

Moccas Church of St Michael & All Angels

Welcome to this ancient church set in the parkland surrounding Moccas Court in the Wye Valley of Herefordshire.

Some history

The name Moccas is derived from the Welsh 'moch rhos', a reference to the moor of the pigs and the story of the foundation of a church here in the fifth century. This Celtic church site is associated with St Dubricius or Dyfrig, Prince of the local Mercian sub-kingdom of Ergyng or Archenfield, who was reputedly born at Madley and became the first Bishop of Llandaff. Legend has it that an angel led Dubricius to found a monastery at a place where he discovered a white sow with her piglets; the place called Moccas. This monastery is one of several churches believed to have been founded by St Dubricius along the Wye Valley, and today churches dedicated to him can be found at Hentland, Whitchurch and Ballingham. The last known abbot of Moccas was Bishop Comereg in c590, after which the monastery seems to have fallen victim to plague and attack from the settling Anglo-Saxons.

By the Norman period Moccas is recorded at Domesday in 1086 as being held in part by St Guthlac's Priory, Hereford and in part by Nigel 'the Physician'. The estate was then held by the de Fresne family from the C13th and the Vaughan family from the C16th until 1650. Moccas then passed to the Cornwall family, and was held by them and their descendants, the Chester-Masters. Since 2014 the Court and the surrounding land is now the property of the Harley family.

The church stands in isolation forming an eye-catching feature in the parkland surrounding Moccas Court, which was laid out by 'Capability' Brown in the 1770's and further improved by Humphrey Repton in the 1790's. There is a medieval castle site near to the historic deer park on the hillside to the south of the church, but no trace of this or any settlement around the church remains above ground. The present small village lies outside the landscaped parkland to the south-east. The fine red brick Moccas Court can be seen across the park from the churchyard and was designed by renowned Scottish architect Robert Adam in 1775-81, but executed by Anthony Keck from Gloucestershire. Keck was the architect of another Herefordshire house, Canon Frome Court, as well as Highgrove, home to the Prince of Wales in Gloucestershire. The Stable Courtyard and Home Farm were also designed by Brown in the 1770's. The landscape park extended across the River Wye with the mile long Monnington Walk, leading to Monnington Court and Church.

Moccas church and park were frequented by Reverend Francis Kilvert, latterly rector at Bredwardine until his untimely death in 1879. His famous diaries record his visits, such as to the deer park on 22nd April 1876;

"I fear those grey old men of Moccas, those grey, gnarled, low-browed, knock-kneed, bowed, bent, huge, strange, long-armed, deformed, misshapen oak men that stand waiting and watching century after century biding God's time with both feet in the grave and yet tiring down and seeing out generation after generation, with such tales to tell, as when they whisper them to each other on midsummer nights, make the silver birches weep and the poplars and aspens shiver and the long ears of the hares and rabbits stand on end. No human hand set those oaks. They are 'the trees which the

Lord hath planted'. They look as if they had been at the beginning and making of the world, and they will probably see its end."

The deer park is now a designated Site of Special scientific Interest and a National Nature Reserve.

A walk around the inside of the church;

The plan of the Norman church with nave, chancel, and apse is unchanged since the C12th. The apse is a high status architectural feature; other examples of which can be found in other Herefordshire churches at Kilpeck & Peterchurch. The interior now has its stone walls exposed showing the principal stone used is tufa, a lime washed sandstone from a local bed in Depple Wood. Although the walls are now scraped, fine wall paintings no doubt once covered the walls as can still be seen in the Norman church at Kempeley in Gloucestershire. A number of small round-headed windows survive from the Norman period when the church must have been dark and mysterious inside. The chancel arch is carved with zigzag with saltire crosses, the apse arch with zigzag, and this carving probably once complemented the wall paintings.

In the C14th, large decorated style windows were inserted into the nave and chancel to give more light. There are some possible masons' marks to a north window. Some of the fine contemporary stained glass survives with beautiful canopies. Look for the little yellow robed figures amongst the painted architectural details. The figures of saints which were once below are now lost, possibly removed at the Reformation. The arms of de Fresne family in the tracery lights shows that these windows were part of their endowment to the church. The worn and recut alabaster effigy of a knight in the centre of the chancel is possibly Richard de Fresne, who died in 1375. The C14th piscina, or washing place for the holy vessels, in the apse is another survival from the improvements to the church during this period.

Although the font in the nave is Norman, the cover is C17th. This is one of few remaining features of the interior from after the Reformation when the church would have had whitewashed walls and been furnished with box pews around a prominent pulpit. The Cornwall family undertook work to the church in the C19th, first with a restoration by Westmacott in 1803, and then a substantial reordering in 1870 by the famous Victorian architect, George Gilbert Scott junior, for the rector (the Reverend Sir George Cornwall) to make it more more suited to the Anglo-Catholic practices of the High Victorian church. Fine interior features include the ceiling with carved bosses including a Green Man, the stone altar, the nave pews including smaller children's seats by the entrance and the unusual returned stalls to the chancel. Scott wrote in a letter to Sir George Cornwall,

"I intended the side seats for general use, the returned ones for any clergy present. It does not look nice to see a clergyman in his surplice sitting side by side with ladies and gentlemen."

The magnificent organ is a RW Walker & Sons instrument in Scott's case and was installed in 1871. The beautiful painting scheme on the case was undertaken by Charles Eamer Kempe, who was famous for his many stained glass windows (such as at Much Marcle). The swell organ was added in 1875 and the instrument restored in 1980. The Victorian stained glass at Moccas is a memorial to the Cornwall family.

The C17th communion rail was installed in 1974 and came from the closed church at Willersley.

A walk around the outside of the church;

The uniformity of the tufa stone used by the Norman builders can be experienced fully. It is similar to that used at nearby Bredwardine, and at several churches in the Teme Valley around Shelsley Walsh in Worcestershire.

Norman features include round-headed windows with rebates for wooden shutters and the simple moulded string course to the apse. The two Norman doorways have worn capitals and tympana. There is evidence in old drawings of carvings by the masons of the Herefordshire School Sculpture which have now been lost. The south doorway tympanum was carved, like that at Kilpeck, with a tree of life with two beasts swallowing human legs, whilst that at the north doorway had a lion with foliage. Both would have suggested representations of good triumphing over evil. The C14th south porch has contemporary bargeboards but was much renewed in 1870.

The 2 C17th bells are housed in a chamber above the west end of nave, which has an opening in the west wall. They were too large for the small medieval bellcote on the west gable. An inscription on one refers to John Goph and Walter Davies, churchwardens in 1674, whilst the other is recorded as cast by John Finch in 1635.

We hope that you have enjoyed your visit to this historic church which remains a much loved place of worship today.

Moccas is one of the 'Borderlink Group' of parishes in the Diocese of Hereford. Why not visit our other churches at Blakemere, Bredwardine, Clifford, Cusop, Dorstone, Hardwicke and Preston-on-Wye?