



*Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Belstone.*



## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN, BELSTONE

There has been a church at Belstone since at least 1260 AD, the date when the first recorded priest, William de Speccot, was appointed. However, at the time, Belstone Church was 'void by official sentence' and it seems probable that a priest was here well before that date. Indeed, the incised granite cross, which stands on the south wall of the Church, near the Lady Chapel, has been dated from somewhere between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. This indicates that there has been active Christian worship in the area since before the Norman Conquest and the Manor of Belstone is recorded in the Domesday Book, confirming the existence of an established farming community from the Anglo-Saxon era. Tin streaming on the moor and granite quarrying and cutting seem to have made Belstone wealthy enough to afford to build a church, even in such a remote place.

There is some evidence in the building of its Norman origins, but the present small and solid granite building, built to withstand the Dartmoor winters, dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest surviving written record of it is in an 'Inventory of Church Goods' compiled in 1547. The first reference to the Church being dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin is later still, in 1738. A contemporary Visitation Report complements the parish on the good state of the Church fabric, but this appears to mark the beginning of a long period of neglect and decline. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century a series of reports testified that the whole fabric was in a very sorry state. A partial restoration was undertaken in 1855, including the rebuilding of the singing gallery, a traditional feature of many small churches.

There is also a record of an unusual and distinctive feature of church life in Belstone: men and women were separated during services at this time, with the men sitting on the south side of the Church and the women on the north. The custom was satirised in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1863 by this verse:

The churches and chapels, we usually find  
Are the places where men unto women are join'd;  
But at Belstone, it seems, they are more cruel hearted,  
For men and their women are brought here to be parted

But by the 1870s the Church had again become very neglected and decayed and there was a further major restoration in 1881 by the Exeter architectural firm, Hayward & Son, which swept away all the old pews, carved rood screen and rotting floor. Much of the present day simple granite church building,

which is listed by English Heritage as Grade II\*, dates from this restoration, which was held up at the time as 'an example of the way in which church restorations should be carried out.' Since then, succeeding generations have continued, and continue, to restore and enhance the beauty of the original mediaeval fabric.

If you stand inside the door and look around the Church, beside you is the ancient font, a relic of the earliest church building in which parishioners have been baptized since perhaps William de Speccot's day. It reminds us that by Holy Baptism we enter into membership of Christ's Church.

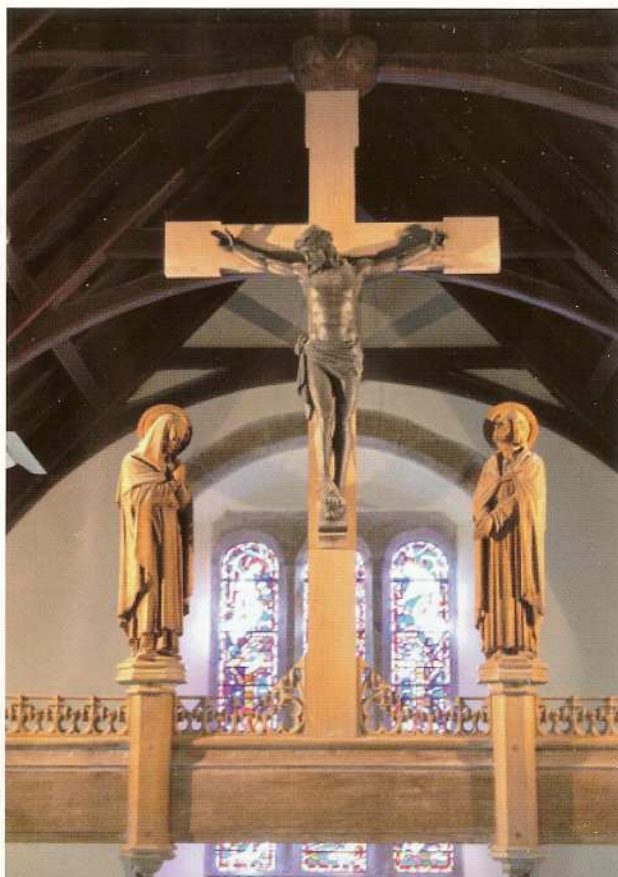
Close by is the organ, which was built in 1862 by J. Walker & Son one of England's leading organ builders, and stood originally in the private chapel of the magnificent Tudor mansion, Knole House in Sevenoaks, Kent. It is notable for its light and bright tone and was installed in 1930, replacing the harmonium, which in turn had replaced the quartet that had provided music before the 1881 restoration.



As you walk down the nave, you will observe that the Church is dominated by the Rood Screen bearing the figure of our Crucified Lord flanked by his mother, Mary, and St. John. The traditional old wooden screens, which can still be seen in many local churches, were much more elaborate, separating the body of the church from the Sanctuary.



The present simpler and more open Rood Screen was erected as the parish's memorial to those killed in the First World War. Their names are recorded on a bronze plaque on the wall to which has been added a second with the names of those killed in the Second World War. The woodwork of the Rood Screen is by Herbert Reed of Exeter and the bronze figure of Christ by Faith Craft's Studios. The image of the crucified Lord reminds us that he who died on the Cross still lives with us now and that it is his will that all may rise with him, and live as he lives.



The low octagonal granite pillars between the nave and the south aisle no doubt date from the first building of the Church. They were each cut in one piece, probably in the small granite quarries around Belstone Tor.

The stone with the ancient incised cross is also local granite. The first record of this cross is when it was discovered during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century demolition of the Church meeting room and alms houses, which adjoined the pub along what is now the north wall of the churchyard. The stone had been used, face down, as the threshold to the meeting room. Later it was incorporated into a garden wall at the Rectory about a mile west of the Church, but when the wall in turn was demolished in the 1930s, the cross was returned to the Church and leant against the outside of the north wall. It was moved to its present position inside the Church in 2005, providing a tangible record of well over a thousand years of Christian worship.



If you stand in front of the High Altar you will see that the centre piece is a copy of the Madonna and Child by Marie Basaili, the original of which is in the National Gallery. This altar piece was given in 1912 and is an excellent example of late Edwardian design. The previous altar was moved to the south aisle and rededicated in 1930 to our Lady Mary, St. Lawrence, and St. Francis of Assisi in memory of the Rev'd Herbert Wilson Milner who did so much to restore the Church and keep the faith alive in Belstone in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.





To the right of this altar is a modern stained glass window, depicting the same three saints. Most of the rest of the stained glass was installed as part of the 1881 restoration, but the large and dramatic window above the High Altar depicting the nativity, with all the associated sheep, cows and other farm animals, dates from 1939. Further recent additions are the priest's chair and desk and the fine oak pews, which are pleasing modern replacements for the previous free-standing chairs. The tradition of enhancement and refurbishment is also continuing; in 2005 a fine pair of new oak notice boards were installed in the porch. The work of a parishioner, Arthur Herbert, they cleverly incorporate his initials and MMV, the date in Latin, into the design.

Set into the floor of the south aisle are three 17<sup>th</sup> century gravestones bearing the names of old Belstone families, including Reddaway, the surname of the present Lord of the Manor of Belstone. They are among a number of

interesting gravestones in the Church and churchyard, several of which are listed Grade II by English Heritage.



At the back of the south aisle, over the vestry door, hang the arms of George III. When King, he ordered that the Royal Arms should be placed in all churches as a reminder that the monarch and not the Pope was the final authority in England.

Out of sight in the tower hang six bells that are still regularly rung. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century only three

are recorded. They probably survived until 1751 when they were recast and a peal of five hung. These bells bear the following inscriptions:

- (1) God bless the Church    (2) Prosperity to the Parish
- (3) God save the King      (4) Thomas Reddaway and Simon Coombe,  
Churchwardens
- (5) I call the quick to church and dead to grave

In 1955 the bells needed rehangng and at the same time a sixth bell was added with the inscription:

- (6) God bless the Parish

Outside the church the massive granite blocks forming the walls of the south aisle and the imposing two-stage tower, unbuttressed and with obelisk pinnacles, are both noteworthy. From the churchyard you can also appreciate that the Church remains the focal point of the village.

Before leaving St. Mary's Church, 1000 feet up on the edge of Dartmoor, do not forget to pray for the present priest and people of this parish, for the multitudes that need God's grace in today's world and for the departed priests and parishioners over so many generations. Our prayers will be with you.



Let us always pray that the Church may  
truly be the body of Christ,  
in loving servanthood, humility and availability;  
that as pastors and teachers,  
prophets and evangelists,  
givers, carers, and listeners  
the whole people of God may make Christ known.  
(Susan Sayers)