



THE CHURCHES
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CHURCH OF THE HOLY SAVIOUR

Puxton,
North Somerset



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Puxton, North Somerset

CHURCH OF THE HOLY SAVIOUR

by Mark McDermott (Retired teacher and lecturer. Local and architectural historian with a particular interest in vernacular architecture and parish churches)

INTRODUCTION

Puxton was described in 1791 as ‘a small parish lying in that dead heavy flat which extends from Banwell on the south, to Congresbury on the north-east, and the Bristol Channel on the north-west. The lands . . . are mostly converted to the uses of grazing and dairy, and are very rich, being divided by deep ditches, in which are eels in great abundance.’ This was one of the low-lying areas of Somerset inundated in 1607 by a great tidal surge or possibly a tsunami. Despite the expansion of Weston-super-Mare, and the busy traffic on the M5 motorway and the A370 road through nearby Hewish, Puxton itself, which has a small population and is reached only by country lanes, retains a feeling of remoteness that is enhanced by the fenland character of the landscape.

Front cover: Interior looking west from the chancel (Ian Sumner)

Left: North porch with carved coat of arms and inscribed date 1557 (Ian Sumner)



*Exterior from the south-east in 1827, by J C Buckler
(By courtesy of the Somerset Archaeological & Natural
History Society)*

Near the church is Puxton Moor which includes a nature reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest important for its wetland plant life and invertebrates. There is archaeological evidence of salt-panning and land reclamation in this area during the Roman period, and of a late-Saxon and early-medieval settlement in the oval-shaped Church Field next to the churchyard, which may explain the location of the church. An area of common meadow known as the Puxton Dolmoors was, until enclosure in 1811, divided

into portions allocated in an annual procedure signalled by the ringing of the church bells. The portions were measured by a chain which was kept in the church and checked for its correct length between the chancel arch and the west door. Each portion was allotted to one of the proprietors or tenant farmers with rights in the moors by drawing marked apples from a bag, and the occasion concluded with a boisterous 'feast' or 'revel'.



Exterior from the south-east in 2007 (Ian Sumner)

HISTORY

Puxton is not mentioned in Domesday Book but is thought to have been part of the manor of Banwell or that of Congresbury. Robert Pukerel, who in c.1176 held land in Wringmarsh, which may refer to Puxton, would therefore have been an undertenant. The place-name Pukereleston (Pukerel's tun or settlement) had emerged by 1212 when Constance of Pukereleston, who may have been Robert's widow, held an estate of that name. Banwell church was granted by the bishop to Bruton

priory in the 12th century, and later in that century the priory acquired from one Henry Tortamanus the chapel of Wringmarsh, which is thought to be a reference to Puxton church. Puxton was later recorded as a chapelry of Banwell. It was referred to as the 'chapel of Pokerston' in 1333 and a chaplain of 'Paxston' named David Mathew was mentioned in 1468. Following the dissolution of Bruton priory in 1539, Henry VIII granted Banwell church and its chapels to the dean and chapter of Bristol





Top left: Exterior from the south in 1821, by George Bennett

Bottom left: Exterior from the south in 2007 (Ian Sumner)

in 1542. Puxton chapel was reconsecrated in 1539, perhaps after rebuilding work. Puxton eventually became a parish separate from Banwell in 1772, with the dean and chapter as patrons of the living.

Above the entrance to the church porch is a coat of arms thought to be that of the St Loe family who were landowners in Puxton in the 15th and 16th centuries. The arms are carved on a stone panel above the date 1557, but the two parts of the panel are not an exact match.



EXTERIOR

Apart from the rebuilding of the chancel in the 19th century, the church – sometimes referred to as St Saviour's – has not been drastically restored and therefore retains a range of fascinating features from various periods of its long history. It has a simple **plan** consisting of a nave with opposing doorways, a north porch, a chancel with an organ chamber on the north side, and a west tower. The **walls** of the nave and tower are of rendered rubble stone, with a high moulded plinth at the east end of the nave, and those of the rebuilt chancel are of squared stonework with a slightly rusticated finish. The **roof** of the church was tiled, possibly with stone, in the 17th and 18th centuries, and covered in Cornish slate from c.1800.

If the building originated in the 12th century, possibly consisting of a nave and chancel only, it has clearly undergone a series of alterations. With regard to the **windows**, the arched two-light eastern window in the north wall of the nave has tracery in 14th-century Decorated style, although not identical with the tracery illustrated, perhaps inaccurately, in 1804; and the two-light western window, apparently designed to have internal shutters, may also date from that period. All the other windows are in various forms of the late-medieval Perpendicular style: there are two-light square-headed windows with trefoiled lights and two- and three-light arched windows with Perpendicular tracery, one of which, in the nave south wall, lacks cusping and may date from the 16th century. The chancel

windows were renewed at the time of the 19th-century rebuilding and a window in sympathetic style was designed for the organ chamber.

The nave **buttresses** vary in design and are more numerous on the north side which, like the variety of the windows and the limited extent of the plinth mentioned above, hints at alterations in the past. The **porch** is an addition – its west wall butts against a buttress – and has an elaborately moulded entrance with a late-medieval four-centred head. The significance of the carved date 1557, which may not be in its original position, is unclear, but it may refer to building work or to the St Loe family. The inner doorway is plain-chamfered and has a 'false' four-centred head which is also late-medieval and contrasts with the two-centred south doorway.

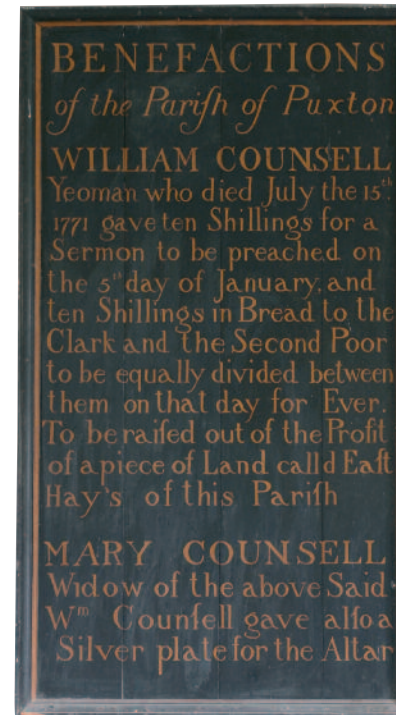
The 15th-century two-stage **tower** has a west doorway with moulded surround and hood, diagonal corner buttresses, a polygonal stair turret on one corner and a pierced parapet with quatrefoils and lozenges, replaced by a solid parapet on the south side. The roof is pyramidal, with the date 1773 on the lead covering and surmounted by a weathercock. The soft ground probably explains the dramatic westward lean of the tower, which may have restricted its height. Despite this problem, the tower survived bomb-blast damage during the Second World War.

The **chancel** was rebuilt in 1884–85 by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. They had acquired responsibility for the chancel along with the

INTERIOR

endowments of Puxton from the dean and chapter of Bristol, who continued as patrons of the living. The architect was Ewan Christian of London. The stonework is distinctive in character but the windows incorporate a mixture of old and new stonework. An **organ chamber** was formed on the north side of the chancel where there had been an external doorway, shown with a rounded head in early 19th-century illustrations, in the earlier chancel.

The earliest identifiable feature in the church is the circular **font** which may be 12th-century or slightly later. The heavily-restored base is shaped like an upturned version of the bowl and is conceivably its predecessor – the discarding and even the burial of fonts is known to have occurred in some medieval churches – although the stylistic similarity may indicate otherwise. It is uncertain whether the font cover, which appears to be 17th-century in style, is the cover which the churchwardens purchased in 1765.



When the **chancel** was rebuilt in the 1880s a simple common-rafter **roof**, not the curved wagon roof characteristic of many Somerset churches, was constructed and new **furniture** installed, with the exception of the 17th-century **altar rail**, with turned balusters, finials and decorative lunette carving, which seems before 1884 to have enclosed the communion table on three sides. A **harmonium** by Mason and Hamlin, and thought to date from the 1930s, now stands in the nave instead of the organ chamber.

The **nave roof**, with principal rafters supporting side purlins, replaced an earlier roof, the ridge of which was below the string course on the tower, probably in the 15th or 16th centuries: the design is uncharacteristic of Somerset's medieval churches. Below the ceiling the ends of the plain-chamfered principals enter directly into the walls immediately below the lowest tier of purlins. Each truss is tied by a collar above the ceiling but there is also an inserted lower tie that supports the joists to which the ceiling is attached. These lower ties have moulded chamfers and

are attached to the sides of the principals by forelock bolts which also pass through additional timbers lapped to the opposite side of each truss. This modification of the roof must date from 1770 when there was heavy expenditure on 'ceiling the church', including supplying the carpenters and plasterers with 26 and 29 gallons of cider respectively! During repairs in 1960 the east end of the ceiling was raised to re-expose the top of the chancel arch.

Painted on a board above the north door are the **royal arms** of George III dated 1775, and at the west end of the nave are **boards** with



the Commandments, Creed and Lord's Prayer, one of which is dated 1825 with the names of the maker and the churchwarden of that year. At the east end a **benefaction board** records the generosity of William Counsell (d.1771) and his widow Mary to the church and to the 'second' poor (those not in receipt of regular parish poor relief).

Memorials include an inscribed tablet set into the rood-screen base to Mary Whippey (d.1666), an ornate ledger stone in the nave floor to Mrs Elizabeth Whippey (d.1683) and 17th- and 18th-century ledger stones in the nave and chancel to members of the Whippey and Taylor families.

The nave **seating** is of particular interest, including early bench seats, probably 16th-century,



with plain ends – contrasting with the richly-carved ends found in south-west Somerset – which have chamfers with diagonal-cut stops; and the back of one of the seats, by the north door, has carved crenellation and a finial. In contrast there is a block of high-backed Georgian box pews with fielded panels; and another panelled pew at the rear of the nave may have been for children or singers.

The octagonal **pulpit**, with arcaded and rectangular panels, and the **reading desk**, with scratch-moulded panelling and finials, are Jacobean; and the **parish chest**, with lunette carving, is also 17th-century. The wrought-iron frame for an **hourglass** for regulating the length of the sermon is still attached to the wall near the pulpit; and on the south wall are traces of **wall paintings**, including a probably scriptural text which presumably dates from the post-Reformation period.

The **chancel arch** and **tower arch** have continuous wave-mouldings. There were formerly two **bells** in the tower but in 1954 a faculty permitted the removal of the broken parts of a bell dated 1680. The remaining bell dates from the 15th century and was cast in Bristol, with a Latin inscription translated 'He shall be called John'. The bell-frame, with spaces for three bells, is also 15th-century.

Perhaps the most remarkable features in the church are the surviving remains of the **rood screen** and **loft**, the latter a rare survival.



Below the chancel arch is a thick low stone screen with a crenellated top and double-ogee mouldings on either side of the central opening, which is rebated for former doors. This unusual feature has a parallel in Somerset in Compton Dundon church and almost certainly formed the base of a rood screen, although an alternative

view is that it replaced the rood screen after the Reformation. The loft projected in front of the chancel arch and screen, for some of its timbers survive and at the north end form an outline embedded in the wall. It must either have been cantilevered, possibly anchored by the stone screen, or supported on posts at intervals across the nave. The loft was reached by a former winding **stair**, the blocked doorways of which survive in the south wall; the lower



Left: Eagle lectern, 17th-century reading desk and remains of the rood stair (Ian Sumner)

Above: Ledger stone to Elizabeth Whippey (d.1683) (Ian Sumner)



doorway is largely hidden by the reading desk. When the doorways and remains of the loft were discovered in 1908, an excavation outside the nave revealed evidence of a former stair turret.

The discoveries made in 1908 were recorded by the Revd T A Robinson, during whose incumbency a small copper or bronze **figure** of the crucified Christ detached from its cross was found in 1895 in a ditch near the church. An expert at the British Museum thought that it dated from the 13th century, was originally gilt and had possibly been attached to a liturgical book or reliquary.

LATER HISTORY

In 1768, shortly before Puxton became a parish with its own vicar, the income of the curate of Puxton was augmented under the scheme known as Queen Anne's Bounty. When the Revd Aubrey Townshend became vicar in 1874 his income was increased by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners who also financed the rebuilding of the chancel but refused to contribute towards renovation of the body of the church. Townshend then appealed successfully to Mrs Gibbs of Tyntesfield for financial help.

In 1892 the bishop decided that because the local population was so small the benefices of Puxton and nearby St Anne's at Hewish could be held by one clergyman, which eventually happened in 1905. The incumbent resided at Hewish. In 1929 the benefices were united, and in 1953 the dean and chapter of Bristol transferred their share of the patronage to the

bishop of Bath and Wells. From the 1950s the benefice consisted of Puxton with Hewish St Anne and Wick St Lawrence, and from the mid-1970s it was the benefice of Congresbury with Puxton and Hewish St Anne. St Anne's church had been built in 1864 for the new parish of Hewish which was created from parts of various parishes including Puxton, but during construction the tower fared even worse than that of Puxton by collapsing. St Anne's church closed in 1986.

When the nave roof of Holy Saviour church failed in 2000 the small congregation lacked the financial resources to save the building. A report in 2000 by the archaeology officer of the Council for the Care of Churches emphasised the importance of the architecture, furniture and fittings of the church and the archaeological significance of the building and its site. In 2002 the church was made redundant and vested in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust, which carried out structural repairs to the roof and also a range of other works to put the building in good order. The surveyor was Philip Hartley. The church remains a consecrated building in which the occasional services are well supported.



War memorial from St Anne's church, Hewish (Ian Sumner)

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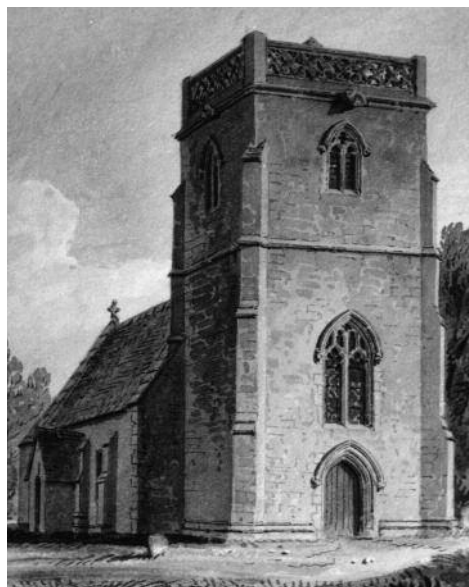
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*Left: Exterior from the west in 1827 by J C Buckler (By courtesy of the Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society)
Back cover: The 12th- or 13th-century font with later cover (Ian Sumner)*