

ST MARY'S CHURCH, KILVE

The Parish of Kilve

The ancient parish of Kilve lies on what was once affectionately called the Watchet/Stogursey coastal route. It was listed in the Domesday Book back in 1086 as Clive, probably after the cliffs that dominate the coastline along this part of Somerset.



The village lies within the Quantock Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (now known as National Landscapes), the first AONB to be established, in 1957.

The coast at Kilve is also an important geological area, where the Jurassic rocks form a spectacular backdrop to the fossil-rich beaches, where ammonites and marine reptile remains are often found by fossil hunters, young and old.

There are close to 400 people and 170 households in Kilve, and the vibrant village enjoys a wealth of amenities

including an excellent public house, The Hood Arms, a village hall hosting many and varied activities, a very successful cricket club, the Chantry and its tea rooms and, of course, St Mary's church.

The Parish Church and Chantry

The parish church of St Mary the Virgin, has been in existence for a very long time, with a recorded list of rectors dating back as far as 1265. The church is closely linked with the ruins of the nearby Chantry, which itself dates from 1329, when it had a complement of five chaplains to celebrate daily in the church for the soul of the lord of the manor – Sir Simon de Furneaux, and his heirs. There is some evidence that there may even have been a tunnel linking the two buildings, although one has never been discovered.



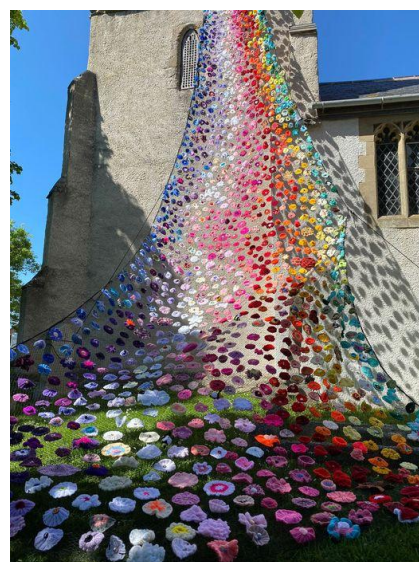
Although supported by property and land in both Kilve and the neighbouring village of Stringston, the Chantry had ceased to function by 1411 (and was, in fact, gutted by fire in 1848) and so by 1433, Kilve church had reverted to its original status. It is interesting to note that the link with Stringston was revived in 1552 and the joint rectorship continued all the way down through the ages until 1946, when the village of East Quantoxhead was added. Kilton and Lilstock were included a year later and in 1977, the United Benefice of Quantoxhead was formed from these villages, together with the addition of Holford, Dodington and West Quantoxhead. In 2007 the parishes of Stogursey and Fiddington joined the Benefice.

In 2023, we had yet another change and our lovely church here in Kilve is now part of a new Benefice, aptly called the Quantock Villages, which incorporates the villages of Aisholt, Enmore, Goathurst, Holford (with Dodington), Kilve (with Kilton and Lilstock), Nether Stowey, Over Stowey, Spaxton and Stringston.

Registers of burials at St Mary's date back to 1530, baptisms to 1591 and marriages to 1632. There are gaps for the years 1648-65, but thereafter, records are almost complete. Kilve communicants numbered around 10 in 1776 and for most of the 19th century there was one service alternating between morning and evening – with five or six communions yearly. In 1851, average morning attendance was 60 and in the evenings 100! There were some 50 Sunday school pupils. Today, services are held on a regular basis with an 11am Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month, and an 11am Morning Worship/Family Service on the third Sunday, a Combined Benefice Holy Communion service is usually held at 11am on the last Sunday of each month, at Nether Stowey.

Currently, the church has a recorded membership of 10 and an average attendance at services of some 8-10 people. However, we are able to compare very favourably with the attendance figures of the mid 1800s, as the festive services at both Easter and Christmas, and indeed at special services, like those held to celebrate both the Millennium and the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, when the church was full to capacity.

In fact, to further celebrate Her Majesty's incredible reign, a Floral Cascade was created with the fabulous needlework efforts of many villagers and hung from the tower during the Jubilee weekend celebrations in 2022. Over 1600 woollen or fabric flowers were stitched onto netting and we hope this impressive piece of work can be preserved and displayed at many other times of celebration in the future. It was, in fact, re-hung in celebration of King Charles III's coronation in 2023.



Apart from being the centre of Christian worship within our community, St Mary's serves the area in many other ways. It is a haven for many tourists who visit the nearby shoreline; a place where they can find quiet and sanctuary from the rigours of the 21st century.

For all the many hundreds of children visiting the educational centre at Kilve Court, it is a place where they can learn of our ancestors and so much of the history of our little village. And entertainment too! The church has been the venue, on occasion, for concerts given not only by local people, but also visiting artists.



Villagers also support the church in Kilve in many other ways, including the Grasscutters team, who look after the churchyard, the cleaners and the flower arrangers. An example of one of the beautiful arrangements is shown here. Everyone is more than happy to help keep St Mary's looking its best at all times.

The church building and renovations:

The church is built of local blue lias stone and consists of a chancel with north vestry, nave, and a western tower and porch to the south. It was originally lime rendered and painted white and had been referred to by Wordsworth in his writings as 'the little white church'. At some point, the render had been removed, which resulted in damage to the stone walls and

following an incredible fundraising effort in 2001 (see details below), the church was re-rendered to protect it for future generations.

The vestry, in memory of William Greswell, who died in 1876, is on the site of an earlier building which was linked to the nearby Chantry with an arcade – suggesting that the original chancel may have been longer, perhaps to provide a choir for the college of Chantry priests.

The porch dates back to the 14th century but the chancel arch, windows and nave roof indicate 15th century rebuilding, when the addition of a screen involved the creation of a shallow projection to the south to house both rood loft light and pulpit.

It is thought that the tower may have been added as late as 1636 (when the wardens were ordered to build an extra room) and the installation of plain windows in 1771. The tower also houses two bells, one of which came from the Bristol Foundry, circa 1500, and it is believed that at first, they were housed in a separate thatched building.

Some other things worth a closer look include the font, which dates to the 12th century and has a plain bowl with a cable-moulded base. In the chancel you will find some medieval glass and a wooden panel in the choir stalls which is dated 1687. Just above the main doorway is the royal coat of arms, painted on canvas, this unique piece dates from 1660. Cast your eyes upwards to the ribbed and plastered vault to the chancel which dates to the 15th century.

In 2001 the Parochial Parish Council commenced the first phase of an ambitious restoration programme (the last one being undertaken back in 1913). The restoration was staged in two phases and completed in late 2006 at a cost exceeding £218,000! It is a compliment to the resourcefulness of the PCC, church members, and the village, that in such a small community, some £100,000 of that total was raised locally. The rest of the funding came from grants.



In 2013, whilst undertaking an 'Archaeological Watching Brief' at the church following an oil spill, the consultant archaeologists discovered a void beneath the vestry and a camera attached to a thin pole was inserted through the hole to inspect the void. This photograph is the only evidence that there are four lead coffins within the vaulted chamber (see photo). At the time, the PCC decided that further investigation would not take place due to the prohibitive cost, despite the excitement of the archaeologists!

The most likely candidates for the creation of the vault and, therefore, the identity of those interred in the lead coffins, are the Sweeting family who acquired the manor in 1769 and also had funds to build a new manor house, Kilve Court, in 1782.

Finances and fundraising

As with every building of such an age, finances, alas, form a very important part of everyday life of the church. It is difficult to understand that back in 1291 the worth of Kilve church was recorded as just £10. Disputes over the legal status of the benefice in 1433 were said to have led to the neglect of the parish and in 1448 the new Rector's understanding of scripture and letters was "very mediocre" so he was ordered to employ a chaplain to allow him to study grammar for two years! Despite "hardly any progress" having been made, he was found competent in 1451 and granted a further two years' study. In 1554 the church was said to lack books and ornaments because of bad debts and in 1577, the Rector was reported for non-residence. The value had shrunk to just £9 by 1535 but was revalued to £100 in 1668 and £642 in 1831. A far cry from today's accounts.

The day-to-day running expenses of the church, together with the Diocesan 'Parish Share'

amounts to many thousands of pounds and so fundraising has become an integral part of the activities for every PCC. Although this is done through necessity, to cover spiralling costs, it is often a very enjoyable activity for everyone involved and the events bring our communities together for fun, as well as for the common goal of supporting the local church.

Here in Kilve, the PCC fundraising efforts have recently seen the welcome return of the much-acclaimed Antiques Fair, which is held at Kilve Court every Easter Monday. Having been held for more than a couple of decades pre-Covid, it was revived in 2023 as an Easter Fair and included stalls for craft, art and local produce, as well as the antiques and collectables, as before. Thankfully, it proved to be as popular as ever and has continued each year since then. It's well worth a visit! Other regular fundraisers have been the annual Malt Tasting and Gin Tasting evenings, both held at the local village hall and always very popular.

All these events raise much-needed money towards the repair and maintenance of St Mary's church.



Being a rural church in a very small community, we appreciate any donation you are able to make to help us maintain our lovely old church

Cash is best especially if enhanced by Gift Aid
(please use the blue envelopes)

No cash? – No problem
Please use the QR code to make a payment

OR you can make a donation by BACS Payment to
PCC KILVE Sort Code 60-24-05 Account No 95274006

Thank you