

Parish/township: CASTERTON

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RELIGIOUS HISTORY

The site of the first chapel in Casterton is marked by the name of Chapel House in the extreme south-western corner of the township. Chapel House Lane, a deeply worn track, running between fields named as Chapelside and Chapelhead,¹ marks its position, on a commanding site at about the 80 foot contour, looking down to the river and the Devil's Bridge, some 40 feet lower. Its foundation so close to the parish church of Kirkby Lonsdale is explained by the fact that it was built near a holy well which may have dated to pagan times and been taken over by the church perhaps as early as the twelfth century.² In 1347 it was named as being in the possession of Gilbert de Brunolvshed, but it may well have been in his family since the thirteenth century at least.³ It passed to his heir, an infant daughter Margaret who latter married Robert de Bellingham, and during her minority was granted to Sir John Coupland as a reward for his prowess at the battle of Nevile's Cross. Bellingham became lord of the manor of Casterton, but the chapel advowson remained with the superior lord. Among the assets held at her death in 1411 by Phillippa widow of Robert de Vere, duke of Ireland, was the advowson of the chapel called Colmekilnechappell in Casterton with certain lands adjoining to it worth 13s.4d.⁴

In 1531 the last chantry priest, Robert Redman, died, and the chapel was closed by Sir Roger Bellingham and left unserved and abandoned. In 1547 the second Chantry Act was passed, which closed down all chantries and authorised commissioners to collect any gold and silver in their possession for the use of the

¹ CAS (Kendal)Tithe Map WDRC/8/250

² Rev. R.P.Brown 'The Chantries of Kirkby Lonsdale' (CWAAS Transactions N.S. XXVII) 54-99

³ 'Chantries of Kirkby Lonsdale'

⁴ Rec. Kend. II, 331

Crown. Under this act Alan Bellingham, one of the statutory commissioners and a junior member of the original Bellingham family, took possession of the decaying building which had no valuables but some 46 acres of land. A bill of complaint was lodged by the tenants that the chapel had been despoiled of timber, glass and iron which had found their way to Bellingham's house, and that their rents were being dishonestly siphoned off by Bellingham's agent. They demanded a commission, and for the next four years, until one was set up, withheld their rents. The commission sat in Kirkby Lonsdale in April 1552 and appears to have disposed of any imputation of dishonesty.⁵

Then or later the site was very thoroughly robbed, as in 1692 Thomas Machell noted that there was a ploughed field where the chapel had stood. He noted two houses, called Chapelhouses, nearby.⁶ Other buildings have since obscured the site of St. Columba's well.⁷

Casterton was then without a church until 1833. The present one was probably designed by George Webster,⁸ but very much according to the ideas of William Carus-Wilson, a strict Evangelical. (He had at first been refused ordination by the Bishop of Chester because of his views on the inevitability of eternal damnation for those who sinned after baptism, but the Archbishop of York was more accommodating.)⁹ Carus-Wilson was appointed Perpetual Curate of Casterton in 1833. Much of the township had been granted to his forbears by Catherine of Braganza in 1681, and further estates near Kendal had been brought into the family by his mother, Margaret Shippard of Natland. He was therefore able to use the family's own land and money to establish schools¹⁰ and build the Casterton chapel. He was interested in church architecture and in 1835 published 'Helps to the Building of Churches and Parsonage Houses', his convictions

⁵ 'Chantries of Kirkby Lonsdale'

⁶ Antiquary on Horseback, ed. J.M.Ewbank (CWAAS Extra Series XIX) Kendal, 1963, 26

⁷ Datestone 2007

⁸ Hyde and Pevsner Cumbria, 274

⁹ J.M.Ewbank The Life and Works of William Carus Wilson (Kendal 1960), 4

¹⁰ See 'Social History'

leading him to recommend an extreme plainness of style.¹¹ The church as first built was almost brutally plain, and as such was highly praised by Queen Adelaide when she visited in 1840, not only for its simplicity but also for the low cost of its erection¹² - £641.¹³

In 1860, shortly after Carus-Wilson's death, the chancel by E.G.Paley was added. Wilson's sons protested at this alteration of the original ascetic style, but lost their case at Carlisle.¹⁴ The stained glass windows and wall paintings by Henry Holiday and James Clark date from the 1890s,¹⁵ during the incumbency of the Rev. A.D. Burton¹⁶ who was also responsible for replacing the old boxed side pews and the airless gallery.¹⁷

The church was not to twentieth-century taste.¹⁸ Henry Holiday's painted stencilling was largely removed in the 1950s as were large wall-paintings of angels. The twenty-first century is more sympathetic.¹⁹ A comprehensive repairs project started in 2004 and costing about £225,000 was largely funded by English Heritage.

At the census in March 1851 the total sittings were entered as 570. Attendance was 372 in the morning and 390 in the afternoon, largely from the two boarding schools. The officiating curate, William Paterson, noted that Casterton Hall and two other principal houses were empty at the time, which affected the population of the township.²⁰

Services in the later nineteenth century were still held on Sundays only, in the morning and the evening, with communion four times a year. The number of

¹¹ Hyde and Pevsner *Cumbria*, 274

¹² *The Queen Dowager's Visit to Kirkby Lonsdale* (Kirkby Lonsdale 1840), 20

¹³ C.M.L Bouch *Prelates and People of the Lake Counties* (Kendal 1948), 460-1

¹⁴ From information in the church by M. Williams.

¹⁵ *Cumbria* 275

¹⁶ See 'Social History'

¹⁷ Inf. M. Williams

¹⁸ Not included by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (1936).

Pevsner in 1967 used the terms 'sentimentality' and 'all-too-easy idealizing realism'.

¹⁹ Hyde and Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 274-5.

²⁰ PRO, HO 129/575 1851 Religious Census

communicants might fall as low as seven, or rise to 80 on the Sunday after a confirmation. From 1890 the pattern changed: three services were regularly held on Sundays, and in the week before Easter there were two services every day and five on Easter Sunday, with 130 communicants.²¹ This coincided with the appointment of the Rev. Arthur Burton as vicar, school chaplain and secretary to the trustees.²² After his retirement in 1920, the three services on Sundays continued, but Easter celebrations were reduced to Good Friday and Easter day.

Established as a separate parish in 1888, in 1976 Casterton's status reverted to that of a chapel of ease within Kirkby Lonsdale.²³ There was a Sunday service at 11.00, and early communion mainly during school terms. In 2008 the average Sunday attendance was sixteen,²⁴ although the building also continued to be used as a school chapel until the closure of the school.²⁵ But after 2013, with no more pupils of secondary age to use the organ and the piano, to attend confirmation classes and to be confirmed, the link between church and school was almost broken, and the very small congregation found itself with a burden of repairs and replacements, which left the future of the church in doubt. The building however, since the addition of the chancel by Paley in the 1860s, acquired remarkably good acoustics, and in the later twentieth century became a concert venue drawing audiences from a wide area. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the congregation and the village combined to raise money to replace the heating and install a sound and loop system.²⁶

²¹ CRO (Kendal) WPR/12/1/5/1-9 Service registers 1889-1989

²² G. Sale, *The History of Casterton School* (Casterton 1983), 82

²³ See under Kirkby Lonsdale.

²⁴ Inf. Church House, Carlisle. Thanks to Jean Hardman and Eleanor Scott.

²⁵ See 'Social History'.

²⁶ Inf. R. Bullman, churchwarden.