

ENGLAND

WELCOME

to St Peter's Church, Molesworth.

This booklet aims to answer some of your questions. We're hoping you might contribute **£1** towards church funds... Please put in the box by the door. Thank you!

How old is the church?

A tricky question, as the building has been added to and repaired over the years. Molesworth village is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, but not the church. The chancel – the part with the altar table beyond the altar rail – is the oldest section of the present building, and experts date it as about 1275. However, the church was restored in 1884-1885, when it is thought the chancel was taken down, repaired and possibly rebuilt to correct a misalignment to the nave (possibly with the help of local church architect John Ladds who had also built Molesworth House, the old rectory, next door some years before).

The south porch (where the main door is) was added in 1890, replacing a simpler structure. The stone figure above the arch of the porch as you enter the church is, of course, of St Peter. The tower and the west wall of the nave were underpinned in 1931. The oak roof was mainly built in the early 1500s although contains some reused older brace beams of 1300s. Despite repairs it is now showing its age with a few leaks.

In 1851 there was still a wooden screen with tracery (1400s) across the chancel and also some old pews, presumably box pews, but there is no trace of these today.

The nave (where the congregation sits) seems to have been rebuilt about 1450-1500 when the wall paintings were created, and the tower added early in the 1500s.



There are some very old carved stone blocks (right) from about 1100, which pre-date the present church and are likely to have come from a previous building on this site. They are placed in the wall alcove opposite the main door.



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What's the history of:

The wall paintings...

Thought to have been painted by itinerant Flemish craftsmen in 1450-1500, the wall paintings had talismanic value for medieval congregations. It was believed that if one caught a glimpse of the painting opposite the main south door, showing St Christopher and staff with the Christ child on his shoulder crossing the river, then one would be safe and preserved from sudden death for that day. For this reason the church door was often left open.

The St Christopher painting shows very unusual wooden timbering for the date, and there is also either 1 or 2 coats of arms top, right which may represent the patron who paid for the paintings, thought to be former local boy made good, Sir Stephen Forster,

Lord Mayor of London in 1454. It is very hard today to distinguish any coat of arms due to deterioration.

The painting on the south wall next to the main door is in a poorer state of preservation. Records from 1914 state that it shows St Anthony holding a bell and staff. In the foreground is a pig with a bell around its neck, standing on hind legs with fore-feet against the Saint; however today it is difficult to make out any of these details. Cactus trees and a timber hut are included.

Many paintings were limewashed over during the religious upheavals in the Reformation and it's likely these were too. It's not clear when the paintings were rediscovered; perhaps when the chancel was repaired in the 1880s? First official mention we've been able to track down is in local gazetteers in 1914.

The bells...

The three bells were restored recently after many years hard work by restorer and ringer Chris Higgins, and his team from the Hunts Church Bell Restoration Society. They are now rung on special occasions, as well as tolling out to summon the congregation prior to services. It is said that they are traditionally rung on St Valentine's Day, 14th Feb.

The inscriptions on the bells are:

1861 L F Clarkson, Rector Thomas Pashler, Churchwarden.

Thomas N Norris Made me 1636

By Henry Penn of Peterborough, Oliver Pashler, churchwarden 1710

In 1549, Molesworth sold handbells and a broken Sanctus bell.

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The ancient tomb at the top of the aisle...

On the floor slab is a worn inscription and over the years different interpretations of the words have been made. In 1884 it was thought to relate to Walter de Molesworth's wife, dating to about 1300. Walter de Molesworth was a sheriff of Beds and Bucks between 1298-1308, and accompanied Edward I to the Holy Land. However, later examination in 1909 by Inskip Ladds (son of John Ladds, architect) concludes that it is instead the wife of William de Molesworth, named perhaps Amicia or Maria. Might it originally have been covered by a brass plate? Hidden under the 19th century oak pulpit is another ancient floor slab of similar age inscribed to the mother of a Walter de Molesworth, said to be Alianore or Alice de Molesworth, although it's uncertain how accurate this information is – and no-one wants to remove the pulpit to find out. The Australian Russell Molesworth believes he is descended from Walter de Molesworth and has written a book about the Molesworth lineage; a copy is held at the Cross Keys pub (named after St Peter's emblem as heaven's gate-keeper, the crossed keys).

The stained glass...

Created by two cousins - both named Margaret Rope - and erected at some time before WW2, this is an example of the Arts and Crafts movement. It is dedicated to the Rev Penzer who served Molesworth and Keystone churches (Keyston has been spelt with and without an e over the years) for 14 years until his death in 1929. There is a plaque on the wall to Henry Arthur Penzer and another to Mary Ann, his wife who died in the 1950s. It is said that the faces of Rev Penzer and his wife feature as models for the kneeling pair left and right – but this may be local myth. The other stained glass in the far wall of the bell tower celebrates the fallen in WW1.

Other interesting features

The wooden board on the bell tower wall gives details of the **Pickering Charity**. Edward Pickering left £200 in 1697 to be invested for the poor of the parish; after enclosure in 1799 this income continued as rents from a 30-acre allotment field. Every year about £20 was distributed, administered by the rector and this was still being paid out in the 1920s. In WW2, the Government compulsorily purchased the allotment field to enable the construction of RAF Molesworth. It seems the purchase money went back to the church., and today no Pickering funds remain. What would £200 in 1697 be worth today?! The Pickering name lives on down the road from the church with the houses built by



the council in the 1950s. The **Hustwaite Charity** consists of a £300 legacy from John Mason Hustwaite in 1816 which was invested to benefit the education of poor children from Bythorn and Molesworth; the last of this money went towards prayerbooks for the church in 2001.

Also on the wall is a list of vicars of Molesworth since 1220, and a list of village soldiers in WW1.

Outside:

The stone coffin next to the box tomb by the church door dates from circa 1200. It was found in the foundations of the north-west corner of the nave in 1931.

If you're wondering - the box tomb of local dignitary and landowner Philip Hustwaite DOES NOT contain a body; it marks where the coffin is buried underground in the normal manner.

There is a sundial carved somewhere on the buttress of the nave – we challenge you to find it.

The village hall:

Originally the National School room, it was built in 1868 and funded by subscriptions. Roll call was on average about 30 pupils from Molesworth and surrounding villages. It closed in 1946, and the building became a church hall. It is now used as a village hall for the benefit of Molesworth and is currently undergoing renovation.



Molesworth witch connection...

Molesworth did not escape the infamous witch trials in the mid 1640s. At Titchmarsh the godly Pickerings – the same family that gave Molesworth the Pickering Charity – were very active hunting out so-called witches in the area. Eleanor Shepherd, a labourer's wife from Molesworth, confessed in 1646 that she had been propositioned by a grey rat-like spirit. She vowed to stop swearing, the sin that had apparently been her undoing, and appears to have escaped with her life. A few days later John Winnick of Molesworth, an illiterate labourer in his fifties, was found to have three teats on his body for "suckling spirits". He was hanged and Huntingdon after some months in gaol. That same year many people from local villages were examined by magistrates for witchcraft.



Today:

St Peter's is used for regular worship as part of a group of churches including Brington, Keyston, Catworth, Bythorn, and others. Rev Jackie Duck presides over the group. The church's condition is suffering a little with cracks, woodworm and damp. Funds from this booklet will go towards maintenance of this building.

Note to family history researchers:

Church warden John Prentis (01832 710457), who lives next door, has a variety of vestry books, photos, maps, village details etc that might help you track down old Molesworthians. The oldest registers (dating from 1564) are kept in Huntingdon Record Office. The Hunts Family History Society has a list of grave inscriptions.