



History of Erlestoke

Village History by Roger Hampton

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By Roger Hampton

Erlestoke is one of a series of long narrow parishes which run north and south straddling the northern escarpment of Salisbury Plain. It is four and a half miles long and never more than one mile wide; the northern part of the parish lies on low ground underlaid by clay, while the southern part is on the high chalk of the plain. The village and its surroundings lie between an outcrop of greensand and gault clay, where springs break out when water percolating through the chalk meets the clay layer below. Just south of the village the scarp is interrupted by the valley of a stream, while it is sheltered from the north by a spur of higher ground extending from the west, so that the village is in a sheltered hollow rather than exposed to the north like its neighbours.

Although evidence of prehistoric – Bronze age and Roman occupation have been found, the village as we know it was probably established by the Saxons settling in Wiltshire in the sixth or seventh century AD. Documentary evidence from such an early period is very rare, and in fact, the earliest mention of Erlestoke by name comes from a document of about 1200, when it is called 'Stokes'. The Domesday Book does not refer to the village by name, no doubt because it formed an outlying part of the manor of Melksham. The Lord of that manor before the Conquest was Earl Harold, later Harold II, and the prefix Erle which is regularly found attached to the name from about 1230 onwards may refer to him. It means merely 'the Earl's place'.

The ownership of the manor in the Middle Ages passed through several Norman families – the de Mandevilles, the Fitz Herberts and the Montagues, Earls of Salisbury among them. None of the Lords is certainly known to have lived at Erlestoke until the early 16th century, when the Brouncker family, whose name survives in Brounckers Court Farm & Brounckers Hill farm, became Lords. Their ownership lasted until 1720 when the daughters of Dauntsey Brouncker, the last male member of the family, sold it to George Heathcote, He in turn sold it to Peter Delme in 1737; another Peter Delme sold the manor of Erlestoke to John Smith in 1780. Smith's son Joshua died in 1819, and his daughters sold it to the executors of a West Indian plantation owner, Simon Taylor.

The purchase of Erlestoke by the Smiths in 1780 marked a turning point in the history of the village. The only map which we have from before that time is from Andrews and Dury's map of Wiltshire, published in 1773. From that we

see that the layout of the village was very noticeably different from that of today. Houses lay not only along the main road and the lower road, but along the road (called in records Water Street) which ran southward from the main road approximately where the lakes now are. Only the uppermost lake then existed, named on the map as Well Head Pond, and from it a stream ran down the valley, partly along Water Street itself. The manor house, with formal gardens adjoining which were approximately on the site of the Park, lay just east of the Church, of which the former Churchyard still remains.

We also know from the map and from documents that Erlestoke remained largely unenclosed until 1782; that is; its agriculture was still organised on the old common field system, where the holdings lay unenclosed in many tiny strips. These lay along the lower road and also south of the village both below and above the hill. The 1773 map shows a large common called Erlestoke Marsh north of the present Manor Farm (then called Dog Kennel) and in the south of the parish were common sheep downs. The only farms isolated from the village were Brounckers Hill Farm on the hill and at Pudnell, the latter being an enclosed settlement with origins probably in the Middle Ages.

The enclosure carried out in 1782 meant that the ancient common rights over the fields, the marshes and the downs were swept away. The land was re-allotted into private ownership in the modern sense, and this gave the new owners of the manor the chance to landscape their property in accordance with the ideas of the time – to make a park of the kind that we still see when we visit Stourhead. Water Street was replaced by a string of seven lakes, and the valley and sides of the hills above it were planted with a great variety of trees and shrubs, the design being by William Eames of London. The old manor house was demolished, and a grand new one designed by an eminent architect, George Steuart, erected on the site away from the village, and with the wide prospect so much desired by the gentry of the time. The two parts of the park, separated by the sunken road to the east, were united by arches across the road.

The destruction of Water Street meant that more houses had to be built in the other parts of the village, among the older houses which still mostly survive today. The new ones were in the picturesque 'Gothic' style so popular at the time; the destruction of the manor house (or possibly of the manor house at Edington also owned by the Smiths and demolished about this time) enabled them to be decorated with pieces of sculpture and carved panels, apparently of 17th century date.

Although, in past years, old villagers told that the 'pieces of sculpture' on the houses came from a temple which used to be above the west end of North close wood, and shown on a map of 1796.

Erlestoke had become an estate village. The houses were occupied largely by estate workers rather than the numerous small farmers of earlier times, and the place was worthy of the attention of travellers in search of the picturesque. Writing in 1814, John Britton described the park in glowing terms – 'a few spots in England present such a series of sylvan beauties' – and went on, 'Connected with this spot is the retired, neat and truly rustic village of Earl Stoke. This consists of several cottages placed on the sides of the road, each detached from the others and every one accompanied by its garden, creepers, trees, jasmines, honeysuckles etc. The scene is singularly pleasing to the philanthropist and seems a sort of illustration of Arcadian romance'.

The attractions of the grand new house, the park, and the remodelled village were probably instrumental in bringing a very rich family to Erlestoke when the property next changed hands in 1819. Simon Taylor held extensive interest in the West Indies; his nephew and heir, Sir Simon Brissett Taylor, died a young man in 1815, and the fortune passed to his only sister, Anna Susanna, wife of George Watson, who added the name Taylor to his own. The ownership of the Watson-Taylors lasted just a century, during which time they built up an extensive landed estate stretching from Edington to Urchfont. But their prosperity varied over the period; in 1830 the Duchess of Kent and her daughter, the future Queen Victoria, were lavishly entertained at Erlestoke and in the following year lavish festivities marked the coming of age of Simon Watson-Taylor, eldest son of George and Anna Susanna. In 1832, however, the family was in financial difficulties, and the contents of the house were sold by auction in a sale lasting twenty-one days, the printed catalogue running to 200 pages.

The Watson-Taylors moved away, and in 1837 the house and park were let to John Cam Hobhouse, later Lord Broughton. In 1844, however, Simon Watson-Taylor returned and lived in Erlestoke until 1902. The estate was finally broken up early in the 20th century; the more outlying parts were sold in 1907, 1910, and the house, park and village houses in 1920.

The house and park subsequently came into the hands of F. H. & F. W. Green and Sons – timber merchants of Chesterfield and then the house passed to the Revd. J. W. Potter, when it was used as a spiritualist centre and hotel. He attempted more than one questionable financial scheme involving the park, leading on one instance to exposure in the magazine John Bull. During and subsequent to the Second World War, the house was used as a Senior Army Officers' training school. In 1950 the main part of the house was destroyed by fire. After a period of disuse the Home Office acquired the remaining parts of the house in 1960 and with the out buildings opened a Detention Centre, this in turn changed to a Youth Custody Centre and more recently to a full prison for adult males in categories 'C' & 'D' (low risk). In 1997 an extension was built in the grounds to house 50 inmates bring the total number of inmates to 300. Further extensions have increased the total inmates to 420.

On the opposite side of the road to the house an American Military hospital was built to service casualties of the 2nd world war. They were flown into New Zealand airstrip (on Salisbury Plain) and transported to Erlestoke. The camp was later used as a base for the Royal Engineers and other regiments but was closed in the late 1950's. It was demolished in the mid-late 1960's. Two ornamental arches which connected the house to the grounds on the south side of the road were demolished by the army in the 1960's after they fell into disrepair. In the woods to the south stood a building used for parties and entertainment by the Lord of the Manor called 'Swiss Cottage'. On party nights Swiss cottage was reached by traversing the lower of the two bridges from Erlestoke house along cinder paths decorated with lights hung from the trees. The cottage was destroyed during the occupation of the camp by American Service personnel as were some of the lakes as the story goes 'they used to fish with dynamite!' and blew the heads out of some of the lakes. Two lakes by the church and village hall were piped and filled in during the 1960s. Longwater, the bottom lake was cleaned out and let out for coarse fishing by the owner.

We have seen that the house, the park and the village were all transformed in the late 18th century in accordance with the taste of the time. One feature remained unaltered. The Church of St. James stood on the foundations of the earlier church of St Margaret's within the old churchyard which still exists, near the site of the former Manor House behind the present village hall. It was a small building consisting only of a nave, chancel, and low western tower. A Church at Erlestoke is first mentioned in documentary evidence about 1220, and surviving capitals and bases from the old Church, now in the present one, show that it was originally a Norman building of circa 1130 – 50. But centuries of piecemeal alteration and repair had resulted in a building which by the 1870's had become completely unfashionable. What we should regard as quaint and picturesque, Church people at the height of the Gothic Revival regarded as merely barbarous. We should have particularly valued the interior if the Church had been allowed to survive. A photograph shows complete Georgian furnishings of the humblest kind (such as we can still see at Dilton Marsh near Westbury), complete with high box pews, a three deck pulpit, a western gallery on which the music stands of the musicians stood, and painted texts on boards round the walls.

Such a Church could not suit the fashionable Watson-Taylors and their guests. The first steps towards the change were to regularise the position of the parish; until 1877 Erlestoke had, since time immemorial, been a chapelry of Melksham. The Vicar of Melksham had been found to provide for services at Erlestoke by employing the curate there, while he himself received the profits of the glebe and tithes. In 1877, Erlestoke was made an ecclesiastical parish, and the patronage of the Church was made over to the Watson-Taylor family. The old Church was closed and demolished, and sites for a new Church and vicarage provided. Designs for both buildings were commissioned from a fashionable architect of the day – George Edmond Street R. A. of London.

Until the new Church was completed, a barn – now a garage showroom, at the Estate Yard (now the Limes) in the middle of the village, opposite the School (now closed), was 'licensed' as a 'temporary Church'. (the Chapel of Ease) It is known that two weddings took place in this 'barn' namely in 1878 Charles Tyler married Annie Miles (both

of Erlestoke), and in 1880 Joseph Hardy (a Royal Marine) wed Esther Susanna Tyler. Presumably christening and funeral services took place here too.

The new Church, in the perpendicular Gothic style was paid for entirely by Lady Hannah Charlotte Watson-Taylor, wife of Simon Watson – Taylor, in memory of her father the 8th Marquis of Tweeddale, and dedicated on 6th October 1880 (an exceedingly wet day) to the Holy Saviour or St. Saviour. The estimated cost was £3500 but the final figure was something over £6000.

The entire Church building is of Box stone, the roofs being covered with plain red tiles made by Mr Box of Market Lavington, surmounted by crestings by Cooper of Maidenhead.

The interior walls are of solid Box ground stone tooled over; the outer walling, after being faced-up, being left 'batted' from the tool.

The total length of the Church is 74 feet, and the height of the tower, to the line of its parapet is 45 feet, above which rises a sharp pitched roof.

The nave which measures 48 feet by 21 feet, contains a four-light western window, and is also lighted with 3 three-lights on the north, and 2 three-lights on the south side, all surmounted by tracery. In the chancel, which is 26 feet by 17½ feet, is a four-centred, 5-light window of rich detail, erected by Lady Hannah Charlotte Watson-Taylor in memory of her father, the 8th Marquis of Tweeddale, who died on 10th October 1876.

The south facing stained glass window in the chancel is dedicated to Lady Hannah Charlotte Watson – Taylor who died in 1887.

Also included are a north aisle, a south transept, a vestry, and a south porch which possesses the peculiarity that its outer arch is pointed, whilst the inner one is struck from four centres.

The roof of the nave and chancel which are of Memel fir are open.

The Church generally, is laid with White's patent block wood flooring; Goodwin's encaustic tiles of ornamental design being used for the chancel. The fittings of the chancel are of oak; and the seats in the nave are of pitch pine. The contractors who built the Church were Messrs Hale and Son of Castle Street Salisbury with Mr Thos Chapelrow being clerk of the works.

The communion table is oak, and over it is a foliated cross in a sunken panel with the text 'look unto me and be ye saved'.

The octagonal font, made of Corsham stone, stands on a pennant stone base, over a dry well, while the oak Jacobean pulpit from the old Church of St. James has been utilised again, placed on a pennant base, and entered by four steps.

Two Norman tablets brought from St. James are found in the entrance porch with another against the south wall by the font. Also brought from the old Church are four 'coats of arms' inset in the wall on the south transept.

The lectern, and eagle with the spread wings, is richly carved in oak. The carvings were all the work of Mr Harry Hems of Exeter.

Located in the north aisle is a two manual and pedal organ, made by William Beales, an organ builder of Clapham, in 1881. It was partially restored in 1961. In 1949 a faculty was obtained to get an electric blower for this previously hand pumped organ. In 1996 the organ was completely restored at a cost of £4000 and relocated in the arch leading to the north aisle.

Five monuments from St. James are on the walls of the north aisle:-

In rhyme to John Axford.

To Jane, wife of Hugh Tilley, died Dec 31st 1750 aged 70

A metal 'plate' to Eleanor Axford died 16th October 1726 aged 83 and

Isaac Axford died 17th November 1729 aged 83.

Anna Maria daughter of Abraham Bincks died July 31st 1737 aged 32

Elizabeth wife of Rev. Thomas died 29th April 1730

These people are buried in the old churchyard situated behind the village hall where St James church was also.

The belfry is entered just inside the porch, by a spiral stone staircase to the tower which houses six bells, five of which came from St. James'. The bells are in need of restoration and at present cannot be rung for this reason. (1996 estimate of £15,000 for repairs)

The ring is as follows:-

By Llewellins and James of Bristol 1882.

Dated 1684 and inscribed with the name of William Brounker.

Dated 1628.

Dated 1619 with the name of another William Brounker.

Cast by William and Roger Purdue 1664.

Dated 1648.

When built, the heating in the Church was a hot air system by Jones & Sons of London, but in the 1960's this was removed and electric heating installed. Lighting was originally by oil lamps, but in 1933 the Revd. Potter of Erlestoke House paid for the installation of electric lighting in the Church at a cost of £37.17s.0d., in memory of his wife Mrs. Clara Rose Potter. A plaque to this effect can be seen in the entrance porch, along with a memorial plaque to parishioners who served in the Boer War, and another plaque commemorating the conservation of the Church in 1880. A plaque acknowledging the services of Verger Eric Oram was added in 1989.

In May 1997 the church lighting was rewired by Wheeler's Electrical of Westbury at a cost of £1400.

The Roll of Honour naming many of the villagers who served in the First World War hangs on the wall in the porch. While the War Memorial to all who fell in the 1914-18 and 1939-45 Wars is located in the Churchyard which surrounds the Church. The Churchyard was extended in 1952.

Erlestoke was a parish on its own till 1927 after which date it was linked with Coulston. The patronage of the two Churches was changed in 1960 and again in 1966. Erlestoke ceased to be linked with Coulston and was then a joint parish with Great Cheverell, the vicar being a chaplain at the Detention Centre (later an open prison), until 1974. It changed again in 1982 when we were linked with the parishes of Edington and Coulston. In 1995 the benefice was

again altered to include the village of Bratton within the existing benefice of Erlestoke, Coulston and Edington with Imber

The Church plate was given by George Watson-Taylor in 1820. The older parish registers, which begin in 1681, are deposited in the County Record Office at Trowbridge.

As the curates were merely employees of the vicars of Melksham until 1877 it is not possible to discover names before the late 17th century. Since then the sequence has been as follows:-

- ? – 1696 James Cumbly, buried 1696

- 1698 – 1740 David Thomas, buried 1740

- ? – 1749 David Price, buried 1749

- ? – 1754 Francis Cave

- 1754 – ? William Thomas

- 1779 – ? Richard Sanderson

- 1781 – 1783 John Baily

- 1784 – 1786 Daniel Lloyd

- 1787 – 1805 William Roots

- 1809 – 1814 William Richards

- 1815 – 1835 A. Bassett

- 1836 – 1841 Daniel Longmire

- 1841 – 1843 Served by various ministers

- 1843 – 1849 George Nutt

- 1849 – 1851 Basil Duckett Aldwell

- 1852 – 1853 Francis Cruse

- 1853 – 1871 Edward Wilton, master of the free school, Lavington,
described as officiating minister

- 1871 – 1872 Matthew Wilkinson

1873 – 1875 Alfred Sells

1875 – 1876 Prince William Thomas

1877 – 1878 Herbert C. Sturges

1878 – 1890 Christopher Knipe

1890 – 1901 C. W. Ridley

1902 – 1926 Henry Stewart Travers

1927 – 1929 Henry James Brunden Hallam

1930 – 1935 John Alfred Griffith Howell

1935 – 1943 William James Evans

1944 – 1948 G. James Jenkins

1949 – 1961 Clifford Walter Buckley

1962 – 1967 Max. M. W. Williams

1967 – 1979 John Foden Lee

1979 – 1981 C. Pat Hanna (Canon)

1982 – 1988 Maurice Bird

1988 – 1993 Neil Heavisides

1995 – 2002 David Belcher 1996-9 Assistant Priest A. Lloyd Davies

2000 – 2003 HFD Priest J Hall

2003- Rev Dr Graham Southgate

In its first century the Church has received many gifts of furnishings and fittings, which are worth recording:-

The Altar Cross was given in memory of Alice Maud Travers – 5 December 1901.

Churchwardens' wands, given by Mrs. N. E. Cook carved by Mr. Newman of Devizes.

Processional Cross, carved by Mr. Newman from oak given by Mr. Robert Hampton (Churchwarden).

Pulpit Bible given in memory of Douglas Phillips 1921 – 1947, a former chorister.

Holy Communion Book, Prayer Book and chest in vestry, all given in memory of Mr. W. M. Reed, 1876 – 1959 (father of Mrs. Lucy Hampton and Mrs. Elsie Poolman). The chest was made by Mr. Poolman and boys of the Kingswood Training School, Bristol.

Alter Cloths: one made by Miss. Watson-Taylor and given when the Church was opened, who also made the kneelers in the front of the rails; one made by Mrs. N. E. Cook, Headmistress of the village school 1921 – 1947 and one time Church organist; one made by Mrs. W. Sharpe, Brown Owl of Brownies for many years.

Alter backcloth; made by Mrs Cook.

Purificators; made by Mrs W Jefferies and Miss Nancy Stone.

Hassocks; embroidered by ladies of the Womens Fellowship.

A lithograph of St James' Church was given by Miss Huntley-Walker.

A painting by Mrs S Newbury-Winnington of the Bishop's visit for the Church's Centenary celebrations 1980.

Altar Service Book donated by Mr A F Tye in memory of his mother (1989).

Carved font cover donated by Mr & Mrs A Tye.

Green Altar Frontal & side curtains given by the family of Miss L Miles in her memory and made by Mrs Pearl Crittle (1995).

Carved oak font cover donated by Mr & Mrs Tye commemorating Mr Tyes long service as churchwarden

Kneelers made by Chris Hampton, Helen Diskett, Audrey Tye and Kathleen Gray

Source: Reproduced from the Erlestoke Parish Website, for posterity.