STOKENHAM 800

Some historical notes

These casual historical notes may be useful to workers and stewards involved in STOKENHAM 800. They may help in answering the questions we shall get from interested visitors.

I have taken, in turn, the principal displays around the church and provided a fuller background story for each of them.

W A Roberts
May 1986

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IN THE BEGINNING .. .. .. (the display in the porch)

It was Saxon families who first settled this area in historical times, between 700 and 800 AD. In that century they established and named nearly all of the present-day villages, hamlets and farms.

These Saxons were pagans, but their national leaders had accepted Christianity from St. Augustine and other missionaries. So it was safe for Christian missionaries to visit Stokenham from time to time. They set up their portable wooden cross on the mound where the church now stands, on the outskirts of the major settlement of Chillington. Then they preached the Christian gospel to whoever would come from Chillington or other villages to listen to them.

These missionaries were sent by some distant Christian centre, such as Tavistock. After a while, as conversion began to succeed, a local shelter was created for these visiting missionaries and their audiences, but it did not happen early, because the pagan Saxons did not like to congregate in enclosed places, where they thought that evil spirits might join them.

By the time just before the Norman Conquest, Chillington was the centre of a great Saxon royal estate embracing all the area east of the Kingsbridge estuary. The estate was controlled from Chillington by Gytha, a Saxon countess, to whom it had been given as part of her dowry by King Canute.

One of Gytha's sons was Harold, who later became the king of the Saxons. He was the King Harold who was defeated and killed by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. When Gytha heard that her son, King Harold, had been defeated and killed by the Normans at Hastings, and that the Norman forces were advancing down the southwest peninsula, Gytha fled the country. Her Saxon royal estate around Chillington became a Norman royal estate. For more than a hundred years it remained part of the personal estate of William the Conqueror and the succeeding Norman kings. They seem to have used it principally for the hunting of the deer.

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The Norman kings rules by the feudal system. That meant that they put large areas of land under the control of a favoured courtier or soldier who, in return, had to provide regular military and financial support to the king. So long as he did that, this 'lord of the manor' was more-or-less the absolute monarch of his manor and its people, although he had to follow some broad ground rules developed by custom and practice. The farming tenants on the manor paid a rent to their lord of the manor partly in money but, importantly, in personal service as regular workers organised by the 'reeve' who can be thought of as the agricultural manager. The over-all master of the manor, under the lord was the 'steward' a man of good family and education who managed everything on behalf of the lord. The steward presided over the frequent and regular manorial courts by which the affairs of the manor and the community were managed. The records of the

manorial courts, the ‘manorial court rolls’ are a powerful, intimate record of life in the manorial community. They exist plentifully for Stokenham of which there is therefore an excellent history for centuries.

Stokenham became a manor around 1185. The lord of the manor to whom the grant was made was Mathew fitz Herbert, a favoured courtier whose family had been close to the Norman kings through generations. Mathew was an orthodox devout lord of the manor and did the socially-expected things. He built a splendid new manor house (the outlines of which can still be seen as mounds on the surface of the field to the seaward side of the church) He also built a manor church. When he had built the church, Mathew set about appointing his own choice of priest to it. He then met opposition from an abbot representing, in effect, those who sent earlier missionary-priests to Stokenham, and the abbot claimed that only they had the right to appoint the priests to Stokenham.

The dispute between the abott and the lord of the manor eventually reached the king’s court at Westminster and is well documented there: that is why we know so much about these circumstances.

The lord won his case (because the abbot’s principal witness withdrew her support for the abbot, having meantime become the lord’s mother-in-law and grandmother to his children_). The lord, and subsequent lords, thereafter had the unchallenged right to appoint Stokenham’s priest to Stokenham’s church. That manorial church built by Mathew around 1186 had become formally established as Stokenham’s own parish church, subject to no alien control.

That is why, today, Stokenham can celebrate the possession of its own parish church for 800 years.

One part of the porch display shows brutal harsh paganism: the other part shows the ascendant Christianity brought to Stokenham by the missionary priests. The rushes on the floor are a reminder that we are re-entering medieval times where rushes where the local conventional floor covering in homes and elsewhere for the simple earthen floors.

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1218: Chillington Borough Market

In return for the grant of his manor, the lord of the manor had to provide annual military and financial support to the king. On the other hand, the lord had the opportunity of making whatever profit he could from the operation of his manor. A large part of that profit came from his own home farm: some came from the rents and personal labour which he was able to demand from his manorial tenants: yet another source was the tax he was able to impose on the grinding of corn or the brewing of ale -0 both being necessities for a medieval household. But ingenuity could find other sources of income, and this display deals with one example.

A lord might decide that he had a village well-placed to become a trading centre. The lord of Stokenham decided that Chillington was such a township. He first, therefore, obtained for it a royal licence to operate a weekly market. He then made the village of Chillington a ‘borough’. This meant that in return for payment from individuals he gave them personal freedom from the obligation to work several days each week on his own home farm. Instead, they could turn their interest to commerce and concentrate on market trading.

The lord of the manor could then hope and expect to get from taxes levied on market stalls and market trade more income that he could ever get from those newly-freed individuals as agricultural workers on his farm.

In the event, and in the long term, Chillington did not prosper as a market centre and it ultimately – after a century or two – relapsed to the status of an ordinary village. But Chillington's technical claim to be a borough was still being quoted for certain legal purposes as late as the 17th century.

The royal licence to operate Chillington's weekly market was given in 1218 and for a while the market thrived as suggested by this display. The local economy within the South Hams was self-supporting and did little in the way of importing or exporting, but the interchange of goods within the community was a necessary function. The market would therefore have all kinds of agricultural produce from livestock to fruit and vegetables, and also the products of local craftsmen and specialists, including the producers of honey and wax (for candles and rushlights).

There were then occasional imported products – wines, perhaps, and certainly salt and spices. The salt, for example, was necessary to preserve the meat supplies through the winter, for there were minimum winter feedstuffs available to keep live cattle and sheep in condition through the winter, so that only breeding stocks were kept.

The imported spices were especially necessary because by the end of the winter some powerful and pungent disguise was necessary to mask the flavour of meat kept for many months.

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1200? The font

The font is quite probably the oldest item present in the church. It is of late Norman character – perhaps around 1200 – and it may even have been the font in the original manorial church built at the end of the 12th century.

It seems to be made of stone from Purbeck in Dorset.

In intermediate centuries it had a locked lead cover: for among the practising witches there seems to have been a demand for the consecrated water taken from a font. The evidence of the locked cover is still present.

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1300: Chillington leper hospital.

The leper was indeed a melancholy character in the medieval world. When identified, he or she was brought to the church. Before the altar, a black pall was placed over the sufferer and a form of prayers reminiscent of the burial service was read.

Then, in a prescribed supplementary form or words, the leper was formally banished from all human society except that of fellow sufferers.

The leper was required to announce his approach to other people by shaking his 'clapper' – a pair of wooden plates which clattered together.

Leper 'hospitals' were scattered over the west country. There was one at the western end of Chillington, between Well Farm and the present-day main road. Such a leper hospital consisted of two or three slight dwellings, a green and a chapel. Lay ecclesiastics ran the hospital which had little medical function but was, instead, a place of retreat where the sufferers could get a measure of care and sympathy while leading a rigorous religious life.

Those lepers who lived at the hospital would consider themselves privileged and fortunate, for they were a minority. They had probably reached the hospital because of privileged or influential friends, or because they were able to turn over their own significant wealth to the hospital when they entered it. Those not in the hospital simply dies, alone and untended, in the fields or the lanes.

Leprosy, as a common scourge, had disappeared in Stokenham by the time of Queen Elizabeth, though an occasional case is, even then, still being reported.

The area around the former leper hospital remains identifiable because the fields are called such as 'Clapper Field; and they border a lane still known to many local people as 'Clapper Lane'.

A clapper of authentic design is included in the display.

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1588: defeat of the Spanish Armada: shown in the western gallery.

Henry VIII had effected the Pope as head of the church in England, and had adopted that position himself: he had also seized the immense possessions of the church and dissolved the religious houses. The Pope had reacted by calling on European nations – notably Spain and the Netherlands – to redress this wrong by invading England.

Thereafter, the Tudor monarchs, meaning particularly Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, were preparing to resist that expected onslaught. They were building up English fighting power at sea and increasing the available manpower by encouraging, for example, the coastal fishing industry. These were the days of the great Elizabethan and Devonian seadogs – Drake, Raleigh, Frobisher, Hawkins and the rest.

The invasion attempt came at the end of July in the year 1588 when an enormous Spanish fleet sailed eastwards along the Channel, followed closely by a small English fleet which had assembled in Plymouth Sound.

The English fleet was in two parts, under common command. One part was made up of private ships, with Drake as a principal commander. The other part was the Queen's navy, led by the flagship ARK ROYAL, under the command of Lord Howard. The chaplain on the ARK ROYAL was Patrick Blare, a life-long seafaring chaplain very recently appointed as vicar of Stokenham (at the request of Drake to Queen Elizabeth).

The battle raged along the Channel and the coastline of Stokenham is reported as having been littered with wreckage. The Spanish Armada was destroyed off Calais, a particular success being scored by blazing fireships sent drifting among the anchored Spanish vessels by the English.

Under the pressure of a southwesterly gale, the broken and shattered Spanish fleet scattered up the North Sea and could only run for Spain by rounding the top of Scotland and then western Ireland. Enormous losses occurred throughout that disastrous defeated voyage.
The sea power of Spain was destroyed and the foundations for the subsequent world-wide pre-eminence of English sea power had been established: and Stokenham, as part of Devon, had been somewhere near the middle of the scene.

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1588: Slapton gold

Half of one of the broken Spanish ships from their Armada drifted ashore on Slapton Sands. A very cross lord of the manor wrote to Queen Elizabeth saying that rascals from Stokenham were raiding this treasure ship and carrying away canvas bags full to the brim with gold, silver, coins, bullion and jewellery, 'each bag weighting in excess of 100 pounds' . He wanted to claim this treasure for himself: but the rascals kept it.

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1636: sanctuary ring.

If a criminal pursued by the law could reach the church door and grasp the sanctuary ring he was free, for the moment, from further pursuit or arrest. Within a few days he must be escorted to the coast and given the opportunity to leave the land of his birth for ever. The alternative was re-arrest and whatever punishment might follow.

The sanctuary ring on display is carried on a door recently removed from the west end of the church. That door was itself dated 1636. The ring appears to have been transferred from a still earlier door.

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13459: Black Death

In August of 1349 a merchant ship from Flanders put in to Bridport in Dorset with a cargo of cloth and a sickly crew. The Black Death, bubonic plague, which had ravaged Europe, had entered England and the west country. It reached Stokenham speedily. In the recurrent epidemics of the next three years, half the population of the parish died.

Many farms fell into decay when the whole family died, the simple houses fell rapidly into decay, the weeds crept back into mastery of the cultivated fields, and the stock wandered only half tended or themselves died of neglect.

The disaster was very great for the parish, as indeed it was for much of the country: it was at that time that the yard on the northern side of the church rose high.

The long slow climb back to normalcy took a century. One of the unexpected results, perhaps, was that those farming families which survived came to have much larger holdings than they had previously possessed, for they were encouraged by the lord of the manor to take over the derelict holdings left by their less fortunate neighbours.

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1308: water-mill

The local grinding of corn was an essential factor in medieval family life. The mills were a monopoly held by the lord of the manor: everyone paid a toll on the corn they had ground.

Every neighbourhood had to have a mill within reach; they were about as common and as necessary, as garages are today. They were nearly always watermills in the early centuries: the invention of windmills came later and they were seldom used in Devon because water-power was so plentiful. The water-mill at the western end of Chillington has been there since Saxon times: others in the parish are a little more recent.

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1300?: DEER PARK

Devon was great deer-hunting country, having plenty of wooded slopes intermingled with grassy grazing grounds. A cultivated deer park existed around Stokenham from Norman times and earlier. The laws protecting this deef conservation and deer-hunting were severe: especially since this was the sport of kings and of the nobility.

Devon eventually chose to buy from King John, for an immense sum, its freedom from the harsh forestry laws: but controlled deer parks survived long afterwards.

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158l; Henry Muge hanged in chains.

During medieval centuries, robbing and plundering pirates roamed constantly up and down the Devon coast, and elsewhere, dashing ashore for plunder and pillage wherever they saw the opportunity.

For that reason, in Stokenham parish there were no coastal settlements during many hundreds of years: it simply was not safe to live there. So the fishermen had their workshops and their nets and boats right on the coats, but they kept their homes and their families a little inland, at places like Bickerton, Beeson and Widewell.

That situation began to change during the reign of the Tudor monarchs – notable Henry VIUII and Elizabeth I. These monarchs were striving hard to build up England's naval sea power, to provide a defense against the attack and invasion expected from Spain and from the Netherlands after the seizure of church property and power by the Tudors.

That great English sea power active along the coasts meant that piracy became a risky enterprise. The hanging in chains on Start Point of Henry Muge, a pirate of the high seas, can be said to mark the end of the coastal unease about raiding pirates. Soon afterwards, in the early 160-0's, substantial settlements began to appear on the coast where the fishermen operated. Torcross, Hallsands and, much later, Beesands, were Stokenham examples of that date. They were among the last Stokenham villages to come into existence.

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1977: time capsule

As part of the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth in 1977, Stokenham parish buried a time capsule designed to be opened in, perhaps, 500 years time. It contained hundreds of domestic articles taken from rooms of the house and associated with stages of life. They were chosen as articles not subject to rapid decay and capable of giving a glimpse of the way we live now to our successors of 500 years later.

There were included, also, three baked clay tiles, prepared and fired at Mr. Bristow;'s Chillington pottery and carrying a message to our successors.

It ends "Across the silent centuries that separate us we stretch out our hands to you in kinship and in greeting."

The capsule is a totally sealed lead container one foot cube. Within it is a secondary sealed ceramic container holding some of the more precious items. Every item within the capsule is separately contained in a non-degradable plastic envelope. The lead cube is wrapped in polythene to protect it from electrolytic decay. It is held at the centre of a barrel which is filled by concrete made with washed aggregate from Beesands beach.

The barrel is buried eight feet deep and surrounded by heavy slate slabs. A scattering of current coins was thrown into the hold by the children who began the process of burying the time capsule in the evening of June 7 1977.

Over the capsule was planted an English oak, which is now a flourishing young tree and will, perhaps, for the first hundred years or more mark the sop in the field faced by the main street of the village, and the church.

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1944: American forces

During 1944 large numbers of American troops trained on Slapton Sands, and its hinterland, for the invasion of Europe. All of the inhabitants and their homes and farms, had to be evacuated. A memorial on Slapton Sands expresses appreciation by the U S authorities.

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Altar frontal

The representation of the Last Supper appearing at the front of the altar was begun, and nearly completed, by Sue Klein, of Hallsands, who had long been concerned with professional embroidery and needlework. It was completed after Sue Klein's death by her professional friends in that field of activity.

Being an artefact of such remarkably high quality it is used only seldom, as on this special celebratory occasion.

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1841: Stokenham Tithe Map

From the earliest days of Christendom the church and the poor have been supported by tithes – a tenth of the produce of land and of labour. Through many centuries those tithes were collected in king, meaning, usually, a very inconvenient procedure. There were often suggestions for concerting the tithe to a monetary payment. Eventually, the problem was resolved by a statute around 1837.

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According to this statute, tighes were to be paid in cash and were to be related to the amount of land controlled by a landlord or a tenant. Moreover, the annual cash mayment was to be indexed-inked to the price of corn.

Since the basis of the payment was to be the amount of land controlled by an individual it immediately became necessary for there to be accurate agreed maps of each parish with all the holdings of each individual clearly shown and listed.

That led to the production, in Stokenham as elsewhere, of an accurate map at a scale around 20 inches to the mile, showing every field and building in the parish.

It was most desirable that this should be a fully agreed map, and Stokenham took particular and creditable care to ensure that this was so. To this end, when the first version of the map and its associated lists had been prepared, it was displayed for many days in the Church House Inn, opposite the church, so that all interested could inspect it and call for any changes which they felt were necessary. Then a final version of the map was prepared. It was of fine exact quality and an important historical document for Stokenham.

The display represents the draft version of the map under public scrutiny.

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Victoriana

The Victorians greatly overhauled, cleaned and repaired the fabric of the church. The collection of Victoriana and of nearby times shown in this Holdsworth chapel acknowledges that contribution.

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1886: "Spirit of the Ocean"

Start Bay, and the seas on either side of Start Point, are littered with hundreds of wrecks, many known and listed, many unknown.

Sailing ships, in particular, were vulnerable. They might sail into the bay before the wind on either side of Start Point, and then be trapped by a sudden change of wind which would prevent them making sufficient way to get out of the bay before they ran ashore.

One of the dramatic wrecks was that of the SPIRIT OF THE OCEAN which was stranded on the rocks off Start Point on 23 March 1886. Two people, only, were saved. 28 others were drowned: their mass grave is near the lychgate on the north side of Stokenham church.

That mass grave was once surmounted by an elaborate broken-mast gravestone, now demolished. It is represented in this display: and nearby is the stained-glass window remembering that sad event.

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1400: John de Montacute

One of the most colourful lords of Stokenham was John de Montacute, 3rd Earl of Salisbury. He had a vivid and turbulent career.

He was a poet, a musician, a composer and a writer of many 'beautiful songs, roundels and lays'. His music must often have echoed around Stokenham church, especially at those favourite feast-days of Whitsun and Christmas

John de Montacute also had a vigorous public career. He was a favourite at the court of King Richard II and at one time was his king's ambassador to France. He was also of strong religious feeling, being a Lollard, one of those people who looked for a simpler uncluttered practice of religion, almost anticipating the Reformation.

Unfortunately, when there was a dispute over the succession to the throne, he backed the wrong man. A mob at Cirencester, seeking to curry favour with the new King, Henvy IV, beheaded him

and sent the head to the king, who staked it on London Bridge as an example of what would happen to the king's enemies.

This turbulent life-story came to the attention of Shakespeare, and John de Montacute, lord of Stokenham, is immortalised as the Salisbury who is a prominent character in Shakespeare's "Tragedy of King Richard II".

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1587: Edward Amerideth and manorial rolls

The manor of Stokenham and the community it contained was governed by the manorial court which met frequently and regularly in the great hall of the manor house at Stokenham.

Everything which happened in the life of the parish was likely to the reflected at some time or other in the manorial rolls which were the records of these manorial courts. Examples of the manorial rolls are shown in this display: they exist plentifully, so that the history of Stokenham is generously recorded for these long-past centuries.

The man who presided over the manorial court and physically wrote the manorial rolls which are the court's record, was the steward of the manor. He acted as deputy for the lord of the manor.

The wooden figure included in this display, which is a contemporary figure, carved in Elizabethan times, is Edward Amerideth: his wife is also there.

Edware Amerideth is most unusual because at one time he was the steward of Stokenham who presided over the court and wrote those tolls and then, at a later date, became himself the lord of the manor.

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1215; Magna Carta

King John was a most unpopular aggressive king, given to asserting his regal rights too unreasonably. He progressively alienated his nobility and eventually the barons of the north and of the east threatened revolt against him.

To avoid the outbreak of revolt the king had to capitulate and he did so by the signing of Magna Carta which gave to the aggrieved barons and nominally to the population at large, the improved rights and freedoms which they had been demanding. Through the following centuries those rights, as they extended to the population at large, became the cornerstone of the personal freedom which we all enjoy under the law.

In the drafting of Magna Carta there was an attempt to save the king's face. In a preamble to the Great Charter the king is caused to say that he has been considering the condition of the country and has taken the advice of some twenty leading men of the state, whom he names. He goes on to say that certain changes are necessary, which he has decided to institute forthwith. They are, he says, as follows …. And then he goes on to list all the changes which the troublesome barons had been demanding.

In the list of twenty leading men of the state whom the king states he has consulted appears the name of Mathew fitz Herbert, the first lord of the manor of Stokenham. So Stokenham is importantly present in Magna Carta.

Mathew fitz Herbert's family had long been close to the Norman and successor kings, and there is evidence that Mathew did various pieces of work or negotiation for John. There is also evidence that King John gave rewards to Mathew apart from that immortality in Magna Carta. He made it possible for Mathew to marry Joan de Mandeville, one of the leaving heiresses of the nation who brought to Mathew a great increase in his possession of lands.

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