

Hidden in the back of beyond

Bob Forster

THE ROAD WINDS OUT of Kingham, heading nowhere. There are no features on this road and no buildings, not even the crossing from Oxfordshire into Gloucestershire is marked. Cropped fields spread up the hill to the right, while to the left the land slopes down towards the unseen river Evenlode and the railway line to Moreton-in-Marsh. There are undulations but no features until a farm precedes a dark clump of trees and, rising through the trees pokes the stump of St. Peter's church at Daylesford.

The hamlet itself contains no features either, just a single street of uniform yellow stone estate houses, chunky and weathered, leading up to the splendour of Daylesford House. But the real splendour is the church.

Part of its splendour lies in its secrecy. Mature trees mask the entire building, except for that truncated spire which can be seen briefly from the road, even more briefly, but more spectacularly, from the train. The trees fold over church paths like a cloister of green. Go along the path, beneath the lych gate and there is the gem so secluded in its attraction.

The church is synonymous with one name, that of Warren Hastings, the former Governor General of India. From his house on the hillside, he looked down on the ancient and tiny church and, in one of the last acts of his life, he decided to rebuild it.

This, however, was no sacrilege but the deed of a benefactor looking to the future.

Only a pair of twelfth century doorways were retained in his new church. Yet within two years of his dream becoming reality, Hastings died, remembered in simplicity by a stark, neo-Greek grave, inscribed just with the words "WARREN HASTINGS 1818".

And within a further fifty years, the congregation had outgrown his church and again the demands led to the re-shaping of its future.

So it was that in 1863 a completely new church was built on the site, incorporating just the two Norman doorways from previous buildings. This church is what stands today, a church whose perfection seems at odds with much of Victorian functionalism.

To us it still seems tiny. Fifty people could squeeze into its pews at Christmas, but even that assumes that those pews hiding in the gloom of the side chapels are filled.

Overhead, huge cedar beams curve up into the roof. The nave is plain, except for the rare and intricate stained glass windows, windows which, particularly at the west end, allow the evening sun to bathe the building during services.

And the chancel is a combination of marble pillars and a tiled mosaic floor leading up to a simple altar and another eye-catching window.

With the building work at an end, perhaps Daylesford church would have atrophied, another monument to a bygone way of life. But further fame arrived in the form of the Rev. Arthur Grisewood, whose son,

Freddie, went on to become one of the doyens of radio broadcasting in the mid twentieth century.

Still its history is not complete. St. Peter's has a present and a future. Although the settlement contains so few houses, Christians gather from there and the surrounding villages, on the second and fourth Sundays of each month, for a Cotswold evensong.

The floodlit spire stands proudly above the trees and a steady trickle of worshippers walk along the path between the lights and the church, sending vast shadows up the church walls like creatures out of Roald Dahl's 'Big Friendly Giant.'

Once inside, the atmosphere is as warm as the night air is chill. The organ leads, the people follow and singing fills this house of prayer. God is in his heaven and all's right with the world.

Meanwhile the darkened road curves onwards and the passing motorist glances neither right nor left. The church is past but its spirit lives on.

The church will be open throughout the weekend of 22nd / 23rd August, culminating in evensong at 6.00 p.m. on the Sunday when the preacher will be Canon Geoffrey Shaw.

RED CROSS

Disabled Club:

The outing to Stanton Harcourt Manor House and gardens was a delightful occasion. The weather was beautiful and members appreciated the warm welcome and the special facilities for wheelchairs. The wonderful gardens and the wander around the lake with its nesting swans afforded great pleasure. The visit began with a talk in the courtyard, and included a delicious tea in the old kitchen.

The Concert:

This concert was held on Saturday, 16th May, at Ashford Mill Farm, by kind permission of Mr. and Mrs. Ritchie.

It began with music played by the Clarendon Quartet; then there was a supper; and this was followed by the second part of the concert – ad hoc jazz of the 1930s and 1940s . People walked about outside on the patio in beautiful evening sun, and it was obviously enjoyed by everyone.

The grand takings for the evening were between £1,800 and £1,900.

Red Cross Week:

Many thanks to all the collectors who helped to make the splendid total of around £3,000 for collections around Woodstock and villages. Special thanks to Mrs. Packerson for offering her home as a receiving point for the tins.