

Wolston Church

by

Richard Norton

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1 A Description of the Church

From the outside it is easy to see that Wolston Church is cruciform, i.e. cross-shaped in 'plan. The best view is that from the bridge over the River Avon on the Brandon road. It stands in a small churchyard which was closed for burial purposes in 1888. It consists of a chancel, central tower, north and south transepts, nave with north and south aisles and a modern vestry on the north side of the chancel. In the churchyard will be seen a number of interesting tombstones of early 18th century date.

The chancel has a low-pitched, lead-covered roof and is mostly built of small limestone rubble with red sandstone dressings. The east window was inserted in 1866 and the upper part of the gable wall has been rebuilt. The tower is a re-building of 1760; until recently it had pinnacles at the angles. Both transepts have received a good deal of attention during the past century, the walls have mostly been refaced or partly rebuilt and angle buttresses added. The north wall of the north transept has a number of inscribed dates of some interest. In the gable are two tablets, one inscribed 'Thomas Willcox 1818' and the other 'John 1776'. Below it will be noticed that the original tracery has been removed from a pointed window, a three-light, square-headed window inserted, and a two-light window above it. The latter, evidently brought from somewhere else, is dated A.D. 1577 on the head, while the sill bears the inscription 'AnDom. 1624 R.W.'

The aisles are built of small limestone rubble in courses. On the north side the buttresses have been rebuilt, while those on the south side are original. The north doorway is of the 14th Century; that on the south is the re-used Norman doorway, dating from c. 1150. The latter is a typical example of two orders, i.e. an inner and an outer arch, round headed and rugged, with the zigzag moulding and a splay decorated with pellet ornamentation. The cushion capitals are almost weathered away.

The large buttresses at the west end are modern. Between them will be seen a 17th Century, segmental pointed window of five lights. The clerestory is built of sandstone ashlar and has three two-light square-headed windows on each side. The roofs of nave and aisles are low-pitched and covered with lead.

Including buttresses, the total external length is about 120 ft., the measurement across the transepts being about 70 ft. It may therefore be observed that the church is, for this part of the country, a little above the average size.

Unpretentious and without claim to special beauty, the general effect of Wolston Church

is of simple dignity and repose. It is well proportioned and harmonious and bears within its walls the care, skill and craftsmanship of many generations during more than 800 years of history.

2 A Tour of the Church

We will assume for the purpose of our tour that the visitor has just entered the church by the south doorway. The first thing that strikes the eye is the font, in the centre exactly between the N. and S. doorways. Its position there is not accidental. Baptism is the beginning of Christian life - the entry into the fellowship of Christ; the font was therefore placed near the entrance to the church. Our font is of the 14th Century and has been called the finest of its period in the county. It would probably look better if raised on one or more steps. It is octagonal and each face is carved with beautiful ogee trefoils springing from mask stops. Certain marks upon bowl and stem probably indicate where it was repaired by Mr. Alcott of Rugby in 1846.

The finest interior view is to be obtained by standing near the font and looking up to the altar framed in the two great arches of the tower. The present nave arcading indicates the width of the original Norman church; a low narrow structure with thick walls pierced by round-headed windows with deep splays. It is also convenient while standing at this point to observe the details of the nave arcading. The south arcade is of three bays and was the first to be built when the church was greatly enlarged during the 14th Century. The pillars are octagonal with moulded capitals and bases. The north arcade is of four bays, similar but of lighter construction. The capitals are more pleasing in appearance than those opposite. All the arches are pointed and of two orders. The outer orders on the north side spring from corbels carved with curious faces: one looks out into the nave, while three others can be seen from the north aisle. Above the west window may be seen indications of the original height of the nave roof. Three clerestory windows will be noticed on each side of the nave; they were inserted late in the 15th Century. The present roof, of the 17th Century, is divided by trusses into five bays. It is built of fine dark oak and all the beams are moulded. In the centre of each truss is a carved boss. Mostly these are of foliage, but the one at the west end is in the shape of a face with a luxuriant beard.

The north aisle may be visited next. Note, as you walk along, the carved faces previously mentioned. One is grotesque, the others are normal human faces with hair of conventionalized type. The window high in the west wall was probably inserted during the 17th Century and corresponds to a similar one in the south aisle. The other windows are restorations of the 19th Century. The roof, which has recently undergone considerable repair, is probably of 17th Century origin.

The north transept, of early 13th Century origin, assumed its present proportions more than a hundred years later. The east window, containing good flowing tracery, is of this period, but has been partly restored. The modern glass was given in memory of Lt. Col. Rowland J. Beech and contains the arms of the Beech family, formerly of Brandon Hall. In the three main lights will be seen the figures of St. George, St. Michael and St. Margaret. The transept is now used as a children's chapel. The tasteful modern furnishing was most generously given by the late Mr. T. Lole, during the

incumbency of the present vicar in memory of his mother, Mrs. E. Lole, whose husband was for many years Headmaster of Wolston School. More recently his widow, Mrs. I. Lole, has added the further gift of the brass vases on the altar and the blue Chenille curtains fringed with gold.

We come now to the crossing underneath the tower. It will be noticed that the arches east and west are of two orders, the outer of which rests upon detached shafts with moulded bases and curiously carved capitals; that on the south side is difficult to interpret with certainty. It has been suggested that it may represent either St. Margaret crowned or the Baptism of Our Lord. The north capital has been mutilated but enough remains for us to make out the crude figures of a Calvary Procession. The north and south arches should be noted, particularly the fluted or 'scalloped' capitals. The south arch belongs to the original Norman church. That on the north side dates from about A.D. 1200. Above them are Norman round-headed windows with deep splays. The east and west arches have been rebuilt.

It will be convenient for the visitor to see the chancel next. This is mainly of 14th Century date and has, on the whole, been restored with care and taste. The east window was erected in 1866; it is of four lights, in the 'Decorated' style and is too ornate to be satisfactory. The tall window on the north side of the sanctuary, together with the two corresponding ones on the south side of the chancel, are pleasing, although considerably restored. The other window on the north side is of three lights, with a segmental pointed head and belongs to the 17th Century. Opposite this will be seen a low-side window almost certainly reconstructed in the 19th Century, when the present jambs and mullions were put in and glass substituted for the shutters, that would once have been there. The exact use of these windows is still matter for debate, but the various theories of their origin need not be discussed here.

Above the two light tracery window next to this may be picked out a stone, adorned with chevron moulding, embedded in the masonry of the wall. Opposite, on the north wall, east of the 17th Century window, part of the jamb and springing stone of a similar window is visible. East of this a portion of moulding, probably from an earlier doorway, may be seen. Higher still, in the same wall, should be noticed what appears to be part of a shaft and capital. This may possibly be part of a former wall-arcade.

The present roof is of considerable interest. It was erected, as the date on the western wall-truss truly indicates, in 1760. It is divided into four bays by three trusses and two wall trusses. The sides of the beams bear central shields and foliage ornament. On one of the shields will be seen the inverted cross of St. Peter and the keys in saltire i.e. crossed diagonally. During the recent renovations it was observed that these were real keys of 18th Century ironwork. The 'colour decoration' will be seen to include chevrons, rosettes and stars. There are also the well known letters IHS and also M, perhaps meaning Margaret. The chief colours used are red, white, blue, black and gold, with foliage in green. The painting dates from about 1882. The only other woodwork of any note consists of the 17th Century altar rails which were brought from Rowington in 1930.

On the south side of the sanctuary will be noticed the Piscina and Triple Sedilia, Early English in character and dating from about A.D. 1220. The Sedilia have continuous

hoodmoulds, with headstops and circular detached shafts. The Piscina has a pointed trefoiled head and a circular basin. The effect is of simple and dignified beauty. Some may like to be reminded that the Piscina was the place where the vessels used for Holy Communion were cleansed: while the Sedilia were the seats for the use of the assistant clergy as they waited to take part in the Mass which the Priest was celebrating.

Returning to the crossing we may now visit the south transept, which is considerably more interesting than its northern counterpart. A few of the roof timbers are old but they cannot be seen because of the modern plaster. Just on the left as you enter is an altar tomb of late 15th Century date. The inscription has vanished so that one may only hazard a conjecture as to the identity of the person commemorated. It is just possible that it may have been intended for John Hugford, lord of the manor, who died in 1485. Above the 14th Century arch leading into the south aisle is a Hatchment, the only one now remaining in the church. The word 'Hatchment' is a corruption of 'Achievement'. In earlier times it was the custom for the Funeral Achievement (coat of arms and sometimes actual armour) of an important person to be hung over the door of his house for a period of about six months and then removed to the church. This one appears to be that of General Scott, Lord of the Manor from 1766 to 1810.

The lower part of the south wall of this transept is of early 14th Century date and is filled by a Piscina, Sedile and two wall recesses, containing recumbent effigies in stone. The eastern figure is that of a woman, and, although it is very mutilated, it is just possible to make out the coif head-dress, wimple and long gown, in the style of the 14th Century. Under the west arch is the bare headed figure of a man, contemporary with that of the woman. This may possibly be a Chantry Founder's tomb.

The visitor may complete his tour of the church by way of the south aisle. The roof has recently been extensively repaired; fortunately some of the old timbers have been retained. All the windows are 19th Century restorations and one has been despoiled of its tracery. During the repairs a stone corbel in the form of a human head came to light; it is probably of 14th Century date.

The bells are four in number and of various dates and inscriptions as follows:-

- 1 1894 - " The gift of the Rev. John Wilcox, Vicar of Wolston" Dia. 29 ½ in.
- 2 C.1350 - "Marcus: Mathus: Lucas: Johes:" Dia. 31 ½ in.
(This is one of the bells made by John de Stafford and the inscription is unique.)
- 3 1620 - "Gloria Deo In Excelsus (sic) John Wawle - William Rowe Churchwardens" Dia. 34 ½ in.
- 4 1789 - "W & T Mears Late Lester Pack & Chapman of London Fecit" Dia. 37 ½ in.

The church plate includes a silver paten, 5 in. in diameter, engraved with the head of Our Lord, and bearing a hallmark of 1518; a silver chalice 6 ¼ in. high, the hallmark of which cannot be deciphered, and a later silver chalice and cover with hallmark of 1729. This is inscribed "Barbara Viscts. Dowager Longueville ex dono".

The registers are extant from 1558 and the earliest churchwarden's accounts

begin in 1713.

3 Historical Notes

The Domesday entry mentions a priest in Wolston and this points to the existence of a church; but of this building nothing visible remains. Possibly it was built of wood as many Saxon churches were. The present church was begun about A.D. 1140; soon after that year the chancel, tower arches and, in all probability, the south transept had been completed. Within the next decade the nave appears to have been built, the only portion remaining being the present south doorway, which was removed and re-set when the church was much enlarged a couple of centuries later. It is fairly certain that the Norman church was narrow, its outer walls corresponding to the present nave arcading. A few round-headed windows, deeply splayed, would give but a dim light and in all likelihood there was only one doorway. The lower part of the tower looked very much as it does today. There was a south transept and a short chancel, probably with a square end. At a very early date in the 13th Century or possibly at the end of the 12th, the north transept was added; soon afterwards the chancel appears to have been enriched and enlarged; the beautiful Piscina and Sedilia remaining as evidence from that time.

It was during the 14th Century that the church began to assume its present proportions and appearance. Our Warwickshire historian, Dugdale refers to Alice le Breton, of Marston as a great benefactress to the church, and there seems little doubt that it was due to her generosity that the work was done. The chancel was almost entirely rebuilt; at the east end was placed a four light window of a type fairly common at that time, the mullions simply crossing over in the head. This window is shewn in a drawing of C 1820 and doubtless existed until 1866 when the present window was inserted. The transepts were remodelled, the south almost certainly being the first to receive attention. At the same time, or at any rate shortly afterwards, the nave was rebuilt with the addition of north and south aisles.

The church at this time was less lofty than at present and there was no clerestory. As so often happened, the Norman door was re-set in the south aisle. It seems certain that the people of old regarded their church doors with veneration. It was the entrance to the Holy place: much business was transacted there, both secular and religious; marriages began there and it played an important part in the funeral service. In mediaeval times wills were frequently read in the porch. The font was also a thing of special sanctity, but here at Wolston a new one was provided, which has outlasted more than 600 years of history. During the late 15th Century the roof was heightened by the addition of a clerestory. No doubt repairs and alterations were carried out during Tudor times, but they were probably of a minor nature, and except for the dated window of 1577, little evidence remains. (This, in any case, was most likely put in later.)

For the repairs and changes that have happened since, however, there is much architectural and documentary evidence. As we have already seen several windows belong to the 17th Century. The large buttress on the north side of the chancel was also added about this time, probably during the reign of Charles I. An interesting document among the State Papers of this reign, dated 1635, gives a plan of the church. The pew of the Lord of the Manor, was by the south-west 'steeple pillar' with two seats for his

servants nearby. Mr. Warner had a seat in the south transept from which, he complained, he could neither hear nor see the priest in the pulpit. The communion table stood lengthwise in the chancel as was then frequently the custom. The oak roof of the nave is of 17th Century work and an inscription on the leads records the fact that 'THIS ROOF WAS REPAYRED AT THE CHARGE OF PAUL WENTWORTH IN THE YEAR 1680'.

It is not until the early 18th Century that the church- warden's accounts yield us any information regarding the history of the fabric. To analyse this information would require a booklet in itself and it must suffice to point out certain general facts of interest. From a mass of small and, in themselves, quite insignificant items, it is possible to trace the gradual decay of the fabric during the first half of this century. The expenses for work done by carpenters, glaziers and masons increase steadily, from small items such as the 5 shillings for 'mending the leads on ye steeple' in 1725, until e.g. we find £7 : 10 : 7 spent on repairs of a similar nature in 1748. In 1742 a new floor was put in the chancel and 1300 quarries were used for this purpose. The church was whitewashed regularly. A minor puzzle is the large number of times repairs seem to have been necessary to the chancel door. Less surprising are the frequent changes of bell-ropes; no doubt they were useful to farmer churchwardens.

The numerous references to repairs done 'about the steeple' provide cumulative evidence that the tower· was becoming ruinous. We are not surprised, therefore, when it finally collapses in 1759. Its fall damaged beyond repair the roof of the chancel and filled it with debris and wreckage. It was a disastrous situation and it was obvious that something must be done about it at once. The east end of the church was open to the sky; the tower was a ruin, while rain and wind swept into the desolate building, making repair a vital and immediate necessity. For the time being services were held at Ryton-on-Dunsmore. The work was entrusted to Job Collins of Warwick, a noted 18th Century builder and craftsman. Parish levies were raised and rebuilding was carried out expeditiously. The lead was recast in Coventry; the stone for the tower came from Bubbenhall quarry and much of the wood for the new chancel roof was brought from Combe Woods. It is of interest to note that the drawing of two loads of timber from there cost 6s. Other interesting items are :-

| | |
|--|---------------|
| Pd. for 410 ft. of oak timber at 1s. 8d. per ft. - | £34 : 3 : 4. |
| Pd. for 1360 ft. of oak boards at £1 : 6 : 0 per 100 - | £17 : 13 : 6. |
| Pulling down the old roof and clearing the ground - | £1 : 5 : 0. |
| Taking down and rebuilding the arches - | £15 : 10 : 9. |
| Taking down and rebuilding the tower - | £96 : 17 : 6. |

It will be understood that all these items are only a few selected from many; it being quite impossible in a short booklet to give full details. In 1761 John Whiteman, a carpenter from Church Lawford, was paid £11 : 7 : 11 for woodwork done in the belfry. But the church was certainly provided with a new roof and made generally safe by the end of 1760. Furthermore it is remarkable that the whole of the work, extending over several years, was completed at a cost of little more than £400.

At some time after the fall of the tower all the arches leading into the transepts, together with those at the east end of the north and south aisles, were completely blocked. When M. H. Bloxam visited the church about 1835, the north transept was used as a burial chapel for the Wilcox family and the south transept served a similar purpose for the Scotts. During the later 18th Century a gallery was erected at the west end of the nave; it was not removed until early in the present century.

There was further restoration in the early 19th Century. More extensive repairs took place in 1860 and in the years following; both transepts were then largely re-faced and part of the north transept rebuilt. In 1930 the level of the sanctuary was lowered and other repairs executed. A vault was opened which contained the coffin of Lord Grey of Ruthin, who died in 1810. In 1948 the gutters of the tower, which had begun to leak, were repaired, and since then extensive renovations to the chancel and both aisle roofs have been effected. Although other work remains to be done before the fabric is perfectly safe for future generations, it is true to say that the church is once again in a reasonable state of preservation.

4. The Advowson and the Vicars

The Advowson means the right of presentation to a benefice, the holder is usually termed the patron of the living. In early times the Rector (ruler) of a parish held the 'great tithes' and might be a layman or an institution such as a monastery. The vicar of a parish was the 'deputy' and was paid out of, but did not himself receive, the emoluments of a rectory. From very early times there has been a vicar of Wolston.

The church was given to the Norman Abbey of St. Pierre-sur-Dives about the year 1090, being granted by Hubert Baldron with the permission of Roger, Earl of Shrewsbury, his feudal overlord. This was by no means an unusual arrangement, similar grants being very common in early Norman days. The abbey ordained a vicarage about the year 1216, the first vicar was Henry of Leicester. One of the vicar's duties was to see that the chapels belonging to the church were served by fit persons. These chapels were presumably in the north and south transepts. At the same time he was to receive 4 marks (£2 : 13 : 4) yearly from the rectory, out of which coats and shoes were to be provided for 13 poor parishioners, any residue going to the support of an assistant priest. This is an unusually early and interesting example of a charity.

The Abbey continued to present to the living until about 1317 and from then until the close of the 14th Century the advowson alternated between the Prior of Wolston and the King. It will be remembered that during this time we were at war with France and for this reason alien priories were regarded with suspicion. Thus Peter Mallory was presented by the Prior of Wolston in 1313, and 40 years later, when Nicholas of Stoneley became vicar, the patron was Edward III. In 1387 the living was still in the King's gift, Walter Walford being then presented. By 1396 the Priory of Wolston, together with the advowson of the church, had been sold to the Carthusian Priory of St. Anne at Coventry, by whom the advowson was retained until the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

At the Dissolution the advowson was granted to various lay persons, until, in 1650 Sir Peter Wentworth acquired it, together with the manor, with which it

descended until about the middle of the 18th Century. It was again united to the manor when it was purchased by the Wilcox family, in whose hands it remained until 1930, when it came into the possession of Sir C. A. King-Harman who, six years later, conveyed it to the Diocesan Board of Patronage. Thus the advowson of Wolston has, after four centuries, found its way once again into ecclesiastical ownership.

Up to the present time we have record of 44 vicars. Most of them are mere names in Episcopal Registers or old documents; but a little is known about others and some facts relating to them are here given. The names of two or three have recently been added to the list already existing in the church: they include the Walter Walford previously mentioned, Richard Hareberwe in 1378 and Thomas Eson who was vicar in 1637. Dugdale relates that in 1454 the vicar complained that the vicarage was so 'slenderly endowed that having there the cure of souls he could not maintain himself in that fit manner as he ought out of the profits thereof; nor well undergo what was incident to him as vicar'. This would be Will Kilworth who was instituted on the 3rd October, 1447. It is evident that clerical poverty is no modern innovation.

The first vicar whose name appears in the Wolston registers is John Middleton, who was buried here on 27th May, 1585. By far the most outstanding of our early vicars was Hugh Clarke (1591-1634) to whose story we shall turn presently. There is a memorial tablet on the north wall of the chancel to John Mitchener, Vicar from 1727 - 1760. Gilbert Swanne D.D. followed him for three years: he was a non-resident and indeed, throughout most of the later 18th Century the real 'vicar' seems to have been the curate Charles Baldwyn. James C. Roberts was the incumbent for 53 years from 1819 - 1872 and was non-resident for 25 years of this time. One good thing in his favour should be remembered. In 1835 he put forward proposals mitigating the severity of treatment then accorded to juvenile first offenders, which, although parliamentary action was not immediately forthcoming, was of value in drawing attention to an undeniable evil. He also left by his will proved 25th September, 1871, £100 to provide coals or bread or both to be distributed to the poor annually at Christmas.

The Parish Register gives the names of many curates and 'officiating ministers' during Mr Roberts incumbency, among them being that of Dr. Nathaniel Bridges, for 35 years Vicar of Willoughby. At one time he had been Rector of Hatton when the famous Samuel Parr was curate there. Dr. Bridges came of the well-known Northamptonshire family, one of whom was the 18th Century historian of that County. He was referred to as an eloquent preacher - so much so that extra seating had to be provided at Willoughby in 1828 to accommodate the congregations. Two members of the Wilcox family were Vicars from 1872-1908. The later Canon Johnson Barker became Rural Dean of Dunchurch, a precedent which is being followed by the present incumbent, Canon J. Ecclestone M.A.

Hugh Clarke, whose story can only be given in brief outline, was born at Burton-on-Trent in 1563 and was educated at both Universities. His first curacy was at Oundle, Northants, where being of the 'moderate Puritan party' he was greatly distressed by Whitsun Ales, Morris dancing and the generally 'papist' behaviour of the inhabitants. In 1590 he was appointed to Wolston by the then patron and Lord of the Manor, Roger Wigston. Dr. Overton, Bishop of Coventry & Lichfield, opposed his institution and did all he could to get him to 'desert his title to it' in favour of one of his

chaplains. This Clarke refused to do and then began one of the most remarkable duels in ecclesiastical history. The Bishop kept him waiting and put him off with one excuse after another, sending chaplains to hear him preach to see if they could 'catch any advantage against him'. He was at length suspended from preaching and thereupon resorted to catechising; suspended from this also he began to expound the Scriptures in answer to questions. Finally the Bishop went so far as to excommunicate him, but he managed to procure absolution from Dr. Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury. This so angered the Bishop that he found means to bring a charge of treason against the unfortunate vicar but, largely through the good offices of Sir Thomas Lucy of Charlecote, he was released and again appealed to Whitgift who forced the Bishop to apologise publicly to him before the congregation at Wolston church. We learn, rather surprisingly, that after this they became firm friends.

It was during the last year of Hugh Clarke's incumbency that a serious fire broke out in the village, thought to have started at a blacksmith's shop. It seems to have destroyed at least 14 houses besides other property. The 'poor inhabitants' of Wolston presented a petition to the Mayor and Aldermen of Coventry, which may still be seen among the Coventry Corporation Records.

In 1291 the vicarage was valued at £6 : 13 : 4. In 1535, 'including the profits of two chapels within the bounds of the parish' it was worth £15 : 10 : 0. The 4 marks for alms, already noted, were still paid to the vicar for this purpose in the latter year. These chapels date from very early times; they were for the convenience of people who found it difficult because of distance to attend the parish church. It should be pointed out that up to 1696 the whole of Stretton and Princethorpe was included in the parish of Wolston. The original church of All Saints at Stretton (pulled down early in the 19th Century) seems to have been one of the chapels. The other was almost certainly at Bretford and was known in the 14th Century as the chapel of St. Edmund; originally it had been the chapel belonging to a Hospital for lepers. The names of eleven of the early incumbents have come down to us. There is a charter extant confirming to them the grant by the Abbot of St. Pierre-sur-Dives of a chaplain of their own in their first chapel at Bretford, also the tithes of milk and herbs from their gardens allowed them by the said Abbot and Convent. For these grants and privileges the lepers were to pay a sum of 2s annually. There was also founded at Bretford in the 12th Century a small house for nuns, of whom there were two, Noemi and Sebure. We are told that they soon became dissatisfied and handed over the endowment to the Canons of Kenilworth Priory, who still held tenements in Brandon and Bretford in 1535.

5. The Edwardian Inventory

An inventory of goods possessed by the church has come down to us from the days of Edward VI. An abbreviated list in modern spelling is here given :-

| | |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 chalice | another altar cloth of silk |
| 3 bells | 5 towels |
| 1 sanctus bell | 1 cross of copper |

| | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 3 copes (1 velvet, 1 silk) | 2 corporals with velvet cases |
| 4 vestments-silk | 4 surplices |
| 5 altar cloths | 1 pair of organs |
| 2 candlesticks | |

This probably did not include everything and it should be remembered that the vestments and altar cloths, even the towels, were frequently of great costliness and beauty. This would be true even of a small village community such as Wolston. The list is very modest compared with many that exist for quite small parishes. Commissioners were appointed in 1552 and 1553 to collect inventories, lately made in all churches, with a view to the sale and dispersal of all such goods as were considered superfluous. After leaving enough linen for the altar, surplices etc., the rest was to be given to the poor (presumably for clothing). All copes, vestments and altar cloths were to be sold; also as a rule all metals except bells and sanctus bells. This Protestant move can only be regarded in the light of plunder and it is therefore likely that some of the church goods were conveniently hidden away; it is of course impossible to say how far this is true of Wolston.

A few notes on some of the items may be found helpful. The Sanctus bell was rung during the solemn part of the Canon of the Mass, beginning 'Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus' and probably at the elevation of the Host. An injunction of 1547 forbade the use of all bells 'except one bell in convenient time to be rung or knolled before the sermon'. The first prayer book of Edward VI directs the use of a cope on those occasions when for lack of a sufficient number of communicants the service is broken off before the consecration and what is now called the Ante-Communion or Table Prayers was said. There is evidence of the continued use of the cope from the time of Elizabeth to that of Victoria. The vestments mentioned were most likely chasubles, now appointed to be worn by Priests celebrating the Eucharist and on no other occasions. The corporal is a 'fair linen cloth' used for the purpose of covering the Blessed Sacrament after the people have communicated. The second one mentioned would in the reign of Edward VI be spread under the sacred vessels before the service began. The case or burse is a receptacle in which corporals are kept when not in use. The pair of organs is interesting; they are of comparative rarity in these inventories. They were small instruments, usually set up on the rood loft for the purpose of accompanying the voices of the singers. Of the 3 bells mentioned only one remains. The rest of the church possessions were no doubt soon dispersed - perhaps stolen is a better word.

6. The Priory and the Marprelate Tracts

Land was given in the late 11th Century by Hubert Baldron, who then held the manor of Rainald de Bailleul, to the Norman Abbey of St. Pierre-sur-Dives for the purpose of founding a cell of the Benedictine Order here in Wolston. Two hides (probably about 240 acres) of land were given 'quit of all secular dues and all else with privileges and rights of common within and without the vill in plain and wood, meadow and pasture'. This was by permission of 'Roger, Earl of Shrewsbury who granted and confirmed the gift, for Rainald and himself in the hearing of many'. Later Hubert's

daughter and heir Sybil confirmed the grant and, with her husband Roger de Frevill, added 'the land lying between the monks' court and the brook running through the vill..... the monks' use, that is for the use of their flocks and mares and all moving things which are the property of the monks or of their men'. This was between 1161 and 1170.

Alien Priories such as that of Wolston were normally served by a few monks, usually only two or three, who acted in the capacity of land agents and were expected to see that the revenues were sent to the chief house of their order in France. Another function was of course the introduction of the Rule of St. Benedict into England. It may be of interest to say something about this rule as it applied to larger monastic houses. That it applied in any detail or for very long to such small establishments as Wolston Priory is most unlikely. At its inception the rule was very strict and was adapted to an eastern climate; it was modified however to suit Western habits and it is true to say that conditions varied considerably in different monasteries.

It was St. Benedict who increased the six Divine Offices in use at Rome to a total of eight. The daily saying of these services constituted a part of the monks' duties in all monastic establishments. They were said as follows: 1. Matins - originally called Nocturnes - said at night; 2. Lauds at daybreak; 3. Prime, in the early morning; 4. Terce. at 9 a.m. ; 5. Sext at 12 noon; 6. None at 3 p.m.; 7. the evening service of vespers; 8. Compline before retiring to rest. They were called the hours of prayer or 'canonical hours'. We should remember too that churches were not heated in those days and terribly cold it must have been in the winter. In practice Matins and Lauds were said together at the most convenient time. Business was transacted in large monasteries from 10.30 to 11.30 after a short breakfast. Dinner was often served soon afterwards, during which a lesson would be read aloud. For this purpose a pulpit was often built in the dining room or refectory, a beautiful example of which may be seen at Chester. Sleep, study and recreation followed. Supper was usually at 6 p.m. After Compline the monks retired to rest before the day began once more with Matins at midnight. In the damp study cells of ancient monasteries, in conditions of deep discomfort, many wonderful manuscripts were produced. Most monasteries had a library including books on medicine, for a part of a monk's life was given to the relief of sickness. In the heyday of the monastic ideal the poor were fed and travellers given shelter; monasteries were the finest inns of the middle ages - in many places the only inns.

There are few details known of Wolston Priory until we come to the 14th Century. Most likely it was at first accepted as a matter of course and probably even a blessing to the village; later, with the general decline of the monastic ideal and owing to the protracted hostilities with France, it would be regarded with the utmost suspicion. The alien priories had reached the end of their period of usefulness. They are now generally regarded by scholars as one of the contributory causes of the break-up of the Reformation.

After 1295 custodians were appointed to see that the income of these priories was paid into the Exchequer. At Wolston the Prior retained control of his cell at the King's pleasure provided that rent was regularly paid. A period of great uncertainty followed; usually the rent was in arrears and several fresh agreements were made. It is probable that the priory was suppressed by 1376. At any rate it is certain that by 1394 the Abbot complained that there had been no profits for 50 years and it was virtually

impossible to continue to send monks over. The priory was therefore sold to the Carthusian Priory of St. Anne at Coventry, in whose hands it remained until the Dissolution in 1536. The estate came into the possession of Roger Wigston, a member of a Leicestershire family who were merchants of the Staple. Several members of this family afterwards lived at Wolston. A fine house was built for them incorporating parts of the monastic buildings, which we may still see today. It has undergone some rebuilding and restoration, inside and out, but it is even now a good example of a smaller Elizabethan Manor House. Roger Wigston and his son William were both buried in Wolston church.

Just after the time of the Spanish Armada there was a fierce outbreak of Puritan rancour against the established church and particularly against the bishops. A number of tracts were written and printed on a secret press that was forced to travel about the country, finding a home in the houses of such sympathizers as would risk fine and imprisonment in support of their cause. It is probable that the chief writer was John Penry, a Welshman and a graduate of Oxford. The tracts were known as the "Marprelate Tracts" and the unknown author used the pen - name of Martin Marprelate.

Wolston Priory, then the home of Roger Wigston (grandson of the first Roger), was used as a hide-out by the conspirators, the press being brought here from Fawsley in Northamptonshire, the house of Sir Richard Knightley. Several of these tracts were printed at Wolston : they have very long titles after the manner or the times, but have short alternatives which are as follows :-

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Martin Junior or Theses Martinianae July 22 nd 1589. |
| 2 | Martin Senior July 29 th 1589. |
| 3 | The Protestatyon September 1589. |

While it is undoubtedly true that all these productions are scurrilous and coarse in expression, there is about them more than a touch of native humour and even wit. Although they are obviously intended to appeal to all classes of people and more especially perhaps to the artisan and merchant classes, the general literary and theological knowledge displayed in them points clearly to an educated author. It is not possible to appreciate them today without some considerable understanding of Elizabethan church history. The authorities employed several well-known writers to reply to them, including the contemporary dramatists, Nash and Lyly. It is sometimes unfairly overlooked that these replies are in a precisely similar vein to the original tracts of 'Martin'.

It is interesting to record that, in the subsequent trial Mrs. Wigston took the whole responsibility for the Wolston activities upon herself, assigning her purpose to 'zeal of reformation in the church". She was fined £1,000 and Roger escaped with 500 marks (£166 : 13 : 4). Several other Warwickshire people were connected with the affair, including John Hales of Coventry and Job Throckmorton or Hasely.

7. Churchwardens' Accounts and other records

Among the parish archives are churchwardens' accounts, commencing in 1723, a thin volume of chancel accounts dating from 1713, and Registers beginning in 1559. These latter are

- 1731 Gave to 3 men and women yt had been taken by ye Turks ... 1s
- 1733 Gave to 2 men yt had a great loss by inundation in
Summersetsheir 1s
- 1745 Pd. Sam Davis for 16 dusen and a half sparrows 2s. 9d
- 1746 Pd. ye ringers upon ye thanksgiving day for suppressing
ye rebellion 2s
(This refers to the unsuccessful Jacobite rising of the previous year.)
- 1756 Pd. the clerk for whaching the lining 4s.
(clerk for washing linen)
- 1777 Pd. Mr. Baker for wrighting the commandments and the
creed and Lord's Prayer and painting the frames ... £18 : 10 : 0
- Pd. Josph Nason for ye holdfasts to hold up the frames ... 4s.
(in 1762, John Whiteman was paid 6s. for making a new pulpit and desk; it
would be interesting to know what happened to all these fittings: probably the
1860 'restoration' removed most of them.)
- 1779 Pd. for a form of Prayer and thanksgiving for the safe delivery of the Queen and
happy birth of a prince 1s.
(This was Octavius, b. 23 Feb., d. May 3rd 1783)
- 1785 Pd. for repairing the Rumprealo (umbrella) 2s. 4d
(The spelling of these days is refreshingly original The umbrella was a common
parish possession at this time; it was a very large affair used for sheltering the
parson when he conducted funerals in the rain.)

Numerous items for expenses are found which would distress a present day auditor; ale making frequent appearances on many different occasions. But it must be remembered that the work of the churchwardens was unpaid and often involved a good deal of time and labour. For instance journeys had to be taken which involved the hire of horses, e.g.

- 1789 1 journey with my hors to hinkly to bind Castle's boy 1s
This was probably an apprentice under the charity of Sir Peter Wentworth who
left money for this purpose in 1675. This is only one at" several such entries.

It is interesting to speculate as to what lay behind this curious item in 1738 :-
Gave a layer (lawyer) for advice to know Mrs. Mary Jones will ... 2s

With that our brief survey of the parish records must conclude.

8. General Notes on the Parish

1. Wolston Parish, with its hamlets of Brandon, Bretford and Marston, is nearly 5,000 acres in extent. Originally the whole of Stretton and Princethorpe were included but they were constituted a separate parish in 1696, by Act of Parliament. If we take Brandon and Wolston together, we find that at the time of the Conqueror's survey there were 5 ½ hides land land, 2 mills, 21 acres of meadow land and woods measuring 4 furlongs in length and 2 in breadth. A priest is recorded with 28 villi, 19 borders and 11 serfs. It is a difficult business to conjecture the total population at this time but possibly 120 may not be an unreasonable guess. Wolston is also a good example of the almost invariable rule that where mills are recorded in Domesday they are still to be found at the present time.

Evidence that cannot be given in a small booklet indicates that the population has been fairly high from mediaeval times onwards, In 1327 for example the parish was assessed for taxation purposes at a figure equal to that of Birmingham and about four times higher than those for Rugby and Leamington. A study of the Registers and other documents suggests a population of about 360 at the Restoration (1660). By the early 18th Century it had increased by at least another 100. In the census returns of 1801 there were 892 people in the parish and, after a brief decline, it increased steadily until in 1931 it had risen to 1426.

In addition to the monastic owners of land already mentioned, it may be recorded that Combe Abbey had certain fishing rights in the Avon in the 13th Century and, a hundred years before that Marston mill had been granted to them by Richard de Frevill. By 1220 about 70 acres in the open fields of Wolston belonged to the nuns of Wroxall. There were a few early inclosures of a minor nature; but the parish as a whole was inclosed by agreement in 1692,

9. Manorial Families

2. It is only possible to mention in very brief outline a few of the more important families who have held land in Wolston at various times. Before the Conquest Brandon was held by Turchil of Arden, one of the most celebrated of Saxon landowners. Some of the names are of feudal overlords such as Roger, Earl of Shrewsbury, John FitzAlan or the Duke of Norfolk, who owned many manors up and down the country, Others are of noted families like the Clares or Lestranges who have played many parts in English history. Some have earned notoriety like Sir William Bagot who figures in Shakespeare's 'Richard II' and whose magnificent brass may be seen in Baginton church. For a time in the 16th Century the manor of Wolston was held by one of the Shelleys of Michelgrove, Sussex, a descendent of whom was Shelley the poet. Brandon, in early times was owned by the de Clintons and de Verdons. One of the 14th Century lords was a son of the Earl of Arundel. In 1615 it came into the hands of Sir Henry Yelverton, the Attorney General whose descendants Viscounts Longueville, Earls of Sussex and Lords Grev de Ruthin held it until it was bought by James Beech in 1818. Of the smaller type of land owner, the squire of modest acres, mention may be made of the Wentworths who owned Wolston for a good part of the 17th Century. The church and parish probably owed much to them. Two facts about the Yelvertons ought to be mentioned. Barbara, Viscountess Longueville, whose name is often found among the parish records, died at Brandon in 1763 at the age of 92. Henry, Lord Grey de Ruthin, to whom a mural tablet may be seen on the north wall of the chancel, was married on the 21st July, 1809 to Anna Maria Kelham, daughter of a farmer of Ryton-on-Dunsmore. The Wilcox family, who bought Wolston manor in 1825, have lived

at Brandon for centuries; a Richard Wilcox of Brandon was a member of the famous Guild of St. Anne of Knowle in 1514.