

All Saints Headley – a personal look at history

On around the 24th June 1348, a seaman arrived on a ship at Weymouth, and it moored next to a ship from Bristol. The seaman fell ill and became the first reported case of the Black Death plague (referred to in the Grey Friars Chronicle as 'the terrible pestilence'). Several other hotspots occurred soon after, but by December 1349 it had largely fizzled out as it spread from ports including Bristol. However, 40-60% of the 6 million population died! Although isolation was actually understood, it was often too late. Priests would go and say prayers with the dying; nearly half of them died too, and a call for priests a few years later was met with a huge, and positive response. In lists of Rectors in churches the arrival of plague is often seen in a rather rapid turnover of Rectors (in the 1470s All Saints had four!).

The bacterial agent causing this came it appears from China, brought along the Silk Road carried by fleas on rats! It returned in the 15th Century. In fact, *China* plague was part of the problems of life. The Book of Common Prayer from 1549 reflects this in its prayer for plague and pestilence. In it the main line reads: *have pity upon us miserable sinners, who are now visited with this great sickness and mortality ... may it now please Thee to withdraw from us this plague and grievous sickness.* They saw God as allowing this, without understanding how, but asked folk, above everything else, to examine and amend life. We too do this in looking for more healthy and positive ways of living and it is a wake-up call for an ever faster and disintegrated world society. There was probably a wooden building on the site of our present church but after the time of the Black Death the tower and a small church were built.

Several things are worth mentioning about the church. First, the Nave has several large memorial shields in stone of notable folk. Almost all are in the burial book as being buried 'in the tower'! When you look in the tower you have to descend four steps, and it has been said that this was the original church level. I don't think that is quite true, for looking further at the burial books you realise that around the tower (esp to the South) there are large areas with no burials. 'In the tower' seems to imply that these people were put in a vault or vaults around the tower accessed from it. It was last used in the early 19th century. Mrs Holme, wife of Rector George Holme who started the school here, is buried there too. Interestingly, George's burial there isn't recorded – it may be that it was simply common knowledge that he was, for it seems odd if he wasn't buried with his beloved wife!

Next the Clock: This was erected in 1899 and started on Christmas Eve. It keeps perfect time when the temperature is about 5°C but loses 1 to 4

minutes a week at higher temperatures. It must have been cold when they installed it!

When we renewed the clockface a couple of years ago it was hanging by just two weak bolts! It is secured by four sturdy stainless-steel bolts now.

Fire: On Ascension Day, 12 May 1836, All Saints caught fire (allegedly from burning straw which children were said to be playing with), and the (then) wooden spire was set alight. The bells fell and the Nave caught fire, but it was brought under control near the rear part of the Nave. The Rector then, Robert Dickinson, who had lost his wife Maria four years before, was a large and jolly man. When he died 11 years after the fire, they forgot to put his name on his wife's memorial tablet in church, and they buried him where the fire stopped outside the church with a small pink memorial stone! You can see it today.

Rectors Ballantine-Dykes and Laverty in the 19th century built on to the Nave and added an organ and reredos (1882) and Screen (1892) to bring the church to looking much as it is today. The pews went in between the World Wars. Since I came, we have renewed the drainage which removed the dampness, and the new Lighting and the refurbished Sound System is now the best in the Diocese according to the Archdeacon of Surrey! With new painting in 2019 we now have All Saints looking better than it ever has in its history, to the Glory of God.

