

## ST MARY THE VIRGIN, COLEORTON

There is no record of the foundation of the Parish Church in Coleorton, a splendid stone building, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin. In 1976 Rev P E Hunt wrote: "There is a tradition that the present building dates from 1179. It is possible that some of the foundations and lower part of the tower are contemporary with this date. In 1218 there is documentary evidence that the village and the patronage of the church belonged to William Quatermars and in 1220 the Bishop of Lincoln had instituted Robert de Ianda as Rector." However Rev. E A Eager records that the oldest part of the current church is believed to be the thirteenth century tower. The Register of the church dates from 1611, but there was no Rectory in 1704. In 1981 parishioners gathered together, with the Bishop of Lincoln, to belatedly celebrate the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church with a Festival of Flowers.



The splendid embattled tower capped by a fine spire, was badly damaged by lightning, but repaired in 1839. Today it houses a peal of eight bells, the sound of which can still be heard over Church Town, Coleorton. Three bells date back to the 17 hundreds, three more were added in 1826 and, as recorded in Wrights Directory, "At Christmas, 1877 the bells were re-hung, one recast, and a new one supplied".... and by the following year all eight bells were in place. The tower's clock was donated by the Rector, Canon W B Beaumont in 1888.

The church suffered significant damage during the Civil War, in the early months of 1646, when the hall was used as a garrison by the Cromwellian forces making raids on the Royalist forces in Ashby Castle, during the siege of Ashby. Included in the damage were windows and walls, as lead was thrown down from the roofs to make ammunition for the battle. After Charles II returned to the throne in 1660, the church was repaired for £1,391. As neither the Parish nor the Diocese could afford this sum, the Bishop of Lincoln held a collection from all of the parishes in England to assist.



To approach the church today, visitors walk through the lych-gate, a cleverly created copy of the original, which was a memorial to Canon W B Beaumont's second wife, Elizabeth. The original was stolen in 1999. History is all around on entering the church under the stone porch, another memorial built in 1874 to Harriett Lewis. Also stolen was the marble Pieta brought from Rome by Canon W B Beaumont and set in a recess behind the high altar. It was replaced in 1998 with a creation of John Roberts of London, a skilled craftsman with works in Westminster Abbey. Roy Hodges, who arranged both of these replacements, remembers the organ of 1851 being rebuilt in 1943 by a firm in Derby, as a memorial to Sir George Arthur Hamilton Beaumont [11<sup>th</sup> Bart]. Before the electric mechanism for the organ was installed, a choirboy had the job of "Organ Blower"; he pumped the organ bellows to help the organist produce the music. At the time of the rebuilding, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Flemish Renaissance carved wooden screen on the side of the choir was expertly cut to enable one panel to be raised so that the organist could see the choir. The screen depicts figures representing Temperance, Knowledge, Faith and Courage as well as scenes from the life of Jesus. On the west side of the organ vestry is another Flemish screen of carved panels and on the north side of the choir by the priest's stall hangs a small carved cherub.

Other treasures of interest include one of the country's best collections of stained glass windows which let beautiful coloured light into the church. The east window, with scenes from the life of Jesus, was donated by Charles Merewether in memory of his father, Rev Francis Merewether [1815-1864]. At the western end of the north wall is the Parish stained glass window memorial also to Rev Merewether... and his widow gave the west end window on the south side in his memory. On the south wall is the window to the memory of William Briggs, Headmaster of Viscount Beaumont School for thirty-two years and the church organist for forty. At the end of the south aisle is the window in memory of Pauline, the wife of Sir George Howland Willoughby Beaumont [8<sup>th</sup> Bart].

Apart from the stained glass windows, there is a fifteenth century window of painted glass in the Vestry. This was brought from Rouen and given to a Sir George Beaumont who donated it to the church.



The church was renovated in the 1850s [Eager gives the date as 1851, but Wright's 1880 Directory states 1854], when the chancel had a new floor, the north aisle was extended, a new pulpit and font were assembled, a new organ was installed and the whole Church re-seated. Wright goes on to say that "...and a painted window representing the Transfiguration inserted, the total cost being about £1500."

The beautiful Illuminated Book of the Litany, the Litany Desk and the oak candlesticks in the Sanctuary are all the work of Elizabeth, Canon Beaumont's second wife. Other fine woodwork in the church includes the old ornate carved oak lectern, said to be of German origin and the chair used by the Archbishop Halford of Canterbury at William 4<sup>th</sup> Coronation in 1831. Top-heavy and needing careful handling, Rev Eager described himself as nearly upsetting the lectern on more than one occasion. The two heavy books of the Old and New Testaments that it carried were placed in the church by Rev W B Beaumont.



Many of the memorials in the church are to the Beaumont family. The tomb that commemorates Sir Henry Beaumont [d1607] and his wife, Elizabeth [d1608] at the east end in the south aisle is described by Eager thus:



"The figure of Sir Henry is that of a bearded man in ruff and armour, with a long cloak and belted dress. Beside him lies his bonneted wife, and his son kneels at a desk."



The Beaumont vault was under the seats that were originally allocated to members and visitors of the Hall and the Rectory. As it could only be reached if the seats were removed, it was not opened for many years. Glenda Wilkinson [Née Brooks] remembers: “To let in more light, the Beaumont pews were removed. They were a row of very tall high-seated pews from where the Beaumonts could see, and be seen, all over the church.” Dowager Lady Beaumont [mother of the 11th Baronet] is remembered by many as a formidable figure, always dressed in black. When attending church, she would fetch any children, sitting with their parents, to sit with her and any misdemeanour, even crossed legs, would be punished with a slap! The last Beaumont to be buried at St Mary’s was Sir George Howland Francis Beaumont [12<sup>th</sup> Bart], her grandson, who died on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2011 aged 86 years.



When Beaumont Hall was owned by the Coal Industry between 1948 and 1997, the church could be entered from both sides and fetes could be held in the grounds. Unfortunately when the Hall was sold in 1997 to a development consortium, easy access for elderly people to the church became more difficult. The only entrance available was the old traditional way of the villagers, walking up the steep path, through the Lych Gate and the graveyard to this Grade 2 listed, fine, historic place of worship.

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September 2018  
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