

## Early History of All Saints Bisley

This is an ancient place of worship and there has been a Christian church on this site since Saxon times. (The carved stone slabs in the wall of the north aisle are thought to be Saxon grave covers) There is some evidence to suggest that it was a pagan religious site for the Romans before that. The church that you see today has a medieval tower and chancel but the central part of the building was largely rebuilt by the then vicar, Thomas Keble, in 1862.

Before the restoration there had been several galleries with their own external stone staircases, which had been erected by the mill-owners of the Stroud valleys for their families so they would not have to mix with their workers. Keble removed all these, raised the main roof, and provided the clerestory.

The stone High Altar at the east end was given by Isaac Williams, curate under Thomas Keble from 1843-1848, and a hymn writer.

The stained glass window in the north aisle commemorates the marriage in Bisley Church in 1835 of John Keble (elder brother of the vicar Thomas Keble), and famous for his part in church revival through the Oxford Movement. It was a real family affair - the bride was Charlotte Clarke, sister of Elizabeth (Thomas Keble's wife). None of the church's older glass survived the Victorian restoration.

The font is of Norman origin (about 1200AD). The bowl, which unusually has two fish carved inside it, was found in the churchyard and was restored to the church in 1862.

There is a ring of eight bells in the tower, the last two of which were added in 1864. In 1991 a new glass-fronted bell chamber was put into the tower. We have a very dedicated and excellent team of ringers, including championship winning youth.

The spire is a notable local landmark. Also seen in the churchyard is what is locally known as "The Bonehouse", built over the twelfth century Well Head. Tradition has it that one dark night the priest was summoned to take communion to a dying parishioner but next morning his body was found down the well so it was built over to make sure this never happened again. Alms for the poor were left in the nooks of the poor souls' light.

The Wells (down a set of steep steps from the churchyard) are dressed with flowers every year on Ascension Day by children from the village school in period costume.

The ancient parish of Bisley was extremely large, including parts of Stroud. The vicar, Thomas Keble, created new and vibrant parishes out of the disparate communities of Oakridge, Chalford, Bussage, and France Lynch. He built new churches and schools in these communities, financially supported not by the poor local congregation, but by his affluent friends and devout Oxford undergraduates.

In 1873 Thomas Keble was succeeded by his son, also Thomas, who was vicar for the next 29 years. It was this Thomas who created the legend of the "Bisley Boy". Next door to the church is Over Court where Elizabeth I is reputed to have stayed while a girl. When building the Victorian school, workmen discovered a medieval stone coffin in which were found the bones of a young girl. From this sprang the fable that they were the bones of Princess Elizabeth, who had died during her stay. Fearing the wrath of King Henry VIII, the frightened villagers found a substitute but the only suitable child was a boy. Maintaining the charade for the rest of his life, he then went on to reign as "Queen" of England from 1558 to 1603, thus explaining why Elizabeth I never married!