

St Mary's CHURCH

Mark Fox continues his tour of Island churches by calling into the picturesque village of Brighstone

St Mary the Virgin, Brighstone, is a beautiful church with roots going back to the 12th century. It is part of a wider group of local churches that includes St. Mary's Brook, St. Peter & St. Paul Mottistone, St. Andrew's Chale, and St. Peter's Shorwell.

Outside it is almost picture postcard perfect and sits well in its setting. Inside it combines history with a clear sense of lively purpose and much love.

The church seems to have benefitted from almost continuous evolution. A fire in the 1840s was clearly a key moment of change, but with a sense of continuity. Notices, the parish website, and other information, speak to a lively and vibrant worshipping community with a range of services and activities on offer. So the sense of the church is very much that it is actively part of the life of the community in which the building sits.

It is always interesting to start a visit to a church not in the building itself but in the graveyard. So much of the history of a place can be read in the headstones and memorials stretching back through time. Here there are graves for Moses Munt and Thomas Cotton, who lost their lives trying to rescue people from a wrecked ship. There is a memorial to Lt. George Cairns VC who died in Burma, and there is also the grave of the three young Salter children, who drowned in 1913 picking winkles off Chilton Chine.

Inside there are memorials to three famous former rectors. Each went on to become a Bishop. Thomas Ken, who wrote the famous hymns 'Awake my Soul and with the Sun' and 'Glory to Thee my God this Night'; Samuel Wilberforce, son of William, and George Moberly, previously headmaster of Winchester. In their honour the village pub is called The Three Bishops.

There is a fine 15th century font, a Jacobean pulpit and medieval brass candleholders. Over the 800 years of its existence much change

and re-ordering has taken place so that physically change marks order and investment by the community in the future of the church. To an architectural historian this might seem a frustrating fusion of styles and periods, but to an interested visitor it speaks of love, care and sustained interest.

A sundial dated 1721 sits above the porch and on it are inscribed the following words: "Go your way into His gates with Thanksgiving."

The tower contains an impressive collection of bells with magnificent inscriptions, according to available histories. Four were recast in the 18th century and the fifth in 1800. I find the inscriptions fascinating because they are part of a sort of hidden history of the church, as with many churches. Hardly anyone will ever see them because of their positioning. Yet they are inscribed with love and care, and for a purpose, that literally rings down through the ages. I think they are worth noting here:

'John Lord zealous for the promotion of campanologias art in the year 1740 caused me to be fabricated in Portsmouth and placed here in the year 1740. For 60 years I led the peal when I was unfortunately broken. In the year 1800 I was cast in the furnace, re-founded in London, and returned to my former station. Reader thou also shalt know a resurrection. May it be unto eternal life. William Chip, David Way, Churchwardens. Thomas Mearsfecit'.

'Success to the great Admiral Vernon'; 'God preserve the British Arms, 1740'; 'Prosperity to the parish of Brixton, 1740'; 'Mr. John Lord Mr. Thomas Jolif Churchwardens, 1740. Joseph Kipling fecit.'

St. Mary's is a wonderful church to visit and if you have the time I would encourage you to do so.



St Mary's church vicar Helen O'Sullivan



Pictures by Laura Boynton

(With thanks and recognition to: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=42078&strquery=brighstone>, <http://www.visitislandlife.com/sections/features/a-history-of-brighstone/>, and Nikolaus Pevsner.) Church link: <http://www.fivechurches.org.uk>