

# DOWN MEMORY LANE

## “Stewkley Church - a Journey Through 900 Years”

Stewkley Church quite rightly returns to the Down Memory Lane spotlight on 15 March with an illustrated talk event inside St Michael's itself. It's a fine prospect to have the star subject of the talk surround us in all its glory to respond to the telling of its historic journey by giving a good account of itself.

From the Church's very commissioning, there is no doubting the skill of its Norman builders in choosing its site 150 metres above sea level on the highest spot in the parish on the exact watershed of the Ousel and Thame River basins. The Romans had already made use of Stewkley's altitude when building a road from Dorchester-on-Thames to Alconbury traversing other nearby strategically high vantage points: Pitchcott, Whitchurch and Creslow through Stewkley and onto the Brickhills.

Stewkley Church windows are relatively small, round-headed, deeply splayed and set high into the thick Nave walls. Only 100 years after the Norman Conquest when castle building had been a priority for the invader, they were probably influenced by Norman castle builders as churches were still places of refuge in times of danger and England remained a pretty rough place in the reign of King Henry II. There was no glass available in those days with only wooden shutters to close against the elements...or maybe worse things.

The Church later suffered the indignity of having almost flat, lead-covered roofs over the Nave and Sanctuary for nearly 200 years. The roofs were reduced to a low pitch in 1684, just before the death of King Charles II. It was expedient probably because they were leaking from rainwater. Although there is no record or evidence of damage to the Church during the English Civil War and the Cromwell Commonwealth 30 years previously, the roofs are likely to have suffered neglect and been in poor shape. It was a tough time to be concerned about maintaining your roof when your village was on the front line in a war twixt the Parliamentarians in Aylesbury and Newport Pagnell, and the Royalists in the Claydons and with King Charles in Oxford.

The Church nearly suffered further indignity in Victorian times when the incumbents of the day came up against the esteemed Victorian High-Gothic architect, George Edmund Street, who had been retained to carry out the restoration and conservation of the Romanesque building in 1860. Concerned with maintaining the architectural proportions of the simple Norman parish church, Street resisted the ideas to lengthen the Nave, build an extra north aisle with vestry and to throw out transepts...with good reason as he believed transepts would endanger the integrity of the Tower walls. But why an extra aisle on the dark, damp, north side of Stewkley Church? Quite simple apparently, extra aisles were usually built on the north side of parish churches because there were fewer graves to get in the way than on the sunnier, south side of churches where villagers preferred to bury their deceased.

Largely unnoticed, mounted on the north wall of the Sanctuary is a group of 14th-century alabaster figures, found during the 1862 restoration. Thought to be part of an original reredos, they represent the Virgin Mary and Christ Child with attendant angels, and the pilgrim saint, St James the Greater. Art historian, Professor Richard Marks in his 2004 book *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England*, conjectures that this was almost certainly Stewkley's patronal image, and that St Michael's was formerly St Mary's, as represented on some antique maps of the village.

Why not come along and discover more on Friday 15 March?



St Michael's from south-west, 1862, pre G E Street restoration.



St Michael's Church West Doorway floodlit

**FROM THE GRAPEVINE 10 YEARS AGO...**

From March 2014, nothing new in global warming about 2024's early foul weather as in January-February 2014, rainstorms and high winds caused village-wide damage with rainfall exceeding records kept locally since 1997... Stewkley Rights of Way Association changed its name to Stewkley Walkers...moving obituary tributes were paid to village stalwarts Doreen Bliss (93) and Bill Chappell (87)...Stewkley Cygnets pre-school group was awarded an 'outstanding' grading by Ofsted...Stewkley Short Mat Bowls Club's annual 'Uppers and Downers' match saw victory for the 'Uppers' team from the North End of Stewkley...Stewkley Singers began rehearsals for their May concert of Haydn's *Creation*... Stewkley Players were lining up for their latest production of *The Fox on the Fairway*...and village patients, cared for by Drs Gibby and Dunford at Ashcroft Surgery in Wing, were very sad to see them both retire after a combined 60 years of service.



**FROM THE GRAPEVINE 20 YEARS AGO...**

From March 2004, burglars fled from the Rec Pavilion, disturbed by the alarm, after causing extensive entry damage but leaving behind an incriminating trainer shoe as evidence... although the 200 required village registrations were exceeded to supposedly trigger BT Openreach into reviewing Stewkley for high-speed fibre broadband, 20 years later it appears we are still waiting for full fibre broadband to premises from Openreach... in 2004 Stewkley enjoyed a plethora of local bus services: respectively three, four and five times daily to Aylesbury, Bletchley/Milton Keynes and Leighton Buzzard...Peter Noad, an active Stewkley figure and avid collector of historic village postcards, passed away...and St Michael's Church bells returned to their Tower after their conservation work at the Nottingham workshop of Hayward Mills Associates.

