Swine, Priory Church of S. Mary

St. Mary's Parish Church, Swine is silent in more ways than one. Firstly the Church is situated off the A165 as it passes beyond the Eastern edges of Hull on its way to Bridlington. There is a marked contrast as city life suddenly recedes and true rural peace descends in the quiet of Swine, sitting amidst the lush Holderness countryside, complete with sheep in the Churchyard. Secondly, apart from the chiming Church clock, the Church bells do not ring out over the fields for practice nights, to celebrate weddings or to call people to worship.

Swine probably has Roman origins, but was settled by the Saxons in the 6th century. It is thought they brought the name Swine with them from the small town of Zwine, not far from Stettis. The parish of Swine at one time included Ellerby, Skirlaugh, Coniston, Burton Constable and Drypool.

Initially a Cistercian Nunnery was founded in the region of 1150 by Robert de Verli, then Lord of the Manor. The Nuns Church was without an aisle, and only 76 feet long. The present Church was built to the due east of this and was much larger, originally being cruciform in shape; two aisles were added around 1170 and parts of the Church can be dated from then. The Clerestories and aisle buttresses are certainly of this time and survive alongside the 16th century aisles; Newbald stone features in some of the 13th century work.

The misericords are of note, and are thought to date from the 13th or early 14th century, of which eight of the original sixteen survive. The carvings include a bearded man looking through his legs, a griffin, a Nuns head in a wimple with the veil drawn mysteriously halfway over her face, a grotesque head with foliage coming down from the mouth, which might possibly be connected with the 'green man' of Saxon times. There are four monuments thought to be the best in Yorkshire. Alabaster beautifully carved by foreign craftsmen, they all date from between 1370 and 1430 and are to members of the Hilton family, the men in their chain-mail armour; Sir Robert Hilton being Lord of the Manor around that time. There is also a stone monument of a knight and his lady in the wall of the South aisle, less elaborate. The rood screen is dated 1531, carved with fine linen-fold panels and pomegranates; it includes emblems of the Hilton, Darcy, Melton and Lascolles families. At this time the North aisle was widened to allow the building of the Hilton Chapel. The pulpit is dated 1619 and the font the late 18th century. The vestry and porch were added to the Church in the 19th century and a stained glass window to the South aisle in 1921. However, most of the glass is plain includ-ing the imposing great East window which allows so much light into the Church interior. The tower portion is blocked off by a wood screen at present, passing through which one gains access to the short climb leading to the belfry and bell chamber.

The Nuns Church was destroyed during Henry VIII's reign, where now stands a farm house. The large central tower was replaced in 1787.

The present tower itself is strongly built and in good repair. Unfortunately the stability of the oak frame within the tower is questionable, its weakness due to the small section timber from which it had been made, although there are no problems where the sub-structure joins the walls.

The bells are a ring of four. They were cast, after the rebuild-ing of the tower, in 1800, at Barton-on-Humber by the bell founder James Harrison. They are thought to be the heaviest complete ring surviving to have been cast by him. The approximate weights of the bells are:-

Treble 10 cwt.

2nd 12 cwt.

3rd 14 cwt.

00 Tenor 18 cwt.

The first three carry the inscription James Harrison of Barton, founder, 1800. The Tenor is inscribed:- Wm Thorp John Acklem William Raines Thomas Turner Churchwardens 1800, Rev. Matthew Williamson (Vicar). James Harrison of Barton, Founder.

The bell fittings were replaced before 1920, possibly the work of Alfred Bowell, from Ipswich, and the canons were removed. The stays and sliders are in good order as are the wheels, though the rims are falling off. The headstocks, of cast iron, steel RSJ's and hardwood are adequate. The plain bearings are rusty like the gudgeon pins and clappers - not surprising, as regular ringing ceased in the late 1950's, the last documented ringing being for the Queens silver jubilee in 1977. However, the bells were sufficiently cleaned and checked for a trial ring in 1991, after which it was estimated that approximately £7,000 would be required to provide suitable restoration. At the present time this is being considered, with the possibility of augmentation to six. For those of us who have yet to hear St. Mary's bells ring out over Swine, we look forward even to the restoration of the four heavy bells.

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