FSCC CHURCH CARD No 1

BISHOPS LYDEARD
Church of St Mary the Virgin

The village of Bishops Lydeard belonged in the earliest times to the Bishop of Bath and Wells. In 1291 King Edward I granted a charter to Robert Burnell, Bishop of Bath and Wells, to hold a weekly fair in the village, and two annual fairs, each for six days, at the Feasts of the Nativity and the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The original charter is still in existence. It was acquired some years ago by the village, and is now kept in the church (1).

There has been a church on the present site since Saxon times, but the oldest part of the present building is the north arcade, which dates from the end of the thirteenth century.

The church is built of red sandstone, with (2) a tall, typically Somerset tower embellished with facings of creamy Ham Hill stone. It was built about 1450. It is one of the earliest of a group with the towers of Isle Abbots, Kingston and Staple Fitzpaine. On the south side of the church, east of the porch, note the Rood Turret (3) housing the spiral stair leading to the top of the Rood Screen.

Inside, the north arcade, the older, is distinctly lower than the south arcade. The present form of the interior, though, is decidedly Victorian and later. The chancel was rebuilt on the original foundations about 1860, at which time the north aisle was extended east (it originally finished level with the chancel arch). Walking up the nave, look at the carved bench ends (4), mostly carved by a group of itinerant Flemish wood-carvers around 1540. Emblems of the Passion and of the Church, together with Green Men and local scenes, are represented.

The Rood Screen (5) was made, probably in Taunton, early in the sixteenth century. It is typical of the fan-vaulted screens being installed throughout Devon and Somerset at that time. It is complete, since when it was built there was no extension of the north aisle as there is now. It is unusual in that one band of the ornament along the richly carved cornice contains the Apostles Creed in Latin in an ornate Gothic script. The lower panels contain elaborate tracery. The colour was restored by Sir Ninian Comper based on traces found when it was being repaired. The figures of Our Lord, St Mary and St John are also the work of Comper, and were erected in 1948. The end of the barrel vault over the nave butting onto the chancel arch is richly embellished. This, the "Cenure of the Rood" is an original mediaeval feature, and was placed there to form a canopy of honour over the figure of Christ crucified.
Except for a few small fragments assembled in a window in the vestry, there is no surviving mediaeval glass. The stained glass in the aisle windows is all Victorian. Both the chancel east window and the Lady Chapel east window are by Comper, the chancel window part of the war memorial scheme, the Lady Chapel a memorial to Beatrice Ringrose, wife of Sir Denis Fortescue Boles of Watts House (now Cedar Falls Health Farm). The parish was fortunate in the years leading up to World War I and between the wars in having two “squirely” families, the Lethbridges of Sandhill Park and the Boles of Watts House, who both embellished the church notably.

Incidentally, it is strictly incorrect to have a Lady Chapel in a church dedicated to Our Lady. The second altar here, though, with its little chapel behind the screen, has for many years been called by this name.

The pulpit is Jacobean, again with its colouring restored to agree with traces of its earlier colour. The stone base on which it stands is modern.

Passing through the screen, the chancel was furnished and re-ordered by Sir Ninian Comper as a War Memorial. The High Alter (6) with its riddel posts surmounted by winged and gilded angels, with curtains to match the altar frontal in the liturgical colour of the season, is in the style that he advocated as the traditional English altar. Above it is a square tester or canopy, similar to the one Comper erected over the altar of the Lady Chapel at Downside Abbey. Note the little angels at the corners, bearing shields of the Boles arms. The gilding round the east window, with the figures of seraphim, is also part of Comper’s scheme.

How to Get There: From Taunton take the A358 Minehead road north-west for about six miles. The village is signposted where a bypass takes the road west of it. From Bridgwater there is a pretty drive over the Quantocks through Enmore and past the old manor of Cothelstone.