THE
CHURCH OF ST. PETER
DIXTON.

The 19th Century restoration of this Church was so thorough that it seems better to give a very brief account of the development of the Church from its earliest days, rather than attempt a guide to what has largely disappeared. Mention of the main features of interest inside the Church will be found towards the end of the pamphlet.

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DIXTON.

Dixton differs from most other old border parishes in two respects. The Church is periodically subject to severe flooding; and the Parish, although entirely within the County of Monmouth, is ecclesiastically in the Deanery of Archenfield in the Diocese of Hereford. The flooding emphasises the antiquity of a site which must have been chosen when floods were unknown; while the Deanery, the Diocese and the County link the Church with the three main stages in its history; Archenfield with the Celtic Church, Hereford with Norman monasticism, and Monmouth with the Reformation. They provide convenient headings for this short account, just as the evolution of its name serves to summarise Dixton's early development.

THE NAME

The old Welsh name for Dixton was Llandidwg. It first appears in the Liber Landavensis as Henllan Tituuc or Llantidiuc, the Church of Tydiuc, a little known Welsh saint. When the Normans arrived they dropped the Llan but retained St. Tydiuc until they rededicated the Church to St. Peter late in the 12th Century. A Papal Bull of 1186 shows the transition in process when it refers to "the church of St. Peter Tadioci." In other words Tydiuc, though not completely ousted by Peter, was becoming a place-name. By the middle of the 13th Century the Ty- of Tydiuc had been dropped and the suffix -ton added to his last four letters to form Diuc's-ton. The name then evolved gradually through Deukestone — Dukeston — Duxton — Dyxton until by 1535 Dixton was in general use.

THE CELTIC FOUNDATION

The Celtic Church, which kept the Faith alive in the centuries when England was completely severed from Rome by barbarism, did so by the missionary activities of its monks. These monks operated from land granted to the Church by local overlords. In the case of Dixton, "King Ithael gave it with his son Meurig for the soul's health of his son Athruis, in perpetual consecration." The charter is witnessed by the King and also by Bishop Berthguinus and concludes with the customary invocation which shows the purpose behind the Liber Landavensis: "Whoever will keep it may God keep him; and whoever will separate it from the Church of Llandaff, may he be accursed." Ithael was King of Glewyssig and Berthguinus a Bishop, possibly in the 7th Century. Before or after the grant, the land may have been cleansed from former crime by the prayer and fasting of a holy man for forty days, "all which days," wrote Bede, "except Sundays, he fasted till the evening, according to the custom, and then took no more substance than a little bread, one hen's egg and a little milk mixed with water . . . and when the time of prayer and fasting was over he there built a monastery." The monastery would have been no more than a rough wooden shelter surrounded by its llan or enclosure, a head-quarters from which the monk could evangelize his chosen district. There was no formal dedication, the llan merely took the name of its founder: at Dixton, Llan Tydiuc. No more is known about him. He is mentioned in the Progenies Keredic as the son of Corun ap Keredic ap Cunedda and the brother of many saints, and J. H. Round suggested that he might even have been Tadiocus, Archbishop of York, who fled from Saxon persecution into Wales in the 6th Century. Whoever he was, his name still lingers in the name Dixton and he is represented in the East window which was put up in 1954 in memory of all past worshippers in the Church.

ARCHENFIELD

Dixton lies at the Southern tip of Archenfield, that triangle of land between the Wye and the Monnow, South of the Worm Brook, which was originally the independent Welsh district of Ercing, with its own Kings and its own peculiar tribal customs and laws. Its position has been an invitation to marauders from all sides at all times, and before the Conquest, its devastation was made absolute by the raid of Gruffydd ap Llewellyn in 1054. It seems unlikely that any Church which may have succeeded the first monastic cell at Dixton could have survived here for long. Less than two years after William landed from Normandy a new Church was consecrated at Dixton by Herwald, Bishop of Llandaff:

Detail of Royal Head Bell c. 1420

"In the time of King William, Earl William, Ualter de Laci and Raoul de Bernai, Sheriff of Hereford, before the building of the castle of Mingui (Monmouth) he consecrated Llanntidiuc and ordained Ris to be his priest there, and on his death his sons Guriul and Duinerth."

The practice of Ordaining the sons at the same time as the father was wholly Welsh. Attempts to enforce celibacy had never been successful. At the same time tribal laws of inheritance operated by which, on a priests death, his Church passed equally to all his sons. It was a system which led, as Giraldus angrily pointed out, to Churches which "have almost as many parsons or parties as there are principal men in the parish."

Before Bishop Herwald's death, at the age of 100 in 1104, "by reason of an infirmity and on account of a discord, he was deprived of the land of Ercycg (Archenfield) and unjustly it was retained by the Cathedral Church of Hereford." This was deliberate Norman policy. The Welsh of Archenfield had already been persuaded to act as Norman shock troops, sacrificing their Welsh loyalty in return for permission to retain their old tribal customs. The process was completed by bringing their souls under the watchful eye of the Bishop of Hereford. And in spite of the efforts of Herwald's successor Urban, the twenty-seven Churches of Archenfield, headed by Llan Tydiuc and Llan Meir Castell Mingui (Monmouth), remained in the Diocese of Hereford until 1844 when Monmouth and Dixton, temporarily, returned to Llandaff. The herring-bone masonry which can be seen on the North wall of the Nave may have been part of the Church which Herwald consecrated and then lost to Hereford.

SUBJECTION TO MONMOUTH PRIORY

About 1080 the Breton lord of Monmouth, Withenoc, founded a Benedictine Priory there which he staffed with monks from the French Abbey of St. Florent, Saumur. These alien monks were maintained by the endowment to the Priory of many local Churches including Dixton. In this way the old rural parish of Llantidiuc, out of which the new urban parish of Monmouth was carved, became dependent on Monmouth Priory for the maintenance of its priests. Many charters confirm this grant of Dixton to Monmouth and one implies that in 1186 Dixton possessed four chapels: St. Thomas, Ganarew, St. Thomas, Wisam, The Garth and Colman's vill. St. Thomas, Wisam seems to have been on the Redbrook Road. The probable base of its old cross is now in the churchyard at Dixton. It is a much finer one than the 14th Century Dixton Cross standing near the Tower. The Garth, across the river from Dixton, was soon to become a hermitage and Colman's vill was perhaps Llangunville, in a part of the Parish near the Monnow which now belongs to Llanrothal.

As the appropriation of Churches to religious houses often led to abuse, in 1215 it was ordained that a portion of the tithe should be set aside for the maintenance of a resident parish priest as Vicarius or deputy for the monks. The vicar's position was further strengthened when his minimum stipend was fixed at 5 marks (£3.6.8) "unless it be in those parts of Wales, where, on account of the slenderness of the Churches, Vicars are content with a smaller stipend."

THE TROUBLES OF THE 14th CENTURY

By 1300 the Tower and much of the fabric of the present Church had probably been completed and Dixton's first known vicar had become Bishop of Geneva. On the other hand Monmouth Priory was a shadow of its former self, and when, in that year the Vicar of Dixton inducted David, a monk from Saumur, as Prior, he unwittingly accelerated the decline. David's enormous debts which included one of £62.0.10 to Edward II, and repeated violation of the Sanctuary in St. Mary's, allowed Dixton to gain a moral superiority over Monmouth

Summer.

which the Vicar of Dixton exercised when, in 1318, he was one of those commissioned, "having put on the sacred vestments, with cross held aloft, bells ringing, candles burning and candles extinguished", to pronounce excommunication on certain men who had polluted the Sanctuary of St. Mary's.

At the turn of the century came the Black Death and Dixton, like many neighbouring parishes, knew three vicars in one year. The Pestilence recurred in 1361 and 1369, and this third visitation struck Hadnock, the North-Easter corner of the Parish with particular severity. Even so, the effects were probably less disastrous than the paralysis caused by the rebellion of Glyn Dwr which was still affecting the neighbourhood in the middle of the 15th Century. At the very beginning of that rebellion Joan Greindre, wife of the lord of the Manor of Hadnock, sought refuge in Bristol, where as an anchoress praying for the good estate of the King, she was awarded by him 8d

a week for life out of the petty customs of the port. Twenty years later a newly inducted Vicar of Dixton was bringing an action against his predecessor's executors, "by reason of the great dilapidation permitted by him", in Church and Parish.

THE HOSPITALS

During the 13th Century John, lord of Monmouth, had founded a hospital, "without the East Gate of Monmouth", dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and endowed with much land in Dixton, including The Vineyard, The Hermitage of the Garth, and "free pasture for 6 cows and their calves in my wood of Hodenac." Where this hospital was is very uncertain. In 1427 an Indulgence was granted to the benefactors of the poor and infirm at St. Michael's Hospital on the bank of the Wye near Dixton. This was undoubtedly Chapel Farm, one mile upstream from the Church. A certain similarity in the endowments of the two hospitals suggests that they may have been one and the same, and that when leprosy died out, as it did in the 15th Century, the Holy Trinity, traditionally a leper hospital, was rededicated to St. Michael and put to other use. The Leper Hospital tradition probably accounts for the stone seat outside the South Wall of the Chancel being called, quite unjustifiably, "The Leper Seat."

THE DISSOLUTION

In 1536 occurred two changes which affected the Parish more than the parishioners. By the Act of Union certain Marcher Lordships were combined to form the County of Monmouth. As the North Eastern corner of the Lordship of Monmouth, Dixton also became the North Eastern corner of the County. At the same time the Monasteries were dissolved and Monmouth Priory passed to the King to be sold into lay hands. In the Survey which preceded the Dissolution "Dyxton in the Marches of Wales" was valued at £8.9.4 of which 18/4 was paid annually by the Vicar to the Prior as Rector. When the Priory was abolished the 18/4 continued to be paid, first to the King and then to the layman to whom the Priory was sold, the Lay Rector as he was called. Almost at once trouble arose over the tithes contributing to the 18/4, the first of a long series of disputes between Vicar and Lay Rector which culminated before the Lord Chief Justice in 1863.

THE CHURCH RECORDS

James Clarke was appointed Vicar in 1630, and with him the Church records begin. He was of a superstitious turn of mind and recorded among the names of his Churchwardens a list of dates, "Erra Pater which Masters of Astronomy and Physicke agreeth and telleth the perylous and dangerous dayes in the yeare; in which if any man or woman be lett bloud of wound or veine they shall dye within 21 dayes following. Or whosoe falleth into sickeness on those dayes they shall not escape. And whoe taketh a great journey he shalbe in danger to dye ere he come home againe. And whosoe marrieth a wife they shall soone be departed, or else they shall live together with much sorrowe. Which days are these

January 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 15, 17, 18, Febr. 8, 10, 17, March, 15, 16, 21 Apr., 15 21 May 7, 15, 20 June 4, 7 July 15, 20 August 19, 20 Sept 6, 7 Oct 6 Nov 5, 19 Decemb 6, 7, 11 et aly dicunt 15, 16. And whosoe will learne the Canicular or dogge-dayes which are of evill and danger they beginn the 19th daye of July and continue to 28th of August in which it is allsoe perylous to take sickeness to take drinke or medicines or to lett bloud: but if necessitie require it must be before noone."

Although dispossessed by the Puritans on the usual grounds of malignancy and drunkenness, the Vicar survived all these dangers remarkably well, and, at the Restoration returned to his Parish where he remained until he died.

The book which he began was continued by his successors. In it they recorded their tithes and their expenses, their troubles and their fears. The tithe accounts reveal that in the middle of the 18th Century a heavy felling of wood in the Parish meant that the Vicar's usual salary of about £30 was doubled. The importance of the tithe of wood was in marked contrast with the 16th Century when in 1535, in an annual income of £8.9.4 the tithe of hay and grain accounted for £5.19.8., and wood only 3/4. The book contains lists of the Briefs, an account of a midnight funeral, and the household details of many Vicars.

THE DIXTON BIBLE

One of the many sources of friction between Vicar and Lay Rector in the 18th Century was the lack of a parsonage. A great deal was spent on converting the old Church at Wyesham into one but most vicars refused to live in it and let it to their curates. The best known and the most frequently absent 18th Century Vicar was Thomas Bankes (1770-1805) who enraged his Patron, Lord Gage, by obtaining from the Bishop a Dispensation of Residence on the grounds that the climate of Dixton would have injured his health. He compiled "The Christian's Family Bible," often referred to as "The Dixton Bible." There are two copies in the Church, well illustrated and annotated and full of statistical information which, if he obtained it himself, explains why he had little time for Dixton. Statements such as, "There are 3,566,486 letters in the Bible" and "The 21st verse of the 7th Chapter of Ezra contains all the letters of the alphabet" are two out of many. His fears about the climate were justified and he died as the result of a chill caught on a fleeting visit to Dixton to arrange an action against his old opponent Lord Gage, for arrears of tithe.

Winter

THE POOR ACCOUNTS

His successor was even less at Dixton, and quarrelled with the parishioners over the Poor Rate which he refused to pay because, as his agent wrote to the Church Wardens, "He had never been on the living except when he was inducted." Payments to the poor in the first half of the 19th Century were considerable. From 1817 until 1833 a total of £4824.17.3 was collected by rate out of which £3868.9.11 went in direct payments to the poor. In 1818 alone £419.4.3 was paid to the poor in this parish of 650 inhabitants. Perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that for the purpose of collecting this sum the parish was assessed in families, and the 650 became 142 families, of whom only 38 were classified as "above the rank of labourer." The remaining 104 families were all labourers and in many cases drawing relief. Some of this relief was expensive, as when sending Jane Dean and her daughter to America cost £21.2.10 Binding an orphan as an apprentice cost £11, and keeping a lunatic in Gloucester Asylum for 11 weeks £9.17.5, but normally the payments were small and, for those who refused, the old parsonage at Wyesham had been converted into a Poor House. Small families got short shrift and one woman, whose husband was injured while working for the Church Warden at 9/- a week, was refused relief because she had only five children. The accounts were carefully kept and checked and provide an accurate picture of an unhappy age when the Social Services were almost entirely the responsibility of the Parish.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY RESTORATIONS

In 1820 the Church seems to have been largely Jacobean in its furnishings and to have had a lower and narrower Chancel Arch. Over it was the Royal Arms of Queen Anne, now on the North wall of the Nave. The double decker pulpit had a large sounding box and the pews were of the box type. At the West end was a gallery to hold 40 people where everything movable was stored in time of flood. There was a Holy Water Stoup in the South Porch and the old font was lying outside in the churchyard. The East window was smaller and had only one light, while the Laudian altar rails, "one yard in height and so thick with pillars that dogs may not get in", enclosed the Sanctuary on three sides. The windows on the North wall of the Nave had wooden frames.

Two vicars changed all this. Mr. Davies (1822-33) removed the pews and pulpit, planted the trees in the churchyard and built, largely at his own expense, Dixton Schoolroom and the present Vestry. This Vestry stands on the site of what was traditionally a Hermit's cell and, in fact, an Indulgence was granted in 1515 to those who would assist David the Hermit repair the Church.

Mr. Deighton (1833-71), not to be outdone by his predecessor and having more time to do it, removed the stone floor, the gallery, the wooden framed windows, the South Porch, the Chancel Arch, and, for good measure, Mr. Davies' Pulpit and Pews; and built, also at his own expense, the present Vicarage and the Kymin Schoolroom (now the Kymin Chapel). He had the ancient font cut down to fit a new pedestal and sold "a very old Communion Cup" to a Monmouth jeweller for £1.

Some, but by no means all, of these changes were caused by a disastrous flood in 1852 which subsided only just in time for the Parish Clerk to wade out and earn 2/- "tolling the bell at the Duke of Wellington's funeral."

By 1860 the Church was much as it is today, and within two years was the scene of a dispute between the Vicar, Mr. Deighton,, and the Lay Rector, Miss Griffin, which had to be settled ultimately by the Lord Chief Justice. The Lay Rector, having rights in the Chancel, asserted them by entering the Church through the small Chancel door. She kept the key herself and the door was only used when she came to Church and unlocked it. This, though inconvenient, did not worry

the Vicar until she developed a liking for fresh air, and on entering the Church for Matins, left the door wide open and the Vicar with his back to a strong through draught. On a particularly cold Sunday he got up and shut the door, whereupon Miss Griffin rose, opened it, and sat down beside it on guard. The same thing happened on the following Sunday except that the door was shut by the Church Warden, and Miss Griffin when she went to reopen it, took with her a hassock on which she sat in the doorway for the rest of the Service. The Vicar then had Miss Griffin's lock on the Chancel door removed, and replaced it with one of his own, offering her a duplicate key. This she refused and sued him, with his Church Warden, for trespass, "In that they broke and entered a certain close of the Plaintiff, that is the Chancel of the

The Church on an Old Fire Screen.

Parish of Dixton, and damaged and broke the door." After nearly two years litigation judgement was given for the Vicar, by Lord Chief Justice Cockburn. Vicar and Lay Rector continued to serve the Church for many years, and now lie buried in its shadow, Miss Griffin a good deal nearer to her Chancel than the Vicar.

The case aroused great interest at the time, as the Lay Rector's rights in the Chancel went back to the days when St. Mary's Church in Monmouth was divided at the Chancel Arch by a stone screen separating the Chancel of the monks from the Nave of the Parishioners. Miss Griffin was simply asserting the right of her monastic predecessors, as Rectors, to control of the Chancel, while their Vicarius or deputy attended to the Parishioners in the Nave.

THE INTERIOR

In 1876 a new bell was given to the Church in memory of Miss Griffin. Of the other three bells, two are 17th Century and the third bears the head of Edward III and his Queen Phillipa stamped as stops in the inscription, "Sancta Margarita Ora Pro Nobis". According to Mr. Arthur Wright in "The Church Bells of Monmouthshire", this is the only Royal Head Bell in the County and was almost certainly cast at Worcester about 1420.

Other features inside the Church are the 18th Century tombs of the Griffitt and Bellamy families in the Sanctuary and the tablet to Admiral Griffin in the Chancel. The opening over the Chancel Arch was cut by a former Vicar looking for traces of a Rood Screen. He also uncovered the herring bone masonry on the North side of the Nave. The reredos shows St. Peter and St. James, the Patron of the sister Church at Wyesham which was built in 1875. Like most other local Churches the alignment of Nave and Chancel is not true.

THE FLOODS

At the side of the Chancel Arch are tablets marking the height of the last two deep floods in the Church; that for 1929 showing a depth of 5ft. 2½ins. and that for 1947 showing 5ft. 11½ins. Floods are mentioned throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries and on one occasion in the 14th. The greatest single cause of these floods is probably the wholesale felling of the Herefordshire forests which must once, when they covered the County, have acted as a sponge absorbing the rainfall. The marks on the Chancel Arch underline the antiquity of a site which was once a clearing in a forest which kept the river safely in its banks.

By the Welsh Church Act (1914) border parishes were allowed to vote on whether they should be included in the Church of Wales or not. In Dixton, which then had a detached portion of the parish in Herefordshire, it was a vote for the Diocese of Hereford or the Diocese of Llandaff to which the Parish had returned in 1844. 209 parishioners voted for England and only 29 for Wales. So the terminal invocation of the original Charter, "Whoever will separate it from the Church of Llandaff may he be accursed," lay squarely on the heads of the 209 who voted for England. And Dixton, in the County of Monmouthshire, returned to the Deanery of Archenfield in the Diocese of Hereford, a strange administrative mixture, but an accurate reflection of its history.

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