

# BYGONE SILEBY



Parish Church of Sileby

How it Began

No.14

# THE HISTORY

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## SILEBY PARISH CHURCH

### Part 1

#### SAXON TIMES

We do not know when the first church was built in Sileby.

The diocese of Leicester had come into existence as early as 679 A.D., when Cuthwine was consecrated the first Bishop of Leicester. The Danish invasion put an end to the diocese in 840 A.D., when most of the churches were destroyed.

At this distance in time, it was not possible to determine if Sileby had a church in Saxon times, there is no evidence of one. To see something of this problem, consider three other Parish Churches in this deanery :

Rothley There was a church there in Saxon times, and in the churchyard can be seen part of a stone cross belonging to that period. The Domesday Book shows that there was a priest in Rothley in 1086 A.D.

Birstall Some remains of a Saxon church are preserved in the present church, but the Domesday Book makes no mention of a priest.

Syston The Domesday Book records that there was a priest in Syston in 1086.A.D. There are no traces of a Saxon church there.

In Sileby, there are no Saxon remains, and no priest is mentioned in the Domesday Book, but from the size of the village, it seems likely that a church did exist at that time. If such a church was built, it would have been destroyed when the Danes took the village about the middle of the 10th Century.

#### THE PARISH

In ancient times, England was divided into Shires, then called "Scires". The official responsible for that region was the Scire Reeve, known later as the Sheriff. The shire was subdivided into areas called Hundreds. Sileby was in the Shire of Leicester and the Hundred of Beeby.

Parishes were at first parts of the Hundred. The word parish is derived from the Greek parokia, meaning "near the house". In medieval times the communicants of the church were known as "Houselings".

Parishes were established in England about 636 A.D., by Honorius, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The boundary of Sileby parish has remained unchanged for 1,300 years, and was regarded as ancient when King Edward the First drew up his system of taxation with the title *Taxatio Ecclesiastica*, between 1288 and 1282, in which this Parish Church is included.

#### SILEBY PARISH IN NORMAN TIMES

##### The Norman Overlords

After the Norman Conquest in 1066 A.D., King William gave most of the land in Sileby to the powerful Norman Baron, Hugh de Grentmaisnil, as part of the Manor of Leicester.

Hugh de Grentmaisnil, his brother Robert and their uncle, William de Gerouis, had financed the refounding of the Abbey of St. Ebrulf in their homeland, Normandy. During the fifteen years after the Conquest, Hugh de Grentmaisnil endowed this Abbey with portions of tithes in all the Leicestershire parishes which were part of his Manors. These gifts were confirmed by William the Conqueror in 1081 A.D.

When the Manor of Leicester passed to Robert Le Bossu, Earl of Leicester, he gave the tithes of the parish of Sileby to St. Ebrulf's, which is recorded in a document called *Vetustas Rutuli*. As Le Bossu died in 1168 A.D., the gift was probably made about 1150 A.D., or even as early as 1120 A.D. In this way, the church and parish of Sileby became associated with the Abbey of St. Ebrulf for more than three centuries.

##### The Abbey of St. Ebrulf, Normandy

The original Abbey, which belonged to the Benedictine Order, was founded at Ouch, in the diocese of Lisieux, in the year 575 A.D., by the pious St. Evroul, better known by his Latin name, Ebrulfus, or Ebrulf. He was remembered in the Roman Calendar on the 29th December, the day on which he died, in 586 A.D., at the age of 79.

By the 11th Century, the Abbey had become dilapidated and neglected. In the early 1040's, the Abbot of Bec, near Rouen, sent one of his monks, Lanfranc of Pavia to restore the aged building. After the completion of the task, Lanfranc became Abbot of Bec, and in 1070, was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, by William the Conqueror.

Through the generosity of the Norman lords in England, and particularly those of Leicester, the Abbey became richly endowed, enjoying an annual income of 30,000 livres. Such gifts caught the attention of the Archbishop, who had a personal interest in the Abbey.

The following churches in Leicestershire were given to the Abbey of St. Ebrulf :

Belgrave; Burton Overy; Carlton Curliou; Desford;  
Glenfield; Peatling Magna; Sapcote; Swithland and  
Thurcaston.

The Abbey was also given the tithes, or some portion of tithes, from the churches of Galby, Humberstone, Kibworth, Kirby Malory, Knaptoft, Church Langton, Laughton, Oadby, Thorpe Arnold, Thurlaston, Waltham-on-the-Wolds, Wigston, Willoughby, Staunton Wyville, Wymeswold and Sileby.

### The Tithes

As tithes will be mentioned from time to time, some brief explanation may be helpful. The tithe was the surrendering of one tenth of all produce of the land and stock for the maintenance of the Parish Church and its ministry. Tithes had been enforced in England by the Council of Chelsea in 787 A.D.

The origin of this offering is found in the Bible, in Genesis, chapter 28, verse 22, where Jacob vowed, "... of all that Thou shalt give to me I will surely give the tenth part unto Thee." It is also seen in Leviticus, chapter 27, verses 30 and 32, "... all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or the fruit of the tree, it is the Lord's: it is holy unto the Lord. And concerning the tithe of the flock, even whatsoever passeth under the rod, the tenth shall be holy unto the Lord."

Tithes were of two kinds, Great and Small. The Great Tithe included corn, hay and wool, while the Small Tithe covered all other produce. Sometimes there were other descriptions of tithes, for example, the Mixed Tithe concerned animals or fowls fed on the land.

As every family in the village gave one tenth of all the farm produce to the Parish Church, it was necessary to have a store house, called a Tithe Barn, near to the church, where all this material could be kept. The tithe was intended to be expended in three ways, first for the upkeep of the Parish Church, secondly to help the poor and thirdly, for the support of the priest.

Until 1450 A.D., Sileby Parish Church prospered from the tithe income, but during the following 400 years, all the tithe income went out of the village into the pockets of laymen. By 1700, the church was desperately poor and dilapidated. The Vicar was paid less than £10 per year, but the person receiving the tithes was making a comfortable profit of £120 a year.

Although Sileby was unfortunate in this respect, many churches continued to receive the tithes. With the rise of the Nonconformist churches, the payment of tithes became unpopular. In the 1800's there was a harvest song, which ran :

"We've cheated the parson, we'll cheat him again,  
For why should the Vicar have one in ten?"

The Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 put an end to the payment on tithes in kind.

To return to ancient times, we shall see how the lords of the Manor of Sileby were able to give some part of the tithe income to the Norman Abbey of St. Ebrulf.

### THE FIRST CHURCH IN SILEBY

#### Where it was Built

The site chosen for the erection of a church, usually had earlier Christian connections, being the place where visiting monks had first preached the Gospel to the villagers, and was thus regarded as a holy place.

The ideal position for open air preaching and instruction was a hill top, where there was a large tree which could protect both the monks and their congregation from the weather.

Preaching the Christian Gospel usually began at the north end of a village. The south was regarded as sunny, warm and life-giving, but the north was dark, cold and deathly. The church, as a stronghold against the powers of darkness and evil, was invariably built on the north side of a village. The earliest churches were built without windows in the north wall - to prevent the devil looking in! Until the Middle Ages, the north side of a church was spoken of as "the Devil's side."

As the church was erected on the north side of a village, the principal entrance, called the porch, was on the south side.

The site chosen for Sileby Parish Church was on a hill, far beyond the flood level, and land belonging to the Manor of Leicester.

#### When it was Built

If we are to attempt to write a complete history of Sileby Parish Church, we must try to discover when the first church was built in the village. There are a number of fragments of information, which when put together, provide a possible date.

- (1) From the evidence of the tithes, we suppose that the first church in Sileby was built by the lord of the Manor, Robert FitzRobert de Meulan, who was the second Earl of Leicester from 1118 to 1168 A.D.

The Eark, known as Le Bossu, and his wife Amicia were generous with their vast wealth and founded the Cistercian Abbey of Garendon, the Benedictine Priory of Luffield and a Priory at Nuneaton, where Amicia became a nun of the Benedictine Order. With the encouragement of the Bishop of Lincoln and the permission of King Stephen, the Earl founded the Abbey of St. Mary de Fratis, by the river Soar in Leicester, between 1137 and 1143 A.D. It became the wealthiest Augustinian Abbey in the Kingdom.

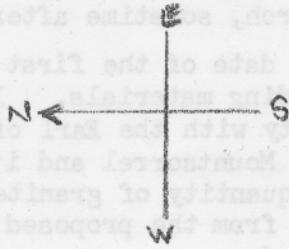
- (2) We suppose that after the completion of these major works, the Earl turned his attention to the minor task of providing his Manor at Sileby with a Parish Church, sometime after 1143 A.D.
- (3) A further indication of the date of the first church may be seen on the availability of building materials. In 1151 A.D., Robert Le Bossu made a treaty with the Earl of Chester, to take possession of the Castle of Mountsorrel and its surroundings. This provided an unlimited quantity of granite from the quarry, which was only a mile or so from the proposed site of the Sileby Church, on his own Manor Land.
- (4) In 1151 A.D., the Bishop of Lincoln was Robert de Chesney, who had signed the Mountsorrel Castle Treaty as a witness. He had been Bishop of the diocese only two years, and before his consecration, had been the Archdeacon of Leicester. As the new Bishop knew this region personally, it is possible that he suggested to the Earl of Leicester that a church should be built in Sileby.
- (5) There is in existence a record of all the churches consecrated by a later Bishop of Lincoln, Hugh de Welles. These churches were built between 1209 and 1235. Sileby is not mentioned in that list. As we have positive evidence that Sileby Parish Church existed in 1220, it means that the church must have been built before 1209.
- (6) From these scraps of information, we estimate that the church at Sileby was consecrated by Robert de Chesney, Bishop of Lincoln, on the 19th September, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the year 1152 A.D.

#### How it was Built

The first church in Sileby was a simple, solid, rectangular building of granite and timber.

A church was built with its sides facing north, south, east and west. The altar was always at the east end, the tower at the west, and the main entrance on the south, the side nearest to the villager's homes.

As ancient churches are not on a precise east-west alignment, it is believed that the marking out of the foundations was determined by the point at which the sun rose above the horizon on a day which had been chosen for the dedication of the building, when it had been completed. As the Sileby church was to be dedicated in honour of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or more simple, the birthday of our Lord's Mother, the Master Mason, assisted by men holding poles, waited for the sun to rise above the Seagrave hill, on the 19th September, about 1150 A.D. The poles in line with the rising sun gave the Master Mason the exact attitude of the church.



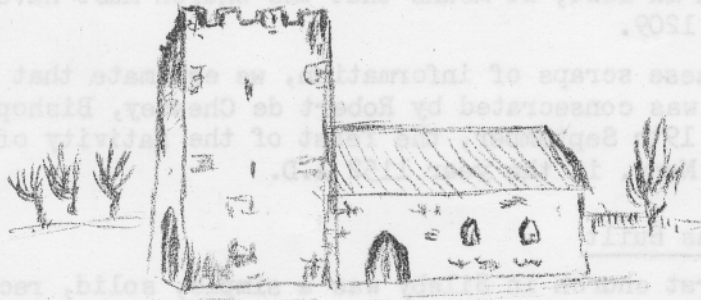
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This first church had a low square tower at the west, in which hung a single curfew bell, which was rung at sunset in summer and at eight o'clock at night during the winter months. At the sound of this bell, all fires in the village were put out, and all lights extinguished.

This first small church (Fig.1) covered the area which is now the nave.



#### The dedication of the church

It was unusual to dedicate a church in honour of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Until 1752, the feast fell on the 19th September, but that year, the government changed the calendar, and removed eleven days from the month of September. Since 1752, the festival has been on the 8th September.

The feast was founded by Pope Sergius the First (687 - 701 A.D.) who appointed homilies and litanies to be used on this day. An ancient legend tells of a vision of angels being seen on the 19th September, solemnising this day as the anniversary of the Nativity or Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and instructing the church to perpetuate a feast. Pope Innocent the Fourth, in 1244, added an Octave.

The feast is mentioned in several 12th Century Leicestershire documents. Robert Blanchesmains, the third Earl of Leicester, gave to Leicester Abbey one stag on this day each year. The Abbey also had the liberty of fishing in the Groby Pool four days a year, including the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

#### Trancepts were added

About 1200 A.D., during the reign of King John, when Robert Fitz Nigel, the fourth Earl of Leicester held the Manor of Sileby, it became fashionable to enlarge the Parish Churches, and many in Leicestershire were increased in size at this time.

At Sileby, the nave was opened on both sides, and two transepts were built north and south, immediately before the chancel.

The original church, which had been rectangular in shape, was now in the form of a Latin cross. In the former church, there had been one altar, but in the enlarged church, there were three, one at the east end, the "high altar", and one in each of the two new transepts.

The two transepts are not easy to identify in the present church as they are now part of the north and south aisles.



#### The Priests

The diocese of Lincoln did not record the names of the Sileby priests during the 12th Century. As nothing is known about them, it must be supposed that they were similar to the other parish clergy in that age.

Although the priest was respected by reason of his office, he was often a man of humble origin rather than of the aristocracy. He had been educated by monks. He baptised, married and buried the peasant villagers and, on occasions, in the services of the church, preached to the congregation. Much of his time was spent farming, where he worked in the fields on his own church land, side by side with his parishioners. The priest was entrusted with the village breeding animals - the parish bull, boar, ram and stallion.



## The Interdict

During the next few years the Sileby villagers proudly attended their newly enlarged three-altar Parish Church. But their peace and contentment was not to last, for there was trouble on the way for both the church and the village.

In 1205, when Hubert, Archbishop of Canterbury died, the younger monks elected a sub-prior, Reginald to be Archbishop. King John and the elder monks then elected John de Grey, Bishop of Norwich. The following year, Pope Innocent the Third ordered the election of a new candidate, Stephen Langton, who was a Cardinal of the Church. King John defied the Pope, and in 1207, refused to allow Stephen Langton to enter England. The same year, King John seized Sileby from Simon de Montfort, then Earl of Leicester.

On Passion Sunday, the 23rd March, 1208, there was no Mass celebrated at the Parish Church. The priest read to the Sileby congregation a letter from the Bishop of Lincoln, Hugh de Welles, that the Pope had placed the whole kingdom under an Interdict. The altars were stripped, pictures and images of the Virgin Mary were covered with dark cloth, and the doors of the church bolted and barred. No services were permitted, with the exception of administering the rite of baptism to infants, and the sacrament to the dying, and then only in their own homes. The churchyard was closed, and the dead were buried without a service in unconsecrated ground. By the command of Rome, for the first time in a thousand years, no voice was heard in the land offering public prayers. The work of the Church came to a halt at a time when it was the centre of life for the people. The only person in the land who did not care was the King, who began to confiscate the goods of the clergy.

By 1209, the position in Sileby was grim. The church was closed, the village was in the hands of King John, and his soldiers filled the Castle at Mountsorrel.

It was not until the 3rd October, 1213, that a reconcilliation was made. King John was forced to surrender his crown to the Papal Legate, and to receive it back as the gift of the Pope, on condition that he paid a tribute of one thousand marks a year.

By the winter of 1213, services were once more being held regularly in Sileby Parish Church

## ECCLESIASTICAL GEOGRAPHY

In the 12th Century, the church in our village stood within five ever-widening ecclesiastical regions :-

1. The Parish of Sileby
2. The Deanery of Goscote
3. The Archdeaconry of Leicester
4. The Diocese of Lincoln
5. The Province of Canterbury

### The Deanery

By 1200 A.D. the Deanery of Goscote contained these parishes :  
Allextton, Asfordby, Ashby Folville, Barkby, Beeby, Belgrave, Brooksby,  
Cossington, Croxton, Great Dalby, Frisby, Hoby, Humberstone, Hungerton,  
Loddington, Lowesby, Prestwold, Queniborough, Ragdale, Ratcliffe,  
Rearsby, Seagrave, SILEBY, Siwoldby, Skeffington, Thrussington, Tilton,  
Walton-on-the-Wolds and Wymeswold.

### The Archdeaconry

The Archdeaconry of Leicester was established early in the 12th Century, and comprised seven Deaneries: Leicester, Guthlaxton, Sparkenhoe, Akley, Goscote, Gartree and Framland. There were two hundred and six parishes.

The Archdeacons of Leicester who were concerned with Sileby Parish Church in this first part of the history were :-

1092	Ralph
1100	Godfrey
1120	Walter
1147	Robert de Chesney
1151	Hugh
1158	Baldrick de Sigillo
1191	Robert de Rolveston
1199	William
1204	Reginald
1214	Reymond
1230	Robert Grossteste

### The Diocese

By 1200, Sileby was within the enormous diocese of Lincoln, which extended from the Thames to the Humber. The parish had been part of several dioceses and under the spiritual guidance of many Bishops during the long history of the Church. The following are shown with approximate dates, from 679 to 1300 A. D.

#### The Diocese of Leicester

679	Cuthwine
691	Wilfrid

#### The Diocese of Lichfield

697 - 737

#### The Diocese of Leicester

737	Torthelm
764	Eadbert
786	Unwona
802	Werenbert
816	Hraethun
841	Ealdred
843	Coelred

The Danish invasion of the midlands put an end to the diocese of Leicester.

The Diocese of Dorchester

872 Wlfwi  
1067 Remigius de Fescamp

The Diocese of Lincoln

The diocese of Lincoln was created shortly after the Norman Conquest.

1078 Remigius de Fescamp  
1093 Robert Bloet  
1123 Alexander  
1147 Robert de Chesney. Formerly Archdeacon of Leicester. Consecrated in September, 1149. Died on the 26th January, 1168. The bishopric was vacant until 1173.  
1173 Geoffrey Plantagenet  
1183 Walter de Constantilis  
1186 Hugh - Formerly Prior of Witham Abbey  
1203 William de Blois  
1209 Hugh de Welles  
1235 Robert Grosseteste. The second Archdeacon of Leicester to be elected Bishop of Lincoln. Consecrated at Reading on the 3rd June, 1235. He was the greatest scholar of his age. Died on the 9th October, 1253, and was buried in his Cathedral.  
1254 Henry de Lexington  
1258 Richard de Gravesend  
1280 Oliver Sutton  
1300 John Dalderby

THE BEGINNING OF CHURCH RECORDS

In 1220, Sir Robert de Harecourt died, and the Manor of Sibleby passed to his son, Sir Richard de Harecourt. There exists a Fine Roll dated 1220, which reveals how he obtained his inheritance :

"The King to the Sheriff of Co. Leicester.

Know you that Richard de Harecourt has made fine with us for £500, to have the lands which were of Robert de Harecourt his father, which accrue to him by hereditary right. We therefore command you to give him seisin of the Manors of Syleby and Borestall and 40 s. rent in Freworth."

(The Manors concerned were Sibleby, Birstall and Frolesworth)

The same year Sir Richard de Harecourt became lord of the Manor of Sileby, Hugh de Welles, the Bishop of Lincoln, ordered an investigation into the state of the church in his diocese.

Under the Archdeaconry of Leicester, is this entry for the parish of Sileby :

"Ecclesie de Sileby  
Patronus Ricardus de Harecourt  
Persona .....  
Monachi de Sancto Ebrulfo percipiunt ibi decimas  
de sex virgatis terrae ab antiquo."

The Bishop's survey, made in 1220, shows that Richard de Harecourt was Patron of the Parish Church. (Information about a Patron shown below). Regrettably, the name of the Persona - or Parson, is not supplied. It seems that the living was vacant. Perhaps the priest had left Sileby to enable the new Patron to make his own choice

It may be of interest to note the names of the priests in the nearby parishes who are recorded in the 1220 survey of the Bishop.

Cossington	William Despensator
Barrow	William
Seagrave	Philip
Rothley	John
Ratcliffe	William
Syston	Gilbert Malory

The last part of the Sileby entry shows that the Monastery of St. Ebrulf had been receiving the tithes of six virgates of land from ancient times. The Latin words "ab antiquo" are found in documents of the 13th Century, where they are used for a period of forty years or more. This would indicate that these tithes had been paid since at least 1180 A.D.

#### The first known Rector of Sileby

In the year 1220, when Sir Richard de Harecourt became lord of the Manor, his first task was to find a suitable priest to fill the vacant Parish Church. Sir Richard had a relative of the same name, who was at the Great Abbey of Bec, in Normandy. Having obtained the consent of the Abbot, Richard de Harecourt, described as a clerk, was brought to England, and was instituted as the first known Rector of Sileby. He remained at the Parish Church until the winter of 1228, when with the approval of the Abbot of Bec, he resigned, and returned to Normandy.