

Church of Our Lady and St Nectan, Hartland, Devon

NGR SS 26025 24414

Results of Historic Building Recording

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AC archaeology

Church of Our Lady and St Nectan, Hartland, Devon

(NGR SS 26025 24414)

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Summary

The Roman Catholic church of Our Lady and St Nectan, Hartland, Devon (SS 26025 24414) was erected and consecrated in 1964 and closed in 2010. An historic building record of the church was prepared by AC archaeology in September prior to its demolition.

The church was the latest in the sequence of Christian and non-conformist buildings to have been built in the town, and its place within the religious history of Hartland is set out.

The church is a prefabricated timber building of no particular architectural significance, although it is clear that, despite the removal of many of its fittings, the building was furnished in traditional, and in part slightly old-fashioned, ecclesiastical fittings. Whilst some, for example the altar, had been reused and were of a magnificence suitable for a church, others such as the confessional, were produced ad hoc locally.

1. INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1)

1.1 The former Roman Catholic church of Our Lady and St Nectan, Hartland, Devon (SS 26025 24414), is a late 20th-century church lying in Well Lane, almost at the centre of the historic town of Hartland (Fig. 1). The church has recently been closed for worship by the Diocese of Plymouth, and the site and building have been sold for redevelopment as housing. In fulfilment of a condition of planning consent (Torrige District Council 1/0491/2012/FUL) for the demolition of the church, an archaeological survey of the buildings was commissioned from AC archaeology by The Bazeley Partnership, acting on behalf Mr G. Colwill, the current owner of the property.

2. AIMS AND METHOD

2.1 The aims of the work were to prepare a record of the building prior to its demolition.

2.2 The recording works were carried out in accordance with a brief for historic building recording supplied by the Devon County Council Historic Environment Team (Dick 2012), and a method statement prepared by AC archaeology (Passmore 2012). The site recording was undertaken on 17 October 2012. A full photographic record of the building was prepared and manuscript notes made which form the basis of this report.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Hartland lies in a remote coastal corner of north-west Devon and has a notable ecclesiastical history. The area formed part of an ancient Saxon Royal estate which passed in the eleventh century to Queen Gytha, who founded a collegiate church here in c.1050 as a thank-offering for the deliverance of her husband from shipwreck (Hoskins 1954, 405). Gytha's collegiate church is believed to have stood on the site of the present parish church of St Nectan at Stoke-by-Hartland. The dedication to St Nectan, like that of the adjoining parish of Welcombe, perpetuates the memory of a 5th-century Celtic saint who is believed to have lived as a hermit in the area and to have been buried at Stoke. In 1169 the collegiate church was re-founded as a monastery staffed by regular Augustinian canons affiliated to the Arroasian order

(*ibid.*) and a church and monastic buildings were provided on a new site close by, now occupied by the mansion known as Hartland Abbey.

3.2 The former Royal estate had passed to the Dinham family soon after the conquest, who founded a borough and market at 'Harton' in the late 13th century with a three day fair on the feast of St Nectan (*ibid.*). The site of the new town lay at a considerable distance from either of the two main ecclesiastical centres, about two miles from Stoke. Although there were many medieval chapels in the parish, the seniority of the church at Stoke may have precluded the successful foundation of a parish church or chapel of ease within the town until 1839, when a new chapel of ease, funded by public subscription and dedicated to St. John, was opened in the town square, on the site of the former Market House. One catalyst for the provision of a new Anglican church for the town may have been the growth of non-conformist congregations in the area. White lists the town as containing an Independent Chapel, built in 1818, and a Wesleyan Methodist Chapel built in 1829 (White 1850, 600). By the end of the 19th century at least seven non-conformist chapels existed in the parish (Hoskins 1954, 241).

3.3 By contrast Roman Catholics do not seem to have gathered in the area in sufficient numbers to justify the foundation of a new church until the mid 20th century. The main Catholic centre in North Devon was at Barnstaple, which acquired an ambitious Romanesque style purpose-built church by gift in 1844 (Pevsner and Cherry 1980, 151). Mass was celebrated in rooms in Bridgeland Street, Bideford, from 1882, and the present church of the Sacred Heart, in a simplified Gothic style, was constructed in 1892 (<http://www.bidefordcatholicchurches.org.uk/bidefordinfo.htm>). Other settlements in north Devon and Cornwall were to acquire Roman Catholic churches in the late 19th and early 20th century, though these were often provided to serve visitors to holiday resorts rather than being targeted at large resident communities. These include the impressive churches of Our Lady Star of the Sea at Ilfracombe (1893) and The Most Holy Saviour at Lynton (1908-10). Many such churches were more modest in scale and without architectural ambition, like the small brick church of St Peter, Bude (1926), and may have been intended as temporary structures in anticipation of a finer building in future. Without the benefit of a private benefactor capable of providing the whole building as a gift (as at Barnstaple) and endowing the church to provide a stipend for a priest, founding and serving such churches was often a struggle.

3.4 The foundation of the Church

Jill Hobbs, writing in 1982 in a memorial booklet celebrating the centenary of what was then believed to be the first Roman Catholic Mass to be offered in Bideford since the Reformation, recalled that the Roman Catholic population in the Hartland area had increased rapidly in the 1940s and 50s after the establishment of an RAF base nearby, which she identified as 'the camp'. She may have been referring to RAF Cleave, near Morwenstow, RAF Chivenor near Barnstaple, or the nearby RAF Hartland Point – an air defence radar station established in 1941 and remained in use, from the 1950s for surveillance of a high-altitude air-to-air gunnery range, until 1983 (Passmore and Passmore 2008, chapter six). Hobbs writes that Hartland was included on a list of possible Mass centres at the suggestion of Fr. Collin, then the curate of Barnstaple. This was agreed in 1959 by the Travelling Missioner, Fr Sean Mason. (Hobbs 1982 on the Hartland Forum Website). It is highly likely that Hartland was chosen as a Mass centre because of its ancient associations with St Nectan and because of the presence of the former Abbey, but the determination of local families to support a Mass centre must also have been a strong consideration.

Mass was first offered in Hartland in a private house, on the feast of the Holy Family, in 1960. Later, the Womens' Institute Rooms were hired, at the cost of £1 per Sunday, but this could not long be satisfactory. Mrs Hobbs son recalls that the altar in the W.I. rooms was a trestle table set up against a cupboard and that: "As the service progressed, at the most solemn part, offering up the host, our eyes would be raised to take in its full glory – the W.I. hanging Jerusalem song sheet" (Hobbs 2012 on the Hartland Forum Website). A fundraising committee was therefore formed and contributions sought to provide a permanent church building in the town where Mass could be offered in more suitable surroundings. Through a generous gift a site in Well Lane was eventually acquired and the present prefabricated building was erected in 1964 at a cost of £2000. The church was consecrated by the Bishop of Plymouth, the Revd Mgr Cyril Restieaux on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December the 8th 1964 and dedicated to our Lady and St Nectan (Hobbs 1982).

The church was served by clergy from Bideford and offered a regular weekly Mass. Ecumenical relations with other Christian groups in the town including the Anglican and Methodist churches were good and were fostered through an organisation entitled Hartland Churches Together. Following the disuse of the Anglican chapel of ease in the town (the date of which is unrecorded, but which appears to have taken place in the late 1960s or early 1970s) the problem of the distance of the parish church from the town again arose. In 1981 the Anglican Priest approached the Roman Catholic clergy and was given permission to use the church for regular Sunday services of Holy Communion (Hobbs 2012). This arrangement continued until the closure of the church.

The closure of the church of Our Lady and St Nectan was announced by the Bishop of Plymouth on an Episcopal Visitation in June 2010, on the grounds that the Roman Catholic community in the area was no longer viable. The final service was held on the Feast of Christ the King, 21st of November 2010. After the closure of the church some furnishings were removed to Bideford, others to the Anglican parish church (Bideford Catholic Churches website). Some yet remain and will be described below. The church was finally auctioned on the 6th of September, 2011, the proceeds of the sale of the site and the building passing to the Diocese of Plymouth.

4. THE CHURCH (Plates 1-5)

- 4.1** The church lies to the east of the market place of the town on a small backland site in Well Lane, an area that may well have been occupied by small holdings, domestic gardens and outbuildings since the foundation of the borough in the 13th century. The church is correctly oriented, with its main entrance to the west. The building stands on concrete plinth blocks to raise it from the level of the ground and ensure adequate ventilation. It is a prefabricated structure clad in vertical tongue-and-grooved cedarwood planking (Plate 1). The body of the church measures 7.5 x 11.15m externally, with a narthex measuring 2.15x 3.38m attached at the west. The exterior has five tall, narrow windows in each side and a long, horizontal strip window at the east end. The roof is low-pitched and covered with roofing felt.
- 4.2** The church is entered by double doors on the south side of the narthex. The narthex has a floor of concrete pavements and a window to the north of obscure glass. The walls are clad in plasterboard and the roof in fibre board. There was a fixed notice board but no evidence of an Holy-water stoup; it is possible that a bowl for the purpose stood on the small gate-legged table, which yet remains.

- 4.3** The nave of the church is entered through a pair of double doors in the east wall of the narthex. Again, there is no trace of an Holy water stoup near these doors. The nave is a single volume, occupying five of the six bays which comprise the church (Plate 2). Each bay is 1.81m wide with a central obscure-glazed window 0.55m wide on either side. The walls and ceilings are as previously described, with the exception that the four main trusses supporting the roof are exposed. Each truss is a composite tie beam truss reinforced by diagonal strutting and supported by steel or iron hoop-brackets at each end. The timbers are painted black, perhaps to give a traditional feeling to the interior. There are the remains of fourteen fixings on the walls which seem certain to have borne the fourteen Stations of the Cross.
- 4.4** The floor is marked out with aluminium strips, demarcating a central aisle and two main areas of eastward-facing seating, facing a raised footpace against the east wall for the altar (Plate 3). The church was designed and furnished for the traditional western rite, before the liturgical practices popularly associated with the second Vatican Council of 1962-5 revolutionised liturgical planning in some Roman Catholic churches, with the introduction of centrally-sited altars and circular seating arrangements around them. The altar seems to have been pulled away from the east wall to allow for celebration *versus populum*, as there are the remains of a pillar-tabernacle in the centre of the east wall, but this may have been a later modification. One electronic sanctuary lamp remained with a bronze-effect bracket and a red glass shade marked with sacred emblems. There was no trace of a fixed reredos, only a nail from which the crucifix was hung above and behind the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament.
- 4.5** The altar and tabernacle have been removed, but photographs on the Hartland Forum website show that the altar was a magnificent timber structure, probably of 19th-century date with four circular colonnettes surmounted by stiff-leaf capitals. The same photographs show a shrine, to the north of the altar consisting of a side board or table vested as an altar, supporting an image of Our Lady. This seems to have been replaced with a simpler arrangement in a later reordering of the church.
- 4.6** The remains of a bench and a bench frontal show that seating was on open benches with hinged kneelers (Plate 3). Several small tables which might have been utilised as credence tables remain, and also an electric 'organ' and a Gothic prayer desk or litany desk with projecting tusk tenons (Plate 4). This conforms to an earlier tradition of ecclesiastical furnishings and may have been brought in from elsewhere, like the altar. There was no evidence of a font or font drain and it is possible either that baptisms always took place at Bideford, or that a portable font was employed. There are no choir stalls, sediliae or piscinae; these may also have been portable.
- 4.7** The easternmost part of the building, or one whole bay, served as the Sacristy. This is entered by a doorway to the south of the altar, which opens into a long rectangular room lit by an high-level strip window and with its own external access to the churchyard. The room was divided into two parts, the main sacristy and a WC adjoining. The only liturgical fixture remaining was part of the confessional, consisting of a reused wardrobe door fixed to the wall, with a hole cut in it veiled by a curtain. The confessional was fixed with hinges, presumably so that it could be folded back against the wall when out of use to maximise space in the sacristy. The penitent appears to have knelt on a Gothic *Prie Dieu* constructed with tusk tenons and decorated with trefoil ornaments, which was positioned in front of the confessional while the priest sat on a chair behind (Plate 5). Marks on the floor show the position of the vestment chest, now removed to Stoke, and the wrought iron Paschal candle stand, advent wreath and a flower stand remain. No other liturgical features survive.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1** The struggle of dissenting and Roman Catholic communities, often in the face of persecution by the establishment, is an inspiring story of hard work and devotion. After Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and the establishment of a Roman Catholic hierarchy in England in 1850, the Roman Catholic Church made steady progress in the establishment of churches, schools and convents in Devon. Hoskins noted in 1954 that the Roman church still 'makes headway, though slowly' and contrasted it with a picture of decline on the part of Anglican and Dissenting congregations, who were suffering severely from the 'poverty, economic and spiritual, of our times' (Hoskins 1954, 302).
- 5.2** Although the church of Our Lady and St Nectan is only a modest building, it testifies to the increasing strength of Roman Catholicism in the county in the mid 20th century. The siting of a Mass-centre, and then a church, at Hartland seems intended to acknowledge the long history of Christianity in the area and its associations with St Nectan and the vanished religious community at Hartland Abbey. The campaign for a church at Hartland town required a huge fundraising effort by the community. Although the church they eventually constructed was only a simple timber building it allowed regular, decent celebration of the Sacred Mysteries and, presumably, reservation of the Sacrament on a more permanent basis than would have been possible in a hired hall. It is well to remember that many of the greatest churches in the land, including the abbeys of Glastonbury and Durham, began as small, timber churches. It is not inconceivable that the founders of the church had hoped, one day, for a more permanent building at Hartland. Jill Hobbs wrote: 'long may it all flourish to the glory of God'. These hopes have been disappointed after just under fifty years.
- 5.3** With the closure of so many churches and convents across the country, it appears that the economic and spiritual poverty of the times have finally caught up with the Roman Catholics. Nevertheless, the passing of this small church, which played such a part in fostering ecumenical relations in the area, is regretted by the whole community of Hartland and North Devon, and this regret is clearly demonstrated on their websites.

6. ARCHIVE AND OASIS ENTRY

- 6.1** A fully integrated site archive has been prepared with reference to the English Heritage 2006 document *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment*. This is currently stored under controlled conditions at the offices of AC Archaeology in Bradninch, but will ultimately be deposited under the accession number NDDMS2012.41 at the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon.
- 6.2** An OASIS entry for the project has been completed under the unique identifying code 136759.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 7.1** This recording was commissioned on behalf of Mr Colwill by The Bazeley Partnership. The project was administered for AC archaeology by Andrew Passmore. The recording was carried out by Richard Parker of Richard Parker Historic Buildings Recording and Interpretation, and the report illustrations prepared by Sarnia Blackmore. The author is grateful to Mr Colwill for his assistance during the recording work on site.

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PROJECT

Church of Our Lady and St Nectan, Hartland, Devon

TITLE

Fig. 1: Location of site





Plate 1 General view of the church from the south west



Plate 2 View of the nave of the church, looking east, showing the layout of the former furnishings marked on the floor and the footpace of the altar



Plate 3 View of the remains of the open bench seating in the church



Plate 4 The Litany or Prayer desk in the nave



Plate 5 The Confessional in the Sacristy, adapted from pieces of other furnishings

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