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# A Brief History of St Lawrence Church, Bovingdon

St. Lawrence Church  
B O V I N G D O N



It is thought that a church or chapel has stood on this site since at least 1200 when Bovingdon was part of the parish of Hemel Hempstead. Bovingdon was then no more than a clearing in the forest and timber was often taken from the 'Forest of

Bovingdon' to repair the castle at Berkhamsted. The first mention of any religious activities here was in 1235 when Bernard de Gravelegh was appointed as vicar of Hemel Hempstead and was told to appoint two curates, one each for Bovingdon and Flaunden. At the same time it was decided that the parish of Bovingdon should pay 20s each year to the vicar of Hemel Hempstead for the support of the curate, a practice which continued up to the mid 19th century.

In 1290 certain lands within Bovingdon were transferred to the monastery at Ashridge and remained part of the Ashridge estate until the monasteries were dissolved in 1539. Little is known about Bovingdon and its church during this time, but it is thought that the church which pre-dated the present building was constructed around 1320. The only remaining church artefact of this period is the stone effigy of an unknown knight from about 1360. Legend has it that this knight was responsible for building the church. Bovingdon also has a long

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history of non-conformity and as early as the 15th century there were Lollards here (Lollards were followers of a man named John Wyclif who wanted to see major changes in the established church). Two residents of Bovingdon were sentenced to death about this time for their Lollardy. In the 16th and 17th centuries some of the curates serving Bovingdon were eminent puritans. Thomas Wilcocks, Nathaniel Walkwood and Edmund Staunto all preached in Bovingdon under the protection of the Mayne and Lomax families who were successive Lords of the Manor at Westbrook Hay. It is therefore no surprise that an early non-conformist chapel was set up in Box Lane on land that belonged to Westbrook Hay.

Although Bovingdon was only a chapelry of Hemel Hempstead, the inhabitants claimed that it was an independent parish. After all, the village had parochial officers of its own, maintained its own poor and had baptisms, marriages and funerals performed in the church. The arrangement was the cause of some dispute and the situation came to head in 1693 when St Mary's Church in Hemel Hempstead was in need of major repairs. The inhabitants of Bovingdon were told they had to pay part of the cost of repairs,

but they refused. As a result the churchwardens of Hemel Hempstead took the churchwardens of Bovingdon to the Court of Common Pleas. Here, the judges ruled that Bovingdon's inhabitants should be exempted from paying for repairs to St Mary's Hemel Hempstead as they already maintained their own church. However, the judges did dismiss Bovingdon's claim of being a separate parish.

By the late 17th or early 18th century it was common practice for clergymen to service more than one parish and, as Bovingdon was only a chapelry not a separate parish, it was often poorly served. Legend has it that every Sunday a man would stand on the top of the church tower and when he saw the curate or vicar coming up from Hemel Hempstead he would descend to ring the church bells. However, if it was raining there was no need to put a man on the tower as the clergyman would not come. The inhabitants of Bovingdon did not appreciate being ignored by their curates, so much so, that they reported two, George Whitehead and John Stirling, to the ecclesiastical courts for neglect of duty. George Whitehead was accused of being 'often disguised in liquor', while John Stirling was accused of threatening people who

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did not pay their tithes.

In 1834 Bovingdon finally became a separate parish independent of Hemel Hempstead. Granville Ryder of Westbrook Hay paid for the patronage of Bovingdon church (that is the person who appoints the vicar) and gave a plot of land opposite the church so that a new parsonage house could be built. The old curate's house in the churchyard was considered to be inadequate in size and was eventually pulled down in 1886.

After years of neglect, the church was in such a poor state of repair that it had to be pulled down in 1844. Arthur Brooking was the incumbent at that time and with the help from Granville Ryder, the church was completely rebuilt on the same site and reopened in 1846. The only part of the old church remaining today is the lower half of the tower.

Since that time the church has seen a number of changes. In the 1880's two rows of yew trees were planted alongside the churchyard path and farmers were no longer allowed to graze their animals there. About the same time the lych gate was built in memory of Granville Ryder's daughter. In the 1930's the parsonage built in 1835 was sold off

as a private house since it was too large for the then vicar, Arthur Bartlett, and was expensive to maintain. A new vicarage was therefore built next to the old one and the parish room was moved about 150 yards up the road from the old vicarage. It was also in the 1930's that the church was equipped with electric lighting.

Then in 2012 this Vicarage too was sold and became 'The Old Vicarage'. The (second!) 'new' Vicarage is in Church Street, opposite the south entrance to the church yard.

Recent times have seen equal changes, inside the church itself. Most recently a new stained glass window depicting St Lawrence has been put in the chancel and the old organ was removed and replaced by one from Berkhamsted Girls School. The font and vestry have also been moved, pews removed from the north aisle, floodlighting installed and a comprehensive building restoration programme carried out.

*S C M Brown*

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St Lawrence Church has been a centre for Christian worship and service in Bovington for many hundreds of years. We are grateful to all in times past whose stewardship has brought us through the centuries. We ask your prayers that we may continue faithfully making Christ known in this place for centuries to come.

If you would like to learn more about the history of our church and village, these two publications will be of help:

*All ExtraOrdinary Remarkable, Tales from Bovington Church and its People (1998)*

*Bovington—History of a Hertfordshire Village (2002)*

*Both by S C M Brown*

We rejoice in our long and interesting history and aim to keep our church in good repair for the benefit of worshippers and of parishioners in the years to come.



## *How to contact us...*

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