

GREAT BOWDEN HERITAGE & ARCHAEOLOGY

The little ruined church next door to Market Harborough Station barely whispers of its important place in history and remains to most a complete mystery.

St Mary in Arden.

In September 1779 when men were digging a large grave they unearthed burial urns containing burnt human remains.

Unfortunately there was no archaeologist or antiquarian to record or draw the finds but it is amazing that there appeared to be a whole cartload of these urns. How they were disposed of we shall probably never know. They could have dated from the Bronze Age, the Iron Age the Roman or even the pre Christian Anglo Saxon periods but their discovery tells us that this site was a burial place and possibly a ritual site well before the Christian era.

In 1950 the Borough Surveyor made a list of all the existing gravestones, including inscriptions, and he also drew a plan of where each was located before the whole site was cleared. This helps us to identify a possible spot for the archaeological discovery in 1779. During the month when the urns were found a grave was dug for the Rev. Christopher Hatton Walker who was the Rector of Kibworth for 10 years and an altar tomb erected. Unfortunately there is not much hope of getting permission to dig to see if any further urns remain.

The name Arden is a mystery. One line of research suggests that the name Arden is very ancient and developed from the pre Roman British Celtic language. The word Ardhu meant a high place, either in status or location. The church stands on a prominent outcrop above the river and would have been more visible in the past without the modern buildings. The cremation urns give a clue to its important status.

There is scant evidence to suggest a village with the name Arden existed although the Latin document from the 14th century which we have translated (see Furlong and Furrow) does describe the position of certain furlongs near the 'tofts of St Mary's'. These buildings could of course have been associated with the church itself. We have no definite evidence but wonder if there was a religious house, perhaps a double house of canons and nuns here during the late Anglo Saxon period. Maybe ruled over by an abbess as was common. Was she Bugga and was Bowden Ridge Bugga's dun or hill which eventually evolved into the name Bowden? Of course we don't know but it makes a good story.

We can rely more on recorded facts from the late Anglo-Saxon period onwards. The church almost certainly pre-dates the division of the counties of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire along the course of the Welland in about 920 AD. Great Bowden was then forced to turn its allegiance north towards Leicester whereas maybe before this it had



been more associated with communities on the southern bank of the Welland and east towards the River Nene. Our pottery finds suggest this is the case and even in the medieval period this area is buying pottery from Northamptonshire and not from the Leicestershire potteries as was much of the rest of the county.

The lands or fields belonging to St Mary's were all south of the River Welland and would therefore have been in a different county and different diocese, an unlikely occurrence had the church been formed after 920.

This lack of land in the right place and the associated non-receipt of tithes led to the church's downfall. St Nicholas in Little Bowden (south of the river) and even St Dionysius in the emerging town of Market Harborough in medieval times, on occasions successfully obtained the tithes from St Mary's lands. People in Market Harborough began to desert the church out in the fields for the newer and more convenient chapel in the town centre.

There was no money to pay for proper clergy and after infamous tales of bad behaviour and even illegal marriages performed, the bishop decided to abandon the church. The building was also neglected and the lead plundered. The final calamity happened in 1658, some say about the time Oliver Cromwell died, when during a violent storm the spire and tower collapsed onto the church destroying it.



In April 2010 David Carpenter at the National Archives uncovered the story which featured on Michael Wood's TV programme about Kibworth in 2010. This led to us organising a walk with people from Kibworth on Whit Saturday 2011. During medieval times there may have been a customary annual procession of local parishes to St Mary in Arden at Pentecost to collect the holy chrism oil. It establishes St Mary's as an important Minster church, something we had always suspected but had never been able to prove.

In 1264 things had not been so friendly and England was in the middle of the Baron's War. The barons were led by Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester and only three weeks earlier he had captured the King, Henry III at the battle of Lewes. Bowden was of course still a Royal manor at this time.

The procession from Kibworth is led by John Wodard, a staunch supporter of his Lord, Saer de Harcourt and of Simon de Montfort. He has probably been at the battle of Lewes and was fired up. When they reached St Mary's on 9th June 1264 they found their way barred by local supporters of the King including William King. King was slain by Wodard in the fight that ensued in the churchyard. At his trial the following year in Rockingham Castle he was found not guilty of murder and set free. Bowden folk may have felt aggrieved as the jury was set up by the Montfortian government and was full of his supporters.

There are also, from the medieval period, a number of bequests in wills to 'Our Lady in the fields' although it has to be said that a larger sum was usually left to the 'mother church at Lincoln'. Two bequests are of particular interest particularly after the tragic fight in 1264 and involve a relation of Saer de Harcourt. Margaret Harcourt died in 1403 and left her fields and tenements to St Mary's for the maintenance of candles, lamps and prayers for her soul and her sister Mary Harcourt did likewise in 1406.

It was not all doom and gloom at St Mary's because we know that at some point 4 bells were installed. These are listed in the remains of the destroyed church and were sold off to pay for the rebuilding of a mortuary chapel in about 1690 replacing the much larger church that once stood there.



People in Market Harborough did not attend the church but did still bury their dead in the graveyard. In the late 17th century representatives of the Bishop said a small chapel should be erected to give shelter to people during funeral services. The townspeople's estimate once the waste had been sold off was a little lower than the bill which Henry Dormer the architect presented and perhaps the finishing off was kept to a minimum to save costs.

We do not know why Henry Dormer kept the medieval porch and the Norman arch with its beaked heads, but we are very grateful that he did. The porch must be one of the oldest buildings in the town and the arch must be the oldest.

In 2004 Great Bowden Heritage & Archaeology did a geo-phys resistivity survey of part of the graveyard. The results are a bit indistinct but we like to think we can pick out the footprint of the original church. We have done some work cleaning the Swithland slate gravestones and have prepared the gravestone information from the 1950s. This is available from the Heritage Group on a CD.



In 2009 we purchased copies of documents from the Record Office at Lincoln and we have some information also from Christchurch Oxford. Work on this project is continuing.

Download **2004 Geophysical survey of St Mary in Arden churchyard**

.**CD** - Database of 1500 names with inscriptions, on 1029 ***St Mary in Arden gravestones***, from 1672 AD to 1907 AD, with photographs of stones where extant. Please contact us via email. **Price:** £5 + P & P.

For orders outside mainland UK please include full postal address with your initial enquiry so that we may ascertain postage. There are very few of these CDs remaining.

Download ***Much Budon Mutterer*** - Local "rag" from 1265 with the story of the murder!

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Re read **Michael Wood's Story of England**.