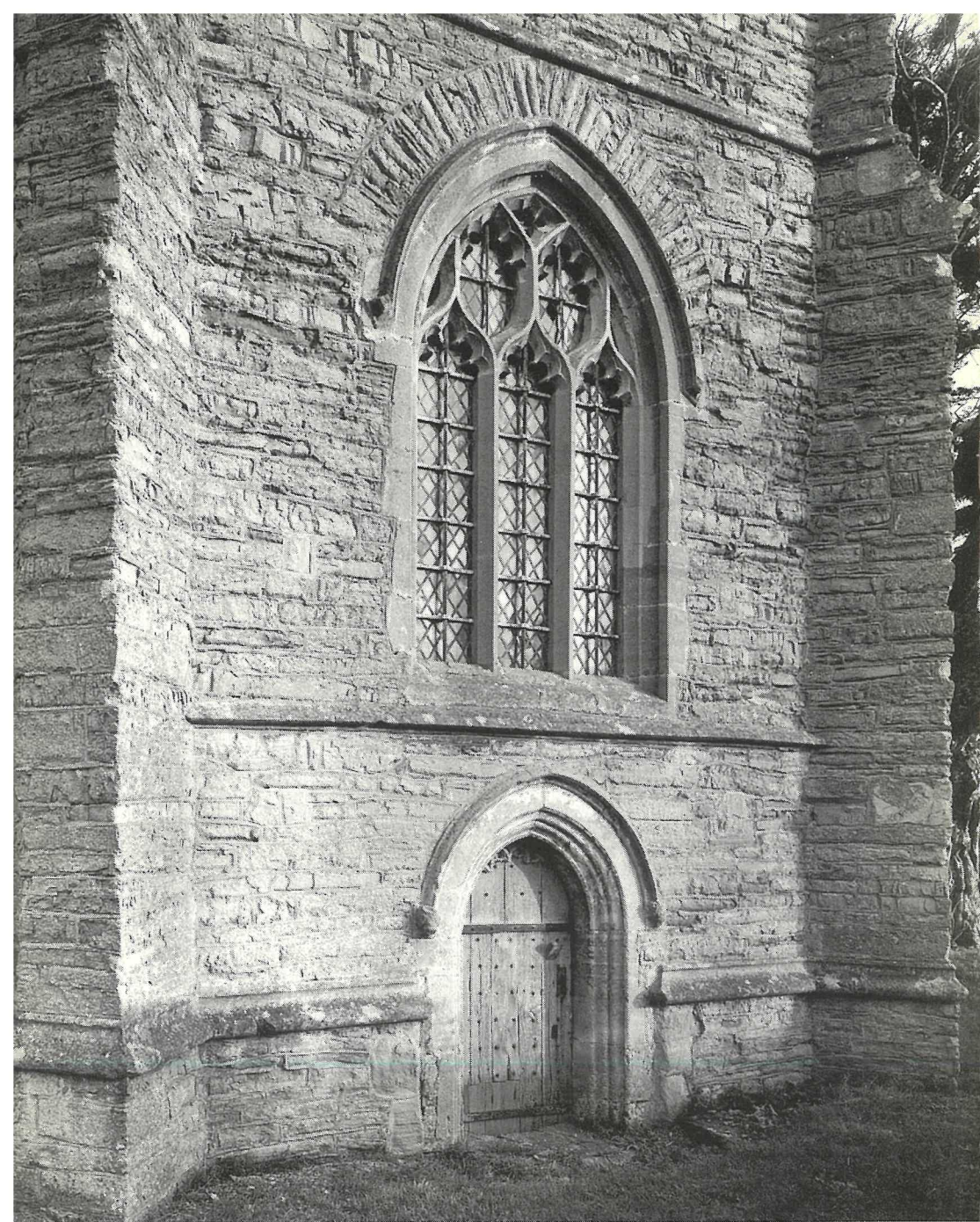




ALL SAINTS CHURCH, OTTERHAMPTON, SOMERSET



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ALL SAINTS CHURCH, OTTERHAMPTON,
SOMERSET.**

Many years ago Christians built and set apart this place for prayer. They made their church beautiful with their skill and craftsmanship. Here they have met for worship, for children to be baptised, for couples to be married and for the dead to be brought for burial. If you have time, enjoy the history, the peace and the holiness here. Please use the prayer card and, if you like it, you are welcome to take a folded copy with you.

Although services are no longer regularly held here, this church remains consecrated; inspiring, teaching and ministering through its beauty and atmosphere. It is one of 291 churches throughout England cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust was created in 1969 and was, until 1994, known as the Redundant Churches Fund. Its object is to ensure that all these churches are kept in repair and cared for, in the interests of the Church and Nation, for present and future generations.

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ALL SAINTS CHURCH, OTTERHAMPTON, SOMERSET.

by Mark McDermott

Introduction

The parish of Otterhampton lies on the west side of the lower reaches of the River Parrett. Until the late 19th century its territory was intermingled with that of the parishes of Cannington and Stockland Bristol, reflecting the complexities of early-medieval landownership in the area; and the northern extremity of the parish, between the Parrett estuary and the Bristol Channel, was only acquired from Huntspill parish in 1933. Apart from Combwich village the settlement pattern is scattered, but there may be some deserted occupation sites near All Saints' church.

The church lies at the foot of rising ground on which stands the Regency-period Hill House (once the home of the Evereds, lords of Otterhampton manor) and the geology of this higher land includes blue lias, the local building stone. The rest of the parish is low-lying and the place-name itself means the settlement of the hamm (an enclosure or low-lying meadow) frequented by otters or adjacent to a stream named the otter. Traditionally the marshland has been important for livestock but it includes alluvium which was the basis of a 19th century brick and tile industry at Combwich. Tidal action has created a dynamic coastline around the Parrett estuary, and embankments and drainage channels are evidence of the struggle to control the sea and the marshes.

The dominant route through the parish is now the improved road from Cannington to Hinkley Point nuclear power station, but Combwich formerly marked a river crossing (by ford and ferry) on an east-west route which may have had prehistoric origins. Another road runs northwards towards Steart marshes and the Bridgwater Bay National Nature Reserve, and the short branch on which the church stands was formerly a through road.

Cannington hillfort dominated the area in the Iron Age and was reoccupied at the end of the Roman period (perhaps from Combwich where there was a port in Roman times) in response to rising sea levels and general insecurity. The area was absorbed into the Saxon kingdom of Wessex in the 7th century and Domesday Book records that by 1066 there were three estates called 'Otramestone' or 'Otremetone', one of which was held by Estan, although by 1086 it was held from Alfred of Spain by a sub-tenant named Herbert. Later known as Otterhampton manor, this estate was held successively by a number of families until it was broken up in 1946, although a part of it became the separate manor of Otterhampton Rumsey during the middle ages.

Origins and History of the Church

There is documentary evidence for the church in the 12th century, which is confirmed by the Norman tub font with its bands of saltire crosses. However until some time after 1377 Otterhampton seems to have been subordinate to

Stockland church where burials had to take place; and Robert, the earliest recorded priest at Otterhampton (in 1144), was merely styled 'chaplain' rather than rector. During the Middle Ages the lords of Otterhampton and Otterhampton Rumsey manors appointed rectors alternately but later the lords of Otterhampton manor did so exclusively. To the south-west of the church stands the former rectory, built in 1802, from which the rector moved to Combwich in the 1970s. In 1386 the rector was accused of customs evasion; and in 1554 another rector was reported for keeping horses in the churchyard and for failing to preach sermons. There is also occasional evidence over the years of absenteeism and other forms of neglect – but the records tend to concentrate on misdemeanours.

In the late medieval period the church seems to have been dedicated to St. Peter or to St. Peter and St. Paul. There was a 'church house' in which fund-raising 'church ales' (parish parties) would have been held until possibly the early 17th century: this was probably the 'old house' which the parish decided to demolish, along with the livestock pound which also stood in front of the church, in 1841, although a building still appears there in an illustration dated 1845.

A chapel of ease, St. Peter's, was built at Combwich in 1868-70, paid for by Mrs. S. Jeffery, widow of a former rector of Otterhampton. Those parts of Combwich which were in Cannington parish were in consequence transferred to Otterhampton but the opening of the chapel resulted in reduced attendance at the parish church. A report in 1881 recommended the closure of the now dilapidated church and its replacement by Combwich chapel as the parish church; but All Saints was renovated in 1894 and the change anticipated in 1881 did not occur until 1988. Meanwhile the benefice was united with Stockland in 1971 and with Cannington in 1984. All Saints passed into the care of the Redundant Churches Fund, now re-named The Churches Conservation Trust, in 1989.

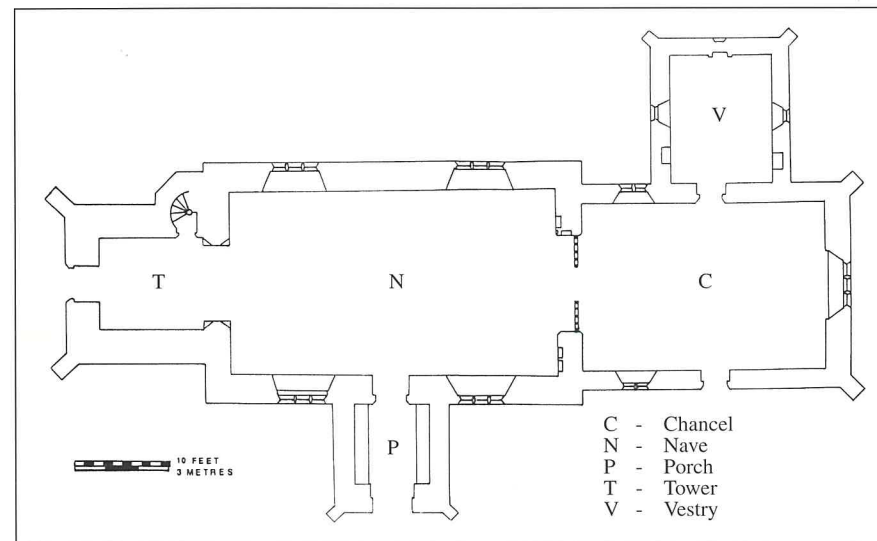
The Building

All Saints' church is largely built of blue lias and sandstone although in the 19th century (and presumably earlier) the exterior was rendered and coloured. It consists of a chancel with a vestry (perhaps a former chapel) on the north side, a nave with a south porch, and a battlemented west tower of three stages with diagonal buttresses. Apart from the font, there is no clear evidence of the early-medieval church, and the windows (several of which have flat heads under label mouldings) are of late-medieval Perpendicular type. There was, however, extensive restoration in the 19th century. In 1804 the church was re-roofed and the north wall of the nave rebuilt; in c.1840 the church underwent thorough repair and the chancel was rebuilt, although the east window seems to have been reused; and in the 1894 renovation new windows were inserted in the north wall of the nave to match those on the south. However Pevsner's view that such restoration reduced the building's architectural interest to 'nil' is certainly exaggerated.

The Interior

The porch contains an elaborate niche for a missing statue. Within the nave, which has been stripped of plaster, is a remarkable set of empty niches on either side of the chancel arch, most with ogee arched heads: there are two pairs of these niches facing westwards into the nave, perhaps once associated with side altars, but another, with a rounded head and moulded edges, is in the north jamb of the chancel arch. The furniture in the nave dates from 1894, as does the renovation of the late-medieval chancel screen (which has traces of earlier colouring on the back). The picture on the north wall, presented by R. G. Evered in the 19th century, represents Christ in the Judgement Hall; and the arms of George VI over the south door are a war memorial. The churchwardens' staves are believed to incorporate village club emblems; and the font, now under the tower, has been moved from the nave.

In the 19th century there was a 'singing' gallery, probably at the west end of the nave, which included three 'stands', presumably music stands for the singers and musicians, one of whom played a cello. Later the services were accompanied by a harmonium, for which in 1894 a recess was formed under the north window of the chancel where two candle sconces survive. The organ on the south side of the chancel was built by Edward Matthews of Bath in 1906 and displaced part of the choir stalls which had been set up in 1894. The missing stall and a wooden reredos which was removed in 1945 are in the vestry. Another piece of carved woodwork, of 17th century type, has been mounted on the south wall of the chancel. The communion rail, which has lost some of its balusters, is 17th century and the Commandment boards cost 10



guineas in 1805. The changes in floor level between the nave and the altar date from 1894.

Monuments, Bells and Plate

The memorials include a Victorian monument, in simulated Decorated style, on the north wall of the chancel to a son of the Revd. C. W. H. Evered. Nearby is a memorial to Dr. J. Jeffery (d. 1861), rector for 67 years, who used some of his private wealth to endow an annual charitable distribution in the church porch to the poor of the parish. On the chancel floor a reused slab with a floriated cross marks the Everard vault (the Evered surname was changed in the early 20th century, as is indicated by the inscriptions on a tablet on the south wall of the chancel). The 16th century alchemist Thomas Charnock is believed to be buried in the churchyard, having failed to find the elixir of life.

The four bells include a medieval bell cast in Bristol and inscribed 'S(AN)C(T)A KATARINA ORA PRO NOBIS'. Another is inscribed 'JOHN LEWIS CHVRCH WARDEN 1737' and is believed to be the work of T. Wroth, and the third bell reads 'HENRY SHEPARD HVEGH HONNYBALL WILLIAM PVRDVE 1647'. The tenor, originally cast in 1617 by another member of the Purdue family (probably George), was recast in 1926 at the Whitechapel foundry and all the bells were then rehung in the restored old wooden frame.

A communion cup and cover are probably late 17th century, and a plate inscribed 'Otterhampton 1812' cost £3.18.0 at the time.

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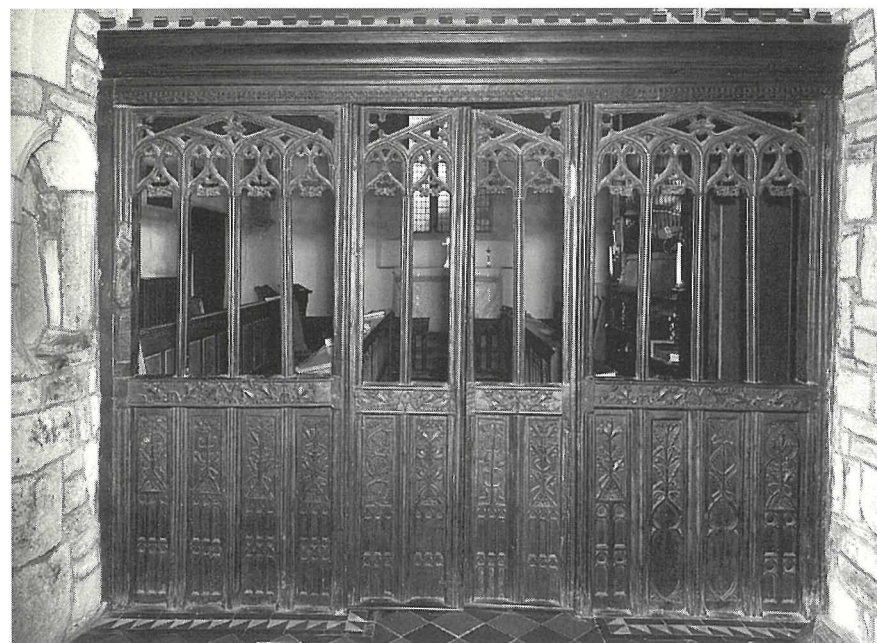
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The writer wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the help given by Mrs. M. Weeks of Otterhampton, Tom Mayberry of the Somerset Record Office and Dr. Michael Costen of Bristol University.



The late medieval chancel screen.



17th century communion rails.