St Bartholomew’s Church, Chosen Hill, Churchdown

By W.D. Pereira (copyright rests with Helen Hail)

Chosen Hill at 580 feet is known geographically as an outlier from the Cotswold Escarpment. It owes its continued prominence over millennia due to a cap of hard marl rock primarily made up from limestone and ironstone. Although this type of stone is difficult to quarry and work it was used in the church foundations and walls. However, over the centuries rain water has percolated down to the ubiquitous Severn Vale clay causing slippages called tumps. There are also springs and wells including one named the Roman Well though it pre-dates that era. Tradition has it that local maidens used to consult its water whispering their romantic hopes.

The hill was undoubtedly a hill fort in Neolithic times then through the Bronze and Iron Ages. Some claim it is on one of those mysterious ley lines though this is a matter of conjecture. Hill forts were protected by earth ramparts the raising of which provided deep steep-sided ditches also for defence. The entrance was in the form of a crooked corridor between the banks believed to be on the north side in line with an ascent path known later as the Roman Steps. Regarding hill forts it is estimated there were at least a dozen locally and about 80 in the county. Their builders were Celts who settled in the area during the 7th Century BC. Because of other tribes pressing in from the east secondary construction on Chosen Hill has been established. The mound on which the church stands is man-made and skeletons as well as stone idols have been found there.
The Roman occupation of Britain began 43 AD and extended over a period of 4-500 years. During this period the people of Churchdown lived in close association with a superior civilisation. By the 4th Century AD Corinium (Cirencester) had become the Romans third most important centre and nearby Gevum (Gloucester) a strategically-placed military base at the ‘Crossroads of England’. Skirting Churchdown was the great Roman arterial road called Ermine Street linking the above two towns. The whole area was dotted with Roman villas and their estates often exceeded 1000 acres. They had baths and heating under beautiful mosaic floors. One such villa on the Hucclecote side of Chosen Hill measured 110 x 60 feet. Much Roman pottery has been found in Parton and Brookfield Roads.

Following the Norman Conquest, King William favoured Gloucester by visiting it annually. At the time Churchdown was part of a church estate not materially affected by a change of monarch, It was in Gloucester the king initiated the Domesday Book and the Churchdown entry came under church lands belonging to the Archbishop of York. This was to prevail over the next four centuries yet no church was registered as yet existing at Churchdown. It is thought there were chapels in the surrounding estates such as the Great Manor at the foot of Chosen Hill and at the sub-manors of Pirton and Parton named after pear orchards.

In 1250 the right was granted to hold a fair in Churchdown at the Feast of St Bartholomew, suggesting this saint was the patron of a church being built there. The oldest parts are typically Norman such as carvings on the south door showing plants and men wearing conical caps. Much of the stone was quarried on site then worked by itinerant masons. It is thought the original St Bartholomew’s Church was a simple single cell structure. Extensions were made in the 13th and 14th Centuries notably to the north porch. This became known as the Hucclecote Porch because parishioners from there worshipped on that side until the 19th Century.

The north porch has medieval graffiti carved by pilgrims and there are stone seats needed by worshippers who had climbed the hill before the services. Above there is a Priest’s Room with a fireplace in it, mostly used by visiting clergymen as there was no resident one. The house in the churchyard is known as the Sexton’s Cottage and is perhaps as old as the church itself. Some researchers say it may have been built for workmen, paupers, imbeciles or even lepers. The present chancel dates from the 15th Century and while it is not known whether this replaced an earlier one it is out of line with the nave probably due to the site foundations.

In 1535 King Henry VIII and his then Queen, Anne Boleyn, passed the outskirts of Churchdown. The royal party had travelled from Tewkesbury and were due to meet the Mayor of Gloucester with his councillors. This took place at the sub-manor of Brickhampton. A year later word came that ‘the King’s dear wife had been beheaded’. Hardly was this astounding news assimilated than the king created a new diocese. The abbey church of St Peter was to become Gloucester Cathedral and all the parishes around including St Bartholomew’s Church passed under its jurisdiction. Wisely the Archbishop of York raised no objection. Churchdown became a parish in 1550 and its first resident priest was appointed in 1563.

During the Reformation it is recorded that St Bartholomew’s attempted to hang on to ‘church trappings known for superstitious practices’. However, when John Hooper was formally enthroned as Bishop of Gloucester and its diocese he was determined to root out all vestiges of the Old Religion and St Bartholomew’s became included. In 1994 fragments of medieval
stained glass were discovered crushed into nearby ground. During the subsequent religious upheavals in the reigns of Catholic Queen Mary and Protestant Queen Elizabeth most churches were said to have suffered decay as no one knew what to do with them. Hooper was burned at the stake by the first queen while the second concentrated on the Spanish invasion threatened in 1588. The highest point of Chosen Hill on the Hucclecote side was one of a signal beacon chain in case the enemy landed. It is still known as ‘The Beacon’ and now mounts a red aircraft warning light.

In the years that followed Gloucestershire churches became increasingly austere mainly to satisfy Puritan consciences. Places of worship were obliged to have bare walls, plain windows and simple tables as altars. Nevertheless, St Bartholomew’s Church enjoyed improvements during this period. Its bell tower was built in 1601 as lengthy peals of bells like their sermons were approved by the Puritans. Other alterations which seemed to then as fanaticism improved the church. Raised floors of the main and side chancels they called ‘idolatrous high places contrary to Holy Writ’ were levelled thus making the church appear more spacious.

The parish records state the early 1640s were ‘Times of Great Confusion and Unrest’. They were referring to the Civil War when the long-brewing quarrel between King Charles I and Parliament eventually came to a head. The county was embroiled and Churchdown drawn into the conflict because of nearby Gloucester being for Parliament. The King, arriving with 30,000 men surrounded the city which held Parliamentarians less than a tenth of that number. Chosen Hill became a Royalist strongpoint at the six-week siege with the soldiers of Prince Rupert of the Rhine quartered in St Bartholomew’s Church and him at Parton Court. His German cavalrymen were feared for their heavy sabres known as ‘widow makers’.

The Royalists tried to draw the Roundheads out of Gloucester but apart from skirmishes Colonel Massey kept the defenders behind its walls. The relieving Parliamentary army that had assembled west of London at a small village named Heathrow arrived to relieve Gloucester in the nick of time. They reached Prestbury on the 5th September, moved through Cheltenham next day and made for Gloucester only to find the royal army had struck camp. Prince Rupert had likewise left Churchdown and the villagers set about restoring St Bartholomew’s Church to decent order. It was said most of the local gentry who sided with the king fled also not a single farm animal was left in the neighbourhood.

Following the Restoration in 1660 and the end of a Puritan-dominated period the Anglican church came back into its own and the Book of Common Prayer re-issued. It was after this turbulent time that the oldest surviving tombs and inscriptions at St Bartholomew’s are to be found. One dated 1689 is in Latin. When translated, it refers to ‘the undiscovered shore from which there is no return’. The line echoes Shakespeare’s words in Hamlet’s soliloquy of ‘from whose bourne / No traveller returns’. Another tomb dated 1700 commemorates the wife of Henry Wright, Yeoman, as a ‘virtuous woman who put her trust in the Lord’. Others tell their own simple stories.

The changes to come in the 18th and 19th Centuries were to prove more profound and far-reaching than any that had previously occurred. There was a total abandonment of the old open-field system and an upsurge in manufacturing. The land around Churchdown contained large percentages of strip areas and these prevented the new agricultural ideas being tried.
They were resisted locally but by 1836 the village finally became subject to the Enclosure Act. It is not known why it held out for so long. After all, Brockworth changed decades earlier. On the other hand, while not affected industrially, Chosen Hill’s marl rocks were increasingly quarried, crushed and used for road surfacing between Gloucester City and the spa town of Cheltenham.

Yet the road problem was far from solved. Then, as now, heavy traffic began to cause damage and a horse-drawn tramway was laid from the quay at Gloucester to Cheltenham. The tramway remained for some years before being purchased by a railway company in 1840. When the horse-drawn trams were replaced by steam trains the journey was reduced to 16 minutes. Passengers spoke of the views being delightful especially as Chosen Hill was in sight for most of the way. A deep cutting had to be dug across Pirton and Parton lanes and the soil moved along to form a raised embankment. Cheltenham Halt was established in 1842 but a fully-fledged station to pick up and set down passengers did not come available until 1874 which lasted until 1967.

During 1880-90 a major scheme for improving St Bartholomew’s Church and its approaches was put in hand. This arrived not before time because the building had become badly affected by damp and decay. There was also the deterioration of its access road that became so overgrown with thorns and briars that worshippers had to make their way to services by climbing a steep field. It was particularly difficult when carrying coffins. A suggestion that St Bartholomew’s should be abandoned altogether instead of throwing good money at a worn-out building was rejected. The situation improved a little when the road was repaired and gravelled in 1883, but it was not until the new century that plans for a new church at the foot of Chosen Hill were to come to fruition.

On St Andrew’s Day (30th November) 1901 a parish meeting was held to discuss the new church building. Funds from the diocese were immediately boosted by local donors. For generations they had been saying that the church on the hill was too old, too small and too difficult for the aged and infirm to reach. In the following year yet more funds were forthcoming and the foundation stone for St Andrew’s was laid in July. It was consecrated in April 1904 though, with the Bishop being unwell, full consecration was not until November 1905. By St Andrew’s Day two years later the building committee reported, ‘all costs had been met and all accounts settled’. It is interesting to note that at the same time there was a tea garden and golf course nearby – both popular places for locals as well as visitors.

What of St Bartholomew’s Church at the top of the hill? Many of the faithful continued going to it and maintaining its structure. The graveyard was kept cleared. Services tended to be special, rather than regular ones, like baptisms, marriages and funerals. Such was the scene up to the First World War. An entry in the Churchdown parish council meeting, typical of British understatement, reads, ‘The Great War broke out on 4th August 1914 and this has more or less interfered with everything’. One result was that German prisoners were brought to the village to help with farming and road-mending. These, it is recorded, caused no trouble being happy to have left the horrors of trench warfare. After long and weary years for the village, after digging for victory, forming a defence corps and coping with the deaths of so many young men it came as a profound relief when the peace treaty was signed and a bonfire lit on Chosen Hill.
Between the First and Second World Wars more repairs were needed for the footings and fabric of St Bartholomew’s Church. At first it seemed as if the cost was more than the parish could raise but within a short time a large number of donations were received which covered the foundations and tower, roofs and walls, windows and interiors. It is reported that the bishop himself tramped up the hill to inspect the good work. His comments sound like misgivings. He said, “Its appearance is more picturesque than decent and the services more occasional than regular”. Even so many villagers wanted services, also to be buried on Chosen Hill, and a local man gave land up there as an extension to the graveyard.

During the 1930s another factor in the life of St Bartholomew’s became evident. For years its bells had regularly rung out over Churchdown but these increasingly needed attention and even a replacement. An appeal was launched in 1933 because, by then, only one bell could be rung safely. Again, many subscribed. The necessary work was done, a re-dedication of the old bells and the blessing of a new treble took place in October of that year. The Misses Auden, relatives of the poet, gave the village its new bell. Later over 5000 changes were rung in celebration. In the same year it was obvious that Churchdown parishioners at the lower ends of Pirton and Parton Lanes (now Roads) needed their own church. In consequence a freehold site was purchased by the Gloucester to Cheltenham Road and a mission hall originally built.

In 1937 a major construction project began at the top of Chosen Hill. This was the building of three reservoirs so that a head of water became available for the whole district. To begin with the road had to be widened and surfaced to take heavy lorries. The excavation work which followed obliterated centuries of archaeological evidence as well as old marl diggings. Eventually the reservoirs were completed and the water controls housed in nearby stone huts. This was done as the threat of another war drew closer. Although a semi-rural area, Churchdown would suffer because of being sandwiched between two shadow factories – Gloucester Aircraft and Rotol Propellers. German air raids were made to get at them, about 100 bombs fell in the area and notably Hurrans was hit.

Despite it being wartime, in 1941-2 Churchdown was subjected to a major civil engineering project. The railway line through the parish needed widening to cope with increased traffic. In effect this tended to cut off the upper from the lower end of the village. Despite the disruptions of war and the work on the railway, local farmers were recorded as producing a huge increase in food. They were helped in many interesting ways. For example schoolchildren collected wild rose hips as being a valuable source of Vitamin C and Gloucestershire was the country’s top county in the weight of hips gathered. This time the war brought Italian instead of German prisoners to work on Churchdown farms and roads. Official reports tell us that they provided ‘a romantic lure’ for the local girls. Other conditions recorded was how, despite the new reservoirs on the top of Chosen Hill, fresh water had to be conserved and the depths of baths restricted to a few inches. Fuel too was precious. There was no heating in St Andrew’s at the foot of the hill and few services on top of it at St Bartholomew’s.

During the Second World War members of the Churchdown Home guard were attached to the Signal Section. St Bartholomew’s served as a signal station and from its tower messages were relayed to other units both in the Severn Valley and on the Cotswold Escarpment. At
first this was done by lamps later replaced first by field telephones and then wireless sets. When on duty at the church signallers were housed in a room below the bells. Heating and lighting were by paraffin lamps and burners as there was, as yet, no electricity. By day they usually looked out at a black smoke screen over the vale with anti-aircraft balloons above that. The final months of war muted Churchdown’s victory celebrations. The parish council decided to mark VE Day with a Thanksgiving Service on Parton Court Field and it was agreed they go it just right.

The main events in post-war Churchdown included the building of two new schools which were enlarged and updated. Similarly medical care was transferred from doctors’ own houses to a medical centre in St John’s Avenue. Religious congregations also required larger places of worship. The Anglican mission hall at the foot of Parton Road was replaced by a church and vicarage in 1958 while Catholics moved from a room in Sandycroft Community Centre first to a converted farm barn (1955) and later to a permanent church (1992). St Andrew’s went through a series of improvements. St Bartholomew’s had electricity installed in 1953 and the old organ from 1925 replaced by a new one in 1967. Despite these the church council wondered about more expensive work being done and once more costs were met by private gifts. An illuminated cross was mounted on the building due to another anonymous donor in 1988. Every Good Friday, members of all the Churchdown religions come together to carry a cross from the Catholic Church on the Gloucester to Cheltenham Road along to nearby St John’s then to St Andrew’s, half way up the slope, and finally to St Bartholomew’s at the top of Chosen Hill.

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