



VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

OVER NORTON

Religious History

Though separated from Chipping Norton for civil purposes in 1866,¹ Over Norton has never formed a separate ecclesiastical parish, and in 2021 remained dependent on Chipping Norton church $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to the south. Cold Norton priory and the nearby hospital provided religious foci in the Middle Ages, though not necessarily for ordinary villagers, while the village school was adapted for Anglican services in the mid 19th century, continuing in use until the early 21st. Small-scale Protestant Nonconformity, evident from the 17th century, became more entrenched by the 19th, when it was largely focused on Chipping Norton, licensed meetings in Over Norton itself having proven short-lived.

Parochial Organization and Chapels

Over Norton was part of Chipping Norton ecclesiastical parish from the Middle Ages, and has only rarely had independent religious provision.² The outlying Cold Norton priory, founded between 1148 and 1158 and dedicated to St John the Evangelist,³ became an object of lay patronage and occasionally of high-status lay burial, while the chapel of St Mary the Virgin (mentioned in the 1450s) was probably within the priory church, having most likely been founded as a chantry chapel c.1370.⁴ The nearby roadside hospital, founded as a joint institution with the priory and dedicated probably to St Giles,⁵ played an important social role and served as a much-frequented wayside chapel, while unconfirmed reports suggest that it may have also provided an additional burial site.⁶

Following the priory's suppression in 1507 the priory church was maintained for a time by Brasenose College (which acquired the site and attached manor in 1513), attracting bequests until at least the 1530s. The hospital chapel was presumably the 'chapel on the heath' mentioned in 1559, for which the college apparently provided chaplains or curates,

¹ Above, landscape etc. (boundaries).

² Above, Chipping Norton, relig. hist.; below.

³ *VCH Oxon.* II, 95–6; above, landownership. Several early charters suggest a joint dedication to St John and St Mary: A. Binns, *Dedications of Monastic Houses in England and Wales, 1066–1216* (1989), 130; Dugdale, *Mon.* VI (1), 420–1; BNC, Chipping Norton 2.

⁴ Below (relig. life).

⁵ *VCH Oxon.* II, 96, 155; BNC, Cold Norton 1–3. St Giles was associated with healing of lepers and cripples: D. Farmer, *Oxf. Dict. of Saints* (2003 edn), 223.

⁶ Below (relig. life).

and which catered presumably for travellers and nearby inhabitants, perhaps continuing medieval practice. The arrangement lapsed in the later 16th century, however, the chapel being superseded by a cottage and later by a coaching inn.⁷

A chapel of ease was established in the village school building by the 1860s, with twice weekly services taken by Chipping Norton's vicar or curate until they were temporarily interrupted in the 1880s–90s.⁸ Following the school's removal in 1901 the building was converted into a parish or mission room,⁹ and in 1943 it was dedicated to St James by the bishop of Dorchester. Regular fortnightly services were held there until 2020 when the building was closed during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in 2021 it was returned to its landlord for major restoration and redevelopment works.¹⁰

Religious Life

The Middle Ages to c.1560

Religious Provision As in later periods, Over Norton's medieval inhabitants presumably relied on Chipping Norton church for baptism, burial, marriage, and regular worship.¹¹ How far the priory and hospital impacted on ordinary people's religious experience is unclear. Prayers were said in the priory church for its founders and other donors,¹² and in 1370 the earl of Stafford endowed a perpetual chantry in a specially built chapel there, granting Great Rollright manor to support daily masses for himself and his family. Probably that marked the beginnings of St Mary's chapel, where John Ashfield of Heythrop requested burial in 1455, leaving 20s. towards the priory's repair, 6s. 8d. to a named canon, and 'two great torches' to the church.¹³ The nearby hospital was mentioned by Gervase of Canterbury c.1200, suggesting it was widely known, and presumably it contributed to the 'burdensome and intolerable concourse of people' reportedly passing by the priory in the 1390s.¹⁴ Those resident at the hospital included several named 'doctor' (*medicus*),¹⁵ and some members of the laity (whether patients or otherwise) may have been buried there, stone coffins containing human remains having reportedly been discovered along with burial urns, beads,

⁷ Ibid.; above, landscape etc. (communicis; built character). The hospital was mentioned in 1573, but only in connection with a small quitrent from property in Banbury: *Cal. Pat.* 1572–5, p. 95.

⁸ TNA, RG 10/1457 ('chapel & school house for boys & girls'); below (relig. life).

⁹ OHC, DV/X/80, no. 226; *Banbury Advertiser*, 19 Nov. 1941.

¹⁰ www.achurchnearyou.com/church/5961/ (accessed Oct. 2021); notice in Chipping Norton church (July 2021); below (relig. life).

¹¹ For later periods, OHC, par. reg. transcripts.

¹² Dugdale, *Mon.* VI (1), 420–1.

¹³ *Cal. Pat.* 1367–70, 395; Dugdale, *Mon.* VI (1), 421; TNA, PROB 11/4/76.

¹⁴ *VCH Oxon.* II, 155; *Cal. Papal Regs* 1396–1404, 198–9.

¹⁵ BNC, Chipping Norton 6; Jeffery, *Rollright*, 3.

a silver crucifix, and fragments of stone mullions and painted glass.¹⁶ An early 13th-century donor left ‘the canons of the hospital of Norton’ ½ yardland with his body, though possibly for burial at the priory itself.¹⁷

After acquiring the priory buildings and manor in 1513 Brasenose College spent considerable sums on repairs, especially in 1520–1,¹⁸ and evidently maintained the priory church. John Ashfield (d. 1521), perhaps deliberately mirroring his grandfather’s bequest, left 3s. 4d. to maintain two wax tapers there, one before the rood and the other before an image of St John, while in 1538 the priory church was one of several local churches remembered by the Chipping Norton widow Isabel Tanty.¹⁹ Offerings to the church’s pyx were appropriated by the college, bringing in 21s. 2d. in 1531–2.²⁰ The church bells were sold c.1540, however,²¹ and the church was not expressly mentioned when the college leased the priory site in 1559, reserving some domestic buildings for its fellows.²²

The ‘chapel on the heath’, mentioned in the same lease, was presumably the former hospital chapel at the crossroads (Chapel House), and from the 1510s the college supported a chaplain or ‘curate’ who presumably ministered either there or at the priory church. William Cordewyn or Cordewayner (chaplain in the 1520s–30s) received a stipend of £5 6s. 8d., said in 1547 (exceptionally) to be for serving the ‘parish church’ (*ecclesia parochiale*) of Cold Norton, while the college also paid for bread, wine, and wax, and for the purchase and repair of vestments.²³ The payments ceased after 1561, responsibility for finding a priest having been transferred to the college’s lessee under the 1559 lease, and thereafter the arrangement apparently lapsed.²⁴ Even before then Chipping Norton church remained a primary focus: inhabitants requested burial there in the 1540s–60s,²⁵ and a light or image dedicated to St Bartholomew (mentioned in 1531) seems to have been particularly associated with the township.²⁶

¹⁶ *Gent. Mag.* n.s. 3 (1835), 144, citing R. Gough (ed.), *Britannia ... by William Camden* (2nd edn, 1806), II, 14; for possible church goods, cf. BNC, Cold Norton 36.

¹⁷ BNC, Chadlington 1.

¹⁸ F. Madan (ed.), *Brasenose College Quatercentenary Monographs*, II.1 (OHS 53, 1909), no. IX, 74.

¹⁹ TNA, PROB 11/20/92; OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 178.131.

²⁰ Madan (ed.), *Brasenose College Monographs*, II.1, no. IX, 77.

²¹ Ralph Churton, *The Lives of William Smyth Bishop of Lincoln ... Founders of Brasen Nose College* (1800), 307.

²² Madan (ed.), *Brasenose College Monographs*, II.1, no. IX, 74–5; BNC, Cold Norton 47.

²³ Madan (ed.), *Brasenose College Monographs*, II.1, no. IX, 76–7, 184–5, 202–3; no. X, 40; *Visit. Dioc. Linc.* II, 47; *Subsidy 1526*, 265. The chaplain in 1549 was a college fellow (Rob. Holmes): Emden, *OU Reg. 1501–40*, 294–5.

²⁴ Madan (ed.), *Brasenose College Monographs*, II.1, no. IX, 77; no. X, 39; BNC, Cold Norton 47. No such obligation was mentioned in the next known lease of 1613: BNC, Property Ledger B.3d.1, f. 151.

²⁵ OHC, MSS Wills Oxon. 179.308; 184.124; 185.309.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 178.35 (‘St Bartholomew of Over Norton’, from the context probably in Chipping Norton church rather than at the priory or hospital).

Cold Norton Priory²⁷ The earliest known prior of Cold Norton in the late 12th or early 13th century was Master Samuel, who was succeeded by at least 26 others before the Crown seized the monastery in 1496. Several were already canons of the priory, and some were almost certainly local men, among them John of Wootton, William of Hook Norton, and Robert of Enstone.²⁸ The priory attracted subsidiary gifts from an early date: in 1181–2 the canons received £5 from Chipping Norton manor (then in wardship), and in 1231 John de St John left them a missal,²⁹ while in 1232 Henry III gave wood for fuel.³⁰ Edward I made a similar grant in 1277, and in 1364–5 Edward III ordered an annual gift of a buck.³¹ Local landholders gave small pieces of land, and in 1269 the bishop of Exeter granted an indulgence to pilgrims making offerings at the church,³² while in 1376 the priory secured its Over Norton tithes against the rector of Chipping Norton.³³ Even so the community remained small and impoverished, the canons complaining in 1399 of the burden of travellers seeking hospitality, the lack of labourers to cultivate their estate, and damage to their buildings caused by unusually high winds, claiming that they were ‘so weighed down with debt ... and want that they must be dissolved and wander forth in quest of food and raiment’.³⁴ Lords of Chipping Norton seem to have taken little interest, despite being hereditary patrons of the priory as successors to the Fitz Alans.³⁵

Some of the difficulties may have been partly due to mismanagement. In 1236 the bishop removed Prior Ralph from office, and in 1343 William of Hook Norton suffered a similar fate following an enquiry into unspecified ‘excesses’.³⁶ Robert of Enstone resigned in disgrace in 1396, having reportedly deprived the priory of vestments and books and saddled it with debt through ‘negligence and idleness’, while 20 years later rumours of ‘excesses and crimes’, particularly disobedience and wasting goods, resulted probably in William Dadington’s replacement as prior by William Islep.³⁷ In 1446 a visitation found only the prior

²⁷ For buildings, above, landscape etc. (built character); landownership (Cold Norton manor: manor ho.).

²⁸ D.M. Smith et al. (eds), *The Heads of Religious Houses, England and Wales, I, 940–1216* (2nd edn, 2001), 160; *II, 1216–1377* (2001), 369–70; *III, 1377–1540* (2008), 417–18. The prior presented by Avelina as founder is unnamed: BNC, Cold Norton 1.

²⁹ *Pipe R* 1182 (PRS 31), 61; *Oseney Cart.* I, p. 135.

³⁰ *Close* 1231–4, 74, 97; *Cal. Pat.* 1225–32, 497.

³¹ *Cal. Close* 1272–9, 370; 1364–9, 127; *Cal. Pat.* 1364–7, 15.

³² BNC, Cold Norton 4 and passim; *ibid.* Over Norton 1–18 (13th and 14th cents); *Reg. Repingdon*, II, 373 (16s. 8d. bequest).

³³ BNC, Cold Norton 27; *ibid.* Chipping Norton 22–4; Madan (ed.), *Brasenose College Monographs*, II.1, no. IX, 63–4.

³⁴ *VCH Oxon.* II, 96; *Cal. Papal Regs* 1396–1404, 198–9.

³⁵ e.g. *Cal. Inq. p.m.* I, p. 287; Smith et al. (eds), *Heads of Religious Houses*, II, 370; *Cal. Inq. p.m.* (Rec. Com.), IV, 252, 370; *Cal. Inq. Misc.* VIII, p. 231; above, Chipping Norton, landownership.

³⁶ H.R. Luard (ed.), *Annales Monastici*, III (RS 36, 1866), 143; Smith et al. (eds), *Heads of Religious Houses*, II, 370.

³⁷ *VCH Oxon.* II, 96; *Reg. Repingdon*, I, p. xxxviii.

and one old (*decrepitus*) canon in residence, with no services held in the church,³⁸ and on the death of the last prior (John Wotton) in 1496 no canons remained to elect a successor, prompting the priory's seizure by the Crown.³⁹ In 1507 the king granted it to St Stephen's, Westminster, and it was formally suppressed, the patron Hugh Croft surrendering any claim.⁴⁰



The seal of Cold Norton priory, possibly illustrating the medieval priory church. Bodleian Library, MS Ch. Oxon. Oseney 245b.*

Since 1560

From the late 16th century to the mid 19th Over Norton's religious life focused almost exclusively on Chipping Norton, although Edmund Hopkins (d. 1588) left money to Salford church, and by the 18th century some inhabitants were buried at Salford, Great Rollright, or Little Rollright.⁴¹ The township presumably contributed (as later) to the costs of Chipping Norton church, and had its own churchwarden by 1604,⁴² while Henry Dawkins (d. 1814) built a family mausoleum in the church in 1800.⁴³ No evidence of Roman Catholic recusancy has been found in the township, though Protestant Dissent was gaining a foothold by the 17th century, and in 1657–8 two Over Norton Quakers were imprisoned.⁴⁴ Nonconformist meeting houses were registered to Over Norton inhabitants in 1695, 1722, and 1744,

³⁸ H.E. Salter (ed.), *Chapters of the Augustinian Canons* (OHS 74, 1922), 113.

³⁹ *Cal. Inq. p.m. Hen. VII*, III, pp. 515, 536.

⁴⁰ Dugdale, *Mon.* VI (1), 422; *Cal. Pat.* 1494–1509, 544.

⁴¹ OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 131/3/34; *ibid.* par. reg. transcripts.

⁴² TNA, PROB 11/104/493; for the township's later contributions, OHC, PAR64/4/F1/1 (chwdns' accts 1807–1907).

⁴³ Above, Chipping Norton, relig. hist. (church archit.).

⁴⁴ Besse, *Sufferings*, 564.

catering presumably for some of the Baptists and Quakers mentioned in the 18th century,⁴⁵ and in 1774 a weekly visit by a Methodist teacher reportedly attracted a 'great many of the lower sort of people'.⁴⁶ The meeting houses may have fallen out of use following the opening of new purpose-built Dissenting chapels in Chipping Norton during the 18th century.⁴⁷

A curate lived in the township in the 1830s, but probably not until the 1860s were regular services held in the village schoolroom. By 1869 Sunday afternoon and Friday evening services, each with a sermon, were led by Chipping Norton's vicar or curate, and a similar pattern was maintained until the evening service was dropped towards the end of Francis Harris's incumbency (1866–86).⁴⁸ Thereafter the arrangement fell foul of doctrinal differences between Harris's successor Godfrey Littledale (vicar 1886–1915) and the schoolroom's owner William Dawkins (d. 1914), who refused to allow 'Popish preaching and services' there and instead allowed Wesleyan Methodists to use the schoolroom on Sunday evenings. The stand-off continued throughout the 1890s, despite the Ecclesiastical Commissioners contributing £120 a year for a curate to serve the village. Littledale acknowledged that while the population included 'several church families' the majority were 'nominally' Dissenters, and urged that the Church badly needed 'her own building' in Over Norton.⁴⁹

Anglican services finally resumed in the former schoolroom in 1906, when it was reopened as a parish or mission room. The initiative (supported by Dawkins and presumably Littledale) came from the evangelical Church Army, and was welcomed by inhabitants, particularly those 'who from infirmity or other causes are unable to attend any place of worship in Chipping Norton'.⁵⁰ Services initially retained their evangelical tone,⁵¹ and Church Army influence continued in the 1920s; a fundraising event in 1941 was attended by the vicar, however, who complimented the mission room's supporters on re-establishment of a Sunday school, acquisition of a new altar and piano, redecoration, and recent introduction of Holy Communion.⁵² A stone font was installed possibly by 1907, while by the 1990s other furnishings included a communion table and rails, oak pews seating thirty, a reed organ, and an electronic keyboard. Baptisms, weddings, and funeral services were held into the 21st

⁴⁵ OHC, Cal. QS, VIII, 802, 806, 808; *ibid.* MSS Wills Oxon. 35/4/3; 138/4/33; 130/4/31; 36/2/30; *ibid.* Chipping Norton Baptist reg. transcript; *Secker's Visit.* 44–5.

⁴⁶ OHC, MS Oxf. Dioc. d 564, f. 119.

⁴⁷ Above, Chipping Norton, relig. hist.

⁴⁸ OHC, MSS Oxf. Dioc. b 39, f. 89; c 335, f. 87v.; c 338, f. 104v.; c 341, f. 120v.; c 344, f. 101v.; c 347, f. 109v.; c 350, f. 92v.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* c 353, f. 97v.; c 356, ff. 103v.–104; c 359, f. 102; c 362, f. 100; c 365, f. 101; c 368, f. 96; c 1772 (bill of presentment, 22 Oct. 1893); *Oxf. Jnl.* 9 Aug. 1890; Arthur, *Over Norton*, 182–4; *London Gaz.* 13 Nov. 1868, p. 5871 (Eccl. Comm. grant).

⁵⁰ *Oxon. Weekly News*, 3 Oct., 31 Oct. 1906.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 9 Oct. 1907, 14 Oct. 1908, 15 Sept., 13 Oct. 1909.

⁵² *Banbury Advertiser*, 13 Jan. 1927, 19 Nov. 1941; Arthur, *Over Norton*, 202.

century, and the Sunday school was maintained,⁵³ until the mission room's closure in 2020 (during the Covid-19 pandemic) rendered its future uncertain,⁵⁴ and the font and communion table were moved to Little Compton (Warws.).⁵⁵ Close links with Chipping Norton also continued, inhabitants complaining in 1954 at the unfair distribution of costs for maintaining the borough cemetery, which served the whole ecclesiastical parish.⁵⁶

The mission room itself, dedicated to St James in 1943, is a small two-storeyed structure of coursed limestone rubble, with ashlar dressings and a Welsh-slate roof. A central doorway with a segmental arch is flanked by timber casements above stone sills, while the gable end has a high-level timber lintel suggesting a former opening accessed by external stairs.⁵⁷ A possible wooden bellcote with a pyramidal roof has been removed.⁵⁸



St James's, Over Norton, in 2020. The chapel closed during the Covid-19 pandemic and the furnishings (photographed through the window) were later removed.

⁵³ Arthur, *Over Norton*, 15, 160, 280; 'Profile of the parish of St Mary the Virgin Chipping Norton' [1995], 5: copy in OHC; cf. *ibid.* par. reg. transcripts, which do not distinguish services held in Over Norton chapel.

⁵⁴ Above (paroch. organization).

⁵⁵ Information from Jan Cliffe (June 2022).

⁵⁶ *Banbury Advertiser*, 18 Aug. 1954.

⁵⁷ J. Cliffe, *An Architectural Record of the Buildings in the Parish of Over Norton, Oxfordshire* (1999), 6; Brooks, *Pevsner N&W*, 436. Illust. (2014) at www.geograph.org.uk/photo/3888490 (accessed Oct. 2020).

⁵⁸ Arthur, *Over Norton*, plate between pp. 80–1.