



Some Notes on the History of
ST. NICHOLAS' CHURCH. WILLOUGHBY.

Price 5p.

ST. NICHOLAS (4th CENT)

6th December.

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. Pawnbrokers 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, 6th December. There is a good sixteenth century window at Hillesden, Bucks, showing scenes from his life.

The village of Willoughby is, itself, an ancient settlement which is mentioned in Domesday Book. The church is probably almost as old. There is evidence that a church existed here in 1215 and further evidence that the advowson of the church (the right of choosing the incumbent) was granted to the Hospital of Saint 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 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.

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. Willoughby has had, for many years, a devoted band of keen bell-ringers as will be seen from the record book to be found in the church. The church tower also houses a clock of the early eighteenth century and a musical chime, brought from Southam in 1724. This was, apparently, repaired about a hundred years later at a cost of £70, which was a great sum of money in those days. It used to play tunes on the bells at four-hourly intervals. Rock of Ages, Lead Kindly Light and Drink to me Only are recalled. It was still working in the early thirties.

but has since fallen into disrepair and it seems that, in this technological age, it is beyond our means to restore it. It is now an antique which should surely be of interest to connoisseurs of mechanical music.

The font dates from the thirteenth century. It was moved to its present position in 1962, when the baptistry was constructed. This 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, small Willoughby boys who died in 1936 in a drowning tragedy. In the churchyard, 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 causes some inconvenience. The only suitable place would appear to be the belfry but when the bells are being rung it is not a comfortable place for the vicar. In bygone days, the vestry was at the upper end of the north aisle where the organ is now. In this space, hidden behind the organ, is an alter tomb, quite inaccessible now, but recorded as being in memory of Thomas Clerke who died in 1663. The Clerke family were, in fact, the most ancient and respected family in the history of the village. On the north 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. The joint arms of Clerke and Adams are at the bottom of the tablet. 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 1671+ and left the profit of to the poor of Willoughby "for ever to be distributed as by decree of Chancery". His memorial verse deserves quotation because of its freshness and simplicity.

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

To the left of the chancel is a memorial tablet to Dr. Nathaniel Bridges, who was vicar from 1791-1834. 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 church in England, that of St. Mary Redcliff, Bristol. During the absence of Dr. Bridges, the duties of this living were performed by the Rev. James Chambers 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 surrounding 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 its position 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 minstrel's gallery, In the church account book for the period Easter 1858 to Easter 1909, there is a regular payment for violin strings recorded until 1864 but in 1885 there is an account for tuning a harmonium which continues until 1897. So 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.

A few 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 very 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

It is hoped that the foregoing 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

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