

## **Chapel of St Gabriel**

According to the parish church and village guide books, there was already a church at Stoke Gabriel at the time of the Norman Conquest.<sup>1</sup> It would have to have been a Saxon church pre-existing the mediaeval church that survives to this day. But did the previous church actually exist and, if so, where and when was it built, what were its origins, and from where did the clergy come to lead its services?

Having been created out of a larger diocese that also included Dorset and Somerset, the Diocese of Devon and Cornwall had been in existence for about 150 years at the time of the Conquest in 1066. It was originally based at Crediton but in 1050 the King of England, Edward the Confessor, gave the Exeter Minster Church to the Bishop of Crediton, Bishop Leofric. He then moved his seat to Exeter and was installed by the King as the first Bishop of Exeter (1050-72), and the minster became the cathedral.<sup>2</sup>

With the minster, the bishop acquired all its parochia – an ancient term meaning lands – to endow his work and that of the diocese. The lands belonging to the See of Exeter at that time were mainly located in the south and east of Devon.<sup>3</sup> They included the Manor of Paignton, which comprised Paignton, Marldon and Stoke Gabriel. It was a valuable estate having no manor house although it did have a palace, the remains of which are near the existing Church of St John Baptist. Since 1050, the Bishops of Exeter have been the Lords of the Manor of Paignton and they were instrumental in the development of a place of worship at Stoke Gabriel.<sup>4</sup>

### **Was there a previous church?**

The existing church building is of Norman origin, dating from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, although only the Norman tower survives intact today.<sup>5</sup> Any reference to a Saxon church cannot therefore be a reference to the existing building. There is also an alleged site of a monastery in the south east corner of the churchyard but no evidence, including that from the drainage excavations for the south porch, has been found as to its existence.<sup>6</sup>

According to local tradition, there was a place of worship – a chapel – in Stoke Gabriel that pre-dated the existing church but which no longer survives. Convincing evidence for its existence has been found from two independent sources, a bishop's register and the churchwarden accounts for the parish. The Bishop of Exeter, Bishop Lacy (1420-55), recorded in his register on the 24<sup>th</sup> June 1455 an entry relating to Stoke Gabriel that he would:

“...grant indulgences to all his parish clergy and others, having been truly penitent and contrite and confessed, who might visit for reasons of devotion, pilgrimage or prayer the Chapel of Saint Gabriel, situated in the Churchyard of the parish church of Stoke Gabriel in the Diocese of Exeter, and who might make gifts there and who might also transfer, bequeath or in any way assign any of their God-given gifts for the fabric, lights, ornaments or any other things needed for the said chapel, as charitable support...”<sup>7</sup>

This reveals several facts: that, like the parish church, the chapel was dedicated to St Gabriel (presumably at the church dedication service in 1268); that the parish church was not built on the site of the chapel but that the two were co-existing; and that the location of the chapel was within the curtilage of the churchyard. It also reveals that the chapel was in a poor state of repair since the purpose of the grant of indulgences was to raise funds to put it right.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, following years of neglect, the main church building itself had been repaired and extended.<sup>9</sup> The bishop (and almost certainly the parishioners) had provided funds for the works but seemingly - and not unreasonably - had not been prepared to fund the chapel repairs. As a result, the additional funds had to be obtained in some other way and the grant of indulgences was one such contemporary practice that had been used for financing repairs to dilapidated chapels.

Two centuries later, an entirely independent record is provided by the churchwarden accounts for Stoke Gabriel for 1613.<sup>10</sup> That was the year in which the tenor bell was re-cast and, unlike today when the bell would be transported to the bell foundry, it was customary to undertake the work on site as close to the tower as possible. The bell founders created a pit within which they built a furnace. The accounts indicate that a payment was made:

“...for one dayes worke for to drawe stones to byld the ffurnes in the chapell”

Choosing a suitable location for the furnace may not have been straightforward since graves were not marked with headstones at the time. The entry in the accounts clearly indicates that the furnace was built in “the chapell” but why would the furnace be built there? The likely answer is that Bishop Lacy’s sale of indulgences failed to raise enough funds for the chapel to be repaired with the result that it gradually fell into greater and greater disrepair. With the main church having been rebuilt, there was probably little or no justification for an additional place of worship anyway. By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was little left of the chapel’s fabric, perhaps just the low-level remains of the perimeter walls. If so, it may have presented itself as the most suitable location for the furnace. Once the bell had been recast, the furnace would have been demolished and the pit filled in, concealing all remains of the chapel and providing additional burial space. This is partly confirmed by Beatrix Cresswell in her early 20<sup>th</sup> century notes, which are based on Milles’ Parochial Returns of 1755 and which state that:

“Chapel in ye churchyard dedicated to St Gabriel, no part of which now remains...”<sup>11</sup>

These independent sources provide sufficient evidence as to the prior existence of a chapel – the Chapel of St Gabriel – within the churchyard, separate from the mediaeval church that exists today.

#### Where was the chapel located?

At this time, the churchyard comprised only the upper churchyard with burial graves to the west and east, and graves with the yew tree to the north. Beatrix Cresswell refers in her notes (again based on Milles’ Parochial Returns of 1755) that there was:

“...a tradition that it stood at ye east end of ye churchyard.”<sup>12</sup>

If the tradition is well-founded, then the tenor bell would have been hauled through the main north door, which makes more sense than having it hauled through the much smaller west or south doors. The chapel furnace would then have been built somewhere to the east of the main entrance path or even to the east of the chancel. There are remains of historic walling to the west of the footpath that connects the chancel end of the churchyard with the lychgate but these could relate to a crypt or burial monument. Without historical records, the local tradition, as recorded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and again in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is the best information available as to the location of the chapel although it is not strictly evidential.

#### When was the chapel built?

Given that the main church was built in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the chapel would have been built sometime previously, probably when the local population was smaller. The question is whether the chapel was built before or after 1066, that is whether it was Saxon or Norman, and there are two disparate lines of evidential enquiry – documentary and archaeological.

#### Documentary Evidence:

Compiled in 1086 and written in Mediaeval Latin, the purpose of the Domesday Book, and in particular the more detailed Exon Domesday, is to provide a record of land holdings, the names of the proprietors, the assessed value of the holdings, and the tax paid. The existence and identification of churches are not therefore directly relevant to its purpose, as a result of which relatively few of the number of churches in existence at the time are actually identified. To provide a complete picture, churches not included in Domesday have to be identified using other sources or by inference. Those that are identified in Domesday are either the more significant churches and minsters or are churches that hold lands since, regardless of their significance, they directly read on to Domesday's purpose. At this time, the church in Devon had substantial land holdings, owning about one seventh of the cultivated land and one fifth of the assessed value of the whole.<sup>13</sup>

One Domesday resource identifies three places as Stoke, one of which is “probably” that for Stoke Gabriel but it makes no mention of a church.<sup>14</sup> Another resource identifies seven places where specific mention is made of the existence of a church and a number of other places where their existence is implied, but none relates to Stoke Gabriel.<sup>15</sup> Yet a further resource lists 45 churches still not including the church at Stoke Gabriel.<sup>16</sup> None of these sources therefore provides evidence as to the existence of a Domesday church in Stoke Gabriel.

In today's parlance, a church is generally regarded as a sacred building that is used for divine worship and prayer.<sup>17</sup> A chapel (or oratory) is a smaller building used for the same purpose but with rights of access limited to members of a religious community or of a private estate, perhaps a manorial estate.<sup>18</sup> In the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the terms were in a state of flux and chapels gradually began to be called churches and minsters gradually began to be called mother churches, if not cathedrals. Having said that, the chapel in Stoke Gabriel never became a church; it was a separate building. Both chapel and

church co-existed within the curtilage of the upper churchyard with the chapel being the smaller and earlier in construction. The point remains of relevance however since chapels were considered at the time as having less significance than churches and their existence was not generally recorded.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an analysis of the Domesday folios was undertaken by Rev'd Reichel using this more refined understanding of "church".<sup>19</sup> At the time of Domesday, parochial churches, that is churches with lands, were a relatively small number, amounting to about twenty in Devon including four in Exeter. One was the cathedral itself and another was the Church of St Stephen, which is the much-restored church in High St, Exeter. The Church of St Stephen including all its landholdings had been given to the bishop at the time of his appointment to the see of Exeter in 1050.<sup>20</sup> Amongst these landholdings were Paignton and "Stoke Gabriel, part of the Bishop's Domesday Peintone", suggesting perhaps that the Manor of Paignton was held by the Church of St Stephen before it was transferred to the bishop. A presumption is made by Reichel that the bishop would have had chapels at all his parochia, thus including Stoke Gabriel. Searches for Domesday sources for the parochia of St Stephen's Church has failed to provide any confirmation. Reichel's analysis is meticulous, increasing the number of Domesday churches in Devon from between 20 and 45 to a number in excess of 100, for which Bishop Osbern (1072-1103) had administrative responsibility.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the conclusion that the Chapel of St Gabriel was a Domesday chapel is, on Reichel's own admission, still a presumption.

#### Archaeological Evidence:

Revealed after the removal of ivy, the remains of a round-headed, red sandstone doorway can be observed from within the churchyard embedded in the north boundary wall. Red sandstone was quarried as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century and it was customary by the 19<sup>th</sup> century to recycle redundant or abandoned stone as building material for stone walls, which would explain its present situation. However, the design of the round-headed doorway is Norman (although it could also indicate a later mediaeval period).<sup>22</sup> There is moreover no evidence to indicate that the remains were sourced from the chapel although some clearly think it was, as indicated by the following unattributed manuscript note dated August 1915:

"The Rev. Lyde Hunt tells me that in the wall of the churchyard (North East corner) there are the remains of a Norman doorway which according to Oliver was the entrance to the Norman Chapel of St Gabriel."<sup>23</sup>

A well-respected historian, Oliver not only thought that the remains were sourced from the chapel but also that the chapel was Norman.

In summary, the most that can be said is that there is a presumption that the Chapel of St Gabriel was Saxon but the available evidence points more to it being early Norman, possibly late 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century.

#### What was the origin of the chapel?

During the early mediaeval period, rural chapels were built for several reasons. One was to serve as a private chapel for the Lord of the Manor, another was to serve the village and estate, and a third, less worthy reason was to provide a source of income out of the offerings there made once the priest had been paid for his services. Whatever the reason, the founding of chapels required some kind of patronage to establish and maintain them.<sup>24</sup> In Stoke Gabriel, the bishop had no personal need for a chapel given that he already had one at nearby Paignton but, nonetheless, the bishop, as Head of the Diocese of Exeter and Lord of the Manor of Paignton, provided the required patronage to found the chapel in Stoke Gabriel and thus became its patron, and the chapel (like the church to come) thus became a peculiar.<sup>25</sup>

#### Who led the services?

Chapels, or at least those that are called chapels of ease, were built to serve communities that were remote from a church; they are called chapels of ease since the population was “eased” from having to make the journey to the church. Such chapels had limited rights, the terms of which were set out in the licence granted by the bishop and recorded in their registers. They existed in subordination to the mother church and would not have their own clergy but rely on itinerant clergy from the mother church. They had no territorial rights and, subject to the terms of the licence, no baptismal or burial rights and would defer to the mother church for services on Sundays and on major festivals. The local community would have been responsible for the cost of repair and maintenance of the chapel in addition to the tithed payments to their patron and the mother church. The latter payments often led to disputes with the mother church, leading larger chapels to secede from their subordination and become independent in their own right. In Devon in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, about ten such chapels were successful in securing such independence.<sup>26</sup>

No episcopal register exists from the time that the Chapel of St Gabriel was licensed as a place of worship. But other sources indicate that the mother church was the Church of St John Baptist, Paignton.<sup>27</sup> A church had existed on the site of the Church of St John Baptist since the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the only remains of which are some old water-worn foundation stones beneath the floor of the existing church.<sup>28</sup> Both Stoke Gabriel and Marldon were part of a large district that was served by the Church of St John Baptist and indeed their chapels have both been described as Chapels of Paignton.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the local population of Stoke Gabriel would have looked to the clergy of the Church of St John Baptist to lead their chapel services but would probably still have had to travel to Paignton for the main Sunday and festival services. In addition, they would have paid their tithes to the Bishop and to the clergy of the mother church.

The 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries were characterised by much church building across the country. Devon was no different and the church in Stoke Gabriel was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century probably following significant growth in the local population to justify the building of a church when it already had a chapel. Once the church had been built, it is unlikely that the Chapel of St Gabriel would have been used for regular services. But, for over a century, it was the only place of worship in Stoke Gabriel for the local community.

End Notes:

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- <sup>1</sup> *Church Guide, Church of St Mary and St Gabriel* (Graham Norman (Printing)) and *Stoke Gabriel Booklet* (Produced by John Battison, 2005), available in the parish church and post office.
- <sup>2</sup> R.J.E. Boggis, *A History of the Diocese of Exeter*, (Exeter, William Pollard & Co. Ltd, 1922), 40-44
- <sup>3</sup> Nicholas Orme, *The Church in Devon 400-1560*, (Impress Books, 2013), 5-8
- <sup>4</sup> Rev George Oliver, *Ecclesiastical Antiquities in Devon*, (Exeter, W. C. Featherstone, New London Inn Square, 1840), Vol 1, 173; and Harold Fox, *Dartmoor's Alluring Uplands: Transhumance and Pastoral Management in the Middle Ages*, (University of Exeter Press, 2012), 120-121
- <sup>5</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1108497> (5th March 2018)
- <sup>6</sup> Historic Environment Record MDV112158  
[http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results\\_Single.aspx?uid=MDV112158&resourceID=104](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MDV112158&resourceID=104)
- <sup>7</sup> Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), DEX/1/a/10, Chanter 11, Episcopal Register of Edmund Lacy, 1429-53
- <sup>8</sup> The doctrine of purgatory, one of the principle objections of Martin Luther, is an intermediate place between earth and heaven through which the soul of the deceased passes for it to be purified before it can enter heaven. Under the Catholic doctrine, the grant of an indulgence helps to speed the passage through purgatory.
- <sup>9</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1108497> (5th March 2018)
- <sup>10</sup> Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 1981 A-99/PW1
- <sup>11</sup> Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), s726.5/DEV/CRE, Beatrix Cresswell, *Notes on Devon Churches, The Fabric and Features of interest in the churches of the Deanery of Totnes*, Revised in 1922 on the basis of original notes of 1904; and Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), Milles Parochial Returns, 1755, Stoke Gabriel Cuttings file, A9
- <sup>12</sup> Devon Heritage Centre, Cresswell, *ibid*, and Milles, *ibid*
- <sup>13</sup> Boggis, *ibid*, 54-5
- <sup>14</sup> *The Devonshire Domesday and Geld Inquest*, (Plymouth, W. Brendon and Son, 1884-1892) 25 and 735
- <sup>15</sup> H.C. Darby and R. Welldon Finn (ed.), *The Domesday Geography of South-West England*, (Cambridge, C.U.P. 1979), 278-9.
- <sup>16</sup> Orme, *ibid*, 11-25.
- <sup>17</sup> It may also mean a community of people having a common faith without reference to a physical building at all. Confusingly, this is one of the meanings used for a church in Domesday as the Saxons often held their meetings in the open air (Reichel, *ibid*, 22).
- <sup>18</sup> Peter F. Anson, *Churches – Their Plan and Furnishing*, (Milwaukee, The Bruce Publishing Company, 1948), 3-10.
- <sup>19</sup> Rev'd Oswald Joseph Reichel, *The Devonshire Domesday, The "Domesday" Churches of Devon*, (London, British Library, Historical Print Editions, 2011), 1-59, Reprinted from the Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, 1898
- <sup>20</sup> Reichel, *ibid*, 52
- <sup>21</sup> Boggis, *ibid*, 55-59 and M. Slader, *The Churches of Devon*, (Dawlish, W J Holman Ltd, 1968) 26-27
- <sup>22</sup> Personal communication from John Allan
- <sup>23</sup> Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), Stoke Gabriel Cuttings file, A10
- <sup>24</sup> Rev'd Oswald Joseph Reichel, *The Origin and Upgrowth of the English Parish*, (Plymouth, W Brendon and Son, Ltd, 1920), Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association, Totnes, July 1920, Vol LII, 239-262
- <sup>25</sup> A peculiar is a chapel or church that is outside the jurisdiction of the diocese but subject to the direct jurisdiction of the bishop.
- <sup>26</sup> Orme, *ibid*, 119-124
- <sup>27</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *A New Survey of England, Devon*, (Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1978), 450
- <sup>28</sup> *The Story of the Parish Church of St John Baptist, Paignton* (Gloucester, The British Publishing Company Limited, 1946) available from Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 3134A/9/PZ/1
- <sup>29</sup> Rev'd Oswald Joseph Reichel, *Extracts from the Hundred Rolls of 3 Edward 1*, (Plymouth, W Brendon and Son, Ltd, 1918), Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association, Torquay, July 1918, Vol L, 380