

St Andrew's Meonstoke



Meonstoke was one of the principal villages of the Jutish province of the Meonwara, which, according to Bede, came under Saxon control in the 7th century, though retaining much of its Jutish identity. St. Wilfred brought Christianity to the Meon Valley also in the 7th century. So it is likely that there has been a church on this site for over a thousand years although no trace of it now survives. There probably would have been a church to rival the Saxon Church at Corhampton built about 1020, which is only two hundred yards across the River Meon, which was then both wider and navigable. The Domesday Book records that "The Bishop receives 25 shillings from the church of Menestocke".

Originally the parish of Meonstoke and Soberton, the benefice provided a considerable income, hence the number of highly placed ecclesiastics among the early rectors. Right from early days, the Bishop of Winchester was the patron until 1927, when Meonstoke became part of the newly created diocese of Portsmouth and its bishop became the patron. In 1384 William of Wykeham, then the Bishop and founder of Winchester College, granted the principal manor in Meonstoke to the college who technically are still the lords of the manor. This explains why there are no sizeable houses in the village, the biggest being Meonstoke House, half a mile down river. This was the rectory, positioned there because Soberton was a chapel of ease to Meonstoke, and it remained the rectory until 1893 when the Rev. Charles Hume, rector for 61 years, died and the house was sold to the Macrae family.

The site of the church close to the river may seem strange, but in fact it is on slightly higher ground and during the disastrous floods of 2000/01, although all round the church was affected and it was only approachable with wellies, the church itself remained dry. The river itself was the main through

route until the building of the old Meon Valley Road in the Middle Ages. This track joined up with the Neolithic road called White Way, in Exton. White Way linked the two Iron Age forts each side of the valley, Beacon Hill (in the parish of Exton) to the north, and Old Winchester Hill (within the parish of Meonstoke) to the south. This track crossed the river at The Grinch about ½ mile to the north of the church, and it was here that a Roman villa was discovered, of which the gable end of a barn is now in the British Museum. The old Meon Valley Road left Exton, cut through farmland and reached the river at Corhampton church, where there was also a mill. The road would have crossed the river here, passed the church and continued south, as today, turning left by the pub (the Buck's Head) up Buck's Head Hill and then down the High Street to Meonstoke House and beyond. The house to the west of the church, St. Andrew's Cottage, and the house at the end of the lane where it joins Buck's Head Hill have both recently been identified as late medieval hall houses. So the seemingly odd position of the church at one end of the village is explained. Meonstoke throughout the Middle Ages was clearly a place of importance as it is specifically recorded that Henry VI in the 1440's visited Meonstoke twice on his Royal Progresses, the only village to be thus visited in this part of the valley.

A strange fact about the church is that the dedication was changed in about 1830 from St. Mary to St. Andrew. It is very rare for a dedication to be deliberately changed; ten years later, by which time the high-church Oxford Movement was well under way and evangelicals were unhappy about too much reverence being paid to the Blessed Virgin Mary, it would have been understandable, but in 1830 it is very surprising.

EXTERIOR

Except for the tower which is 15th century, the entire fabric of the church, including the aisles, dates from the 13th century with only a few windows inserted later. The church was started about 1230 and probably built as one long campaign. It is unusual to have a building almost exclusively of this early English style of architecture. There were two doors but the north door now leads to the vestry. (There was also a priest's door on the south side of the chancel but this was blocked centuries ago.) The tower was rebuilt of flint rubble in the 15th century, probably as a result of settlement due to the proximity of the marshy river. Originally, the aisles would have been covered with separate steep pitched roofs (the corbels on which the timber beams rested can still be seen inside). However, in the 18th century the present roof, spanning nave and aisles, was put up and this necessitated raising the height of the nave roof by three and a half feet and the aisle walls by four inches. This in its turn left the tower dwarfed and in 1900 this was given its present distinguishing, rather attractive, open top built in wood to save weight.

INTERIOR

The nave, virtually as the 13th century builders left it (except for the roof), has all the serenity and majesty that one associates with Early English architecture. The chancel arch is round in the Norman style, which makes it an unusually late survivor of this style, but the Meon Valley was always rather remote from what was going on elsewhere! There has, of course, been considerable Victorian restoration of this as elsewhere, in the church, all of it carried out by the Rev. Charles Hume. The pillars of the arcades, too, hark back to the transitional style of architecture ('twixt Norman and Early English) with its alternating round and octagonal pillars, but the arches are entirely pointed and, more importantly, the four circular clerestory windows, which are placed most unusually above the apex of the arches rather than in the spandrels, are pure Early English and a very rare survivor. The original roof line can be seen, as can the corbels in the aisles which formerly supported the separate aisle roofs. Notice, too, the tiny window high up above the chancel arch, inserted when the roof was raised in the 18th century. The nave was re-pewed in 1900 but there is otherwise very little in the way of fittings and monuments to distract the eye from the harmony of its 13th century architecture.

Turning to the details, notice the original 13th century holy water stoup to the right of the entrance, before going to look at the font, one of the delights of this church. This is original and is constructed

of Purbeck marble and lead. There were four angle shafts as well and you can see traces of those. The top has leaf-like decoration at each corner, a circle of leaflets and small fruit round the bowl and on the sides different bands of damaged decoration. The bowl itself has a plughole and near it vestiges of a fastening for plug and chain. Surrounding the font is a series of cushions denoting the theme of baptism. These eleven cushions were worked by ten parishioners over a period of five years and were dedicated on February 1st 1998; each of the cushions represents a baptismal symbol - the shell, the cross, the fish, the dove, and the candle.

Turning to the east end of this south aisle you will find the Lady Chapel and, above it, the memorial window erected in 1906 by Charles Macrae to his mother-in-law, Mary Laing. Most of the stonework of the windows in this part is of the 15th century (much restored) and what stained glass there is, is Victorian, except for this little gem of the Arts & Crafts Movement. The main scene shows the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth and was the work Mary Lowndes, co-founder of Lowndes & Drury in 1897, and a leading light in the Arts and Crafts Movement..

The west end of the north aisle is the children's corner, while the organ, which is a Hunter (c. 1875), is at the east end—an uncommonly awkward place as far as the choir are concerned, but late-Victorian plans to build an organ chamber on the north side of the Chancel were discarded. There are two items of interest in this aisle. Firstly, above the original doorway which now leads to the vestry is a Royal Coat of Arms of George I; this has the arms of Hanover with a combination of three separate insignia on an inescutcheon, or small shield in the middle of the big one. Secondly, there is a beautiful collage of Meonstoke, where St. Andrew's church can be seen in the top picture, local flowers and wild orchids in the centre, while the river Meon with its trout and flowers is depicted at the bottom. This unusual and lovely piece of needlework was made by Esther Grainger in 1983/4 as a memorial to her aunt, Esther Croxson, and to Isa Murra, who both ran Meonstoke village school from 1915-1934. Mrs. Croxson continued to live in the village and to support the church until her death aged 100.

Moving into the chancel, notice the graffiti on the east side of the easternmost pillar before you pass the rather fine late 17th century pulpit. The inner wooden panels were carved as copies of the original by a local woodwork class c. 1913. The lectern dates from 1901. The chancel itself is almost entirely 13th century with its string course and its lancet windows (the middle one on the south side being blocked at a later date). The roof is 15th century and was covered with a Georgian barrel vault until one Sunday in the early 1900's when a large portion at the western end fell down, narrowly missing the rector who had gone to the chancel step to address the Sunday School children. This combination of Newton's Law and Divine Intervention was far more effective than any structured lesson! The rather fine oak choir-stalls were designed in 1946 by Sir Charles Nicholson and were given by James Crystal, then at Meonstoke House, as a memorial to his wife, and to his son who had been killed in Italy in 1944. On the north side of the chancel you will see an original 13th century consecration cross painted on the wall, and just beyond it the remains of a 14th century Easter Sepulchre containing one of two almost identical 14th century Purbeck stone coffins (the other is opposite), probably originally buried in the chancel floor and lifted when the chancel floor was re-laid in the 19th century. In the sanctuary there is an unusual feature in the two square holes in the side walls about eight feet from the floor. These probably held the ends of a beam to carry the Lentern Veil. The stonework of the east window and the two tall niches for statues are 1st century, but the reredos is Victorian, as is the glass in all the windows.

The churchyard was probably the site of the market and annual fair granted to Meonstoke Waleraund Manor about 1280 and extended to include the north side in 1895. The lych gate is a memorial to those who died in the first world war.

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Updated 5 April 2011: Correction of Mary Lowndes as the artist/creator of the Lady Chapel window.