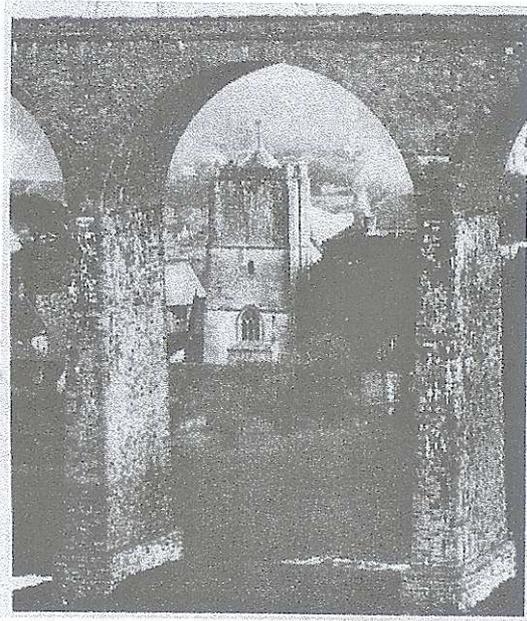


The Tower



St Thomas a Becket
Pensford

**The Tower is in the hands of the
Churches Conservation Trust who have
been responsible for the repair and
wonderful transformation of the room
below the tower**

**A substantial contribution was made by
former and present parishioners and
friends**

The Church and Tower of St Thomas a Becket, Pensford

We first hear of a Chapel in Pensford in the *Taxatio* of Pope Nicolas recorded in 1291. Here it is described as “a chapel of ease for the St Loe family in the chapelry of Publow”. The St Loe family were the Lords of the Manor of Publow and the Chapel at Publow was part of the *spiritualia* of Keynsham Abbey. The Abbey was founded in 1170 and was endowed with many properties of which one was the Minster Church at Keynsham with its attendant chapels (the *spiritualia*) of which Publow was one. However, it is likely that there was a chapel at Pensford much earlier as chapels or preaching crosses were built at places wherever people congregated such as at fords, bridges or market places and Christianity was well established in the Keynsham area by the 9th Century. By 1306, we find that the Chapel at Pensford had been appropriated to the Parish of Stanton Drew and so it would remain until 1902 when it returned from its long exile to become a Chapelry of Publow once again.

By the end of the 12th Century the textile trade at Pensford was well established and the market had become the most important in North Somerset. Pensford had become a significant place in the region standing at the centre of a network of roads. During the second half of the 14th Century, a church was built of which our Tower is all that remains. In the Tower is a rare medieval bell frame, which dates from the early 16th century. The present nave, which has been rebuilt several times, would have been a simple halt, but it would have been lavishly painted and decorated. With an illiterate congregation, the walls would have been its library covered with illustrations from the Bible and Lives of the Saints. As well as the main altar, there would have been statues altars dedicated to different saints; we know that there was an altar dedicated to St Nicholas.

At the end of the 13th Century, the process of fulling or tucking was revolutionised by the use of water power to drive the mill wheels. This technology was quickly adopted and it was during the 13th or 14th Centuries that the leat on the north side of the Church was built. The mill was where the car park of the Rising Sun is now. This led to a sudden increase in the number of mills and together with a reaction against the restrictive practices of the Trade Guilds in the towns, many workers flocked to the villages. They brought not only their skills but often their radical ideas.

This possibly led to an interesting episode in the life of the Church. In June 1457, the Church was put under Interdict and the priest excommunicated. At this time Lollardy, a movement considered to be heretical by the Church authorities was popular in Bristol and the surrounding villages so it seems most likely that the Pensford priest was preaching this heresy and this was why the Church was condemned. However the Interdict did not last for long as the Lord of the Manor appealed to the Bishop to replace the Priest and allow the congregation to return for Christmas. For several years, there were further episodes where parishioners would be brought before the Bishops Court for failing to observe the teachings of the Church.

By the end of the 16th Century, the appearance of the Church inside had completely changed; the altars and the painted walls would have gone. The Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries would have been accomplished and the Church would follow the Protestant liturgy. Once again, as it did with Lollardy, the Church of St Thomas bears direct witness to this change. Attached to the Church is a Trust known as "The Church Lands Trust of the Church or Chapell of St Thomas a Becket in Pensford". It was set up to provide money for the adornment and care of the Church and also for extra services wanted by the congregation, which the Parish Church of Stanton Drew was unable to supply. Established in approx 1527, some years before the Reformation it still continues as a Charity administered by six to eight local people, which now cares for the Church Room. Within the last five years some documents concerning the Feoffees have come to light and one particular document dated 1591 throws light not only upon the Church in this parish but also upon the thoughts that accompanied the Reformation and the years that followed. The hierarchy of the Church was distrustful of Rome and there is fear that popish practices might still be observed in this church.

Throughout the centuries, the Church has been subjected to floods but in 1772, the nave was severely damaged by fire. Repairs were no doubt carried out but by the 1860s, the whole fabric was in bad repair. The Feoffees were obliged to use their funds to mortgage the cost of rebuilding and in the end lost much of their capital. Before the fire, the Church Room was built on the site of one of the properties owned by the Feoffees. The plot was given to the Curate Mr. Tyler to build the first School in Pensford. It remained the only school on the western side of the village until the present Pensford School was started in 1890.

In 1902 as part of a reorganization of parishes the Church of St Thomas a Becket became part of the ecclesiastical parish of Publow again. It has been almost impossible to gather a comprehensive picture of Church life in the years until the flood of 1988 but many people still remember a busy and happy parish life; children baptized and confirmed and weddings and funerals celebrated. In the '50's and '60's the morning service on Sunday morning was held alternately in Publow and Pensford.

By the mid '60's it was becoming obvious that the Parish could not support two Churches and the Flood of 1968 finally decided the issue. The Church was badly damaged. On January 28th 1971, the Nave was declared Redundant but the Tower remained consecrated. The last time that the Eucharist was celebrated here was in the mid 1980s when two Anglican Franciscan monks were walking from North Wales to Southampton; they put up for the night in the village and celebrated Communion at 6am with three parishioners. Then everyone had a very good breakfast and the pilgrims continued on their way.

In 1980, a Community Centre with especial interest in the Arts and in Rural life called the Becket Centre was established in the nave. It was very popular but foundered for lack of sufficient funds after the discovery that the roof could no longer be insured. The nave was finally put up for sale in 1991 and sold in 1993. There then followed a long period of shameful neglect. In 2000, the Churches Conservation Trust acquired the Tower and over the last few years have repaired and restored the small room at the base of the Tower. Work is still ongoing and work has to be undertaken on the bell frame. New oak doors have been made to replace the old ones, which were beyond repair. They are beautiful and the money for them was mainly raised at a 90' birthday party. The nave has also been bought and is being restored with pride and vision.

Of great importance not only to us, but also internationally is the fact that John Locke the "father of English philosophy" was brought up in this parish and attended this Church. At the end of the 16th Century Nicholas Locke, a clothier from Dorset moved to Pensford attracted by its prosperity. His eldest son John was the father of the philosopher, who was born in 1630. The elder John was attorney and agent to Sir Alexander Popham, lord of the manor, a local magistrate and MP for Bath. As such, he would have been closely concerned with the management of a large estate and in the administration of the law, cruel and harsh as it was at this time. The younger John left home at the age of 13 to go to Westminster School, but it seems likely that an intelligent boy must have been influenced by the social scene that he observed

around him and that would no doubt have been discussed at home. Religious intolerance and social unrest in Europe and America were rife during his life and his writings had great influence on both sides of the Atlantic. He wrote passionately of religious tolerance and was interested in the education and care of the young. But he is chiefly known for his political writings and especially his revolutionary ideas. He advocated a social contract between people and government with rights and obligations on both sides and this was advanced by both France and America. Lord Rees-Mogg wrote "All revolutions start in a Somerset village". Locke never returned to live in Pensford but he had extensive properties, which he visited frequently until his death. Like his father and grandfather, he left money to the Church and to the poor of the Parish. His words "the right to life and liberty" are enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence so we often find American visitors here. It is good that we no longer have to show them a building so sadly neglected.

This Tower has stood in the centre of the village for seven hundred years. It has borne witness to the parishioners in their faith and in their questionings. It is hoped to establish a Trust, which can administer a centre, which can be used by small groups for contemplation or study - a centre of spiritual importance in the centre of our village, which it has lacked for over forty years. More recently, Canon John Simpson has presided over three Services at the Tower. A Service of re-Dedication was held on All Souls' Day (30th November 2011) a beautiful bright autumn day, attended by nearly 70 people gathered around the West door. On June 17th, the Churches Conservation Trust's Open Day saw the Blessing of baby Josh aged six months, son of Paul and Laura who have rebuilt the nave. On 8th July a Service of Holy Communion was, once again, celebrated in the Church of St Thomas a Becket in Pensford, attended by 15 parishioners.

June 2013

It is hoped to establish a Trust that will be responsible for the care of the Tower and incidental expenses such as heating

Occasional Services will be held here and it is hoped that individuals or small groups will use it for prayer, study or contemplation