



THE PARISH CHURCH

St. Helen

WHEATHAMPSTEAD

RETURN TO  
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THE PARISH CHURCH OF

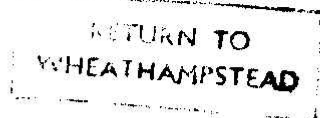
# St. Helen

WHEATHAMPSTEAD

## *A Short Guide*

by the Rev. George Talbot Roe, M.A.

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## Wayfarer

Who comest hither to visit this Church,  
leabe it not without a prayer.

## Give Thanks

To God for all his blessings; for those  
who in past ages built this place; and  
for all who worshipping here have gone  
forth to serve God truly in Church and  
State.

## Offer Thyself

In the Service of God's will and for the  
furtherance of his purposes of Right-  
eousness, Truth and Beauty.

## Hearken

To what the Lord God will say concern-  
ing thee: "The Lord bless thy going out,  
and thy coming in."

## I. THE EARLIEST RECORDS

IT IS as difficult to say of a building as of the human face and form, why it is beautiful. In each case beauty seen must depend chiefly on proportion, line and colour, and, most subtle quality of all, upon character. By common consent the parish church of St. Helen, like most of the ancient churches of England, is judged to be beautiful both by the casual visitor and by those who know it well. This little book attempts to set out some of its features and to tell something of its story. It is, in point of time, a long story, for the church is old, and the village of Wheathampstead still older. There was a fortified camp here, built by a Belgic tribe, which resisted Caesar's legions when they marched through Britain in the century before Christ was born. We may take it that Christianity came early to these parts since the first Christian martyr of England, Alban gave his life for his faith only a few miles from here. But of the earliest church or churches to stand on this site we have no record.

There was a church here in later Saxon times. When in 1871 excavations were made beneath the chapel floor in connection with the enlargement of the organ, the foundations of an apse, the rounded eastern end of a church of Saxon date, were found. The traces of a round-headed doorway to be seen in the south wall of the south transept, are thought by some to be a part of this original Saxon church also. While the men of the village sowed and reaped in the fields about their Saxon church, the wheat which may have given the village its name and which, according to a long tradition, provided bread for the Royal table in those days, King Edward the Confessor was establishing his great and famous Abbey of St. Peter at Westminster, and by a charter of 1065, he gave the manor and lands of Wheathampstead to the Abbey. When a few years later, William the Conqueror ordered to be made the great survey of England which is known as Domesday Book, "Watamestede" had "a manor held by the Abbot of St. Peter of Westminster . . . and a church and 4 mills."

## II. THE PRESENT CHURCH

IN THE thirteenth century the decision was made to rebuild the church, and in 1238 the eastern arm of the present cruciform church was begun. The slender lancets of the east window, the window on the north side of the sanctuary and the carved doorway below it, are typical of the style of the period. Building went on for the next hundred years. By 1290 the crossing was reached and the tower with its fine soaring arches built. The decorated work done at this time, notably the carved stonework in the north and south transepts, has been described by one authority as finer than any comparable work in Hertfordshire outside St. Albans Abbey. The eye lingers with pleasure on the bold yet delicately carved flowers and heads around the windows, and the masks above the piscina, and perhaps longest on the elegant canopied tabernacle above the piscina on the south side of the high altar. Here the stone carver has achieved grace down to the last finished little angel who holds the perpendicular moulding to the wall surface. In the north transept beneath the east window is a vigorously carved reredos of fourteenth century date. It is unfinished, and it might be guessed that the Black Death which ravaged England 1348-9 and brought building and much else to a standstill, carried off the sculptor, and none after him ventured to take a chisel to the work for fear of spoiling what was so well done. The whole building must have been completed about this time and apart from an enlargement of the vestry, no substantial addition to the fabric has been made in the last six hundred years.

Changes there have been. In the chancel and south transept we can see where older work has been partly done away to make place for new. At the time of the Reformation the church must have lost some ornaments and fittings. Salmon in his "History of Hertfordshire," writing in 1728, says: "The Rood seems to be left in the church still: A plain figure of coarse wood, with the head almost cut off with a saw or other instrument, standing. This image is made the clerk's desk, and a

shelf made above it to hold the book." No trace of the figure now remains. The place occupied by the rood screen at the entrance to the chancel is marked by an opening on the wall on the north side, now blocked up. There is a circular stone staircase in the thickness of the wall giving access to this former opening on to the platform of the rood screen, and also to the bell chamber in the tower. Fittings and monuments have of course been added at all periods and an impression of the interior of the church as it was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century may be had from two water colours of 1840 which hang near the south door.

Those interested in church bells will like to know that there are six in the tower ranging from 10 to 17 cwt. They bear the inscription "Richard Phelps me fecit 1717," but have been recast several times. An inventory of the church taken in 1548 shows there were then four bells in the steeple.

The Churchwardens' accounts from 1800 onward reveal a constant expenditure on repairs to the church, large and small. By 1860 the building presented a patched and dilapidated appearance and a thorough restoration was determined upon. This accounts for the fact that the exterior of the building does not much suggest a mediaeval building. It is too tidy and seen in the distance suggests a toy or model. The Victorian restorers were thorough. Most of what they did to St. Helen's was no doubt necessary and has abiding value. It they took away interest from the exterior of the building, at least they made secure the beauty of the interior, and they did not impose upon it too much of their favourite ideas of decoration. Briefly what was done between 1863 and 1866 was this. Walls were repaired and stripped of the plaster with which the mediaeval builders had covered the flint work. It is a pity the plaster was not replaced on the exterior. Buttresses were rebuilt and stonework renewed. The north porch was rebuilt. The roofs were stripped off and rebuilt using some of the old timber, and the pitch was made steeper. The painted ceiling over the chancel was

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done at this time. The spire, which had been shortened at some period, was also rebuilt, using the original timber and lead. A series of photographs taken at the time is preserved in the vestry and shows the church before and after the alterations. The interior restoration included the removal of the eighteenth and nineteenth century seating and panelling on the east wall, and the provision of stalls for the choir and seats in the nave. These were made out of old oak which was removed from the fifteenth century roof of Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge which was pulled down at this time, and the design of the seats in the nave was copied from an old pew found in the church before 1863. The Victorian choir stalls were found in 1960 to be badly affected by rot and woodworm. They have been replaced by stalls of an admirable simple design by Mr. Cecil Brown, who also designed at the same time the altar rails. Both are memorials to former parishioners. Some older fittings and ornaments in the church were suffered to remain. The fine fourteenth century font mounted on steps which are oddly askew, has a handsome wooden cover of apparently eighteenth century "gothick" work. The fine Jacobean pulpit of about 1634 has lost its sounding board and its former lofty base and stairs. The benches in the north or Lamer Chapel bear the date 1631, and came from Lamer House when the chapel there was pulled down. In the same chapel is a small Jacobean Communion table. The Royal Arms over the south door, "of wood, carved, gilt, and coloured" were made in 1805 at a cost of £5, as we learn from the Churchwardens' accounts. The coloured glass in the windows dates from mid-Victorian times onwards and shows some typical changes in fashion. There are fragments of ancient glass in the east windows of the north and south transepts. The ornaments and other fittings are modern, or relatively so.

The organ is a fine instrument, though its position in the chancel is unsatisfactory, architecturally and acoustically. It was built by J. W. Walker in 1866, with the swell and some further stops added later.

### III. MONUMENTS AND PEOPLE

THE MONUMENTS of the church afford a fascinating study of changing tastes, styles and materials in memorials, from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. The fourteenth century canopy in the north wall of the nave presumably covered a tomb of some kind, but no record survives. In the floor to the south of the tower is a part of a fifteenth century brass to a knight and his lady, probably Sir William de Gretwell. The figure of the knight, the inscription, the surround have all gone. Only the lady and the greyhound at his feet survive. In the north transept is a fine brass to Hugo and Margaret Bostock, of Mackerye End, parents of John of Wethampstede, perhaps the most famous son of Wheathampstead, who was the thirty-third Abbot of St. Albans during the reign of King Henry VI, his patron and friend. Fuller, in his "Worthies of England," writing in the time of the first Queen Elizabeth, says "he was famous for his learning and pleasant disposition and godly life. He ruled over the great Abbey for twenty years and died at a great age about 1465." The next brass in the Lamer Chapel is to John Heyworth of the same family, who is shewn with his wife and four sons and five daughters, with an inscription and four shields. The date is 1520. A third small brass to a man and his wife and six children, has no inscription but is believed to date from c.1510. On the wall above these is another Heyworth monument of the Tudor period. Passing for a moment to the south side of the tower, there is a splendid tomb of the Brockets dated 1558, with its fine carved effigies of alabaster partly coloured. The Brockets lived at Wheathampstead Place and parts of the Tudor house survive just across the river from the Church. Returning to the north transept or Lamer Chapel, there is a notable series of monuments to the Garrard family who lived at Lamer from about 1620 to 1950. The art of monumental sculpture is finely exhibited here, from the grand and splendidly executed wall monument to the successful business man of the Elizabethan age, down to the dull brass plate commemorating the Victorian squire

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and lady. Two of the Garrard family were Lord Mayors of London, and on one of the monuments may be seen the badges of office. The two eighteenth century monuments on the north nave wall with their characteristic flowery inscriptions should not be overlooked by those who prefer fine lettering and bold carving to dull and mechanical work typical of memorials today. Finally the monument to the last of the Garrard family should be noticed. It is a modern bronze sculpture of Apsley Cherry Garrard who was a member of the ill-fated Scott expedition to the South Pole in 1913. The sculptor was Ivor Roberts-Jones, and the work fitly closes the series of family monuments, so characteristic a feature of our parish churches from the Middle Ages to the present day.

Two other names claim our attention: Henry Killebrew and John Lamb. In front of the High Altar are ledger stones beautifully lettered, and these relate to the families of Killebrew and Lamb. Henry Killebrew, D.D., was Rector here from 1660 to 1673. He was a man of many parts. At the age of 17 he wrote a play "The Conspiracy," praised by Ben Johnson. During the Civil War he became a royalist chaplain and at the Restoration, James, Duke of York, his patron, made him his Almoner, and Master of the Savoy in London. Still deeply interested in the theatre, he was also made patentee of Drury Lane. His daughter, Anne, was Maid of Honour to Queen Mary of Modena, wife of James II, and though she died at the early age of 25, she was famous in her day as a poet and painter. Dryden wrote for her an elegy. Dr. Killebrew's second daughter, Elizabeth, married her father's curate, John Lamb. On the death of Henry Killebrew, Lamb succeeded him as Rector of Wheathampstead. John Lamb was a Doctor of Divinity and became Dean of Ely. He is well remembered here because on his death he bequeathed to the church two lovely pieces of silver—a large flagon for wine at Communion and a paten. Both bear the date 1708 and an inscription commemorating Lamb, with his crest and the arms of Ely. This fine Queen Ann silver

together with the Elizabethan communion cup and cover of 1571 are the principal silver treasures belonging to the church.

On the south wall at the entrance to the Chancel is a tablet giving the names of the Rectors of Wheathampstead as far as the records go back. Some of these names have already been noticed. Among the earlier incumbents John of Leycester is notable. He was John of Lea Castle, a name surviving in the Old Castle Farm which lies just above the river west of the village, and he was the first Rector here to be Lord of the Manor, a title still borne by his successors. It seems likely that the work on the church carried out in his time, including the building of the tower, owes a good deal to his energy and wealth, for a record preserved in Lincoln Cathedral Registry shows that the old tower being in a dangerous state, Bishop Oliver Sutton of Lincoln granted an "indulgence" to the then Rector and Churchwardens to raise money to rebuild it. The religious and political troubles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seem to have caused no significant break in the incumbencies. In 1543 Richard Sampson was consecrated Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, and his successor in the living, Richard Pate, became Bishop of Worcester in 1554. Lambert Osboldstone was a notable Puritan, at one time Master of Westminster School, of whom his political adversaries had a great many bad things to say, while his friends gave him extravagant praise. He was deprived of the living in 1640 after a controversy with Archbishop Laud. Parliament restored him in 1642 but he was again ejected shortly before the Restoration of Charles II, when Henry Killebrew was appointed, no doubt in recognition of his twenty-one years' faithful service to King Charles I and the Duke of York. No doubt, also, the censorious noted that his sister, Lady Shannon, was a favourite of the King's. The long incumbencies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will be noticed: two Rectors spanned a hundred years between them.

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One more figure must not be forgotten: the man who sang the praises of "happy, homely, Hertfordshire." There is no memorial in the church to Charles Lamb, but lovers of Elia will remember his associations with Mackerye End in this parish. He first visited it as a small boy in about 1779, and stayed at Mackerye End Farmhouse with the Brutons. His great aunt, Ann Gladman, was at that time housekeeper at the "big house" to Thomas Hawkins. There is a tablet in church on the north side of the choir to this Thomas Hawkins, recording that his grandmother was one of the twenty-three children of Sir John Garrard! Mackerye End House and Mackerye End Farm are still a lovely feature of that historic and beautiful corner of the parish.

On leaving the church it may be noticed that the lych gate was erected in memory of a soldier who was killed when fighting in China under General Gordon. At the south-east and south-west corners of the churchyard are wrought iron gates of Jacobean pattern, made by a craftsman in the village in 1951 and 1953.

This little survey of the church and its associations will, it is hoped, call attention to those features which are best worth remembering. The plan of the church gives a sense of size and spaciousness heightened by the dignity and proportion of the fine arches of the central tower. The lovely carving in stone of the fourteenth century, especially in the north and south transepts, the interesting tracery and clear glass add grace to the building, while the wide range of monuments and fittings of all periods gives a sense of continuity of life in the church. Above all, its character lies deeper than words can tell, for here down many centuries praise and honour to God have been offered continually.

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