

Aspley Guise Village and Church

We are very fond of our village and church history and wonder if you, who have come to celebrate the marriage of loved ones and friends may be interested too.

The church is dedicated to St. Botolph, an East Anglian Saxon Abbot who died in 655 AD. The village is first mentioned in 969. It was one of 12,500 Anglo Saxon villages at the time of the Norman Conquest. These were allocated in 1066 to Normans who had funded the 695 ships, horses and soldiers for the invasion. We probably had a wooden church/chapel connected with the Lord of the Manor. The Normans were keen to govern by church and state and built 6,000 stone churches in the next 150 years. Ours was started by 1220 and bits of it survive in the North wall and arcade and the fourteenth century tower. We have to admit that most of what you see is the result of a great Church of England restoration of the nineteenth century.

You entered by the west door under the ancient tower. We used to have a south facing entrance porch but that disappeared when the south aisle was built. You must have passed the 14th century font and how that survived Cromwell's iconoclasm is a mystery. Fonts are usually near the entrance because Baptism is the entry into the Church.

The marriage takes place at the east end, facing the altar and towards the Holy land. The bride and groom will stand by the altar rail for the immediate holy space beyond the rail, the sacristy, is just for the priest and his acolytes, (if he has any.) Our Rector is called Graham Bradshaw. This is set beyond the twentieth century Screen surmounted by a Cross. The remains of the old Rood Screen, which was scrapped at the Reformation in the 1540s, now separates the Lady Chapel from the North aisle. Look up above there and you will see an ancient King post and roof and crude carved angel heads, perhaps portraying some long gone parishioners. Inside this chapel, as well as our War memorial, there is a stone tomb of a knight in chain mail with a lion at his feet. This is the tomb identified with his coat of arms, of Sir William Tyrington (died 1400.) He was the guardian of the young Anselm de Guise II whose father may have died in the Great Plague. Protected by the carpet are two ancient Brasses, one of a priest, John Daneurs who died in 1414 and the other of Sir John Guise IV who died in 1501.

How did our village get the name Aspley Guise? Asplea was originally a clearing in the Aspen trees. Those trees were purported to shiver in the breeze because their wood was said to have been used for the cross at the Crucifixion. Guise came much later. Hugh de Burgh, co Regent during the minority of King Henry III and also Chief Justicar of England, became the owner of Asplea in the 1220s. He married Margaret, the sister of the King of Scotland. They became Earl and Countess of Kent. Their daughter and heiress Ann, married Anselm de Guyse and inherited the village at the Countess's death in 1257.

Anselm added Guise to the village name and brought in a gibbet, a tumbrel and stocks and arranged with the King for us to have a fair at St. Botolph's day which was good for trade. It was in 1540 that John Guise V arranged with Henry VIII to swap Aspley Guise for more land in Elmore, Gloucestershire where the family lives to this day. Our village was added to the King's estate at Ampthill. On inheriting, Queen Elizabeth sold Aspley Guise to a Knight of the Garter, Sir Richard Lee, a military engineer whose work you can see in the defensive walls of Boulogne and Calais. His daughter married Edward Sadlier the son of the richest Tudor commoner in England. Aspley Guise remained in the descendants of that family for 200 years. Sadlier graves are near the Lady Chapel altar. Remember to look at our treasured Jacobean pulpit. It has lost its base and sounding board but gained Flemish carving of high quality, a spoil of the Napoleonic wars.

Aspley prospered and there are some fine houses in the village. We have memorials in the north aisle to Frances Northcliff the owner of the beautiful Aspley House on the Bedford road. After her first much older husband died she won a court case to keep the house. Immediately, she married William Northcliff who was responsible for that Wren style frontage which graces our village. She died in a road accident in Dunstable in 1724. Next to her plaque is one to William Wright, headmaster 1778-1807 of Aspley Guise Classical Academy. This was a successful boarding school founded in the 1720s by Robert Sawell in Guise House, Church Street. Sawell's daughter married an ambitious student, Francis Moore from Somerset in 1766. He became a large landowner and planted some 51,000 Scots Pines in the area from which we benefit today. He built the Georgian house now the hotel in the Square. His bachelor grandson John Vaux Moore became the Rector here in 1850. For the next 20 years he took responsibility for the restoration and extension of the church, particularly building the south aisle. There are memorials to him and his mother in the Nativity Chapel in the south east corner. All the stained glass, by F. Baillie and G. Mayer in the south aisle, was given by him. The chapel altar window of relevant saints to the history of the church and Diocese was a gift of the banking family the Hoares and is the work of Michael O Connor.

The nativity Chapel is named after a beautiful Nativity window, the work of C E Kempe's workshop. It is well worth a look. The glorious East window over the main altar is thought to be the work of Herbert William Bryans, a pupil of Kempe and designed by Ernest Heasman, see the feathered angel wings. Christ is in the centre with St. Alban on his right. We are in St Alban's Diocese. He was England's first Christian Martyr. On Christ's left is St Anselm, a Norman Archbishop of Canterbury. This is a memorial to two young Downe's sons from Aspley House who were killed in France at the beginning of the Great War in 1914. Another war memorial window portraying St. Michael is in the north wall. It is designed by George Parlby, look for a portrait of the young soldier in grisaille at the bottom right corner. As the bride and groom leave the marriage ceremony the church bells will often peel out in celebration. The six bells have 720 changes with about 5,000 peels. They reflect the happiness we wish the bride and groom.