

ST. PETER'S CHURCH, DLXTON

The derivation of the name - Dixton - underlines the antiquity of this site as a place of worship. The old Celtic name was Llandidwg, meaning the Llan or enclosure of Didwg, probably a monk who evangelised this district for the Celtic church. The Normans re-dedicated the Church to St. Peter, Tydiuc. By about 1250 the "Ty" had been dropped, and it was St. Peter's Diuc'ston. The name then evolved through Dukeston - Duxton to Dixton by the 15th century.

It lay in the old Welsh commote of Erging or Archenfield and the original building was probably destroyed when Gruffydd ap Llywelyn raided the district in 1054. It was rebuilt shortly after the Conquest and the herring-bone masonry of c.1080 in the North wall of the Nave may date from that re-building. At this time the Church was appropriated by the Benedictine Priory in Monmouth and remained attached to that house until the Dissolution.

By 1100 Archenfield, including Dixton and Monmouth, had been seized from the Welsh Church by the Bishop of Hereford. Dixton remained in the Diocese of Hereford until 1844 when it was returned to Llandaff. In 1914 Dixton was one of the Border parishes which were allowed to vote whether they wished to be in England or Wales, and by 209 to 29, voted to return to Hereford. So now, although the whole parish lies within the County of Monmouth, ecclesiastically, it is in the Deanery of Archenfield and the Diocese of Hereford, a strange administrative mixture but an accurate reflection of its history.

The Tower and much of the existing fabric of the Church was completed in the 13th Century and by 1300 its Vicar had become Bishop of Geneva, the only one so far to attain such an exalted rank. In 1346, the year of Crecy, the Vicar, a Frenchman, was cited as an alien by the Bishop of Hereford. He was, however, too old to be dangerous and was allowed to stay in office until he succumbed to the Black Death in 1348/9, a year which saw three different incumbents.

In 1536 the County of Monmouth was formed and the monasteries were dissolved. As a result, Dixton passed from Monmouth Priory, which had acted as Rector of the Church, to a Lay Rector appointed by the King.

The Church records begin with William Clarke in 1630 and are fairly complete. Clarke was dismissed by the Puritans on the grounds of drunkenness and malignancy but returned after the Civil War and stayed until he died. His initials were on the old Three-decker Pulpit and in his time the rails were on three sides of the Communion Table, and there were box pews and a low Norman Chancel Arch.

The Royal Arms are those of Queen Anne. They were painted locally, as were the tablets at the West end which are on tin and have a mistake in the Lord's Prayer. The Church Plate was given in 1755 by the Vicar and his wife. The Bible on the old Communion table near the South door was compiled by another Vicar, Thomas Bankes (1770-1805). He did not set foot in the Parish until the year in which he died so he had time to compile the information which this Bible contains, e.g.

"There are 3,566,486 letters in the Bible"

"The 21st verse of the 7th Chapter of Ezra contains all the letters of the alphabet"

"The word 'and' occurs 35,543 times in the O.T. and 10,684 times in the N.T."

The Church was restored twice in the 19th Century. In 1824 the box pews were removed and the Vestry was built. The three-decker pulpit was replaced and the Communion rails placed in their present position. In 1860, the Chancel Arch was raised, the gallery removed, the South Porch re-built and, for good measure, the 1824 pews and the pulpit replaced by the existing ones. This was easily the most disastrous restoration. Mercifully, the plaster inside and out was retained.

The candle brackets and iron candelabra were made c.1952 by John Bryan of Grosmont; the East Window, erected in 1954 in memory of Mr E.H. Jones, was designed by Francis Stephens; and the Vicar's stall and Chancel Prayer desks were given in memory of Captain N.C. Elstob, who is also commemorated by the gates bearing his initials on the river bank. The North Window in the Sanctuary was given by Mr and Mrs H. Woodhouse, and the South Window commemorates St. Michael's Chapel.

Other details include two low side windows, the Griffin monuments in the Chancel and the Italian plaster cast of the crucifixion of St. Peter in the Porch. The opening above the Pulpit was made by a former Vicar looking for traces of a rood screen. He was unable to replace the stones he took out. The font in the Chancel came from St. Michael's Chapel.

The bells consist of two 17th Century ones, one dated 1876 and a Royal Head bell, probably cast at Worcester in about 1420, bearing the heads of Edward III, and his Queen Philippa, as stops in the inscription, "Sancta Margareta Ora Pro Nobis". It is the only bell of this kind in the County.

The Church is subject to severe flooding and brass plates can be seen on the North side of the Chancel arch recording the height of the last three high floods.

In the Churchyard, there is a stone seat on the south side of the Chancel, sometimes erroneously called a "Leper Seat", and the base of a wayside cross brought from Wyesham just south of the Tower.

K.E.K.

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