

Church of St Mary the Virgin Throwleigh



Throwleigh is a parish of about 300 people on the north-eastern fringes of Dartmoor, approximately three miles from Chagford and six from Okehampton. The granite church and its Church House (now privately owned) form the centrepiece of 'Throwleigh Village', although the parish extends almost to Chagford. Throwleigh is now one of the Whiddon Parishes in the care of the Rector in Chagford.

For many centuries the church has been dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, although the annual Revel at Whitsun suggests an earlier, or possibly additional, dedication to the Holy Spirit. The Revel was certainly active in the 18th century, and the brutal wrestling matches in the field next to the church, which were the main attraction, survived into the early 20th century.

The first recorded rector was in 1248, but most of the present church dates from the 15th and 16th centuries. The south-west end of the nave, between the porch and the vestry, is built of granite rubble, and may be a remnant of an earlier church; the rest of the church is constructed of large coursed blocks of granite. There was some restoration in the 19th century, and more work was carried out under the direction of Herbert Read from around 1945.

The Porch

From the outside, the upper right section of the porch archway is carved with the initials TC – almost certainly for Thomas Courtenay, Earl of Devon, who was patron in 1452. It may be around this time that most of the nave was rebuilt.



The sundial is dated 1663, but was put above the porch doorway in 1914, in memory of Robert Fitzgerald Penrose, who lived in the Old Rectory and died in that year. It was found in a junk shop in Exeter. There is an almost identical sundial on Ringmore Towers, Shaldon, dated 1635, and inscribed *Vivat Carolus Primus*. This is revised in the later Throwleigh dial to read *Vivat Carolus Secundus*. This sundial can also be seen in Priestgate, Peterborough, and at Polesden Lacey. All four dials are connected with the Hake family (Thomas Hake and his son William, both Royalist MPs for Peterborough). The inscription reads:

O beata solitudo, O sola beatitudo; mihi opidum carcer est, et solitudo paradisus. Et corona manuum opus nostrum. WH. Deus nobiscum. 1663. Vivat Carolus Secundus.



O blessed solitude, the only happiness; to me the town is a cell, and solitude paradise. And the crown the work of our hands. WH. God be with us. 1663. Long live Charles II

The Nave

The window (c. 1400) in the south wall at the back of the church was fitted with new stained glass in 1912 in memory of the Rector's daughter, Ciceley Lowe, who died of appendicitis, aged 11. The glass is by Sir Ninian Comper, and portrays St. Cecilia and an angel. At the angel's feet lies Comper's signature motif: a yellow strawberry. Comper adopted this symbol in memory of his father, who had died suddenly in 1903 after fetching strawberries for his wife.



Cicely on Jessie

The granite font is 15th century. The tile at its foot is from the chancel, removed during a Victorian restoration.

The Stations of the Cross (1953-54) are by Nina Somerset. She had a studio in Bournemouth, near St. Francis Church, where she was regular member of the congregation for many years, until her death in 1983. More of her religious art may be seen there and at St Silas the Martyr, Kentish Town, London.

The screen, based on surviving remnants of the screen of 1544, was designed by Herbert Read of Exeter. He died in 1950, and the work was completed by craftsmen from his workshop around 1953. Some pieces of the earlier screen, with their original colours, are skillfully inset. The modern rood beam above the screen supports the rood itself (the cross and the crucifixion) and 20th-century carved figures from Oberammergau. Before the Reformation the rood beam or loft was reached from the 15th-century rood stairway set in the south wall.



Part of the 1544 screen

The oak Pulpit is made up from carved pieces of 16th-century craftsmanship, probably including some early bench-ends.

The Chancel

The east window is the work of Sir Ninian Comper (1864 – 1960). The subject is the Annunciation. The two central windows depict the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. Gabriel holds a scroll with the words from Luke 1:28: *Ave, gratia plena, Dominus tecum; benedicta tu in mulieribus – Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women.* St. Mary Magdalene is on the left window; the window on the right shows St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, teaching her to read from the Bible. She is pointing to a prophecy of Christ's birth in Isaiah 11:10: *In die illa radix Jesse, qui stat in signum populorum – In that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people.*



Comper's strawberry emblem and the date (1912) are added discretely at bottom right. His many commissions include a line of windows in the north wall of the nave in Westminster Abbey, and the Lady Chapel at Downside Abbey.



The granite altar is the work of Herbert Read.

The window in the south wall is in memory of John Aysh and his wife Elizabeth, who died of smallpox in March 1858, a few days after the birth of their son John Dunning Aysh. They had farmed at Clannaborough and William Endacott was offered the tenancy on condition that he brought up their child. The Endacotts then ran the farm for 130 years.

The wagon roof of the chancel has some intricate carving from the 15th century, and some good bosses. The 20th-century shields represent (left to right):

North: the instruments of the crucifixion; three fishes (an early Christian symbol); the communion sacrament; the Chi-Rho symbol; the Cross. **South:** the star of David; IHS (from the first three letters of Jesus in Greek capitals); anchor (found on some early Christian gravestones); Fleur-de-lys (from the lily's association with the Virgin Mary); Crossed Keys and sword (the symbols of Saints Peter and Paul).



The Easter Sepulchre

The Easter Sepulchre is an extremely rare survival from the pre-Reformation church. It played an important part in the ritual of the period from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Mass on Good Friday would end with the *Creeping to the Cross*, when parishioners made their way on their knees to the cross and kissed it. The priest would then place the cross and the consecrated Host (representing the body of Christ) in the Easter Sepulchre; then curtains would be closed around it, and candles lit. From this point until Easter Sunday the lights burned and the sepulchre was watched (as a real body would be watched before a funeral), usually by the Clerk or Sexton. The churchwardens' accounts for Throwleigh have not survived for this period, but records from other parishes from the late 15th century show the cost of bread, drink and coal for those attending the wake. On the morning of Easter Sunday, the priest removed the cross and host from the sepulchre with great ceremony and placed them on the altar in celebration of the Resurrection. In some parishes there may have been Easter plays.



After the Reformation, theologians criticized the Easter Sepulchre and its rituals as idolatry. The Bishop of Worcester noted in his diary in 1549: *No sepulchre, or service of sepulchre, on Good Friday*. After a brief respite in Queen Mary's reign, the use of the Easter Sepulchre, along with other 'popish' practices, disappeared completely from the Church of England with the accession of Elizabeth in 1558.

Some time in the 19th century the Sepulchre was moved from its rightful place in the north wall of the chancel to the south wall. Around 1938, a recess was discovered in the north wall with holes suggesting that an image of the Crucifixion or Resurrection, probably a carved plaque, had hung there. In 1939 Father Drew had the Sepulchre replaced in the north wall. The recess now holds a modern copy of *The Dead Christ tended by angels*; the original marble panel was once attributed to Donatello (c. 1386-1466), but is now considered by its owners (the Victoria & Albert Museum) to be from the period 1520-1540.

See also: Pamela Sheingorn - *The Easter Sepulchre in England*. W. Michigan Univ., 1987

The North Aisle

The North aisle, and the columns supporting its wagon roof, were built in the 16th century, almost certainly to house an altar at its east end. This was removed, probably soon after the Reformation; in the early 20th century, the vestry was here. In 1911 Father Lowe replaced the altar, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The painting above the altar is a copy of Raphael's *Madonna del Granduca*. The original, completed around 1504, can be seen in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.



There are some interesting **roof bosses**. Some of these are based on patterns like spirals or leaves, but two adjacent to the altar are of special interest.

The image of the **Three Hares** occurs in a number of Devon churches, and elsewhere in England. It can also be seen in churches in Europe, and further afield in the East – in Iran and China, for example. Wherever it occurs, the three ears are joined in a triangle. In the West, this probably represented the Trinity. Also, the hare was believed to be able to have young without a mate, and thus shared the mystery of the virgin birth with the Virgin Mary.



The Green Man (or Foliate Head) can also be found in many churches throughout Europe. All examples show something sprouting from the mouth, and sometimes from eyes and ears. This usually looks like foliage, but sometimes seems to be something much more unpleasant. In the 20th century at least, the symbol has been associated with folk traditions like Jack in the Green, and the May King – an ancient, pagan spirit of nature. It seems unlikely, however, that pagan symbols would be used in a church, in a time of devout and almost universal belief in Christianity. To its creators, the Green Man perhaps represented man's carnal sin and inevitable death (and serves to remind us of what happens to the buried body after death). The Throwleigh Green Man does look somewhat melancholic.



The stained glass in the east end of the north aisle is by Bell of Bristol, depicting the four evangelists, the meeting of Jacob and Joseph, Jacob blessing

the children of Joseph, the presentation of Jesus at the temple, the angel bringing the good tidings to the shepherds, and Christ with the children – “suffer the little children to come unto me.”

The Statue of the Virgin Mary was carved by Herbert Read, and presented to the church. He also carved *St George and the Dragon*, a memorial to a young sailor, Anthony Manisty, who died in action on a convoy going to the wartime relief of Malta. The statue of the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* was carved in Belgium in 1947.

Music in the church

The Churchwarden’s Account Book (in Devon Record Office), gives us some idea of the musical forces available in the church in the 19th century. In 1836 it lists four string players and two clarinetists, who must have supported the choir in the old ‘Gallery Band’ tradition: Gustavus and George Gidley, William Moore, Thomas Lethbridge, John Dunning, and Francis Leamon.

An entry for 1851 makes it clear that the choir was also paid (the curious sum of £1-8s-11d), but we do not know whether this was for some special event. Emmie Varwell, writing in 1938, had interviewed old Richard Dunning of Throwleigh Barton about the choir in the ‘old days’:

“Such psalms and anthems as they used to sing,” said Mr Dunning – and continued: “The women all sat together, of course, and their pew had a curtain in front so that they should not be seen.” “A curtain?” I said. “Certainly,” he replied, “And very properly; when the sermon began you would hear a kind of ripping sound, that was the curtain being drawn back so that they might look towards the pulpit – but directly it was over, back went the curtain.”

For around ten years at the end of the 19th century, a harmonium was used, but in 1899 an organ is mentioned for the first time, and G. Powlesland as organist, who received £10 a year. The instrument was made by Bevington & Sons of London. It was rebuilt and enlarged in 1928 by Hele & Co. of Plymouth.

Bells

The Church Goods Commissioners recorded the presence of bells in 1553. In 1763, Parson Baddeley had them recast by Pennington in the churchyard, and added a fifth bell. Gillett & Johnston of Croydon recast two of Pennington’s bells and added a sixth in a new bell-frame in 1938; this was in the time of Father Drew, and the finance was provided by a lady described by Emmie Varwell as “a fairy godmother”. Emmie Varwell also wrote (and decorated with pixies) the “Bell ringers’ rules” which hang on the vestry partition.

The Exterior

The **tower** was built in the 15th century, and the ornate **priest's doorway** is of a similar date, and unique in the diocese. Through it, the priest could enter the chancel without going through the nave; this gives an idea of the status of the chancel, in previous centuries, as a place solely for the priest. The tall pre-Reformation rood screen emphasized this distinction; but even in the time of Charles I, a cleric recommended a screen with a "decent strong door, with lock and key, to keep out boys, girls and irreverent men and women".

There is a **thorn tree**, near the east wall of the churchyard, south of the lych gate; a plaque tells us it is a cutting from the Glastonbury Thorn, associated with the legend of Joseph of Arimathea's visit to Glastonbury in 63 AD.

Father Gambier Lowe (1865-1933)

He came to Throwleigh in 1895, and is probably the most important man in the development of modern Throwleigh. He was a disciple of the Oxford Movement, which aimed to take the Church back to its Catholic roots. Father Lowe thus brought the 'High Church' and its ritual to Throwleigh, with Mass every morning, often sung. He and his brother Willoughby were also responsible for building most of the houses in Shilstone Lane, where many like-minded parishioners came to live.

The Lowe Family graves are in the south-west corner of the graveyard, near the gate which led to Hollow Park (where Father Lowe lived). On the far side of the gate, there is a memorial to Father Lowe's favourite dog, Ripple (or Rip). It reads *RIP: MY LITTLE FRIEND; WAITING FOR THE REDEMPTION, CANDLEMAS 1919*

The Lych Gate was completed in 1936, in memory of Father Lowe. The Anglo-Catholic tradition continued for another thirty years, but is now just a memory.



Father Lowe at the Priest's door

Emmie Varwell - *Throwleigh: the story of a Dartmoor village*. The Rector, 1938
Throwleigh: pictures and memories from a Dartmoor Parish. Throwleigh Archive, 2006
 Michael Yelton - *Outposts of the Faith*. Canterbury Press, 2009. ISBN 9781853 119859