

The Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Eardisland



INTRODUCTION

Much of the fabric of the present building is the result of the considerable amount of “restoration” work which took place in 1864-1865.

However, the story of the Church in Eardisland starts very much earlier.

In 1086 King William “The Conqueror” commanded the compilation of a book of record of his domains in England. This very soon became known as “Domesday Book”. By the name of “Eardisland” this parish/village/manor does not appear, but expert opinion has for many years now been that Eardisland is the second of the two places named “Lene” at folio 179d,¹ the other being Kingsland.

Domesday Book records that: *Of these two manors St Mary’s of Cormeilles holds in alms from the King the churches, priests and tithes and two villagers.* From this it can be deduced that either the Normans built a church here within twenty years of The Battle of Hastings, or it was a pre-Conquest building which was recorded in Domesday. The present building has no architectural features which can assist in deciding between these two circumstances.²

Recent research³ has shown that the parish of Eardisland was not one of the “Leominster Parochia” mentioned in a charter of 1123. Also within the publication mentioned in footnote (3) is a Paper by John Blair “The Anglo-Saxon Church in Herefordshire-four themes” which discusses, if Eardisland were to be taken as the subject parish, whether or not there was likely to have been a church here in pre-Conquest times. No decision can be made from the premises he puts forward, but other circumstances suggest that it is highly likely that there was.

¹ See for example Phillimore & Co. Ltd’s edition. Volume 17. Chichester, 1983.

² The oldest parts are the lowest few feet of the North and South walls of the nave which date to c.1170-1190.

³ Hillaby, J “The Early Church in Herefordshire: Columban and Roman” within “The Early Church in Herefordshire” Leominster History Study Group, Orphans Press, Leominster. 2001

But to return to Domesday Book.

Whilst with good reason Domesday can be thought to be the ultimate documentary authority about the early pre-1086 church in Eardisland, elsewhere it is recorded that: *While William FitzOsbern was earl of Hereford and had the royal manors in Herefs at his disposal, that is between 1067 and his death in 1071, he gave the church at Eardisland to the abbey he had founded at Lyre in Normandy* This recent wording is based on the reference *Gallia Christiana, xi, instrumenta, col.25.*

This discrepancy between the two sources led to me to write a separate Paper on the topic: *Lyre and Cormeilles* which, together with others on a spread of topics, form the contents of this section.

Whatever the circumstances in the intervening period, by 1172 Lyre Abbey was holding Eardisland church,⁴ and continued to do so until 1415 when the property in England of various monastic establishments was added by the Crown to the endowment of Shene Priory in Surrey. Shene had been founded in September 1414 [25th September] by King Henry V.

The present nave of the church was built c.1200, perhaps with a tower at the west end.⁵ Another source suggests that, impliedly the earliest, tower of the church was added in the 14th century, but the reason for stating this is not given and is therefore not to be relied upon. Three sources maintain that the earliest tower dated to the 15th century.⁶

Whatever the date of this earlier tower, there is no doubting that by circa 1683, probably much earlier, there was a spire on the tower as shown in a drawing by Thomas Dingley.⁷ A little later, circa 1712-1718, Hill's Manuscript also shows a spire as does Taylor's Map of 1754.

However by the early 1700s the tower and/or spire had fallen into disrepair. There are several versions of what happened -and when, these I have dealt with in detail in a separate Paper. From the records I myself have seen, I am fully inclined to agree with what is said by the most recent writer on the subject, D. Paul⁸ and the easiest way to take this forward is to quote from her work:

...at Eardisland. The tower there has been attributed to several different dates in the first half of the eighteenth century.....The tower was first described (at a vestry meeting) as ruinous and likely to fall and crush the nave in 1750, but nothing was done until 1758...when the vestry ordered that the spire and battlements be taken down. The parish was cited several times between 1758 and 1760 and finally confirmed that the work was finished and the bells rehung in 1761.

⁴ The loose wording here is intentional - it is by no means clear in what way the Abbey was benefiting.

⁵ RCHM, Volume 3, page 45.

⁶ a) Birley, Reverend P.A.H. "Records Book". A manuscript notebook compiled by Birley who was Vicar of Eardisland 1917-1938. It is now in Hereford Record Office.

b) A *Short Guide* being the information leaflet provided in the church. It is thought to have been compiled by the Reverend S. Thomas, Vicar here in the 1990s. [With more recent additions by Mr B. Freeman].

c) Reeves Notebook Number 10, page 35.

⁷ Dingley, Thomas "History From Marble". Circa 1683. Reprinted by the Camden Society in 1867.

⁸ Paul, D. "Why so Few? Rebuilding Country Churches in Herefordshire, 1662-1762". Published by The Friends of the Centre for English Local History. 2005.

My review of the Vestry Minutes⁹ reveals that, within the timescale quoted by D. Paul, all was not straightforward. In my Paper 'The Tower of Eardisland Church' I set out the full story and summarise with the words: *Of the records contemporary with the events described in them the only ones I have myself so far studied*¹⁰ *indicate that in 1749 the steeple (spire) was in great decay and very ruinous and that it was not possible to repair it: there was concern that it would damage the tower and nave if it fell. The Churchwardens were instructed to get the Bishop's permission to pull it down.*

Nothing is then recorded until 1757 when payments were made which indicate that a mason had looked at the 'Steeple' and 40 loads of stone, and materials for making mortar were on site. That was in February and April 1757; and later that year, on November the 21st, the Vestry agreed that the arch between the 'steeple' and the church should be made up. Then in January 1758 a Vestry meeting ordered that the spire be taken down immediately and the battlements round the top of the tower also. Not until the 4th of March 1760 did the Vestry appoint a builder (Hooper of Yarpole) to demolish and rebuild the tower.

My understanding of all this is that the Vestry recognized a problem with the spire in 1749, but nothing was done. Eight years later a by then rapidly deteriorating structure (spire, battlements, tower and all), forced them into, by their standards, rapid action. Demolition and rebuild of the tower itself followed in 1760.

After 1760 the records speak for themselves; nothing major being done but, after an initial gap, fairly continuous minor works and, perhaps, further minor alterations being evidenced.

The number of bells in the tower at various times, and the inscriptions thereon, is to be a separate Paper. In the meantime suffice it to record that one of the five bells in the tower in 1898 was dated "1798", two were dated 1728 and two bore no date at all.¹¹

A drawing of the church was made in 1837 which shows the south and west faces of the tower, and the whole south aspect of the church. This, together with the drawings made by Dingley c.1683, and Hill circa 1712-1718, make interesting comparisons available. Such comparisons can be taken a step further by including the Architect's drawing for the 'Restoration' of 1863-1865. His drawings of the church before restoration [dated 1863] and what the intention was to restore it to¹², dated 15th May 1864, are extant.

In 1850 a new Font, the current one, was donated to the church by Miss Elizabeth Evans in memory of her sister, Miss Mary Anne Evans, of Burton Court, who died on the 21st. August 1850.¹³

⁹ HRO AJ32/58.

¹⁰ HRO AJ32/58 and 59.

¹¹ HRO BM81/1/19.

¹² Not everything came to fruition.

¹³ Birley: Records Book.

An Appeal¹⁴ for the monies to pay for a 'Restoration' of the fabric of the church was made towards the end of 1863, and whilst there are reports that the work finished in 1864, the church did not re-open until Thursday 15th June 1865¹⁵

In 1890 the Vicar, the Reverend Barker, published a booklet: "Eardisland its Church and Antiquities". Snippets from this were included in Kelly's Directory of 1895, notably that the five bells then in the church tower had been re-cast in 1728, and impliedly that they were inscribed to that effect. Kelly's also said that the tower was built about 1770 to replace one which fell. This topic I have already touched on herein. Then in 1898, making mention of Reverend Barker's work and impliedly acknowledging that he was contradicting it, George Marshall¹⁶ recorded the inscriptions on three of the five bells. Impliedly the other two were not inscribed at all.¹⁷

Circa 1900 a photograph was taken in the church looking towards the altar from well back in the nave.¹⁸



By 1904 further work on the tower had become necessary as evidenced by the Vicar thanking the parishioners, by open letter, for their generous response to the "Appeal for the Church Tower expenses".

From 1917 to 1938 the Reverend Birley was Vicar of Eardisland. He corresponded with the RCHM¹⁹ on points of detail about the church in the period before they reported in 1934.

¹⁴ Further financial arrangements were later necessary to cover the cost . Whether the cost over-ran or the Appeal under-achieved, or both, I do not know.

¹⁵ Hereford Library, Pilley 2268, page 25.

¹⁶ More likely to be reliable than Barker.

¹⁷ My Paper about the bells is 'forthcoming'.

¹⁸ WI Book, facing page 73.

¹⁹ Royal Commission On Historic Monuments.

Then in 1919: *Three pews on each side of the nave towards the chancel were removed. This portion of the nave and the central aisle were floored with artificial stone slabs, and the pulpit and font were moved a few feet forward. Thus the church achieved its present dignified appearance.*²⁰

Electricity was first installed in the church in 1931.²¹

At Michaelmas 1931 the Font cover (which is still in use now, 2012) was donated by the Vicar, the Reverend Birley.²²

In 1956 the WI Book had much to say about the church.

At some date after the eleventh of June 1964 memorial stained glass was inserted in the window furthest West in the South wall of the nave. It is in memory of: *Margaret Rosamund Parker, died 11th April 1962 and her husband Arthur Ralph Nevill Parker, died 11th June 1964.*

In 1980 Norman Reeves published ‘The Leon Valley...’ which he wrote from his own Notebooks, which were compiled from about 1975. There is much there about Eardisland church.

In the year 2000 the glass screen in the tower arch was fabricated; also the southern extension of the screen across the nave, towards the west end. The north section of this screen is thought to date to the late fifteenth century.²³

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These notes are but a foretaste of the mass of information which is available about Eardisland’s church.

Various topics will be covered in the Papers which follow.

²⁰ Reeves. “Leon Valley...”, page 138.

²¹ WI Book.

²² WI Book, page 74.

²³ RCHM.