

In April's meeting of the local history group we heard a talk by Stephen Hartley, a volunteer member of the National Trust talk service based at Calke Abbey. His talk focussed on the estate church at Staunton Harold and the part played by Earl Ferrers and other members of the Shirley family in its history.

Staunton Harold Church, also known as the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, is a fine example of Gothic style, built in 1653 for Sir Robert Shirley. It is a rare ecclesiastical building for its time, an era known as the Commonwealth Period, when Oliver Cromwell was Lord Protector of England.

The 4th Baronet, Robert Shirley, was determined in these dangerous times for those who refused to follow puritanical edicts of Cromwell and his advisors to stand up for 'all things sacred' as he saw it. Despite the Shirleys in previous generations being catholic, Sir Robert remained faithful to the traditions of the High Anglican Church and the God-given right of the monarch to rule.

At a time which saw a steep decline in the building of churches and a move to make them plainer, Shirley created a gothic

edifice with pinnacles, panelling and wall paintings suffice to make any roundhead's blood boil. Puritans firmly believed that the Church of England needed purifying of certain practices, including the removal of lavish decorations.

After the execution of Charles I, many royalist supporters, like Robert Shirley rebelled against Cromwell, turned their support instead to Archbishop Laud, who wanted to restore the Church of England and encouraged the building and beautification of churches.

Shirley started to build a church following Archbishop Laud's ideas closely. It was imposing and grand. Inside, there is carved wood panelling, a mural on the ceiling depicting the creation of the world, and a communion table with an altar front.

Hearing about the lavish church being erected by Sir Robert Shirley, Oliver Cromwell demanded that Shirley should contribute to the costs of a new ship for the Navy.

Shirley refused Cromwell's demand and was subsequently imprisoned in The Tower of London, where he died at the age of 27. Although he died before his church was finished, Shirley left detailed instructions in his will for the furnishing of the interior, which was overseen by his wife. Later, after the Restoration of the Monarchy, the church was completed in 1665 by Richard Shepard, for Sir Robert's young heir.

Sir Robert's descendant, the 12th Earl Ferrers, presented the church to the National Trust back in 1954 when he feared that its upkeep would become impossible for the estate to bear any longer. Although they received endowments from both the Dulverton and Pilgrim trusts, a lot of restoration work to the gothic features of the building have had to be carried out by the Trust over the years. In 2014, the external stonework needed essential mortar repairs to prevent water damage to the building. Several areas of stonework along the nave and aisles were badly eroded and needed replacing. The slot windows in the tower needed re-leading, due to their poor condition, with Holywell Glass completing work on the East window. The bell

chamber inside the tower underwent restoration work to strengthen the bell supports. In recent times there was serious water ingress caused by lead being pinched from the chancel roof. This threatened to damage the unique ceiling mural depicting the Creation which is thought to have been painted by brothers, Samuel and Zachary Kirk in 1655. The later sanctuary and aisle paintings can be attributed to a Mr Lovett in 1662 when the accounts indicate he was paid £26 for clowding the iles.”

Other features Stephen encouraged us to look out for whenever visiting the church include; the Jacobean panelling, pulpit and pews, the Father Schmidt organ (parts of which survive from 1623, predating the building), some Victorian stained glass (Faith, Hope and Charity depicted by Heaton, Butler and Bayne), the iron work screen, funerary hatchments and the various family monuments lining the walls. The expensive work of restoration continues with banners and other items being archived at Calke awaiting the attention of the conservation experts. However, we did discover that the peal of

eight bells, which hadn't been heard since 1998, was recently renovated in time to be rung for the coronation of Charles III in May 2023.