

History of St Giles Church, Cheddington



The earliest church of which there is any trace appears to have been built during the reign of Henry I or Stephen (i.e. between 1100 and 1135). This church must have been built in the Norman style and its outline is now marked by the present chancel and nave. Fragments of this old church are to be found decorating the walls of the porch. Two centuries later (in 1340) the chancel arch was widened and probably replaced a round headed Norman arch, but the greatest changes came in the 15th century. First the windows of the nave and the chancel were put in (but not the large east window which is modern). Later the north aisle and west tower were added thus completing the general outline as it is at present. All these alterations and additions were built in the Perpendicular style and so radical were these changes that the church has the general appearance of a 15th century church.

The addition of an aisle was usually the sign of a growing population and it was often placed on the north side of the church as that side was considered unlucky for burials. There was therefore room on the north side for the building of an extension and this was apparently the case here at Cheddington.

Throughout the troubled times of the Reformation, the fabric remained unaltered. Slackness, however, crept into certain churches, and we read in a Report of the Archdeaconry (1584) that 'at Cheddington they had no sermons'.

Of the six bells in the tower, three are cast at this time, though two are of the previous century. A few years later (in 1637) a short description was written about the state of the church. We learn that some of the glass needed renewing and suggestions were made that the feet of the Communion rails should be cut off so that the rails could rest flat on the floor, and that seats in the chancel (where in those days the wealthier parishioners often used to sit) should be made to a uniform size. The porch, we learn, had been leaded but was then tiled and a window inside the porch had been blocked in.



To the following century belongs the Poor Box in the north aisle, inscribed with various letters and the date 1615. It was possibly at this time that the beautiful oak pulpit was given to the church, probably at the same time as the solid oak Communion Table as both are of Jacobean workmanship.



Poor Box

Pulpit

East Window

Font



By the middle of the 19th century the church needed thorough restoration and this was carried out in 1855. The chancel was newly roofed and the east wall of the chancel with its large window entirely rebuilt. The south porch underwent complete restoration and a new vestry was built on the north side of the chancel.



Footnote: The Saxon name Cheddington and the fact that the church is built on a wooded hill give ground for believing that the first Christian church here was built on the site of an old pagan temple. It was a frequent practise of the heathen Saxons to build their temples among the trees on hilltops. St Augustine, who came to convert England in 579 A.D. was advised by Pope Gregory the Great 'that heathen temples were not to be destroyed but turned, whenever possible, into Christian churches and that the huts which they used to make of boughs of trees round the temples were still to be used for amusements on Christian festivals'. If this happened at Cheddington, then the church built in the 12th century replaced a much older building.

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10th August 1946