

The Church of Saint John the Baptist, Colsterworth



Welcome, visitor, to this ancient church, where you will discover many aspects and items to engage your interest. Before you embark on a tour of the building, pause for a moment if you will. This historic edifice has stood for centuries paying Christian witness through times of trial by war and oppression, plague and starvation. It rests as a memorial to those of our forefathers who gathered within its walls to offer their praises and thanksgivings to God, and today, its spiritual message is as relevant to our needs as to the generations long past.

The beginnings of this Holy House lie in times beyond memory or recorded data. We know next to nothing about our ancient village churches before the fourth century, but here, the herringbone work, which is clearly visible over the arches in the north wall of the nave, gives indication of a Saxon origin.

Attempts have been made to prove Roman ancestry for this building. Indeed Roman remains were discovered half a mile to the south and the great Roman road of Ermine Street, used by the legions on their journeys up and down the country, runs to the east of the village. The Romans did use herringbone construction and the square pillars are similar to square pillars in Bath. If this is indeed the case that a pagan temple stood on this spot, then the remains date from before AD 410, as in that year Alaric the Goth led his hordes in the sack of Rome and the last of the legionaries were withdrawn from these islands to defend their homeland. Tempting, as it is to accept this argument, nevertheless most experts lean to the opinion that our church was founded by the early Saxons who settled in this region within a century of the departure of the Roman occupation forces.

It would be difficult to determine when the early Saxon church was built, but remnants of Runic crosses found on the site indicate there was a building here from the 9th or

10th Century. The largest remnant is near the lectern where model number one is situated



It is certain the original church, consisting of Nave and Chancel, built in herringbone coursing with small round-headed windows, was here in the year 1,000. The last of the herringbone walling can be seen above the North Arcade and in the corner of the Lady Chapel above the South Arcade.

Possibly a two light window at the east end lit the Chancel, with around headed door at the west end. The roof is very likely to have been thatched at this period.



There had been very little influence on the architecture following the departure of the Romans around 500 years earlier and many of the building skills had been lost during the "Dark Ages". Hence a very simple structure would exist at this time but still reflecting the Roman architectural style.

The floor might well have been hard earth in the Nave and perhaps some rough paving in the Chancel. Seating, simple benches if any, with a few stout chairs in the Chancel for the clergy. A stone slab supported on piers might serve as the altar, no font at this time, baptisms taking place in local rivers. Lighting in the Chancel would be by candles and in the Nave oil or fat fuelled torches. Some thatched roofs caught fire as a result!

Following the arrival of the Normans after William's defeat of Harold in 1066, the influx of skilled masons made rapid strides in improving existing buildings and erecting many new ones particularly castles and churches, some eight thousand of the latter being founded or rebuilt. By 1200 the north aisle had been added and probably the south aisle, both with Norman arcades of semicircular arches, heavy piers and columns. These aisles were only six feet wide; the southern one remains unchanged, so it was not an ambitious project. A semicircular Chancel arch would also have been built to match and the rood loft erected. It is likely this was also used as a minstrel gallery.

The lack of high quality masonry from this period suggests that simple lancet windows would replace the smaller Saxon windows. One such window is to be seen at the west end of the south aisle, a three light version may have illuminated the altar. The simple Saxon door would be changed to a larger Norman door with pointed arch, hoodmould and shafts. This may well be the present doorway re-erected in the north aisle. The roof is likely to have been extended on each side to cover the aisles and tiles, maybe of Collyweston type replacing the thatched roof.



There seems to have been little additional work done on the church until the tower was raised, dated 1305, the mason was Thomas de Somersby as inscribed on the southern base plinth of the tower. With such a massive structure, the walls are four feet thick; it almost certainly had a spire as depicted in a sketch by the young Isaac Newton on the kitchen wall of the Woolsthorpe Manor, drawn around 1650. The four gargoyles, water outlets no longer in use, tend to support this assumption. Some old timber recently removed from the tower roof suggests that it was a lead covered wooden structure. Maybe it was struck by lightning or destroyed by the Great Storm of 1703, but this is purely conjecture.



This was high class building in close jointed ashlar blocks of Ancaster stone or similar, possibly quarried as near as Corby Glen. Was this the first phase of a plan to completely rebuild the church in a similar manner?

However, the 14th Century was not an auspicious time for building. Floods and droughts caused crop failures. Money was in short supply and, for the churches, exacerbated by

the appropriations of the monasteries, whereby the abbeys took over the church funds and provided priests in return. The Priory of St Barbara in Colsterworth may well have been the recipient of funds at this time, but it was suppressed in 1414.

The middle of the century saw the onset of the Black Death, when a third of England's population perished. So many corpses had to be buried that new burial grounds were opened in places such as Melton Mowbray and Newark. It is likely then that the churchyard of St Johns was built up over the mass graves, raising the level some two to three feet above the church floor. This would lead to complications with future building.

In 1381 the levying of even higher taxes in the form of a poll tax, led to the Peasants' Revolt when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sudbury and the Kings treasurer were murdered.

It may therefore have been towards the end of the 14th Century before the Nave was extended to meet the tower, though it had been built out of line and off-centre.

The roof would need to be raised to clear the tower arch, so the walls were raised two feet and the new roof pitched at 55°. The earlier chancel arch would be re-used on the west end of the north arcade while a completely new south arcade and matching chancel arch were built in the perpendicular style. [The hood mould is a 19th Century addition.] From the position of the Chancel arch, half obscuring the rood loft access, it is likely that this new arch was built in front of the existing semicircular Norman arch before it was removed and re-used at the west end of the Nave. Inspection of the section of Saxon wall in the south aisle indicates where the original wall angle would have been. The rood loft may have been retained in part, the opening being roughly modified, as it is at present, to allow limited access to the rood loft figures of John and Mary. There would

now be no room for minstrels. There was almost certainly a parapet built on the north and south verges of the new nave roof. This becomes apparent when observing where the line of the pitched roof, visible on the tower wall, meets the former wall top. The north and south aisle east windows were added about this time; the former being re-sited in the east wall of the Newton chapel, most probably when the chapel was restored in the 19th Century. The west window in the north aisle is of this period also. Since there is a re-use of the lancet window in the west end of the south aisle, it is likely that the other lancet windows had been re-used or left in situ, being replaced as above.

Presumably at this stage the north aisle was widened and extended. The old west wall would be taken down and the now redundant west doorway re-used in its present position in the new north wall.

At the start of the 15th Century, since the south aisle could not be widened, due to the raised level of the churchyard, the new south door, being built at this new ground level, needed a drop of three large steps to reach the church floor level. One of the older lancet windows has been re-used at the west end of the south aisle, but two new windows in perpendicular style were built in the south aisle wall. A similar window was made in the north aisle wall. This had the tracery replaced in the 19th. Century to complement the two new chapel windows built in the same style.

There appears to have been much re-using of certain elements of construction such as arches, doorways and windows. Obviously, if funds are in short supply the most has to be made of existing materials. The level of craftsmanship shown in the re-erection of the third Norman arch is very substandard, compared with the south arcade. The difference in the floor levels between the Nave and the Tower also caused problems, the rather unorthodox solution was to slope the Nave floor some two feet downwards from east to

west. A very odd compromise. This tends to indicate that the original plans made at the time of the towers construction had been lost, or abandoned.

After suppression of St Barbara's Priory, perhaps more funds were available for the church building and it seems likely that a new chancel was built at the beginning of the 16th Century. Henry VIII built a number of palaces and Cardinal Wolsey built Hampton Court. This was a favourable time to improve the church.

The new chancel was larger with bigger windows, much lighter than the Saxon-Norman edifice. It was built to match the nave in height, the east window; much the same as the present replica made for John Mirehouse, would create a wonderful impression. The nave would look like a dungeon in comparison. Doubtless the interior would be lavishly decorated. Perhaps some of the reliquaries, statues etc were transferred from the closed priory. With the reduced rood loft, supporting a large cross and full sized figures of John and Mary, and the nave probably hung with banners, the church would be extremely ornate. Were the holes in the nave north wall used for poles to support the banners?

During the reign of Henry VIII the fortunes of the churches began to change. Initially the liturgy was directed from Rome, much as it had been over most, but not all, of the earlier centuries. However, after Henry's split with Rome and following the dissolution of the monasteries, an era of uncertainty began. Although Elizabeth I was a devout Christian, all traces of "Popery" were to be removed from the churches. Many artifacts in Colsterworth church were burnt, destroyed or sold, such as the high altar, the rood loft and figures, Latin prayer books, surplices etc. Thus the 16th Century began a time of neglect and purging of our churches and when Cromwell's Republic was declared in 1642, many churches were in decline. Much desecration by Cromwell's soldiers followed.

Records written by the then Churchwardens state that:

"Item. The rood Marie and John was burned A^o primo Elizabeth by Thomas Tidd and John Tidd church wardens."

"Item. The rood loft, altars and altar stones broken and defaced by John Buds and Wm Billingworth church wardens"

This was in "the second year of Elizabeth"

Thus, in the early years of Queen Elizabeth I reign, all "Popish things" were destroyed or sold.

Towards the end of Elizabeth's reign times became more settled and it would appear that the Newton chantry or chapel was built around 1600. Arthur Mee's book "The Kings England" printed in 1944, in its description of Colsterworth church, states that some three generations of Newton's family are buried in the Newton chapel. Perhaps they lie under the organ? This may well place the building of the original chapel, or chantry in the late 16th Century. This then is how the church may have looked at Isaac Newton's baptism on January 1st 1643 and in his boyhood, with spire, steep pitched Nave roof and the family chapel, as depicted by him on the kitchen wall of Woolsthorpe Manor.

Around the end of the 17th Century, during the reigns of William and Mary and Queen Anne, there was a re-emergence of the arts and it is probable that the clerestory was constructed with the semicircular windows at this time. Perhaps this coincided with the disappearance of the spire. Did the Great Storm of 1703 blow it on to the Nave roof creating the impetus to construct a new roof? No one knows but it is a thought to tease the mind. The existing parapet was almost certainly taken down, the walls and windows of the clerestory added and the parapet replaced at the higher level. They didn't throw

much away! The new low-pitched lead covered roof is quite impressive; it is a great pity that the carved beam and corbel figures cannot be seen.

At this time the Nave was plastered and painted white, but Revd John Mirehouse had all the plaster removed so that darkness descended once again.

It is presumed that the flue behind the pulpit was constructed during this building phase, with a fireplace where the pulpit now stands. The font was nearby since total immersion was practised at baptisms in those days.

Correspondence by Sir Isaac Newton shows that a gallery was erected at the west end of the Nave at his expense and is depicted in the model. Revd John Mirehouse had this removed during the reconstruction of 1876.

By 1770, the continuing decline of the churches triggered by the 16th and 17th Centuries stripping of church ornamentation had left the Chancel and Newton chapel in a very poor state of repair. The then rector, the Revd Henry Dodwell demolished them and built a crude stone Chancel from the recovered stones. His time of office was to last some sixty years from 1766, but it seems little other work was carried out on the church, and it was to be over a hundred years before the present Chancel and Newton Chapel were restored. However, during Dodwell's ministry the old rectory adjacent to the church was built dated 1802 and in 1805 the south porch was added.

One surprising fact is that three Rectors spanned 145 years ministry between them. Revd Henry Dodwell 1766, Revd William Squire Mirehouse 1826 followed by his son Revd John Mirehouse 1864- 1911.

In this period 19th Century, the church heating was from a large cast iron stove where the fireplace had been. It is likely a second stove was installed in the Newton Chapel, as it was at that time, which stood close to where the present access door to vestry is. The font, originally constructed in the Norman period, perhaps late 12th Century, still has its original shaft or pedestal. The bowl, however appears to have had a chequered history. The one made with the pedestal was broken, perhaps at the time of the 1703 Great Storm when, it is believed, the spire came through the Nave roof. According to Revd John Mirehouse it was replaced by a bowl of the 'Decorated' period. This was some four centuries earlier? It could well be that the replacement bowl came from another church and the refurbished font was then placed near the new fireplace, where the pulpit now stands, the rood loft having been removed as described earlier. Mirehouse account states that this bowl became cracked due to the heat from a cast iron stove and disintegrated on removal to the present site near the Tower. He then had a third bowl carved to replicate the original Norman font, which is the one in use today. He decided to rebuild the Chancel in the style of the one demolished by Dodwell, built around 1500 as a memorial to Sir Isaac Newton. He accomplished this by raising funds from many sources. The kudos accorded to Newton in the late 19th Century is apparent in the number of donations from all over the country. Revd John Mirehouse was able to raise the new Chancel in 1876, finding enough original re-used stones in the rough building he had demolished, to be able to re-create the east window. This appears to be in the Tudor style. Lancet windows were chosen for the new south wall.

The Turnor family, Newton descendents, who contributed to the Chancel, also had the Newton chantry rebuilt. The north windows of the chantry are copies of the earlier perpendicular style and new tracery was installed in the similar window in the north aisle.

The east chantry window is likely to be the north aisle east window re-used. The new arch between the north aisle and the chantry was built at this time. The present screen and access was added in mid 20th Century.

During this rebuilding, new lead roofs were laid on the Nave and north and south aisles. New paving, pews and a pulpit were installed.

So we have the church building largely as it stands today. There is much of interest to be seen in the windows, furniture and decoration as described on the following pages.

The Embellishments and Artifacts

The beautiful stained glass in the Chancel east window was executed by Messrs. Bell of Bristol. The four lights depict scenes from the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The angels above hold the instruments of torture, a sponge on a reed, the garments for which lots were cast, a spear that pierced the side of Our Lord, three nails, a scourge and a crown of thorns. At the foot of the lights are four angels holding texts.



The window was given in memory of Revd William Mirehouse by his widow. The four windows in the south wall of the Chancel depict scenes from the life of John the Baptist and were given in memory of Revd William Mirehouse by his son the Revd John Mirehouse. He also donated the communion table or altar in memory of his mother and the carved oak screen between Chancel and Vestry commemorates his grandparents.

The reredos behind the altar splendidly complements the east window and portrays the scene of the Last Supper. It was made in mosaic by Messrs. Powell of Blackfriars, London. St Peter and St Paul stand on either side and the glowing colours and the skill of the artist draws all eyes in admiration. Mrs Bigge of Torquay commissioned this magnificent work in memory of her mother Mrs Ord, widow of the Revd Thomas Ord of Galby. The stained glass of the window in the tower room was also given in her memory by her many friends in Colsterworth. She was the superintendent of the Sunday School for many years and the apt subject of the window is "Suffer the little children to come into me."

The Credence Table to the south of the altar was given in memory of the crew of a Lancaster bomber DV226, lost over Germany in 1943 and the Bishop's chair to the north of the altar was given by grateful parishioners in memory of Canon Mahon, Rector here from 1911 to 1939.

The menorah seven-branched candlestick, being a copy of one in the Tabernacle in Jerusalem, was given by the Revd John Mirehouse to improve the Chancel illumination in the 19th Century. This was rescued from the rectory garage by the churchwarden Sqn Ldr A W Adams who, with his wife also saved many parish records, which are now housed in the Lincoln Archives. Their industry also cleared a backlog of debris from the tower and restored some order to the church.

The church services are still enhanced by the two manual pipe organ installed in 1897 and given by the then organist Mrs Edith Heaven, wife of Dr Heaven. A plate on the side of the organ commemorates the event and a plaque on the south wall of the Chancel records her services as organist. A large bronze plaque above celebrates the

reconstruction of the Chancel in honour of Sir Isaac Newton. A translation of the Latin inscription hangs nearby



Behind the organ is a sundial carved by the young Isaac Newton at Woolsthorpe Manor. It was built into the wall at the time of the chapel's reconstruction and a bust of Newton was carved into the corbel above it. This work was carried out by the Turnor family.

At the east end of the south aisle is the Lady Chapel. The altar was given by the Modd family in memory of William Modd and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Close by in the south wall the window has the stained glass showing the story of the Good Samaritan. This was given in memory of Elizabeth Beeson.

The north aisle has two decorated windows at the western end and illustrate the sadness brought about by war. The three light window facing west was given by Mrs Bland in memory of her husband Captain Charles Bland who was killed in action on April 23rd 1915 soon after his daughter was born. The three lights depict the patron saints of England - St George; Scotland St Andrew and France St Denis. Close by on the north wall is the window in memory of Mrs. Bland who remained a widow until her death in 1956. The two lights show St Patrick, patron saint of Ireland and St Hugh of Lincoln.

Along the north wall is a representation of the church in painted clay tiles executed by Colsterworth School pupils. This was to commemorate Mr. Philip Isaac, headmaster 1953 to 1978, and a lay preacher at this church for many years.

At the east end of the north aisle is a collection of Sir Isaac Newton memorabilia. Born at Woolsthorpe Manor on Christmas Day 1642 he was baptised here on January 1st 1643. The black alabaster bust of him is a copy of one by Roubiliac 1751.

The arch between the north aisle and the vestry or Newton Chapel, was erected at the same time as the rebuilding of the Chancel, 1876. The oak screen was inserted into the opening around 1950 and was dedicated to Mr Frederick Ball, his wife Elizabeth, also Robert and Caroline Doubleday, their son having married a daughter of Mr and Mrs Ball. Mr Ball was headmaster at Colsterworth School for 35 years from 1889.

The tower clock was installed by public subscription in 1854 by Messrs William Thomas of Lincoln. Due to the efforts of Sqn Ldr Douglas Campion and others the clock still keeps good time, though weekly winding is required. It is hoped to restore the clock to its former glory with new, rectangular faces as depicted on 1905 photographs, and the chiming mechanism to record the hours once again.

The tower houses a splendid peal of bells

There are six bells. It was the custom of the maker to date each bell and to decorate it with a motto, or a religious or patriotic text, and with his own name. The bells of this church are marked as follows:

- Treble: - 'Tobias Norris cast me in 1684."
- 2nd: - "God save the King. Hardell J Whittle
 Tobias Norris cast me in 1674."
- 3rd :- "Non clamor sed amor cantat in aure Dei, 1613" [the oldest].
 From constant use this bell became
 cracked and, in 1859, was recast by
 Messrs Taylor of Loughborough, but [it
 is averred] is not in tune with others.
- 4th: - Made by Messrs. Taylor of Loughborough
and Tenor when the bells were rehung on a new steel frame in 1911.
- 5th: - God save the King. Tobias Norris cast me in 1684."

The King for whom Tobias Norris declared his allegiance was King Charles II, who was restored to the throne at the restoration in 1660, when the Puritan era of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell came to an end.

In 1983, all the bells were cleaned, new bolts fitted and pre-packed bearings fitted on serviced headstocks. All the wheel brackets were cleaned and refixed to the wheels. New stays were fitted to the bells and the whole frame cleaned and repainted. Much of this work was voluntarily undertaken by Mr Fred Pembleton and Sqn Ldr A W Adams.

The following set of rules were at one time painted on the wall for the guidance of the ringers:

"Ye ringers all observe these orders well,
He forfeits 12 pence that turns off a bell,
And he that doth ring with either spur or hatt,
His sixpence shall certainly pay for that.
He that doth spoil, or doth disturb a peal
Shall pay his fourpence for a quart of ale;
And he that is heard to curse or swear
Shall pay his 12 pence and forbear.
These customs elsewhere now be used,
Lest bells and ringers be abused;
Ye gallants that on purpose come to ring,
See that ye coyne along with you do bring,
And further also that if you ring here,
You must ring truly both with hands and eare;

Or else your forfeits surely pay,
And that full speedily without delay,
Our laws is old that are not newe,
The Sexton looketh for his due. AD1686.

On the wall of this room can be seen a list of the names of the bell-ringers who rang a peal of 5040 changes in two hours and forty minutes on November 20th 1918, in thanksgiving for the Armistice, which marked the end of the carnage and the suffering of the Great War 1914-1918.

Another list gives the team who rang a quarter of a peal of Plain Bob Minor [1260 changes] on 2nd February 1953, the year of the Coronation of Elizabeth II Mr Godby, who rang treble, was a teacher at Colsterworth School who served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War 1939-1945, returning safely to his duties at the end of hostilities.

It is interesting to note that three of the six bells were cast during Sir Isaac Newton's lifetime. It also appears that the clerestory was built in this period and the sundial commissioned by him was moved from the tower wall to its present position during the clerestory building. Having provided the money to build a gallery by the tower in the last year of his life, one speculates how much influence he had on the considerable improvements made to the church during this time.

From this history, based on facts and some speculation, it will be seen that this ancient building has evolved through many changes due in some measure to manmade and natural disasters.

The influence of monarchs, bishops, clergy, aristocracy and the local populace have all left their marks through extension, improvement, decay, demolition and rebuilding of this splendid church. It reflects the centuries of work involving many hands, hearts and minds of our antecedents. It is hoped that many more people will use this church for prayer, finding peace and tranquillity within its walls.

Bertram L Cole Church Warden 2003

Acknowledgements

To Reverend John Mirehouse, late rector of this church, for much information gained from his History of St John the Baptist Church.

To Sqn Ldr A W [Fred] Adams, church warden extraordinary, for historical data and encouragement.

To Lincoln Archives, for information on St Barbara's Priory.

To producers of the booklet "A Walk Around the Church", especially Joy Isaac.