



VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

## Spelsbury parish

Religious History

Spelsbury's large parish had its own church by the 12th century and perhaps considerably earlier. A modestly endowed vicarage was established following the church's appropriation by the collegiate church of St Mary, Warwick, in 1392, and the late Middle Ages saw wide participation in administering church funds and looking after lights and bells. After the Reformation the living's poverty meant that it was often held in plurality (despite augmentation in 1723), and although the church was adequately served there is little indication that religious life was particularly vibrant. Catholicism was confined largely (and briefly) to some members of the Dillon household at Ditchley, and Protestant Nonconformity had only a modest impact during the 19th century. In the late 20th century the Anglican parish itself became part of a wider united benefice.



Spelsbury church.

## Church Origins and Parochial Organization

Surviving fabric suggests the existence of a church in the 11th or 12th century, and an earlier foundation seems possible given Spelsbury's connection with the bishops of Worcester from the 9th century.<sup>1</sup> Probably it had baptismal and burial rights from the start: the plain octagonal font is presumably medieval, and the churchyard (*cimiterium*) was mentioned in 1392.<sup>2</sup> The church's dedication to All Saints was mentioned in the 18th century.<sup>3</sup> The benefice was united with Chadlington in 1963 and with Ascott-under-Wychwood in 1987, and in 2001 Enstone and Heythrop were added to what was by then called the Chase benefice. Heythrop was removed in 2014,<sup>4</sup> the other four churches remaining within the united benefice in 2024.<sup>5</sup>

## Advowson, Rectory and Vicarage

Spelsbury's lords (or their representatives) presented rectors until the church's appropriation by the collegiate church of St Mary, Warwick, in 1392, following a grant of the advowson by William de Beauchamp (d. 1411) as part of a wider re-endowment of St Mary's by William and his brother Thomas, earl of Warwick.<sup>6</sup> The moderately well-endowed rectory, comprising tithes, cottages, and a small glebe, was valued at 15 marks in 1254 and at 20 marks (£13 6s. 8d.) from 1291.<sup>7</sup> The vicarage established in 1392 was worth £9 8s. 8¼d. in 1535,<sup>8</sup> derived from land, tithes, and dues rather than a fixed stipend: in 1778 the vicar's glebe totalled 76 a., comprising 58 a. of arable in Taston and 18 a. of grass in Spelsbury.<sup>9</sup> The vicar's initial responsibilities included provision of a deacon and repair of the chancel (a responsibility later transferred to the rectory lessee);<sup>10</sup> demands on him were eased in 1447 when the dean and chapter of St Mary's awarded £2 a year to the 'church reeves' on behalf of the parishioners, including £1 6s. 8d. to pay for the deacon.<sup>11</sup> St Mary's was dissolved in

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<sup>1</sup> Above, landscape etc. (settlement); landownership.

<sup>2</sup> Bodl. MS Top. Eccles. b 14; C. Fonge (ed.), *The Cartulary of St Mary's Collegiate Church, Warwick* (2004), pp. 191–2.

<sup>3</sup> J. Ecton, *Liber Valorum* (1754 edn), 354.

<sup>4</sup> *London Gaz.* 1 March 1963; OHC, DIOC/1/C/6/25/1; VCH Oxon. XIX, 117.

<sup>5</sup> <https://thechasebenefice.org.uk>.

<sup>6</sup> *Cartulary of St Mary's*, pp. xc, 3, 187–91; *Cal. Pat.* 1381–5, 580. For earlier presentations, e.g. *Rot. Grosseteste*, 465, 467; *Reg. Sutton*, VIII, 193–4; *Reg. Burghersh*, II, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Lunt (ed.), *Val. Norw.* 311; *Tax. Eccl.* 311; *Feudal Aids*, VI, 380; above, landownership (rectory estate).

<sup>8</sup> *Valor Eccl.* II, 182.

<sup>9</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 26. Two crofts and meadows were mentioned in 1392 but no acreage given: *Cartulary of St Mary's*, pp. 191–2.

<sup>10</sup> *Cartulary of St Mary's*, pp. xc, 191–2 and n., 362; Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 5v.

<sup>11</sup> BL, Add. Ch. 55588; *Cartulary of St Mary's*, pp. 197–8; below (relig. life). For the rectory lessee's detention of deeds relating to this payment c.1528, *Early Chancery Proceedings*, V, 265.

1544, and two years later the rectory and the right to present to the vicarage passed to Christ Church, Oxford.<sup>12</sup> Christ Church retained the patronage thereafter, becoming joint patron with the bishop of Oxford under the 2001 reorganization.<sup>13</sup>

The vicarage was augmented in 1723, £200 from Queen Anne's Bounty matching a £200 bequest from Mrs Mary Baron. The resulting income of £8 a year was reduced to £6 4s. by 1802 because £90 had been spent on redeeming the land tax.<sup>14</sup> In 1778 the living was worth just over £82 a year including small tithes, and the following year 14 a. and a 16s. mill rent were allotted at Dean's enclosure, raising the income to £125 by 1795. A further 127 a. was allotted at Spelsbury's enclosure in 1803 when remaining tithes were commuted, bringing the value to £220.<sup>15</sup> Falling rental income during the late 19th-century agricultural recession nevertheless reduced the net value to £132 in 1890 and to £157 ten years later,<sup>16</sup> and in 1921 the then 158-a. glebe farm was sold to the tenant Frank Bosley for £3,150.<sup>17</sup> The same year the living was augmented by £1,000 including £250 from Christ Church,<sup>18</sup> and further augmentations in 1928 and 1934 brought the net value to £348. In 1951 it stood at £410, or £543 including voluntary grants.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Rectory and Vicarage House***

The larger part of the medieval rectory complex south of the church was given to the vicar at the church's appropriation in 1392, when he was allocated the hall with a room above, a bakehouse, a brewhouse with other buildings 'towards the cemetery', and a (probably detached) kitchen, along with a dovecot. Other buildings (including barns) were reserved to the rectory,<sup>20</sup> and in 1468 St Mary's was permitted to demolish ruined and unused outbuildings.<sup>21</sup> The vicarage house itself was described c.1550 as a 'fair mansion house' with a garden, orchard and small close, having probably been restored after a period of neglect.<sup>22</sup> A glazed hall, parlour, upper chamber, and outer and cheese chambers were mentioned in 1585, and a study and kitchen in 1636, and in 1662 the house had five hearths.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cartulary of St Mary's, 414; L&P Hen. VIII, XXI (2), 335, 338.

<sup>13</sup> *Crockford's Clerical Dir.* (various edns).

<sup>14</sup> C. Hodgson, *QAB* (1826 edn), 142; OHC, PAR246/1/R1/2, f. 56v.; Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 41. No local connection for Mary Baron has been found.

<sup>15</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, ff. 26, 51v.; OHC, encl. awards.

<sup>16</sup> *Crockford's Clerical Dir.* (1890 and 1900 edns).

<sup>17</sup> OHC, PAR246/4/F1/1 (transcribed in PAR246/10/X/1).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., T/xiv/c.5; OHC, PAR246/10/X/1; *Crockford's Clerical Dir.* (1936 and 1951–2 edns).

<sup>20</sup> *Cartulary of St Mary's*, pp. 191–2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 195; below (relig. life).

<sup>22</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 6.

<sup>23</sup> OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 58/1/67; 47/3/24; TNA, E 179/255/3, m. 46.

Alterations in 1810–11 involved raising the walls, re-roofing in blue and Stonesfield slate, rebuilding the 44-ft-long south front, and inserting sashed windows in the hall, as well as building a single-range brewhouse, chaise-house, and dairy.<sup>24</sup> Space around the house was much reduced when the vicar John Williams (1841–55) erected a farmhouse for his tenant farmer in the farmyard,<sup>25</sup> and his successor Thomas Barker (vicar 1856–85) found the house ‘bad’ and its thick walls full of mud and rats’ nests, though he was unable to afford alterations.<sup>26</sup> Extensive remodelling, including partial demolition and rebuilding, was finally carried out in 1866 to designs by the Christ Church architect E.G. Bruton, creating a seven-bedroomed house.<sup>27</sup> The vicar A.H. Paget-Wilks turned the upper part of the house into a flat in 1949 to generate rental income, and set up glasshouses to run a market-gardening business. The house was returned to single occupancy in 1963–4 and was finally sold in 1982,<sup>28</sup> the rector of the united benefice living in Chadlington.<sup>29</sup>

### **Church Estate**

By the 1520s property given in support of the church included several houses (one of them in Woodstock), a barn (*orium*), and a meadow called ‘Sydnall’, which were leased out by the churchwardens and parishioners. Sheep from an accumulated ‘church flock’ were similarly leased to local farmers, sometimes for several years. The flock was sold c.1556, and much of the other property seems to have been lost at the Reformation,<sup>30</sup> although rent from the meadow (described in 1921 as a ¼-a. close near Dean mill) was still applied to church funds in 1972.<sup>31</sup> Some of the houses were perhaps amongst those used by the parish as pauper accommodation in the 18th century, which were demolished c.1839.<sup>32</sup>

### **Religious Life**

#### **The Middle Ages**

<sup>24</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, ff. 53v.–56.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. f. 152.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. ff. 164–71, 178v.; *Wilb. Dioc. Bks*, 276; OHC, PAR246/10/X/1 (1863 report on vicarage ho., mentioning occasional flooding).

<sup>27</sup> Ch.Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, ff. 164, 178v., 190–1; OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 2014/1 (incl. plans). Brooks, *Oxon. N&W*, 481 conflates it with Spelsbury House.

<sup>28</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., T/xiv/c.5; *Sale Cat.*, *The Vicarage, Spelsbury* (1982): copy in OHC.

<sup>29</sup> <https://thechasebenefice.org.uk/whos-who> (accessed Nov. 2024).

<sup>30</sup> F.W. Weaver and G.N. Clark (eds.), *Churchwarden's Accounts of Marston, Spelsbury, Pyrton* (ORS 6, 1925), 35, 38 sqq (extracts from OHC, PAR246/4/F1/1, more fully transcribed in *ibid.* PAR246/10/X/1). For land in Charlbury given towards a light, *Cal. Pat.* 1563–4, 97.

<sup>31</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1; PAR246/13/A/1.

<sup>32</sup> Above, social hist. (welfare).

Spelsbury's medieval rectors were a mix of graduates and non-graduates, most of whom were presented in full orders from the mid 14th century.<sup>33</sup> Pluralists such as John de Ludlow (presented as a young man in 1308) probably served the parish at least partly through hired chaplains,<sup>34</sup> though some other rectors were involved in local life, amongst them the long-serving John de Chalveston (rector 1347–86), who was lessee of nearby Glympton manor in 1371–2.<sup>35</sup> Later-medieval vicars were poorly remunerated and many served short terms, the first known university graduate being appointed in 1517.<sup>36</sup> Most probably resided, however, William Saunders leasing the garden of the neighbouring manor house in 1439–40.<sup>37</sup> Richard Wyrlok (vicar 1457–78) was the first of several long-serving incumbents, although his successor John Bedyll (1479–1516) was either neglectful or absent since in 1520 the vicarage house was said to be 'ruined'.<sup>38</sup> Robert Charde (vicar 1517–50) apparently restored it and was resident by 1524.<sup>39</sup>

The church's successive remodellings between the 11th and 15th centuries probably involved the lords of Spelsbury, the Beauchamp arms featuring in now lost stained glass and ceiling decorations.<sup>40</sup> Two defaced stone tombs in the churchyard, probably removed from the church, may also have commemorated Beauchamp family members.<sup>41</sup> By the late Middle Ages parishioners, too, were closely involved in the running of the church. From 1447 they were responsible for the outlay of the £2 a year from St Mary's, Warwick, comprising £1 6s. 8d. to support a deacon chosen by them (although answerable to the vicar in liturgical matters), and 13s. 4d. towards repair of church ornaments or for masses or alms.<sup>42</sup> In the 1520s (when the deacon had his own house) they raised money for lights, bells, and the poor, partly from leasing accumulated parish property (including sheep from the church flock), and by holding church ales. Like the bells each light had two lay 'keepers' who accounted to the churchwardens, and four 'guilds' mentioned c.1551 (by then in a manorial context) may have formerly contributed to church fundraising in the parish's various settlements. Lights listed in the church included several to the Virgin Mary (one in a side chapel, probably in the north aisle), with others dedicated to saints Andrew, Anthony, Clement, Christopher, Erasmus, George, Katherine, Michael, Nicholas, and the Trinity, and

<sup>33</sup> *Rot. Grosseteste*, 465, 467; *Reg. Sutton*, VIII, 193–4; *Reg. Burghersh*, II, 69; *Lincs. Arch.* REG/2, ff. 153v., 171; REG/11, f. 306; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 301–2.

<sup>34</sup> *Lincs. Arch.* REG/2, f. 153v.; *Cal. Papal Regs* 1305–42, 62.

<sup>35</sup> *Cal. Close* 1354–60, 497; H. Barnett, *Glympton: the History of an Oxfordshire Manor* (ORS, 5, 1923), 22; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 301.

<sup>36</sup> *Lincs. Arch.* REG/11, f. 320v.; REG/17, f. 55; XX, f. 234; XXI, f. 87v.; *Reg. Fleming*, II, pp. 38, 42; *Cartulary of St Mary's*, pp. 195–7, 413–14; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 301–2; above (vicarage).

<sup>37</sup> OHC, E36/2/2/F1/3.

<sup>38</sup> *Cartulary of St Mary's*, p. 197; *Visit Dioc. Linc.* I, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Churchwarden's Accounts of Marston, Spelsbury, Pyrton, 39; *Visit Dioc. Linc.* II, 45.

<sup>40</sup> *Par. Colln*, III, 277–8; below (church archit.).

<sup>41</sup> *Par. Colln*, III, 278; HER, PRN 25018.

<sup>42</sup> BL, Add. Ch. 55588; *Cartulary of St Mary's*, pp. 197–8.

there was also a hearse light and torches.<sup>43</sup> Lords of Spelsbury supplied timber for repairs,<sup>44</sup> and the Wilcotes of Dean paid for a chantry priest to give annual sermons (which continued into the 17th century).<sup>45</sup> Religious focal points beyond the church included stone wayside crosses at Dean and Taston,<sup>46</sup> and a hermitage in the woods at 'Phelleley' in Ditchley, established by the 1130s but abandoned before 1315, may be recalled by the field name 'Fenny chapel'.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Reformation to 1840**

Spelsbury's post-Reformation vicars were all graduates, most of them former fellows (or 'students') of Christ Church.<sup>48</sup> The long-serving Robert Charde (in post 1517–50) presumably oversaw the removal of lights and ornaments, which ceased to be mentioned in churchwardens' accounts,<sup>49</sup> although the 'guilds' were still mentioned in the 1550s, when manorial custom required them to supply bread, cheese and ale from All Hallows to All Souls day (31 October to 2 November).<sup>50</sup> Catholic preambles to wills returned in Mary's reign but disappeared immediately after.<sup>51</sup> Henry Sadler (vicar 1550–86), although a pluralist, witnessed numerous local wills, suggesting strong local ties, but was reportedly 'no preacher'.<sup>52</sup> In 1575 every communicant was required to contribute ½d. towards the costs of bread and wine,<sup>53</sup> although some neglect was evident in 1584 when the churchwardens were cited because of broken windows and lack of painted texts in the church.<sup>54</sup>

Late 16th- to 17th-century vicars were mainly resident, including Robert Kisbey (1589–1613), William Negose (1613–36), and John Feriby (instituted in 1641).<sup>55</sup> Disruption

<sup>43</sup> *Churchwarden's Accounts of Marston, Spelsbury, Pyrton*, 35–52; OHC, E36/2/1/E/2 (guilds); above (church estate). A north chapel was mentioned in 1557: OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 181.181 (Anth. Osbaldeston, gent., 1557); 183.96 (Edm. Osbaldeston, gent., 1558, mentioning its west door).

<sup>44</sup> e.g. OHC, E36/2/2/F1/8 (acct 1446–7).

<sup>45</sup> Lobel, *Dean and Chalford*, p. 69.

<sup>46</sup> HER, PRN 3890, 2581; NHLE, no. 1008406 (with photo).

<sup>47</sup> *Eynsham Cart.* I, pp. xiv, 52, 364; B. Schumer, 'The 1298/1300 Perambulations of Wychwood Forest – and After', *Oxoniensia* 69 (2004), 5, 12–13; E.A. Jones, 'The Hermits and Anchorites of Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia* 63 (1998), 66; OHC, E36/1/10/M/1, Ditchley map (1726). For swanimote courts held there in the 16th century, below, local govt.

<sup>48</sup> <https://theclergydatabase.org.uk> (accessed June 2024), listing vicars 1550–1792.

<sup>49</sup> *Churchwarden's Accounts of Marston, Spelsbury*, 52 sqq (subsequently mentioning only the two lights allowed on the altar). Charde (d. 1550) latterly had an assistant curate: OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 179.18 (Wm Percy, 1546).

<sup>50</sup> OHC, E36/2/1/E/2.

<sup>51</sup> e.g. OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 180.208; 180.266; 181.49; 182.156; 182.170; 181.181; 183.95; 183.96; 183.181; 183.183; 183.295; 183.332. Chwdns' accts show no discernible changes during Mary's reign.

<sup>52</sup> Peel, *Register*, II, 135; OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 58/1/67; *ibid.* Archd. Oxon c 7, f. 44. Sadler was rector of Lapworth (Warws.) from 1563: <https://theclergydatabase.org.uk> (accessed 2024).

<sup>53</sup> *Churchwarden's Accounts of Marston, Spelsbury*, 63.

<sup>54</sup> OHC, MS Archd. Oxon. c 7, f. 44.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* parish reg. transcript.

during the Civil War and Interregnum may be indicated by gaps in the parish registers c.1646–50, and by 1653 Feriby had been succeeded by Thomas Coles (c.1653–72), who at his death had books worth £20 in his study.<sup>56</sup> Coles' own successor Francis Davis was deprived in 1683,<sup>57</sup> perhaps for neglect. The parish's lords remained closely involved in church life: members of the Lee and Wilmot families maintained a burial vault under the north aisle,<sup>58</sup> and an elaborate marble and alabaster monument to Sir Henry Lee (d. 1631) and his wife was erected in the chancel,<sup>59</sup> while vicars performed baptisms in the family's private chapel in Ditchley House from at least 1637.<sup>60</sup> Protestant Nonconformity, meanwhile, remained very limited, with just two Nonconformists noted in 1676 and four (including two Anabaptists) in 1682.<sup>61</sup> A similar pattern continued under William Child (vicar 1683–1712) and William Ryman (1713–30), who donated a paten, pulpit cloth and cushion, while other gifts included a silver chalice.<sup>62</sup>

Under the pluralist and mainly absentee vicar Thomas Horne (1736–68) poorly paid curates performed two Sunday services with a single sermon, John Lloyd serving also as domestic chaplain to the earl of Lichfield at Ditchley Park in 1759. Parishioners were said that year to be 'remarkably diligent' in attendance, with as many as 89 communicants at Easter.<sup>63</sup> By the 1770s–80s, however, curates standing in for further pluralist vicars sometimes also lived elsewhere, and by 1784 the number of communicants had fallen to c.15,<sup>64</sup> despite investment in the church fabric with support from the earls of Lichfield, who set up further lavish family monuments.<sup>65</sup> There was limited change (save for a rise to c.30 communicants) under the long-serving and well-liked George Turner (vicar 1792–1840), who resided despite holding the livings of Hook Norton and (until 1825) Wragby (Lincs.).<sup>66</sup> Nonconformity seems to have remained almost non-existent until c.1833 when a (probably Methodist) meeting house was established at Taston,<sup>67</sup> although from c.1799–c.1810 Catholic female members of the Dillon household and their servants used the family's private chapel at Ditchley House for worship, served by a visiting priest. One other Catholic family was mentioned c.1808–14 (when they attended Heythrop chapel).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.; *ibid.* MS Wills Oxon. 14/1/24.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. MS Oxf. Dioc. Papers d 106, f. 92v.

<sup>58</sup> *Par. Colln*, III, 277; Lewis, *Topog. Dict. England* (1840 edn).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.; Brooks, *Pevsner N&W*, 481.

<sup>60</sup> OHC, parish reg. transcript.

<sup>61</sup> *Bp Fell and Nonconf.* xxxvi, 29–30, 60 nn.

<sup>62</sup> *Par. Colln*, III, 277; Evans, *Ch. Plate*, 155.

<sup>63</sup> *Secker's Visit.* 142; OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. d 557, ff. 53–5.; d 560, ff. 74–7.

<sup>64</sup> OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. d 563, ff. 73–6; d 565, ff. 141–4; b 37, ff. 227–8.

<sup>65</sup> Below (church archit.).

<sup>66</sup> Memorial tablet in church; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 264.

<sup>67</sup> OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. c 645, f. 220; c 646, f. 141; d 577, f. 100 (one or two Methodists in 1817).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. d 567, f. 111; d 569, f. 97; d 571, f. 95; 1811: d 573, f. 95; d 575, f. 97.



## Since 1841

Turner's successor John Williams (vicar 1841–55) rapidly alienated his parishioners, asserting in 1844 that the principal inhabitants, including Lord Dillon, were 'leagued against him' because he refused to lease the glebe to them, and that the congregation had fallen to a dozen. From 1847 Williams left the church in the hands of his energetic curate Charles Carey (who also served Wilcote), but even so up to 120 parishioners attended divine service at Ditchley Park rather than in the church, Charles Dillon (d. 1865), the 14th Viscount, having apparently opened the chapel to public worship after Williams' arrival, and also attracting the church choir there.<sup>69</sup> Church attendance in bad weather was additionally affected by the parish's scattered settlement, presumably a recurring long-term problem.<sup>70</sup> Against this background Nonconformity increased. A Primitive Methodist meeting (served by a minister living in Fulwell) was established at Taston in 1848, apparently replacing the earlier Wesleyan meeting, and on Census Sunday in 1851 attracted an evening congregation of 78. No permanent meeting houses were established, however, and although by 1860 there were thought to be nearly 100 Dissenters, by then all of them attended places of worship outside the parish.<sup>71</sup> So, too, did an estimated 70 Baptists and 12 Roman Catholics mentioned in 1868.<sup>72</sup>

Thomas Barker (vicar 1856–85) recovered most of the congregation,<sup>73</sup> though in 1881 a pew dispute with Viscount Dillon (d. 1892) led to the temporary closure of Ditchley chapel as a venue for services for the outlying population.<sup>74</sup> Barker also added daily prayers and weekly sacraments, and took on pupils to augment his income.<sup>75</sup> His successors Arthur Wilcox (1885–97) and James Rowley (1898–1914) continued a similar pattern of services and a broadly High-Church tone, which included a surpliced choir.<sup>76</sup> Wilcox built a short-lived iron mission room in Spelsbury c.1886, partly because Dillon would not allow him to hold services in the school during a major restoration of the church,<sup>77</sup> and in 1893 he overcame

<sup>69</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, ff. 88–9, 93–106v.; *Wilb. Letter Bks*, pp. 110–11 (mentioning Williams' 'improvident match'); *Ch. and Chapel 1851*, p. 93; *Wilb. Visit.* 133–4; *Wilb. Dioc. Bks*, 276; *Lascelles' Dir. Oxon.* (1853); *Oxf. Jnl*, 6 Jan. 1855; Corbett, Spelsbury, 224–6. For Carey's work for the poor: *Oxf. Jnl*, 1 Dec. 1855.

<sup>70</sup> e.g. *Wilb. Visit.* 134; OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. d 180, f. 1044v.

<sup>71</sup> *Ch. and Chapel 1851*, p. 101; *Wilb. Visit.* 134 (claiming the 1851 fig. to be inflated); OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. d 180, f. 1045; c 347, f. 387v. (150 Dissenters in 1881).

<sup>72</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 178.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> OHC, E36/2/8/N/1; *ibid.* MS Oxf. Dioc. c 350, f. 370v.

<sup>75</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 164v.; OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. c 344, f. 375v.; c 347, f. 387v.; c 350, f. 370v.

<sup>76</sup> OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. c 353, f. 384v.; c 362, f. 380v.; c 371, f. 119; *ibid.* PAR246/1/R7/1; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 264.

<sup>77</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, ff. 200–3; OHC, PAR246/2/A1/2. The vestry met in the mission room from 1890 until it was sold in 1910.



opposition from the Quaker Alfred Neild (of Dean House) to installation of a reredos in the chancel.<sup>78</sup> Despite the improvements no fixed organ was installed, however, with music long supplied by a harmonium which replaced an old barrel organ.<sup>79</sup> The 1886 restoration included a new east window commemorating members of the Dillon family,<sup>80</sup> whom Wilcox nevertheless claimed set 'a very injurious example' by worshipping at Ditchley and never coming to church. Relations later improved, with several vicars acting as chaplains at Ditchley.<sup>81</sup>



View  
towards the  
chancel of  
the church.

Thomas Tanner (vicar 1914–25) reported a great increase in church attendance by 1918, and though critical of older parishioners (who 'expect everything to be done for them') expressed hopes for the 'rising generation'.<sup>82</sup> Besides the Anglican congregation there were 11 Roman Catholics, and unspecified 'chapel meetings' were held in Manor Farm House in Spelsbury.<sup>83</sup> The elderly former missionary Canon John Stansfeld (vicar 1929–39) made

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<sup>78</sup> OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 2014/1 (1893 faculty papers). For Neild: *Morning Post*, 10 Nov. 1873 (marriages); OHC, E36/2/8/N/1 (mentioning Quaker ratepayers).

<sup>79</sup> Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 264. For the lack of music in some earlier periods: *Chipping Norton Deanery Magazine*, 1883.

<sup>80</sup> Below (church archit.).

<sup>81</sup> OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 362, f. 380v.; *Gore's Visit.* p. 284 n.; Ch. Ch. Arch., T/xiv/c.5. For baptisms at Ditchley: OHC, PAR246/17/X/1.

<sup>82</sup> *Gore's Visit.*, 56, 534.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 534; Corbett, *Spelsbury*, 279.

strong efforts to engage young people, building a church room for 'lads' at the vicarage house,<sup>84</sup> but though the clergy's efforts were supported by affluent inhabitants such as Brig.-Gen. Charles Winser and Ronald Tree the churchgoing population was nevertheless dwindling.<sup>85</sup> The chapel at Ditchley closed c.1933,<sup>86</sup> and by 1950 parishioners were seeking a vicar from the 'middle church' evangelical tradition who understood countrymen and would be active in pastoral visits.<sup>87</sup> From 1963 Spelsbury ceased to be an independent benefice, and in 1982 (despite financial support from Christ Church as patron) the vicarage house was sold, the joint incumbent living thereafter in Chadlington.<sup>88</sup> Sunday services were reduced from two to one, and by 2023–4 services were held just twice a month at Spelsbury, those in the united benefice's other four churches including a weekly Thursday communion service at Chadlington. A short recorded online service was available weekly.<sup>89</sup>

## Church Architecture

Spelsbury church is a medium-sized medieval building much altered in the 18th and 19th centuries, constructed of coursed and rubble limestone with ashlar dressings, and roofed with Stonesfield slate and modern sheet metal. In its present form it comprises chancel, nave, north and south aisles, gabled transepts, and a two-stage west tower.<sup>90</sup> The tower's lower part includes probably 11th- or 12th-century pilaster buttresses and bell openings, and it appears to have begun as a central tower of the kind identified locally at Enstone and Hook Norton, suggesting a church of above average status. Transepts were cut through the tower's central buttresses on the north and south sides probably c.1200, followed by a major reorganization which saw the Norman chancel replaced by an aisled nave, a new (mis-aligned) chancel built further east, and the transepts demolished. The present transepts and a west doorway were added in the 14th century along with a reticulated window, while 15th-century refenestration (much altered in the 18th century) included addition of a nave clerestory. A doorway (now lost) gave access to the rood loft stairs.<sup>91</sup> The chancel roof was repaired c.1550, by which time the church had some straw-covered seats.<sup>92</sup> A clock

<sup>84</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., T/xiv.c.5; *Spelsbury Parish Magazine*, Jan. 1935 (copies at OHC).

<sup>85</sup> *Spelsbury Parish Magazine* (1929–39); OHC, PAR246/2/A1/2 (162 on church electoral roll in 1953).

<sup>86</sup> *Spelsbury Parish Magazine* (various edns to Apr. 1933).

<sup>87</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., T/xiv/c.5.

<sup>88</sup> Above (paroch. organizn).

<sup>89</sup> OHC, PAR246/1/R7/4–5; <https://thechasebenefice.org.uk> (accessed Nov. 2024); local information.

<sup>90</sup> For other descriptions: Parker, *Eccl. Topog.* no. 85; NHLE, no. 1251447 (Church of All Saints); Sherwood, *Oxon. Churches*, 174; Brooks, *Pevsner N&W*, 480–1; <https://thechasebenefice.org.uk/spelsbury-all-saints> (plan and guide by Geoffrey Ellis, 2012, accessed Mar. 2024).

<sup>91</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1, s.v. 1611 (seat set up where rood loft door stood).

<sup>92</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 5v.

mentioned in 1574 does not survive,<sup>93</sup> and a vestry standing on the north side of the chancel in 1585 was removed probably in the 18th or 19th century.<sup>94</sup>

Major 18th-century work, partly sponsored by the earls of Lichfield, began with the erection of a 'fine' spire in 1706.<sup>95</sup> The chancel was repaired in 1715–16<sup>96</sup> and very extensive work carried out in 1774, when the body of the church and the tower were substantially rebuilt. Work on the latter included replacement of the (by then unstable) spire with four corner pinnacles, and probably the tower arch was blocked to give additional strength.<sup>97</sup> A gallery which survived into the 19th century may have been erected at the same time,<sup>98</sup> and in 1788 the bells were recast, retaining only the saunce (dated 1642).<sup>99</sup> The chancel was rebuilt in Gothic style in 1851, when lath and plaster arches were inserted in its north and south walls to house monuments to Sir Henry Lee (d. 1631) and his family and to the 1st, 3rd, and 4th earls of Lichfield. An elaborate white marble effigy to the 14th Viscount Dillon (d. 1865) was later installed in the north transept, set under a Gothic stone canopy.<sup>100</sup>



The church tower viewed from the south.

<sup>93</sup> C.F.C. Beeson, *Clockmaking in Oxfordshire, 1400–1850* (3rd edn, 1989), 67.

<sup>94</sup> OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 58/1/67 (Henry Sadler, vicar, 1585). For wall foundations excavated north of the chancel: 'Archaeological Watching Brief at All Saints Church, Spelsbury' (unpubl. John Moore Heritage Services report, Aug. 2009).

<sup>95</sup> Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 178v.; *Par. Colln*, III, 276.

<sup>96</sup> OHC, PAR246/10/X/1.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* E36/2/8/A/1; *ibid.* MSS Oxf. Dioc. d 563, f. 76; d 565, f. 144; Ch. Ch. Arch., MS Estates 82, f. 25.

<sup>98</sup> OHC, parish reg. transcript (1865 burial of James Howse of Dean).

<sup>99</sup> OHC, E36/2/8/A/1; *Ch. Bells Oxon.* IV, pp. 382–3.

<sup>100</sup> For the monuments, Brooks, *Pevsner N&W*, 481; for reseating, *Wilb. Visit.* 134; *Wilb. Dioc. Bks*, 276.

Extensive works to designs by Romaine-Walker and Tanner of London in 1886 included the re-opening of the tower arch, creation of a bell-ringing chamber and stair turret, reseating and re-ceiling, insertion of new choir stalls, and creation of a screened and ceilinged vestry space in the south aisle. The Lichfield tomb arches were replaced by Gothic-style stonework, and the present colourful east window (by Gibbs of Camden Town) replaced a larger one of 1854, the new one commemorating the 12th, 13th, and 14th Viscounts Dillon and their wives.<sup>101</sup> The Chipping Norton solicitor Abram Rawlinson paid for a panelled Caen stone reredos (designed by H.G.W. Drinkwater) in 1893.<sup>102</sup>

Twentieth-century work included the tower's south window of 1923 by J. Eadie Reid, paid for by Kathleen Dillon and depicting St Martin and St Michael.<sup>103</sup> The third bell was recast in 1924,<sup>104</sup> and the tower restored in 1952.<sup>105</sup> Roof repairs were carried out in 1973, and the bells (with a recast tenor) were rehung by Whites of Appleton the following year, when the bell tower was restored.<sup>106</sup> Restoration of the Lee and Dillon tombs in 2010–11 was preceded by drainage works to alleviate damp, and further costly roof repairs were carried out in 2017–22.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Bodl. G.A. Oxon. c 317 (13), naming chief subscribers as Miss Etheldred Dillon and Christ Church; OHC, PAR246/10/X/1; *Bucks. Herald*, 16 Dec. 1854; VCH fieldwork.

<sup>102</sup> OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 2014/1 (faculty papers).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. (incl. drawing).

<sup>104</sup> *Ch. Bells Oxon.* IV, 382.

<sup>105</sup> Stone plaque near base of tower.

<sup>106</sup> OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 2014/1 (faculty papers); *Oxf. Mail*, 24 June 1983.

<sup>107</sup> <https://thechasebenefice.org.uk/spelsbury-all-saints/>;  
<https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/church/all-saints-spelsbury> (both accessed Mar. 2024); 'Friends of Spelsbury Church Summer Newsletter' (2024), copy in church, giving cost of works in 2022 as £350,000.