

ST. NICHOLAS (4th CENTURY)

St. Nicholas, the son of a rich nobleman, was Bishop of Myra, Asia Minor, during the early part of the fourth century. Although many legends concerning his acts have been handed down to us, very little is known about his life and work as a bishop.

Nicholas is best remembered for his kindness to an impoverished nobleman and his three daughters. The nobleman, unable to pay the necessary dowries which would allow his daughters to marry men of high rank, was tempted to sell them into slavery. Nicholas is said to have saved the young girls by secretly providing them with dowries. One night he made his way to the nobleman's house and, while the household was asleep, cast three heavy bags of gold through an open window. The nobleman was overjoyed at his good fortune and his daughters were saved.

The story of the three bags of gold forms the basis of the saint's symbol - three golden balls. Pawn-brokers adopted the emblem, and used it as a trade sign. Some examples are still in use today.

Another legend records how Nicholas saved sailors in peril and makes him the patron of seafarers. It may be for this reason that so many of the nearly four hundred English churches dedicated to him are situated on

the coast at places as far apart as Whitehaven, Cumberland, and Great Yarmouth in Norfolk.

As the patron saint of children St. Nicholas (Santa Claus) is of course traditionally responsible for filling the Christmas stocking. In some European countries, like Holland, children receive Santa Claus' presents on his feast day, December 6th.

There is a good sixteenth century window at Hillesden, Bucks. showing scenes from his life and he is also featured in the east window of Willoughby church, behind the altar.

ST NICHOLAS' CHURCH

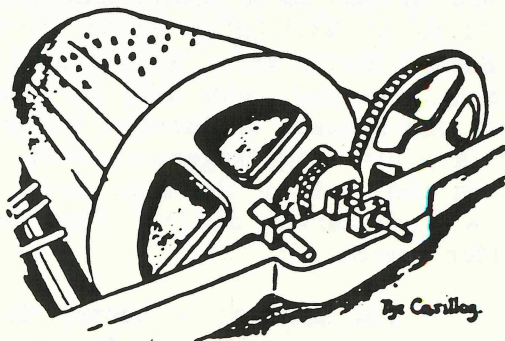
The village of Willoughby is, itself, an ancient settlement which is mentioned in the Domesday Book. The church is probably almost as old. There is evidence that a church existed here in 1215 and further evidence that the right of choosing the incumbent (the advowson) was granted to the Hospital of St John at Oxford in 1242. Much later, in 1447, William de Wainfleet, Bishop of Winchester, began the foundation of Magdalen College at Oxford in the place where the Hospital of St John had formerly stood. The Manor of Willoughby with the patronage of the church was, in the course of time, granted to Magdalen College. The College held these lands until 1952 and they were, at that time, the oldest property belonging to it. Although the connection with Magdalen College is now gone, the east window shows the

tower of the college with St Nicholas in his bishop's robes.

The present building, however, dates mainly from the second half of the fifteenth century. The tower, north aisle and nave belong to this period. The south aisle is later and the first chancel was built in 1662. It was rebuilt in 1779.

A church inventory of 1552 revealed the existence of three bells and a sanctus bell. These were recast in 1713 to provide a minor peal of five bells. A sixth bell was hung in 1781. In 1920 the bells were condemned as unsafe. However, appeals for their restoration were made in the village and they rang again on Boxing Day, 1926.

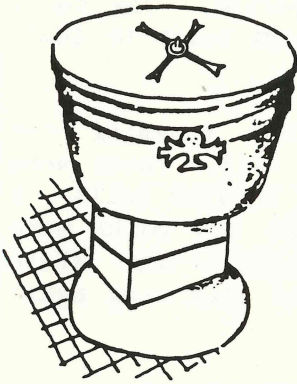
The present clock, an electric one, was installed after the Second World War as part of the Village War Memorial. The church tower also houses a clock of the early eighteenth century and a musical chime brought from Southam in 1724. This chime was, apparently, repaired about a hundred years later at a cost of £70 which was a great sum of money in those days. It was still working in the late nineteen twenties. It played



tunes on the bells at four-hourly intervals. But later this chime, or carillon, fell into disrepair and it was not restored until April 12th., 1983. It now plays the old tunes 'Rock of Ages', 'We love the place, O God', 'Lead;

Kindly Light', 'Drink to me only with thine eyes' and 'Rousseau's Dream'.

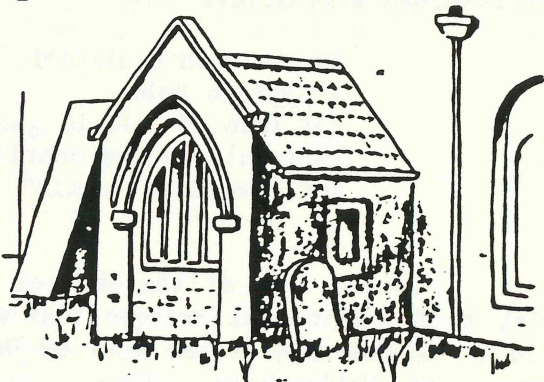
The font dates from the thirteenth century. It was moved to its present position in 1962, when the baptistry was constructed. This baptistry was paid for by funds allocated to the church from the profits of a festival week held in Willoughby to celebrate the dedication of the new Coventry Cathedral. Old pews were removed and the area was paved. When the font was removed from its old position, embedded behind a pillar, part of another font was found beneath it and this fragment may still be seen near the baptistry.



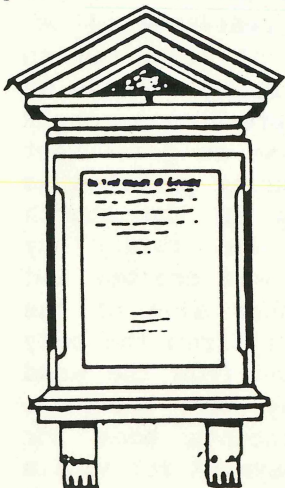
Most of the memorials upon the walls of the church are self-explanatory. The Children's Corner, at the end of the north aisle, was given by Captain Pearce, who lived at Willoughby House in the years just before the Second World War. This chapel is in memory of his daughter, Jennifer, who died at the age of nine and of Robert and Kenneth Wooldridge, young Willoughby boys, who died in a drowning tragedy in 1936. In the church-yard, just to the left of the side path, is a small tombstone with a lamb carved on it. This is the grave of little Jennifer Pearce.

The lack of a vestry in our church used to cause some inconvenience. The only suitable place was the belfry but, when the bells were being rung, it was not a comfortable place for the Vicar. However, plans to convert the south porch into a vestry were eventually

carried out. This project was first suggested in December, 1974. The south porch was not used as an entrance but was a repository for brooms, brushes, vases and other useful things. The idea was to block the doorway with suitable stonework below and a window of ecclesiastical design above. Planning, estimates and finance took some time to arrange but from January 1979 the work went ahead and was completed on April 18th., 1980.



In bygone days, the vestry was at the upper end of the north aisle where the organ is now. In a space behind the organ is an altar tomb, quite



inaccessible now, but recorded as being in memory of Thomas Clerke, who died in 1663. The Clerke family was the most ancient and respected family in the history of the village. On the wall of the north aisle is a monument to Henry Clerke, son of Thomas Clerke, and his wife, Catherine (formerly Adams). The Clerke arms (three cranes and three pellets) surmount the monument. Another tablet of interest is the one in memory of Captain George Watson, to the left of the main door, in the north aisle. He died at sea in 1674 and

left the "profit of £50" to the poor of Willoughby "for ever to be distributed as by decree in Chancery". His memorial verse deserves quotation because of its freshness and simplicity:

"Death hath control'd
A Captain bold
Yet loss of life is gain
Especially where charity
For ever doth remain"

To the left of the chancel there is a memorial tablet to Dr. Nathaniel Bridges who was Vicar from 1791 to 1834. An account of the work of Dr. Bridges (from the 'History of Willoughby', 1828) provides a revealing commentary on the usages of the times. Dr. Bridges was, at the same time, Vicar of Willoughby, Rector of Hatton near Warwick and lecturer of the largest parish in England, St Mary Redcliff, Bristol. During the absence of Dr. Bridges the duties were performed by the Revd. James Chambers, the curate, who occupied the residence of Dr. Bridges "and received a limited number of gentlemen to educate". The 'History' records that Dr. Bridges, while so often absent from his parish, made his presence strongly felt when he was here. His eloquence was so great that people flocked to hear him from neighbouring parishes as well as from Willoughby. The seating in the church proved to be inadequate and money was raised by subscription to build a gallery. This was erected and traces of it can still be seen at either side of the belfry. The screen now dividing the belfry from the body of the church is said to have been made from the wood of the gallery. Later this gallery may have become a minstrels' gallery. In the church accounts book for Easter 1858 onwards there is a regular payment for violin

strings recorded until 1864. In 1885 there is an account for tuning an harmonium which continues until 1897. We may assume that the minstrels' gallery was demolished between 1864 and 1885. A Mr. Ringrose was paid ten shillings for playing the organ in 1907 so the organ was probably installed between 1897 and 1907. It was built by an organ builder named Bebbington and has a preservation order on it.

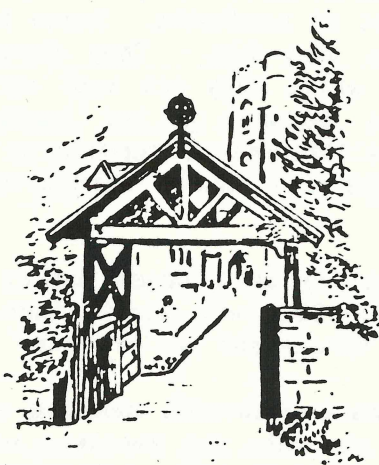
In the converted south porch there is a wooden box containing a set of handbells. These bells belong to the church and are very old. They were renovated in 1978. The case in which they are kept was presented by Mrs. A Hancock in memory of her husband, Frederick Hancock, who gave a lifetime of service to the church as chorister, bell-ringer and church warden until his death in 1978.

In the belfry is a brass tablet in memory of Charles Jarvis (1903-1982) who served throughout most of his life as sexton, vergger and bell-ringer.

Some years ago several members of the Mothers' Union undertook to renovate the kneelers which are to be found in many of the pews. These beautiful examples of tapestry-work in various designs are well worthy of notice. The Mothers' Union banner was worked by Mrs. Margaret Heckford, who also supervised the working of the hassocks. The completed banner is the result of ten years of loving and devoted work and as such is an adornment of which any church could be proud.

Recent improvements include the tarmacing and curbing of the main church path, the bringing of a mains water supply for the heating system and hand-basin and the installation of new louvres in the tower.

Money raised during the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of 1977 was voted by the village to be used for the building of a lych-gate. The lower part of the lych-gate is built of weathered stone to be in keeping with the ancient church. The wooden structure was made by Mr. George Stewart, a parishioner and church councillor. The roof is of weathered slates. The lych-gate was dedicated on July 29th., 1979 by the Revd. Gerald Knight, a former incumbent.



It is hoped that the fore-going brief items of information from the church's long history will be of interest to visitors and villagers alike. The little that can be discovered serves to stimulate a desire for more information which, perhaps, at some later date will be forthcoming.