

The Parish Church of St John the Evangelist

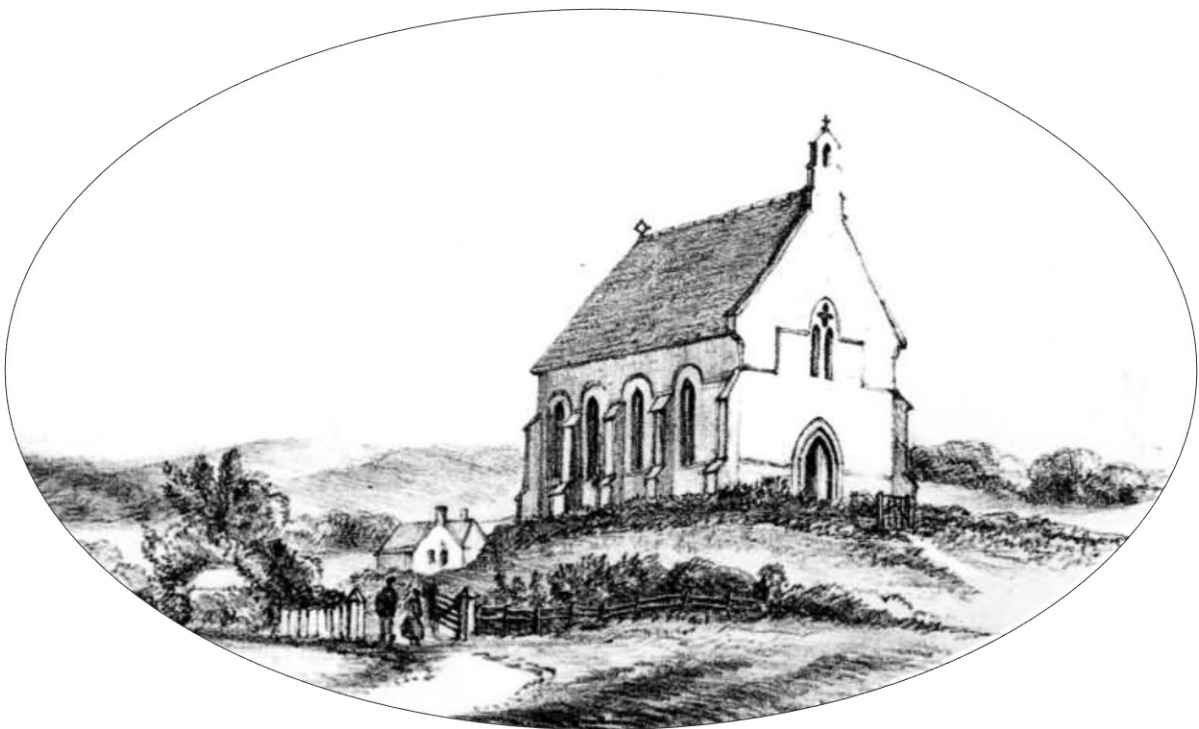
DIOCESE OF  THE CHURCH
CHICHESTER OF ENGLAND



A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST JOHN'S CHURCH

Nestled amongst the trees, the Parish Church of St John the Evangelist enjoys an idyllic location; situated on the edge of the beautiful Ashdown Forest, tucked away from the road, hidden in woodland and out of sight from passing traffic but only a mile from the town of Crowborough. It is a haven for wildlife, where deer frequently eat the plants and flowers in the churchyard, and is often referred to as the *“little church in the woods.”*

However, although the church appears to have been built in a small clearing in the woods it is actually in stark contrast to 1839 when the church was constructed on a bare unwooded hillside being plainly visible from all around. Revd Thomas Helmore (Priest-in-Ordinary to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, and Master of the Boys of the Chapel Royal) stated in his journal after attending the 10th anniversary of the consecration of St John’s in 1849 that the church is *“on the slope of a hill in a most wild region”*.



Crowborough Chapel c1840
West Crowborough Society

The trees quickly grew around the church, for by 1890 we read: “... we soon reach a plantation of trees, situated within which is the Church of S. John, Crowborough town. It is a charming little church, nestled in a quiet, peaceful spot, where there is every inducement to meditation and reflection. If your soul can be affected by solitude and the association of spiritual mysteries, you will feel yourself swayed by them as you linger near this little church.”¹

This was not the original planned location for the church. According to local legend, the De la Warr family had chosen a place on Church Hill on the opposite slope of the valley from where it is today, close to the Five Hundred Acre Wood and directly beside the track along which the smugglers, or ‘owlers’ drove their mule caravans by night. However, these smugglers became alarmed by the idea of the then fairly remote part of the Forest becoming busy with builders and eventually congregations, and so the legend records that when the first loads of dressed stone and other materials were unloaded the smugglers removed them on pack mules under cover of darkness to the site of the present church. The De La Warr family seem to have accepted what was perhaps Divine intervention of their site choice, and so work commenced on the church in its present location. Although there is no documented basis for this widespread and oft-repeated legend, it is fact that the title Church Hill does not appear on maps before 1840.

photograph by A.H. Homewood, Burgess Hill c1910



¹ *An Illustrated Guide to Crowborough*, Boys Firmin, The Hansard Publishing Union Ltd

St John's was founded by Elizabeth, Countess De La Warr who was a supporter of the early Victorian Catholic revival. Rev Thomas F Charlton (Vicar of St John's 1926-1931) wrote that she *"considered the responsibility laid upon her family to provide for the spiritual needs of those who lived in this corner of their great domain"*.



*Elizabeth Countess De La Warr
& 1st Baroness Buckhurst
Sissinghurst Castle, National Trust*

Until St John's was built the population had to travel to Withyham, and her desire to meet the spiritual needs of the area was supported by Rev William Davidson, Rector of the parish of St Michael and All Angels, Withyham who wrote in 1839: *"The roads leading from the Hill to the Church [in Withyham] are at all times difficult, and in Winter they are hardly passible"*. He described the inhabitants of the area: *"With a very few exceptions, the population is extremely poor; by far the greater part being Labourers, or of that class which is commonly known by the name Foresters. Thus situated, it may easily be imagined how great was the destitution of Sabbath ordinances, and of all those convictions and motive to Duty, which Religion is wont to inspire; as well as those spiritual consolations and temporal aids which all, - but especially the Poor, - do occasionally require, and which a Christian Church and Ministry are graciously designed to afford. Deeply convinced of the vast importance of such an undertaking, and anxious that it should not be delayed, the Patron and Rector resolved, in the Spring of 1838, to advertise for Tenders for the Building of a Chapel, holding themselves responsible for Payment, but purposing to appeal to the Christian Benevolence of their friends and acquaintances for pecuniary aid, under a strong persuasion that for such a cause the appeal would not be in vain"*²

To this end fourteen acres of the Ashdown Forest was set aside for a new church to be built, officially a 'chapel of ease' for Withyham but clearly built to be the personal church of Elizabeth, Countess De La Warr. The Rev William Davidson, Rector of the parish of St Michael and All Angels, Withyham ensured the church was served by his Curate until 1841, when he was succeeded by Elizabeth's younger son the Rev the Hon Reginald W Sackville-West, a chaplain to Queen Victoria and Lord Chamberlain, who *"for many years took a keen interest in the services at St John's, and in all matters relating to the church."*³ He remained the Rector at Withyham until becoming the 7th Earl De La Warr in 1873.

² Crowborough & North Weald Monthly Magazine, May 1990

³ Historical Notes of Withyham, Hartfield and Ashdown Forest, C N Sutton, A K Baldwin, 1902

NEW CHAPEL, AND SCHOOLS, &c.

AT CROWBOROUGH,

IN THE COUNTY OF SUSSEX.

Between the two main Roads, which lead from Uckfield to Tonbridge Wells, on the border of Ashdown Forest, and on the North-west side of Crowborough Hill, there is a portion of the extensive Parish of Withyham, having a population of upwards of *Five Hundred*, at a distance of between three and four miles from the Church.

The Roads leading from the Hill to the Church are at all times difficult, and in Winter they are hardly passable.

With a very few exceptions, the population is extremely poor; by far the greater part being Labourers, or of that class which is commonly known by the name FORESTER.

Thus situated, it may easily be imagined how great was the destitution of Sabbath ordinances, and of all those convictions of and motives to Duty, which Religion is wont to inspire; as well as of those spiritual consolations and temporal aids which all,—but especially the Poor,—do occasionally require, and which a Christian Church and Ministry are graciously designed to afford.

In order to mitigate in some degree the existing evils,—for evils, and of a serious kind, they truly are, it was proposed, in the beginning of the year 1838, to build in the heart of this District a Chapel, a House for a Minister, and Two Schools, as the most efficacious means, in dependence on the divine blessing, of enlightening the minds, awakening the conscience, improving the morals, alleviating the sufferings, and generally bettering the whole condition of the Inhabitants.

A few acres of Forest land, sufficient for the various Buildings, a moderate sized Glebe, and a Garden Field for the Boys' School, were given, free of expense, by the Lord of the Manor and others who had an interest in it; but such is the poverty of the Inhabitants of this District, that it was in vain to hope from them a Contribution of even a few Pounds.

Deeply convinced of the vast importance of such an undertaking, and anxious that it should not be delayed, the Patron and Rector resolved, in the Spring of 1838, to advertise for Tenders for the Building of a Chapel, holding themselves responsible for Payment, but purposing to appeal to the Christian Benevolence of their friends and acquaintance for pecuniary aid, under a strong persuasion that for such a cause the appeal would not be made in vain.

A Contract having been made, the Foundation was laid on the 11th of August, in the same year; but on the 29th of October, when the Walls were nearly completed and the Roof Timbers were fixed, the violent storm, which prevailed throughout the South of England, blew down part of the Wall, and the whole of the Timbers, occasioning thereby a damage somewhat exceeding One Hundred Pounds. However the work was resumed, and on the 23rd of July, 1839, the Chapel was consecrated.

It contains 207 Sitings; of which number 193 are Free and Unappropriated. A Minister has been appointed; its Services seem to be much valued, there being usually a very crowded and devout Congregation; and there is a fair promise of all the anticipated advantages being in due time realized.

Two School-rooms, together with a House for the Master and Mistress, have also been built during the present year; and being now ready for use, they will be opened as soon as a suitable Master and Mistress can be provided.

Although several very liberal Contributions have been received,—as will be seen in the accompanying List,—yet as they still fall far short of the expense incurred, a further appeal is thus made to those, who feel an interest in such undertakings of acknowledged utility, that the Debt already contracted may be liquidated before the contemplated House for the Residence of the Minister be entered upon.

Withyham Rectory, October 3rd, 1839.

The endowment from St Michael and All Angels to St John's consisted of 11 acres of glebe; £60 from the Rector of Withyham; £40 secured by deed on the Buckhurst Estate; £50 from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners – total, £150⁴.

*“A Contract having been made, the Foundation was laid on the 11th of August, in the same year; but on the 29th October, when the Walls were nearly completed and the Roof Timbers were fixed, the violent storm, which prevailed throughout the South of England, blew down part of the Walls, and the whole of the timbers, occasioning thereby a damage somewhat exceeding One Hundred Pounds. However the work was resumed, and on the 23rd July, 1839, the Chapel was consecrated.”*⁵

Crowborough Chapel, as it was originally known, was consecrated by the then Bishop of Chichester, Dr William Otter. Rev Charlton (vicar of St John's 1926 – 1931) described the impressive ceremonies: *“It was a great day indeed! It must have been a picturesque and stirring scene: the cannon booming from the battery in front of the great house of Buckhurst, as they did on all great occasions; the Earl and Countess with the Lord Bishop setting out in their carriage with outriders, a numerous company of the nobility and gentry following, and, at last, in the new little stone building perched on the flank of Crowborough Beacon, the apostolic words were spoken and the acts performed which made it none other but the House of God and the Gate of Heaven”*.⁶

Rev Charles Sutton, successor to Revd Read as Rector at Withyham, wrote, *“It was a source of the greatest comfort to him, in the closing years of his life, to think of each of the distant districts of Withyham being duly provided with churches and services”*.

The original church was of very plain design and consisted of nave only, measuring just 60 feet by 25 feet and 43 feet high. It is in Early English style but has no tower or spire, just a small bell-cote at the west end, and was designed and built by William Lamport Blaker of Worthing following the design of the Church of St Mary and St Nicholas, in Littlemore, Oxford which had been built just three years earlier in 1836 by H J Underwood for John Henry Newman (later Cardinal Newman of the Roman Catholic Church). In their original state, neither church had a chancel, but St John's at least had a west gallery.

The ornate double-hammerbeam nave roof features shields bearing the arms of the Diocese of Chichester, England, Sussex, the Sackville family, St John and the Church of England Province of Canterbury.

⁴ *Historical Notes of Withyham, Hartfield and Ashdown Forest*, C N Sutton, A K Baldwin, 1902

⁵ *Crowborough & North Weald Monthly Magazine*, May 1990

⁶ *The Story of Crowborough*, Courier Co Ltd, 1933

The bell in the church bears the inscription “*St John’s Church, Crowborough, the parish of Withyham, 1839*”. A tradition is to the effect that it was cast in the Jinks Furnace ironworks at the bottom of Marden’s Hill, but if this is so it must have been some time before the chapel was erected. Some 170 years later in December 2010 the clapper dropped from the bell to the ground just outside the West door whilst it was being tolled for the 10 o’clock Mass, narrowly missing the people gathering outside; fortunately, no-one was injured and the bell was sent away to be repaired and has now been restored to the bell-cote.

The stone Altar table dates from 1839, and was consecrated along with the church at the express desire of the founders. Rev Thomas F Charlton (Vicar of St John’s 1926-1931) writes, “*The significance of a stone altar being placed in an English church ninety years ago cannot be over-estimated. It shows that St John’s was one of the earliest churches of the Catholic Revival.*” During the Reformation moveable Communion Tables were adopted and stone altars destroyed as it was believed they represented the sacrifice of the Mass.



Originally the altar was sited at the west end of the nave and a carved stone cross was situated in the central recess. It was re-located to its present position when the chancel was built in 1870 some thirty years after the church was built, which was again funded by Elizabeth, Countess De La Warr. *The Illustrated London News*, dated 18th November 1870 reported *A new chancel to the chapel of St John, Crowborough, was consecrated by the Bishop of Chichester on the 2nd inst.* Curiously the plans attached to the faculty show a chancel with a three-sided apse and a plain, pointed chancel arch, but the finished chancel has five sides. The architect’s correspondence attached to the plans state that their work was complete giving no explanation for the change, so the reasons are not known. The chancel roof is painted red and decorated with gold stars, and has eight ribs decorated with black and gold chevrons supported on corbels.

In 1895 the reredos was given by the widow of James Ramsbotham a wealthy mill owner and generous patron of St John’s, the centre-piece being *The Adoration of the Shepherds* with figures of St John the Evangelist and St James of Compostela (brother of St John) on either side. It was designed by Charles Eamer Kempe, who also designed the majority of the windows in the church. Set into the centre of the reredos is a tabernacle, for reserving consecrated bread from the Mass with a brass door decorated with a Pelican in her Piety and cherubs’ heads. The reredos was hand-carved and painted in Oberammergau, Bavaria by Joseph Meyer, who for many years was the ‘Christos’ in the famous Passion Play.



Detail of the reredos

*Joseph Meyer
'Christos' in the Passion Play
at Oberammergau c1900*





The pulpit with 17th century Flemish carved panels on the side, was given in about 1870, reputedly from the De La Warr's private chapel at Buckhurst Park.

The panels represent the following scenes (left to right): St Peter holding a large key and a book, St John the Evangelist holding the Chalice with a snake on top (this is an emblem for St John), a Nativity scene with Mary, Joseph and the Christ Child, with an ass, ox and an angel below a stylised roof, and St Thomas holding a spear and a book in each hand.⁷

The lead-lined stone font near the entrance to the church was donated by the Baden-Powell family, who lived in Speldhurst, but it is unclear when this was received.



⁷ *St John's Guide*, Michael Hewens, 2015

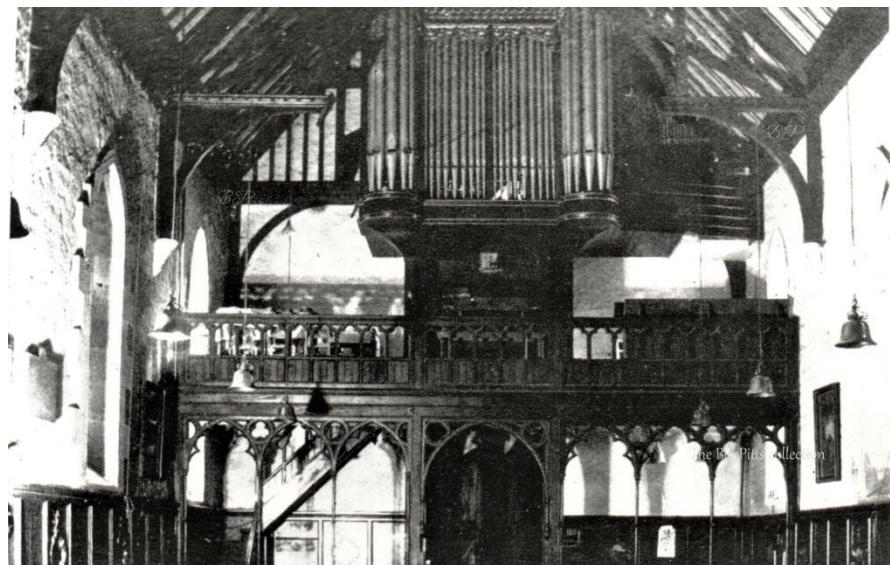


St John's, 1890's⁸

An organ gallery was created in 1890, with a vestry below, where the font now stands; two years later the organ was moved to an organ-chamber built on the north side of the chancel where the Sacristy now is to provide seating for the

Sunday School children. A new organ, purchased in 1899, was re-sited back in the organ gallery in 1930.

As mentioned by Rev William Davidson, Rector of the parish of St Michael and All Angels, Withyham in 1839, the parishioners of St John's were in the main very poor, and so between 1873 and 1886 the church organised

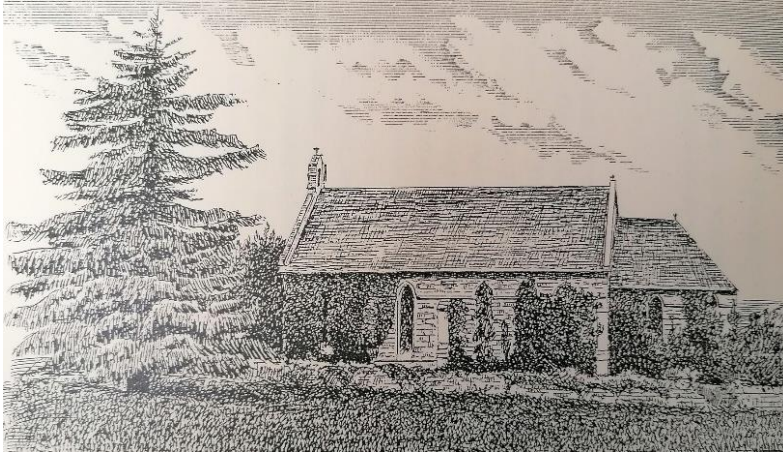


and ran a clothing club and a children's shoe/boot club, whereby the more affluent residents including Earl De La Warr, Rev J F R Read (Rector at Withyham), J Ramsbotham and Rev Edward Herbert (vicar at St John's) amongst others, contributed money which presumably was allocated to those deemed to be most in need.

Later the system changed and parishioners were able to subscribe to clothing and coal clubs. In 1907 Rev Walter Dingwell, vicar of St John's, wrote *it will be seen that the money subscribed to these two clubs has been the means of inducing a number of poor people to save nearly £50 towards providing themselves with coal and clothing in the winter months, a form of self-help much commended. Gifts which depend upon absolute destitution are only an*

⁸ *Memories of Crowborough & Rotherfield*, Robert Pitts, Facebook

inducement to poor people to present themselves in as pitiable a plight as possible. It is much better to encourage people to live decently by mostly helping those who help themselves. The usefulness of both these clubs could in all probability be much extended by increasing the amount of the subscription.



St John's Church
1890

St John's remained a chapel of ease to the parish church at Withyham until 1870, the year in which Elizabeth, Countess De La Warr died, when the land and buildings were conveyed to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The Revd Thomas Rudston Read, Rector of Withyham was responsible for creating the independent ecclesiastical parish of Withyham St John through Order in Council, dated 21st December 1871, with the Rev Edward Otway Herbert (then priest-in-charge) as the first vicar.

Following the building of a railway station in Crowborough in 1868 things began to change. In 1885 Dr Charles Leeson-Prince published *Observations on the Topography and Climate of Crowborough Hill*, encouraging people to live in the 'healthy' climate of the Ashdown Forest. The development of the Warren began, and between 1875 and 1900 a number of 'villas', large detached houses with substantial grounds, were built in Crowborough. E V Lucas described the area in his *Highways and Byways of Sussex*, "*Never was a fine remote hill so be-villa'd. The east slope is all scaffold poles and heaps of bricks, new churches and chapels are sprouting, and many hoardings announce that Follies, Pierrots, or conjurers are continually imminent. Crowborough itself has shops that would not disgrace Croydon, and a hotel where a Lord Mayor might feel at home. Houses in their own grounds are commoner than cottages*"⁹. Estate agents described the neighbourhood as "Scotland in Sussex". It is also interesting to note that the population of Crowborough Town (Withyham St John's) was in 716 in 1891 and 1089 in 1931.¹⁰

⁹ *Highways and Byways of Sussex*, E V Lucas, 1904

¹⁰ *St John's Guide*, Michael Hewens, 2015

Withyham.

S. John's, Parochial Funds, 1907.

NOTES.

1. THE SCHOOLS.—During the Christmas holidays the rooms over the class-room were removed, and the Managers propose to pay for the cost of this out of the balance in hand. Since then H.M. Inspector has visited the School and recommends the building of a new Infant School. Whether or no the Managers agree to this, it will certainly be necessary very soon to increase the accommodation in some way or other, and the best way to meet the expenditure is for all parishioners to subscribe to the School Fund, so as to have as large a nest-egg as possible in hand when the time comes to build. The wisdom of this may be seen in the fact that it was unnecessary to issue any special appeal for funds for the alteration of the class-room.

The following amounts were received after the School account was closed: Mrs. Wren £1 1s. and the Rev. B. T. Winterborn 10/-.

2.—CHRISTMAS TREATS.—In addition to subscriptions, some gifts of toys, books, etc., were received from Mr. and Miss Humphry, Miss Jenkinson, Miss Lang, Mrs. and the Misses Le Hunte, and the Christmas tree was presented by Mr. Ramsbotham. Out of this fund 17/- was paid towards Girls' Bible Class Treat, and £1 4s. 4d. for Christmas gifts to the inmates of the Almshouses.

3. COAL AND CLOTHING CLUBS.—It will be seen that the money subscribed to these two clubs has been the means of inducing a number of poor people to save nearly £50 towards providing themselves with coal and clothing in the winter months, a form of self-help much to be commended. Gifts which depend upon absolute destitution are only an inducement to poor people to present themselves in as pitiable a plight as possible. It is much better to encourage people to live decently by mostly helping those who help themselves. The usefulness of both these clubs could in all probability be much extended by increasing the amount of the subscriptions.

4. THE READING ROOM.—This excellent little institution is worthy of all support. The number of members is larger than it has ever been. The monthly concerts have been very well attended. A new piano has been bought at a cost of £20; the whole of this sum, with the exception of £8 10s. already in hand, has been loaned in small sums by the members themselves. The Committee are now striving to pay back these sums and ask all interested in the Club to help them.

5. NURSING FUND.—This fund has a good balance in hand, due chiefly to some special donations in 1907. A few more regular subscribers of smaller sums would prevent the necessity of making special appeals.

6. CHOIR SUPPER.—As only 7/6½ was required to make up the amount of the cost of the Choir Supper, no appeal was issued, and the money was provided out of the Church collections.

7. DUNLOP TESTIMONIAL FUND.—When the Committee came to deal with the donations to "The Dunlop Testimonial Fund" it was found that a majority of the contributors wished that the money should be expended on personal gifts to Mr. Dunlop and family. After carrying out this wish a surplus remains in the bank of over £30, and with Mr. Dunlop's approval this money will remain in the names of the Churchwardens, and be used as occasion offers for the benefit of the sick poor of the parish, to help in defraying expenses for change of air after illness, either to the sea or elsewhere.

N.B.—All these funds have been audited and found correct by Mr. P. H. Phillips. The list does not include Summer Treats and Soup Kitchen, but it is hoped that these and some others may be added another year.

WALTER M. DINGWALL (Vicar).

The church was much decorated and beautified between 1895 and 1902. The chancel roof painted, black and white marbled tiles laid on the floor and the walls were beautifully stencilled, although these have very sadly been long-since painted over. The bottom-half of the chancel walls were panelled; the panels were painted a dark colour and had decorative stencilling around the edges. Photos from the beginning of the twentieth century depict panels wrapping the whole way around the chancel. However, the majority of these have since been removed leaving just a couple on the south side, mirroring the Sacristy wall, but again it is unclear when that happened.

Carved oak stalls and organ case were donated in 1901. These were carved by John Henry Grahame Dunlop (3rd November 1874 – 5th November 1917) the son of the vicar of St John's, the Rev Henry Beachcroft Buchanan-Dunlop, and designed by his friend Alfred Gilson Humphry. There is a commemorative plaque to this effect in the Chancel.

Most of the original windows throughout the church were replaced with many of the new ones being designed by Charles Eamer Kempe, although the original subjects of the old window were retained having been memorial windows to Lord and Lady De La Warr and their daughter, Lady Arabella Bannerman.

The Nave walls were panelled sometime between 1905 and 1918. They are depicted in a postcard which was posted in 1918 as being painted a very dark colour, which in turn must have made the church seem very dark indeed.

Windows in the Chancel

The windows in the Chancel are all by Charles Eamer Kempe, dated 1898, and are *in memory of George Earl De La Warr and Elizabeth his wife, the founders of the chapel and all the benefactors of the same.*

- The East Window: The Crucifixion
- Left apse: St George,
Patron saint of England
- Right apse: St Elizabeth and
St John the Baptist
- South wall: St John the Evangelist

This window is in memory of Fanny Dunlop, by her son Rev Henry Dunlop, vicar of St John's 1893 – 1907.

*St George*¹¹



¹¹ <https://sussexparishchurches.org/church/withyham-st-john/>

Windows in the Nave

South side:

1. St Peter: In memory of Mrs Ramsbotham, by Charles Kempe, 1898
2. St James: To commemorate the golden wedding in 1887 of Mr and Mrs Ramsbotham's by Clayton and Bell
3. St Paul: In memory of Mr & Mrs Ramsbotham's children who died as Infants, artist unknown. This window is of much poorer quality than the other windows in the church.

The windows on the north side of the Nave are all by Charles Kempe. Each window is split into two parts: the top sections depict Bishops of Chichester, representing three periods of the history of the English Church in Sussex, whilst the lower portions show the Christian story of the Nativity.

1. Top: St Wilfred,
founder of the See of Chichester
Bottom: The adoration of the shepherds
In memory of Catherine Constance Lang.

2. Top: St Richard,
bishop in mediaeval times
Bottom: The Visitation,
Mary is greeted by her
cousin Elizabeth
In memory of Emma Stern. Dated 1900.

3. Top: Bishop Andrewes,
Bishop of Chichester 1555 – 1626
Bottom: The Annunciation

Dated 1901 in memory of Queen Victoria; this window was paid for as the result of contributions of over a hundred persons, in sums varying from £10 to one penny.

St Peter





The beautiful ornate carving positioned above the Chancel arch depicts the Annunciation; Mary and the Archangel Gabriel are in the middle of the scene, with angels on either side. The Archangel Gabriel wears a gold cloak over a red robe, and carries a staff with a scroll bearing the words "*Ave Mar' Deo*". Mary wears a blue and gold cloak over a red gown. Her right hand is on her heart and in her left she holds a book. At the centre bottom is a gold vase containing lilies; these symbolise chastity and are associated with the Virgin Mary. Above the figures is the Holy Spirit, depicted as a dove.

It has not been possible to trace the exact age of this carving nor when it was installed in the church; it does not appear in photos taken at the very beginning of the Twentieth century, but is clearly visible in a postcard posted 1918.





*St John's postcard posted 1905
the stencilling on the chancel wall is just visible,
together with the chancel panelling and carved pews.
There is also evidence of significant damp on the walls.*

Both these photos were taken before the installation of The Annunciation.

A slightly later postcard posted shows the church redecorated and the panelling in the nave.





Postcard¹² posted in 1918 depicts the Annunciation, carved pews and dark wood panelling in the nave. In the chancel the stencilling on the walls is very clearly perceptible as are the organ pipes. It is not possible to make out whether the lights are gas or electrically powered.

¹² H Wilkins, *The Library, Crowborough*



St. John's Church, Crowborough.

15994.

An early postcard¹³ (date unknown), clearly depicting the dark wood panelling in the nave, however the stencilling on the walls has been painted over.

¹³ *Memories of Crowborough & Rotherfield*, Robert Pitts, Facebook



St John's today

The fourteen paintings around the nave depicting the day of Christ's crucifixion, collectively known as the Stations of the Cross, are believed to be Flemish. Again, it is unclear when they first appeared in the church, but they are not apparent in the 1918 postcard.

They depict the following:

1. Pilate washing his hands while Jesus is led away
2. Jesus receiving the Cross from two men
3. Jesus falls for the first time
4. Jesus carrying the Cross and
5. meeting His mother Mary
6. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross
7. Veronica offers Jesus a cloth
8. Jesus falls for the second time
9. Jesus carrying his Cross meets three women of Jerusalem
10. Jesus falls for the third time
11. Jesus is stripped of his garments
12. Jesus being nailed to the Cross
13. Jesus on the Cross. On the left is his Mother the Virgin Mary and St John and on the right is the kneeling figure of Mary Magdalene with Joseph of Arimathea standing behind
14. Jesus is removed from the Cross by the Virgin Mary assisted by St John. Also portrayed are Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea
15. Jesus being placed in his tomb by the Virgin Mary, St John and Joseph of Arimathea



Alongside the spiritual the social life of St John's also flourished. Rev Walter M Dingwell, (vicar of St John's 1907-1920) reported in 1907 that the Reading Room was being used as a both a club (possibly a small lending library) and also hosted monthly concerts: *This excellent little institution is worthy of all support. The number of members is larger than it has ever been. The monthly concerts have been very well attended. A new piano has been bought at a cost of £20; the whole of this sum, with the exception of £8.10s already in hand, has been loaned*



in small sums by the members themselves. The Committee are now striving to pay back these sums and ask all interested in the Club to help them. The Reading Room together with the land around it was conveyed jointly to the PCC and Diocese in 1920. It has been used by a preschool playgroup since 1978.



This is possibly the earliest colour photograph of Crowborough. It depicts the Reading Room and was taken by Ellis Kelsey, an Eastbourne photographer, on 10th September 1910 using the 'Autocrome' process (from the B Franks collection).



Entrance to St John's, 1890

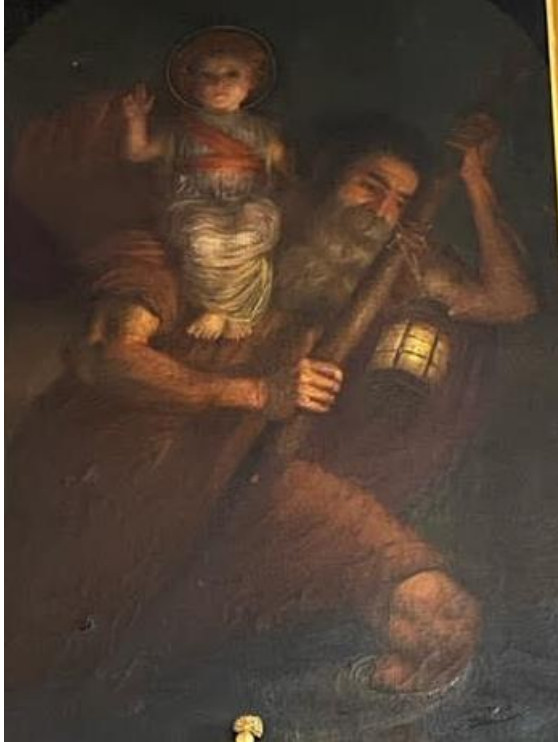
John's Church, West door.



St John's, 1900

St John's Church, Crowborough

*Memories of Crowborough & Rotherfield,
Robert Pitts, Facebook*



The site of the Horder Centre was built on the area of The Crowborough West Camp; this had been established on the site of an earlier Canadian army camp dating back from the First World War.

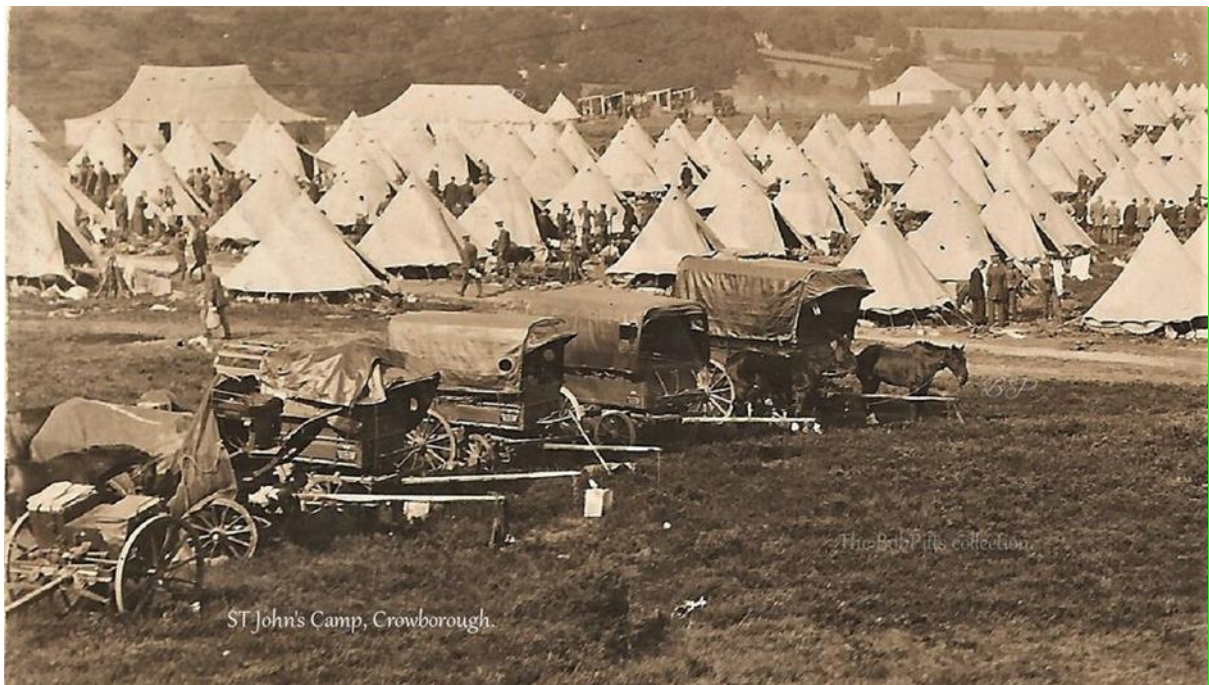
During the Second World War it was occupied in the early years by the 23rd Armoured Brigade, comprising the 40th, 46th and 50th Royal Tank Regiments who left for the Western Desert in 1942 and were replaced by the Canadian Grenadiers of the 22nd Canadian Armoured Regiment. In 1944 the Canadians took part in the fierce fighting in Normandy around Caen and Falaise and then went on into Germany.

Along with a Canadian flag, which hangs from the balcony, the oil painting of St Christopher carrying the Infant Christ across river was donated by the Canadian soldiers stationed there during the Second War. The painting is dated 1911 and signed "WF" (artist's identity unknown). A large oil on canvas painting of St Christopher carrying the Infant Christ across a river. A muscular bearded St Christopher is holding a staff with a lantern attached in both hands and carries the infant Child on his right shoulder. He is wearing a brown, knee length tunic and a purple cloak. The Child is haloed and has His right hand raised in the Latin form of blessing. He is wearing a thin, white robe and has a red sash around His upper body and over His right shoulder. The painting was cleaned and restored in 2024, and at a ceremony attended by Brigadier General Dwayne Parsons, Defence adviser for Canada it was unveiled by Mrs Lucinda Fraser, High Sheriff of East Sussex, on 2nd June 2024 to commemorate the 80th anniversary of D-Day.

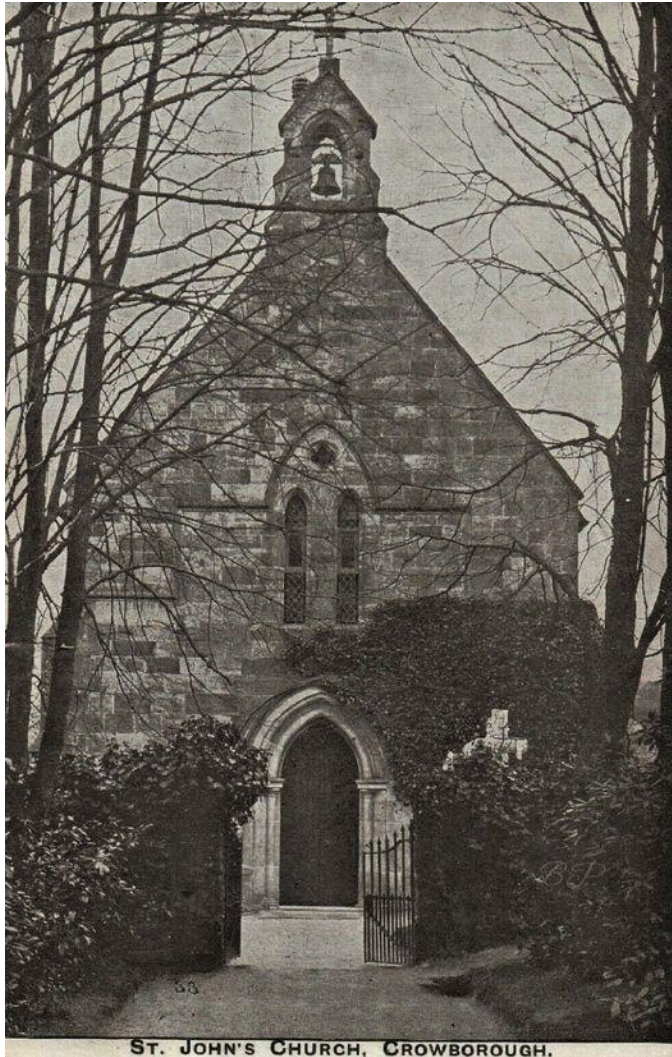


Aerial view of training camp, 1947 (the church is circled.)¹⁴

The same site had previously been used as an army camp during World War I

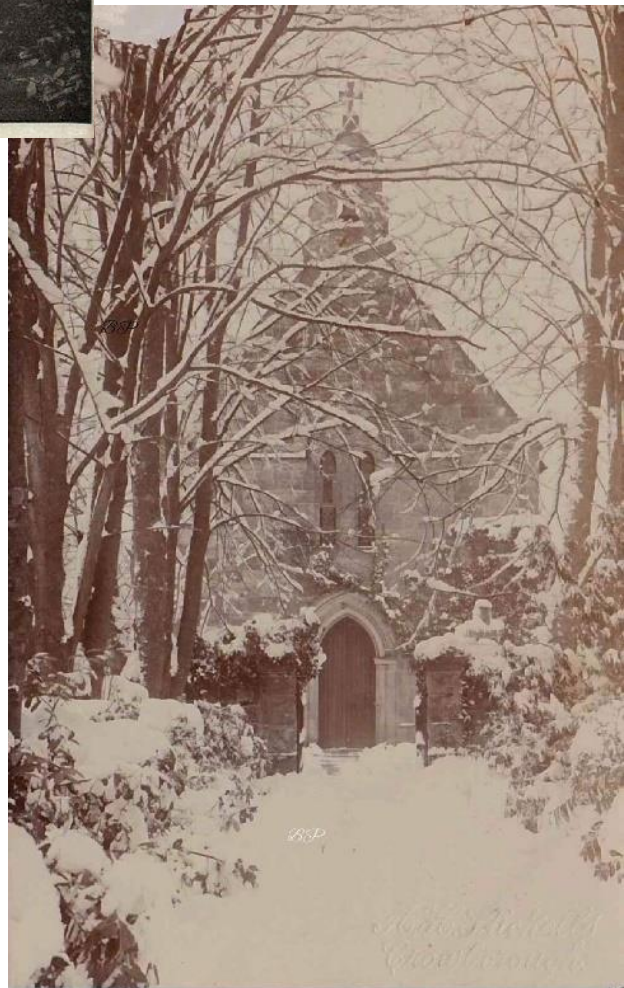


¹⁴ Memories of Crowborough and Rotherfield, Robert Pitts, Facebook



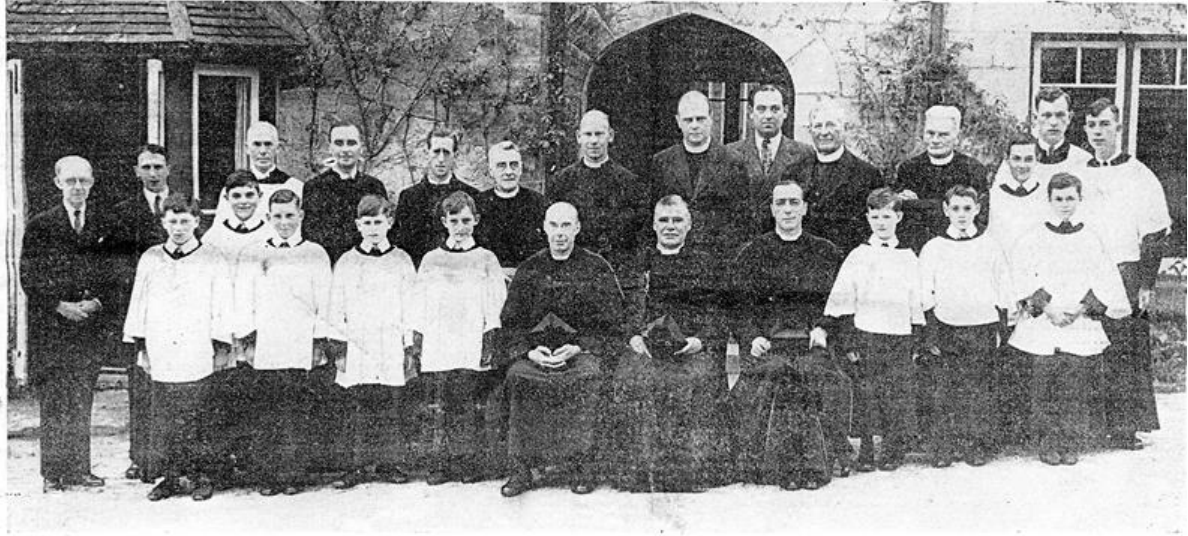
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH, CROWBOROUGH.

*St John's Church, 1904
The gates were removed
during the Second World War
to aid the war effort*



*St. John's Church
Crowborough*

CENTENARY OF OLD CROWBOROUGH CHURCH



Officials, clergy, servers and choir of St. John's Church, Withyham, Crowborough, grouped after Monday's service of the centenary of the dedication of the church. Seated from left to right: The Revs. T. F. Charlton, a former Vicar, J. J. Olive, Vicar, and F. Steel, at Tunbridge Wells.

At the end of July 1939 St John's celebrated the centenary of its founding. The *Crowborough and Uckfield Weekly* published a description of the celebrations. The Rev J Olive (Vicar of St John's) officiated at a solemn Eucharist, which was attended by a large congregation and local clergy together the Rev Thomas Charlton (Vicar of St John's 1926 – 1931) who had written a booklet to commemorate the centenary and in which he describes the founding of the church: *A little house stood in this area. This was said to have been originally a hunting-box of the lords of Buckhurst. It was enlarged to form a schoolmaster's dwelling and a residence for a priest. A churchyard was walled in, and within it arose the little church, known at first as Crowborough Chapel, under the patronage of St John the Evangelist.*

Rev Olive, in his sermon said *the rite of consecration carried their imagination beyond the mere collection of materials wrought into the building. The Church was itself a figure of the Christian Soul, a type of the new Jerusalem – more than a type, a little bit of heaven in which already we could take refuge, and encouraged, strengthened and renewed go forth once more to fight our battles, and qualify for our reward. One hundred years ago that day all that happened to that little building.... It needed only the apostolic words and acts of the Bishop to make this none other than the House of God, and the Gate of Heaven. That too was done and ever since – God's handiwork – it had stood firmly, builded in the stone of the countryside, with the foundations on the holy hills.*

"LITTLE CHURCH IN THE WOOD" CELEBRATES

THE church of St. John's, Withyham, the parish church of Old Crowborough, was consecrated on 31st July, 1839, by Bishop Otter, of Winchester, who had founded the Theological College in the Cathedral city 11 years before.

One hundred years of life and work were thus completed on Monday and during the week special services and a series of social gatherings have been held in commemoration of the centenary.

The founders of what is popularly known as "the Little Church in the Wood" were the 5th Earl and Countess De La Warr, who enclosed 14 acres of virgin forest.

"A little house stood in this area," writes the Rev. T. F. Charlton, who is the author of a booklet issued to commemorate the centenary.

"This was said to have been originally a hunting-box of the lords of Buckhurst. It was enlarged to form a schoolmaster's dwelling and a residence for a priest. A churchyard was walled in, and within it arose the little church, known at first as Crowborough Chapel, under the patronage of St. John the Evangelist.

"It was made to be almost an exact copy of Dr. Newman's church at Littlemore. In the year 1870 the chancel was built by Elisabeth, Countess De La Warr, and in the following year the church became a parish church, with the Rev. Otway Herbert as its first vicar."

SOLEMN EUCHARIST

The First Evensong of the Feast was held on Sunday, when the preacher was the Vicar (the Rev. J. Olive).

On Monday at 11.15 there was solemn Eucharist, which was attended by a number of the neighbouring clergy and a large congregation. Among those present were the Rev. L. G. M. Sheldon (Vicar of Crowborough), the Rev. A. B. Fisher (Vicar of High Hurstwood), the Rev. J. Arthur Brookes (Vicar of St. Michael and All Angels, Jarvis Brook), the Rev. G. H. Warlow (Vicar of St. Mark's, Hadlow Down) and the Rev. C. H. Bond (Jarvis Brook).

The Celebrant was the Vicar, with the Rev. F. Steel (Vicar of St. Barnabas, Tunbridge Wells) as Deacon, and the Rev. T. F. Charlton (who was Vicar of St. John's from 1926 to 1931) as Sub-Deacon. Assisting in the Sanctuary were past and present servers of the church. The music was impressively rendered, Mr. H. W. B. Raw-

together the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob."

BEYOND THE MATERIAL

The rite of consecration carried their imagination, said the preacher, beyond the mere collection of materials wrought into the building. The Church was itself a figure of the Christian Soul, a type of the new Jerusalem—more than a type, a little bit of heaven in which already we could take refuge, and encouraged, strengthened and renewed, go forth once more to fight our battles, and qualify for our reward. One hundred years ago that day all that happened to that little building.

The noble founders, George, Earl de la Warr, and Elizabeth, his Countess, had done their part. Of their munificence and their love for God, and the people who lived on their broad acres, they had given the site, the Church, and its furnishings, the Priest's house, and the School, and now all had been conveyed to the authorities of the English Church to have and to hold for ever. It needed only the apostolic words and acts of the Bishop to make this none other than the house of God, and the Gate of Heaven. That, too, was done and ever since—God's handiwork—it had stood firmly, builded in the stone of the countryside, with the foundations on the holy hills.

THE FUTURE

"You do well to keep your centenary with great gladness," said the speaker, "nothing in the way of its celebration could be too good. This Feast of Dedication is a Feast of Feasts. You have praised Him and thanked Him this morning in the ordinance of His love. You have pleaded that sacrifice that the work of the past might stand fast, and the work of the future be assured so far as it

other hands have passed it, guard it, keep it, use it to the honour and glory of God, and for the benefit of your own souls and those of all whom you and others can bring to Him here."

Following the service, the visiting priests and servers were entertained to luncheon at the Vicarage. The Vicar presided, and read a telegram from the Rev. Dr. Golding-Bird (Rural Dean of East Grinstead), congratulating the church and wishing them happiness and prosperity in the years to come.

HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

An excellent brochure on the church has been written by the Rev. T. F. Charlton, B.A., sometime Vicar of the Parish, and published at 1s. This takes the reader back to the time of Keble and the Oxford Movement.

"Now, among the many parish priests impressed and convinced by the arguments and teaching of the learned fathers of the Oxford Movement," says the author, "was the Rev. and Hon. W. Sackville-West, who became Rector of Withyham in 1841, a son of the 5th Earl and Countess De La Warr, whose seat was at Buckhurst in the parish. It is of interest that he had his first curacy under Archdeacon (afterwards Cardinal) Manning. The old church became, under him, an example of order and reverence in the conduct of its services, while with, once delivered to the saints, was proclaimed from its pulpit.

"There can be no doubt but that the Earl and Countess were themselves disciples of the Movement; they were certainly patrons and protectors of the vigorous but much-persecuted schoolmaster, John Mason Neale, whom they gave the wardenship of the ancient foundation, Sackville College at East Grinstead, which was in their gift. They gave, indeed, more than they knew for, Mr. Neale was to found the Community and Convent of St. Margaret which has been so blessed in its life and works.

"It may well have been, at the suggestion of the future Rector of Withyham the Vicar's parents, resolved to bulldoze a church for the hamlet and vicar of Crowborough, the underlying part of the parish, brother."

To make Misses M. etc. by providing a delegate, Mrs. T. the Countess Elizabeth Groves (Worth added the vicar's brother, on the north attend owing to ill and bade it before God Gen (Firle Estate), Mrs. Viscount G. A. Bishop, Mr. and in whose Miss D. Backshall of God she Backshall were also tablet in this obligation. It is prior



The figure of Our Lady, which hangs to the left of the chancel arch was donated in 1943. It was designed by Sir Ninian Comper, (1864 - 1960) and depicts Mary, wearing a gold crown over a white head covering, a blue and gold gown and gilded over-gown with red and gold decorated border. She holds the Christ Child who is dressed in a gilded robe with blue and gold decorated border. The subject of the carving and decoration is based on the biblical text from the Revelations 12: *“And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.”*¹⁵

This beautiful sculpture was given in memory of Amy Driberg by her sons, John, James and Thomas. The plaque beneath in Latin reads (in part): *“To the Greater Glory of God this image of the venerable Blessed Virgin Mary in pious memory of the most beloved mother Amy Mary Driberg who in this church worshipped God, the best and greatest, for many years, and who died in the year 1939.”*



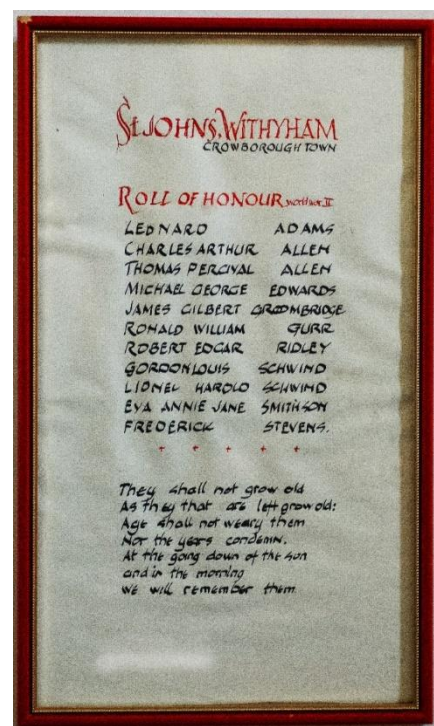
¹⁵ *St John's Guide*, Michael Hewens, 2015

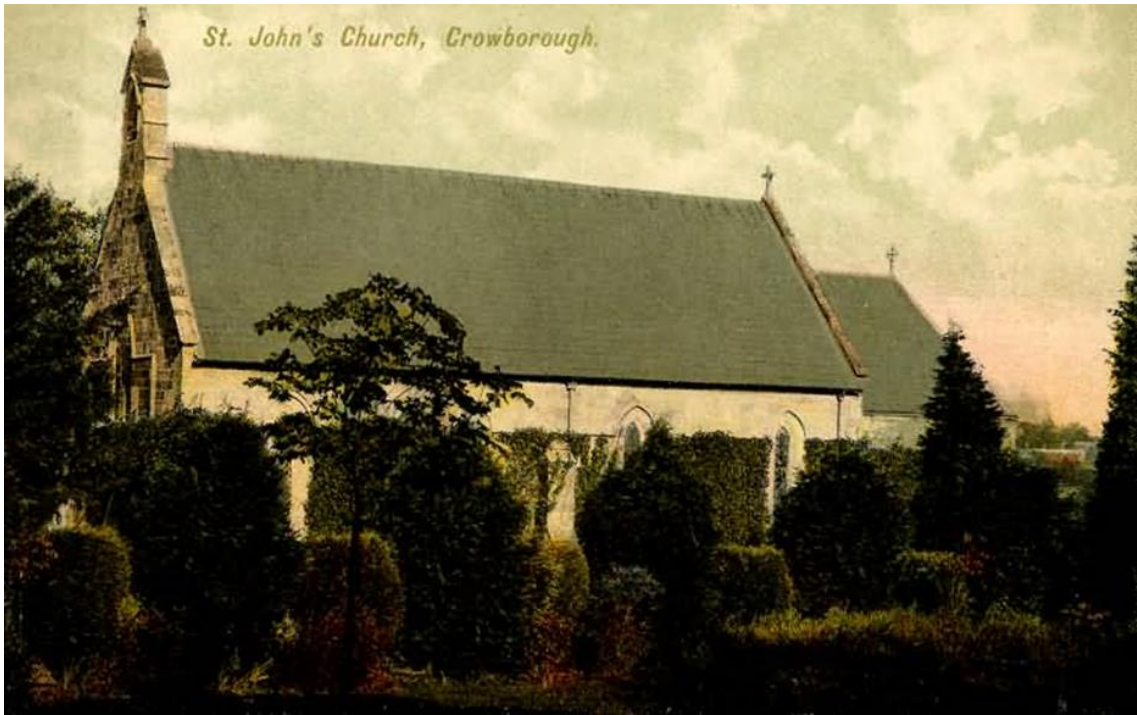
After the two World Wars Roll of Honour boards to commemorating those who lost their lives were placed at the back of the church near the font. Details of those commemorated on these memorials along with those honoured on memorials around the church are to be found in a separate booklet.



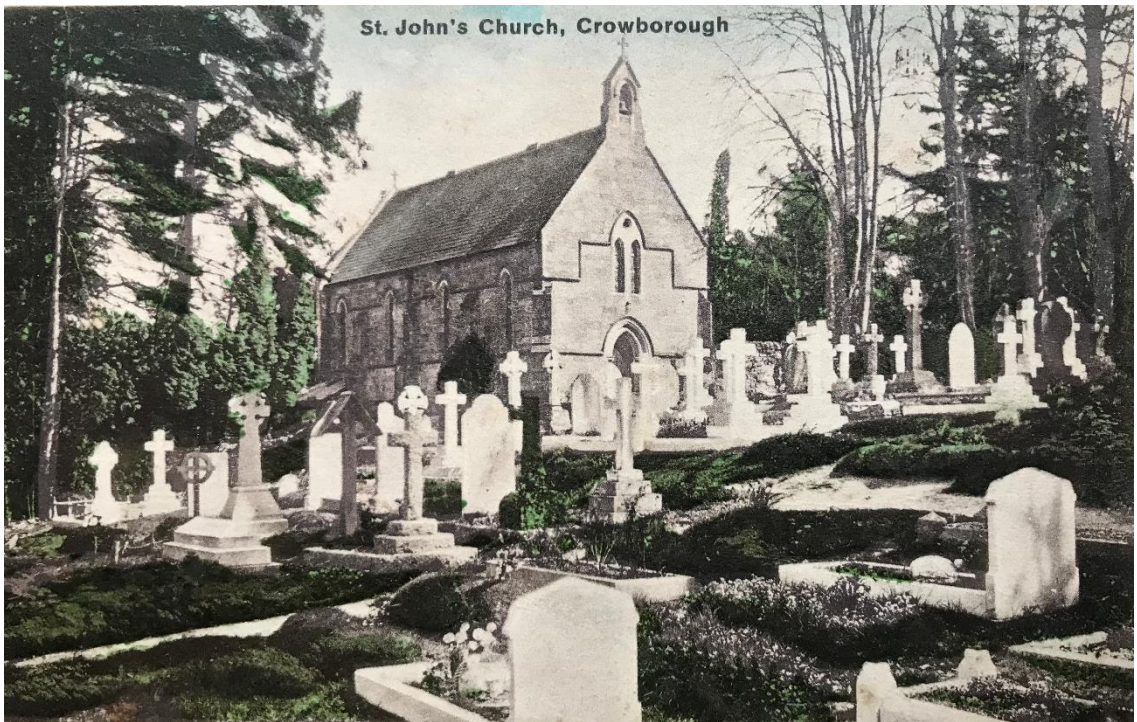
First World War Memorial

Second World War Memorial





C1930



Postcard, bearing a July 1936 post mark

OLD POSTCARDS DEPICTING ST JOHN'S



date unknown¹⁶



*St John's Church,
published by H Wilkins,
The Library, Crowborough,
date unknown*



1924

¹⁶ *Memories of Crowborough & Rotherfield*, Robert Pitts, Facebook



St John's Church Choir, c1969¹⁷

Further refurbishments took place in celebration of the centenary of the ecclesiastical parish in 1971, including new tiles on the Nave floor. The porch inside the church was completed by Stevens Brothers in 1973, and at about that

time the present pews were installed in the church. Photos from the beginning of the 20th Century show pews with high ornate carved ends, which some parishioners still remember. They were sold, possibly in an attempt to make the church more airy and modern-looking; one was purchased by the Half Moon Pub in Friars Gate where it stayed until the pub closed in around 2015.



*Two views of St John's in 1990
An original publication
by West Crowborough Society*



¹⁷ *Memories of Crowborough & Rotherfield*, Tinka Cheesareeva, Facebook



In 1973 the churchyard was reported as being nearly full and the PCC therefore applied for a faculty to extend it. Another faculty was requested to remove or cover the gravestones around the church. Both faculties were granted; many of the headstones around the church were repositioned along the wall and the churchyard was extended in 1978.

18

In 1973 Series III services were trialled and in 1974 the PCC agreed that the Authorised version of the Bible should be used in church services.

The Lady Altar was funded by parishioners and dedicated on Sunday 2nd March 1975 at a Requiem Mass in memory of Rev Edward Kerr, who died suddenly in the vicarage on 2nd March 1974; he is buried in the churchyard.



The church was redecorated in 1982 by Stevens Brothers for a total cost of £2,500 and in 1986 the drive was re-laid by Penfolds at a cost of £1,200. During Great Storm of 16th October 1987 many trees were blown over and damage was sustained to the churchyard wall.

31st July 1989 was the 150th anniversary of the founding of the church and as well as a celebratory party a Requiem Mass for past benefactors was held on 15th November 1989. To mark the occasion the Reredos was refurbished in 1990, with gold paint at a cost of £2,260 + VAT and the 14 Stations of the Cross were also restored, costing £1,380 + VAT. It had been hoped to also get the Annunciation restored, but that involved examining the condition of the wall to which it is affixed, which was more problematic.

Decay in the wood in the floor was first discovered in 1988, but it was not until February 1991 that the Nave floor was lifted to be repaired, when it was discovered that the batons holding up the panels on wall were also rotten which created a massive increase in the anticipated cost of the repair work. Although improved underfloor ventilation helped ease the problem, this extra cost meant that the heating system remained unchanged and the planned modernisation of the organ, costing in the region of £30,000 + VAT, was put on hold. Various fundraising events followed – one particularly unusual scheme was given by Graham Kneath, an airline pilot and member of the PCC, who offered subscribers a chance to use the flight simulator at Gatwick.

¹⁸ <https://sussexhistory.net/2020/02/13/a-hidden-sussex-church/>

In May 1991 the congregation were surprised when Princess Margaret, along with the Earl and Countess De La Warr, joined them for morning Mass. They are pictured here outside the church with Fr Richard Dinnis.



In protest at the ordination of women priests the vicar Fr Richard Dinnis resigned from the Anglican church and St John's in 1993. He switched to Catholicism and retrained as a Roman Catholic priest and served as such until his death in 2007.

In 1997 the church received a break-in: the 7-day candle was blown out and moved, the vestry door stolen, candles were lit and lined up along the aisle a figure of Christ smashed and the cross broken. The local press reported it as a 'Satanist Attack', citing black magic and devil worship and leading to concerns that the church would need to be reconsecrated. However, as the holiest places in the church had not been desecrated and the tabernacle on the altar had not been touched Fr Robert Featherston, the vicar, deemed that to be unnecessary.

The press subsequently blamed drug addicts, New Age Travellers who were camping nearby on the Ashdown Forest and black metal rock groups, although no one particular group was ever held to blame and charges were not brought against anyone.

Crowborough Courier, Friday April 18, 1997

Priest vows to continue after church is violated

SATANIST ATTACK

A BLACK magic ceremony by devil worshippers at a Wingham church has left its priest devastated but determined to carry on with his religious work.

Police said satanists broke into St John's Church in the early hours of Monday and performed a pagan ritual where they smashed a figure of Jesus and placed it on the altar and moved and lit candles.

On Tuesday, Fr Robert Featherstone told the Courier that he was "very upset" by the violation — but he vowed it was "business as usual".

By Laura Kemp

responsibilities for maintaining worship and for the safe-keeping of the building. When you find it broken into in a forceful way, with the doors kicked open, it's very upsetting. It's a violation of privacy," he said.

Desecrated

Originally there had been plans to get a bishop to bless the church, but Fr Featherstone said that because the church had not been desecrated — the tabernacle on the altar had not been touched — there was no need.

"Mass has been celebrated twice since the break-in," he said.

Det Sgt Martyn Underhill, of Crowborough CID, said that he was very concerned by the "horrific event", and asked: "Is nothing sacred?"

The group responsible for the crime are

devil worshipping has happened in the area.

But Det Sgt Underhill ruled out pranksters or children and blamed a more organised circle. He said: "We are taking the matter very seriously".

Canon Will Pratt, press officer for the Diocese of Chichester, also viewed the situation with concern.

"It is not always to do with a particular group. It may be somebody suffering from delusions and imaginations who perhaps has been attracted to this through the media, films or through something they have read.

"Sometimes they need help. The answer is not to sensationalise this but offer help," he said.

Anyone with information should contact Crowborough CID on 01892 652211 or

'We are taking the matter very seriously'





Father Robert Featherstone with a vandalised crucifix after a break-in at St John's the Evangelist Church in Withyham
 Photo by Matt Walker
 Courier photo 107357/20

Crowborough Courier, Friday, April 18, 1997

Tunbridge Wells Leader & Times, May 2, 1997

Door taken during raid on church

DRUG addicts, New Age travellers and black metal rock group fans are on the list of suspects police are investigating in connection with the vandalism at St John's Church, Crowborough on April 14.

DC Robin Emery of Crowborough CID believes the intruders had broken in looking for something to steal and decided to violate the church while they were there.

He said: "None of the most sacred areas were touched which means the church will not have to be re-consecrated."

A large oak door leading to the vestry was stolen and DC Emery is concentrating on finding that. He said: "It was quite hefty and it would have taken at least two people to carry it away."

"I believe people under the influence of drink or drugs broke in and thought they would have a bit of fun while they were there."

"A lot of drug addicts are into the occult and Satanism and somebody who knew something about Satanic rituals was responsible for breaking the figure of Jesus Christ and arranging the candles on black tiles around the altar."

One lead he is investigating has come from a computer buff. He says fans of black metal bands - a list of which is carried on the Internet - have been involved in Satanic rituals abroad.

He is also investigating the New Age travellers camped in nearby Phie Forest.

Anyone with information should contact Crowborough CID on 01293 592828.

Pagan Druid angry at blame for vandalism

POLICE and church claims that pagans were responsible for the vandalism at St John's Church, Crowborough, have met with indignation from a Pagan Druid living in Tunbridge Wells.

Accountant Barrie Wright of St James' Park, is concerned that bizarre pagan rituals were initially blamed for the desecration and wants to put the record straight.

He said: "It is terrible that anybody's beliefs should be raped in this way and my sympathy goes to all the people who worship their God in this church."

"Pagans do not perform rituals - bizarre or otherwise - against the Christian church, that is the domain of Satanists. To be a Satanist means you have to believe in God, vis-a-vis you are a 'reverse' Christian."

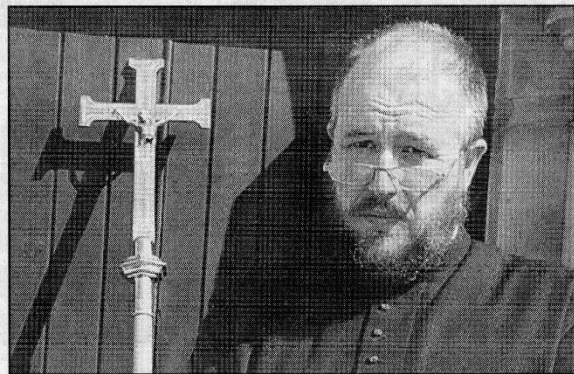
"The term 'Pagan' means 'country-dweller'. We do not believe in one God, nor do we accept the Christian theory of Satan, but instead revere the environment, our countryside and the spirits that live in the natural land."

"May I ask people not to confuse Pagans with Satanists as there is no connection."

Barrie, 42, started training as a Pagan Druid a year ago after a lifetime of being drawn to Megalithic stone circle sites such as Stonehenge.

He said: "I couldn't explain it, but I was always pulled towards them. I also have a great love of trees."

"I had spent time looking at different



SHOCKED: The Reverend Robert Featherstone outside St John's Church, Crowborough.
 ND3935/16C

religions of the world, none of which met my inner spiritual needs. Then I discovered Druidry."

He contacted a Druid Order - the Order of Bards, Orates and Druids - and started his training which will take many years to complete.

He said: "Our Order is very much about worshipping in the environment. The public face is our ceremony at Stonehenge. We went there recently and did a night-time ceremony for the comet, Hale Bopp - English Heritage allows us access to the stones."

"There are several Druid Orders in Great Britain today - my own has

about 5,000 members - but I am not aware of any other Druids in Tunbridge Wells. We are scattered all over the place and tend to operate on a private basis."

"Our ancestors built the stone circles as places of worship to the sun, stars and elements and there are eight major festivals each year - four for the sun and four for the moon."

Barrie says many people think Paganism and Satanism are the same thing and added: "I think that comes from genuine misunderstanding. Pagan Druids, however, wish for peace and would not be involved in the desecration of churches."

St John's continued to be called 'Withyham St John's' until July 1999 when it was renamed 'The Parish Church of St John the Evangelist, Crowborough' to underpin the growing links with that town.

In 2000 a sound and loop system to help with the acoustics was installed and the church was re-ordered: the communion rail, which had been moved to the edge of the step between the Nave and the Chancel in 1977, was returned to its original position in front of the High Altar; the Lady Altar, given in memory of Fr Kerr, was moved to the chancel in front of the High Altar facing the Nave so that the priest could face the congregation during Mass, and the choir stalls which had been situated either side of the Chancel were moved to the front of the Nave on both sides of the aisle to allow more space around the repositioned altar. This layout remained until 2017 when Fr Paul Redparth returned the altar to the font of the Nave to allow it again to be used as a Lady Altar, and in order to allow access to it the choir stalls immediately in front of the Lady Altar were removed. The High Altar is once again used for Masses.

At the APCM in 2000 Fr Robert Featherstone announced that he had been 'head hunted' by a church in Gillingham. When he left shortly afterwards the parish was put into suspension and lost its living, and St John's was without a priest for two years.

Fr Peter Naylor, a retired priest from Maidstone and Honorary Canon of Canterbury, took on the position as part-time priest in charge in 2002, initially for a period of 5 years but in the event he stayed for seven years. Fr Robert Norbury joined him as a curate in 2007 becoming Priest-in-Charge in 2009, and the two of them worked tirelessly to increase the numbers attending Mass each Sunday. Although the Electoral Roll was healthy, having in excess of 120 names, attendance at services was poor with fewer than 40 people regularly attending each week. It is down to their untiring work that St John's was able to prosper once again, and the suspension to the living was finally lifted in 2013 when Fr Robert Norbury was licensed as vicar of St John's by the Bishop of Chichester, the Right Honourable Martin Warner. A celebratory barbeque/party followed.



Fr Peter continued to assist Fr Robert until the latter left the parish in 2015, and under their enthusiastic guidance St John's continued to grow and flourish. Fr Robert wholeheartedly nurtured and encouraged the strong family spirit amongst the congregation and established many popular social events, and the numbers of those regularly attending services continued to increase.

Fr Robert Norbury



The proposal to provide 'facilities', i.e., a toilet and a very basic kitchen, was first mooted in 2000 whilst Fr Robert Featherstone was vicar. The original idea was for it to be inside the church in the area by the West door now occupied by the font, but this idea was quickly dropped. Faculties were applied for a brick built lean-to extension to the North side of the church, but again, the idea never really got off the ground.

Both Fr Peter Naylor and Fr Robert Norbury, however, were extremely proactive and determined to get things moving, and under their direction things moved apace and fund-raising began in earnest. Fr Robert Norbury very enthusiastically pushed the cause even further, leading a group of some of the more energetic parishioners on a sponsored walk from Crowborough to Chichester in his determination to raise funds and make the church hall a reality. However, despite his seemingly boundless zeal, determination and energy he very sadly was not to see the project completed during his occupancy.

Building work eventually began on the new hall in 2016 during the interregnum between Fr Robert Norbury and Fr Paul Redparth's terms of office, and the whole congregation were delighted when St John's Church Hall was officially opened by the Bishop of Chichester, the Rt Rev Martin Warner, on Sunday 27th November 2016.

The hall has been a tremendous blessing and is very heavily used, not only for a wide variety of church related events and activities from Lent groups through to Junior church services, Harvest lunches, fish and chip suppers, PCC meetings,

coffee after services and charitable fund-raising activities, but it has also proved to be a very valuable asset to the local area and is in constant demand for such diverse activities as flower arranging workshops, yoga, mindfulness classes, music workshop for



mothers and babies, children's parties, a carers' café and a bereavement counselling group. It is also a popular venue for receptions after funerals, baptisms and occasionally weddings.

The church was broken into again during 2019, but although a set of 'big six' candlesticks, the sanctuary bells and, very sadly, a set of beautiful antique candlesticks were stolen, no damage was sustained within the church.



*Fr Paul Redparth with the Bishop of Chichester
at the Hall opening ceremony, 27th November 2016*

For the first time since its construction, St John's, along with every other place of worship in the land, was closed for all worship and private prayer during the Covid-19 world-wide pandemic of 2020/2021. In an attempt to control the virus Government legislation stipulated that only 'essential' facilities were allowed to open from the end of March and throughout the whole April, May, June and November of that year; sadly, churches were not deemed to be 'essential'. During the initial lockdown, Stevens Brothers generously repaired the roof and redecorated the Chancel.

The first lockdown, which lasted just over three months, very unfortunately coincided with the church going into interregnum as Fr Paul Redparth retired at the end of March 2020, the week immediately prior to Easter. However, by the time of the second lockdown in November 2020 Fr Edward Dowler, Archdeacon of Hastings, had been installed as Priest in Charge, and he ensured that throughout subsequent lockdowns weekly services were streamed via the internet and also hosted weekly Zoom meetings, giving parishioners a much-needed opportunity to see and talk with each other. The dreadful pandemic highlighted and reinforced the very strong fellowship and close family spirit of St John's, as parishioners stayed constantly in touch with each other via phone, email and the internet, helping those who were more severely affected – doing shopping, collecting prescriptions etc. Fr Edward's son, Greg, continued to film Sunday Mass each week so that those who are unable to attend the service for whatever reason can join it remotely; this is very greatly appreciated by those concerned.



In the summer of 2021, at the instigation of Fr Edward Dowler, a woodland school was devised in the wooded area by the car park complete with canopy and firepit. Junior Church meet there twice a month when the weather allows, and the site is also available for use by the school and pre-school, much to the delight of the children.

PRIESTS IN CHARGE OF ST JOHN'S CHAPEL

1839 - 1841	Henry Hopwood
1842 - 1843	W H Anderson
1843 - 1846	Edward Clayton
1847 - 1862	George Antrobus
1862 - 1865	John Eaton
1865 - 1867	George Booth Perry
1867 - 1871	Edward Otway Herbert

VICARS OF THE PARISH OF ST JOHN, WITHYHAM

1871 - 1878	Edward Otway Herbert
1878 - 1885	Adam Clark Smith (buried at St John's, 15 th December 1896)
1885 - 1889	Edward Arthur Graham
1889 - 1893	Edmund Ralph Ruck-Keene
1893 - 1907	Henry Beachcroft Buchanan-Dunlop
1907 - 1920	Walter Molyneux Dingwall
1920 - 1926	Basil Pulteney Gurdon (memorial in St John's burial ground)
1926 - 1931	Thomas Frederick Charlton
1931 - 1942	John Joshua Olive
1942 - 1968	Richard Harry Green (memorial in St John's burial ground)
1969 - 1974	Arthur Edward Kerr (buried at St John's, March 1974)
1974 - 1988	John Ambrose Taylor, Hon Canon Diocese of Fulham & Gibraltar Rural Dean of Rotherfield
1988 - 1993	Richard Geoffrey Dinnis
1994 - 2000	Robert Leslie Featherstone

VICARS/PRIESTS IN CHARGE OF ST JOHN'S, CROWBOROUGH

2002 - 2009	Peter Aubrey Naylor, Hon Canon of Canterbury Cathedral
2009 - 2015	Robert John Norbury
2016 - 2020	Paul Robert Redparth
2020 - 2024	Edward Mackenzie Dowler, Archdeacon of Hastings (left to become Dean of Chichester)

*The Venerable Dr Edward Dowler at his licensing as Priest in Charge,
with the Rt Rev Will Hazlewood, Bishop of Lewes, 18th October 2020*





ST JOHN'S SCHOOL

When Elizabeth, Countess De La Warr provided for the building of the church, she also made provision for a school. Within the site of the fourteen acres allocated for the church was a small house which was enlarged to constitute a schoolhouse. The very strong link between the church and the school continues to this day. Church members form a large percentage of the school Governing Body with the vicar being automatically an ex-officio member, and weekly services are held in the church for whole-school assemblies, together with other services, i.e. Carols at Christmas, Easter services, Harvest Festival etc. The vicar and other members of the Church regularly visit the school.

According to the original documentation the idea of a school in St John's was first mooted [sic] in 1838. The idea being "... to build in the heart of this district a Chapel, a House for a rich Minister, and Two Schools ...". In those days the boys and the girls had separate class rooms, usually with all age groups being catered for within those classes.

Copies of the original accounts show the costs to have been shared by Earl De La Warr, and Mr Davidson, Rector of Withyham. There are donations from other sources. At one point, early in these accounts, the monies collected are marked down separately for church and school. By the end of 1838, to the beginning of 1839, £236 had been collected for the school, and £1,188.1.2d for the Chapel. The costs for the chapel were £1,373.10.0, and the deficiency of £185.8.10d is noted as being made up by Earl De La Warr, and the Rector of Withyham. A combined payment of £70 for the road to the Chapel was also paid for by the Earl and the Rector.

From 1862, a log had to be kept of all school activities. In the first log is a record – School opened 20th January 1840, trust deed dated – 4th March 1840. A printed foreword advises "Extract from a Revised Code of Regulations, 1862. The Principal Teacher must daily make in the Log Book the briefest entry which will suffice to specify ordinary progress ...". The Inspector, on his annual visit, would first peruse the log book. Throughout the year the vicar of St John's visited the school, at times to give religious education, at others to investigate the standard of work. Many of the names found in the log book are those of old local families, still found in the area today. Children of the Pastor of Forest Fold Baptist Chapel, Ebenezer, Littleton, went to the school, and in 1874 one of them, W Littleton, was a pupil teacher in the second year of his work.²⁰

An example from the Log Book dated June 26th 1875 cites: 'School thinner [sic] in upper classes, Julia Hollands returned to school after 6 weeks illness, and Jane Porter. Admitted 2 children. Several children complained that they had not time

²⁰ Crowborough & North Weald Magazine, May 1990

to do homework as their parents found them employment in their gardens, etc. Several children hay-making, and swede hoeing. Had to speak seriously to Albert Adams about swearing. Amy Barlow had to be fetched to school.' Another entry that same year: 'Belsey Groombridge returned to school after being in service'. It also mentions that the school closed for six weeks in the summer, not for holidays but 'for harvest and hop picking'.²¹

On 12 December 1882 an awful tragedy occurred; 7-year-old Alice Hemsley was warming herself by the the open and unguarded classroom fire shortly after 1pm when her clothes caught fire. Despite efforts to save her, she died the following day and was buried on the north side of the church-yard not far from the west door, however it would seem that her gravestone was one of those cleared in the 1970s.

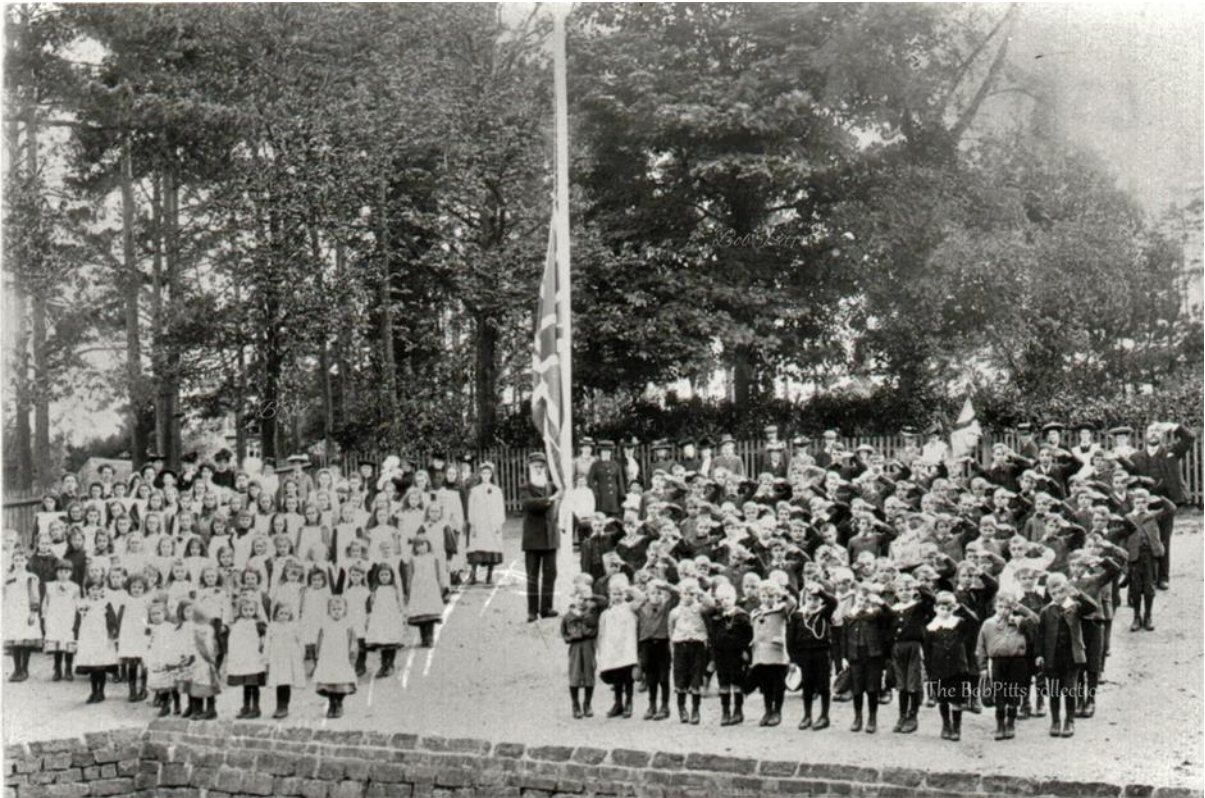


Group I,
St John's School,
c1900



St John's School,
1903, Robert Pitts

²¹ Crowborough - The Growth of a Wealden Town, Malcolm Payne published by K. A. F. Brewin, 1985



St John's School, Empire Day, May 24th 1907



Peace Day Celebrations, 19th July 1919, to celebrate the end of World War I²²

²² *Memories of Crowborough & Rotherfield, Robert Pitts & John Bailey, Facebook*

THE ALMSHOUSES

Twelve years after the consecration of the Church the almshouses were opened on 24th July 1850. Built by Elizabeth, Countess De la Warr as a memorial to her eldest son, George John Frederick, Viscount Cantelupe, who died that year, they were endowed by her with £270 for keeping the fabric in repair.

“There are six dwellings for the reception of six poor persons of the Parish of Withyham, of whom two shall be men and four women, who respectively shall be qualified and appointed under the provisions of these presents.

That the said six poor persons shall be unmarried or widowers or widows of honest report, members of the Church of England, and (with the exception hereafter mentioned) of the age of fifty years and upwards shall be respectively entitled to remain in the said almshouses until their death, or marriage, or removal under the provisions hereafter.

That one of the said poor women may be younger than the said age of fifty years, and need not necessarily be of the said Parish of Withyham if she shall be competent upon the certificate of a medical man nominated by the Patron or Patroness for the time being of the said Charity to discharge the duties of a nurse whenever called upon to perform the same in the manner hereinafter mentioned.

That no person shall be eligible for election to any of the said almshouses except the certificate of the Rector of Withyham for the time being as to character shall be first obtained.”



The residents received £12 each per annum. There was originally no endowment for the allowances, but they were paid for many years by the Earls De la Warr.

C N Sutton notes in 1902 that in each of the six rooms hung a framed card with the words: *"This House for the Poor was founded by Elizabeth, Countess De La Warr, as a memorial of her eldest son George John Frederick, Viscount Cantelupe, 1850. In your prayers remember the founder of this House and Him in whose memory it is erected."*²³

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These almshouses are now a private residence. New almshouses were built in 1974 by Anne Rachel, Countess De La Warr, behind the Dorset Arms, Withyham.

²³ *Historical Notes of Withyham, Hartfield and Ashdown Forest*, C. N. Sutton, A. K. Baldwin, 1902

²⁴ Rightmove.co.uk

ST JOHN'S BENEFACTORS

St John's is extremely fortunate to have received patronage from a wide variety of people, and we are greatly indebted to a great many extremely generous benefactors who have unstintingly supported St John's, not only financially but also with their time, knowledge and expertise.

Over the years the congregation as a whole have very generously worked extremely hard in a wide variety of ways raising funds and contributing to various individual projects as necessary, as was most recently demonstrated by the building and equipping of the church hall. They also fund-raise and contribute generously to a wide range of charities.

St John's is entirely dependent on the generosity of parishioners and other donations. It does not receive any funding from either general church funds or the government. Maintaining and running a church is incredibly expensive, and we are extremely grateful to all those who contribute towards this in any way.



The Sphere, 2nd February 1907, depicting Elizabeth Sackville-West: *A Peeress in Her Own Right who Married an Earl: The Countess De La Warr.* by Sir William Beechey. This picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1820.

**Elizabeth Sackville-West,
Countess De La Warr and 1st Baroness Buckhurst
(11th August 1795 – 9th January 1870)**



*Portraits of a nobleman's children
John Hoppner, 1796
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*

Lady Elizabeth Sackville was born at Knole, the Sackville family seat, the youngest child of the third Duke of Dorset and his wife Arabella Cope.

John Hoppner's painting depicts the three children, (left to right): Lady Mary Sackville (1792–1864); Lord Middlesex later fourth Duke of Dorset (1793–1815), and Lady Elizabeth Sackville. The picture hung at Knole until the 1920s when it was sold to pay death duties.

Elizabeth's father John Frederick Sackville died at the age of 54 when his son George was just 5 years old. George himself sadly died in a riding accident in 1815 aged 21; the Dukedom passed briefly to a cousin before dying out and the Sackville estates returned to his mother Arabella, Duchess of Dorset.

On her death in 1825 the eldest daughter, Mary, inherited Knole, whilst the Buckhurst estate went to the younger daughter, Elizabeth. However, Mary died childless in 1864 and so the Knole estate passed to her sister Elizabeth, now Countess De La Warr. Queen Victoria created Elizabeth Baroness Buckhurst in her own right on 27th April 1864, stipulating that the title could only be inherited by second or subsequent sons to prevent the barony and earldom being held by the same person.

Baroness Elizabeth married George West, 5th Earl De La Warr on 21st June 1813 when he took her family name becoming George Sackville-West to reflect the great eminence and large estate associated with the Sackville family. He served as Lord Chamberlain under Sir Robert Peel and Lord Derby and was a member of the Privy Council. The couple had 10 children, 9 of whom grew to adulthood:

- George Sackville, Viscount Cantelupe (1814–1850), Member of Parliament for Helston and Lewes, died unmarried.
- Charles Sackville-West, 6th Earl De La Warr (1815–1873).

- Reginald Sackville (1817–1896), Rector of St Michael and All Angels, Withyham before becoming 7th Earl De La Warr
- Lady Elizabeth Sackville-West, Duchess of Bedford (1818–1897), married Francis Russell, 9th Duke of Bedford and had issue.
- Mortimer Sackville-West, 1st Baron Sackville (1820–1888).
- Lady Mary Catherine (1824–1900), married firstly, James Gascoyne-Cecil, 2nd Marquess of Salisbury and had issue. She married secondly Edward Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby.
- Lionel Sackville-West, 2nd Baron Sackville (1827–1908).
- Hon William Sackville-West (1830–1905), married Georgina Dodwell and had issue, including Lionel Sackville-West, 3rd Baron Sackville, father of the author Vita Sackville-West.
- Lady Arabella Diana Sackville-West (1835–1869), married Sir Alexander Bannerman, 9th Baronet.

On Elizabeth's death Buckhurst Park went to her elder son whilst Knole passed to her younger son Mortimer, who was created the 1st Baron Sackville thereby splitting the family and Sackville lands into two branches. The Earls De La Warr still live at Buckhurst, but Knole and many of its treasures passed into the care of the National Trust in the 1940s, although Robert Sackville-West, 7th Baron Sackville, lives in an apartment there and oversees the estate.

Lady Elizabeth Sackville is buried in the churchyard of St Michael and All Angels, Withyham. Inside that church there is a monument to her and her husband.

We are very greatly indebted to Elizabeth, Countess De La Warr for the founding of St John's Church but also to her and her family for other generous donations, including the pulpit, which was given in about 1870, reputedly from Buckhurst Park chapel, and a chalice which bears a 1707 Copenhagen hallmark. The Kempe windows in the chancel are in memory of *George Earl De La Warr and Elizabeth his wife, the founders of the chapel and all the benefactors of the same.*



*Lady Elizabeth Sackville, later
Elizabeth Sackville-West,
Countess de la Warr.
Knole © National Trust*

The Ramsbotham Family

James Ramsbotham: 10th March 1814 - 8th March 1888

Jane Ramsbotham: 5th April 1818 - 22nd December 1897



James Ramsbotham was a Lancashire mill-owner and Justice of the Peace. Born in the Vale of Todmorden 10th March 1814, he married Jane Fielden and lived at Warren House. The Warren House estate formerly belonged to the De La Warr Family, taken in from Duddleswell Manor, on the Ashdown Forest.

The family were very generous benefactors to St Johns. The reredos was given by Jane Ramsbotham in memory of her husband in 1895. On the right-hand end of the main

structure there is a brass plate with a memorial inscription in Latin, translated as: *In honour of the holy Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and in devoted memory of James Ramsbotham his wife Jane dedicates this work in the year of our Lord 1895.* Another plaque reads: *James Ramsbotham Esq of Old Hall Stand, Lancashire and Crowborough Warren; born 10th March 1814, died 8th March 1888.*



They donated windows in the Nave: the Kempe one depicting St Peter bears a plaque *Jane, wife of James Ramsbotham of Crowborough Warren; born 5th April 1818, died 22nd December 1887;* the window depicting St James commemorates their Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary (20th April 1887); the window depicting St Matthias is in memory of their children who died as infants. The window behind the pulpit, depicting St Peter, was given by their children in 1898 in memory of their parents. The children were:

- John Ramsbotham JP (26 December 1839 - 23 November 1905)
- James Ramsbotham (1841)
- Thomas Ramsbotham (10 August 1842 - 28 December 1913)
- Joshua Ramsbotham (1844 – 1845)
- Fielden Ramsbotham (10 July 1846 - 29 May 1922)

- Richard Hugh Ramsbotham (1 May 1848 - 8 May 1917)
- Alice Fielden Ramsbotham (1850 - 1938) *mother of Robert Hugh Walker (WWI plaque in church)*
- Frances Ramsbotham (1852 - 1944)
- Philip Bury Ramsbotham (4 March 1854 - 16 July 1927) *father of Geoffrey Bury Ramsbotham (WWI plaque in church) and Charlotte Louise who married Henry Percy Valentine Hickman (WWI plaque in church)*



Alice, Richard & Frances Ramsbotham

- Edward Geoffrey Ramsbotham (1 April 1856 - 25 March 1929)
- Herwald Ramsbotham (29 October 1859 - 11 August 1941) *father of Herwald Ramsbotham, 1st Viscount Soulbury*

St John's with the Ramsbotham family tomb in the foreground.



The Driberg Family

By her will dated 27th June 1938, **Amy Mary Driberg**, bequeathed £200 to the PCC of St John's to be put to charitable purposes. She worshipped at St John's, and had a history of charitable activities, regularly sending generous food parcels to soldiers during the First World War. She was also a keen beekeeper, owning six hives and publishing her diaries on the subject. Her husband John James Street Driberg, a former officer in the Indian Civil Service, died in 1919. The family lived at Uckfield Lodge, Church Road, Crowborough. She died on 13th July 1939 and is listed on the Guild of All Souls' Chantry List, and buried in St John's churchyard along with her husband, John.

The figure of Our Lady was given in her memory by her three sons, John, James and Thomas.

John Herbert Driberg (April 1888 – 5 February 1946)



The oldest son, educated at Lancing College and Hertford College, Oxford, he joined the Uganda Administration in 1912, before being transferred to the Sudan Political Service. Whilst in Uganda he lived with the Langi people, and in 1923 wrote *The Lango: A Nilotic Tribe of Uganda* which includes fables and a Lango-English dictionary and established him as an anthropologist. After training in the London School of Economics, he was appointed to a lectureship in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge where he stayed until the outbreak of the War in

1939, when he volunteered for war-work and was posted to the Near East.

James Douglas Driberg MC, OBE, FRCS (30th July 1890 - 29th November 1956)

The second son, qualified from the London Hospital where he was surgical registrar and first assistant in the surgical unit, as an assistant surgeon. He served in the RAMC during the war of 1914-18, won the Military Cross, and rose to the rank of Colonel. He was surgeon to the Poplar Accident Hospital, and a surgical specialist under the Ministry of Pensions.

Towards the end of his life he lived with his brother, Tom, at Bradwell Lodge, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex, before dying in Exeter.

Thomas Edward Neil Driberg, Baron Bradwell (22 May 1905 – 12 August 1976)

A journalist, politician and possible Soviet spy, who served as a Member of Parliament 1942–55 and 1959–74, first as an Independent before joining the Labour Party in 1945. Thomas Driberg was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain for over 20 years, before being expelled.

He joined the *Daily Express* after attending Lancing College and Christ Church, Oxford, where he left without gaining a degree.

In 1933 he began the "William Hickey" column, which he wrote until 1943. He wrote several books, including biographies of Lord Beaverbrook and Guy Burgess. He retired from the House of Commons in 1974, and was subsequently raised to the peerage as Baron Bradwell, of Bradwell juxta Mare in the County of Essex. He combined a bizarre, wild lifestyle with an unwavering devotion to Anglo-Catholicism; brazenly homosexual, despite it being illegal, he counted the Kray twins amongst his friends. After his death, allegations were published about his role over many years as an MI5 informant, a KGB agent, or both.

His father was 65 years old when Tom was born in Crowborough. He found growing up with his elderly parents a stifling experience, and described Crowborough as "*a place which I can never revisit, or think of, without a feeling of sick horror*". When he was 8 he attended the Grange School in Crowborough, and whilst there mentions in his autobiography his discovery of "exotic" religion - High Anglicanism. The Gothic chapel at Lancing College, where he was Chief Sacristan, gave the religious atmosphere he sought, but the services were disappointingly "moderate". Throughout his life he was a devout Anglo-Catholic. He is buried at St Thomas's, Bradwell.



The Baden-Powell Family

The font in the church was donated by the Baden-Powell family, however it is unclear which member of the Baden-Powell family was the benefactor, and what their connection was to St John's.

Lord Robert Baden-Powell, (22nd February 1857 – 8th January 1941) was born at Speldhurst, where his father Revd Professor Baden Powell (22nd August 1796 – 11th June 1860) was vicar at St Mary's Church. He attended Rose Hill School, Tunbridge Wells then Charterhouse. He served in the Army, including successfully defending Mafeking during the Second Boer War, before starting The Scout Association in Wadhurst in 1910 and soon after, with his sister Agnes, the Girl Guide and Girl Scout movement. He married Olave St Clair Soames in 1912 and they moved to Nyeri, Kenya, where he died 1941.



However, the link with St John's appears to be stronger via Robert's cousins:

Charles Watson Powell (1852–1937) JP for Kent and Master of the Mercers Company, lived with his wife Elizabeth Constance Drury, daughter of Colonel H Drury of The Beeches, Crowborough, at Manor House, Speldhurst. They had two sons, **Charles Baden Drury Powell** (15th September 1889 – 14th August 1916) and **Gerald Frederick Watson Powell** (24th April 1891 – 28th July 1917). Both boys attended The Grange School, Crowborough, (where **Malcolm Powell** (1888-1960) lived and was Assistant Master) then Charles attended first Bedales then Wye Agricultural College and afterwards the School of Dramatic Art. Gerald attended Harrow then Magdalen College, Oxford before studying for the Bar. At the outbreak of war both boys joined up with the Cyclist Battalion; Gerald ultimately becoming Major. Both boys were sadly killed, but although they are both listed on the Speldhurst church Roll of Honour, Gerald alone is commemorated on St John's Roll of Honour; there is no reference to Charles.

Another cousin, **Henry Powell** (1809–1867) was a doctor in Tunbridge Wells married to Mary Sophia Watson (1817-1901) with 5 sons and 2 daughters. After Henry's death Mary lived at The Croft, Crowborough. One son **Cecil Cornthwaite Powell** (30th September 1857 – 1935) an electric engineer, married Christina Maria Blake on 28th April 1887 in St John's Church.

Buried in the churchyard is **Patrick Baden Machattie Powell** (1 June 1882-1954) together with his mother **Marion Constance Sarah Powell** (died 1896 aged 44).

Rev James Baden Powell (1842-1931) lived with his sister **Eleanor Powell** (1859-1956) at Church Croft, Crowborough, but there are no obvious links to St John's.

Rev Henry Beachcroft Buchanan-Dunlop

27th January 1842 – 27th February 1924

Henry Beachcroft Dunlop was Vicar of St John's Church 1893 – 1907. Born 27th January 1842 at Henfield, the second son of Rev Charles Buchanan-Dunlop of Drumhead. Educated at Brighton College, then in 1863 Trinity College, Cambridge. He was ordained deacon in 1867 and priest at Chichester in 1868. He served at Icklesham, Brede and Cross in Hand, Waldron, was appointed Vicar of St Matthew, Netley Marsh, Hampshire 1874 - 1893 and then ultimately to St John's 1893 - 1907. He retired to Red Oaks, Henfield, Sussex and died there 27th February 1924.

He donated the Kempe window depicting St John the Evangelist wearing a red robe and white cloak, and holding a quill pen and an open book, on which is written "*In principio erat verbu*" (in the beginning was the Word - the first words of his Gospel), was in memory of his mother. It is inscribed (in Latin) *Frances Dunlop who fell asleep in the Lord 22nd September AD 1893. A beloved son to a beloved mother.*

When he arrived at St John's there was no organ, but at the turn of the 20th century an organ was purchased and positioned within a specially-created arch on the north side of the chancel (where the sacristy is now). The coloured and gilded organ-case was carved in 1901 by Rev Henry Dunlop's son, John H Dunlop, who also created the panelling and carved and donated the oak stalls in the chancel. There is a brass plaque in the chancel which reads: *In grateful remembrance of John Henry Grahame Dunlop, only son of the Rev Henry Beechcroft Dunlop and Mary his wife. Born Nov 3rd 1874, his sweet spirit left its frail body on Nov 5th 1917. The carving of the organ case and choir stalls,*



designed by his friend Alfred Gilson Humphry are amongst the loving works he did for this church. May everlasting light shine upon him.

Photographed by

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH.

[J. H. Dunlop, Esq.

Photograph by John H Dunlop

The Stern Family

At the bottom of the Kempe window depicting St Richard in Mediaeval times, and the Visitation, when Mary visited Elizabeth, is the Latin inscription which translates as *Remember in the Lord, Emma Stern aged 58 who died on the 29th day of the month of December 1899. A husband mourning a beloved wife.*

The 1891 census records the Stern family as living at Crowborough House, Beacon Road. Leopold, (52 years old) was recorded as the Head of the household, a British subject, born in Germany and 'living on own means'. His wife Emma (50 years old) was born in Hackney, Middlesex. Their daughter Alice (25 years old) was also born in Hackney, Middlesex. Also registered was a 61-year-old cook called Phoebe Stern, born in Soham, Cambridgeshire, but it is unclear whether she was related to the family; she was no longer living there by the time of the 1901 census.

Confusingly there is no mention of a son in either census, but in his will dated 1911 Leopold Stern left money *in trust of his daughter in law, Liliast during widowhood and subject thereto his grandsons; John Edward Stern and Leopold Graham Stern.* Liliast Stern was the daughter of Rev Henry Dunlop, vicar of St John's (1893 – 1907); there is buried in the churchyard a Leopold John Stern, who died in 1910 aged 40, and who may possibly have been the Leopold's son and husband of Lilias.

Leopold Stern died 13th February 1912 and he and Emma are buried immediately outside the front door of St John's Church.

There are memorials to members of the Stern family around the church. In particular there is a very poignant plaque to Leopold Grahame Stern who was killed in the First World War. Born at Rodmell, East Sussex on 4th October 1899 the son of Leopold John Stern and Liliast Mary (née Dunlop) Stern of Red Oaks, Henfield, Sussex. He was educated at Lancing College and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant and Flying Officer in the Royal Air Force on 15th July 1918 and *was last seen flying over the German lines* on the 26th September 1918 when he was just 18 years old.



Leopold Grahame Stern

Catherine Constance Lang

It has not been possible to find any information about Miss Lang, although she obviously worshipped at St John's.

At the foot of the Kempe window in the Nave depicting the Adoration of the Shepherds Nativity together with St Wilfred, there is a memorial inscription on a scroll in Latin, painted in gothic lettering in the bottom right-hand corner, which translates as: *Remember in the Lord, Catherine Constance Lang who died on the 14th day of January 1887. A sister mourning a beloved sister*".

Records record ... *the chancel was much improved between 1895 and 1902 it was refloored with black and white marble, the walls panelled and the roof painted, chiefly at the expense of Miss Lang of Heatherdene The Altar candlesticks are of ancient design. The Gospel Lights are old Italian ones; both sets were given by Miss Lang*²⁵. Sadly, these were stolen from the church in 2019.



²⁵ *Historical Notes of Withyham, Hartfield and Ashdown Forest*, C N Sutton, A K Baldwin, 1902

The Stevens Family

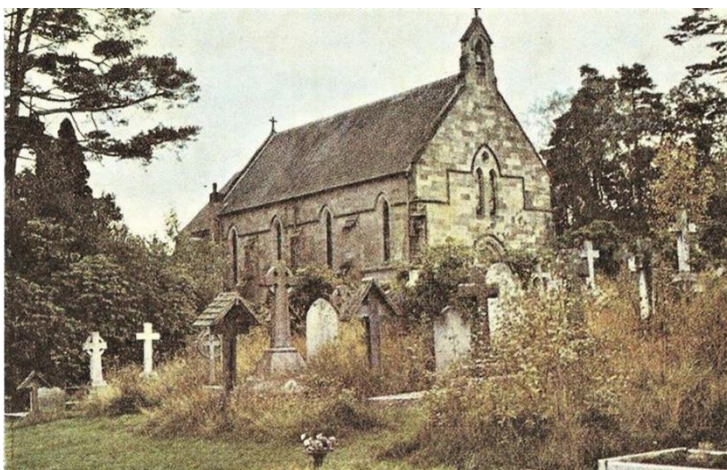
The local building firm of Stevens Brothers Builders have very generously maintained, repaired and decorated the church, both inside and out for very many years.

The Stevens brothers, Alf, John and Cliff, spent their childhood at Mount Pleasant, a 2-bedroom cottage in School Lane. There were 7 boys and 2 girls in the family, so life was hard; a family of 11 living in such cramped conditions, without electricity or running water and only a large range for heating and cooking. The family attended St John's Church, and although their father died whilst the children were still very young, solace was found at the Church; there was an active Sunday School and welcome treats such as day trips to the seaside in a Char-à-banc. The children went to St John's School until they were just 14, having had a simple basic education.

After the War Alf, John and Cliff worked for themselves, carrying out building work for local people and by word of mouth they became busy, but wages were low. They hatched a plan to go to Crawley where a new Town was being built, where they managed to find employment and were paid £16 per week – double the rate they were earning in Crowborough. From this extra income they saved money which they put aside, and in 1962 set up their own business. Cliff became the front man of the company, meeting people, providing estimates and planning the work. The business grew and took on larger projects – they created the Ballroom at the Crest Hotel, converted the Old Picture House to a supermarket and built Crowborough Town Hall.

Cliff was Churchwarden at St John's for 25 years, and over the years the family company, now under the leadership of James Stevens, have taken on the responsibility for caring for and maintaining the church, and more recently the hall which they built. We are greatly indebted to them.

The original Stevens Brothers have now sadly all passed away – Alfred on 28th April 2014 and John on 10th December 2016. Cliff (born 11th May 1932), suffered 3 strokes in 1988 when he lost his voice and partial movement, which he never recovered. He died on 28th September 2020 and is buried in the churchyard.²⁶



²⁶ *Cliff Stevens' Eulogy*, James Stevens 2020

Bertrand Evelyn Mellish Gurdon²⁷



In the Chancel floor there is a single stone plaque: *Bertrand E M Gurdon OIE DSO at rest 6 October 1949 and also his beloved wife Evelyn Agnes died 3 September 1963*. It is unclear as to what part he played in the life of St John's to merit such a prestigious memorial, but he was presumably related to Basil Pulteney Gurdon, vicar of St John's 1920-1926.

Lieutenant-Colonel Bertrand Evelyn Mellish Gurdon CIE DSO was a British soldier and administrator. He gained prominence as an officer during the Siege of Chitral.

Bertrand Evelyn Mellish Gurdon was born on 2 September 1867 at Simla, Punjab, India. He was the third son of Major-General Evelyn Pulteney Gurdon. He received education and training from Haileybury Imperial Service College and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He was commissioned into the British Indian Army on 25 August 1886. His first posting was in the Foreign and Political Department of the British Indian Army. In 1892 he was posted as Assistant to the British Agent at Gilgit. As Lieutenant, in 1892, he was posted as Acting Assistant Political Agent in Chitral in the turbulent period following the death of Mehtar Aman ul-Mulk. He was serving in that capacity when the Siege of Chitral unfolded in 1895.

He played an active role during the conflict, and was subsequently decorated as Companion of the Distinguished Service Order. Following the lifting of the siege Gurdon was stationed in Chitral as Assistant Political Officer of the state until late 1902. In 1900 he was made a Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire. In 1903 he was appointed Political Agent of the Gilgit Agency and served there until 1906. In 1908 he was entrusted with the post of Political Agent Khyber Agency. His next posting was as Political Agent Rajputana Agency. 1912 saw Gurdon being promoted as Lieutenant Colonel. He later served as Political Agent of the Phulkian States Agency from 1913 to 1916. He was scheduled for another promotion but owing to ill health sought leave and then premature retirement in 1918.

Bertrand Evelyn Mellish Gurdon died a natural death at the age of 82 in Crowborough, Sussex on 6 October 1949.

²⁷ Wikipedia

