the south aisle. No guilds or brotherhoods to these saints are recorded. In 1517 Thomas Elles of Reach left almost £50 to paint St Cyriac's tabernacle and to buy a cope and vestment, a silver-gilt monstrance and a processional cross. The latter was still there in 1552 when it was reported to weigh 5lbs (2.5 kg).

By 1350 the church had reached its greatest size, with a nave of four bays and a chancel, north and south aisles, probably north and south porches and perhaps a west tower. Its main altar had been consecrated in May 1346. A new tower was erected in about

1493, as Richard Gaysley, William Larde and John of Dullingham made bequests in that year for building the bell tower, as did John Meede in 1504. When it was still in use, this medieval church was described and illustrated in 1744 by William Cole, the antiquarian vicar of Milton.

After the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 Ely still functioned as a cathedral and its bishop continued to lead the diocese; its prior and monastic officials became the dean and chapter (with many of the same personnel continuing to serve). St Cyriac's passed from the patronage of the prior to the newly created dean in 1541. Robert Wells served from 1522 to 1557. St Mary's passed first to the Crown and then back to the bishop in 1562. In both churches the patron was responsible for the repair of the chancel and in the 1590s that at St Cyriac's was reported to be out of repair. The position had improved by 1638 when no faults were reported during the archdeacon's visitation.

The dean appointed vicars who lived in the village, though if the vicars were non-resident they would appoint curates. In the 1640s St Mary's tended to have Puritan clergymen, while St Cyriac's had more conservative (Laudian) vicars. This led to disputes and ejections in the Civil War. The fierce enforcer of presbyterian orthodoxy William Dowsing wrote in his journal for 3 January 1644

'At Swaffham we brake down a great many pictures superstitious, 20 cherubims, and the rayles we brake in pieces, and diged down the steps'. This did not deter the Laudian vicar Richard Peacock, who continued to dress in a surplice and to read the communion service from beside the holy table in the chancel, even after the rails had been removed. He was ejected in September 1644. One hundred years later William Cole reported that 'the altar is neither railed nor on any eminence'. The destroyed 'cherubim' probably decorated the roof timbers, and the superstitious pictures were almost certainly in the stained glass, though Dowsing does not specify whether he was describing St Cyriac's or St Mary's church.

Some restoration of furnishings occurred when king Charles II returned in 1660, but a major change followed in 1667 when St Cyriac's and St Mary's were formally united by Act of Parliament into one parish. The vicar, Martin Hill, served both churches. However the parish officers continued to be appointed to each church and the registers (dating from 1559) were maintained separately until the 1750s. The combined parish enjoyed a long period of stability with only four vicars serving from 1664–1848 (Hill 1664–1712; John Peter Allix 1713–53; William Collier 1753–87; George Leonard Jenyns 1787–1848). However Dr Allix was

also Dean of Ely (1730–59) and Mr Jenyns was a canon at Ely (1802–48). Dr Allix spent a few months in each year at his vicarage in Swaffham Prior (rebuilt in about 1740), preferring to live at Ely or at Castle Camps, one of his 13 clergy posts. Dr Allix bought Swaffham Prior House, the largest manor house in the village, from the Rant family in 1751. His descendants lived there until 1926 and became in effect the village squires. Mr Jenyns, another village squire, lived in his newly built Bottisham Hall after 1797. As a result Swaffham was often served by curates.

Initially the church fabric was 'upheld and maintained', as the Act of Parliament required, with money raised by parish rates. During Martin Hill's incumbency St Cyriac's was kept in repair and this vicar was buried in the chancel on the south side of the main altar. Dean Allix also kept the church well maintained with new timbers put in the tower in 1738. In August 1744 William Cole reported that the interior of both nave and chancel had been refitted in the previous year; the old stalls in the sanctuary remained, as did the medieval screen and rood loft stair and an old font. However under William Collier the fabric of St Cyriac's was neglected and in 1783 it was reported to be dilapidated. Collier also combined the registers into one book and appointed only one set of parish officers. However the spire of St Mary's was

struck by lightning in 1779 and the tower became increasingly perilous. Its five bells were removed and, together with the three old bells from St Cyriac's, were all recast as a peal of six by John Briant of Hertford, and were hung in a new bell-frame in St Cyriac's in 1791. The old clock was also installed there with a new clock bell of 1793. Nothing was done to the rest of St Cyriac's, which became a roofless and ivy-grown ruin.

In 1803 the tower of St Mary's was bulging dangerously. The vicar (George Jenyns) and the squire (John Peter Allix) decided to have the spire removed for greater safety. However the demolition brought down not only the spire but also part of the tower. The falling masonry broke the porch vault and seriously damaged the nave roof. As a result it was resolved in 1805 to build a new church in place of the derelict St Cyriac's, though still keeping its medieval tower. In 1806 the nave roof at St Mary's was removed and the lead sold to help pay for the new church. The chancel of St Mary's was kept as a burial chapel for the Allix family, whilst the nave remained open to erosion by wind and weather. The walls of the south aisle and the south clerestory were removed.

The vicar George Leonard Jenyns commissioned Charles Humfrey (1772–1848), the Cambridge architect and builder, to provide a new St Cyriac's church beside the



View from the south-west, showing both churches and churchyard

medieval tower. Although Humfrey had been a pupil of James Wyatt, he seldom had important commissions but instead provided Georgian terraces in Cambridge and rural vicarages with the occasional public or collegiate building in Cambridge and Ely. Swaffham Prior is his earliest known church design (1806–09) and he seems to have been influenced by George Richardson's 1783 Gothic rebuilding at Stapleford, Leicestershire, now in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. Humfrey later rebuilt the octagonal tower at St Clement's in Cambridge (1821). Swaffham Prior church has none of Wyatt's frivolity or spidery plaster vaulting as at Fonthill Abbey, nor his unauthentic use of

Gothic details as in some cathedral 'restorations'. Humfrey chose a simplified Perpendicular style with early Gothic for most windows. In its open and light structure it is similar to the Gothic Revival church at Croome d'Abitot, Worcestershire (1763, by Lancelot Brown), now in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. The use of shallow transepts may be prompted by those at Stapleford. The interior roof profile can be paralleled in the screen on the east wall and the gentry pew cornice at Stapleford. The church was planned as a Georgian 'preaching-box' with fine acoustics. The tower was later crowned by an openwork iron spire of 1848 with the clock bell exposed

and wind-direction letters taken from the former weathercock. In the mid-19th century the gallery had a barrel organ and was used by the village choir. William Feakes was choir leader as well as being estate gamekeeper for the Allix family, parish constable and village rat-catcher. In his hymn singing he personally omitted the penultimate line of each verse in order to emphasise the final line. He kept discipline among the choir with a 16-foot (4.9 m) long cane, which he used to strike inattentive or unruly boys.

After a hundred years with St Cyriac's as the sole parish church, the roles were reversed. Charles Humfrey's church design was considered unsuitable both architecturally and ritually. The 'Churchwardens' Gothic' was not authentically medieval. Its use of timber frames for the window tracery was derided as 'carpenters' Gothic'. Similarly the use of private box pews for some of the seating conflicted with the preference for open benches freely available to all on the presumed medieval pattern. The short sanctuary allowed no space for a pipe organ and a robed choir. The new vicar, Lawrence Fisher (1897–1932) called St Cyriac's 'an almost grotesque travesty of a church, standing where once was a beautiful one'. So St Mary's was restored as the parish church in 1903 and St Cyriac's was again abandoned. The bells and clock remained in the medieval

tower, as St Mary's tower was still in ruins and remained roofless until 1965.

One traveller described the decaying structure 50 years ago. 'A scene of indescribable desolation awaits him who pushes open the cracked and blistering door of St Cyriac's and St Julitta's . . . its elegant proportions and its little gallery resting on six Ionic columns still defy the onrush of dissolution. But the neat box pews are all broken; the doors lie in fragments or dangle at harsh angles from severed hinges. Glass from the windows strews the floor, wall tablets, loosened and cracked by damp, have crashed down, and through the eastern end, open to the sky, a hoary tree has pushed its heavy branches. Such ruin is rare in the Fens, where most churches are well cared for . . .' Olive Cook, *Cambridgeshire* (1953), p. 86.

After seven decades of neglect St Cyriac's passed to the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust, in 1973. This has ensured that, as with other churches in the care of the Trust at nearby Duxford and Longstanton, the second church building in a single village has been saved for posterity. It now fulfils a valued function as a venue for concerts, exhibitions, drama and the occasional service, where its excellent acoustics enhance the performances and add to the richness of village life.

Exterior

When ascending the path from the north-west corner of the churchyard, St Mary's church dominates with only the taller tower of St Cyriac's at all prominent among the cedars. There are many memorials in the churchyard and there is now no distinction between the two former parishes within the single village. On closer inspection of St Cyriac's it is clear that the church has two main elements: the stone-built late medieval tower and a Georgian Gothic nave built of cream-coloured gault brick with its plinth and buttresses of dressed stone.

The tower is built from roughly coursed field stones, flint, rag stone, and a little brick, with finer stone dressings at the wall angles. There are diagonal buttresses with 'Barnack' stone quoins, string-courses and the bases of former pinnacles. The tower is square up to the height of the roof ridge of the medieval nave and is octagonal above, imitating the basic outline of the Norman tower of St Mary's. The plinth has a chequer pattern of clunch and red-brick squares beneath a wave-moulded horizontal stone band. The west doorway, now the main door into the church, has chamfered jambs and an arched head with a label moulding. The lower stage has a tall west window of three lights with a four-centred head and cusped tracery (partly blocked up). There are narrow windows on the north and south walls at the ringing floor

level. The octagonal upper stage has ribs or buttresses at the eight angles rising from corbel heads of lions, human grotesques and half-angels carrying shields or crowns. There are tall two-light belfry windows on each face; on the north there is a semi-octagonal stair turret. The tower and stair turret rise to a flint flushwork parapet, formerly with three battlements on each face. The north-west wall of the tower has the clock hands and face. Scaffold-pole or 'putlog' holes are prominent throughout the tower.

The new aisled nave is unrelated to the plan of the medieval nave. The east wall of the nave has a battlemented gable, whilst the flanking aisles have similar gables at the east and the west. All the walls have battlemented parapets and the wall junctions have diagonal corner buttresses topped by plain pinnacles. These may be imitating the pinnacles on the four corners of the square tower and those which formerly crowned the octagonal upper stage of the tower. The nave has three projections of lesser height: a chancel or sanctuary to the east and transepts symmetrically placed to north and south outside the aisles. All three are gabled, battlemented and provided with corner buttresses of similar design to the main rectangular body of the church. All the plinths and the buttresses appear to be of Northamptonshire stone reused from the

Interior

medieval church. This new work was given its Gothic character by window tracery in wood but placed in stone surrounds. These windows are of two lights in the ends of the aisles, three lights in the sanctuary east wall and the south transept, and four lights elsewhere in the aisles and north transept. Many of the windows were repaired 30 years ago, those on the north in wood, most of those on the south in stone.

The tower interior is divided into three stages, two within the square tower and the third occupying the whole of the octagonal upper stage. The arched doorway leads into the paved ground floor and through a 19th-century four-centred tower arch into the nave. The stair originally led up from the ground floor by a (disused) north doorway but is now approached by a 19th-century external door on the north-west side of the turret.

Interior looking south-east showing the chancel and pillars





Interior looking west showing the gallery

A wooden stair leads up to the gallery through a door on the north side. A ring of six bells was cast by John Briant of Hertford 1791, and a clock bell of 1793 (no longer hung) provided by the same bell-founder. The timber bell-frame is also of this date. The clock mechanism is late 17th century, though it was repaired by Thomas Safford of Cambridge in 1811, which is probably the time when the wooden clock face was added externally.

The church interior is completely plain with whitewashed walls, a stone flagged and yellow brick floor and a simple plastered early 19th-century ceiling supported on four wooden quatrefoil columns. The gallery remains: this is carried on six shafted wooden columns, miniature versions of the main columns, with a rectangular break front. A notice-board of 1819 declares that 50 free sittings were provided in this gallery by the

generosity of the vicar and the inhabitants. These benches still remain.

There was a barrel organ in the gallery, and beneath the gallery is the charity cupboard; its doors have inlaid initials SC and SJ with martyrs' crowns and crossed palm branches. The transepts (both of which may have been intended for gentry pews) have arched plastered roofs, as has the chancel. The south transept has a west door for a private entry to the Allix family pew.

Only the sanctuary gives some indication of its former arrangements with a plain altar table (brought from All Saints' Old Church, Nuneham Courtenay, Oxfordshire) and walls painted with the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Cuts in the stone arch give evidence for the communion rails, set slightly below the level of the surviving wainscot panelling.

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The interior has lost all its furniture. The varnished deal box pews, so suitable for a preaching hall dominated by a tall octagonal pulpit, once stood in the side aisles. Nearly all the benches from the centre of the nave have been installed in St Mary's. The octagonal pulpit was also transferred, but has now lost its door. The small shell-shaped grey marble font and the oak lectern were transferred to Reach in 1914. The memorials to Revd Martin Hill and to members of the Rant family were transferred to St Mary's in 1903, and are now mainly in the north aisle. Some Victorian stained glass was transferred to St Mary's in 1878 and 1909 (now in the chancel south wall, south aisle and tower north wall). A set of church communion silver plate would originally have been provided for each parish church. The Elizabethan silver cup and cover paten for St Cyriac's still survives, inscribed 'Soffame Priore othr wyse called Sant Serres'. A Victorian chalice and a pair of patens given by Revd G Leonard Jenyns in 1842 was originally used at St Cyriac's, since worship was then no longer being conducted in St Mary's. The church chest of 1665 from St Cyriac's was transferred to St Mary's, but has since been stolen. The Victorian parish bier rests in the north aisle.

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