

St. Olave's CHURCH

Mark Fox continues his look at Island churches. This time he visits St. Olave's Church, Gatcombe

St. Olave's sits in a beautiful leafy opening next to the Gatcombe Estate and originally served as its chapel. The 13th century saw the first building on the site and it has been a local centre of Christian worship ever since.

Over seven centuries the church has seen many changes. Often the character as well as the history of a church can be traced in the changes successive generations have made. At St. Olave's this can be seen in the addition of buttresses to support the walls, the re-ordering of the Chancel and the reconstruction of the porch.

The church originally prospered under the patronage of two Island families, the Esturs and the Worsleys. Subsequently it has been the support of its congregation that has kept the church such a warm and welcoming place. The most vivid example of this are the beautiful kneelers spread throughout the church.

The most important historical feature of the church is the east window with its Pre-Raphaelite glass, which Pevsner says 'is the church's finest possession'. There is other fine stained glass some of which is believed to be the oldest on the Island.

The Chancel was re-built in 1864-65 on the instruction of the then Rector, John Branthwaite. He did not live in his parish because he was Principal of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. This reminds us that having part-time priests is not

a new experience for many parishes. He also commissioned the stained glass in the east window. Similar glass also commissioned by him can be seen in the chapel of St. Edmund Hall, providing an interesting link.

Also in the Chancel is the wooden effigy of a crusader knight. There are apparently no written records about its provenance and Pevsner queries its age, saying it is carved in the manner of the fourteenth century but that some of its details indicate carving of a later period. What is certain is that it provides a remarkable feature spurring interest in visits to the church.

The porch dates from 1910 and includes the carving of a head of a monster. It is a startling sight and Pevsner notes that 'it might give some people a real fright'. The organ is by Henry Speechley and dates from 1919. It was overhauled in 2000 by Griffiths & Cooper and incorporated pipework from an organ by Hunter from Upper Chine School, Shanklin.

The oldest bell in the tower dates from 1605, the third year of James I's reign. The church has two fountains. At the back of the church is the original font made of Purbeck stone and lined by lead. In the Chancel is a more modern portable font.

Outside the graveyard is spacious and beautiful. It is worth visiting at different times of the year and taking time to wonder quietly around reflecting on the lives recorded on the headstones. Many who lived together in the parish now rest beside one another in peace in this beautiful space.

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Main picture by Laura Boynton

