

# The Church of St John the Baptist, Cockayne Hatley

## HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE AND CHURCH

By By Dr A Crossley



### The Village

Cockayne Hatley is a tiny village of about 140 inhabitants on a by-road linking Potton and Wrestlingworth and much of its charm is due to its isolated position. (The visitor is warned that Cockayne Hatley has neither pub nor shop!)

To the north, Potton Wood and Cockayne Hatley Wood provide a beautiful backdrop for the Church, while to the south there is a fine view over rolling countryside to the hills of north Hertfordshire. The village lies in the extreme east of Bedfordshire and is separated by the Cambridgeshire border from its neighbours East Hatley and Hatley St George.

The name Hatley suggests that the village was originally a Saxon settlement, and references to it are found in documents of the tenth century. One explanation of the place-name is that Hatley was the clearing on the hill (known fancifully as the Hat) while Potton was the town in the hollow (or Pot) and, descending the steep hill towards Potton, one is aware of how appropriate such names are. Corn, oil-seed rape and, linseed are now the main crops of this exclusively agricultural parish and have displaced the orchards which, until some twenty years ago, were the dominant feature of the landscape. Indeed, the sight of the orchards in blossom led some to describe the village as a "land of Cockaigne".

The village name derives, in fact, from the Cockayne family, who acquired the manor in 1417 and held it in unbroken line until 1745 when it passed to the Custs (a family related by marriage) who sold the estate in the late nineteenth century. At that time it was a fine country mansion surrounded by parkland studded with noble oaks. A decline set in after the First World War and in 1931 the manor house (known as The Hall) was severely damaged by fire.

Meanwhile, a remarkable enterprise had filled the parkland with old London buses which served as unconventional henhouses. This was succeeded by Coxes Orange Pippins Orchards, under whose auspices the greater part of the parish was given over to orchards. The land was purchased by the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in 1946, since when most of the houses on the estate have been sold to private owners. Most of the houses in the village line a winding road which now peters out into a farm track but which is a vestige of the former road system joining the village to Tadlow and East Hatley; some of the route can be followed by taking the Clopton Way footpath.

The oldest building in the village is a former farm house now known as **The Well House** and believed to date from 1707.

The Victorian age is represented in the solidity of the former Rectory, Village Farm, and some of the outlying houses. The house known as Orchard View was once a laundry which served The Hall, itself a largely Victorian building, much altered over the years.

The Hall and Church lie in fields somewhat away from the village and are approached by footpaths. The Church, which is dedicated to St John the Baptist, is the chief glory of the village and also the focus of the social life of the community: on occasions such as the Patronal Festival (24 June), the Harvest Festival and the Carol Service, flowers and decorations enhance its beauty.

### **The Building & Restoration of the Church of St John the Baptist**

The Church is first recorded as one of the fourteen churches that formed part of the original endowment of Newnham Priory, Bedford, founded in 1166. When Newnham Priory was dissolved the rectory became crown property but by 1595 had been transferred to the Lord of Cockayne Hatley manor.

The benefice, now in the gift of the Lord Chancellor, was linked with that of Potton in 1931. The Church consists of a chancel 19 ft 6 in by 16 ft 3 in, nave 36 ft by 18 ft, with north aisle 5 ft 9 in wide and south aisle 6 ft wide, and west tower 12 ft 8 in by 13 ft 4 in (all internal measurements). Owing to successive re-buildings, the plan is rather irregular, the chancel, nave and tower all being set at different angles, and only the tower being rectangular on plan.

The earliest part of the Church now existing is the north arcade of the nave, belonging to the latter part of the thirteenth century, and the north aisle probably retains its thirteenth-century width. The Chancel seems to have been rebuilt in the early part of the fourteenth century. Later in that century a south aisle was added. The tower was built early in the fifteenth century.

Later in the fifteenth century the south aisle was lengthened eastward, and a south porch was added.

After the death of Samuel Cockayne in 1745 there was for many years no squire in residence and it was not surprising that Henry Cockayne Cust (who became both Squire and Rector in 1806) found that the Church had fallen into a "most lamentable state of neglect". The stone of the east window had crumbled away, and on Christmas Day 1806 snow fell through the roof on to the altar during the service. Henry Cockayne Cust undertook a major restoration, which was completed by 1830. The roof of the nave was taken down and repaired and replaced. The east wall of the chancel was taken down and the chancel shortened and re-roofed. The whole of the south aisle had to be rebuilt, using the old materials. The south porch was removed, and the entrances on the south side were stopped up. The present door on the north side was opened for the convenience of the residents of The Hall, and that under the west window (now disused) for the congregation. The ornamental stonework of the old south porch was re-used in the north doorway. However, the most remarkable change wrought by Cockayne Cust was to fill the Church with the beautiful Flemish woodwork; this is described in detail below. The work of restoration continues.

Since 1987 we have raised sufficient money to have carried out the following work: Restoration of the Tower; Restoration of the exterior stonework of the nave and chancel and north and south aisles; Cleaning and restoration of the fourteenth-century stained glass window and replacement of the stone mullions and tracery; Restoration and repair of the north aisle roof; and repair of the junction of the chancel and nave roofs. In recent years many of the windows, the monumental brasses and the woodwork have been restored; details are given in the text.

### **The Exterior**

The walls are made of rubble and sandstone, as is usual in the neighbourhood, and are surmounted by battlements. The nave is higher than the chancel, and at the point of junction of the two roofs a stone arch was erected for a sanctus bell at the time of the restoration, though no bell was ever installed. The tower is in four stages and rises to a height of sixty feet. The battlements were restored in the nineteenth century and enhanced by four handsome stone pinnacles twenty feet in height. The bell-openings are a pair of very long two-light openings on each side of the tower. There are two bells, made by Mears of London in 1828. The Nave and Tower The four arches which separate the nave from the aisles differ. The north side, in Early English style, has round pillars with strong and simple capitals, while the south side has octagonal pillars. The six windows in the clerestory, each with two cinquefoiled lights, date from the latter part of the fifteenth century but contain plain nineteenth century glass.

The roof beams are supported, by ten angels holding shields with emblems of the Passion. Four of these, as well as the carved bosses in the ceiling of the tower, date from the fifteenth century and were obtained by Henry Cockayne Cust from a church in Biggleswade when a new roof was installed there; six others of slightly different design were made. In 1974 one of the angels was found to be riddled with death watch beetle and had to be replaced with a modern replica. In the centre of the oak beams are the initials of the restorer and the date of the restoration (1820). The very tall Perpendicular arch connecting the tower to the nave is a beautiful specimen of its age.

The large oaken folding doors at the base were obtained by Cockayne Cust from Louvain. The rail of the organ loft once formed part of the Communion rail at Malines. The organ pipes are painted and gilded in imitation of pipes once to be found in Kings College, Cambridge; however, they are only mock pipes, and there are no organ works.

The west window was constructed in about 1830 but some fifteenth-century glass was re-used. The centre light is occupied by a full-length figure of St Peter, copied from an ancient original. Beneath it are the armorial bearings of Cockayne Cust; the side lights are filled with various geometrical patterns. The window was restored in 1986 following storm damage. At the extreme west of the nave, by the north tower arch, there can be seen the indent of a cross, two shields and inscription; the brass has long been removed. The inscription refers to a lady of the de Brien family, lords of the manor in the early fourteenth century. Set in the wall above this is a piscina, which should properly be sited in the Chancel]; it was moved to make room for the woodwork.

The font is octagonal. It was originally quite plain, but at the time of the restoration was decorated with quatrefoils to match the adjacent windows. It was placed in the traditional position close to the door, but this is less obvious now that the south door has been stopped up.

The stalls in the nave are arranged in collegiate style facing each other, except that the two western ones face the altar. (See description of the Chancel woodwork.)

On the floor of the nave are a number of brasses, monuments to members of the Cockayne family. There is some uncertainty about the identity and positioning of these brasses. At the west end of the nave (near the tower) is a brass to William Cockayne, who died in 1527, with his first wife Dorothy and his second wife Catherine; there is an inscription recording this. There are also two sets of children, five sons and five daughters, but it is thought that these may date from about 1430 and belong with the next brass in the nave. This is the brass of a man in armour of about 1430, once supposed to be Sir John Cockayne, Chief Baron of the Exchequer and the first of the family to own the estate; it is possibly in fact his brother. The brass of the

lady beside him dates from about 1480 and may be that of the wife of a later John Cockayne who died in 1490. There is a Latin inscription which means "Whoever thou art who passeth over, stand, read carefully, weep". There are also brasses of children in this group. The three boys below the man date from about 1525 and may belong with the brass of William Cockayne; the two sons and one daughter (the upper part is lost) below the woman date from about 1480 and may have been her children. The brass to a man and his wife at the chancel end of the nave is to Edmond Cockayne, who died in 1515, and his wife Elizabeth; also represented are their twelve sons and four daughters, and the shield. Nearby, on the south side of the chancel arch, a plaque commemorates two men of the village who lost their lives in the Great War.

### **The Chancel**

The chancel was originally of greater length, with two windows on each side which did not correspond in design. This was shortened in the nineteenth century restoration, the eastern wall being set on a new foundation, with an entirely new window.

There are eight stalls, ending at the Communion rail, but the carved woodwork extends nearly the whole length of the chancel, and consists of sixteen carved medallions in oak, representing the busts of some of the most distinguished of the later saints and writers of the Roman Catholic Church. Each bust is surrounded by a wreath of foliage and fruits, in the style of the later renaissance, most elaborately carved; each compartment has a different design. Between each compartment are angels holding the instruments of the Passion. The remaining sixteen stalls were placed in the nave. The backs of the stalls are ornamented by different patterns inlaid in black wood. All the stalls have tip-up seats with misericords. This woodwork is unique of its kind in this country. It was bought by Cockayne Cust from a dealer in Charleroi and was long believed to come from the Abbey d'Aulne; it is now known to have come from the nearby Abbey of Oignies, ruined in the French invasion of Flanders. Its original date, 1689, together with the arms of the Abbey, is recorded on two of the stalls (the first to the right and left as you enter the chancel) and on the woodwork connecting the chancel with the nave is recorded the date of their re-erection in Cockayne Hatley, 1826, together with the arms of Cockayne Cust. The Communion rail was purchased from a church at Malines. It is about two feet high and consists of four oak compartments with carved representations typical of the Holy Sacrament. Infant forms are seen (left to right) obtaining water from the rock; harvesting, to symbolise the bread; gathering the grapes, to symbolise the wine; and gathering manna.

The chairs are facsimiles of the well-known Glastonbury chair, and were presented to the Church by the brother and sons of Cockayne Cust.

Surrounding the window are woodwork tablets containing, in Old English letters on a gold background, the text of the ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. Over the table are the words "The Law was given by Moses ... Grace and Truth come by Jesus Christ".

The Communion Table itself is in carved oak of Renaissance style, but, nothing is known of its history; it was purchased in London in the nineteenth century. Within the Communion rail are four slabs of blackstone, all of the eighteenth century, to the memory of the last four members of the Cockayne family to be buried in the Church.

On the north wall is a memorial to Henry Cockayne Cust, who died in 1861; the text pays tribute to his work in restoring the Church.

The front of the lectern (to the left as you enter the chancel) is made from a panel with a figure of St Andrew. This was originally part of the sounding board of a pulpit in the Church, which came from the Church of St Andrew in Antwerp.

The pulpit itself is no longer in Cockayne Hatley, having been sold to Carlisle Cathedral for £500 in 1963. At the time of its removal, a large number of Flemish prayer-slips were discovered inside the pulpit: these were the petitions of the faithful of Antwerp. Facsimiles of some of these prayer slips are displayed in the Church. The Lectern Bible was presented to the Church in 1971, having come from the Chapel of Bishop's College, Cheshunt, of which the rector of the day, Canon PH Cecil, had formerly been the principal.

There are three windows in the chancel. The great east window was made in 1829 using some older glass. The three lights represent six moments in the life of Christ: the birth; dispute with the doctors; baptism; agony in the garden; crucifixion; and resurrection. In the upper compartments are allegorical representations of the four evangelists, and other devices; the highest compartment bears a shield with the emblems of the passion, and was obtained from a church in Kent. The window was restored in 1985. The two side windows in the chancel were made in 1839 and represent the armorial bearings of eight occupants of the estate: the four on the north side are of the Cockayne family and those on the south side, of the Cust family. These windows were restored in 1978. In the south wall of the chancel there is another similar window, now blocked up, and to the east of this is a small fourteenth-century priest's door, also blocked; both are visible from outside.

## **The North Aisle**

The woodwork screen separating the family pew from the rest of the Church is from the Church of St Bavon at Ghent; it is thought that the lattice work was part of a confessional.

The Church's greatest treasure in stained glass is the thirteenth-century glass in the finely-detailed Perpendicular window at the east end of the north aisle. It represents the Saxon kings Oswald of Northumbria and Edward of East Anglia, and Saints Dunstan and Sebaldu. This glass was saved from destruction in a small parish in Yorkshire by Cockayne Cust. It was restored in 1968 and again in 1992, when the stonework was also rebuilt. The other windows in the aisles, with quatrefoil lights, are later than the clerestory windows, and contain nineteenth-century glass.

On the north wall are memorials to two daughters of Henry Cockayne Cust: the wording of the memorials is typical of Victorian sentiment. There is also in the north aisle a list of the rectors of the parish, which is here given its earlier name of Hatley Port as well as the modern name. The old name also derived from the family name of the lords of the manor: the de Port family, who owned the estate in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The name Hatley Port continued to be used long after the acquisition of the manor by Sir John Cockayne.

The north doorway has a pointed arch under a square head with traceried spandrels, and four-leaf flowers in the arch and jambs.

The north aisle roof had to be completely re-built in 1993 following the discovery that the roof timbers had rotted.

### **The South Aisle**

The south aisle is rich in monuments. A number of these are to another member of the Cust family, Robert Needham Cust, and his wives and family; there is a particularly impressive memorial to his wife Maria Adelaide. Other monuments represent more recent owners of the estate: F.G Lomax, squire in the early part of this century; and the son of J.A Whitehead, whose remarkable COPO enterprise filled the parish with the orchards for which it was once famous.

The most striking monument is the one opposite the north door. Sir Patrick Hume was Master of Hounds to James VI of Scotland and followed him into England when he became James I of England. He died in 1621 and his wife, formerly Elizabeth Cockayne, erected the monument. It comprises two kneeling figures with armorial decorations. The monument now blocks the south doorway; prior to the restoration, the monument was in the north aisle.

On the west wall of the south aisle is a monument to Judith Porteous. She was the daughter of Thomas Cockayne, of the Soham branch of the family,

and was married to Robert Porteous, rector of Cockayne Hatley 1735-1754. A remarkable family tree links Robert and Judith with George Washington and the present Queen!

On the east wall of the south aisle is a painting presented to the Church in 1978 by Miss Rosemarie Cockayne, a painter who belongs to another branch of the family who once owned the estate, and who presented it as a tribute from the present to the past.

The east window of the south aisle is blocked up but may be seen from the outside to be a good fifteenth-century window of three lights with tracery.

### **The Churchyard**

The churchyard lies to the south of the Church building. The majority of the larger headstones date from the nineteenth century and mark the graves of families who held the tenancies of farms on the estate: the names of Tongue, Hart and Folbigg among others mark uniform headstones, as many as six in a row.

Two monuments are particularly striking. Near the Church stands a stone in the shape of a Celtic cross to the memory of Henry Francis Cockayne Cust, eldest son of Henry Cockayne Cust. Further off is the monument of the nineteenth-century poet and man of letters, W.E Henley. The monument had begun to lean dangerously and was re-set in 1993. Also commemorated is Henley's daughter Margaret who, being able to describe her father's friend J.M Barrie only as his "fwendy", is said to have inspired the character of Wendy in Barrie's Peter Pan. Margaret died in 1894, aged only five. Henley himself, a giant of a man who had the misfortune to have a leg amputated, was the model for Long John Silver in Treasure Island, written by his friend R.L Stevenson. However, the village has only a slight claim to fame, as neither Henley nor his daughter lived here. It was at the suggestion of Harry Cust, a great friend of Henley's that Margaret was buried at Cockayne Hatley. Henley himself died in 1903, aged 54, and was buried with his daughter.