

A Short Guide to Liston Church

The Parish

In relation to its neighbours, the parish of Liston is small, and its medieval church, though listed Grade 1, appears to lack distinction: it has not the magnificence of Long Melford, nor the Victorian exuberance of the tower at Foxearth, nor anything like the imposing Waldegrave monument at Borley. However, despite the size of the parish, the history of Liston and its church illustrates many of the political, social, and architectural developments in England since the Conquest.

The name of the parish is Anglo-Saxon, perhaps from *Lissa's tun* (settlement of Lissa) and is recorded as *Listuna* in the *Domesday Book*, when its three manors (Liston Overhall, Liston Netherhall, and Liston Weston) were in the hands of three different men, at least one of whom had fought with William the Conqueror.

The principal family in the parish was de Liston from the mid-twelfth century until 1374, in which year Thomas de Liston granted Liston Overhall to Richard Lyons, a wealthy merchant, M.P., and sometime Sheriff of London. Lyons was beheaded in London by Wat Tyler in June 1381; but two days before that event, William Wrawe, a notorious leader of the Peasant's Revolt in south Suffolk, sacked Lyons' hall in Liston and used the parish as a gathering place for his forces and subsequent armed excursions to Cavendish and Bury.

During the following century, representatives of various important families – Alice Neville, the Earl of March, Sir Hugh de Segrave, and Sir John Say – were proprietors in Liston, and then in 1497 lordship of the manor passed to William Clopton, second son of Sir William Clopton of Kentwell Hall and grandson of Thomas Clopton, who was primarily responsible for the rebuilding of Long Melford church in the latter half of the fifteenth century.

The Clopton family remained the major figures in Liston until 1745, when William Campbell, brother of the Duke of Argyll, became the lord of the manor and built a new hall in one of the prevailing styles for grand houses, a square central block with curved wings projecting from both the principal and garden fronts. This family (later Campbell Lambert) remained lords of the manor until the late twentieth century.

Agriculture and the processing of agricultural products have always been the principal occupations in Liston. A mill is mentioned in

the *Domesday Book*; but in addition to the corn mill, which was a feature of almost every village on the Stour, Liston had a paper mill from the eighteenth century onwards. This became a flax mill in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and at the end of the century gave way to the factory of Stafford Allen & Sons, millers of locally grown and imported herbs and spices. By the 1920s this business was international, and by the 1980s the Bush Boake Allen Company, as it had become, held the largest collection of spices in Britain.

The end of the nineteenth century saw a population peak for Liston, when 130 people lived in the parish. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, all this had changed. The corn mill was demolished in 1887 (the very attractive Mill House remains on the lane from Liston to Long Melford). The spice factory closed in 2002. Lyston Hall was largely demolished in 1951, and no Campbell Lambert now lives in the parish. At present, the population of Liston is about fifty, a return to the level of the early sixteenth century.

The Church

Families, buildings, industries rise and fall, but the church in Liston has endured. The precise age of the building is uncertain: a charter of 1087 refers to an existing church in Liston, whereas architectural scholars date the earliest work in the present building to the early twelfth century.

As is the case at the neighbouring church at Borley, no dedication for the church is known, though here too there are grounds for uncertainty: in 1893 a local newspaper reported that the marriage of Annie Elizabeth Campbell Lambert took place in "the picturesque little village church of St. Catherine's Lyston," and one of the church's two bells is dedicated to St. Katherine.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that despite vicissitudes and alterations during the nine hundred years since its foundation, Liston church still serves as the spiritual and social centre of the parish.

Against the relative plainness of its flint rubble walls and red-tiled roof (whose subtle variations of colour and texture have a subdued beauty), the most immediately obvious features of the exterior of the church are the additions to the ancient fabric.

The handsome west tower, deemed a fine example of sixteenth-century brickwork, has a distinctive continuous band of trefoiled

corbels, surmounted by stepped battlements and, on the northeast corner, a stair turret higher than the rest of the tower.

The south porch and the vestry on the north side of the building (both of coursed flint cobbles) and the Palmer Chapel on the southeast (of finely-coursed knapped flint) were all designed by Henry Woodyer and constructed in 1867. Woodyer, who largely rebuilt Lyston Hall following a fire in 1870, practiced extensively in Essex, including work at Castle Hedingham, Felsted, Stebbing, Twinstead, and the west tower at Foxearth. Among the exterior features, only the small blocked north doorway, with its round arch and lintel decorated with foliage and chevrons, clearly indicates the antiquity of the building.

The sixteenth-century south door opens into the aisleless Norman nave. Ahead is the Norman chancel, which was widened in the thirteenth century to the dimensions of the nave. The chancel arch that separated these two compartments was removed in the middle ages, and all the windows in the nave and chancel have been altered over the centuries.

The present wooden chancel screen and all the decoration on the east wall, including the stone reredos, the painted figures, and the geometrical pattern with its red glass bosses, were designed by Woodyer. Viewed close at hand in the light of day, Woodyer's work and the undistinguished window it surrounds might seem "typically Victorian" in the most negative sense in which that phrase is sometimes used. Viewed at night through the chancel screen, illuminated by candlelight, the composition is lovely.

The organ, a Georgian instrument formerly at Lyston Hall, was possibly the gift of Georg Friederich Handel. From the solid oak chancel ceiling of about 1500 four well-carved canopied figures look down; each holds a shield and wears a simple crown surmounted by a trefoil, but their identity and significance are unknown. The nave ceiling is 20thC. The date and initials in the plasterwork above the chancel screen commemorate work on an earlier ceiling.

The Palmer Chapel is "typically Victorian" in the more positive sense. The floor is handsomely tiled and has a striking raised cross in its center. The east wall has two flowing annunciatory angels painted above an ornamented arch, which is flanked by long Biblical passages curiously composed of multi-coloured lettering on strips of stone. In general, the stained glass and the chapel's other decorative elements harmonize more effectively than do those in the chancel.

Because there is relatively little light in the chapel even on bright days, it can be difficult to read the two plaques on the south

wall. The plaque on the left commemorates Sir Ralph Palmer, who died in 1838 and is buried at Nazing. The plaque on the right commemorates Margaret Eliza Palmer, who died in 1867 and for whom this mortuary and memorial chapel was built by her children.

Two other memorials, both in the nave, merit special attention. The most elaborate is the Baroque monument to Dr. Poley Clopton, who died in 1730. He had posts at Queen's College, Cambridge, and was a physician in Bury. In his will he left land in Foxearth, Liston, and Stisted to endow an almshouse in the cathedral precincts in Bury for six old men and six old women.

The most touching monument is a marble plaque set in a piscina (a recess for washing communion vessels) adjacent to the entrance to the Palmer Chapel. One cost of empire was the death of loved ones far from home, in this case two related families and their children's nurses, who were killed during the Indian Mutiny in June and July 1857.

All of the stained glass windows in the body of the church contain dedications and are thus another form of memorial. The following information about the glass is taken from Bettley and Pevsner's volume on Essex in *The Buildings of England* series:

- East window, 1864, probably by Hardman and Co.
- South chancel window, 1873, by Powell and Sons,
designed by Henry Holiday
- South nave window, 1869, by Lavers, Barraud, and Westlake
- North nave window, 1932, by C. E. Kempe and Co.,
with fragments of fifteenth-century glass above
- West window, 1927, by C. E. Kempe and Co.

The font, at the base of the tower, is fifteenth century. The Commandment boards are eighteenth century. The painting of the Holy Family is by Dorothy Morton.

The tower itself has three levels: the first is the ringing chamber, now the haunt of bats; the second is the bell chamber, where there are two bells, one probably made by Reignold Chirche in the fifteenth century and inscribed "Sancta Katerina Ora Pro Nobis" and the other made by Miles Graye in 1675; the third level is the platform at the top of the tower, which gives superb views of the surrounding countryside. A cautionary note, however: the steps up the tower are steep and very narrow, suitable only for the sure of foot and brave of heart.