

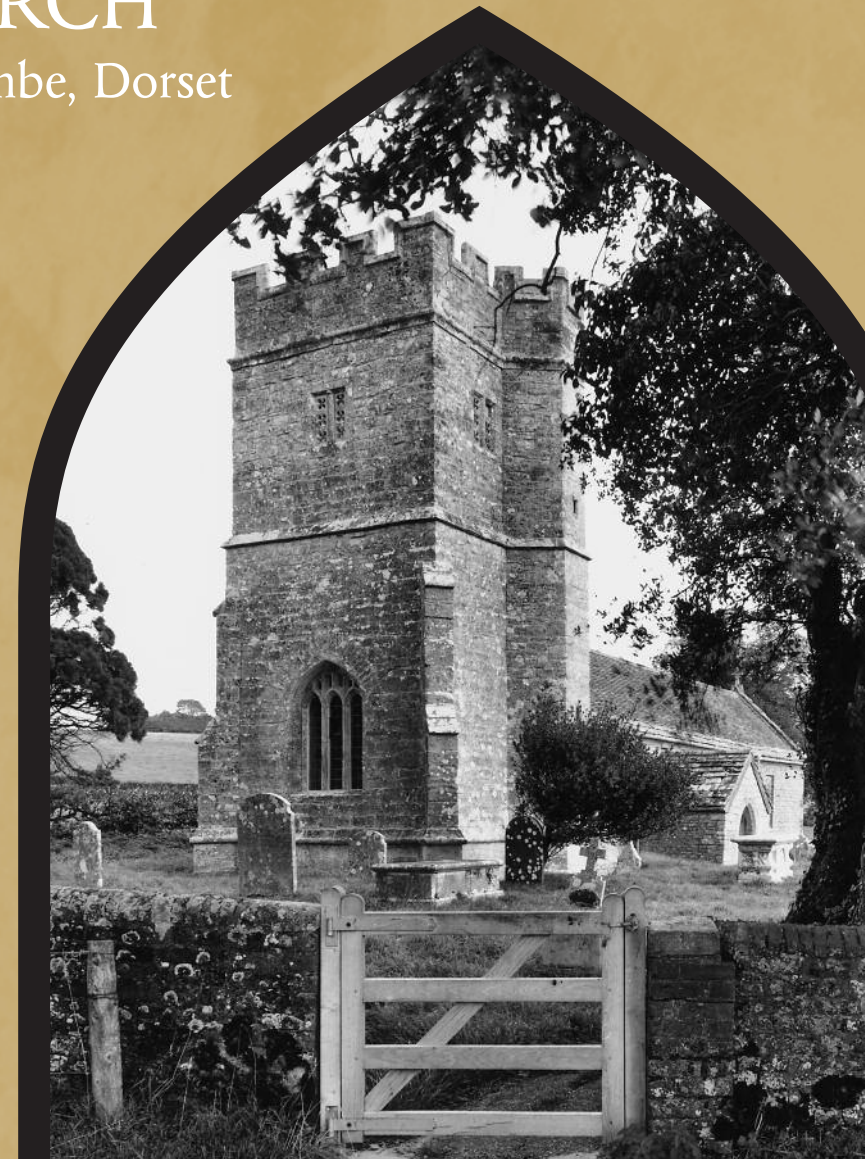


THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



WHITCOMBE CHURCH

Whitcombe, Dorset



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

1 West Smithfield London EC1A 9EE

Tel: 020 7213 0660 Fax: 020 7213 0678 Email: central@tcct.org.uk

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Whitcombe, Dorset

WHITCOMBE CHURCH

by Kenneth Smith

HISTORY

Whitcombe is numbered among several Dorset villages that have been lost or deserted. Excavation of the field south and east of the church during the 20th century uncovered evidence of a mediaeval settlement occupying 14 acres (5.7 hectares). Local folklore relates that the village was destroyed by fire during the Black Death in 1348/49. The adjacent hamlet is one of the best examples in Dorset. The manor house, cottages and thatched barns are arranged round a green and date largely from the 17th century. Excavation at nearby Whitcombe Hill uncovered part of a pre-Roman settlement. During 1963 a plough uncovered a Portland stone relief of a man on horseback, possibly of the late 2nd or early 3rd century. This is now in the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester.

Front cover: The tower from the south-west (Christopher Dalton)

Left: Detail from the wall painting of St Christopher (Boris Baggs)





Left: Exterior from the south-east (Boris Baggs)

Below: Exterior from the south (Christopher Dalton)

EXTERIOR

Today Whitcombe Church stands in a field, enjoying a marvellous setting. The nave is largely 12th century, though it incorporates pre-Conquest masonry at the west end. Both the blocked north doorway and the south doorway are of the 12th century, though the latter has had a later, lower, arch inserted below the original rere-arch. The wall to the east of the main door was rebuilt in the 18th century and the square, wood-framed window is a reminder of this reconstruction.

The west tower was built in the 16th century and apparently not completed until 1596, which date is carved into one of the delicate stone louvres which open into the bell chamber on the south elevation.

The place name probably means 'wide valley', but the first element may alternatively derive from the Old English *wipig* ('willow'). Whitcombe was part of the original endowment of Milton Abbey by King Athelstan (c. AD 966) and a church must have existed from near that date, as is attested by the fragments of two late-10th-century Saxon crosses (see below). The church has no known dedication, possibly because, from its foundation until the Reformation, it was regarded simply as an adjunct to the Abbey and served by one of the monks. After the Dissolution in the 1530s the church passed to the lay impropiators of Milton Abbey, the Tregonwells, and thence to the family of Joseph Damer (later Lord Milton and Earl of Dorchester), one of whose descendants still lives at nearby Came House.

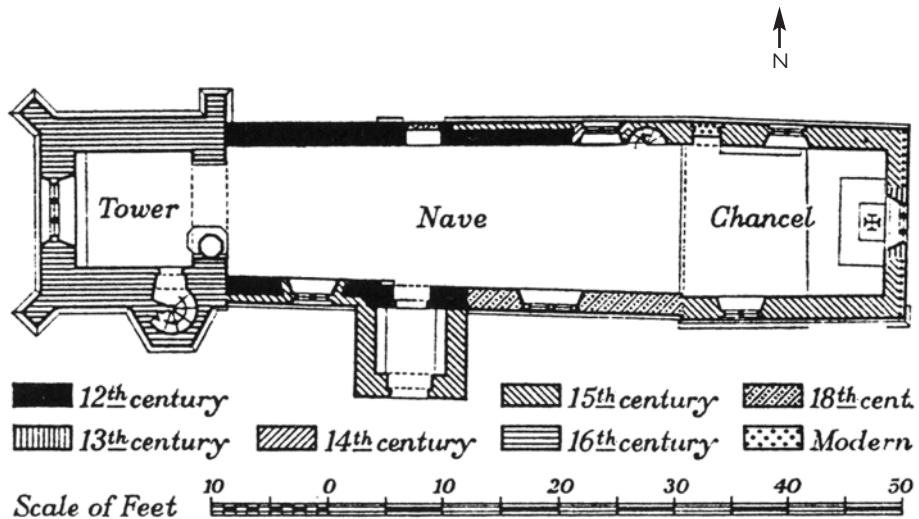
From the time of Henry VIII Whitcombe became a 'donative' (something less than a curacy) with a stipend of £13 a year, which seemingly persisted into the 19th century. In 1847 Colonel Damer of Came House presented William Barnes with the donative of Whitcombe, when the latter was still a schoolmaster at Dorchester. Later, Barnes, the famous Dorset poet, became also Rector of Came (now also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust). On 15 February 1885, his daughter wrote, 'Father was driven over to Whitcombe and took the last service he was able to take. In the same little church in which his ministry began, there he ended it'.



INTERIOR

The chancel and its steps to the rood loft were built in the 15th century, though, happily, a fine triple lancet of the 13th century was reused for the east window. The rood screen itself was destroyed in 1561. On the threshold of the blocked north door are fragments of two 10th-century crosses, with panels of interlace. They were discovered built into the east wall of the chancel when major repairs were undertaken in 1912. Repairs to the chancel in 1975/76 restored the floor to its original level and uncovered the tender and rustic memorial to a baby, here recorded.

*In
Memory of
Jejane Sherren
Died on Monday March the 6 1815
Aged 6 months one week and 5 days
Grive not for me my Mother dear
But be content think unto you I was but lent
Short was my Days long is my Rest
God call'd me whenever he thought Best*



Left: Section of painted arcade on nave north wall (Boris Baggs)

Below: Painting of St Christopher on nave north wall (Christopher Dalton)

The wall paintings are of outstanding interest. To the west of the blocked Norman doorway is a painted arcade of trefoiled niches dating from about 1300. The large painting of St Christopher on the other side of the doorway was probably executed about 100 years later. The saint wades westwards, one hand on a large staff, the other pulling up his robe out of the water. The Christ

Child sits pick-a-back on his shoulder, unsupported, and the saint looks back at Him. He blesses with His right hand and holds an orb in His left. The saint has a torque or bandeau round his temples, which falls in folds on his shoulders. The yellow shapes on either side represent the banks of the river on which there are many trees: the trunks, branches and leaves



Right: The 13th-century font

Below: The nave looking west (Christopher Dalton)



can be made out. On the right, there is a figure which may be that of the donor of the painting. Below him is a mermaid, combing her hair and holding a mirror. At the top on the left, certain yellow lines may be part of the representation of a timbered building, the hermit's cell – the hermit's figure lower down having perished. Finally, two small, square, crosses (one near the blocked doorway and the other on the splay of the window farther east) are consecration

crosses and the oldest of all, probably dating from the 12th or 13th century. The wall paintings were conserved by Mr E Clive Rouse in 1968.

The font is of Purbeck marble of the early 13th century, but the four supporting shafts are of later date. There are two 17th-century bells, one inscribed *Hope Well IW 1610* and the other *Love God IW 1610*: both were cast by John Wallis of Salisbury.



Below: The tomb of Melchisadeck Gillet (P de Rougemont)

RECENT HISTORY

Small fragments of 15th-century glass survive in the traceried head of the north chancel window. The 17th-century communion table is at Stockwood church, now also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. The present altar was rescued from the Victorian former church of All Saints, Dorchester, currently used as an archaeological store by the Dorset County Museum.

The church had been little used for a hundred years before it was formally declared redundant in 1971. In 1973 it was vested in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust. Since then repairs have been undertaken under the supervision successively of Kenneth Wiltshire, Penelope Adamson and Philip Hughes.

CHURCHYARD

The churchyard contains a fine 17th-century table tomb to Melchisadeck Gillet and the shaft of a 15th-century preaching cross. Much of the churchyard is bounded by an 18th-century wall of brick from the former brickworks at nearby Broadmayne.



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity 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 it 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 335 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 ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF
All Saints, Nether Cerne
5 miles N of Dorchester on A352

St Peter, Winterborne Came
2 miles SE of Dorchester off A352

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