The Church of St Cyr’s

Introduction

Estimated reading time: 19 minutes

First of all, let’s make it clear that the best introduction is the excellent 23 page brochure *The History of St Cyr’s, Stinchcombe*. It leads the reader on a guided tour, both inside and outside. Background information on the Purnells of Stancombe Park, the Ven. Sir George Prevost, perpetual curate and leading light of the Oxford Movement and author, Evelyn Waugh bring the history alive. The brochure costs £3 inside the church, or if you don’t live locally please contact St Cyr’s via their ***webpage***.



Front cover of the brochure about the history of St Cyr’s

We would like you to support St Cyr’s by buying the brochure, so we won’t repeat its content here. Fortunately, there is plenty more information to share about different periods in the church’s history.

The Medieval Period

Our starting point is the Medieval period. Although people have lived in the Stinchcombe area since at least Roman times, the first known mention of a chapel is in 1156. It is around that time that the ***de Stinchcombe*** family begin to appear in the ***Berkeley Castle muniments***. Volume 3 of the ***Berkeley manuscripts***, written by John Smyth in 1639, suggests that a succession of men called Piers or Peter de Stinchcombe gave their name to Piers Court.

Back in 2019, during the ***History Society's*** churchyard recording project, a medieval cross slab was uncovered near the north-east corner of the church. Cross slab expert, ***Chiz Hayward*** described it as a simple bracelet cross, a design quite common in Gloucestershire. He estimated its date as late 12th to early 13th century, so certainly from the time of the de Stinchcombes. The initials on the slab are much later – we think that they belong to members of the Hood family in the 1700s. An early example of recycling!



Medieval cross slab, estimated date late 12th to early 13th century

During his rebuilding project, Victorian architect ***John Loughborough Pearson*** preserved the largely 14th century porch and tower. Recently, Pearson has been ***criticised*** for destroying medieval stonework that could have been saved. This may be a case of unreasonably applying modern sensibilities to the past – certainly at the time his work received the highest praise. As noted in the St Cyr's brochure, Pearson sacrificed the remains of stone screen of the Perpendicular period and those of an older rood staircase beside it. In his defence, he took the trouble to replicate the design of the screen in front of the vestry.

Finally, another relic of the middle ages lies outside the church to the right of the west porch. It is the head end of a stone coffin, discovered in the stones of the tower during the 1854-5 rebuild.



The head end of a medieval stone coffin found in the stones of the tower

The Early Modern Period

Next, we move to the period 1500 to 1800, which historians call Early Modern. A surprising amount of information has been pieced together from various sources.

Going by the Book

First up is a battered, leather-bound book containing our earliest parish register, starting in 1582. With an Ancestry.com subscription one can leaf through the virtual book. Its vellum pages contain much of general interest as well as being invaluable to family historians. Examples include:

- ***"in woollen only" burials*** due to a law requiring all except plague victims and the destitute to be buried in a shroud of pure English wool

- a full page in 1670 recording the Minister's pay increase to £20 per year (according to the ***National Archives currency converter*** that was enough to buy three cows and only about 3/4 of what a skilled tradesman would earn)
- a note signed by Jo. King (Minister) and Will Tratman (Churchwarden) recording the collection in March 1704 of £5 10s 10d "towards the relief of persecuted Protestants of the Principality of Orange" (similar collections took place in many churches in response to a ***published sermon*** by Gilbert Burnet, Lord Bishop of Sarum)

Mind the Gap

Moving inside the church, have you ever noticed the gaps in the list of incumbents hanging on the wall? They occur in the mid-1600s; Richard Britten's tenure ends in 1640, yet that of Christopher Hanley does not begin until 1670. For the year 1650 only, Tobyas Higgins is named as Able Minister followed by the phrase "devoid of a minister".



List of the incumbents of Stinchcombe displayed in the church

Lurking in the ***Lambeth Palace library*** is a document that sheds some light on this. It contains two brief references to the chapel at Stinchcombe, both dated 1648. At that time the ***Second Civil War*** was coming to an end and a Presbyterian system of church government was being set up.

The main entry is a survey of the parsonages in Cam and Stinchcombe. These belonged to the unfortunate ***Godfrey Goodman, Bishop of Gloucester***. His palace had been pillaged by Parliamentarian soldiers in 1643 and over the next few years most of his former possessions were taken away from him. The

survey says that Walter, Christopher and Richard Woodward are given the "**power to nominate and present an Able, Orthodox and learned Clerke to bee Vicar of Cam**". If the Bishop refuses to admit their candidate he will not get the annual rent of forty one pounds.

Could Tobyas be the man selected by the three Woodwards? We have found the will of one Tobias Higgins, almost certainly the same man. Interestingly, he is still describing himself as Minister of Cam in November 1652.

A further short entry specifically relating to Stinchcombe says that the curate is usually paid £5 6s 8d each year. It notes that there are about 100 families in the village, suggesting a larger population than today.

A True and Perfect Account

Next is a small document of 1680, *A True and Perfect Account of all things belonging to the Church of Stinchcombe*, held at Gloucestershire Archives. Minister Christopher Hanley and churchwardens Nathaniel Hooper and Charles Selman prepared it for the Venerable Richard Parsons, Chancellor of the Consistory Court at Gloucester.

The list comprises:

- one large church bible with a common prayer book and another book for the Clerk
- one book of homilies with Erasmus paraphrased upon the four Evangelists *(In 1547, Edward VI of ordered an English-language version of the **Paraphrases of Erasmus** to be displayed in all parish churches)*
- a register book and a book of accounts for church and poor and two chests to keep them in
- one surplice
- one cushion for the pulpit
- one flagon

- one silver bowl
- one pewter plate
- one carpet
- one linen tablecloth for the communion table
- one bier *(a wheeled trolley for carrying coffins or shrouded bodies to the church – see below)*
- one table of degrees (*does anyone know what this could be?)*
- a font
- one bell in the tower

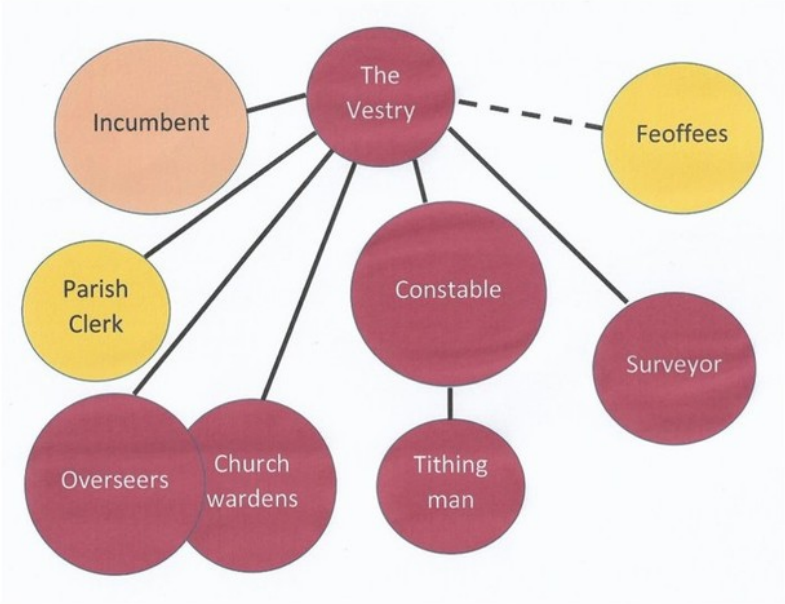


Funeral bier at Exton Church Photo © Alan Murray-Rust (cc-by-sa/2.0)

Churchwardens and their Role

Stinchcombe's two churchwardens, along with the vicar or curate, the parish clerk, two overseers of the poor, the constable and the surveyor of the highways were part of a powerful group that ran the parish. Such groups were often called "the Vestry" because that is where they tended to meet.

Whilst the parish clerk, appointed for life, was paid a salary the parish officers were volunteers. Once a year the Vestry met to set the poor rate and appoint the officers for the next 12 months.



Organisation chart for “The Vestry”

Churchwardens are familiar to us, though as the table shows they had some unusual duties in those days. Overseers collected the poor tax and paid out poor relief to those who needed it. The constable, as the name suggests, dealt with law and order and also had local militia responsibilities. The tithing man helped him and in some parishes was responsible for order in the church and church attendance.

In our parish book we can see who held these posts each year and look at the accounts of the churchwardens and overseers. It is noticeable how the same names keep appearing – was The Vestry something of a closed shop? For example, John Nelmes junior was a churchwarden in 1659 and had already been surveyor in 1653, overseer in 1654 and constable in 1658. He was also a feoffee (trustee of the parish charities) for life.

Now, let’s have a closer look at church warden, John Pearce,

also the village blacksmith. The Pearce family's impressive tomb gives an idea what an important job this was – read more about the blacksmith's role in the **Langside Cottage** history. John served as a churchwarden in 1737, a busy year as we will see, and again in 1739.



The chest tomb of the Pearce family

1737: Supervising repairs to the tower and steeple

John Pearce gives detailed accounts for these repairs. It was a big job that involved paying for labour, ladders, timber, stones, buckets and ropes and boards for scaffolding. He also had to buy lime and animal hair to mix with it for the mortar. Best of all, there was a new weather cock from Bristol and the gold and colour to decorate it. But the entry I like most of all is the two shillings for a bottle of wine to celebrate installing the weather cock.

The year "1737" is inscribed low down on the north side of the tower to commemorate this sizeable project. It is easy to miss -even in the photo it looks rather like a colour blindness

test!



Inscription at the base of the north side of the tower

1739: A more normal year

Before we say goodbye to John Pearce, let's look at his accounts in a more normal year. The table gives an idea of his wide range of activities as a churchwarden.

Expense item	Pounds, shillings and pence
Expenses at the first ***Visitation***	0-11-0
Fees of the Court	0-7-8 ½
Apparitor(?)	0-1-0
Paid Mr Weston for keeping the Register & drawing the transcripts	0-9-0

Mr Weston’s dinner	0-2-6
Paid for a brief for Dunbar Harbour (An East Lothian harbour seems an unlikely place for a Stinchcombe churchwarden to have business!)	0-0-4
Paid for 17 foxes *The churchwardens waged war on foxes, rodents and sparrows, which clearly had a bounty on their heads.*	0-17-0
Gave several travellers	0-6-6
Spent at Whitsuntide when the Parish went possessioning *Could he mean processioning – **walks and processions** were a common custom at Whitsuntide.*	0-11-6
Bread and white rods (robes?) for the aforesaid occasion	0-6-0
Expenses at the Citation(?)	0-3-6
Fees of the Court	0-4-0
Bread and wine for three sacraments	0-19-2
Bottles	0-0-10 ½
Paid the Clerk’s wages	1 – 1 – 0
For washing the church linen	0-3-0
For cutting the weeds in the churchyard	0-1-0
Spent at making the Tithe Roll	0-1-0
Paid Thomas Miller for mending the bell	0-0-6
Paid for a new Surplice and making	02/04/06

Churchwarden John Pearce’s accounts for 1739

Whitsuntide Customs

Some of John Pearce’s expenses give a tantalising hint that Stinchcombe had ***Whitsuntide customs***. The Whit walk or

procession still survives in many Northern towns. Young girls taking part traditionally wore white, as in the photo of the Huddersfield Whit walk below. Indeed, Whitsun is believed to be a contraction of White Sunday. And what did John Pearce need the bread for ? Whitsun is still celebrated by ***bread and cheese*** throwing at St Briavel's Church in the Forest of Dean – could it be something along those lines?



Photo of a Whit Walk in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire © Anon (cc-by-sa/2.0)

The Nineteenth Century – Stinchcombe's Heyday?

Moving on to the 19th century, much more information is available from newspaper archives. During the time of Sir George ***Prevost***, St Cyr's was the subject of long articles. These reflect his fame and popularity and perhaps also the attention span of the Victorian reader! The younger and less well known Rev. Lynch Blosse followed Sir George. He appears as often in connection with golfing on Stinchcombe Hill as for his work as a clergyman. His wife was also a keen golfer and if anything the more successful of the two.

Why is the church so rarely called St Cyr's?

It is noticeable that the newspapers rarely refer to the church as St Cyr's. Could this be to avoid confusion with ***St Cyr's, Stonehouse***? Lovely as our church's namesake is, this seems unlikely. Does anyone khow far back the association with this ***child saint*** goes?

Stroud Journal 4th August 1855 Consecration of Stinchcombe Church

The consecration of St Cyr's after rebuilding was attended by about 500 people, including 70 clergymen and two Bishops. After the daily service by Rev Sir George Prevost, the Bishop of Oxford made an eloquent address. The bishops and clergy then consecrate a piece of land set apart as a burial ground. Following the sacrament, 450 people retired to a marquee on what we now call Church Field, for a "sumptuous repast".The meal was provided by Mrs Ayliffe of the Old Bell in Dursley. The day ended with a further service and a sermon by a visiting clergyman from Hampshire.

Next, the article waxes lyrical about the rebuilt church, much larger with the addition of a south aisle. It admires the English oak sittings, reading desk, pulpit and alter rail and the roof timbers stained to the colour of new oak. Aptly named Mr Thomas Spire of Eastington is credited with the carpentry and joinery. The masonry was the work of Messrs Wall & Hook of Stroud. Floor tiles by Minton & Co. replicated fragments found under the foundations of the old building.

Miss Anderson of ***Lea Hall***, Lincolnshire embroidered the crimson silk velvet altar cloth. She was the granddaughter of the last of a line of baronets. Sadly, she ended up selling her ancestral home, another of Pearson's projects, and it was demolished in 1972.

Gloucester Chronicle 15th April 1882 Stinchcombe – New Bells

A new peal of bells was inaugurated in a special full choral service with six ringers from Gloucester Cathedral. Rev. Isaac Williams intoned, Sir George Prevost read the lessons and Rev. Johnson preached the sermon. Previously, there had been only one bell. "A gentleman" had presented five more cast by ***Messrs Warner & Sons*** of Cripplegate, London.

Strangely, the article omits to name ***Rev. R Jermyn Cooper*** of Fylingdales near Whitby as the donor. The new bells were dedicated to his mother, granddaughter of the late John Wallington of Piers Court. Although Rev. Cooper was based so far away from Stinchcombe, he was no stranger to the village. The Parish Magazine of August 1872 describes him as 'a gentleman who has been all his life connected by family ties to the Parish". It probably helped that, like Sir George Prevost, he was a passionate supporter of the ***Oxford Movement***.

Gloucester Chronicle 16th August 1884 Stinchcombe Church Celebration

Special services took place to re-dedicate the rebuilt spire following its destruction by lightning in November 1883. (There is a photograph of the devastated spire in the St Cyr's brochure.) Numerous visitors attended due to the church's architectural interest, its "revered and honoured vicar" Sir George Prevost and the fact that it was the last resting place of Isaac Williams "one of the sweetest singers of the church".



The grave of Rev. Isaac Williams

The lightning strike occurred early afternoon, just after children at the school opposite had taken shelter from the heavy rain. Struck at the capstone, the spire fell with the weather cock ending up buried in the ground. Most of the masonry fell in the burial ground, causing much damage to the monuments. The north side of the tower was considerably affected with nearly the whole of the pierced parapet knocked away. In addition, the north wall of the ringing tower was shattered, the tower window blown out and the new bells covered in fallen debris. One bell had to be recast.

Good photographs taken only a few days before the disaster assisted reconstruction on the original lines. Every stone that could be re-used was reinstated in its former position.

Clergy and former churchwardens of the diocese set up a repair fund, but it turned out that the insurance almost entirely covered the rebuilding costs. The fund was instead used to fill the three light window in the tower with figured glass by ***Clayton and Bell*** and affix a large brass plaque dedicating it to Sir George Prevost. (The window is pictured and described on the back cover of the St Cyr's brochure.)

The 20th Century – Celebrations and Cricketers

Now the newspaper articles are shorter, but no less interesting in their way. Although we do not have the associated articles, we are grateful to The Gazatte for allowing us to reproduce a couple of photographs at the end of this section.

Cheltenham Chronicle & Gloucestershire Graphic 12th May 1923 Bell Repairs

A short article reports that the church bells are in use again after a long silence. They have been "rehung and fitted with new ball bearings and spring buffer clappers". I have no idea how significant that is – perhaps our modern day bellringers can comment. Apparently, it had a "wonderful mellow effect on the tone" and the local Association of Church Bellringers was delighted. Parishioners had raised all the money for the costly repairs over a period of only a few months.

Gloucester Journal 2nd August 1930 Memorial to Vicar: New Recreation Ground at Stinchcombe

Rev. Mark Perfitt dedicated a tablet erected by parishioners in memory of Rev Dr Vincent Charles Reynell Reynell, who had died the previous year after 29 year in post. After the

service, there was a procession to the new children's recreation ground given in memory of Dr & Mrs Selina Caroline Reynell. This was the land we now call Church Field and had been donated by Sir Charles Prevost. The Reynell family and parishioners paid for its levelling and fencing and Major G Maitland Reynell formally opened the recreation ground.

The memorial gateway in oak, presented by the Reynell's sons and daughter is still there today. A few years ago Ken and Joan Jelfs and I cleared it of ivy to reveal a brass plaque bearing the initials of Rev. and Mrs Reynell.



Brass plaque with Rev. & Mrs Reynell's initials on Church Field gatepost

Cheltenham Chronicle & Gloucestershire Graphic 15th July 1933*: *Oxford Movement Celebrations

Stinchcombe Parish Church was selected for a commemorative service because of its association with one of the Oxford Movement's originators, ***Rev. John Keble***. Keble was Gloucestershire born and bred, though he spent little of his ministerial life in the county. He had family associations with Stinchcombe and preached more than once there. Rev. Isaac

Williams and the Ven. Sir George Prevost are mentioned too. There is also a minor grumble about the number of steps in the church.

Gloucestershire Echo 11th September 1936: Stinchcombe Vicar's Reply to Critics

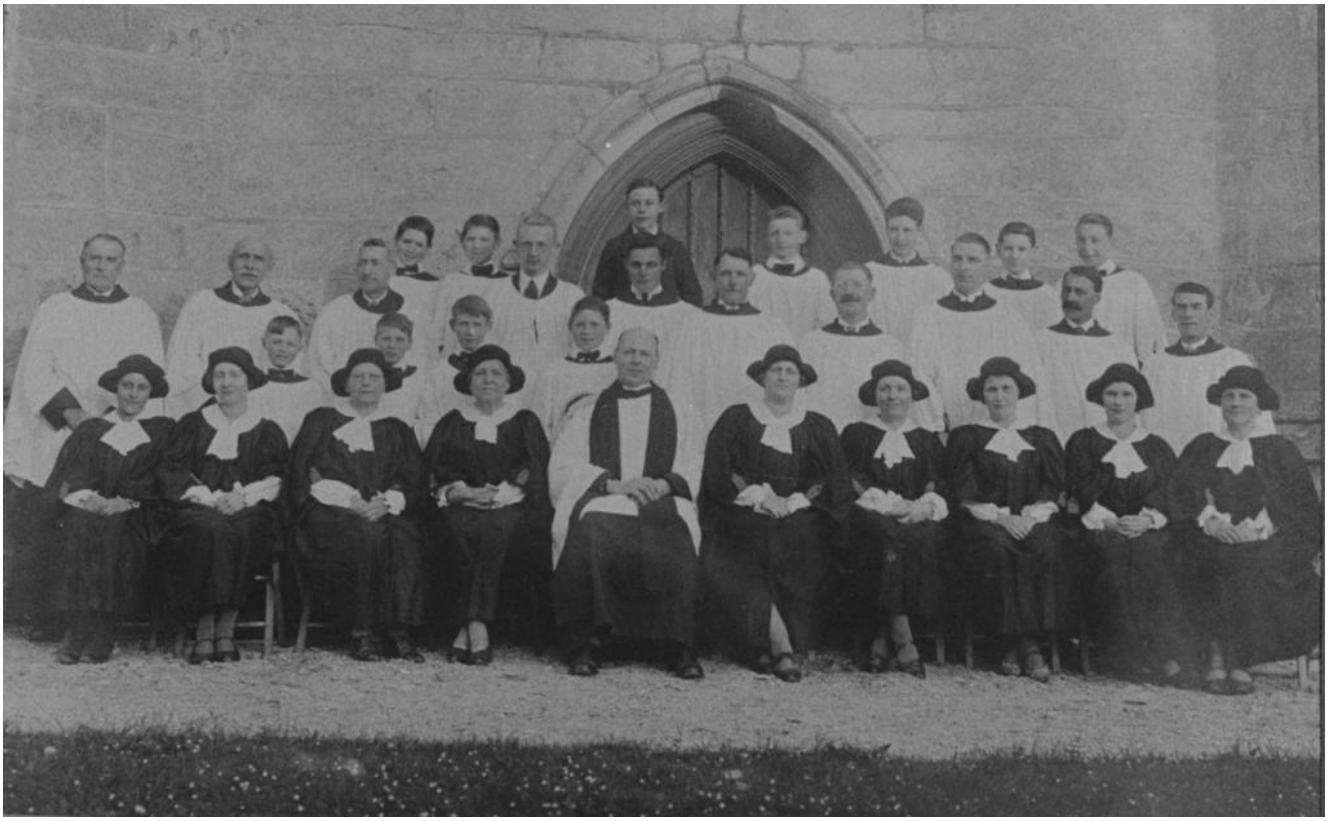
Rev. H K Page is surprised at letters criticising a planned Sunday benefit match in Bristol. He says "Sunday is the Lord's Day – a day of joy. There is nothing wrong in a game of cricket that is not going to mean work for others". He points out that there is going to be a special service at the ground after the match and says he is in favour of taking religion to the people.

The Citizen 30th August 1937: Cricketers in Church at Stinchcombe

Rev. Page practised what he preached as this article of the following year proves. Cricketers in flannels, Mr A E Bennett and Mr E F Longrigg, read the lessons at a sportmen's service on Sunday 29th August. The service was followed by a match between the Stinchcombe Stragglers and Mr Longrigg's XI. The Vicar encourages members of the local team, the first Sunday cricket club in the country, to attend the morning service before the match. When the weather is favourable, he holds a service actually on the ground. On this occasion his text was "thy faith has made thee whole". Rev. Page cautioned against trying to separate the spiritual from the secular.

Stinchcombe Church Choir

We do not know when or why this photograph was taken in front of the church. The women's hats and shoes would suggest the 1920s or 1930s. The central figure definitely isn't Dr Reynell but could be Rev. Perfitt or that supporter of Sunday cricket, Rev. Page. We would love to hear from you if you know more.



Stinchcombe Brass Band

This photograph is perhaps not strictly related to the church which appears in the background, but is too nice not to include. It was taken in connection with an article of unknown date about Hector Woodward, who passed away in 1993. It presumably shows Hector as one of the younger band members. The photo seems to pre-date the war memorial, which was built in 1920. Can anyone identify Hector in the photo and tell us more about the band?



Stinchcombe Brass Band

It doesn’t have to finish here

The History Society would welcome any further newspaper cuttings, memories, family stories and photos relating to St Cyr’s. Please use the comments facility or contact ***Roger Batty***. Gloucestershire Archives may also hold further information if anyone has an interest and time to spare.