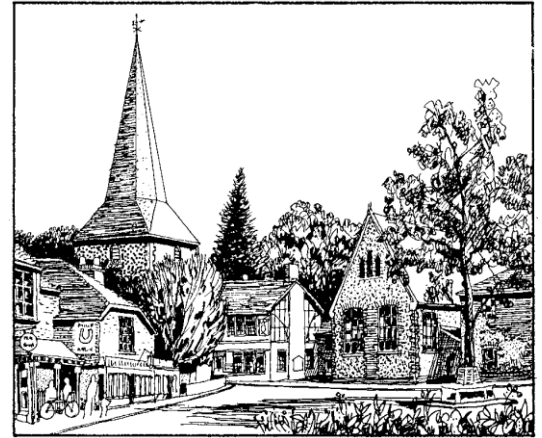


Welcome to Downe Church

Historical Background

Precise dates for anything to do with the early history of Downe are hard to come by. The village is not mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 but the land on which it stood was known to have been part of the Manor of Great Orpington. This was held by the Archbishops of Canterbury and later transferred to the Bishop of Rochester.



What is certain is that Christian worship has taken place on this spot at least since 1291 when Prior Henry of Christchurch, Canterbury, decided that a chapel was needed in his manor of Orpington. This unostentatious building, erected at a cost of £60 0s 11d was the precursor of the present church in Downe. It would have been constructed from the local flint and built without aisles, vestry or porch and probably without a tower. Light would be provided by small narrow windows. There was no seating, worshippers would stand or kneel on a floor of beaten earth.

There is some doubt as to the dedication of the church. It has usually been referred to as St. Mary the Virgin but originally may have been dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene. The will of Thomas Fryth, made in 1492, refers to it by that name.

The Building

The building today is medieval and is listed Grade II. During the fifteenth century much of the work of the previous centuries was in need of renewal. The north wall is thought to have been rebuilt with a plinth and buttresses and the tower was either built at this time or repaired and strengthened with buttresses. The crown post oak roof which runs continuously over the nave and chancel belongs to this period. The windows, with one exception, were enlarged during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and, although they have undergone subsequent restorations, some of the original Kentish ragstone can still be seen in the window heads.

The Victorian restoration carried out during the incumbency of the Reverend George Ffinden was based on designs prepared by Joseph Clarke RIBA, who had considerable knowledge and experience of church architecture. The work was overseen by the less well known Daniel Bell, a painter and worker in stained glass. Several parts of the church including the south door, the porch and the north window of the chancel were made new. A vestry, extended in 1903-4. was added. Steps were made in the chancel and disturbance to the whole of the floor resulted in extensive repairs being needed in the 1990s.

In August 1944 a flying bomb landed opposite the east end of the church causing considerable damage. The east window was all but destroyed, stonework and wall plaster damaged and the north-east side of the tower impaired. Rubble was piled up in the chancel and tarpaulins, which blew off in high winds, placed over the roof. Owing to the shortage of materials which continued for several years after the war ended repairs were not completed until 1950.

The South Wall

The narrow Early English lancet window next to the door and the wall which runs between it and the next window on the south side are the oldest parts of the fabric of the church. In Tudor times the other windows were enlarged. Further work was done during the Victorian restoration.

The stained glass in the Tree of Jesse window dates from 1986. Given by Mary Knox-Johnston in memory of her husband it is the work of Keith Coleborn, a talented and respected artist who lived for many years in the village. His design uses foliage to represent the Tree of Jesse and doves the relationships of God to man, man to God and man to man. The Chi Rho (Christ the King) symbol, repeated for the sake of balance, denotes the divinity of Jesus and the names of those in His family tree are used as a surround to the whole.

The Chancel

The east window was installed in 1950, at a cost of £720 which was met by the War Damage Commission. It is the work of Evie Hone (1894-1955), an Irish Catholic artist of international repute both in painting and stained glass. Winner of a competition to design the window her work was highly regarded by Robin Darwin, (the great-grandson of Charles), who was at that time Principal of the Royal College of Art.

The window depicts the crucified Christ between His mother and John the beloved disciple. The four lights above show the evening of Peter's denial, the instruments of scourging and mockery, Judas Iscariot's betrayal and the crucifixion.

The organ was given in 1920 in memory of those who died in the Great War. Until 1952 when electricity was installed in the church it was powered manually. A two manual tracker organ, it was built by Henry Willis and Sons, a company which built the organ at the Albert Hall as well as many of the great cathedral organs.

On this wall are the memorial tablets of Ellen, the wife of Sir John William Lubbock, his son, also called John William. and his widow Harriet. The son later became Lord Avebury, remembered for his introduction of Bank Holidays. (Lord Avebury is not buried in Downe.) He was a member of St. Mary's until a sermon denouncing the theories of his great friend Charles Darwin caused him to leave the church and worship elsewhere.

The window at the east end of the south wall of the chancel was given by the parents of Robin Knox-Johnston in thanksgiving for his safe return after making the first solo circumnavigation of the world under sail without touching land. He left Falmouth in his yacht Suhali in June 1968, returning in April 1969 having lost wireless communication with the outside world for several weeks. His ship is represented by a white triangle. The vertical and horizontal lines, making crosses, symbolise the ever-present Holy Spirit and also refer to latitude. The constellations of the Great Bear and Southern Cross indicate the north and south hemispheres. Circumnavigation of the world is symbolised by the signs of the zodiac. This window was also designed and made by Keith Coleborn.

On the south side of the chancel floor is a black stone bearing the arms and motto of the Manning family, perhaps the most notable family in Downe from medieval times until the early seventeenth century. Beneath the stone lie the remains of the twenty year old Edward Manning who "emigrated to the celestial country" in 1622. He had been page to Prince Charles who in 1625 became King Charles I. On the north side of the floor is the indent for a large brass which has been removed and set on the west end of the north wall of the church. It commemorates Jacob Verzelini, a Venetian glassmaker about whom there is so much that can be said that he warrants separate information on our website.

The Nave

There are two small brasses on the floor of the nave, both of which are damaged. One commemorates Thomas Petle and his wife Isabella. It is undated but belongs to the fifteenth century. The Petleys, as they were later spelt, were a numerous and important family in Downe and their name is still in use for a house and farm. The other brass, from which the female figure is missing, is that of John Manning, who died in 1543, and his wife Agnes.

Just inside the south door is a black floor stone marking the grave of Richard Sandys of Downe Hall. The Sandys were a distinguished family. Richard's grandfather had been an Archbishop of York and his father, Sir Edwin, a notable member of Parliament and man of letters. Richard, his third son, was a colonel in the Parliamentary army during the Civil War.

In 1990 work began on a new heating system and a trench was made along the north side of the nave. Bones and a skull were unearthed. The skull was found to be about three hundred years old and was of insufficient depth to accommodate a brain of normal size.

The following year the burial place of John Berenden who died in 1445 was discovered. The inscription was unreadable but a copy of it made at some date between 1790 and 1805 tells us that he was "one time draper and chamberlain of London." What it does not explain is why he was buried in Downe.

The North Wall

The stained glass panel in the window nearest to the pulpit was inserted in 1981. It is a copy by Freda Coleborn of a piece from the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Dijon which is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It shows a servant of the Duke of Burgundy offering a cup of wine to his master.

Halfway along the wall can be seen the blocked up north doorway. It appears to have been of unusually low height but this is because the floor of the nave was raised during the Victorian restoration.. In front of the doorway is a board listing the ministers of Downe from 1585 to the present day. No records are known to exist of the Catholic ministers who served the church before the Reformation. Downe must have had its share of difficulties during the religious and political upheavals of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It would seem that no minister was appointed between Nicholas Peerson in 1589 and Thomas Emerson fifty four years later. Each of the three ministers who followed him were likely to have been sympathetic to the Parliamentary cause. In the eighteenth century Downe was a curacy of Hayes and did not have its own vicar until 1841.

The Reverend John Brodie-Innes was a great friend of Charles Darwin despite their widely differing views. He was said by Darwin to be "one of those rare mortals from whom one can differ without the least shade of animosity." He assisted Darwin in his investigations into the habits of bees and was observed by Emma Darwin as they went about the village together, "wonderful figures in their bee dresses with white veils on their hats."

In 1976 Downe joined with the neighbouring village of Cudham to form a United Benefice.

The Tower and Spire

The arch leading to the tower belongs to the Perpendicular period. The glass screen and doorway was dedicated in 1982 by the then Bishop of Rochester, the Rt. Reverend David Say.

The earliest written reference to the tower is in an inventory of 1552 when there were "three bells of brass suted in the steeple." Two of these bells were already over a hundred years old, having been cast by William Dawe(s) who worked between 1385 and 1418. The other, by a different maker, dates from 1511. Only five churches in Kent have bells hung for change ringing which are older than these three at Downe.

Three more bells were added in 1903, one to commemorate the coronation of King Edward VII. The Millennium was rung in on the night of December 30th/January 1st 2000 by a band of local ringers.

In 1878 a “handsome” west window and a clock were installed in the church. The window was the gift of John Teesdale who lived at Downe Hall. Depicting Christ as the Good Shepherd it is the work of Daniel Bell (1840-1904) and is the oldest stained glass in the church. Daniel was the younger brother of the better-known Alfred Bell. Although not an architect he was in part responsible for the restoration of the church which took place in Victorian times.

Extract from the Churchwarden’s accounts of 1713

Paid for the ringers one Gonpowder treason 2s 6d (12p)

(The following year King George I landed at Greenwich

From Hanover. The ringers were paid twice as much.)

The Font

This is thought to have been local work produced sometime in the fifteenth or early sixteenth century. It is of Purbeck marble on a Kentish ragstone moulded plinth. At some time it has been damaged but there are no known records of when or why this occurred.

On 30th November 1559 Margaret, daughter of Henry Manning, was baptised “after ye Queenes visitation”. We like to think that this denotes the presence of Queen Elizabeth I in Downe, but so far no other reference to such a momentous event in the life of the village has been found. Margaret’s father was a man of some standing, being Master of the Household to Elizabeth I. He had also held the same position under three other Tudor monarchs, Henry VIII, Edward VI and Queen Mary.

Extracts from the register of Baptisms

1829 17th April FRANCIS Caroline d. of William and Mary.

Mendicants, lodging in the barn at Farthing Street.

1844 12th May LUBBOCK Frederic s. of John William and Harriet. Baronet, of High Elms.

1847 10th Oct. DARWIN Elizabeth d. of Charles Robert and Emma. Esquire (sic)

The Churchyards

The yew tree is classified as ancient/excellent by the Ancient Yew Group and is one of only 40 such trees in Britain.

The grave of some of Darwin’s children is on the west of the path. His daughter Annie is buried at Malvern where she was receiving treatment for her illness. Emma Darwin and Charles’ brother Erasmus are buried near the road on the east side of the churchyard. Darwin is interred at Westminster Abbey and Downe’s memorial to him, a sundial, can be seen on the south wall of the tower. Joseph Parslow, Darwin’s friend and servant lies at the edge of the churchyard near the white weather-boarded house.

By the churchyard wall near the bus stop a head stone marks the place where James Fontaine is buried. This young man, a Christian minister, came to a sad end. “Thursday saw him cheerful and grateful for health, Saturday August 6th 1825 a pale corpse.” He was however able to utter a “compendious sermon” before departing.

In May 1897 the churchyard was closed for burials and a new burial ground in High Elms Road came into use, which can be found by turning left outside the church, following the road to the lych gate.

The Records

In 1538 Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII 's Vicar General for church affairs, issued an order that the "day and yere of every weddyng christening and burial" which took place in a parish should be recorded by its minister.

Many of these records were haphazardly kept on loose sheets of paper and in 1603 an injunction that copies, beginning no later than 1558, should be made on to parchment was issued. Downe's copies were very likely made by Nicholas Peerson, who began his ministry here in 1589. They date from 1538, making Downe one of the ten parishes in the Rochester Diocese which can boast records as old as these. There are gaps, notably between 1640 and 1672, in which year Philip Jones was appointed and the registers were again properly kept.

The original registers are held in Bromley Local Studies Library. The Church has typed transcripts and also records of burials in the High Elms Road Churchyard which may be seen on application to Sue King. For any enquiries please complete the enquiry form on the 'Contact Us' page.

Living Stones

Christians have been worshipping on the site of St Mary's, Downe for at least the last 700 years, and there is still a lively worshipping community today. St Mary's Downe is more than just an historic building. If our churches were merely ancient buildings which needed to be cared for, they would be little more than museums. There is certainly a historical element to our existence here - but we are here as a Church which lives in the present and looks to the future.

As the Bible tells us, the Church is primarily not a building but a body of people - people who relate together as the Body of Christ. The window at the east end of the Church shows the reason why this church is here. Jesus died on a cross in order that whoever puts their faith in him can know the blessings of eternal life.

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