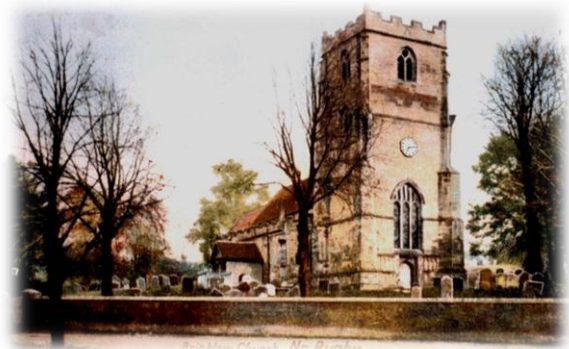


## THE CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

It seems likely that there has long been a site of some religious or sacred significance where the Church of St. John the Baptist stands in Brinklow today. Although there are no records of an earlier church, the very name of Brynca's Low suggests an Anglo-Saxon presence locally. Modern research suggests that far from falling into disuse after the withdrawal of Roman rule, the great Roman roads such as the Fosse Way actually guided



the settlement of incoming Angles and Saxons, and the proliferation of place-names locally with the Old English suffix *ton* strongly reinforces this. In addition, the pattern of distribution of pagan burial sites and cemeteries, the most striking evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement, closely coincides with Roman roads and Romano-British settlements.

Originally, the invading newcomers were pagan, but by the end of the 6th century, had converted to Christianity. These early Christians built small wooden churches to serve their spiritual needs, often on pagan sites, and sometimes to serve both as places of worship and as refuge and sanctuary in times of attack. It seems entirely possible that just as the Normans exploited the existing mound for their castle, they may well have sited their church in Brinklow on similarly established religious foundations.

The earliest records state that Brinklow was a chapelry of Smite, and as such, was given to the Augustin Canons of Kenilworth Priory early in the 11th century by Samson D'Aubigny. The original stone church of Brinklow seems to have been built by Kenilworth Priory around 1252, the first date we have for a Rector. He was one Hugo de Underwood, and the patronage of Brinklow continued with the Augustin Canons until 1539, when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, and the patronage passed to the Crown, Elizabeth I being the first Royal patron, (followed in the 18th century by the Lord Chancellor, who remains Patron today). The church then had a north aisle, and was built following the contours of the natural slope with a most attractive and rare sloping nave.

The 13th century church probably represents the point in history when Brinklow was poised to become either a thriving market town or remain a village. In 1218, there was a charter granted to hold a weekly market and an annual fair on St. Margaret's Day (July 20th.) and in 1340, a further Grant was made to enable Brinklow to hold another weekly market on Tuesdays. However, perhaps due to the troubled times of that century, with the Black Death raging and civil disturbances such as those that led to the Peasant's Revolt in the next century, the moment passed, and Brinklow was destined to remain a comparatively small community. Fortunately, perhaps due to its position on what must always have been a prominent line of communication, it was spared the fate of many communities such as Smite itself and Hopsford, which are now no more than names on the map, and to this day it has remained a "living" village.

In the 14th century, there were clearly sufficient souls, and Brinklow was a thriving enough settlement for the Prior and Convent of Kenilworth to decide to modernise its church. The present tower was built at this time, and also the south porch (now the vestry), which seems originally to have had a thatched roof. The "perpendicular" style of architecture, much of which remains today, dates from that time, with some larger windows and new roof arches being installed. The windows on the north side of the church are probably the earliest remainders of the old church, as are parts of the north aisle walls. As late as 1500, worshippers in Brinklow would have entered through the south door, and stepped onto an earthen floor covered with rushes. Seating was around the walls, which were decorated with paintings, and the east end of the church was hidden by a large wooden screen, over which ran a gallery. The monks had their own door to the chancel, where the present door is today, and the services would have been in Latin.

After the dissolution, and Henry VIII's break with the Church of Rome, much of the earlier ornamentation would have been stripped away; the wall paintings were whitewashed over and the statues removed. At this time, Kenilworth was said to receive 26s 8d for an annual tithe from "Brinkelowe". The Bible and the services were translated into English for the first time, and the keeping of the church registers was made obligatory. Brinklow's registers date from 1557 for baptisms and burials, and a few years later for marriages; the early ones, beautifully kept, are now held in Warwick Record Office. It should not be thought, however, that worship in Brinklow suddenly became very different; much of the traditional Catholic service would still have been in use, and indeed, during the reigns of Protestant Edward VI, Roman Catholic Mary I and Elizabeth, the momentous affairs of state taking place elsewhere probably affected the ordinary inhabitants of Brinklow very little. Their chief concerns after the spiritual health of their souls was almost certainly the weather, the season and the harvest.

We may assume, however, human nature being what it is, opinion was divided as to the changes, and certainly it soon became impossible not to take sides in the issue of religion. In 1642, Civil War broke out in England, and Warwickshire fell early to the Parliamentary forces. It must have been a time of great upheaval in both county and village alike. The Puritans were zealous reformers, believing that ornament and decoration in churches distracted worshippers from a true contemplation of God. At this time, many of Brinklow's church treasures disappeared, or were damaged, as much through neglect as deliberate intent. The then rector, William Clerke, was summarily removed from office, and replaced by Simon Dingley and John Gilpin, ministers of Puritan persuasion.

The authorities of Oliver Cromwell took religion very seriously, and attempted to improve the nation's moral health through legislation. Anything thought to encourage licence was banned. Theatres were suppressed as instruments of the devil, maypoles were taken down and forbidden as echoes of pagan fertility rites, and thus encouragements to the sins of the flesh (which, to be fair, they probably were), and then, as now, the demon drink was held to be the cause of loutish, unmannerly, and even sinful behaviour. The following revealing glimpses of Brinklow life are extracted from the records of Warwick Quarter sessions during Parliamentary rule:

#### **EASTER 16462**

### **ALEHOUSES IN BRINCLOE SUPPRESSED**

*Foreasmuch as it appeareth to this court and divers of the most substantial inhabitants of Brincloe in this county that there are seven alehouses at present in the said town of Brincloe, by means whereof the children and servants of the said inhabitants are often drawn into many inconveniences and so neglect their callings to the great trouble and grief of their parents and masters and begetting quarrels and other disorders amongst them, it is therefore ordered that six of the seven alehouses shall from henceforth be suppressed, and put down and the seventh who is to be licensed, shall be nominated by the Minister and five or six of the most substantial inhabitants of the said town be observing the laws and orders by such victuallers to be observed according to the statute in that behalf made and provided to attend to Justices of the Peace of this county to be licensed accordingly."*

### **EPIPHANY 1652**

#### **ALEHOUSES IN BRINCLOE**

*upon proof made in court that Thomas Pagett, John Cotton and Hugh Damford keeping victualling houses in Brincloe are disordered and keep not the assize and also suffer drunken lewd persons to be drinking and tippling in their houses on the Lord's Day and at other times, whereupon it was prayed that they might be suppressed from the selling of ale and victualling, which this court thought fit and doth order the same accordingly*

Given the probable size of Brinklow at the time, seven does seem rather a lot of alehouses, although the image of the village as a hotbed of vice and depravity must be tempered by the Puritans' somewhat dour view of anything enjoyable! It should be remembered that the brewing of ale had a long and respectable history, that it was often safer to drink than plain water before the days of universal sanitation, and that formerly, every housewife with a reputation to maintain made the brewing of ale part of her wifely duties.

Equally, those engaged in strenuous agricultural work might well be excused for having thirsts relative to their labours. That said, amongst a community with its fair share of poverty and distress, perhaps we should not blame the Puritan authorities too much for trying to limit the amount of alcohol consumed by the "children and servants" of "the most substantial inhabitants". It is possible that the name of The Half Moon and Seven Stars, a public house in Brinklow until the 1950s, and still remembered in the name of flats at the lower end of Broad Street may commemorate this suppression of six out of seven alehouses.

Clearly the task of administering parish affairs was often a thankless and unpopular one; the records of Warwick Quarter Sessions for the period offer several instances of parish officers neglecting their duty, avoiding their appointments, (for which they were nominated rather than volunteering) and sometimes even appearing to cook the books. In 1654, after reprimanding Richard Cure and William Smyth of Coombe for failing to collect 2s. 6d. from the lordship of Coombe for the poor of Brinklow, the court ordered that they collect both the levy and the arrears, and *not to fail, or they will answer to the contrary*. At the same time, some discharged their responsibilities faithfully, and showed due concern for the aged and impoverished: in 1665, for instance, both Abraham Fretter and Elizabeth Blake, the first *"an impotent old man near fourscore years"*, and the second *"an ancient inhabitant of*

*Brinklow*" were allowed to stay in their condemned cottages "without further interruption" in the form of maintenance orders.

With the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, William Clerke was reinstated as Rector, and one is tempted to imagine that many in the the village heaved a sigh of relief. The Clerkes were a wealthy landowning family, restoring much of the damage to the church at their own expense, and some celebrations previously banned were restored to favour. The only evidence of Brinklow's Parliamentary past lives on in the name of "Cromwell Cottages", and the legend that the man himself once stayed in the village. He could not have stayed in the buildings that bear that name today, because they are of a later date, but it is entirely possible that earlier dwellings on the site were named during his rule.

Between 1680 and 1743, an astonishing 54 years, the Rector of Brinklow was Thomas Muston. At this time, church seating took the form of "box" pews, most of which were rented by the more substantial citizens; the poor would have had forms to sit on, or would have been forced to stand. The "Reading Pew" and the "Clark's Pew" covered the right - hand side of the present chancel, and the pulpit lay behind, against the pillar. Over the west of the nave was a small musicians' gallery, reached by a spiral staircase, and in common with other villages, Brinklow almost certainly had its own group of ecclesiastical bandsmen, amateur but devoted musicians, playing a variety of instruments not now associated with church music - strings, woodwind, perhaps even a cornet. Early in the 18th century, five of the church's six bells were recast at Handsworth, Birmingham, and as well as calling the faithful to church, one in particular would have tolled a passing bell for every departed Brinklow soul. This latter bears the sobering inscription: *My Mournfull sound doth warning give that heare men cannot always live*". Also, a chalice and paten, made in London in 1761, were added to church artefacts.

The Rector between 1793 and 1840, another long period in office, was Richard Rouse Bloxham, sometime Under-master at Rugby School, and father of Matthew Holbeache Bloxham, noted antiquary and historian, Andrew Bloxham, botanist and later Rector of Harborough Magna, and John Rouse Bloxham,

originator of the ceremonious revival in the Church of England . Between 1861/62, under the tenure of Reverend J.C. Ritson, much of the church interior was remodelled at a cost of £850, including a new high chancel arch, and the accentuation of the slope to the nave. New pews were installed on a new wooden floor, and in this era of preoccupation with the social order, the chancel seats were reserved for the more well-to-do members of the congregation, who had the former priests' door as their own private entrance.

Early in the 19th century, the then Curate was instructing around 100 children in the church; in 1826, £100 was raised by private subscription, and a school building consisting of two small classrooms with galleries and a bell turret was erected. Later, around 1871, following the 1870 Education Act, the National Society took over the maintenance of the school, which was also allowed a government grant, provided it followed certain guidelines including the keeping of proper registers and log-books, and allowed regular inspection by government inspectors(often appointed from local clergy.) Brinklow School log-books date from 1871, and the Revd. Ritson's presence is very much in evidence in the early entries,

clearly taking a strong interest in educational and social matters, and visiting almost every day.

Sadly, only fragments of original glass remain in the church windows; there are parts of a castle and a peacock and two chalices in the centre and east windows. The Hardman window, under the tower, shows Christ in Glory and the Last Judgement, and contains over 100 faces. The figure of St. George and the Dragon in one of the south aisle windows came from the demolished All Saints' Church in Coventry, and in the same window is a poignant "Jenny Wren", a memorial to a young local girl.

In 1873, the church organ was donated, and in 1874, the west window, by Mr. Edward Wood of Newbold Revel, who was then manager of the Daimler Motor Company. It is on record that Mrs. Wood attended church in a flowing purple gown, and was evidently a most charitable woman; members of the congregation would often find packets of tea in the pews, and the organist would discover a £1 note on his stool.

The churchyard contains some very ancient tombstones, amongst which the most unusual bears an epitaph to a deaf and dumb woodcutter, Thomas Bolton of Coombe Fields who died in August 1779.

It shows the tools of his trade and the following verse:

He chiefly got his livelihood  
By faggoting and felling wood.  
Till Death, the conqueror of all-  
Gave the feller himself a fall.

Nearby, also showing the tools of his trade, is the grave of John Blakemore, maltster and brickmaker, who died in 1820. In 1884, space in the churchyard permitting no more burials, Brinklow Cemetery was opened, the first burial attended by "many people" recorded as that of "Old John Moore".

The church has been repaired many times, and will always be in need of some restoration. During this century, coke stoves and oil lamps have been replaced with electricity, and in 1968, the wooden floors of the nave and chancel were renewed. The Chapel of Remembrance of All Souls was dedicated and restored to use in 1969, the gift of Brinklow's branch of the Royal British Legion, who previously, in 1952 started the Remembrance Sunday parades, and in 1953, reinstated the ancient tradition of the Wake Sunday Walk.

Brinklow's parishioners have always been, it seems, a sociable crowd. A copy of the Parish Magazine, the forerunner of *Round the Revel*, dated July 1897, describes Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in vivid detail. The occasion must certainly have been one to remember, beginning on the Sunday with a peal from the church bells and the raising of the white ensign over the church tower, followed by services attended by "large congregations". The following Tuesday, a national holiday, again began with celebratory bell ringing, which continued at intervals throughout the day. A large dinner for parishioners had been organised, taking place in a tent (made from rick-sheets), consisting of meat, puddings, bread and cake, and tea for the women and children at 4 o'clock, eating in two shifts. After tea, sports took place, with prizes, followed by dancing in the streets. Later in the evening

"a general exodus to the Hills began" and a bonfire and fireworks display was enjoyed by "nearly every inhabitant of the village." For its times, the outlay of three guineas for fireworks must have ensured a spectacular display indeed. Every child who attended was given a commemorative cup and saucer and generally, "everything passed off pleasantly, with good feeling and concord."