

St Mary the Virgin, Ross on Wye

Church and Town

Background to Activities to support Key Stage 2 use of St Mary's by visiting groups and families.

This booklet tells you a little of the past history of St Mary's. We have materials for fifteen workshops. Where use is being made by groups of school visitors the necessary materials will be made available. Workshop activities are available for family visitors by prior arrangement (01989 565167 or administrator@rawchurch.org.uk)

- Topic A - The Church in the Middle Ages
- Topic B - Disagreements - the Civil War
- Topic C - Education across the centuries
- Topic D - Health and helpers - John Kyrle
- Topic E - Remembering



Do please remember that this is a place of prayer and attempt to introduce a spiritual element to your visit by having a few quiet moments wondering at the beauty of the building and the centuries of worship.

Topic A - The Church in the Middle Ages

The date 1066 is one of the most remembered facts in English history. This was the time when, after the death of Edward the Confessor, the Norman Army of William 'The Conqueror' invaded the country and took over the estates of many landowners.

To be sure of the worth of all that he had taken on in England, William instructed a team of officials to travel all over the country to survey all towns and villages and to make an assessment of their value. He appointed officers called sheriffs to collect taxes according to the wealth of the estate. This record of this assessment became known as the Domesday Book. The detail for Ross said that it had 'A church and a mill' and although this doesn't seem to suggest that the settlement was important, it had the nucleus of growth with the mill on Rudhall Brook (possibly at Millpond Street) and then a Saxon church (Possibly at Redmeadow, but it could have been on St Mary's site).

Over the next century the settlement developed up the slope and away from the flood plain with a string of buildings up Broad St. to the market place. The land belonged to the Bishop of Hereford and the big advantage of the settlement was that it commanded a river crossing on the route north to south along the Welsh border (the Borderlands). There might have been a simple church on the present site by 1100 but a growing town needed something more grand.

What better site could there be for building a new church but here at the top of the red cliffs which might have had given Ross its name, although its name might have come from the Welsh word for a headland jutting out into the flood plain. Think of the way in which it looked out over the great meander of the River Wye, but also of the way in which people approaching from the crossing at Wilton could be seen and challenged if they were thought to be passing criminals or refugees from Wales. It seems that the Bishop (possibly Canteloupe) wanted an outpost from Hereford on the way to Gloucester and so the church here, dedicated to St. Mary was started in 1278. The outbuildings (Palace Pound) provided a resting place and shelter for priests and monks working in the south of the area we call the Diocese of Hereford as missionaries, medical workers and wandering teachers. This explains why the church has at least five 'piscinae' or bowls marking old altars in a number of chapels where visiting priests celebrated communion.

The link to Hereford was strong because the Bishop collected his rents for the land being used for farms (the glebe) and because he was responsible for the welfare of the church communities. Standing on what we now call The Prospect you can see the two routes that visitors followed - one alongside the river via Hoarwithy (but it was likely to flood and to take longer to walk), and the other from ridge to ridge from Callow to Peterstow and Wilton (shorter and drained but very wooded and possibly more likely to have robbers hiding alongside the track).

As the church was built over the next thirty years the township of Ross grew up alongside the buildings on the hill and a Market Place showed the growing importance of farming, fishing, transport and trade. When the church was finished it was blessed (consecrated) by the Bishop in 1316 and its importance grew for worship, for a meeting place, and for the care of the sick and the education of a very few local children in the room above the South Porch. And that just starts our story!

Topic B. Disagreements - the Civil War

Sometimes there are serious differences between the rulers of a country and the people they are ruling over. This happened with Charles 1st. after he became king in 1625 and he tried to raise taxes and change laws without the agreement of Parliament in 'the eleven years' tyranny'. Parliament rebelled and sent a list of 204 complaints which Charles ignored and so war broke out between the Royalist (Cavaliers) who supported Charles and the Parliamentarians (Puritans, Roundheads) who supported Oliver Cromwell with his New Model Army. The traders and merchants of the South East of the country mainly hoped that Cromwell would rule as 'The protector' but the farmers and estate owners of the North and West hoped that Charles would continue as king.

The main dividing line ran from Bristol to York. There were important battles at Marston Moor near York (1644) and Naseby in Northamptonshire (1645) and Charles surrendered in 1646 and was allowed to continue as king if he would agree to a list of Proposals suggested by Parliament in 1647. Charles meanwhile had made a deal with the Scots and started a second civil war in 1648 but after six months he was defeated at the Battle of Preston. Parliament put him on trial for treason and he was executed in 1649. His son, Charles II was defeated at the Battle of Worcester in 1651 and Oliver Cromwell was the head of government for 11 years.

Although Ross was in the middle of Royalist country but as it was on the border between the groups there were several nearby battles when Parliamentary leaders attempted to take control. There were attempts to take Hereford in 1642 and 1644 and the city was twice under siege until the Royalists surrendered in 1645. Ross was defended by Colonel Mynne, who was one of the king's commanders and the Church site had defensive earthworks to the east (Church Street), the south (at the end of the Church estate overlooking Ashfield) and the west (now overlooked by The Prospect). The church was to become a refuge in the event of an attack.

Life in Ross during the Civil War and the continuing reprisals between the Royalist and the Parliamentarians could not have been easy. In 1645 a local unit of Scots soldiers under the Earl of Leven and supporting the Royalist army had not been paid and so thought it just to seize crops, cider and anything that was of value. Later that year Sir Barnabas Scudamore, a Royalist leading a team from Hereford attacked Sir John Bridges at Wilton Castle because he had refused to take sides and so also refused to let his house be used for accommodation for the king. The reprisal was that the castle was set on fire and became a ruin.

After the Civil War, life gradually returned to normal and Cavaliers and Roundheads were forgotten. But they were the basis of our political parties. The cavaliers were landowners and they expected that their employees would support them... the origin of the Tories. It had been difficult for Cromwell controlling the roundheads because they were not regularly paid, and they began to resent the fact that they had supported him but saw no improvement in their lives... they started a union called 'The Levellers' and were the origin of the Whigs who later split into Liberal and Labour.

Topic C. Education across the centuries

The Church has always played an important part in the provision of education until it shared a much greater role when responsibility was given to the state sector for 'Board Schools' by the Education Act of 1871. The priests were the learned members of the community and so they could have been paid for by wealthy families as 'chantry' priests. (Chantries, or chapels, were sometimes endowed as memorials to pay for a place in heaven.) We think that the school room was possibly above the South Porch and it would have taken a group of about eight or ten boys learning to read and write using the scriptures. Eventually a Churchyard House became the St Mairie's school and took more pupils. When the Dissolution of the Monasteries occurred under Henry VIII this school was allowed to continue because it was judged to have been successful.

Over time this school was run by the church but it took more pupils and included arithmetic and Latin and Greek as subjects, and became a Grammar School. This was in the building we know as Church House and the wall memorial on the south side of the sanctuary reminds us of Dr John Newton, a very able mathematician at Oxford University who became rector of Ross in 1675. He persuaded landowners to pay for the rebuilding and maintenance of the church school and he made changes to the subjects taught so that more boys could have access to arts and sciences.

There was another link to education in that a new Blue Coat School had been established by public subscription to clothe and educate the poor children of the parish in Christian ways and to secure their apprenticeship to a trade. From 1709 to 1786 the school used buildings in the town but Walter Scott, a former pupil, left money for the purpose built school in Old Gloucester Road. The memorial for his generosity is prominent in the churchyard.

By 1811 St Mairies' School had fallen into disrepair and the site was then taken over and rebuilt by the Anglican National Society offering places for both boys and girls. The building was used as a school until 1885, when pupils from the church school and the nonconformist British and Foreign School Society in Wye Street, were brought together in the new Board School in Canteloupe Road.

School attendance was made compulsory by the 1880 Education Act to make sure that all children were educated between 5 and initially 10 and later, 13 years of age. Before this the church provided Sunday Schools and again, through using the Bible and Prayer Book as a text, taught reading and writing to both boys and girls of all abilities. The Sunday School movement was known in the area because of the work of Robert Raikes, a printer of Gloucester. He lived when the divisions between rich and poor were worsening and in 1780 established a national framework for churches to follow.

There were several private schools in Ross e.g. Clairville at the bottom of Old Maids Walk, and Palmerston House off Walford Rd. but following the Education Act of 1902 the county school was developed in Canteloupe Road and the grammar school in Ryefield Road catering for most of the secondary pupils. The connection between church and schools gradually became much looser over time but there important use of St. Mary's and Church Hall continues for Sunday and community use especially at Christmas, Easter and Harvest.

Topic D. Health and helpers - John Kyrle and others

In the early years of St. Mary's people had a very limited knowledge of public health (water supply and sewerage) and relied on a range of herbal, and even witchcraft, remedies for personal health needs. Sometimes the priests or brothers associated with St Mary's would have skills in caring for people and would certainly have been with people nearing death. Medieval towns did not have systems of sewers or water pipes but Ross had advantages because the River Wye acted like a drainage system and many of the houses would have been solidly made of sandstone. Other cottages were made of wood, with mud and dung as a filler. The problem was that rats, lice and fleas flourished in the rushes strewn over the clay floors of people's houses (and these rushes were often changed only once a year when the rushes were harvested).

The seriousness of these problems was seen when the Black Death (sometimes called bubonic plague because of the pustules that developed in dying people) struck in 1349. People were weakened by war and harvest failures. Germs, the fleas which carried them, and the rats which carried the fleas, flourished in the dirty towns. Once the disease reached the lungs of the malnourished, it was then spread to the wider population through sneezes and coughs. Within five years over one third of the people locally had died. With fewer people there was less pressure on the town and for the next two hundred years, although dreadful diseases such as cholera broke out from time to time, there was no major health scare in Ross. However, in 1636 an outbreak of plague possibly carried in by a trader from Gloucester, caused awful misery - families losing their underfed children, no services in St Mary's, money washed before it was used, the market moved out to Wilton. The Vicar, Revd. Philip Price, said the funeral service for the dead each day at the spot where the Plague Cross now stands by a deep pit for burials. He led a 5.0 a.m. procession of prayer in September and the number dying began to fall from then on... but over three hundred people lost their lives. The problem had been lack of clean water and poor personal hygiene - as well as the large number of people travelling through the town! Too many, too close, and meetings in church may not have helped. The Plague Cross was erected in the church yard of St. Mary's church in 1637 as a memorial to 315 people who died in the town of the plague that year. It was also known as the Corpse Cross.

The need for better public health was appreciated by John Kyrle. He was born in Dymock in 1637 and no doubt grew up learning of the terrible problems in Ross. His father was a lawyer and when the family moved into the timber framed house in the Market Place, he was determined to 'improve' the town. He only had limited income from the tenants on his estates (e.g. land at Cleeve Lane) but he persuaded others to help fund the causeway, lifting the Hereford road above the wet flood plain to Wilton; the Prospect, a covered reservoir into which water pumped from the Wye could be stored and then distributed in underground pipes around the town, and, in 1721, the rebuilding of the Church Tower. The signs of the Man of Ross are evident in church and town.

Kyrle's example encouraged others and for the next two hundred years local benefactors supported basic health help for individuals and for the town - their record is partially shown on some of the memorials in St. Mary's - especially in the Markye Chapel and on the charity lists in the Choir Vestry. John Kyrle has an ornate tablet on the north wall by the High Altar. What is its link to Ross today?

Topic E. Remembering

The Church is the focus or centre of most communities because it has been in existence for a very long while and because it is associated with the graveyard. Whilst there are many memorials in the church there are also some important reminders of people from the past out in the Churchyard. Many of these have been weathered over time and especially the limestone and soft sandstone memorials have become almost unreadable. Where the early ones are readable some contain information about the people remembered but the detail may be difficult to read because of the script that was in use at the time, especially the f/s confusion.

There were some bigger memorials that have been kept in very good repair - we have already spoken of the Plague Cross and of the Walter Scott memorial in the sloping churchyard between St. Mary's and the Hall. But there are other outdoor memorials from more recent events and these include the memorial for those who veteran soldiers (Chelsea Pensioners) who were evacuated from London during the second world war, and for those who were killed in the Korean War

We have several memorials in the church that mention individuals - Thomas Thirkhill fought in the Zulu Wars for example, but the major memorials are to those men and women of Ross who died in the First World War (1914-1918), and the Second World War (1939 - 1945). There is also a Ross Town War memorial on the Prospect. Often visitors come to look at these and to light a candle in the Markye Chapel and this might be an opportunity for youngsters to have a few quiet moments thinking about the sacrifices of the past century. Alternatively, it might be helpful to go out to the Prospect and to find the rationale for involvement - 'They died that we might live in Peace and Liberty'.

In both wars the place of women in the community appears to have been overlooked but their role was as members of the Land Army, as volunteers for those jobs where men had been 'called up' to the services and locally, as part of 12000 people who worked at the Munitions Factory at Rotherwas, Hereford, making munitions for fight against Germany in both wars. A memorial for these people is being developed at the old factory site. It would be interesting to ascertain whether any of our younger generation of visitors have distant relatives who were involved in the munitions industry.

Some statistics to ponder:

World War 1.

Country	Military deaths	Civilian	Total
Germany	908,000	44,000	952,000
Great Britain	790,000	6,700	796,700
United States	126,000	2,300	128,300

World War 2.

Country	Military deaths	Civilian	Total
Germany	3.25 million	2.44 million	5.69 million
Great Britain	403,000	92,700	495,000
United States	407,000	6,000	413,000