



Church of  
St Katherine

Chiselhampton, Oxfordshire



THE CHURCHES  
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# Church of St Katherine

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## Introduction

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The village was originally known simply as *Hentone*, meaning 'high village' but, in order to avoid confusion with other 'hamptons' in the vicinity, such as Brookhampton and Stadhampton, 'Chisel' (meaning gravel or shingle) was added from the 12th century. The bridge over the River Thame (a tributary of the Thames) has long been an important crossing point and has existed since at least the 15th century. The original village lay just north of the bridge, though by the 17th century it had become much reduced in size.

At the time of Domesday Book (1086) the manor appears to have been among the possessions of William FitzAnsculf. Subsequently it passed through various owners including the de Chiselhamptons in the 13th century and, in about 1530, the Doyley family from Hambleton, Buckinghamshire. The Doyleys were an influential family in Oxfordshire, with two members becoming High Sheriff of the county in the 16th and 17th centuries. However, by the 18th century they had run heavily into debt and, in 1748, they sold the estate including the second manor in the parish, Camoys, to Charles Peers.

Charles Peers was the son of a Lord Mayor of London and the family had made their money as hosiers and grocers. His wife, Katherine Knapp, came from Oxfordshire

which may be why Charles decided to purchase the estate. He immediately set about building a new house for himself uphill from the river and employed the London builder Samuel Dowbiggin to construct it. Little is known about Samuel Dowbiggin, although he and his father, Launcelot (architect of St Mary's church, Islington, London) were both members of the Joiners' Company.

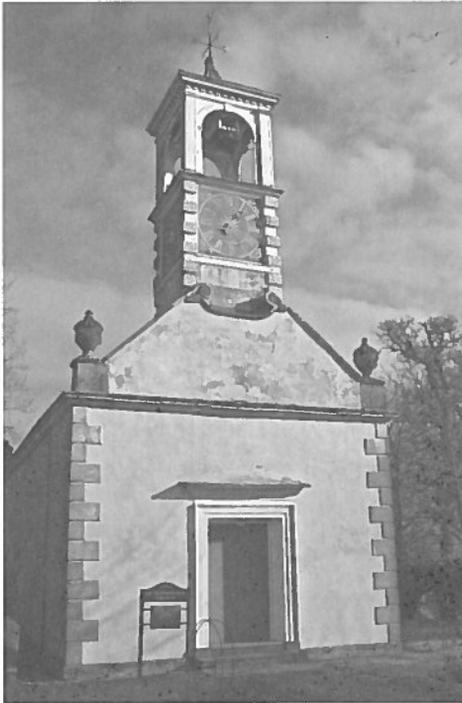
## History

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In the Middle Ages Chiselhampton was one of six chapels annexed to Dorchester Abbey. Dedicated to St Mary, it was first mentioned in 1146 and was situated near the river and adjacent to the old manor house. By the mid-18th century it seems to have fallen into disrepair – so much so that it was claimed that 'the inhabitants cannot assemble for worship without manifest hazard to their lives'. When Charles Peers acquired the estate, he obtained permission to demolish the old chapel and to reuse the materials for a new church, to be built some 200 yards (180 m) to the west and away from the river. Peers' new church was consecrated by the

Bishop of Oxford on 22 August 1763 and dedicated to St Katherine – perhaps in honour of his wife.

Although it is not known who designed the new church, it is quite likely to have been Samuel Dowbiggin: some of the woodwork in Chiselhampton House is similar to that in the church. St Katherine's is certainly one of the outstanding Georgian churches in Oxfordshire, notwithstanding the Oxford architectural historian J H Parker's description of it as 'a sad instance of departure from all properties of church architecture' and the bell turret 'such as is usually placed on stables'. The church is little changed from when it was originally built. It received a new roof in 1882 and the bell turret was repaired in 1894.



Exterior from the west

In 1936 parts of the plaster ceiling began to fall and the whole was removed, exposing the roof timbers reused from the old church. In 1952 an appeal for £3000 was set up to put the church into good repair, launched by Sir John Betjeman who wrote a poem about St Katherine's: he was clearly fascinated by the building. Work soon started and included the reinstatement of the plaster ceilings. However by the mid-1970s the parish felt unable to continue to maintain the church and it was declared redundant in 1977, being vested in The Churches Conservation Trust the following year.

## Exterior

The small churchyard is entered through a pair of stone gate piers, formerly with a stone ball on top of each one. The church itself is a rectangle with a bell turret over the west gable. The walls are of brick, covered with stucco. The gabled roof is tiled. A moulded course, which forms the pediment to the west gable, is carried right round the building. Each corner is accentuated by a stone urn garlanded with flowers. There was a further urn at the apex of the east gable, recently taken down for safety reasons though it is hoped to reinstate it in due course. There are no windows on the north side: four large round-headed windows in the south wall provide all the light to the church. The bell turret of two stages is of wood. The lower stage contains a clock face on the north, west and south sides, each painted in blue with gold Roman numerals – that on the west side includes the date '1762' (cover). Following repairs to the church in 1952 the



Interior looking east

clock faces were repainted by the celebrated artist John Piper. The upper stage contains three small bells, probably all contemporary with the church. On top is a gilded weather-vane, pierced with the name 'St Katherine'. The entrance to the church is by the panelled west door, also painted blue.

## Interior

The church is entered under the west gallery which is supported on four Tuscan columns. The gallery is panelled, with a dentilled frieze. Inside all is laid out in a typical 'auditory' style where it was important that the Word of God (readings from the Scriptures and the sermon) could easily be heard. Thus the emphasis is very much on the pulpit, reading desk and communion table or altar. The side walls are divided into bays by pairs of shallow pilasters.

To the right of the entrance is located a small panelled vestry and then the font on its square plinth and wooden pedestal. The bowl itself is of white marble and its wooden cover modern. The oak pews are grouped in two blocks: on the south side are two narrow pews at the west end with benches, then a series of box pews ending with a larger square box pew for the squire. On the north side the layout is similar except that the pulpit and reading desk take the place of two of the box pews. The doors are panelled; some have iron bolts and the grander ones brass handles. The walls, except the west wall, are panelled in oak.



Marble font with wooden cover

The hexagonal pulpit is of oak and 17th-century in date, though modified by the addition of a Georgian staircase. Each panel is richly carved. It is likely to have come from the old church. Below it is the reading desk with its own seat and extending candle holders. From here the clerk would have read from the Bible.

There is no division between the nave and the chancel. The communion rails, believed to be of yew wood, enclose the altar on three sides with a two-leaf gate in the centre. On either side are benches enclosed by rails of similar design, probably intended for those people taking Holy Communion. A small doorway on the north side, now blocked and serving as a cupboard, may have provided separate access to the church by the vicar's family. The communion table itself has panelled legs with a frieze composed of a band of Xs and florets. The top of the table (or 'mensa') is of grey marble. Behind the altar is the reredos. Of oak, it comprises three panels decorated with carvings of flowers and scrolls. The left-hand panel contains the Lord's Prayer, the central panels the Ten Commandments and the right-hand panel The Creed – all lettered in gold. There are return panels on the north and south sides of the alcove, also carved. Whilst the nave floors are of stone flags and wooden boards in the pewed areas, the chancel floor consists of diagonally laid squares with black tiles at the intersections – emphasising the liturgical importance of this area.

The windows all contain clear glass, although the easternmost window on the south side has a small panel of painted glass with the arms of the Peers family; it was made by Kaye & Pemberton, 1953.

From the plastered ceiling hang three brass chandeliers, one of which is dated 'April 13th 1899'. Around the walls are brass candle brackets, possibly 18th-century, though they might be later reproductions.

There are several monuments on the walls, all but one to members of the Peers family. One on the north wall, just east of the pulpit, is to Charles Peers (d. 1781) and his three wives – he was the builder of the church. The tablet is of white marble with an urn at the top; Peers' coat-of-arms is displayed below. The monument was made by Johnson of London. A later Charles Peers (d. 1952) is commemorated by a monument in Georgian style, designed by Frederick Etchells, on the east wall of the chancel. As Sir Charles Peers, he was a President of the Society of Antiquaries and Surveyor to the Fabric of Westminster Abbey. He is buried in the Islip Chapel in the Abbey though his wife (d. 1953) is buried in Chiselhampton churchyard. There is a memorial on the north nave wall commemorating those who died in the two World Wars.

The registers date from 1763; entries from 1556 to 1762 are contained in the registers for Stadhampton. They are kept in the Oxfordshire Record Office.

## Bibliography

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