

The church of Thomas à Becket, Widcombe is believed to be the oldest parish church in Bath and stands on what has been a consecrated site for over 1,000 years. A Saxon chapel existed before the Norman church, which was dedicated to the memory of Thomas à Becket, and probably dated from about the time of his martyrdom, 20 Dec 1170. The present church was built between 1490 and 1498 by John Cantlow, Prior of Bath Abbey.

From 1263 St Thomas à Becket had been attached to the vicarage of St Mary Stalls in Bath, at the corner of Cheap Street and Stall Street. After the Reformation, the city decided to amalgamate its small parishes to create one overall parish, of which the Abbey would be the new parish church. The parishioners of St Thomas à Becket resisted the proposal that their chapel be closed while they went to worship in the Abbey and it survived. So also did St Michael's Without in Broad Street and St James' by the South Gate, at first as curacies, later elevated in status. (St James', damaged by bombing, was demolished.)

The chancel was repaired in 1746 when the east window was blocked up. In 1748, a gallery was added on the north side, the cost being borne by Ralph Allen as he wished to provide extra accommodation for his workpeople employed in his Combe Down quarries and on the wharf at Dolemeads. In 1842, another gallery was placed at the west end, blocking the tower arch.

The church can seat only about 100 people and the increase in the population of Widcombe and Lyncombe at the beginning of the 19th century led to the establishment of new churches in the parish: St Mark's, Lyncombe in 1832, St Matthew's, Widcombe in 1847 and St Luke's, South Lyncombe, in 1867, St Bartholomew's, West Lyncombe in 1938 and St Philip & St James, Odd Down in 1958.

In 1861, the existence of St Thomas à Becket church was again in jeopardy. At that time it needed extensive repairs and the then Vicar, fearful of the expense both at the time and for the future, suggested the church be closed. Once more the parishioners protested and a restoration fund was set up. The restoration was undertaken to plans by Major Charles Edward Davis (1827-1902), then City Surveyor of Works: the galleries were removed, the east window uncovered, and both this and other windows fitted with stained glass, including some dedicated to members of Major Davis's family.

Cemeteries

There are four cemeteries for the parish:

- 1 the churchyard of St Thomas à Becket
- 2 the graveyard in Church Lane, referred to as the 'bowling alley' (its original use) and now known as the 'old burial ground'
- 3 the graveyard by St Mark's church which opened in 1825 and predates St Mark's church



View of the church's tower



Memorials on the southern wall.



Memorials on the northern wall.

4 the cemetery on the Lower Bristol Road which opened in 1861.

There is also a small graveyard at St Mary Magdalen Chapel, Holloway. Burials occurring here were entered into the register for St Thomas à Becket with an annotation about the location.

For the period 1825-1843 entries in the St Thomas à Becket burial register are for any of the first three graveyards and St Mary Magdalen. The burial order books which would indicate who was buried where have not been found. Where a burial can be ascribed to a particular graveyard because of a surviving memorial or an annotation in the burial register, this is shown in the notes against the burial register entries.

The surviving memorials in the two graveyards at the church are being documented.



Locations of the first two churchyards



Eastern section of the first churchyard



The 'Bowling Alley'

References

The Unification of the Churches 1583 by Dr John Wroughton in *Tudor Bath: Life and Strife in the 'Little City' 1485-1603* The Lansdown Press, 2006. (For St Thomas à Becket see p 84.)

Further Reading

Guides to the church were produced by William Hammon Devenish, who was churchwarden in the period 1918-1925, in 1919 and they went through a series of editions over the following decades. For further information see <http://www.widcombebenefice.org.uk/churches.html>

Transcript of the Registers of St Thomas à Becket, The Parish Church of Lyncombe & Widcombe 1813-1840, E S Jenkins, 1983. (Copy at Bath Record Office.)

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