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CHURCH OF ST MARGARET OF ANTIOCH

LEIGH DELAMERE
WILTSHIRE





THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
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THE CHURCH OF
ST MARGARET OF ANTIOCH
LEIGH DELAMERE, WILTSHIRE

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CHURCH OF ST MARGARET OF ANTIOCH

LEIGH DELAMERE, WILTSHIRE

by GEOFFREY K BRANDWOOD

Leigh Delamere is now best known as the name of a service station on the M4. The place name is derived from Leigh, denoting that the village once stood in a clearing. The Delamere element comes from the knightly de la Mere family. Adam de la Mere held the manor here in 1236. It was sold out of the family before 1396.

Half a mile from the motorway, still within earshot of the roaring traffic, is the quite extraordinary church of St Margaret of Antioch. Listed Grade II*, it was built in 1846–48 to replace a mediaeval one, parts of which dated from the 13th century. Although neither ancient nor immediately imposing, the present church is remarkable for the circumstances of, and the philosophy behind, its construction, as well as for its many unusual features.

The key figures in the rebuilding of the church were the lord of the manor, Joseph Neeld (1789–1856), and his architect James Thomson (1800–83). Neeld was the great-nephew of Philip Rundell of the London silversmithing and jewellery firm of Rundell, Bridge & Rundell. The old man was looked after by Neeld for the last 14 years of his life and was, by any standards rich, leaving an estate worth £1.4–£1.5 million at the time of his death in 1827. Of this some £900,000 – worth over £40 million at current values – passed to the fortunate Neeld. The following year he became MP for Chippenham and purchased the Grittleton estate, which included Leigh Delamere, from Col. Joseph Houlton. Neeld entered a disastrous marriage in 1830 to the eldest daughter of the sixth earl of Shaftesbury. After a high-profile separation in 1832 he seems to have devoted himself to his estate, which he greatly expanded from 1840, and to a stream of building activities. The largest of these was the rebuilding of Grittleton House which was still unfinished at the time of his death (it was completed by his brother). Other schemes included farmhouses, schools, almshouses and a huge cheese market in Chippenham.

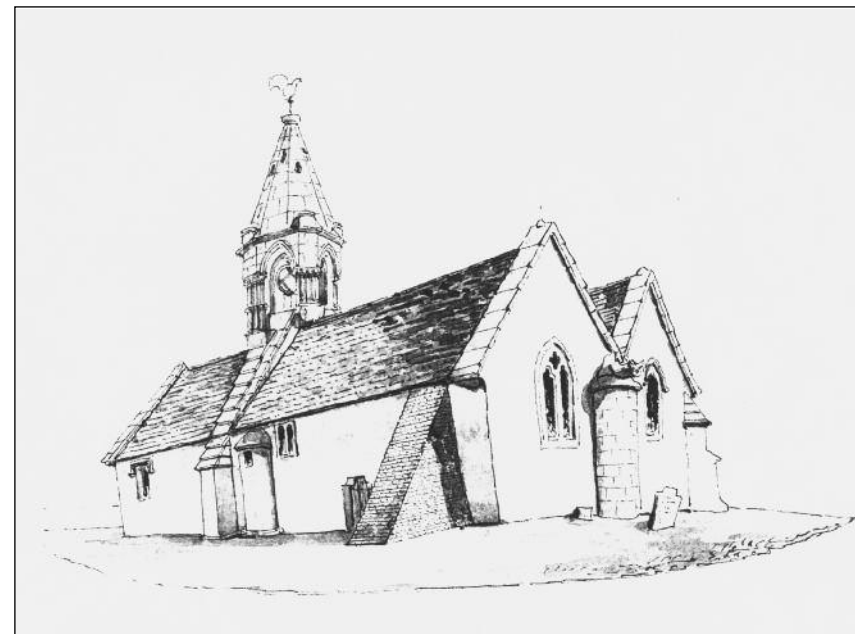
Neeld's architect was the relatively little-known James Thomson who was born in Melrose and was a pupil (1814–21) and then assistant to JB Papworth. He built Cumberland Terrace and Place, Regent's Park, to designs by John Nash and much later was responsible for major works at



The old church from the south-east, drawn by James Thomson, May 1845.

Charing Cross Hospital (1870–77). His work was entirely secular apart from the two commissions from Neeld for rebuilding Alderton and Leigh Delamere churches. He published a book called *Retreats – designs for cottages, villas &c* in 1827 and another on schoolrooms in 1842. How Neeld came to select Thomson is shrouded in mystery but the two men were in contact in mid-1827 and Neeld lost no time in devoting part of his fortune to building works.

A third player in the story may well have been the Revd (later Canon) JE Jackson who came as rector of Leigh Delamere in 1845 where he remained until his death in 1891. He was a very distinguished Wiltshire antiquary and was one of the founders of the Wiltshire Archaeological Society in 1853. He became its secretary and edited its many publications. It seems eminently likely, given his inclinations, that he would have taken a great interest in, and may have influenced the plans for, what was to be done at the church. He collected items about the church in a scrapbook which forms a valuable record of the changes.



The old church from the north-west, drawn by James Thomson, May 1845. The semicircular projection at the west end contained a stair. The church also had a projecting rood-loft stair.

REBUILDING THE OLD CHURCH

Neeld and Thomson were planning to rebuild the church at Alderton in 1842 and this project seems to have been complete late in 1844. Attention then shifted to Leigh Delamere. The old church had a nave, chancel, south aisle and porch, and also a most remarkable 13th-century bell turret at the junction of the nave and chancel. It had attracted attention in an article in the *Archaeological Journal* which was reprinted in the *Builder*. Obviously Thomson also thought the church was of considerable interest because he made a number of careful sketches and notes about the old building in 1845 and early 1846. He was particularly intrigued by a semicircular stair-turret at the west end which led to a dormer on the south side of the nave roof; he had no definitive explanation for it but provided the unlikely suggestion that it may have given access for a person to toll the bell in the turret. Another remarkable feature was the ornate mediaeval stone reredos which spanned the east wall of the chancel.

Thomson's report about the church declared that it was in 'a state of great dilapidation and decay . . . if not a dangerous condition.' The mortar had lost its strength, the roof was broken and the fittings were in 'a most lamentable condition'. The only sensible course was rebuilding. Accordingly this began in 1846 and was probably complete the following year. Later, commenting upon the work, Thomson noted 'Whether that which has been done has been done judiciously or not I am now alone answerable' which suggests that Joseph Neeld probably had a substantial say in the work. What Jackson felt is not recorded.

THE NEW CHURCH

The materials used in the rebuilding are conventional enough – local limestone, partly reused from the old church, and Cotswold stone slates. But *what* was done with them was quite radical and says much about attitudes to the restoration of mediaeval buildings in the 1840s. Thomson explained that he was faced with an old building of several periods. It would have been much easier, he said, to adopt the style of one of these for the new church but he consciously 'resolved to preserve . . . some record of whatever was most interesting in the old one; thinking that if, in so doing, I should lose something in the way of *unity* . . . , I should gain much in picturesque effect by the variety of forms which would thus . . . become grouped together.' He believed he had been responsible for 'preserving to after times the lineaments of [the church's] time-worn, time-honoured, and venerable parent.'

The plan of the old church was kept but with the addition of a north aisle for the Neeld family and a vestry leading off this. Below the aisle was constructed a vault for the Neelds. What to present-day sensibilities is most remarkable is the way certain key mediaeval features were altered. The south arcade which originally had three round-headed arches of differing spans was rebuilt with equal-sized arches, but still without capitals and with unusual stylised leaves at the tops of the piers. The reredos was removed and replaced by a new one of different design, although broadly in the same spirit as the original. Externally the western stair turret, which had attracted so much interest, was done away with and an odd cylindrical projection inserted in the angle between the south aisle and chancel, and it is from the base of this that the bell was to be rung. But strangest of all, the bell turret was removed and replaced with an 'improved' version with a slightly higher pitch, and, where none had existed before, ribs at the angles and symbols of the Evangelists at the foot of the spirelet. However, the fabric of the old

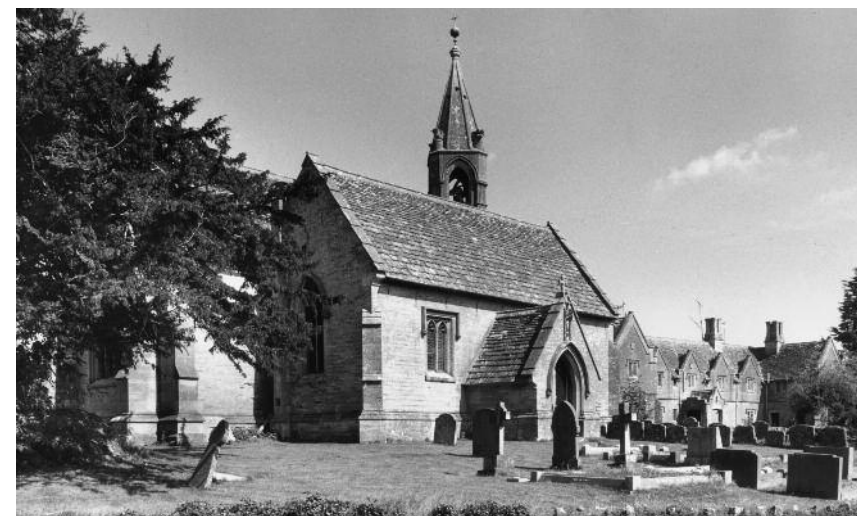
church was not just discarded. Much of the stone, along with the turret, east window, and reredos was moved bodily by Neeld and Thomson to the next hamlet, Sevington, to build a school which opened in 1849. A 15th-century sculpture of the Virgin and Child was placed over the schoolroom entrance.

A visit to the Sevington school, approximately one mile (1.6 km) west of the church, is most revealing in that the mediaeval work still looks in *very* good condition. If the present attitudes towards mediaeval fabric (which developed after the middle of the 19th century) had been in Neeld and Thomson's minds in the 1840s, there is little doubt that they would have striven to save what they could at the church with rebuilding being kept to an absolute minimum. Thomson's words, however, do not reveal a cavalier approach but one in which the desire is to construct a carefully worked out mediaeval *appearance* and the fact that the fabric is not actually mediaeval is of secondary importance. He clearly saw the new building as a legitimate child of the former one.

A TOUR OF THE CHURCH

Exterior

The most striking feature is the bell turret which follows the general but not exact details of the old one. The four openings are separated by small stretches of shafted masonry. The symbolic opportunity of placing the



Exterior from the south-west

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

emblems of the Evangelists at the corners was not wasted by Messrs Neeld and Thomson. In the south aisle/chancel angle is a projection created to house the bell-ringer; its top is an odd contrivance with a triple, mushroom-like capping. Close up it will be seen that the stops to the window hoods are varied and bear odd imagery. On the south aisle they are deer at a fountain, two fish with an anchor, a tree with a serpent and a phoenix. Further unexpected hood-stops occur round the church.

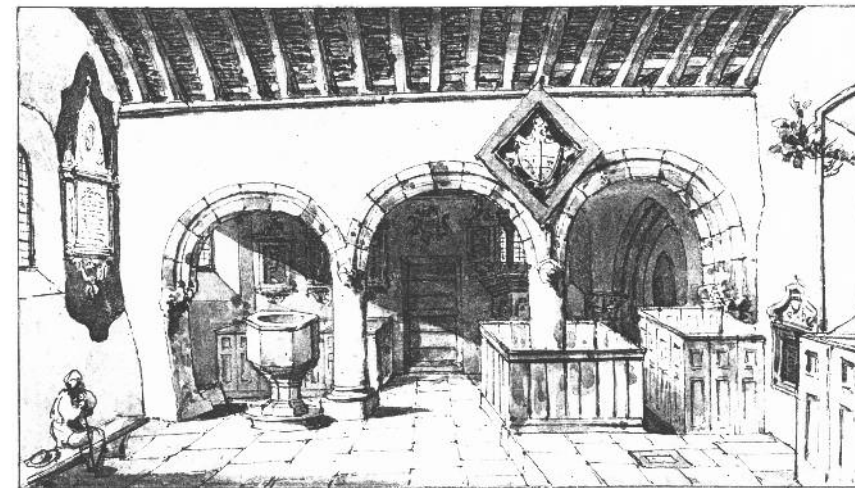
The aisles stop well short of the west end of the nave which has a particularly fine, large window. Below the west window of the north aisle is an entrance created in 1891 to the Neeld vault. On the north side of the church is a most curious feature, an apsidal vestry projecting like a tiny transept. On either side a dormer cuts the roof and covers a window of spherical triangle shape. Built into the east wall of the chancel are two memorial stones to 17th-century rectors. Above, the wall is blank except for a circular window placed high up.

A figure of St Margaret of Antioch, coeval with the building of the church, may be seen in the niche above the south porch entrance.

Interior

Despite the plastered and whitened walls, the inside of the church is quite dark due to the lack of a clerestory and the fact that the only large window, at the west end, is filled with rich stained glass (depicting the Crucifixion). The south arcade has three round arches with double chamfers and responds with strangely crude chamfered angles. The arch form is replicated in the north arcade but here there are also subsidiary arches rising from a low wall; this screen-like arrangement serves to mark out the Neeld aisle from the rest of the church. The walling above the arches becomes thicker above a quarter-round moulding over the arches and may be a feature copied from the mediaeval building (such a feature also occurs at Alderton church). Over the nave side of the chancel arch is the Triangle of Trinity painted on boards.

On the north wall of the north aisle is an impressively-treated organ sited on a three-sided tribune which is flanked by entrances to the vestry (left) and to the organ loft. This arrangement, so close to the Neeld family stalls in the east part of the aisle, and the possibility of the choir being placed in the west part of the aisle, have been taken as suggesting that Neeld took a close interest in the music for the church. The reveals of the north aisle windows have small stencilled leaves on a quarter-round moulding, a feature which recurs in the chancel.



Interior of the old church, drawn by James Thomson, May 1845. Note how the arcade arches increase in size towards the east.

The south aisle contains an enclosure for the font at the western end. Adjacent to the chancel is a small doorway leading to the space from which the single bell was rung.

The chancel is, symbolically, slightly higher than the nave and more highly ornamented. Originally the arch to it contained a tall stone screen but this was removed in 1865 to Grittleton where it may now be seen under the tower arch. The present low stone screen was installed in 1892 and previously formed part of the altar rails (the rest of these were stored in the vestry where they remain). At the entrance to the chancel arch, on the north side, is a stone pulpit which served originally as a reading desk; there was a corresponding structure on the south which acted as the pulpit proper (this too went to Grittleton in 1892). The fact that so many items were made of stone is quite remarkable. The reason is all part of the homage which the builders of the new church paid to the old one. A report in 1848 said that 'every thing which could be made of *stone* was so formed' but, strangely, does not go on to list anything more unusual than a stone pulpit and reredos.

The chancel floor is laid with red, buff and blue Minton tiles forming designs of quatrefoils and circles, and there are two black marble steps at the altar rails (a late Victorian replacement for the stone ones). The sanctuary has a patterned tile border with the body of the floor having four-tile



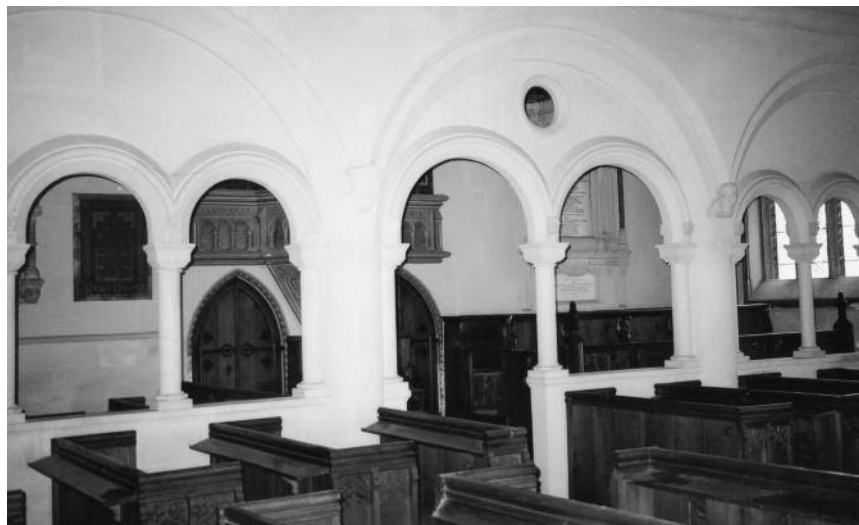
Nave roof (NEIL SKELTON)

(Right) Chancel looking east
(NEIL SKELTON)

fleur-de-lys designs. In the sanctuary are recessed arches in the side walls, perhaps a further echo of something in the old church. The roof of the chancel is similar to those elsewhere in the church – arch braces form a wagon roof – though the detail is rather more elaborate. Indeed, it has the enrichment of stencilled decoration and corbels carved as angels.

The climax of the building is the east wall, dominated by the imposing painted stone reredos. Just above the altar is a narrow band of arches flanking the Lord's Prayer. Over this come seven canopied niches, those at the sides painted with the Ten Commandments. The other niches have free-standing white stone statues set against blue and gold backgrounds. The figures were carved by EH Baily (after the work of the early-19th-century Danish sculptor, Bertel Thorwaldsen) representing the Four Evangelists with Christ in an enlarged niche in the centre holding out his arms. It seems probable that Neeld met Baily, several of whose sculptures he possessed at





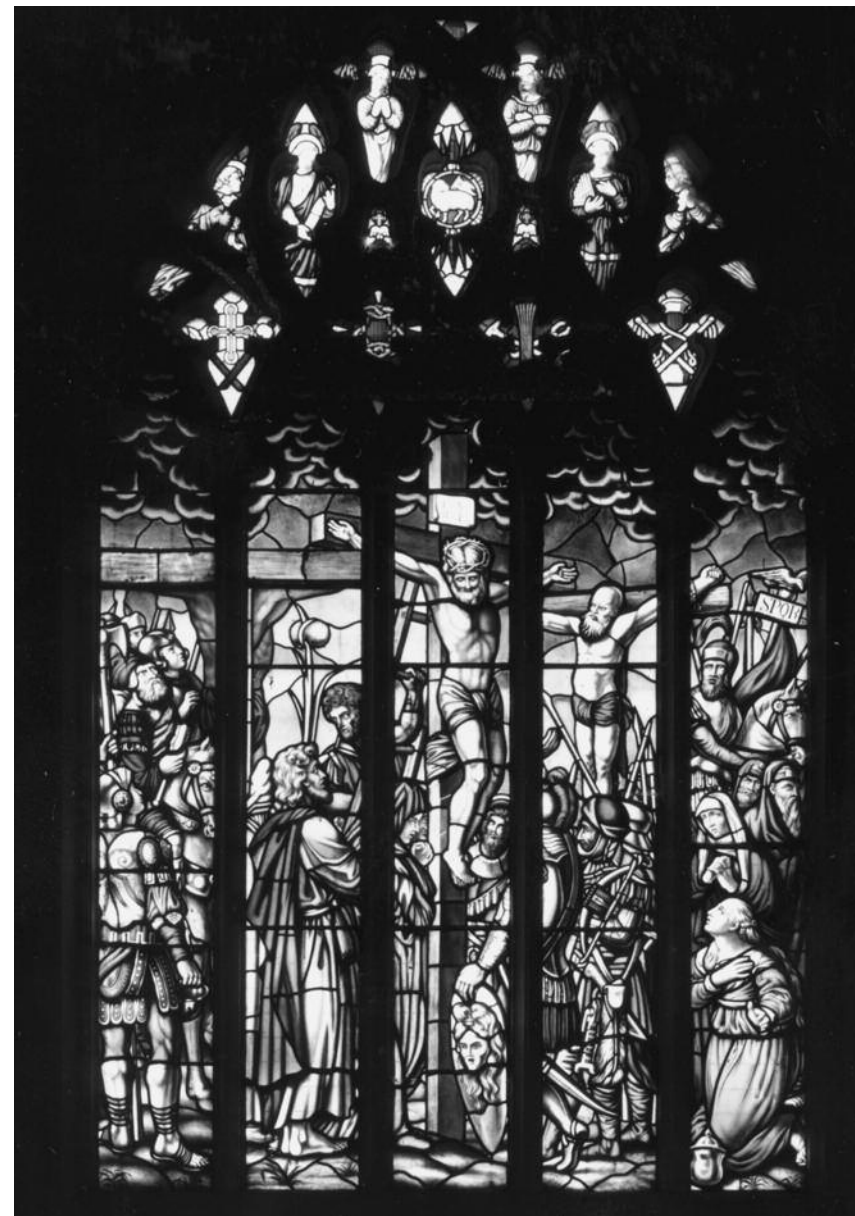
Looking from the nave into the north aisle

(NEIL SKELTON)

Grittleton House, through Philip Rundell for whose company Baily had made designs. Over the reredos is a text reflecting Christ's gesture – 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' Above the reredos and surrounding a small circular window are stencilled patterns of swirling leaves and flowers painted in gold on a blue background. There are also two roundels enclosed by four fleurs-de-lys and containing the IHS and JDF (Jesus Domini Filius) monograms. These decorations surrounding the east window are considerably later than the fabric of the church and do not appear in a drawing of the east end of 1878; they are painted on slate.

Other features

Stained glass. This is all contemporary with the building of the church and is the work of the little-known Thomas Wilmshurst (1806–80). The Crucifixion in the west window has already been mentioned. Other windows include the Dove Descending (east: with dramatic yellow and black clouds), Resurrection (north aisle, east), Deposition (north aisle, west), Virgin and Child (south aisle, east), Baptism of Christ (south aisle, west). The chancel side windows depict Old Testament prophets, a somewhat unusual theme for a chancel; they are copies of Michelangelo's figures in the Sistine chapel.



Nave west window

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Monuments. Despite what we might regard today as a cavalier treatment of an ancient fabric, the rebuilders of the church were scrupulous in preserving the monuments from the old building. The oldest is a tablet to Elizabeth Chiver (+1653) at the east end of the south aisle. The inscription reads:

STAND, LOOKE DOWNE AND BEHOLD THE STONE
VNDER WHICH WAS LAIDE THE BODY OF ELIZABETH ELDEST DAUGHTER
OF SECOLE CHIVER ESQVIER LORD OF THIS MANNOVR. THE MIRACLE
OF HER AGE FOR REASON LANGVAGE AND RELIGEON WHO DECEASED
AVGVST 10TH 1653 MENSE AETATIS SVAE 33 (sic)

There is a series of 18th-century tablets, mostly to members of the Browning family. A large white tablet to Joseph Neeld in the north aisle records something of his life and explains whence came his fortune. Other, later monuments commemorate various members of the Neeld family.

Organ. Originally built by WG Vowles of Bristol, it was played from a console in the loft. From 1880 to 1896 it was disused but in the latter year it was rebuilt with the console at floor level. It was rebuilt again by Hill, Norman & Beard in 1926 but is no longer playable. The case has three rounded towers of dummy wooden pipes and two flats of pierced tracery between them. At each side are pierced wooden frames of arcading similar to the design of the pulpit. The action is electro-pneumatic although trackers remain inside the console. The single manual has the specification 16, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 4 and all the pipes except the pedal Bourdon and the Open Diapason are in a swell box. The hand-blowing mechanism still survives.

Poor box. Obsessed as the rebuilders were with the idea of using stone furnishings, the poor box and even its lid are made of stone.

Bell. The single bell comes from the old church and was cast by William Cockey of Frome in 1706.

SOURCES

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Donald Findlay, Report for the Council for the Care of Churches (1992).

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Exterior from the south-east

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Front cover: Exterior from the south (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

Back cover: Nave looking west (NEIL SKELTON).

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