

St Peter's Church

a talk by Margaret Taylor



A packed room gathered to hear Margaret speak about the history of St Peter's Church, (formerly the Old Parish Church), and the discoveries that came to light during the recent 'reordering' project. Margaret stated that a wooden church may have existed during Saxon times, but no such church was recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086; the oldest surviving parts of today's church date to the last quarter of 12th century. Picking out the building's most interesting features, Margaret traced its development from Norman times. Of particular interest were the pseudo-door in the south wall, with its rounded arch; the medieval wall paintings of SS Eugenia, Agnes and Maria; the three surviving consecration crosses; the beautiful 15th century porch, with its perpendicular-style tracery; and the gallery and wooden tower, both dating from the 17th century.



The reordering project, Margaret went on to explain, was prompted by an attack of death watch beetle in the floor of the church. As plans took shape, speculation grew as to what might be discovered beneath the floor, perhaps the legendary crypt of the Earls of Anglesey, five of whom were known to have been buried in the church between 1686 and 1737.

Work duly began, and on the fourth day workmen pierced a hole into an underground void. Over succeeding days, first a flight of 25 steps was uncovered, then a bricked-up door. The workmanship was superb, and excitement mounted. Surely this was the Anglesey crypt. Sadly, no. The vault contained the tombs of the Wilmot and Morant families. Henry Wilmot, Lord of the Manor from 1768 and for whom the vault was built, was a London lawyer who died in 1794. Judging by the size of his coffin, his nickname, 'The Giant', was richly deserved. Wilmot's successor as Lord of the Manor, George Morant, also lies in the vault, which measures 31' x 21' and contains 20 niches on two levels, 13 of which are occupied. Now re-sealed, an inscription in the floor marks the location of the vault.



At a later stage of the project, the tombs of Katherine Sophia Cox, who died in 1780, and her daughter Catherine Sophia Grant (possibly lying on top of her husband) were discovered. The Coxes were residents of what is now Farnborough Hill.

Towards the end of the project, one of the elusive Earls of Anglesey was finally discovered. Beneath the gallery lie the fifth Earl and his Countess, not in a grand crypt as previously thought but simply buried in the church. It is now believed that this was the case with all the Earls. The plaque from the Fifth Earl's coffin has been removed and will be displayed somewhere in the church in due course.

Following all the excitement surrounding the discoveries, the time eventually came to complete the project. A limecrete base was laid, under-floor heating installed, and a stone floor laid on top. A curved ramp was created to give disabled access to the Chancel and new Communion Table and Rails. Chairs have replaced the pews, giving the church much more flexibility as to how the space can be used. Finally, the blocked Norman doorway in the south wall was opened and a glazed door installed, bearing a fish design created by a local student.

The audience had clearly been absorbed by Margaret's fascinating story, and had plenty of questions and comments for her. She told us that she plans to write an account of the reordering project, which will no doubt be of great interest to residents of Farnborough.