

# OLD SHIFFORD AND ITS CHURCH

Much of the history of old Shifford and its church has been lost in antiquity, but what is known has been so well authenticated as to provide a sound basis on which to build.

Shifford was virtually the first Parliamentary meeting-place of this country for it was here that Alfred the Great called together in 890 his 'Wise Men' and his 'Royal Court' to attend what has been called the 'Mother of all Parliaments.' This is commemorated in an Anglo-Saxon poem, the original of which is in the possession of the British Museum. A copy is said to be in the Bodleian.

An extract from this poem describes how "There sate at Shifford many thanes, many bishops and many learned men, wise earls and awful knights; there was Earl Elfric, very learned in the law; and Alfred, England's herdsman, England's darling; he was King of England, he taught them that could hear him how they should live."

Alfred is said to have built a church on the site as a thanksgiving for his first Parliament. Rumour has it that at one time there were seven churches and many inns; this could very well be true for we know that there was a Roman settlement only two miles away. Undoubtedly Christianity flourished at Shifford long before Alfred's day for in the churchyard there is an Anglo-Saxon Preaching Cross, the carving on which shows it to have been in existence before 800 A.D. A valuable clue lies in the fact that some very old maps show a road across the fields from Standlake to Old Shifford called the Hlaew-Paeth which means 'burial road.' Hlaew is Celtic, and the road might well have been given its Celtic name in the Second Century, or even earlier.

In 1858 fifty-four graves were unearthed and in one of them were found ten Roman coins dating from 196-251 A.D. In 1920 grave-diggers uncovered a Cromwellian helmet.

The present church stands in a field called Court Close and it is thought to be the third one built on the same foundations. It is a small but elegant building in the Gothic style and was extensively rebuilt in 1863. It consists of a Chancel and a Nave with a bell-turret containing two bells, one of which dates from the Thirteenth Century and is one of the three oldest bells in the country. The other bell is

from the Sixteenth Century and carries on it the name of 'Southby' one of the biggest landowners in the district at that time. The oldest part of the church is the small vestry which also contains a fireplace of great age.

The Church furniture is worthy of mention and includes:

**CHALICE.** The inscription reads:- "This was given to the Church of Shifford by Robt, Veisey Esqre, deceay'd and renewed by Christian Veisey his Widdow 1689." The Veisey's owned and lived at the Manor of Chimney and founded the Bampton Grammar School.

**PATEN.** Inscribed:- "The Gift of Thomas Horde Esqre, for the use of Shifforde Chapple 1706." The Horde's lived at Cote House, there is a Horde Chapel in Bampton Church.

**THE CHRISTENING JUG.** Was presented to I. I. Birch from Rev. C. B. Marshall, Oct. 1876. This is very unusual being enamel on solid brass. This, with brass Candle Sticks and Cross were presented to St. Mary's, Shifford, by Mrs. Wickham Birch, 1921. Mrs. Birch being the widow of the late Vicar of the Parish.

**THE CHURCHWARDENS STAFF** was hers, being given to her by her husband as she was the first lady Churchwarden in the country. Mrs. Birch gave this staff to Charles J. Bartlett who's widow presented it to the Church on his death.

The large **PRAYER BOOK** is interesting, bearing the names of and showing that there were three Vicars of the Parish at that time 1872.

Ecclesiastically Shifford is known as Bampton, Aston with Shifford.

From the time of Alfred's meeting Shifford (Scipford in the Domesday Book) was declared a Royal Borough and, as such, was excused all taxes and given the right to levy tolls on traffic using the ford. These could have been substantial as travellers going from Burford to London went via Old Shifford and Abingdon.

The thatched cottages by the Church are known as Cold Harbour cottages which meant that here was a safe area where live-stock could be 'harboured' for the night. Shifford means Sheepford.

The Manor of Shifford has been variously owned by Edward Crouchbank, the son of Henry III, John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, Henry IV, Lord North and Greville Harcourt.