

# A Brief History of Christianity in Holmesfield

## And the Church of St. Swithin

The earliest settlers in Holmesfield were Neolithic folk. Flint fragments and remains have been discovered at various sites throughout the parish. The first agriculturalists were the Anglian settlers who arrived in the 5th century. Early Christianity only reached areas of Roman settlement. So this hilltop, where our church now stands, may well have been the site where their timber heathen temple once stood. The early history is the subject of much speculation and little proof!

**641 AD** Bands of monks travelled from Aidan's monastery at Lindisfarne, through the kingdom of Northumbria to Mercia. Our parish occupies the area that was the northern border of the Kingdom of Mercia. It is thought that, as the folk were converted to Christianity, the temple was blessed and consecrated for Christian use.

It was the custom for the monks to erect a Cross at a meeting place where they would preach. At first, this was made from a felled tree. Years later, as Christianity was accepted by the people, expert stone-carvers from the Monastery community would have replaced this wooden cross with a stone one. The remains of an ancient cross, believed to be "Saxon", can be seen outside our church. It was damaged during the Reformation and has been converted into a sundial.

St. Swithin was a trusted friend and advisor to King Ecgbert, his son King Aethelwulf and grandson, King Alfred. He had a tremendous beneficial influence on developments in England, including the reforms carried out by King Alfred. (NOTE the important event in English history 829AD. Ecgbert, King of Mercia, led his men along the border of Mercia to Dore, where King Eanred and his Northumbrians waited. The latter offered obedience and allegiance; there was no battle. The treaty that was signed was the event, which made England one Kingdom.)

Swithin taught Aethelwulf in his youth, and when he became King he made Swithin Bishop of Winchester, which was the capital at that time. He was a revered Bishop, renowned for his interest and skill in building in stone. Swithin was a man of piety and learning. He was buried where he had asked, outside the west wall of his cathedral so that the feet of his people could pass over him and the rain from the eaves fall on his grave. He died in 862 and was canonised by popular acclaim about the year 931.

The use of stone (of which we have plenty) had been encouraged by Swithin, and Alfred's reforms promoted local leaders (ceorls), who acquired various specified properties, to become "Thegns" (Lords). These included building a church in stone with briefly, a mill, brewery and bakehouse. The "Angel Inn" was the old brewing house for the Lord of the Manor; the bakehouse was at Cartledge and the mill in Milithorpe. The origin of the church as property of the Lord of the Manor is certain; Holmesfield had a "Thegn" many years before the Norman Conquest, and so it can be suggested that the church may have been built at that time.

Our first stone church would be built in the "Hall and Chamber" design, like the early timber church; the Lord of the Manor or his steward, living and holding court in the Chamber, and the Hall being the meeting place for the villagers, much like a community centre! As from the time of the earliest building, the church was used as a meeting place for all community events and the centre for much of the business of the village. Feasts were held here and it was the venue for Parish meetings (usually on Sundays). "Manorial Courts", were held in the Chamber. These dealt with the details of agriculture and social responsibility. Justice was administered, usually by a fine, ("trial by ordeal" could be carried out in the nave in the very earliest days, prior to 1200s). Inquests were held here and the church was where the decreed number of bows which Holmesfield must provide for a fighting force, were kept. In the reign of Edward 1V, every Englishman must have a bow of his own height; butts for archery practice on feast days had to be erected, arrows often being sharpened on the stones in the church porch! A school was also held in the chapel and meetings of the villagers were called to discuss disaster, peril, or jollification.

The Hall became the nave and eventually, the Chamber became the chancel. From the earliest times the Chamber, or a small room over, was the dwelling of the Lord's officiating priest. There was a separate room above the nave of the church in which wool and grain were stored. A staircase outside the building entered this "over-chapel". Although there is no evidence of the date at which the first stone church was built, speculation that it was pre-Norman is supported by a description of it by a Mr. Rawlins who visited the building in 1821, five years before it was demolished: "The church contained Saxon arches supported by circular piers which separated the nave from the aisle. The altar was at the head of the nave, in front of the chancel, which was entered by a plain round arch."

The picture of the old church dated 1785 shows that there had been alterations, in particular to the chamber. The roof

had been raised and a large east window is to be seen, suggesting that the chamber had by this time been converted into a chancel. Whatever the exact date of the new church, the dedication to the memory of St. Swithin seems very appropriate. The first church was used throughout the Norman, Tudor and Stuart times and up to the Georgian period. Connections with the Parish of Dronfield and Beauchief Abbey were established. Later the ownership of the church passed from the succession of Lords of the Manor to a group of trustees.

In the very earliest days, the "advowson" was in the hands of the Lord of the manor. Later, perhaps by the end of the twelfth century, Holmesfield became connected to the Parish of Dronfield, recognising the larger church of St. John the Baptist at Dronfield as the mother church. This could well have been to help provide a priest to take services; our church was referred to as a "chapel". Holmesfield was not actually a "chapel of ease" to Dronfield as it possessed its own independent endowment of Glebe land. In 1399, the rights to the wealthy parish of Dronfield with its several chapels, was handed over to Beauchief Abbey. Perhaps, in return, the Monastery provided an ordained priest to celebrate Mass at Holmesfield. The lay-brethren of the Abbey would form a large part of the village community. There was much activity in the village associated with the movement, and storage of wool and fleeces and also of iron ore, both of which were eventually processed at the Abbey.

In 1402, the Abbey was instituted "rector" of the Parish having official responsibility for the conduct of all services, including the daughter chapels. An Act passed that year, required that the vicar (officiating priest) must be a secular person. This meant that the monastery could not remove him at will. A perpetual vicarage was created in Dronfield and a perpetual curacy for the Chapelry of Holmesfield. The overall responsibility for the parish continued to be held by the Abbey until the dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536.

In 1486, the Crown granted the manor of Holmesfield to Sir John Savage, following the death of Francis Lord Lovell who had been found guilty of treason. The earliest surviving records date from this time. Successive members of the Savage family who inherited the manor did not seem interested in the "Chapel of Holmesfield" and in 1581; another John Savage offered the church to the people if they could raise the sum of £43. Permanent ownership of the church then passed to the copyholders who became the Trustees. He then sold the Manor to Sir John Manners in 1586. It was in this same year as the sale to the copyholders (1581), which the records tell of Star Chamber proceedings: it seems that the Lord's steward, a Robert Fanshawe, was not of a mind with these copyholders!

In 1649 part of John Frechville's "assessed" property was bought to secure a yearly income for a minister to serve at Holmesfield. Previous curates had enjoyed private means and the provision of a reasonable stipend was needed. In the 1700's some rooms were added to the Lord's Brewhouse next to the chapel-yard, where the curate could live. These are shown as the older section on the right in the picture taken in the 1950's. In 1727, Holmesfield was established as a separate ecclesiastical parish and could then keep its own register and inter the dead in the churchyard. Previous burials had to be at Dronfield.

There are several "Bequest Boards" retained in the present church. One of these, dated 1742, shows the spelling "Houndsfield", and refers to the members of the family of Rev. John Jolley of Cartledge. He was local, wealthy and endowed with a family who were popular due to all the good works they did in the village. This board also refers to the bequest of silver: "a Cup and Salver to Houndsfield Chappell for ever." (The silver chalice is French, dated about 1670 and still kept in the church safe!)



In 1749 a gallery was built from donations of "the Singers of Holmesfield" for their use, "which is looked upon more seemly for that purpose. The sole Right and Property of Nich and Edward Swift and their Heirs for ever." Also, during the 1700's, the school acquired separate premises. Land was bought in 1717. A record in an old register dated 1792, shows that contributions were required to make repairs to the school. In the 1800's a new building called the "Sunday School" was built on Castle Hill, This is now the Church Hall. By 1825, the old church was said to be

"in a ruinous condition" and was demolished. We speculate that the base of the tower and the Gallery may have been retained, in part at least. In 1826 the new church was erected, originally just a plain wide nave with a low tower and containing box pews.

By the mid 1800's, the Glebe house was also very dilapidated and a new Vicarage was built in 1873. Major changes to the church were made in 1895: The Chancel was added, the Tower raised, a new font provided and illumination by

paraffin lamps was installed (quite an advance which made a great change for the worshippers). The Church Hall (Sunday school) was now used for social gatherings. A "Chapel of Ease", a small Mission Room, was built in the Cordwell Valley for the convenience of parishioners. The Modern extensions were carried out in 1963. The Chancel was extended, vestries enlarged and toilet, kitchen and porch added. The most recent addition is the new Vicarage, built in 1999. To comply with new regulations in the twenty first century, more extension work will be necessary. What will the future hold for this ancient "chapel on the hill"?

A new Vicarage was built in 1999 in the grounds of the old Vicarage. The most recent development is the Relocation of the Church Hall to be joined to north side of the Church. The old Church Hall was sold to fund the new one which upgrades the facilities of the Church to a 21st century standard. From 2010 a new phase in the life of this ancient "chapel on the hill" has begun.

NOTE: The information in this leaflet has been obtained mainly from the writings of B. Bunker: "The story of an Ancient Chapelry", 1963, and "All Their Yesterdays" 1973. It has been modified in the light of information from current experts. If anyone could provide further information or evidence, it would be greatly appreciated.



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