

Introduction

This guide book cannot begin to do justice to the rich history of Heather Church over the centuries. St. John the Baptist's earliest recorded roots are in the Domesday Book and also there are strong links with the Hospitaller Knights.

This guide will, it is hoped, make it easier for all who visit the church and village to understand the significance of what they see, and why it should be preserved for generations to come.

Rectors: -

- 1220 Thomas
- 1221 Richard Arundel
- 1262 Elia's de Alderby
- 1300 Alan de Santhorp
William de Gotham
- 1319 Roger de Gotham
- 1349 Thomas de Bigge
- 1350 Andrew de Bytham
- 1376 Richard de Wodeford
- 1385 Thomas Baron
- 1388 Simon Farnsly
- 1402 Thomas Cowdale
- 1417 Sir Ralph Astoloth
- 1435 Thomas Persebrugge
- 1439 Richard Brotherode
- 1448 Thomas Lyster
- 1452 Robert Joye
- 1479 Sir Robert Barker
- 1516 Sir Robert Dey
- 1532 Sir William Jerram

1557	Robert Mathewe
1619-1620	John Ash
1620-1653	Henery Pate
1660-1681	Jonathan Clay
1681-1730	Edward Pate
1730-1751	John Everard
1751-1775	George Everard
1775-1823	Paul Belcher
1823-1836	Paul Belcher
1836-1884	George Paul Belcher
1884-1898	Evans Belcher
1898-1945	Herbert Standidge

Benefice in Sequestration.

1946-1952	Thomas Foote, MA.
1953-1955	Hugh D. Tyson
1962-1967	John L. Hamlet
1967-1972	Clifford Berdinner
1973-1976	Harry Taylor

Benefice united with Ibstock

1976	Major Derek Buxton, BD.
1988	Robin Nigel Everett, B.A., Dip Th
1998	Richard White
2011– 2019	Patricia Laura Bailey, Cert Ed, Adv Dip Th & PS

Four of the rectors from 1221 to 1301, were thought to be Priors of the Preceptory of the Knight Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem.

Thomas was the first Rector (1220), who only held the living one year. This was when Heather was in the Diocese of Lincoln and Bishops rode on horseback.



Information about the parish is very scanty, but in the Domesday, Book the name was Hadre, late Hethyr, Hether and lastly as it is now. Nobody knows the derivation of any of the spelling, but the present one seems the most appropriate from the fact that Normanton-le-Heath and Donington le Heath are nearby, and the name probably derives from heath-land, hence the pronunciation 'Hee-ther'.

The following extracts are taken from Nichols' Leicestershire:

In the time of King Edward, the Confessor (1041-1066) Hadre was part of the possessions of Walthe Earl of Northumberland, but after the conquest it came to the family of Ferrers, who gave it to the Greasley's of Drakelow, co-Derby.

About the time of Henry II. (1154-1189) Ralph de Greasley with the consent of Robert Nigell, Henry and William his brothers gave to the Knights Hospitallers all Heather and his lands in Ravenstone, and William de Ferrers granted them the service of the said Robert, viz., one Knight's fee, after which it became one of their Preceptories, and was possessed by the Knights of that Order, till their dissolution by Henry VIII. ¹

In 1220 Heather is described as in the patronage of Knights Hospitallers. (*The Parish Church dedicated to St. John the Baptist was established in the 14th century on the site of the original Knights' chapel.*) Next door to the church is the Manor House whose extensive stone foundations are believed to be part of the former Preceptory, where men were recruited for service with the Knights in the Holy Land, Rhodes, Cyprus and Malta.

Heather, Rothley and Old Dalby in Leicestershire were all linked together to form a Commandery, through their Manors. Rothley preceptory was originally Knights Templars, but when the order was dissolved in 1312 the Knights Hospitallers received their lands.

The first recorded priest at Heather was Thomas, in 1220. Four of the Rectors from 1221 to 1300 are thought to have been priors of the preceptory of the Knights Hospitallers. Whilst the Hospitallers were fighting monks, they also

developed a role in caring for pilgrims and it is fascinating to note that, although the order was suppressed in 1540, a protestant order of St John was revived in the 19th century, one of whose charitable foundations is St John Ambulance, which survives to this day.

In 1346 the Prior of Hospital of S. John of Jerusalem in England was assessed 20s. for half a Knight's fee in Hethyr.

In 1371 the Preceptory of Dalby on the Wolds possessed the Manor of Heather for an annual rent of 26s. 8d. They had also a pulling mill there which was let for 13s. 4d. a year and a water mill let for £2 10s. 0d.

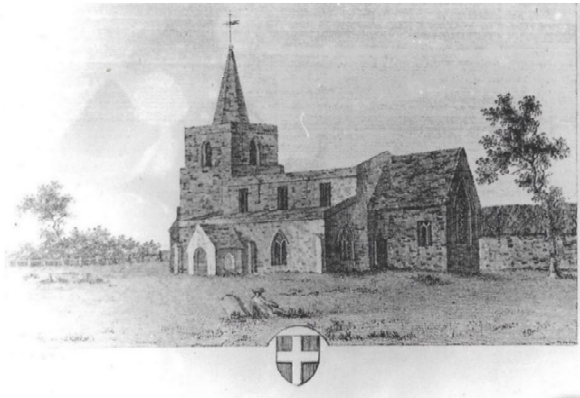
Nichols has the further following notes to record:

In this church standeth the coat armour of the Knights, Hospitallers, Gules, a plain Cross Argent. Note: Gules, a red colour, i.e., the red in heraldic shield, it signifies valour. Argent. Silvery colour on a coat of arms, designed to represent purity, justice and gentleness.²



The two flags currently hanging in the Chancel bear the Badges of both orders and were presented to the church by Mr Barry Theobald on the 24th June 1984, St. John the Baptist day.

In a pen and ink sketch by Malcolm, as it was in 1796, the building had a spire with a weather vane, a porch, and there was a door leading into the chancel.



Below, in a recent photograph, note the changes in the outside of the building viz: on the tower, the spire and weather vane have been removed and there is now a church clock. There is no longer an exterior porch at the entrance to the church and there are changes to the chancel area, i.e. removal of the door and changes to the windows.



The church was Grade II* listed on 24th November 1965, which recognises its importance as a largely medieval structure.

The Tower

The 14th century tower is approached through a door from the churchyard path. The tower has typical crocketed pinnacles, and a crenellated parapet. The spire was removed during work in 1846-47 and the tower roof made flat.



The Clock

The memorial clock was installed in the church tower by Messrs J & H Dronfield in memory of their parents. There is a memorial tablet in the church. It is fixed to the eastern side of the tower facing the roadway. The hammer strikes the Tenor Bell on the hour and requires winding once a week. The dial is cast in iron open frame work with roman numerals. The finish is of hard black enamel and 23 carat gold leaf.



The Church Bells:

There were only three bells until in 1959 the Ladies Fellowship decided to undertake their restoration, as the framework had become too old and worn. Restoration began in 1963, during which the ringing chamber was moved to the first floor. The new recast bells were dedicated on Wed 24th June 1964.

Inscriptions on the Bells: -

1. Blank.

Waist. (T)
1985

22” 2.1.16

2. JUBILATE DEO

Waist. J. L. HAMLET, RECTOR

J. W. ATKINS

J. K. RICHARDSON }

1964

[T]

} CHURCHWARDENS

23.125”

2.2.2

3. TE DEUM LAUDAMUS

Waist. J. L. HAMLET, RECTOR

J. W. ATKINS

J. K. RICHARDSON }

1964

[T]

} CHURCHWARDENS

25” 3.0.13

4. [12] IOHN EVERRAD RECTOR [12] 1734

Waist. [T]
RECAST 1963

26.125”

3.2.21

5. W. BAILIE [12] GOD SAVE HIS CHVRCH 1734 [??]

Waist.

[T]

RECAST 1963

29.625”

4.3.22

6. IHS : NAZARENVS [9] REX : IVDEORVM [9] FILI : DEI [9]

MISERERE : MEI [9] 1630 [9] [1]

31.25” 5.1.0

A# (939 Hz)

Due to the foresight of those who designed the augmentation of the bells from three to five there was a space left for a Sixth Bell. In 1985 the iron bell frame was brushed down and painted with red oxide. The new bell was raised in November that year. Woodwork alterations were done in the ringing chamber to clear ringing room.





Carvings

The outside of the church building has many fascinating carvings, typical of the 14th century, both as gargoyles, which act as water outlets, and faces at the base of the corbels. The carvings are in the best condition on the north side and figures including a knight, a bishop, and woman with medieval headdress can be seen, as well as the fantastic beasts of the gargoyles.



Inside the church building

The Font:

The font, which is used for baptisms, dates from the Victorian period, although the base appears to be medieval. It is octagonal in shape, with upper part made of limestone, with a wooden cover, made by Dennis Lever in the late 1970's. The font has occupied three different places in the church: firstly, close behind the door, but it was moved to the South aisle soon after the wooden porch was erected in 1954 and seating, known as the Berrisford House pew, was removed. In September 1971 the font again moved to a new place at the back of the nave, to stand on a piece of tiled floor, where once the stove stood, and part of the back pew was taken away to accommodate it.



Children's Corner:

From the pews in the north aisle, seating and doors were taken away to make an open space near the pulpit for a Children's Corner. A polished wooden cross and a pair of brass candle sticks were given as gifts, small wooden chairs were bought, (plastic ones today) and a piano was used for music. In June 1954 Rev. Hugh Tyson dedicated this corner and the wooden vestibule to the memory of Mrs May Standidge.

Pulpit:

The six-sided pulpit is high, made of wood-deal, and is approached from the floor of the nave by four steps.



In the Chancel

The East Window:

The one that is lit up by the rising sun and is by the largest in the church. In 1885 a fine set of stained-glass panels were installed in the chancel east window, made by Burlison and Grylls, of Newman Street, London, in the 'Arts & Crafts' style, with glowing colours. The Agnus Dei and musical angels are shown in the tracery, and a crucifixion is shown below, together with an image of the prophet Elias, and a series of images telling the story of John the Baptist.



The window is a memorial to the Belcher family.

In the churchyard the Belcher family tomb can be seen. The Rectors of Heather for a century and a quarter were of this family.



The Altar

The Altar or Communion Table stands close to the wall at the square east end of the church. The sanctuary, or rector's place is separated from the rest of the church by rails and is one step higher than the floor of the chancel.

In 1843 a visitation mentions that the "Communion rails were of deal and oak and that they were decent". It would appear then, that the present ones of wrought Iron and brass were put it during time of the restorations in the nineteenth century.



The Everard Monument

On the south wall of the chancel is a fine marble and alabaster monument to Stephen Everard, who died in 1615. This is framed with Corinthian columns, and has carved figures of Everard, his wife and their seven children, all portrayed in the attitude of prayer.

This links the Church with Rothley temple, a former property of the Knights Templar and the Babington family.



The Processional Cross:



The Processional Cross made by a Churchwarden Mr J Dilks from thirtieth century timber taken from the roof of Thornton Church, was presented to John Linden, Rector for Heather Church. (rev. J. L. Hamlet was vicar of Thornton before coming to Heather in 1962) notes from parish magazine 29/06/1969. The cross is hand worked in brass and follows an ancient Celtic design.

Lectern:

To the right side of the nave at the front of the chancel steps stands the lectern of wrought Iron with brass fittings and brass candlesticks, which holds the large church Bible.



The Piscina:

(A stone basin with outlet beside the altar in some churches to receive the water used in purifying the Chalice) it is situated at the east end of the south aisle wall, with a gentle ogee form to the arch, indicating a 14th century origin.



The Royal Arms:

Presented to the Church by Queen Adelaide, is of great interest, being painted between 1801 and 1816. This can be ascertained from the Coat -of-Arms displayed on it – it is now on the south aisle wall between the two windows. It was moved to this position from its older place high up on the North wall of the nave because of the installation of electric heaters. Previously it had a place in the archway of the west wall, above the old choir or gallery seats, but had to be moved to its place in the nave, when the organ was put at the west end of the church in 1924 as a village war memorial.

Church Organ:

An unusual War memorial to those of the village who fell in WW1 is the Church Organ, although it was subsequently restored as a memorial to the fallen of the Second World War as well. This is situated at the west end of the nave, in front of the tower arch, positioned on an oak gallery in 1924.

The inscription reads: To the Glory of God, this organ was erected and dedicated in grateful memory of the men of the parish who gave their lives in the Great War.

1914-1918

W Boobyer	E J Cleaver	W.L. Pearson
W. Bradford	E. Flamson	T. H. Sharpe
A. Brooks DCM	H. Grewcock	T.N. Sidwell
S. Button	G. Harris	A. Woodman
	J. Holyoake	



E. G. Chandler's grave in Church Yard.



In 1969 an overhaul of the organ was carried out and a special service was held to dedicate the restoration of the organ in memory of the fallen of the second World War (1939-1945)

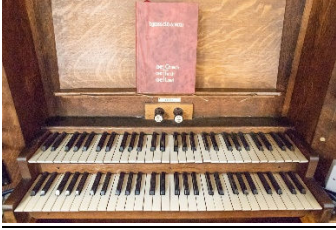
N.E. Hodges

E. Wragg

C. Ball

J. Bradford

E. G. Chandler



The Pews:

The pews are made of deal, and those of the aisles have doors, but the rest have not. The pews with doors are known as “box pews”, and in years gone by were rented, and seats provided with cushions.



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University of Leicester.

Dr Pamela J Fisher Leicestershire Victoria County History Trust (LVCHT)

^{1,2} Nichols “History and Antiquities of Leicestershire” Vol IV (Pts), Leics VCH Vol. 11, pp 32-3.

Information from the late Miss Mabel Watts (from her short story)

Researchers: -

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Susan Marlow, Jennifer & David Wragg and Bryan Martin.

Photographs: Coopersdimension & Bryan Martin (Architect)

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Web links: -

www.stjohnthebaptistchurchheather.weebly.com

<https://www.hlf.org.uk> (The National Lottery Heritage Fund)

<https://www.sja.org.uk> (St. Johns Ambulance)

museumstjohn.org.uk (Museum of the Order of St John)

ibstocklives.wixsite.com/home (Ibstock Historical Society)

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/about-the-record-office>
(The records Office at Wigston)

<https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/leicestershire>
(LVCHT)

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