

St. Mary's through the Ages - 13th Century



Architectural evidence dates the core of the building to around 1200, characterised by the chamfered semi-circular **Chancel** arch and the little window in the south wall of the Chancel – the word 'chancel' is from the Latin meaning 'to enclose by a lattice'. In the church's original form clergy and choir would be in the Chancel while the congregation would stand in the Nave.

As well as worship the **Nave** was also used for lay purposes such as Courts of Justice, Parish meetings and for storing goods belonging to the parishioners. The congregation in this early Church would look with wonder towards the Chancel with its hidden ceremonies and Latin chants. There were no pews and the elderly and infirm would sit alongside the walls where there would be some form of seating.

Over the course of the 13th century most parish churches took on the appearance familiar today. The church tower and porch declared the pride of each community and the wealth of its senior citizens. The tower began as a place of security, often with a priest's room high off the ground and reached only by a ladder. It developed into a chamber for hanging bells.

Porches were equally significant. Since churches were usually locked to protect Chancels and keep out vagrants and thieves, porches were where conscientious clergy performed their parochial duties.

St. Mary's through the Ages - 14th Century



The history of the manor of Offwell during the medieval period is a complex one but Offwell was once part of the 'Honour of Okehampton', a massive conglomeration of estates that formed the power base of the Norman Baron Baldwin. By the beginning of the 13th century the Honour had passed to one of England's great noble families, the **Courtenays** (ancestors of the Earls of Devon) who dominated the region. The owning family would hold the advowson: the right to appoint the Rector.

The west tower of the church was probably built in the early part of the 14th century as the doorway and the neatly made stair turret appears to date from that time.

During the 'Little Ice Age' in the 14th century most of the rivers in Europe froze over. Winters were bitterly cold and prolonged, reducing the growing season by several weeks. These conditions led to widespread crop failure, famine and population decline. In England even the King, Edward II, had difficulty finding food.

Then, in 1348, the first wave of **bubonic plague** struck England. Small rural communities like Offwell were probably better protected than towns, but mortality was very high (the Black Death killed around one-third of the population of England) and although it is known that a young Thomas de Courtenay bought the manor of Offwell in 1341 at this point the records, too, descend into darkness.

St. Mary's through the Ages - 15th Century



The Bishops' registers contain no further information about Offwell until 1410 when the Rector, John Kykke, was pardoned for being non-resident in his parish. An important duty of the Bishop was to ensure the clergy were not absent from their parishes without permission or without making provision for curates and vicars to fulfil their duties. John Kykke must have been a serious offender, since a sequestration order was imposed on him. Eleven years later, on 13th February 1421, he obtained a proper licence to be absent from Offwell until the following Michaelmas (29th September). It is possible that he served as a military chaplain to **Henry V's** army in France. He received a further licence to be absent on 7th December 1425, this time for a year.

In June 1433 John Kykke became a Canon at the secular college at Ottery St. Mary and his successor was John Hereward who was appointed by Bishop Lacy to inquire into the vacancy at the church of Northleigh and, later, the church of Gittisham. Offwell would have three more rectors before the turn of the century and this illustrates how rapidly the advowson changed hands at this period, but whether this was by outright purchase or by rotation between part owners of the manor, is not clear.

St. Mary's through the Ages - 16th Century



Rev. William Hawker was appointed rector in 1505 and it was during this time that the **north aisle**, with its fine arcade and robustly decorated capitals, was built. This extension would have significantly increased the capacity of the church, and may reflect a rise in the population, but such aisles had another function; they were a favourite burial place for prominent members of the community, and Offwell's north aisle might have formed part of a large chantry chapel, enclosing the tomb of the founder under the panelled arch (where the organ presently stands). A chantry chapel was used by the priest to sing masses for the soul of the founder of the chapel. At the time of the Reformation chantry chapels were abolished.

In 1529 **John Stone** became Rector of Offwell. When he entered the parish, England was part of Catholic Christendom, but by the end of his rectorship in 1545 Henry VIII had broken away from Rome and the church was well on the way to becoming the Protestant Church of England. John Stone's successor, Richard Gyll (1545-1571) had an even stormier ride under Edward VI as reform began to have serious financial consequences and parishes lost an important source of income.

New taxes were introduced on sheep and wool and in July 1549, in what was to become known as the **Prayer book Rebellion**, a peasant army numbering several thousand men of Devon and Cornwall marched on Exeter and besieged the city, demanding a return to the old Latin Missal and to numerous pre-Reformation practices.

St. Mary's through the Ages - 17th Century



On the eve of the **Civil War** the great majority of the Church of England clergy were sympathetic to the Royalist cause and opposed to the Puritans and the Parliamentarians. In Offwell **Thomas Jones** took his opposition to Parliamentary rule much further than most – he was an active Royalist, and was first arrested by an order from the House of Commons in January 1641, having preached an anti-Parliamentarian sermon. The following year he was arrested while riding with a servant of the leading Royalist, Prince Rupert.

On release from prison he was so continually harassed and molested, including the threat of hanging, that he left Offwell in order to join the Royalists in Cornwall. Unfortunately, he was attacked by Parliamentarians and ended up back in prison.

On returning to Offwell he continued to oppose the Parliamentary edicts and the Rectory was attacked no less than seven times. On one occasion they threatened to carry away his aged father prisoner *'who was no less than 86 years old'*. He was rescued by the women of the parish. On another occasion Jones was *'forced to creep into a Mault-Kiln in his own house'*. Missing their intended prey *'...they wreck their malice on the household-stuff... they plunder the maid-servants, and that of their smocks'*. Jones eventually had to flee the country and did not live to see the monarchy restored.

St. Mary's through the Ages - 18th Century



John Rost was Rector from 1667 until his death in 1713, a period of nearly 46 years. The earliest church wardens' accounts for Offwell date from John Rost's time and from this date we are given an insight into the day-to-day running of the parish. This included several charitable payments to families afflicted by smallpox during the years 1708 to 1723.

At the end of the 17th Century there was a flurry of church repairs and improvements, inspired perhaps by a new air of optimism and the end of two centuries of religious trauma. In the summary of repairs carried out in the year 1699 we find a significant outlay: *'Paid Mr. Pyke for setting up the sentences in ye Church - £5. For beer and making a scaffold for Mr. Pike: 1s. 8d.'* The large sum indicates that this was a major work. The term 'sentences' means passages from scripture and this is undoubtedly a reference to the painting of two large Biblical texts on the south wall.

In 1700 three crosses were set up on the church roof and in the same year the north door of the church was repaired. In 1724 a new and splendid pulpit was made of oak at a cost of £36; carvings of the four evangelists were added in 1784. The singers' gallery was built in 1754, at the west end of the north aisle. The Georgian box pews were installed at some point prior to 1770 and lowered, into their present form, in 1852.

St. Mary's through the Ages - 19th Century



The Copleston era began in 1772 when Rev. John Bradford Copleston purchased the advowson of Offwell church. For the next 181 years members of the Copleston family served continuously as Rectors of the parish.

The Revd (later Bishop) Edward Copleston was by far the most distinguished member of the Copleston family. At the age of 24 he became Rector of the parish for only four years, between 1800 and 1804, but he continued to take a great interest in its people and landscape and he derived much pleasure from his many visits. In a letter to a friend just before he died Bishop Copleston described Offwell as his *"favourite retreat from the world, with its walks, rhododendrons and the 'old labourers'"* with whom he loved to converse.

Bishop Copleston built Offwell House, the Vestry, the stone cover and pump for the Well, the School, the Bishop's Tower and the old Rectory. When he died, in 1849, his brother, John Gay Copleston, continued to press ahead with church improvements. The church gates were improved, belfry windows added to the tower and a new bell recast.

In the mid 19th Century parish clergymen across the country were attempting to raise the standard of worship in their churches. John Gay Copleston was determined to bring the church up to date; he removed the singers' gallery in the north aisle and replaced the musicians with a 'Scudamore' organ.

St. Mary's through the Ages - 20th Century



During **John Henry Copleston's** tenure as Rector (1880-1918) the west window of the north aisle was installed (dedicated to his older sister, Catherine Anne) and the church had heating for the first time.

During the period 1914-1918 35 men from Offwell Parish served in the Great War and two were killed in action. John Henry Copleston died just eleven days after the Armistice, on 22nd November 1918. A tribute to him read: *"...when the question of a shortage of food became acute, Mr. Copleston, although he was of an advanced age, turned to and went about doing his utmost to increase his cultivation. No doubt this extra work... has hastened his death."*

In 1935 **Frederick Elford Copleston** became the last of the Copleston rectors, combining the Rectory of Offwell with Widworthy. He retired in 1954 and died five years later. During WWII 42 men and women of Offwell served in the Armed Forces; three men were killed in action.

Electric lighting was installed in 1946 plus a new church lectern, which incorporates an ornate Flemish carved panel depicting the Last Supper. During the incumbency of William Wright (1969-1985) Offwell church acquired what is now one of the most striking features of the church interior – the early 16th century tower screen, which originally stood in the old church of St. Mary Major in Exeter.