

Shrivenham Church Rebuild – A Seventeenth Century Mystery

(Margaret Andrews March 2020)



St Andrew's Church Shrivenham

The fine building of St Andrew's Church that you see now dates for the most part from the seventeenth century. The exceptions are the tower which is later medieval and parts of the West end which are earlier medieval.

Rebuilding churches in the seventeenth century was not common so who organised it here and why?

There are a number of candidates none of whom we definitively say were the builder.

Lord Craven

The first and commonly held candidate is Lord Craven, the story being that he rebuilt the church in 1638 taking down and replacing all but the tower. It is also said that the dedication of the church changed at that time from St Mary to St Andrew.

To deal with the second assertion first.

The story about St Mary comes from the 14th Century with a will leaving a bequest to the “alter of St Mary” at Shrivenham.

However, a hundred years before in the 13th Century the lord of the manor of Stallpits was in dispute with the Abbot of Cirencester. This was resolved by the lord of the manor agreeing to turn up in church on the feast of St Andrew and also paying off the Abbot on that date, suggesting St Andrew was significant to the church at that time. Perhaps St Mary was a side chapel.



Lord Craven

To return to the fine cavalier, William Lord Craven. He was the son of another William. William senior came from a poor background in Yorkshire. He went to London where he made his fortune and became Lord Mayor (a latter day Dick Whittington).

With his new found wealth William senior set about buying property in Berkshire including Uffington and Ashbury together with Hampstead Marshall near Newbury which became his seat. Shrivenham did not really figure on his shopping list.

His son, William junior decided on a military career rather than going into trade In 1632 he went to Europe to fight for the dispossessed king of Bohemia Frederick V, and fell in love with his wife Elizabeth (the so called “Winter Queen”)

In 1638 he was taken prisoner (along with Prince Rupert of the Rhine) and managed to ransom himself – going to the Hague to the court of Fredericks (by this time) widow Elizabeth of Bohemia. He stayed at her court throughout the English Civil War, only returning to England with the Restoration in 1660

His later career including building Ashdown House for Elizabeth of Bohemia (the Winter Queen).



Ashdown House, Ashbury

He died in the 1690s and was buried elsewhere. In other words he was largely abroad when the church is reputed to have been rebuilt. He did not have a strong link to Shrivenham and didn't want to be buried in his shiny new church.

However, it is possible that he was involved in a fracas in London in the late 1630s and the matter was dealt with by the judge Henry Marten senior – more of whom anon. There is a note in the papers of this Henry Marten that Lord Craven had given £500 to him to pay for repair of Shrivenham Church in 1638. It is not clear why Craven should be giving Marten such a large sum but given the problems in London was it a sweetener for the judge. Sadly we don't know what this repair entailed nor whether it was the famous rebuild.

Henry Marten Senior



Henry Marten (Senior)

So to the next candidate. Henry Marten senior himself. He was another newly prosperous man – in his case making his fortune in the law in the Admiralty Court. He also bought property in Berkshire including Hinton Waldrist which became his main residence together with the various manors of Shrivenham and Becket. It was to Henry that Lord Craven gave the £500. Interestingly at this same time Henry was buying 60 trees from Littleworth for some purpose. Again was this to do with the rebuild?

Henry died in 1641 leaving his son Sir Henry Marten – the regicide.

He obviously was involved with renovations in 1638 and had a direct interest in Shrivenham in that he owned the manors, but if there was to be a fully-fledged rebuild why Shrivenham and not his seat Hinton Waldrist or Longworth where he was buried?

Henry Marten Junior (the Regicide)



Henry Marten (the Regicide)

On to our third and probably, least likely candidate as the rebuildier. Henry Junior was at the radical wing of Parliament, he was a puritan (even being accused of being an atheist) and a republican. In 1649 he was one of the signatories of the death warrant for Charles I, hence his sobriquet of Regicide. During the Protectorate he was something of a thorn in the side of Cromwell – promoting the Levellers and raising money to fund troops to pursue his ideas. In fact he spent so much that by the mid-1650s he had to sell his Shrivensham and Beckett estates to pay debts. With the restoration he escaped the death penalty and spent the rest of his life in prison.

I think you will agree that his does not sound like a church builder.

John Wildman



John Wildman

John Wildman is our final candidate. Wildman was also a republican and an associate of Henry the Regicide. However he was more inclined to compromise his views, especially when cash was involved and he profited during the protectorate.

It was Wildman who bought Shrevenham and Beckett when Marten sold up in the late 1650s

It is his (adopted) descendants who continued to hold the estate becoming the Barringtons. He based himself at Becket so that Shrevenham was his parish church, something that suggests he may be a good candidate, the others being based elsewhere.

Looking at the church itself for clues, we know that in 1654 Elizabeth Fairthorne left a will asking to be buried in the chancel near to her husband. That suggests that there was a chancel standing at that date, however there is no memorial to the Fairthornes although they were important citizens of Shrevenham. Indeed this was an important local family both before and after this period.

In fact there are no memorials in the Church from before the 1670s, which seems surprising, given that there were prosperous residents of the parish who may have erected them. Does this mean that the chancel had been newly built in the 1670s, or was it just that someone had ensured a good clear out of the old so that they could establish their rights as the new lords of Shrevenham? Either of these would point strongly to Wildman.

Who did promote the church rebuilding?

So where does that leave us? The most likely benefactors are either Henry Marten senior (with a contribution from Lord Craven), who was a new man establishing himself. But why did he chose Shrivenham and not Hinton Waldrist or Longworth, or alternatively John Wildman, who was another man with new money and possibly a wish to establish himself, who was at least based in the parish.

And Why

Henry Marten senior is not recorded as a particular builder so why update Shrivenham with the unusual new design, unless perhaps the medieval church was badly dilapidated. However there are no records of this either way.

We know little of Shrivenham itself during the Civil War. However it is not unlikely that the church suffered. Highworth Church was attacked by Parliamentary forces as was Faringdon Church, and both still bear the scars. There is a report that Henry Marten's house at Beckett was fired by royalist troops and Ashbury vicarage was "almost destroyed" by Parliamentary forces' gunpowder blowing up in the house.

A mystery that continues.