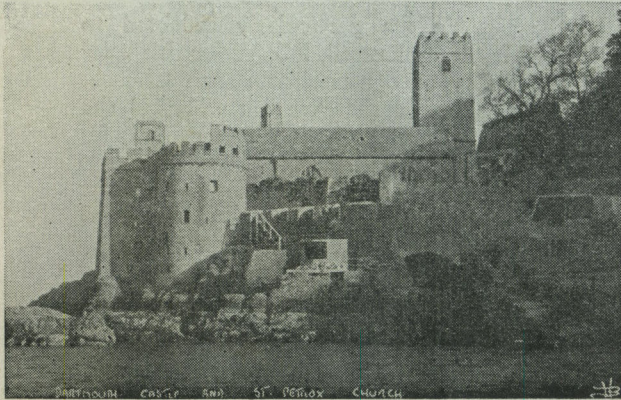

THE STORY OF



St. Petrox Church

PRICE 3D

We are particularly indebted to Mr. Percy Russell, F.S.A., for this brief history of our ancient Parish Church. It is hoped that visitors will find the compilation both interesting and instructive. It is perhaps significant that although so many Churches and historic buildings were damaged or destroyed during the late war, this Building, standing in such a conspicuous and exposed position, remained intact throughout those dark years. This is a cause for thanksgiving. The photographs of the interior and exterior respectively have been kindly supplied by Mr. Bernard Wakeman, B.Sc., to whom we express our gratitude. W. A. Roberton (Vicar) St. Petrox Vicarage, Dartmouth.

DARTMOUTH

"SAINT PETROC (or Petrox at Dartmouth and in Pembrokeshire) has left a deeper impression in the West of England than any other saint." In support of this statement, Baring Gould and Fisher (*Lives of the British Saints*) list a score of surviving dedications to the saint, and it is likely that as many more stood originally in his name. The cell at the mouth of the Dart may have been founded by him either on his departure for, or return from, his journey to Rome. It is difficult, if not impossible, to believe that any religious foundation had a continuous existence in so exposed a spot during four hundred years of piracy following the death of the saint about 594 A.D.; but it may be that, here as elsewhere, the primitive chapel was adjacent to a holy well, and that the latter allowed the name to bridge the centuries. Spring water still runs into the harbour from below the platform on which the existing church is reared.

It is not until 1192 that any written record is available. In that year a deed was drawn by William, son of Stephen (of Tunstal), restoring to Richard the Fleming all the land of Dertmeta which is above Wyke and *between* the monastery of St. Peter and the land of Stoke. The land referred to is clearly the settlement of Little Dartmouth, but the "monastery of St. Peter" must surely refer to the religious settlement called St. Petrox.

It is just possible that this establishment of a cell of monks may have had its origin in 1177, when a remarkable, but well authenticated, incident occurred. St. Petrox, like some other Celtic saints, had his followers in Brittany, as well as in England and Wales. Amongst these were the monks of St. Meen near Rennes; and they contrived to steal

away the body of the saint from Bodmin, and bear it to their own church. Roger, Prior of Bodmin, successfully appealed for redress

to Henry II., and, on his orders, Rolland of Dinan mustered his men and compelled the Abbot of Meen to surrender the sacred body. The relics were carried with great ceremony, first to the King at Winchester, and then to Bodmin ; where the chest which contained them still survives. The chronicles do not describe the route which was followed ; but as Dartmouth was one of the principal ports for Brittany, it is at least possible that the relics were landed here.

Whatever the occasion of the building of the chapel, it is likely that in 1192 it was maintained to provide a light at the harbour entrance. The whole coast was fringed with chapels in medieval times, some of which were used for a few years, whilst others were in service for centuries. The lonely site at the mouth of the Dart would seem to have been abandoned at some date before 1332 ; when Bishop Grandison licensed two priests to celebrate in the chapel of St. Petrox, built, as it was said of old, in the parish of the church of Stoke Fleming, the rights of the parish church being preserved. Seventeen years later William Smale (mayor in 1346) was contemplating " the endowment of a chapel at Saint Petrox."

Out of one or other of these schemes developed the chapel of St. Petrox for the use of the residents in that part of Dartmouth which lies along the harbour edge between Bayard's Cove and the harbour mouth. This was known as South Town and was in the parish of Stoke Fleming, which village is fully two miles away.

By 1425 there is mention of the wardens of the store of the chapel of St. Petrox, and in 1438 a forty days¹ indulgence was granted by Bishop Lacy for building, main-taining and repairing the parochial chapel with cure of St. Petrox. Granted that the people of South Town were better off by reason of the liberty to use St. Petrox as their parish church in place of the distant Stoke Fleming, it still seems extraordinary that they were content to maintain and enlarge a building in so exposed and remote a situation until 1831 ; when the church of St. Barnabas was built as a chapel of ease in South Town itself. Without the bridge to assist the crossing of Warfleet Creek, winter journeyings for worship, christenings and funerals must, on occasion, have been arduous indeed. Probably the site was determined by the influence of the Carew family, who erected their manor house close by, whilst there were a score or two of parishioners not far away at the hamlet of Warfleet.

The chapel is known to have been a building of only " one roof." According to a writer in " Dartmouth Chronicle " (1st April, 1868) this "one roof" corresponded with the south aisle of the existing church. This may well be so, since Buck's view of the castle area of 1734 shows that the south wall was supported by two buttresses and had two small dormer windows ; and this tallies with a War Office plan of 1741. The three windows now existing would appear to have been traced to correspond with the two in the north aisle, erected in 1641.

The existence of the ancient font affords a puzzle, since these venerable relics with the palmette decoration are usually ascribed to the twelfth century, a date long before any parochial use of the chapel of St. Petrox. Several of these heavy fonts have been rescued from a spell of duty as garden ornaments, so that it is not certain for what church the font was originally intended. It evidently lay in the churchyard for some years, but was observed in use in 1845.

The period between 1600 and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642 was one of great prosperity in Dartmouth, owing to the development of the Newfoundland codfishery. To this period belong the fine brasses of John Roope (1609), Elizabeth Plumleigh and another, now grouped together at the east end of the Church. It is significant that the list of incumbents in the Bishop's Register commences at this period (Edmund White 1610-1620). The parish registers also date from 1610.

As a consequence of this prosperity and the increase of population, the people of Dartmouth were able largely to rebuild and very much enrich the town church of Saint Saviour's in the years 1631-1636 ; a work which was followed by a subscription towards the rebuilding of the church of Saint Petrox in 1641. Both the tower (with a 20-foot spire) and the two arcades, as well as the windows on the north side were built by craftsmen who could only work in the Gothic tradition, though this had lost much vitality since the XVth century. Over the main door and on the pulpit the date 1641 is inscribed. There was, until 1885, a great western gallery (similar to that at St. Saviour's), some part of which has been refurbished as a memorial to those who fell in the wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945.

Scarcely was the building completed than it was in danger of ruin by reason of the Civil War. The whole castle area was used, first by the Parliamentarians and then by the Royalists as a place of defence, the church being used as the main provision store for a considerable garrison. Fortunately the fabric survived and escaped the fate of the neighbouring manor house, which was burnt out and never rebuilt.

Besides the brasses mentioned, there are numerous slabs of slate and stone recording the burial of members of the merchant families of Newman and of Holdsworth, the latter of which for a hundred years held as a sinecure the governorship of the castle.

In the aisles may also be seen fragments of the old gallery, with the Royal Arms (1660), two Holdsworth funeral hatchments and a good set of Charity Boards.

The Charitable gifts recorded were eventually consolidated by the Charity Commissioners as part of the Dartmouth United Charities, and the income made available to the Vicar and Churchwardens for distribution in the parish.

After the building of Church Day Schools (now the Church Hall) by voluntary subscription in 1823, and the building of the new Church of St. Barnabas in 1833, the Church of Saint Petrox fell into disrepair, but considerable alterations at St. Barnabas in 1884 necessitated the re-use of the older church, and after that time it has been used for Services on the fine summer evenings from Whitsun until the end of August, when returning Dartmothians and Visitors love to meet in this hallowed building for a service. The Bells ring out their message of welcome across the water to jassing shipping. The Church is also open for private prayer and meditation.

It may well be said that the builders "built better than they knew," for whilst they sought to provide for the every-day needs of their parish by an adequate church and cemetery they have bequeathed to thousands a powerful impression of the serenity and strength of the Christian Church, founded upon a rock, which neither wind nor wave shall destroy.

FURTHER NOTES

The windows in the north aisle are in memory of Major General W. E. Mountervn who died in 1897, and to William Mountervn, ensign of the 8th King's Regiment, killed in action before Delhi in 1857. The central East window with its interesting symbolism was installed in 1927 in memory of George Parker Bidder, the celebrated engineer and mathematician. On either side of this are windows bearing the arms of the Newcomen family (north) and of the Roope and Brooking families (south). In the south aisle are windows to the memory of Alfred Challice Johnson, M.A., an instructor in the training ship Britannia—precursor of the Royal Naval College, and in memory of Langmead Casey Pillar (died 1893), who was responsible for the extensive alteration to St. Barnabas Church in 1884. He was Churchwarden for 19 years.

The West window was blocked for many years, and was re-opened in 1924 as a memorial to the men of the parish who fell in the war of 1914-1918. Their names were inscribed on part of the woodwork of the old gallery, and to them have been added the names of Servicemen and civilians who fell in the war of 1939-1945

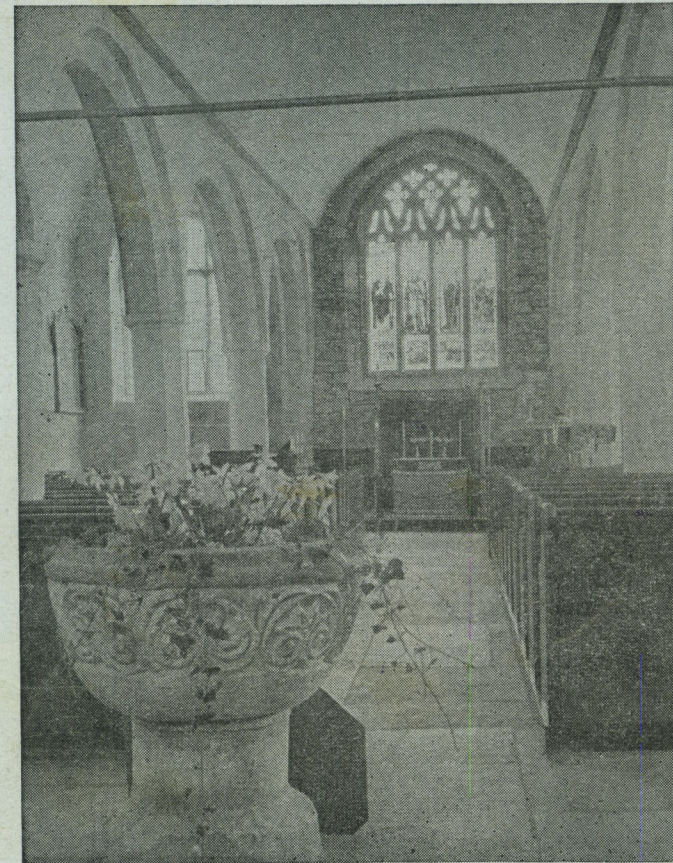
The six Bells were tuned and re-hung in 1947 in memory of Mr. Walter MacKinnon, a parishioner. The Carved Chair in the sanctuary was the gift of Mr. Edward Tew, of Gunfield, a Warden and a member of a family long associated with the parish.

In the Churchyard, near the main door, is the tombstone of Samuel Codner, a Newfoundland merchant, who founded the Newfoundland Mission (later the Colonial and Continental Church Society) in 1823.

The stone shaft erected in the yard is variously held to be that of a cross of 15th century, or possibly of the old Manor House sundial.

On the brass of Mistress Barbara Plumleigh is the inscription :—

Here lyeth the wife of John Plumleigh, who Barbara had to Name.
Whose vertuous Life and Godly Death hath left her lasting Fae,
Of Rich and Poore she was beloved, to Y one and Neighbour kind.
Two Sons and Daughters 4 she bare unto her Husband deare,
And dyed when age had neere run out ye Four and XXXth year,
Whose corps Have Thou O Death Destroy, yet Christ shall raise again
And it conjoin with soul in Blisse for ever to remaine.
For Death to Life A Passage Is, as Scriptures ALL Record,
Blest are the Dead therefore that Die in favour of YE Lorde.



Interior, Looking East