

# The Church of The Most Holy Trinity

## Theale with North Street

A collection of historical and architectural information about the 'great church' at Theale, gathered together with some additional observations

by Albert Mars



**(Abridged version)**

..... denotes extracted text

The full, unabridged text is available in the church or from Brian Gatward

### Preface

Each time I celebrate the Eucharist at Theale I am conscious of the historical nature of the building, a building that has resounded to the sight, sound and action of Christian worship for over 170 years.

What is not always as obvious is the context in which the church, through its architects, founders and patrons, has developed in that time.

I am very grateful to Mr Albert Mars for the immense amount of work that he has undertaken in producing this history, so that a wider readership might have an insight into the reasons for the Church of The Most Holy Trinity Theale taking the form that it does.

The Revd. Geoffrey Borrowdale  
October 2003

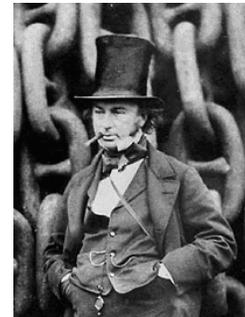
## The Church of The Most Holy Trinity

### Theale with North Street

### Distinguished Visitors

In the year 1833 Isambard Kingdom Brunel was in the Kennet Valley carrying out a survey to determine the route that the main railway line west of Reading was to take.

Shortly after its consecration, another 19th century worthy, John Constable the artist, was attracted to the newly built church. He was in the area to carry out a commission at Englefield and made a sketch of the church which is now stored at the British Museum.



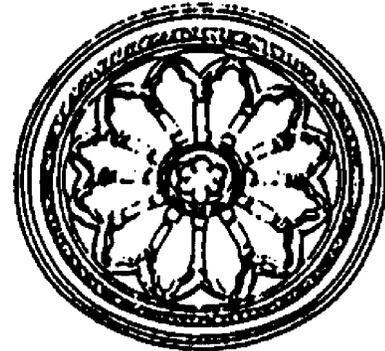
## The Consecration

The church of Holy Trinity, which had drawn the interest of these two gentlemen, was consecrated on Tuesday 21st August 1832, by the Bishop of Salisbury, in whose diocese it then stood.

A contemporary account of the consecration ceremony appeared in the Berkshire Chronicle...

## The Architect

Mrs Sheppard worked in close partnership with her brother, Dr. Routh. The architect they chose was Edward Garbett who practised in Reading. Before coming here he had assisted his father William Garbett in his practice in Winchester...



## The Exterior

Edward Garbett designed the church in the 13th century early English style, and chose Salisbury Cathedral as his pattern. The same is true of the buttresses, described by Pevsner as *Salisbury buttresses*. An interesting feature of the west front is the rose (or wheel) window which is not seen from the inside of the nave. Although this is often referred to as being unique to Theale, it is not an unusual feature in churches which have vaulted ceilings. There are, however, two features of the church which are rather unusual. The first is the small octagonal vestry, positioned at the north-east side of the nave and connected by a small passageway.....

## The Tower

The second unusual feature is the position of the tower at the south-east of the nave. It has been suggested that the tower was an afterthought.... Strangely, Edward Garbett did not go on to become the architect of the tower. The task was eventually assigned to John Buckler... ....despite the inevitable upheaval that a change of architect must have caused, continuity of style and detailing was maintained and the result is a very handsome tower which contains a ring of six bells. The ringing chamber is situated at first floor level and a stone vaulted open passage runs beneath at ground level, leading into the burial ground.

... It is often said and written that the tower is a copy of the bell-tower that once stood in Salisbury near the entrance to the Cathedral Close. This was demolished in 1790, but prints and drawings of it show that except for the buttresses and other Salisbury detailing, there seems little similarity between the two towers.

## Addition and Subtractions

The apse was added in 1892 in memory of the Revd. Thomas Butler (Rector of Theale 1855-1887). The architect was John Oldrid Scott who faithfully reproduced the style and detailing of the rest of the building. The whole exterior including the apse, is clad in Bath stone brought from the quarry to Theale on the Kennet and Avon Canal....

## **The Interior**

...Entrance to the church is through a handsome stone vaulted porch situated at the west end.. The plan of the church is a simple rectangle terminating in a five-sided apse at the eastern end. This was added in 1892 by John Oldrid Scott.....

The single-aisled nave is approximately 80ft long and 30ft wide and the apse, which is slightly narrower than the nave, is 22ft deep..... (The) strong vertical features, which are Salisbury/Early English in style, are partly balanced by a strong horizontal string course which runs the length of the nave just below the level of the windows. When viewed from the west end the lines of this string course and the wooden wainscoting combine with those of the wide central aisle and its flanking rows of pew-end finials to lead the eye eastwards to the apse and the altar, the symbol of Our Lord's supreme sacrifice for us all

The addition of the apse has not always found favour.....

We know from his comments at the time in the parish magazine, that the then Rector, the Revd. Angel-Smith, had reservations about the project before it was built, but was won over when he saw the end result.....

The floor of the apse is covered with Minten encaustic tiles as is the area between the choir stalls. These tiles were used extensively in public buildings during the mid and late 19th century.

## **The Vaulted Ceiling**

One of the outstanding features of the church is the plaster ceiling. It takes the form of a quadripartite vault and the ribs are decorated with dog-toothing, a typically early English form of decoration. It is interesting that Edward Garbett's father, William, was responsible for the vaulting in Christchurch Priory in Dorset in 1819.

## **A Distinguished Exile from Oxford**

In his book 'Architecture of Southern England', John Julius Norwich describes the church as an intriguing curiosity. One of the curiosities it contains is the chantry of William of Wainfleet, positioned on the north side of the east end of the nave.....

William of Wainfleet, who is buried in Winchester Cathedral where he was bishop from 1447 to 1486, was Lord Chancellor of England from 1456 to 1486, serving under the last of the Lancastrian Kings, Henry VI.

Inside the chantry on the north wall is a memorial plaque to Dr. Routh, who died in 1854 but the interior is almost completely taken up by a memorial to Sophia Sheppard, his sister, who died in 1848..... The arms over the door of the chantry are those of William of Wainfleet and those at the west end belong to Magdalen College, Oxford, the chantry's original home....

### ***A man that looks on glass On it may stay his eye***

We know from a contemporary newspaper report that the original east windows were filled with coloured glass and, because no mention is made of the others, must conclude that they were glazed with clear glass. Sometime during the mid 19th century this was replaced by the present geometrically pattered stained glass.....

The triple lancet above the gallery is filled with glass similar to that used in the nave but each window contains the figure of a *musical angel*. The windows on the south side are seen at their best on a bright sunny morning when columns of mosaic patterns of diffused brightly coloured light are projected on to the opposite wall.....

## Furniture and Fittings

Undoubtedly the most important item of furnishing in a church is the seating..... Sir Christopher Wren is probably the most notable of architects in a tradition, which has continued down to the present day. Edward Garbett followed the practice of including the design of seating and other furnishings into the general aesthetics of church interiors. His detailed drawings of Theale with measurements of the pews and their *poppy head* finials are among his drawings held in the British Museum. The drawings of other furnishings are also there, including the font, the pulpit and interestingly, the small round table now positioned at the west end of the church... The present handsome brass lectern was the gift of the Blatch family in 1892. It follows traditional medieval style, the Bible being supported on the outspread wings of an eagle, the symbol of St. John the Evangelist. The eagle is standing on a sphere which represents the world and the lectern itself stands on beasts' claws which symbolise the evil powers overcome by the Word of God, which goes out from this position every Sunday.

## The Organ

The original organ, a single manual instrument built by R.W.Rouse of Somerton, Oxford, was located in the gallery at the west end of the church. In 1933, thanks to the generosity of the Blatch family, it was enlarged and rebuilt in its present position in the nave by G.H.Foskett of London.

The ornate pipes at the front of the organ were part of the old organ..... The organ has been restored by Richard Bower of Weston Longville, Norfolk and we now hope that its fine tonal qualities will continue to enrich the services at Theale for many years to come.

## Tractarianism comes to Theale

Before the Reformation the walls of most churches were covered with paintings....

Biblical texts in lettering nine inches high surrounded by stencilled patterns filled the wall spaces beneath the nave windows (at Theale) and an early photograph of the east end shows the walls completely covered by this type of decoration. During the

same period, the clear glass in the windows was replaced by the present coloured glass and the parishioners of Theale found the familiar Georgian sobriety of their church interior overcome by an exuberant Victorian medievalism, the outward manifestation of the increasing influence that the Tractarian movement was having on the established church. When in 1892 the apse was added, this was decorated in the same flamboyant style by George Bodley. It is said to have taken five years for the artist to complete the work, but it was not to last for long.

Theale was to experience its own minor Puritan revolution which came in two parts.

The first was in 1946 when the apse was redecorated and the whole of Bodley's work was obliterated except for the angels on the south wall. The second was in 1965, when the nave was given similar treatment. However, some of the stencilled decoration was restored and the vaulted ceiling, with its coloured dog-toothing and bosses depicting the Sheppard family's coat of arms, is particularly effective. The Sheppard coat of arms also decorates the front of the gallery which has a Royal coat of arms centrally with the arms of the Oxford diocese imposed upon them.



## Origins, Motivations and Dr. Routh

Dr. Sheppard's wish to provide another church in Theale better suited to the worship of God, to replace the brick chapel he had built earlier must be seen as initiating the building of our present church. He died in 1814, so it was left to his wife Sophia, supported by her brother Dr. Martin Routh, to carry out his wish. Mrs Sheppard provided the money - £39,000 is given as the cost of the church, rectory and school and Dr. Routh's influence would have been predominant....

During the period when the Tractarian Movement was growing in influence in Oxford, he came under criticism for his alleged support of the young men who were involved in it, especially John Newman, who was later to *go over* to Rome and become a cardinal...

In 1815, although the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo signalled the end of the territorial ambitions of post revolutionary France, its revolutionary politics and philosophy had crossed the channel much earlier and were at work in the industrial towns and rural countryside of England. Alarm bells were ringing in the establishment of both Church and state and Dr. Routh, for all his apparent isolation from the contemporary scene, did, when necessary, have a keen awareness of what was happening in the world outside. His inevitable apprehension that everything that he stood for was in danger led to his church at Theale being built as a bold statement in defence of those principles. In consequence, instead of what might well have been a small modest early 19th century building as our parish church, we have a structure acknowledged as being the most solid and most satisfactory church of the whole period.

It is interesting to note that it was Dr. Routh's own wish that he should be buried at Theale but the family bowed to the stronger claim by the college in which he had spent 83 years of his long life. He was buried in the chapel of Magdalen College, Oxford.

## Theale and the Gothic Revival

Dr. Routh and Mrs. Sheppard were not the only builders of churches at that time. In 1818, Parliament passed the Church Building Act and one million pounds was given, followed later by further sums to build churches in the rapidly growing areas of London and the northern industrial towns. In the same year, The Church Building Society was set up to raise money privately to build and enlarge churches. During this period, 217 churches are said to have been built, the majority of them in the then fashionable Grecian Classical style but many in the new revised Gothic style.

These churches were often designed to classical proportions with pointed arches and other Gothic details added. It is with this group of churches that Theale is usually compared and judged. The full impact of the Gothic Revival had not yet made itself felt. That was to come later in the 19th century when churches were built not only to the medieval style but to the medieval church plan, with arcades of arches, long chancels and often screens. Theale came before this and was originally a simple rectangular church built to the Gothic proportions in correct Early English style.

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## Early Chapels in Theale

Soon after he acquired the advowson of the Parish of Tilehurst in 1799, Dr. Sheppard built a Chapel of Ease to serve the people of Theale which was part of the Tilehurst parish. It was built of brick and had a bellcote and was endowed to provide for a service once on a Sunday. It was built on what is now part of the Old Rectory garden, on the right of the present church entry gates and adjacent to the car park...

Before the brick chapel existed there is evidence that the people of Theale, although parishioners of Tilehurst, used Englefield church for Sunday worship and also for baptisms, weddings and funerals....

In a collection of writings and cuttings compiled by the Berkshire Local History Club in the 19th century, A.Harrison writes *'I can now state that on the site of the present church (in Theale) stood the Englefield Chapel belonging to Goring Priory.'*

In the year 1291 the Priory of Goring on Thames, which was a nunnery, made a record of all its properties, and in this is listed a chapel dedicated to St John the Baptist in Theale. When, over 200 years later, in 1542, the Priory was dissolved by Henry VIII and its properties disposed of, the chapel can again be traced among other items that were granted to Richard Andrews and a Leonard Chamberlain.....

It would be interesting if the exact location of the medieval chapel could be found. There are many inferences that foundations were discovered when the present church was being built but these may not necessarily been those of the old chapel. Old maps show a number of buildings lining the road, now Church Street, in that area. Harrison, quoting a document held in the British Museum *writes 'the chapel at Theale was demolished in 1808'.....*

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all those people from whom, over many years, much of the information in this booklet has been gleaned. Especial thanks are due to Roy Townsend for his assistance and advice in clarifying many facts and dates. I am also indebted to the following publications from which information was obtained.

The Victorian History of England	Berkshire
The Buildings of England (Berks)	Nikolaus Pevsner
The Gothic Revival	Kenneth Clark
The History of Tilehurst and Theale	Alfred Harrison
Dictionary of British Architects	Howard Calvin
The Architecture of England	Doreen Yarwood
Theale Parish Magazine	Various dates
Dr. Routh	R.D.Middleton

## **Rectors**

**M. Routh D.D. 1832 1854**

**T. H. Butler D.D. 1855 1887**

**S. C. F. Angel-Smith M.A. 1887 1924**

**W. F. S. Duckworth M.A. 1924 1930**

**H. F. Wilson B.D. D.C.L. 1931 1932**

**J. S. Sharp M.A. 1932 1942**

**C. T. H. Dams M.A. 1942 1945**

**W. H. Treble M.A. 1945 1954**

**J. Bromley M.A. Hon. C.F. 1955 1962**

**E. L. King M.A. 1963 1968**

**S. N. H. Roberts 1969 1985**

**D. Rice B.A. 1986 2000**

**G. N. Borrowdale B.Sc. (Hons) P.G.C.E.**

**Priest-in-Charge 2001**