

Hodgeston Church emerges into history in the thirteenth century, when at least the nave was built, but the presence of a good Norman font, with incised decoration, is indicative of an earlier foundation date. Described as a ‘Free Chapel’ in the Middle Ages – that is, a church with the rights of a parish church but without its status – it has no known dedication, a not uncommon feature of such chapelries. There was clearly some association with the square moated site nearby, but the history is obscure. Today the church stands at the centre of a small village, and came into the care of the Friends of Friendless Churches in the year 2000. Probably Hodgeston’s most distinguished son was Thomas Young, born here, and rector of the church from 1542. A firm Protestant, he fled abroad in the reign of Mary I, returning to be briefly bishop of St Davids before becoming archbishop of York in 1561.

History

The church consists of a nave, chancel, south porch and western tower, with a building history spanning at least two hundred years. The nave, with a pointed barrel vault, has been dated to the 13th century.

In the north-east corner is a flight of steep stone steps, which led up to the now vanished rood loft.

The chancel, of similar length, is an altogether more distinguished construction, and is particularly notable for the high quality of the stone carving of the sedilia and piscina within, and of the masonry without. Such elaboration, and necessarily high expenditure, in an otherwise modest building, poses a puzzle for historians. The most likely, and generally accepted, explanation is that the work was undertaken by masons in the employ of the great “building-bishop” of St Davids (1328–47), Henry de Gower, at his nearby palace of Lamphey, as well as elsewhere in his diocese (he paid for work at the now ruined chapel of Portclew, in Freshwater East, nearby). Work on the building was completed in the 15th century, with the erection of the elegant, tapering, pencil-thin west tower, with its corbelled blind parapet.



Sedilia

The church today

By the mid-19th century the church was in disrepair, with some windows blocked, and undistinguished furnishings – it is recorded in 1851 that the pews were painted blue, and the east window a ‘wretched’ piece of work. On the initiative of the local magnate, Earl Cawdor, and Professor E Freeman, a full restoration of the church was undertaken in 1856, the earl’s favoured architect, David Brandon,



Corbel head

directing the work. Much of the present appearance of the building, including what the *Gentleman’s Magazine* rudely called his ‘dandy Gothic roof’, the Minton tiles – a hallmark of his restorations – and the south porch, is Brandon’s legacy. The choir stalls, the work of the distinguished Arts & Crafts architect, W.D. Caroe, were imported by the Friends of Friendless Churches from St David’s Church, Exeter, where they were redundant.



19th-century tile



Norman font

Other Friends churches near the Free Chapel of Hodgeston

St Decuman, Rhoscrowther Medieval church with nave and chancel of the 13th and 14th century with a complex plan of chapels or oratories (key available nearby).

St Oudoceus, Llandawke Rescued from a state of dereliction in 2003. 14th century effigy, a 6th century inscribed stone and idiosyncratic carved oak altar of 1882 (church open).



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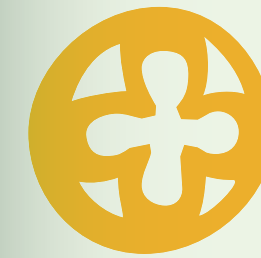
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The Free Chapel of Hodgeston

a guide to its history

St Eloi, Llandeloy Tiny Welsh chapel revived and renewed in 1926 by John Coates Carter using local methods and materials, and SPAB principles to ‘restore’ it to a pre-Reformation framework. Striking woodwork, and reredos of almost childlike directness (church open).



St Andrew the Apostle, Bayvil Modest early nineteenth century church retaining its evocative late Georgian Anglican interior. Painted and panelled pulpit, reading desk and box pews (key available nearby).

