

The History of St Swithun's Church

Pre-Roman – 17th Century

There has been a settlement on the high ground overlooking the River Severn at Hempsted since pre-Roman times. Certainly there was a chapel here soon after the Norman Conquest; it was one of the first endowments of Llanthony Priory when this was founded in 1136.



The early thirteenth century font dates from not long after this. However, the main pattern and structure of the present church – with chancel, central tower, nave and south porch – comes from the late 15th century. At this time the chapel was rebuilt in perpendicular style, at the instigation of the Prior of Llanthony, Henry Dene (who went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury). One of the stone roof corbels in the nave wears a mitre, and is thought to represent him, as is the mitred head in medieval glass used in the tracery of the north window under the tower (1878 by Hardman).

With the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1546 the Priory's possessions were sold. The patronage, manse and tithes of the church were acquired by one Arthur Porter; there is a stone tablet with a brass plate above the small door under the tower in memory of six of his children. At the same time, the manor of Hempsted went to Thomas Atkyns, a London judge; his son Richard is commemorated in the tomb and effigy in the chancel. Richard Atkyns was chief justice of North Wales and died in 1610.

The Civil War ebbed and flowed round Gloucester, which was besieged in 1643. There is a table tomb in the churchyard of one Captain John Freeman, a Royalist, killed during the siege itself. By the Restoration in 1660 the church was in some disrepair. However fortunately the then patron, John, Viscount Scudamore – who had been a zealous Royalist – restored the impropriated tithes of his own property, repaired the church and began the building of a new rectory, now Hempsted House. Probably the first incumbent to live there was John Gregory (rector 1669-1678). He became an Archdeacon of Gloucester, and his tombstone comprises part of the flooring behind the altar.

His son, another John Gregory, was the next rector and it was during his tenure, in 1694, that the two oldest bells in the tower (the Tenor and the number 5) were first hung. As can be seen in the choir, the peal is rung, somewhat unusually, from ground level. In 1979 the old oak bell frame was replaced with a new steel one; at the same time the bells were retuned and fitted with new headstocks. Two new bells were added, bringing the total to eight. A plaque near the belfry door pays tribute to the Taylor family, five generations of whom (including the present Tower Captain) have been bell-ringers here.

Lysons Family

In the late 17th century the Lysons family began to play a prominent part in the history of Hempsted, and did so for the next two centuries. At this time they built Hempsted Court (demolished 1962) where the family lived until Victorian times. There are memorial tablets to various members of the family in the chancel and choir, and above the pulpit, and a hatchment of the Rev Samuel Lysons (d. 1804) on the south wall of the nave. In addition there are flat tombstones of the Lysons family in the churchyard to the north-east of the vestry door, one of which is inscribed 'Entrance to vault'.



There are undoubtedly still vaults under the church containing the remains of many of those commemorated on tablets and flagstones. But for the church, the most important member of the family was Sylvanus Lysons (d. 1731), commemorated together with others of his family on the tablet

on the south wall above the pulpit. On his death without a direct heir, his will established the Lysons Charity, many of the benefits of which were to the inhabitants of Hempsted. In particular, the stipend of the incumbent was to be paid, at a relatively high level. The Sylvanus Lysons Charity has prospered and, although extending its scope nowadays throughout the diocese, remains greatly supportive of village and church, contributing considerably to the construction of the new Church Hall, and to various renovations in the church itself.

18th Century –

A very early Sunday School was established at Hempsted in about 1780, then the Rev Thomas Stock, collaborator with Robert Raikes of Gloucester in founding the Sunday School movement, was for some years curate here.

In common with many churches, St Swithun's underwent appreciable Victorian renovation. In 1837-39 it was re-roofed, a vestry built, and also a gallery across the west end, which must have considerably reduced the light. In 1885 it was again restored, on the advice of Waller and Son of Gloucester. This time there were more major changes, including the removal of most of what had been done in the 1850s. The nave was lengthened by 12 feet and re-floored, and a new perpendicular style west window was put in. The low wall separating the nave from the east part of the church and the pulpit were built; the chancel floor was raised and laid with encaustic tiles.

Much of the stained glass dates from this period too; however the rather lovely north-east window in the nave is later (Karl Parsons, 1923/24) and was given in memory of Margaret Tew by her parents, whose eldest child she was and who had died at the age of 8.

The oak lectern was given to the church in 1906 by the incumbent, the Rev Canon the Hon. Charles Sinclair – he was rector for 44 years and died in 1946. His grave lies just outside the south porch.

