

# DOWN MEMORY LANE

## Medieval Stewkley

### St Michael's Parish Church



1790 Engraving of Stewkley Church in the Society of Antiquaries, London

The early archaeological record for Stewkley parish 'proper' is completed by the only surviving building, St Michael and All Angels Church.

At the time of Domesday Book in 1086, Stewkley had two equal-sized manors, half a mile apart to the north and south. They each became great manorial, three-field open systems. The priory of Kenilworth also inherited a smaller manorial holding in the parish, handed down from the Normandy Coutances estate.

Built around AD 1150, Stewkley Church was gifted by the second Geoffrey de Clinton in 1170 to the prior of Kenilworth who was thus in possession of the patronages of both parish church and priory. For a scattered population of less than 300 at this time, Stewkley was to be a large and important church. It was located almost in 'no man's land' between the north and south planned settlements. In due course North End and South End coalesced by growing towards the 12th-century church built in the centre of today's modern Stewkley. These terms of distinction can be seen on historic maps and remain with us even today.

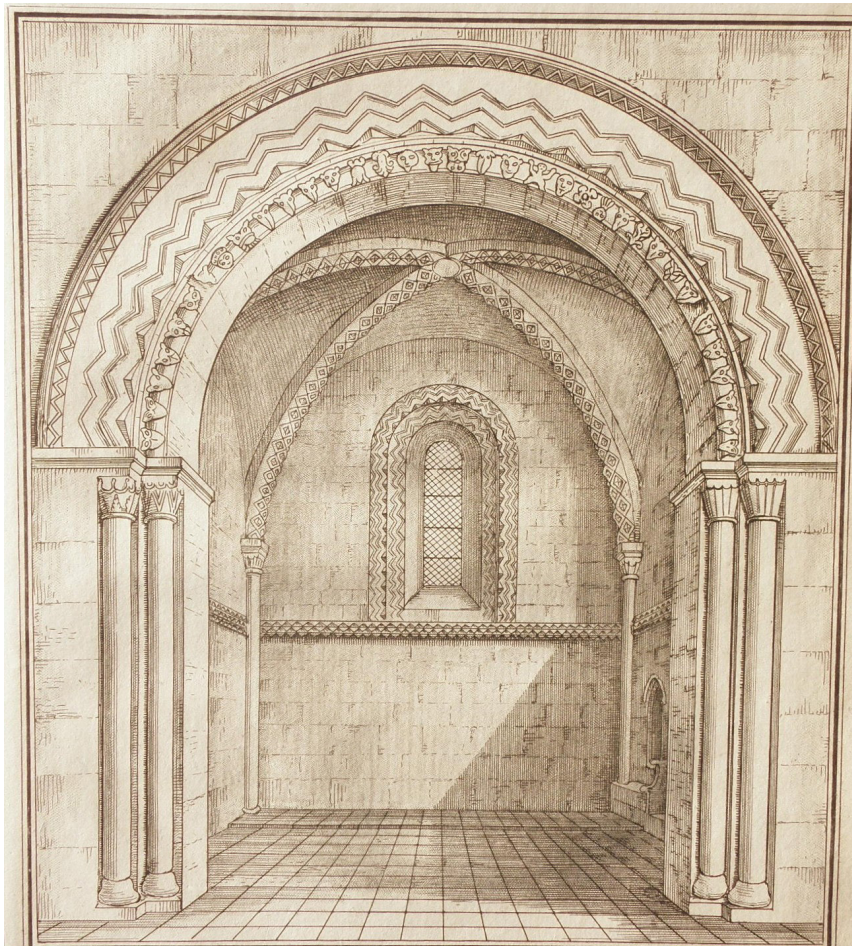
Although its manorial history remained complex throughout the medieval period, Stewkley's ecclesiastical history suggests that it only had this one early church. There is no evidence of a Saxon building on the site, or that the substantial Norman building may have replaced separate smaller places of worship in the two settlements, despite it lying conveniently on vacant ground halfway between them.

The earliest parish register of 1547 records the first vicar, Hubert de Coutances, being presented by the prior of Kenilworth in 1226.

Medieval conditions inside the church would have been grim. The ten original Norman windows are relatively small, deeply splayed and set high into the thick walls. This was likely influenced by Norman military architects as churches were still places of refuge in times of danger. Window glass was expensive and came much later, with only wooden shutters to close against the elements.

The original floors would have been beaten clay earth or lime ash with rush covering. There would have been no seating in the Nave with worshippers standing, kneeling, or sitting on the ground during services. Fortunately, these were short with very rare sermons.

The only fixture was the stone font, with a rudimentary altar in the Sanctuary with a cross and candles for the priest to read by. True evening services were unusual, evensong taking place by about 3pm, so that little light was necessary in the Nave, and was then provided by candles or rush lights. As few parishioners were literate, sufficient light was only necessary for the congregation to see their way around or to see the priest's actions in the liturgy of the eucharist during Mass. *The Grapevine Heritage Correspondent is grateful to Bucks Archaeological Society for access to archives in researching this article.*



The Chancel as it might have appeared from late Medieval times.