

History of the Parish of Willingdon

Traces of a settlement at Willingdon pre-dates Saxon times, the Saxon word 'don' or 'dun' meaning hill. Set on a spur at the foot of the South Downs, it was the site from which our modern parish has grown. A local Christian presence pre-dates the Norman Conquest with evidence of a place of worship here stretching back a thousand years. The Domesday survey refers to the Manors of Rattendon and Willendone, with a chapel for a resident priest in the time of Edward the Confessor. In 1204 Simon Bishop of Chichester granted land at Willingdon to Robert, Abbot of Grestain in Normandy, thereby linking Willingdon to the nearby Benedictine Priory at Wilmington, a cell of the Abbey of Notre-Dame Grestain. This link survived until 1413 when foreign domination of religious houses was ended by the suppression of the alien priories.



In the 15th century Henry V granted the patronage of the parish church to the Dean and Chapter of Chichester and it remains so today. However, in the 17th and 18th centuries the patronage was leased to the Parker family, Lords of the Manor.

The church building itself tells many stories of events and of those who lived in the parish. It is constructed of local materials; flint which is found in abundance and the local green sandstone that was quarried in the area of the Wish Tower at Eastbourne and from which the Romans built Pevensey Castle. The tower is the oldest part of the building dating from the late 12th, early 13th century. The spire is shingled and the six bells, which hang in the belfry, are rung weekly for services. The clock was installed to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887. Willingdon's tower is unique in that it is the only one in Sussex that is offset to the north west of the nave. It is thought an earlier church once stood in line with the tower in the position of the existing north aisle. The mark of a former gable can be seen on the east side of the tower, which gives weight to this theory. The present broad nave dates from the early 14th century with a north aisle of four bays, the eastern most of which forms the manorial Rattton chapel. The chancel was added in the late 14th, early 15th century.



The parish registers date from 1560 recording the important events of baptism, marriage and burial, in the lives of the villagers. A large collection of archives records the history of the church, manor and parish.

The church suffered flying bomb damage twice in a matter of weeks in the summer of 1944; in July a V1 landed in Church Street. Much of the stained glass was lost, the roof, tower and some of the monuments were damaged. After the war the fabric was restored and many improvements carried out. Around this time a 14th century document provided evidence of a chapel at Willingdon dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In December 1946 the Bishop of Chichester decreed that Willingdon Church be dedicated to St Mary the Virgin.



There are many monuments in the church particularly of two families who were prominent in the history of Willingdon. The Parker and Thomas families were Lords of the Manor residing at Ratton for a combined total of approximately 460 years. The Parkers occupied the original medieval manor house for some 300 years. They married into many aristocratic families; their direct descendants include the Earls Spencer, Diana Princess of Wales, Princes William, Harry and George, Louis Archie and Princess Charlotte.

The last male heir, Sir Walter Parker, died in 1750 and the manor passed to Philadelphia his sister and her husband, Nathaniel Trayton. Nathaniel bequeathed it to his brother Edward, on whose death it passed to Samuel Durrant of St John's Southover Lewes. The manor was purchased in 1762 by Sir George Thomas of Yapton a former Governor of Pennsylvania and the Leeward Islands. Sir George and his son built a fashionable new Georgian manor house at Ratton, which was destroyed by fire in December 1891. It was rebuilt on the same site by 1899, becoming the home of Freeman Thomas and his wife the Hon Marie Adelaide Brassey. In 1892, Freeman the great great great grandson of Sir George changed his surname to Freeman-Thomas. Born at Ratton in 1866 he was a politician and diplomat who was raised to the peerage becoming the 1st Marquess of Willingdon. He was Governor of Bombay and Madras, Governor General of Canada, Viceroy of India and Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. His banner hangs in the Ratton Chapel. Lord Willingdon's heir, Gerard, was killed in the first few weeks of WW1. The estate was broken up and auctioned on 12 November 1918, so ending a way of life for many in the parish whose families had been employed on the estate for generations. On Christmas Eve 1940, whilst occupied by Canadian troops, the manor house was once again damaged by fire. Ratton house was never to be restored and was eventually demolished, the land being sold for housing development. Today nothing remains of this third and last house although oak panelling from the hall can be seen in the church. Parts of the medieval manor survive now converted into attractive accommodation. A stone from the original medieval manor is in the Ratton Chapel.



Willingdon was a small isolated rural community for the majority of its history; centred on the beautiful church and manor with outlying farms and scattered cottages at Lower Willingdon. Today it is much changed as the farmland has been sold and developed for housing and in 1934 the main A22 was built bisecting the village. Church Street and the area around the Malthouse and Old Post Office still retain many historic flint buildings. The attractive old pump house that supplied much of the village with water is still standing in Wish Hill. In 1970 Church Street and part of Wish Hill was designated a Conservation Area to protect what remains of this ancient settlement at the foot of the South Downs. Today the church of St Mary the Virgin remains a focal point and the spiritual centre of this parish where people have worshipped for 800 years in a building of timeless beauty.

