THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY -
WEARE GIFFARD.

“The Church the Angels built”

The Rev. Harold Cavalier, vicar between 1918 - 1921, wrote the following account (abridged):

“An old lady called Palmer, who was devoted to the Church, was telling me one day that the Church had originally been built on the top of the hill, but that the angels moved it away as fast as the men built it, and placed it where it now stands today. ‘You ought to be proud of a church built by angels’ she said. Seeing that I was not very responsive, she asked, ‘don’t you believe me?’ I said that I was puzzled to know why the men went on building when they found nothing of their work left. She was indignant, and said I had no faith! She was usually so respectful that I felt sorry to have roused in her so deep feeling.

She told me to go to the top of Park Hill and look to the side of the little lane and I should see a long mound, which was the ‘Giantess’s Grave’.

‘She were a wicked woman, and the angels could not abide to have the church just over the hedge, so near to her grave, so they moved it away; and you can see where it was on top of the hill, and you can see where it stands now, and that proves I’m telling the truth’.

The article from which the above was taken finishes with an aside: “Today’s harassed Churchwardens or even rector, might be forgiven if they were to say: ‘The angels may have built the Church in the first place, but we wish they would keep it in good repair!!’”

Holy Trinity Church, 1857, unsigned watercolour
Although there is much evidence of an earlier Church, our present building dates from the 14th century, with the **NAVE AND CHANCEL** being considerably altered in the 15th century when the Lady Chapel, **SOUTH AISLE AND PORCH** were added as well as the **TOWER**. The beautiful 15th century roof of the chancel is thought to have been the work of the same craftsmen who were responsible for the magnificent hammer-beam roof in the Hall.

The **EFFIGIES** in the north wall of the Nave and Choir are of Sir Walter Giffard, and his wife Alice, once Lord and Lady of the Manor and from whose family name Weare Giffard is derived. (see “Weare Giffard - the name”). Originally they were side by side on an altar tomb, but were moved and separated to accommodate the new organ. The tombs are believed to date from 1243 when an earlier Church occupied the site. There is a legend that the ghost of Sir Walter walks at midnight seeking his wife from whom he has been separated in his last rest!

The **BENCH ENDS** are fine examples of the use of heraldic design, and date from 1510 when Bartholomew Fortescue became ‘patron’ of the living.

The **SOUTH AISLE, AND FORTESCUE OR LADY CHAPEL** have a wagon roof which was added by Sir Martin Fortescue who married Elizabeth Denzill, a descendant of the Giffards, in 1454.

The **FINE EAST WINDOW** of the Chapel contains some very good medieval glass. It is all that remains of a ‘Jesse’ window (one that depicts Our Lord’s descent from King David, son of Jesse). This is the window it is said the roundheads shot at during the Civil War. The east window of the Chancel is Victorian as is the glass of the window near the pulpit. There are fragments of medieval glass in some of the south windows.

A **17th CENTURY MONUMENT** on the south wall of the chapel is interesting as it depicts Hugh Fortescue and his wife kneeling and facing each other. Beneath are the figures of their son, John and his wife, Maria nee Sprecott. Their children and grandchildren are depicted in roundels and ovals. Below are the arms of the Rolle family.

An interesting feature is the **PRIEST’S DOOR’** in the south wall which has a rare **MEDIEVAL WALL PAINTING** over it showing the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. The victim is bound to a tree, the roots showing at his feet and the branches like horns sprouting from his head.

**Medieval wall painting**
The **MAIN DOOR** is very old and is typical of the 15th century. It has a ‘closing ring’ with a worked iron surround. This is likely to have been a ‘sanctuary knocker’ connected with the ancient right of seeking sanctuary in a Church from the power of the civil law.

**THE FONT** is a well-preserved example of the style of a 12th century Norman capital and is another pointer to there being an earlier Church on the site.

**IN MORE RECENT TIMES.**

A significant amount of renovation was undertaken in Victorian times, and the Church we see today is much as it has been for the past 100-150 years.

Over the Millennium year, the village raised over £1500 to install the “Millennium Window”, to mark 2000 years of Christianity.

**PARISH CHURCH RECORDS**

In the Devon Records Office at Tuly Street, Barnstable are housed the Parish Registers and the Vestry Minutes - records which would for centuries have been stored in perhaps damp Churches or Rectories. We are very fortunate indeed that so many still survive.

The **PARISH REGISTERS** are those which record Births, Marriages and Deaths, but thankfully for the historian, also have the odd snippet of a gem, where the Vicar has added news of the day, from:-

“heavy snowed fell as we buried Thomas”

to:

“Wm Dillon murdered servant girl, Elizabeth, who walks”.

In the case of Weare Giffard, we have records from 1583 but unfortunately records are incomplete, as there has been a loss of a register, or registers i.e. BAPTISMS 1617-1711; MARRIAGES 1587-1616 and 1667 - 1711 (and possibly a small more recent gap); and BURIALS 1631-1711.

In addition, the DRO houses the **VESTRY MINUTES**. These are actually more secular than religious and records the “Council” of the day, i.e.
support of the poor etc. Obviously today these responsibilities have been transferred to Parish, District and County Councils. However the Vestry Minutes give us a unique insight into village concerns, and extracted below, verbatim, are just a few, both religious and secular.

1671 - John Lovering left £100 for Endowment of a school.

1825 - 1/4 shilling (1.25p) to William Lameron’s boy for killing 14 bullfinches and 1 jay. Richard Lameron 17 bullfinches 1/5th shilling (1p) (accounts signed by several including Daniel Chaming).

1826 - Paid Mr. Chaming for 2 hocks (hedgehogs) and 1 bullfinch 5d (2p). John Jones for 2 hedgehogs 4d. James Ford for 2 hocks 4d.

1848 - Church Wardens Accounts: 2s 8d (13p) paid for horse to Bideford and turnpike.

March 26th 1860. After this all vestry meeting were held in the School Room.

March 25th 1864. Old pulpit has been removed and an old pulpit from Bideford Church (St. Mary’s) erected in its place. (N.B. the new (Bideford) one was only installed in 1864).

RURAL DEAN’S notes (on Church) - 1862, March 20th, includes: ‘The gallery is very feeble and out of repair. It does not hold above 26 sittings while at least 20 seats below it are rendered useless by this very ugly excrescence on the original fabric. It would be a great improvement to move it entirely and restore the seats below to their former usefulness. R.D. (Rural Dean) recommends a Church Architects advice’.

March 13th 1863. R.D. reports Mr Ashworth, Church architect, has visited and supplied advice and plans for restoration.

March 17th 1864. R.D. reports new vestry has been erected. New window in chancel end. Old oak seat ends, formerly within Communion enclosure, have been restored to their former positions. The whole area has been reseated. A new pulpit and desk. Gallery has been removed and tower archway thrown open. General restoration completed.

1870 (approx). School to be run on voluntary principle with Committee under newly passed Education Act.

April 29th 1876. Resolved that Church be insured for £1,000 and organ for £200 (first mention of organ).

April 12th 1887. R.D. recommends small plot of land opposite Rectory to be taken on as burial ground. This done before another visit in 1889.

March 23rd 1895. Old pulpit has been removed and an old pulpit from Bideford Church (St. Mary’s) erected in its place. (N.B. the new (Bideford) one was only installed in 1864).

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, CONSULT THE CHURCH RECORDS AT NORTH DEVON RECORDS OFFICE, BARNSTAPLE. Chief records available:

REGISTERs:  Baptisms 1583 to current

Banns 1823-1986

Marriages 1755 to current

Burials 1813-1931

Vestry Minutes 1841-current.
THE BELLS IN THE CHURCH

There is a ring of 6 bells. In the early 1950s when all churches were in dire need of restoration, the parish committed itself to restoring the bells at a cost of £700. This was collected with great difficulty. New bell-ringers had to be trained. The main ringers were Harry Busby and Ernie Beer. There was also Frank Gordon, Jock Smart, Albert Nickels, Cecil Netherway and Freddie Martin. When they had almost got it right, visitors from Canada, staying with the Fulfords at Landcross, insisted on recording them on a large recorder. The plan was that this peal would be transmitted from microphones over the top of Vancouver Cathedral on the next New Years Day. The first time the ringers did ring in the New Year, they finished their old year peal at 11.45 pm and went to the rectory for hot punch and refreshments. They were very thirsty, and when at midnight someone went back to ring in midnight, sixteen strikes were heard and apparently the New Year peel was very unusual!!! There were numerous bell-ringing competitions that were taken very seriously and it was vital that the judges did not know who was ringing. Only the rector could take them refreshments and everyone knew we are Giffard Bell Ringers ringing away from home Medieval Bench End
There was an annual ‘dole’ of bread at one time - intended for the destitute! The expression ‘on the dole’ is still used today to refer to those who are unemployed and live on state benefits!

By the 1950’s, this had become an annual ‘dole’ of two shillings (one florin), or 10p in modern money, given to any unemployed man if he walked to pick it up! Some folk wore out twice that amount in shoe leather in order to get their ‘two bob’!

The Rector and churchwardens made themselves rather unpopular by co-operating with the Charity Commissioners (who disliked these useless doles), to create a fund to help poor children to buy books if they wished to better themselves. This applied to anyone living within the parish boundary including Gammaton but not Annery Kiln which came within the parish of Monkleigh.

N.B. Mrs Lucas, who now lives in Exeter, is the wife of the Reverend J. Michael Lucas, Rector of Weare Giffard from 1952 to 1962.
EXTRACT FROM: ‘DEVON IN THE RELIGIOUS CENSUS OF 1851’
(Edited by Michael J.L. Wickes, M.A., June 1990)

The 1851 Religious Census of England and Walles was a unique event. It was the only occasion when the British Government of the time, attempted to estimate church attendances. As such, this summary serves as a window into the intricacies of provincial life during the early Victorian era and yields information on the state of the Christian religion for this nation during one specific Sunday, March 30th., 1851. (Michael J.L. Wickes).

EDITORS NOTE: One should have care in putting too greater importance to the accuracy of this survey, as Church and Chapel vied with each other for the largest attendances!

WEARE GIFFARD (Survey Results)

Entry No.
1156 Anglican: The Church of the Holy Trinity. An Ancient Church, consecrated before 1800

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Free sittings:</th>
<th>c.150</th>
<th>Other sittings:</th>
<th>c.50</th>
<th>Total: 200</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Est. No. People</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Average M A E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>c.55</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday School</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed: C.E. Palmer, Minister of Weare Giffard. March 30th, 1851.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1157 Wesleyan Methodists: Huxwill Chapel (Gammaton?), used exclusively for religious worship, but one house adjoining.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Free sittings:</th>
<th>48</th>
<th>Other sittings:</th>
<th>110</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Est. No. People</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday School</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>78</td>
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</table>

1158 Wesleyan Chapel, Weare Giffard. Wesleyan Methodists, erected 1835.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Free sittings:</th>
<th>48</th>
<th>Other sittings:</th>
<th>85</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Est. No. People</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday School</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed: John Molland, Minister, of Great Torrington. March 31st, 1851.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1. M, A and E refer to church attendances in the morning, afternoon and evening.

SUMMARY
It is interesting to compare the above attendances at Holy Trinity Church with a typical Sunday in 2001. There being no afternoon or evening services, the (average) attendance might read:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Est. No. People</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25th Feb: 2001</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday School</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Less than 15% of the attendance in 1851