Establishment of the Church and the Parish of Stoke Gabriel

The founding of the church and the establishment of the parish of Stoke Gabriel are largely informed by the records of the Bishops of Exeter and the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral. The register of Bishop Bronescombe (1257-80) is of particular note since he was the first Bishop of Exeter to keep a register of his activities, following the practice established by bishops elsewhere in the country. Written in Latin, these registers record the visits that the bishops made around the Diocese, their purpose and much other information, all of which helps to provide an early timeline of the church and parish.

In the mediaeval period, the county of Devon had a population of about 100,000 (cf. about 1.1 million today), most of whom lived and worked in the countryside.[1] The infrastructure was undeveloped and neighbourhoods were largely self-sufficient, exploiting locally available land and water resources to sustain themselves. Known at the time as "Stoche", an Anglo Saxon word meaning "settlement", Stoke Gabriel would have been no more inaccessible than many other places in the county. Its distance from Exeter was not a problem since the registers show that the bishops regularly travelled throughout the Diocese, which at that time included Cornwall. Moreover, they regularly stayed in Paignton, the principal neighbourhood within the Manor of Paignton and the location of their palace.[2] Stoke Gabriel was within the manorial estate and a mere five miles from the palace. Yet, Stoke Gabriel is rarely mentioned amongst the bishops' itineraries. It was somewhat off the beaten track and, without a sizeable population, religious house or anyone of standing, it may have simply been passed by except for those occasions when the need for a bishop was essential, such as at a service to install a priest or dedicate the church.

When was the church of Stoke Gabriel built?

A chapel was built in Stoke Gabriel which is presumed to be of Saxon origin but which, according to the available evidence, is more likely to be early Norman, possibly late 11th or early 12th century. The motivation to build a church when a chapel already existed is unknown but it was probably due to an increase in the local population at the time. Across the country, the population tripled between 1086 and 1282 and in Devon itself, already a relatively populous county, the population had increased by half between 1086 and 1290; moreover, a higher than average growth was probably experienced in the Manor of Paignton.[3] Over this same period there was an unprecedented wave of church building, which was also reflected in Devon. Whatever the motivation, a church came to be built in Stoke Gabriel.

There is an early ecclesiastical record, which is a deed of Bishop Robert Chichester (1138-55), the fourth Bishop of Exeter following the transfer of the see from Crediton to Exeter. The deed is dated 15th August 1148 and is the instrument by which seven churches were

appropriated by the bishop to provide an income for the canons of the cathedral.[4] One of the seven is a church at "Stoke", thus dating the church to the 12th century. There is also an indication that Bishop Leofric (1016-1072) might have recovered the church at Stoke from the despoiled see of Crediton, thus giving it an even earlier date.[5] The suggestion has been made that Stoke is a reference to Stoke Gabriel.[6] However, Stoke was a common name at the time and it is more likely to refer to Stoke Canon.[7] The reasons are several-fold. Firstly, the church of Stoke Gabriel was built by the Bishop of Exeter on lands that he already owned and one cannot appropriate what one already has! Secondly, the church of Stoke Canon, as its name suggests, has had a long association with the cathedral canons.[8] In contrast, the church of Stoke Gabriel has had no such relationship (although it did have a relationship with the chancellors as will become apparent). Thirdly, if this were a reference to the church at Stoke Gabriel, then it would mean that it had been built at about the same time as the chapel which would not make a sensible chronological fit. As a result, the suggestion that this deed has relevance to Stoke Gabriel is mistaken.

The grade 1 listing for the church indicates that it is of 13th century origin, the tower (and chancel) surviving from that time period.[9] While no records have been found that directly relate to the date of its build, a strong inference can be drawn from entries in the registers of the Bishops of Exeter, Bishop Bronescombe (1257-80) and Bishop Quivil (1280-91). These entries relate to the endowment of the diocesan office of chancellor to provide an income for the performance of his duties and in so doing bear upon the existence of a church at Stoke Gabriel.[10]

As with the pre-existing chapel, the founding of a church required a patron on whose land the church would be built. In mediaeval times, patronage was typically provided by the Lord of the Manor and so it was with Stoke Gabriel. The Lord of the Manor of Paignton was the Bishop of Exeter and he became the patron of the church in addition to his pre-existing patronage of the chapel. Patrons acquire the advowson, which is a valuable property right capable of being bought and sold and which empowers the holder of the right to appoint a priest as and when a vacancy arises. The appointment requires approval from the diocesan bishop since it is he who installs the priest, but in the case of Stoke Gabriel that would not be a problem since the patron and bishop were one and the same person.

The bishop provided the funds for the church to be built and created a benefice (otherwise known as a living) with which the church would be associated. A benefice is an ecclesiastical office which requires the discharge of specified duties (spiritualities) and the receipt of specified revenues (temporalities). The holder of the office is the incumbent who is a rector if he receives all the tithes or a vicar if he receives only some of the tithes. In the case of Stoke Gabriel, the bishop received all the tithes but diverted some to support a vicarage.

Given that background, the office of chancellor was in need of an income and the bishop decided to endow it with his Stoke Gabriel tithes. The precise date of the endowment is not known but it occurred before July 1281 because in that year Bishop Quivil recorded in his register, as follows:

"STOKE-GABRIEL, Vicar of-

> *Robert de Crydetone*, priest, inst. 18 July, 1281; Patron, Sir Clement [de Langeforde], Chancellor of the Cathedral;"[11]

The chancellor is identified as the patron of the church, which suggests that the bishop had not only endowed the office with the tithes, an act confirmed by events during Bishop Grandisson's tenure (1327-1369) as Bishop of Exeter, but had also transferred the advowson.[12] Neither of Bishop Bronescombe's and Quivil's registers makes any mention of the grant of the endowment or the transfer of the advowson, which were the kind of transactions that would have been recorded had they occurred during their term of office. Consequently, the transfer of these rights likely occurred before 1257, which was when Bishop Bronescombe took office and first began to keep a register of his activities.

At the other end of the time frame, the office of chancellor was created in 1225 and would have required funding from the beginning, probably using the Stoke Gabriel tithes.[13] Conceivably, the building of the church could have predated the creation of the office but, to be consistent with the Grade 1 listing entry, it could not have occurred earlier than the 13th century. To fit all the available facts, therefore, the endowment would have been granted before 1281, and even before 1257, the most likely scenario being that Bishop Briwere endowed the office at the time of its creation in 1225. Self-evidently, the endowment could have been granted only if the bishop was already in receipt of the tithed income, which required the church to be in existence. So, to provide a chronological fit, the building of the church would have been completed in the early 13th century, probably during the second or third decade, that is about a century after the chapel had been built.

What were the social and ecclesiastical consequences?

The date on which the church was built and became the primary place of worship for the local population had significant consequences for the social and ecclesiastical development of Stoke Gabriel. Having a church (and not just a chapel) meant that Stoke Gabriel would now have its own priest who would be installed as its incumbent and vicar and be responsible for the cure of souls – the spiritual welfare – of its population. As a result, they would no longer be reliant on the clergy of the Mother Church of St John Baptist, Paignton. All the services would now take place at the local church including the Sunday and festival services, funeral services and services of baptisms and weddings. Pastoral dues to the clergy of the Church of

St John Baptist, Paignton, required when the chapel was the only place of worship, would have ceased.

Having a vicar responsible for the cure of souls required some means of determination as to whom came within the scope of his duties. Similarly, the local population had an obligation to pay tithes and those living in more remote areas might come under the reach of several churches.[14] The people would want to ensure that they paid their tithes once only and to the correct vicar. Both the vicar and the local population therefore required some certainty respectively as to whom was under their care and as to which was their church. For these reasons, there was a need for a distinct geographical area to be established for the church. Those living within the area – the parish – would come under the vicar's care and bear the obligation to pay tithes. Between the 10th and 13th centuries, some 9000 parishes were established across the country.[15] One such parish was Stoke Gabriel which would have been established at about the same time as the founding of the church, the creation of the benefice and the installation of the vicar.

The determination of parish boundaries was based upon several considerations. Critically, the area had to contain a sufficient population to support both the church and vicar. Otherwise, due account would be taken of pre-existing parish and manorial boundaries and land ownership and waterways. In the case of Stoke Gabriel, for example, the western boundary of the parish was determined to coincide with the boundary which separated the Manors of Paignton and Berie (the former name of Berry Pomeroy), and thus it was that Aish came within the parish. The manorial and parochial systems existed together. While the manor continued to be the principal unit of local administration and justice in the early rural economy, the parish church became the organisational vehicle for ecclesiastical administration. Over several centuries, the balance of power between the two institutions changed with the church gradually acquiring the responsibilities of the manor court. Having the same person as the Bishop of Exeter and as the Lord of the Manor will have simplified the decision-making process on parish boundaries and facilitated the transition of responsibilities from manor to church.

The foundation of the church and the concomitant establishment of the parish of Stoke Gabriel meant that it was now ecclesiastically independent from Paignton. It no longer looked to the church in Paignton as the mother church and was no longer part of the district that its clergy served. Having the bishop as its patron also resulted in the church being outside Diocesan jurisdiction and accountable directly to the bishop himself; it was a so-called peculiar. The newly formed parish continued, however, to be part of the Manor of Paignton and that would not change for centuries, but otherwise it was now for the first time in its history able to forge its own social and ecclesiastical identity.

The founding of a parish church in Stoke Gabriel had an adverse consequence for the Chapel of St Gabriel since it was effectively made redundant. It may have been thought that two places of worship could be sustained but subsequent events showed that that was not the case. Over the following centuries, it fell into greater and greater disrepair until it was finally demolished in the early 17th century.

Dedication of the Church of Stoke Gabriel

The formal ritual of consecration and dedication of a church involves the act of declaring that the building is set aside for holy purposes and the action – performed by a bishop – of making it thus. The process as a whole is generally called dedication and, while the dedicatee is God, it was customary by the end of the 4th century to place the church under an additional dedicatee – Saints, Angels, Christ or the Trinity – after whom the church is named and identified.[16] In the mediaeval era, the ritual was elaborate, comprising two stages which together would take several hours.[17]

The first stage began outside with a procession three times around the empty building during which the bishop asperged – sprayed – the wall with holy water. The bishop and clergy then entered the church, purified the inside with holy water and exorcised it of demons and evil spirits. The litany was said and ashes were sprinkled in two broad diagonal paths from one corner of the building to the other thereby forming a cross. With the base of his crozier, the bishop traced the Greek alphabet in the ashes along one length of the cross and then the Latin alphabet along the other. A solemn prayer of dedication concluded the first stage.

The service then moved into its second stage, which focused on the hallowing of the altar during which it was purified and anointed, being marked with a cross in each corner. Finally, the service culminated in its most important element, the mass of dedication and the admission of the congregation into the now consecrated church building.

In the early mediaeval period, many churches had been built but not all had been dedicated. There were about a hundred such churches within the Diocese of Exeter including the church of Stoke Gabriel, a statistic not too surprising given the length of time required for the dedication ritual. However, this was all about to change.

In 1237, the Papal legate, Otto, issued a decree at the Council of London that all churches should be dedicated within two years, if not so done already.[18] In spite of the penalties for failing to comply in a timely manner, little happened within the diocese for some twenty years. Indeed, it was not until the succession of Bishop Bronescombe to the see of Exeter that the many undedicated churches began to be dedicated. In the period from 1259 to 1268, the bishop dedicated almost ninety churches.[19] More than half are identified in his register but they do not include the church of Stoke Gabriel.

The first recorded reference in Bishop Bronescombe's register to Stoke Gabriel is in 1276, the entry reading as follows:

"BODMIN [Parochialis Ecclesia Sancti Petroci, MS.], Vicars of –

Sir *Philip de Stokes Gabriele*, priest, was inst. 28 July, 1276…"[20]

This reference has no relevance to the church in Stoke Gabriel but relates to the installation of a parishioner by the name of Philip as the priest of St Petrox, Bodmin. The significant use of the suffix "Gabriele" to identify "Stokes" as Stokes Gabriele indicates that by this time the church had been dedicated since Philip was identified as coming from Stokes Gabriele. This is the latest date by which the church would have been dedicated. The forty churches that were not identified, which would have included Stoke Gabriel, were all possibly dedicated in 1268 since there is no indication that the bishop dedicated any church after that year.[21] According to his published itineraries, the bishop made visits to Paignton about once a year and could have used one of these occasions to travel to Stoke Gabriel for the dedication ritual, but if so it was not recorded. In summary, the church was dedicated before 1276 and possibly in 1268, about 50 years after it was built.

The dates on which the church was built and dedicated precede the earliest recorded date on which a priest was installed to the vicarage of Stoke Gabriel. According to Bishop Quivil's register and the Priest's Roll, which hangs in the church and which sourced its information from the register, Robert de Crydetone is the first priest of the parish of Stoke Gabriel. He was installed in 1281, at least five years after the church's dedication and some fifty years after the church had been built.[22] Self-evidently, Robert de Crydetone was not the first vicar of Stoke Gabriel, just the first holder of the office to be recorded.

At the time the church was dedicated to St Gabriel, the parish had no association with the archangel. In contrast, Bishop Bronescombe was a devotee of the cult of St Gabriel, restored the Chapel of St Gabriel in the Cathedral, next to which he is now entombed, and endowed the Chapel of St Gabriel in Clyst Manor House. As the patron of the church and the diocesan bishop, the choice of St Gabriel as the dedicatee was almost certainly made by himself.[23] At the same time, the pre-existing chapel would also have been dedicated to St Gabriel.

In consequence of the dedication of the church and chapel to St Gabriel, the name of the neighbourhood changed from Stoche to Stoche Gabriel, a change from a widely used generic term to something much more distinctive. Appending a distinguishing suffix in this way was a custom repeated time and again across the county and country in order to differentiate one "Stoche" from the many others for ecclesiastical and administrative purposes.[24] The village and the parish have since been known as Stokes Gabriele, Gabrielstoke, Stoke St Gabriel and St Gabriel's Stoke (all with variable spelling) but for the last century have been known as

Stoke Gabriel.[25] Within several decades, the local population had gone from being part of some vague and diffuse neighbourhood within the Manor of Paignton to a defined parish with its own distinctive name.

The dedication to St Gabriel survived until 1846 when it was apparently changed to St Mary and St Gabriel.[26] It is the joint dedication by which the church is known today while the parish and village names remained unaffected. Oddly, no record exists of the change in the register of Henry Phillpotts who was Bishop of Exeter from 1831-69. Moreover, later records, specifically for the years of 1873, 1939 and 1996, show that the dedication was not changed.[27] The reason for this discrepancy has not been discovered.

Prior to the Reformation, the feast day of St Gabriel was set for the first Monday of September and was celebrated by Bishop Bronescombe in the Chapel of St Gabriel within the cathedral. It would also have been celebrated by the parishioners of Stoke Gabriel and, like many festivals of this era, would have been accompanied by much merrymaking. Nowadays, the Church of England has no date set aside for the commemoration of St Gabriel, but the Feast of St Michael and All Angels on the 29th September does broadly encompass him.[28] One advantage of a joint dedication is that parishioners have a choice whether to celebrate the feast day of St Gabriel or of St Mary (on 8th September) or of both!

Postscript:

The dedication of churches to St Gabriel is not common and exists for only about twenty churches in the country. The dedication of a church to St Mary and St Gabriel is even less common. There are two such other churches, one nestling in the foothills of the South Downs in the picturesque West Sussex village of South Harting and the other at Binbrook in Lincolnshire.[29]

Mike Stott, April 2018

End Notes:

[1] Boggis, R.J.E, *A History of the Diocese of Exeter* (Exeter, William Pollard & Co. Ltd, 1922), 53-5
[2] Orme, Nicholas, *Exeter Cathedral as it was 1050-1550* (Exeter, Devon Books, 1986), 31-32
[3] Broadberry, S, Campbell, M and Van Leeuwen, B, *English Mediaeval Population: Reconciling Time Series and Cross Sectional Evidence,* 27 July 2010, pages 3-8 and Table 8; https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/sbroadberry/wp/medievalpopulation7.pdf
[4] Oliver, G, *Lives of the Bishops of Exeter,* (Exeter, William Roberts, Broadgate, 1861), 17
[5] Oliver, *Lives of the Bishops of Exeter*, 7
[6] *Church of St Mary and St Gabriel, Some Brief Notes,* Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 8489Z/1/109,
[7] Boggis, *A History of the Diocese of Exeter,* 106
[8]http://www.netherexe.org/images/stories/stokecparish/the%20parish%20church%20of%20st%20mary%20magdalene%20stoke%20canon.pdf

[9] https://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101108497-church-of-st-gabriel-and-st-mary-stoke-gabriel#.WsI-E2aZNmw

[10] The office of chancellor is third in seniority within the Diocesan hierarchy after the bishop and dean of the cathedral. The chancellor is a cleric and lawyer who presides over the bishop's court, the consistory court. All legal matters are delegated by the bishop to the chancellor although the role was also to encompass an educational remit.

[11] Hingeston-Randolph F.C, *The Register of Peter Quivil*, 356

[12] The assignment of the advowson became a contentious issue between the bishop and chancellor. It seems that the bishop intended that the chancellor should receive only the tithes and that he should retain the right of patronage. The issue was not resolved until about a century later when it was resolved in favour of the bishop.

[13] Bishop Briwere (1224-44) appointed Henry of Warwick from among the canons to be the first holder of the office of chancellor; Oliver, *Lives of the Bishops of Exeter*, 34, 35 and 280;

[14] As the founding patron of the church, the Bishop of Exeter would receive the more valuable, greater tithes while the incumbent would receive the lesser tithes that were required to support him in his office as vicar.

[15] *The English Parish Churches Through the Centuries, Late Mediaeval England, Daily Life and Worship, The Christian Community, Parishes,* (Interactive DVD-ROM, University of York), 1st Edition

[16] Orme, Nicholas, *English Church Dedications with a Survey of Cornwall and Devon*, (Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1996), 3-41

[17] *The English Parish Churches Through the Centuries, Late Mediaeval England, Church Art and Architecture, Church Buildings, Consecration of Churches,* (Interactive DVD-ROM, University of York), 1st Edition

[18] Orme, *English Church Dedications*, 5

[19] Hingeston-Randolph, *The Register of Walter Bronescombe*, xii and Boggis, *A History of the Diocese of Exeter*, 130-1

[20] Hingeston-Randolph, *The Register of Walter Bronescombe*, 115

[21] Hingeston-Randolph, *The Register of Walter Bronescombe*, 65-68 and 298, footnote 12

[22] Hingeston-Randolph, *The Register of Peter Quivil*, 356; and the framed Priest's Roll within the church.

[23] Hingeston-Randolph, *The Register of Walter Bronescombe*, xvi

[24] Gover, J.E.B, Mawer, A and Stenton F. M, *The Place-Names of Devon, Part II*, (Cambridge University Press, 1932), 522

[25] The parish church has a bible given by Frederick Churchward in September 1879 which is imprinted with the name "Stoke Saint Gabriel".

[26] Oliver, George, *Monasticon Dioecesis Exoniensis*, with supplement (Exeter and London), 453

[27] Orme, *English Church Dedications*, 205

[28] Arthur P Lancefield, *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, *Saint Gabriel in Devon,* (Exeter, James G Commin, 1913), Vol VII, 156-160

[29] https://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/15082/ and http://www.harting.org.uk/welcome.htm