

## ST LEONARD'S SHEEPSTOR

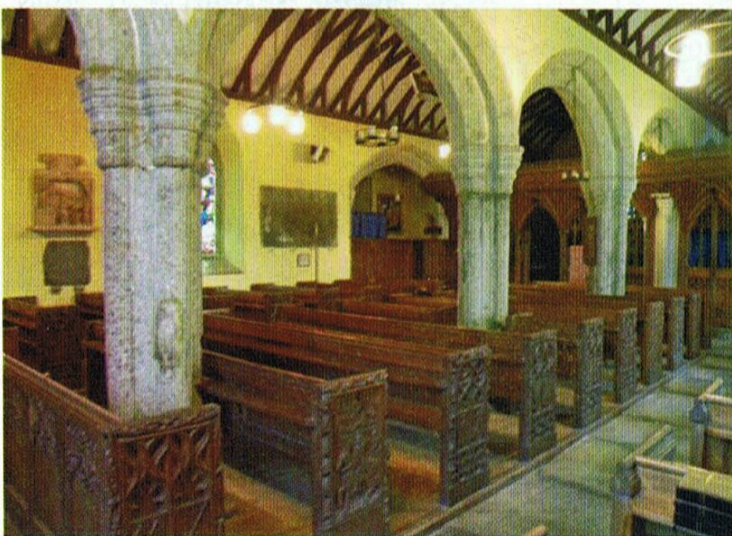
*Ben Chends explores this charming parish church*

St Leonard's dates from the mid fifteenth century but records show that a chapel had been constructed in the hamlet some time before 1240. It is more than likely that the church was rebuilt on the original site at a time when rebuilding or restoration was at its height in Devon and Cornwall sadly obliterating all signs of the previous building. Like most of the Perpendicular churches in the area it is built from surface



*Print of the church in 1898*

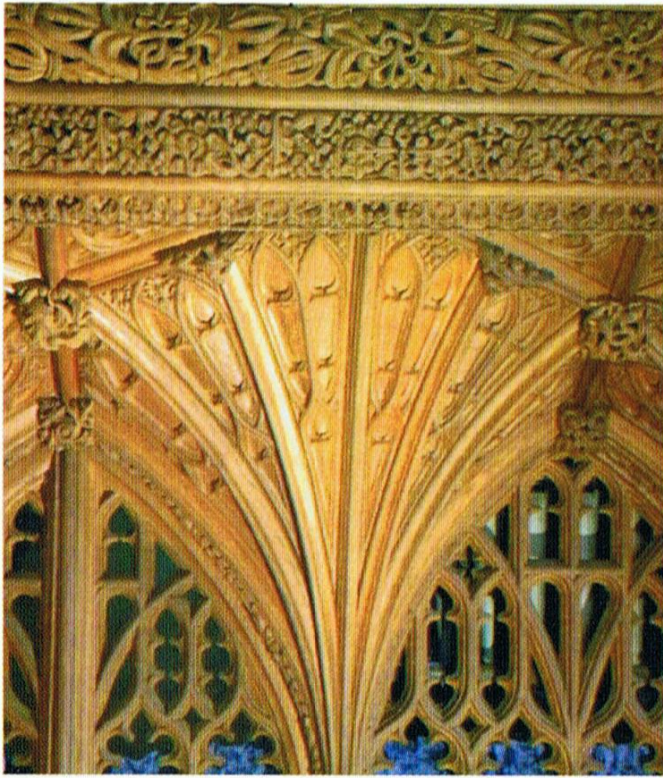
'moorstone' (only in the nineteenth century did quarrying become general practice). This local granite had become the fashionable construction material despite the difficulty of carving it satisfactorily hence the simplicity of the design. Roborough Stone was easier to carve and has been used for the piers, windows and door mouldings. The original chapel and the later church were attached to Bickleigh parish and the vicar was granted all the tithes. It became an independent ecclesiastical parish in 1877 but was united with Meavy in 1921 and is now part of the West Dartmoor Benefice. As with so many churches, the original dedication had been long forgotten but Nicholas Orme suggests that if the traditional name of the well is correct then it was probable that the dedication was to the sixth-century Saint Leonard of whom very little is really known other than apocryphal stories created in the eleventh century.



*Interior view showing some of the bench-ends and screen*

The unbuttressed west tower has embattlements and four fine crocketed polygonal pinnacles in the style of Plympton and Plymouth. There is also a polygonal stair-turret and a gabled ended slate roof. Just above the porch is a curious carving with the initials JE and dated 1640. Most think it to be a reference to John Elford (senior or junior?) who owned Longstone Manor at that time but it could be John Elliot who appears in 1641 Devon Protestation Returns. It has been variously described as a sundial or part of a tomb carving





*Detail from the 1914 screen*

but no Elford died in 1640 so it is possible that it was specially carved to go above the porch. One enters through an arched granite doorway.

The interior consists of a nave, chancel, south aisle and a shallow north transept connected by a squint. There was once a superb rood screen which was probably carved not long after the church was built. The Rev Sabine Baring Gould described it "*of oak . . . rich with gold and colour*". Sadly the screen was removed in 1861 when Messrs Blatchford of Tavistock restored the church under the watchful eye of Sir Massey Lopes who had ordered it to be taken away. Luckily Baring Gould had made some sketches and so, in 1914, Frederick Bligh Bond was able to produce the architectural drawings for Herbert Read of Exeter to carve

& construct an exact copy of the original at a cost of £440. The left-hand door and a piece on the right are from the original screen otherwise much of the original can be seen in St Andrew's church, Buckland Monachorum. The original fifteenth century octagonal font is of plain design with plain shields and dog toothed enrichments. Other original features include the piscina and hagioscope.

The church contains two monuments of which the most important is the small alabaster semi-reclining effigy of Elizabeth Elford (died 1641) with her baby and three kneeling daughters. In the vestry is an oil painting Madonna & Child with a view of Sheepstor village in background. It is by the Plymouth born artist Victor Elford (1911-2003). The kneeler by the altar was made by some of the parishioners in memory of Michael Page. The design comes from the floor tiles. The Elizabethan Chalice is by J Jones of Exeter and is dated 1576. For such an old church the brass is most disappointing none being older than 1902.

According to Baring Gould the village was very musical with many in the choir & orchestra. The churchwardens' accounts show money being paid for *15 singing books* (1781), *nine singing books* (1803), *five strings for the Tribble Vial* (1803) and



*The Elizabeth Elford monument c1641*



numerous references for *Vialin/Vieolin/Violing* strings. The organ was presented by Sir Charles Brooke and was made by Heles of Plymouth. It was completely renovated in 1909 and again in 1996. In 2007 the blower was loaned to Walkhampton Church and the organ replaced by an electronic organ by Rodgers of America.

There are two north windows – one showing St John the Baptist with Christ and the other the infant St John and the infant Christ by John Hardman of Birmingham. The north transept window depicting St Cecilia and St Catherine, is in memory of Celia Jane Ware of Ditsworthy, the village schoolmistress who died in 1872 aged 27. The east window, also executed by John Hardman, shows the exaltation of the patriarch Joseph and is in memory of Sir James Brooke. The south window, St Stephen holding a stone and St Leonard holding fetters, was given by the Association of the Sarawak Civil Servants - note the blue/green butterfly (*Papilio brookiana*) named after Sir James. The window was produced by Francis Walter Skeat in 1950, whose name may be seen in the bottom right-hand side.



*The Association of Sarawak Civil Servants window*

Perhaps most striking of all are the oak bench-ends. All designed by Miss Rashleigh Pinwell of Plymouth and carved between 1920 and 1930. They depict the history of Christianity from its foundation to the present day and include the last supper, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus, the good shepherd, and the stoning of St Stephen as well as the signing of the Magna Carta, a bishop preaching, crusaders by castle walls, and a sailing ship with crew. Much of the money came from the balance of the Rood Screen fund which *"will be devoted to Sheepstor Oak Benches Fund."*



*Details from some of the Rashleigh Pinwell bench-end carvings*

An inventory of 1558 lists 4 bells in the tower. There are now six. Five, dated 1769, were recast by the Cornish Penningtons. In the same year Pennington also recast Walkhampton and Shaugh Prior. His bill for casting and hanging came to £75. They were rehung in 1904 leaving room for a sixth bell which followed in 1906 when



Mears & Stainbank of London cast the treble bell. It is interesting to note here that the ringing chamber could well have had a second use according to a letter from the Tavistock Joint Rural and Urban District Councils as a Warden's post in an emergency in the 1960s cold war.

The church underwent two restorations. One in the late 1770s when it was reroofed – the churchwardens' accounts contain many references including, “for Laths at Plymoth and Carage of the same 6s 6d; for Thousand and half of Lathe nails 3s 0d; for Thousand and half of helling stones [roofing tiles] 5s 0d; another two thousand helling stones 7s 0d; 2400 helling stones 8s 5d.” The 1860-61 restoration was more drastic - out went the screen which was in a poor state of repair, the 17th century oak carved pulpit and the gallery at the west end. The ancient east window may also have gone at this time. It displayed the arms of the Scudamour, Copleston, Sevelle, and Southcote families. John Scudamore was “Lord of Shittlestorre” in 1483 and he or his predecessors may have added the south aisle to the church. A plaque above the door shows that Sir Massy Lopes gave £250, Sir James Brooke £70 plus another £100 that he collected from friends. A total of £590 was collected.

The centre stone of the lychgate has the initials W E probably for Walter Elford (1576-1648) of Longstone Manor. Just outside is the village cross. William Crossing reported in 1902 that the base was broken and a shaft, in a nearby field, lacked its arms. It is doubtful that this was the original nevertheless the Rev Hugh Breton had the cross restored to commemorate the coronation of King George V in 1911. There is a 1914-18 Memorial Cross near the porch.

The spring that feeds St Leonard's well is located near to the church and is mentioned in a 1570 deed. It was around 1875 that it was moved to make way for the new glebe land but as so many people crossed the glebe to obtain water the parson, in the early 1900s, decided to divert it yet again so that it now comes out at the present site. At the same time some window tracery that had been taken out in

the 1861 restoration was used to build a surround. In 1994 the Dartmoor National Park placed two large granite slabs either side to prevent damage to the well. Although it is supposed to be a Holy Well any healing properties have long since been forgotten and it is more likely just to have been a fresh water supply for the villagers.

One cannot but help to notice a Sarawakian influence in the church, be it the bust of Sir James Brooke, the first white Rajah, the Sarawak Ceremonial Blanket (Pua kumbu), the Brooke window or the granite tomb in the churchyard - a large sarcophagus of polished red Aberdeen granite - with the white rajahs and ranees buried close to James Brooke. Sheepstor has become a mecca for visitors with Sarawak connections. Well worth a visit.



*Plaster cast of Sir James Brooke KCB,  
the first white Rajah of Sarawak*