St Peter's West Blatchington

Our History

Knowledge of our local history goes back to the days of the Roman occupation as the remains of a Roman villa less than half a mile to the NW of the church were discovered in 1818, but were not excavated until 1948 prior to the layout of the Sunninghill Estate when coins of the era of Emperor Valerian were found dating back to circa 250 A.D.

The Saxons later established an estate with settlements interconnected by existing Roman tracks. On an archaeological map of the area as in Saxon times, the 'hides' of Blatchington and also Hangleton are identified on the routes of these ancient tracks. One of these, labelled 'Droveway', passed through Blatchington and continued north and was joined by another from the southwest that passed through Hangleton, originating from the port of the Adur. The latter track is labelled 'Port's road' from which the village of Portslade must surely get its name since 'lād' is an O.E. word for a 'way' or a 'course'. The term 'hides' refers to parcels of land of sufficient size for a small settlement to be self-supporting and which hedges or banks separated.

The settlements would have originally consisted of merely a group of small timber buildings probably including a thegn's hall and Blatchington was known to have also had a thegn's church. Esmerewic was a farmstead to the west of Hangleton which later became known as Benfield Manor, the ruins of which were found in the area of what is now the junction of Hangleton Valley Drive and Sylvester Way. After the Norman Conquest, Sussex became extremely important since it provided convenient sea crossings to Normandy.

The settlements were administered under a system by which they were divided into a number of Rapes, each of which was under the control of family members or loyal followers of William the Conqueror. There were eventually six Rapes, each of which encompassed a castle that overlooked either a river or the coast. Blatchington came within the Rape of Lewes, the responsibility for which was initially bestowed by the monarch to William de Warenne in recognition of his service at the Battle of Hastings.

The Rapes were subdivided into Hundreds, which were parcels of land considered capable of supporting about a hundred households. The Hundreds had their own courts responsible for both jurisdiction and the setting of local taxes.

The groupings of the settlements within the Hundreds changed frequently, possibly due to changes in population. Blatchington, under various spellings, e.g. Blechinton (13th Cent),

Blachyngton (15th Cent), Blechington (16th Cent) was, by the 17th Century, grouped with Brighthelmstone in the Hundred of Whalesbone. The latter name is thought to relate to the once heavily polluted Wellesbourne stream, which flowed through the Old Steine until it was diverted underground in 1780. The outflow of the stream can still be seen seeping out through the shingle at low tide slightly to the west of the Brighton (Palace) Pier.

Ownership of land in medieval times followed the manorial system under which the monarch bestowed estates to his loyal followers. The manor of Blatchington was held during the 13th and 14th Centuries by a succession of the Earls de Warenne but by the early 15th Century, it passed to Richard de Wyavill. However, the ownership of the manor was the subject of several disputes until the beginning of the 16th Century when it passed into the family of the Lords Bergavenny and subsequently to the Marquesses of Abergavenny. These titles have been held by the many succeeding generations of the Nevill family until relatively recently and several of the roads in today's parish bear this family name.

The manor house was situated to the east of the church and the north wing of the manor dated back to the 14th Century. Many alterations were made during the succeeding centuries including an extension at the rear providing a kitchen and domestic quarters.

Much of the land provided pasture for sheep but cereal crops were also grown and oxen were used in the early days for drawing the ploughs and carts.The farmland covered nearly 800 acres and several small cottages, together with a number of barns, formed the manor farm complex. A small knapped flint bake house stood opposite the manor house, which served the needs of the local farming community. More farm cottages were built as the farming activity grew over the years. 'Meadow Cottages' stood on the land below the south churchyard and 'Hillside Cottages' and 'New Cottages' were eventually built on the land where the flats in Hangleton Road on either side of Clarke Avenue now stand. The final addition to the manor house was a 2-storey east wing built in the late Victorian era to replace the earlier kitchen and domestic quarters. This new wing was let to the local tenant farmers but it was later utilised to house evacuees during WWII. Before the roadway of Holmes Avenue between Nevill Avenue and Court Farm Road was built, there was a pond to the north of the windmill but the latter is now the only visible reminder of the former farming activity.

The hexagonal design of the 'smock' mill, erected in the early 1820s, is quite unique and originally had two long barns attached to it, one extending to the north and the other to the south. A third small barn built on the west side still remains. The south barn was destroyed by fire in 1936 but the Mill was thankfully preserved as a Grade ll* listed building. Considerable work has been carried out in restoring the Mill and part of the north barn was rebuilt as a venue for community activities in 1997.   Although not in working order, the Mill is open to the public at weekends and Bank Holidays during the summer season and houses a collection of historic agricultural machinery and many educational exhibits - thanks to a team of dedicated volunteers.

The tenants of the farm and of the manor house, from the 15th Century to the latter part of the 19th Century, were members of the Scrase family who were of Danish descent. It is

believed that, at the time of the Reformation, the family adhered to the Roman Catholic faith but later became followers of the Quaker Movement as it is on record that one of the earliest meetings in Sussex of that Society was held at *"Widow Scrase's in Blatchington ye 2nd of ye 8th mo. 1662."*

Many Quakers were either imprisoned or subject to extortion and in the following year, when Joane Scrase would not (or could not) pay a demand for £90 in tithes, 28 beasts worth £120 were seized in lieu. In view of their religious beliefs, the family did not levy any taxes on the small community for the upkeep of the church building and thus the church soon fell into disrepair.

Richard Scrase, who was tenant of the manor, resisted being appointed Churchwarden and was therefore summoned to the Archdeaconry Court of Lewes. Henry Scrase, son of the above, was similarly in trouble in 1635 but in the following year and in the same Court, he was described as Churchwarden and stated that *"our Churchyard is not well fenced nor hath bin Tyme out of minde because it hath not been used as a buryall place."*

Towards the end of the 17th Century, Henry Holcroft who was then Rector (and also Vicar of Patcham) was in trouble with the patron who complained that *"there is no Churchwarden duly sworne from year to year to repair the church as need requires; that there is no churchyard fence, no doors, nor windows to the church nor chancell, no pulpit, reading deske, books, bell, communion table, cloathes nor ornaments."* Nothing came of all this and thus the church continued to fall further into disrepair. The Scrase family continued as tenants of the manor until the tenancy passed by marriage to the Hodson family who were members of the Established Church. During the 19th Century when the church was in ruins, Divine Service was held in the manor house until the eventual rebuilding of the church and its restoration to use in 1890.

It is not known when this area became known as West Blatchington but it was clearly to distinguish it from the village of East Blatchington, which is now just a residential area within the town of Seaford. The Parish Church of East Blatchington is also dedicated to St. Peter and similarly dates back to Saxon times.

The Medieval Church

Many references can be found in books and web pages about the history of the church, probably based on the findings of I.C. Hannah and W.H. Godfrey which were published in 1929 and 1940 respectively. These accounts differ in various respects due to some archaeological evidence having been obscured by successive structural changes to the building over the centuries. However, excavations and a close inspection of the flint work of the south wall carried out in 1980 by a local historian and archaeologist revealed further evidence enabling a more complete account to be compiled.

These extensive excavations in the churchyard revealed footings beneath the south and west walls of the old part of the present church but these continue westwards for some considerable distance. The footings were identified as Saxon on account of their width and

construction as they contain fragments of Roman tiles from the ruins of the Roman villa that was less than half a mile to the NW of the church. Similar findings at other sites in England indicate that the Saxons made use of such debris where it was available rather than quarrying for new material.

Saxon churches were frequently built of a length approximately three times their width and had three small windows equally spaced along the length of the building. The locations of two such windows have now been identified at high level in the flint work of the south wall of the old part of the present church and the third would have been towards the western end. Evidence of an entrance was found in the form of a stone threshold in the foundations at the west end, which had jambs on either side indicating a narrow doorway. A similar set of windows may have existed in the north wall but this could not be verified as the entire north wall had collapsed by the 19th Century.

The Normans partially rebuilt the church in the 12th Century and reduced it in length by building a new west wall containing two narrow slit windows fitted with external shutters. If the west end of the earlier church was intact at that time, it was probably demolished but the thickness of the other three walls was increased to 3 feet by the addition of knapped flint facings above ground level on the outside which thus overhung the Saxon foundations.

The Decline of the Norman Church

The Norman church serving the remote downland settlement at Blatchington sadly went into decline after the 14th Century. Although the reasons for this are not recorded, it may have

resulted from a dwindling population caused by the plague which reached southern England via the maritime trade routes from mainland Europe around 1350. Outbreaks of the Black Death

continued until the mid 15th Century with devastating effect. Other factors for the neglect of the church may well have been that Blatchington may not have had a resident Rector and also

that the tenants of the manor did not support the established church.

Attempts to obtain any information held in the Chichester Diocesan archives resulted in the reply " *there is considerable doubt as to whether any parish registers for St. Peter's Church, West Blatchington, ever existed.*"   The transcript from the Diocese also included the statement " *there was nothing done to make the building fit for the services of the church since 1596 and by 1686 it was utterly ruinate.*"

The population of West Blatchington in 1881 was just 59 by which time the ruins of the building were being utilized by the community to provide shelter for livestock, the windows and doorway on the south side having been blocked up to keep out the prevailing south westerly wind. The farming activity by now had expanded and diversified into milling with the windmill having been built some 60 years earlier. By 1890, the population had risen to 95. However, the elements continued to take their toll on the ruins of the church such that the east gable fell and much of the north wall crumbled in part to a height of just a few feet.

The right of presentation of priests to fill a vacancy of Rector or Vicar of a benefice within the established church is held by the patron of that benefice. William de Warenne gifted West Blatchington to the monks of Lewes in the 12th Century and the patronage would thus have been in the possession of the priors. The Priory of St. Pancras in Lewes was an important religious community within medieval Sussex exercising control over upwards of 200 churches and chapels. Although the title of Rector of Blatchington can be traced back to 1307, the title was held in plurality after the 16th Century, often together with Hangleton and in some cases with Patcham or Preston, and it is unlikely that any of them were resident within the settlement since any parsonage house that may have existed was no longer habitable.

In his struggle against the power and wealth of the Church, Henry VIII disbanded all religious establishments by means of the Dissolution of the Monasteries Act in the early part of the 16th Century and, by subsequent Suppression Acts, established himself as Supreme Head of the Church of England.

The many monasteries, abbeys and priories had controlled the appointments to around one third of all benefices and the patronage of West Blatchington passed to the Crown but the monarch subsequently disposed of these assets. Ownership of the patronage of the West Blatchington benefice was to change hands about ten times before the parish was eventually annexed in 1744 to the parish of St. Nicholas at the southern end of Dyke Road which was, at that time, the Parish Church of Brighton.

The Victorian Restoration and the 20th Century

The outlook for West Blatchington improved significantly after the parish was annexed to that of St. Nicholas Church in Brighton which is the oldest surviving building in Brighton. This

affiliation explains the presence of a number of graves with headstones in the churchyard close to the south side of the church which mark the burials of various one-time Vicars of Brighton

during the 18th and 19th Centuries.

Four generations of the extremely wealthy Wagner family were clerics and between them built some 20 churches in Brighton of which St. Bartholomew's, St. Paul's in West St. and St. Peter's in the centre of the town are just three examples. Their aim was to provide free seating for poor people as opposed to accommodation reserved for the rich and to revive a more Anglo Catholic form of worship.

The Reverend H.M. Wagner was Vicar of Brighton and thus also Rector of West Blatchington from 1824 to 1870. Not only were services held in one of the manor cottages during his incumbency, but he also planned to provide the villagers with a new church with a churchyard and a school. The request for a suitable plot of land from the Marquess of Abergavenny failed as brothers M.H and G.W Hodson, who were his tenants at the time, were not willing to give up the two acres sought from their farm land as they were not in favour of a churchyard and as the 80 villagers apparently did not mind the walk to St. Helen's Church in Hangleton.

No progress was made for 35 years until a later tenant, Harriot Hodson, died in 1888 leaving a legacy to the Diocese for the benefit of the parish which was subsequently applied to the restoration of the Norman church rather than to the execution of the previous and more ambitious plans.

On clearing debris from within the ruins in 1889, the architect discovered a grave within the chancel area, which had been filled in with fragments of carved stone from a round-headed Norman arch, which had probably marked the division between the nave and the chancel. The unmarked coffin could not be identified and is still under the floor of the present chancel but may have contained the remains of a member of the Wayvill family who owned the manor around the 14th Century. The stone fragments were incorporated in the rebuilding of the north wall of the nave.

All the outer walls of the Norman church were restored to full height and the north and south walls were strengthened by the addition of stout buttresses. A small bell turret was built at the west end of the church and a porch with outer wrought iron gates was added to keep the weather and sheep from the southwest door. A vestry built on the south side of the chancel housed a solid fuel fired boiler in a small cellar beneath the floor.

A plain wooden screen was erected at the entrance to the chancel but this was removed in the 20th Century. An oil lamp lit the nave and the hook from which it hung can still be seen in the wooden cross beam towards the back of the old church.

The chancel was rebuilt with a barrel vaulted boarded ceiling whereas that of the nave was pitched and noticeably higher. A single sedilia for the priest and a small aumbry were recessed into the dividing wall between the chancel and the vestry. By 1916 when an organ survey was undertaken a single manual pipe organ had been installed on the south side of the chancel where the present oak panel with a door into the vestry was later erected.

The lancet in the south wall was enlarged to accommodate a stained glass window designed by Charles Kempe who was a distinguished local artist and whose remains are buried in the churchyard of St Wulfran's Church in Ovingdean.

The subject of the window in the south wall is seen wearing a royal crown and is believed to represent the Duke of Bohemia who was martyred circa AD 930 for his mission against paganism. He was later canonised and adopted as the Patron Saint of the Czech Republic. The window was possibly the gift of the Reverend H.M. Wagner.

The Norman square headed east window of the chancel was too badly decayed to be retained and was therefore replaced by a 3-light stained glass window designed by Burlison & Grylls of London. The central panel depicts Christ as the Good Shepherd and the side panels illustrate the themes of 'Launch out into the deep' and 'Feed my lambs'.

A small 3-light square headed plain window was incorporated in the restored gable of the west wall and the difference in appearance between the Norman and the Victorian flint work is clearly visible.

Stone plaques on the walls in the southwest corner of the nave record the death of Harriot Hodson on 21st June 1888 and her generous legacy for the restoration of the church. Another is dedicated to John Hannah who was the Rector of West Blatchington from 1870 to 1888. The third plaque, placed by John Julias Hannah who succeeded his father as Rector from 1888 to 1902, records the re-opening of the restored church by the Bishop of Chichester on St. Peter's Day, 29th June 1891.

Although the light and spacious ambience of the new building contrasts with that of the "Old Church", there is a link with Norman architecture in the use of the pointed arch style of the ceiling, window reveals and doorways, etc. Another link is in the inclusion of knapped flints in the exterior facing of the walls.

The sanctuary floor was laid with Travertine, a naturally occurring limestone, which has been used as a building material since the 1st Century and of which the Colosseum in Rome was built.

Far less solid, however, is the false ceiling of the church which is merely a thin shell of fibrous plaster formed in situ and suspended from the roof structure on countless steel wires.

Several artifacts were saved from the "Old Church" such as a plain triple window, which was transferred to the southwest corner of the new nave, and the stained glass window from

the old chancel which was relocated in the choir gallery. It depicts St. Patrick and St. Elizabeth and was given by the 13 children of the Henfry family in memory of their parents. The old Victorian pipe organ was also transferred to the choir gallery but a new instrument built by Messrs Browne & Son of Canterbury in 1966 replaced it.

The small south vestry of the Victorian church was extremely cramped from the outset since almost half of it was taken up by part of the pipe organ and also steps leading down to the cellar which housed a solid fuel boiler. Two further vestries of apsidal form were therefore built at the west end of the new nave.

The dual purpose Parish Hall had been used for worship since its completion in 1952 using an altar behind a folding partition at the back of the stage. When the new church was completed, this altar was enlarged and transferred to its present location in the new sanctuary.

Site work for the church extension commenced in the Spring of 1960. The old chimney stack at the west end of the south vestry was eventually demolished; the solid fuel boiler not having been used since electric heating was installed during the 1940s.

The Bishop of Chichester, The Right Reverend Dr. Roger Wilson, laid the foundation stone on Sunday 8th May 1960 and he also consecrated the completed building on Wednesday 24th May 1961. In 1966 the old one manual organ which had been moved to the gallery of the new church when it was built was replaced by the present two manual organ.

In the history of St Peter's West Blatchington there have been many named and unnamed people whose generosity, vision, faith, and hard work have contributed to making the church we know today. In 2008 St Peter's became part of the Portslade and Western Hove Group Ministry comprising, Bishop Hannington, St Helen's, St Nicolas Portslade, St Philip's, St Leonard's, Holy Cross and the Church of the Good Shepherd, Mile Oak, thus beginning a new phase in its history.

Rectors of West Blatchington

Rectors of West Blatchington as far as they can be ascertained:

 1307   John Sikelfot de Lewes

1325   Hamo de Cessay

1397   John Yong (exchanged, later Vicar of Patcham)

1397   William Gamyn

1405   Simon Ingolf (formerly Rector of Hangleton)

1412   William Hokle

1439   John Rogers (resigned)

1439-1440   John Profit

1440   William Mylle

1484   William Syers (exchanged)

1484-1486   John Hardyng

1486-1524   William Thetcher

1524-1534   John Segar (also Vicar of Bodiam and of Preston)

1534-1541   Andrew Coby

1541-1556   William Scott

1556-1582   Edward Crakell (also Rector of Hangleton}

1582-1585   Henry Shales (also Rector of Hangleton)

1585-1593   Thomas Wilsher, B.D. (also Rector of Hangleton)

1593-1619   John Sysson

1619-1625   Thomas Heyney, B.A. (also Vicar of Arundel)

1625-1628   Alan Carr (also Vicar of East Grinstead)

1628-1664   George Butler, B.A.

1664-1713   Henry Holcroft, M.A. (also Vicar of Patcham)

1713-1744   William Colbron, B.A. (also Vicar of Brighton)

From 1744, the Parish was in the care of the following Vicars of St. Nicholas Church which was the Parish Church of Brighton:

1744-1789   Henry Michell, M. A.

1799-1804   Thomas Hudson

1804-1824　Robert James Carr, D.D. (later Bp. of Chichester and subsequently Bp. of Worcester)

1824-1870　Henry Michell Wagner, M.A., (also Treasurer of Chichester Cathedral)

1870-1888　John Hannah, D.C.L. (also Archdeacon of Lewes

1888-1902　John Julias Hannah, M.A. (later Dean of Chichester Cathedral)

1902-1917　Benedict George Hoskyns, M.A. (later Archdeacon of Chichester)

1917-1924　Francis Dormer Pierce, B.A. (buried in the Churchyard)

1924-1927　Frederick Cyril Nugent Hicks, D.D. (later Bp. of Gibraltar and subsequently Bp. of Lincoln)

1927-1934　Alfred Carey Wollaston Rose, M.A. (later Bp. of Dover)

1934-1938　John Charles Halland How, M.A. (later Bp. of Glasgow and buried in the Churchyard)

1938-1940　Geoffrey Hodgson Warde, M.A. (resigned, later Bp. of Lewes)

West Blatchington became a separate Benefice in 1940

1940-1941　Spencer Hugh Hamilton, M.A. (later Vicar of St. Elisabeth's Eastbourne)

1941-1948　Cecil Francis George Chisholm (later Rector of Ardingly)

1948-1959　James Robinson (later Vicar of Findon)

1959-1963　Herbert Friess (later Rector of Crossmolina, and subsequently Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Killala, County Mayo)

1963-1976　Paul David Way (later Vicar of All Saints South Norwood)

1976-1983　Trevor Wilson Thomas (later Vicar of St John the Baptist, Rowland's Castle)

1983-1987　Keith Wood (later Vicar of St. John the Divine, W. Worthing}

1988-1999　Michael Stanley Porteous (retired)

2000 -2011   Robin Thomas Adrian Farrow M.A. A.K.C.

2011 -   Daniel Bradley Smith, BTh (Oxon), Dip Min