

ST. NICHOLAS NORTON

A history and description of the church.

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Friends of St. Nicholas, Norton.
Letchworth Garden City.

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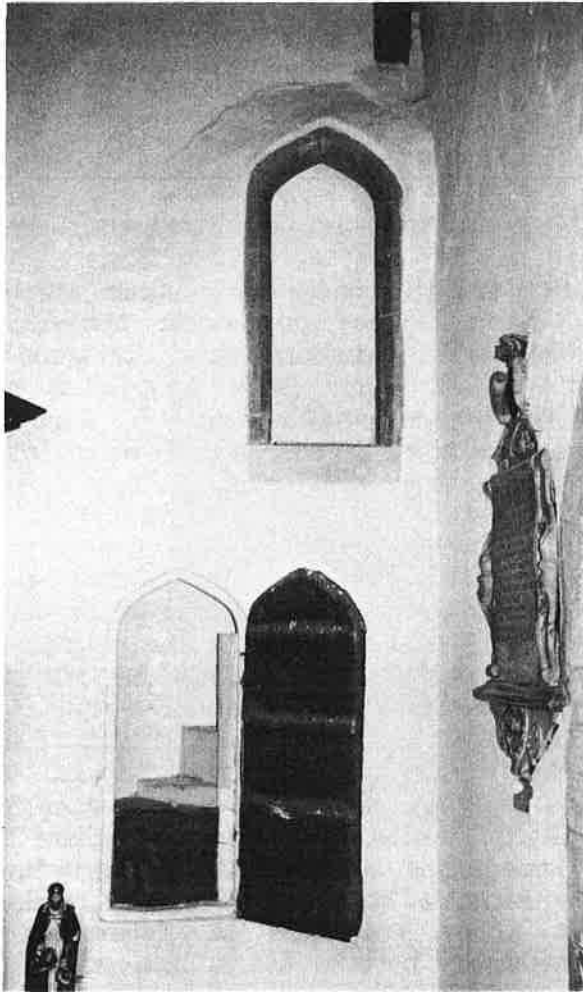


St. Nicholas from the North-East.

1 HISTORY

NORTON - a Saxon name for a parish which has been inhabited since prehistoric times, which its archaeological remains show. Its wealth of written records begin with a charter dated 1007. This gave the manor of Norton to St. Albans Abbey. It was confirmation of an earlier charter granted by Offa, King of Mercia, in c792.

The mention of a priest at Norton in the Domesday Book suggests, rather than proves, the existence of a church here at that time. There are several reasons for thinking that there was a church here then. Apart from the mention of a priest it must be remembered that St. Albans Abbey had held the manor, admittedly not continuously, for nearly 300 years. Norton was on a pilgrim route to Tynemouth, where there was a Benedictine monastery which according to Matthew Paris, a St. Albans chronicler, belonged to that Abbey. Travellers to Tynemouth were given hospitality here by the monks.



Rood stairs and entrance to rood loft

Histories of St. Albans Abbey tell us that in c1110-19 Hervey, Bishop of Ely, dedicated a church at Norton. This may have been either the rededication of an existing building or the consecration of a new one. At the same service Herbert Losinga, Bishop of Norwich, dedicated chapels to St. Andrew the Apostle and to St. Mary Magdalen in the church. These chapels probably stood either side of the chancel arch.

In the Middle Ages it was the monasteries which provided hospitality to travellers. St. Albans Abbey was no exception. During the Abbacy of John II, 1235-60, Laurence, the Rector of Norton, made a freewill offering of the Rectory of Norton to the Abbot. He did this so that the Abbey could better provide hospitality for its guests. What he had in effect done was to entitle the Abbot to receive the tithes of the parish. That meant that one tenth of everything produced - crops, livestock, eggs, etc., belonged to the Abbot. The Rector had to appoint someone to take care of the spiritual welfare of the parish in his place - a Vicar - who had certain rights too, but far fewer! Ever since then Norton has had a Vicar.

The Rector was required to provide the Vicar with a minimum income and adequate housing. The Vicar held strips of land in the open fields alongside the tenants of the lord. The Court Books of the manor refer to various vicars, and also to where he lived in the early days.

Following Laurence's gift the Abbot decided to keep the church at Norton. He could have sold the Rectory and/or the Advowson - right to appoint the Vicar - as these were saleable commodities. His decision to retain the church was confirmed by a charter from Henry III in 1258.

In 1291 the Pope, coincidentally called Nicholas, drew up a list of churches in England, for taxation purposes. In this Norton is described as being in the Deanery of Baldock and the Archdeaconry of St. Albans. It was valued at £6.13s.4d. In the same year the Pope granted indulgences to pilgrims visiting the church at Norton for the four feasts of the year dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Expansion and change.

The first half of the 15th century was a period of expansion for the church at Norton. Partly financed by a number of bequests several improvements were made to the building. The most obvious of these was the construction of the tower. It was built apart from the church, the nave was then extended to join it. The walls of the nave were heightened and new windows were fitted. Pews were installed, probably for the first time.

John Whethamsted, Abbot 1420-40, acquired a property for the use of the Rectory from Walter Bradeway in return for a corrody of 2d a day

for life. He may have used this to provide a new vicarage.



The nave looking East.

All in all the future must have looked bright but the second half of the 15th century was unsettled at Norton. Sometime before 1468 the Vicar, John Clapham, was assaulted by John Green of Baldock. John Green was excommunicated and later absolved. In the years 1468-83 there were seven vicars of Norton of whom one died, two resigned, two were deprived and one fled !

This unrest would seem to reflect the breakdown of monastic life which later provided Henry VIII with an excuse to dissolve the monasteries. In the King's Books 1532, shortly before the Dissolution, the Vicarage at Norton was valued at £5.6s.8d. With the Dissolution of St. Albans Abbey the Rectory and Advowson of Norton passed into lay hands.

An Inventory of the church's possessions made during the reign of Edward VI shows that it was supplied with the basic requirements for conducting services - vestments, table coverings, copes, and a bier. There were also 3 bells in the steeple and a sanctus bell. The income of £5.6s.8d meant that it was one of the poorest in the area. Not surprisingly the incumbents were described as "poor sorts of creatures" and "unlearned sorts of ministers". One Vicar did not wear vestments, but would do so if requested. On his Visitation 1583/4 the Archdeacon commented on Vicar Thomas Longley's ignorance of Latin, although it was supposed to be a pre-requisite of ordination to be literate in this.

The Vicar at the end of the 16th century was called John Pratt. He was reputed to have been a friend of Foxe, author of "The Book of Martyrs" and has even been accused of removing any religious images that the church might have had. Pratt resided in the parish. He did not preach instead he provided published homilies for licensed preachers to give and recorded the names of visiting clergy.

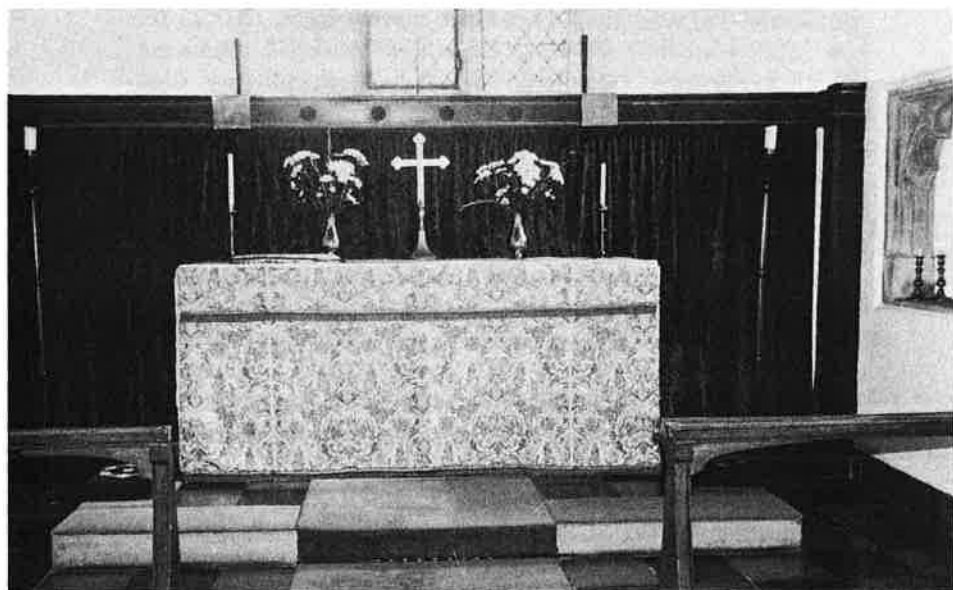
There were various requirements placed on the clergy in the 16th century. Among these was the duty to keep records of the baptisms, marriages and burials which took place. Those of Norton date from 1571 and are fairly complete. They are held at the County Record Office at Hertford. Each church was also required to have a copy of Foxe's Book of Martyrs.

With the threat of the Armada in 1588 the clergy of England were called on to provide men equipped for the defence of the realm. Each parish was assessed and then told what to provide. Norton had to provide a man equipped with a bill, a weapon like a halberd. The Vicar was also to provide a jack or plete coat - value 9s. These two demands must have been difficult to meet on a stipend of £5 p.a.. Although this measure was introduced to meet an emergency it continued to be demanded of the clergy until 1626.

Norton and the rise of Puritanism.

The first half of the 17th century was taken up with the religious differences which culminated in the Civil War and the Commonwealth period. Norton would appear to have had Puritan leanings. The Rector at the time of Pratt's appointment was of the Puritan Bowles family from nearby Wallington. John Pratt died in 1633. He was followed by Jonathan Frances in 1634 and later by James Fish or Fisher. Fish was one of the 63 beneficed clergy who were signatories of a petition to the Long Parliament in 1646. This petition requested government "according to our Covenant".

During Fish's incumbency a Glebe Terrier, in 1637, was drawn up as well as an Inventory of goods, in 1638. The Glebe Terrier was a list of lands held by the Vicar in the 3 open fields of Norton. He had 37½ acres in half acre strips. The Inventory listed the various vestments, cloths and silver which the church owned as well as a number of books. There were, of course, the Prayer Book, Bible and registers as well as two Psalters, as you would expect as well as some other books including one of homilies. There were two chests, one a strong one with three locks. The church had three bells, the sanctus one seems to have gone by now.



The altar

Another reflection of the troublous times of the 17th century was the trial and execution of two Norton people for witchcraft. John Palmer and Elizabeth Knott were tried at St. Albans and hanged there in 1649. Before he died Palmer accused 9 other Norton folk of witchcraft. None were tried and they all seem to have long outlived Palmer and the Commonwealth.

The Puritans wanted greater simplicity in worship, moving away from the rituals of the High Church. Some of them also wanted to abolish episcopal rule in the church and replace it with a presbyterian system of church government. In 1645 they succeeded in getting Parliament to abolish the Book of Common Prayer. In its place came the Westminster "Directory" with guidelines for simpler services.

Among some Puritans was a trend against the baptism of infants. This seems to have been the case at Norton for during the Commonwealth period it is the births of infants not baptisms which are recorded in the parish registers.

In 1650 Norton's value was assessed by the Parliamentary Commissioners as £20 - a fourfold increase since 1532.

Clergy were frequently called on to administer bequests made to the poor of his parish. In 1668 Thomas Chapman of Stevenage left, among other bequests elsewhere, 7yds of yard wide cloth @ 2s per yard and 6 dozen loaves of good

wheaten bread to be given to pious and deserving poor of Norton on St. Andrews day or the Sunday nearest. The Vicar was called on to administer this.

Burials in wool.

In 1678 a new law came into force designed to protect England's flagging wool trade. Every one had to be buried in a woollen shroud and an affidavit had to be sworn to that effect for each person. These burials were recorded in a separate register in addition to the burials register. It was the same for Guy Pym, son of the lord of the manor, in 1686, as for the twin Garrett daughters who had been baptised 21st, July, and were buried on 11th, August and 6th, November, 1689, and also for the anonymous traveller, or gipsy, buried in February 1698, probably at the expense of the Overseers for the Poor.

In the years 1678-1756 only one person was not buried in wool at Norton. Just consider Thomas Dickens, the parish clerk, who was buried in wool in 1678 being over 80 years old and think of all that his life spanned. There is also something amusing about Henry Lambkin, shepherd, being buried in wool.

At the end of the 17th century Samuel Sparhawke held both the livings of Norton and nearby Radwell. He rented the Vicarage at Norton out to

Anne Willmot. She paid him £2 rent for 2 years. Sparhauke remained Vicar for 60 years.

Changes and developments in the
18th and 19th centuries.

The 18th century saw the publication of County guides. From these we get an idea of what the church at Norton was like then. The nave was flat roofed and covered in lead while the chancel roof was tiled. There was a bench round the chancel, presumably round the Communion table. Within this was a brass, dated 1607, to Ann Bury showing a little girl in a ruff and a Mary Queen of Scots cap. This has since been lost.

The 18th century was a period of great advances in farming methods which frequently led to the enclosure of the parishes. Enclosure consolidated an individual's holdings into one or more compact units which he then had to enclose, usually with hawthorn. Enclosure came to Norton by private Act of Parliament in 1796. The Vicar received almost 60 acres in one unit. This compensated him for his 37½ acres of strips and for the loss of tithes, which ceased to be paid after enclosure. His holding was beside Norton common where Norton Way North is and included the Western ends of Glebe Road and Common View. The Rector also received land in lieu of his tithes.

The Rector was responsible for the upkeep of the chancel and the Vicarage. At the beginning of the 19th Century both were in a sad way. Despite various repairs made to the chancel in the mid-18th century by 1814 extensive repairs were necessary. The Vicarage was falling down in the early 19th century and several incumbents had had permission to live elsewhere because of its condition.

The state of the Vicarage remained unremedied until the 1830s. Interestingly the new Vicarage, built in 1832, came at a time when the patron, Joseph Watson, was the father of the Vicar, Joseph Burges Watson. The architect was John Burges Watson, brother of the Vicar. Watson's time as Vicar was marred by sadness. His father died in 1833 and his infant daughter in 1838. He did not long outlive them and was brought back here for burial in 1846.

Watson's successor at the Vicarage was George James Pierson who remained here until his death 67 years later. One of his major achievements was the building of St. Nicholas School. He was instrumental in raising funds locally to more than match those given by the National Society. The links between the school and the church remain very strong even today.

Travelling folk were a frequent sight at Norton over the centuries. In 1865 two of them, Polly and Cornelius Smith, called to see a doctor in Baldock as their eldest daughter was ill. The

doctor quickly diagnosed smallpox and sent them out of town to a fairly isolated spot in Norton. This is thought to have been some chalk pits about at the present junction of Green Lane and Icknield Way.

The Vicar came out to baptise a new baby, Louise, at the caravan. Polly the mother became ill too and died. She was buried late at night for fear of the smallpox. Little Louise followed shortly aged only 18 days. Polly Smith appears in the burial register as Mary Welch, because she was married only under gipsy law. Among the children Polly left behind was 5 year old Rodney. He grew up to be the travelling Methodist evangelist Gipsy Smith. He led a mission in Norton in 1903 and had associations with North Avenue Methodist church which is dedicated to the memory of his parents.

The church in the early 20th century.

At the beginning of the 20th century the nave still had its low pitched roof. The walls outside were plastered but much patched with brick. Inside the stone font had been painted to resemble marble. The pulpit was covered in thick layers of paint. The Royal Coat of Arms hung over the chancel arch. The Lord's Prayer and the Creed were painted on the North wall in black.

By 1907 extensive work was needed on the church. The repair work envisaged was the making safe of the tower, repairing the window

mullions which had been patched with wood, remedying the subsidence around the Pym pew and repainting the wall surfaces. It was also hoped that efficient lighting, heating and ventilation could be installed, as well as a floor and a ceiling, and that a vestry could be built and the seating rearranged to provide greater accommodation. The estimated cost was £1,500, which it was felt would be difficult for the largely working class residents to raise. The Pym family made a donation. There were also a variety of fund raising events and much of the work was achieved.

The coming of the Garden City.

When, in 1903, the First Garden City Company Ltd. bought up virtually all the land in the three villages of Norton, Willian and Letchworth the effects were far reaching. By building the new town on what had been the fields lying between the villages these centres were preserved. Norton at the village end of the parish and out towards Stotfold would still be recognisable to many preceding generations. However the creation of the Garden City both vastly increased the population of the area and also moved its centre away from the village. Fairly early on it was realised that St. Nicholas church would not be large enough for the population envisaged nor would it be in a convenient situation.

By 1915 a variety of plans had been drawn up for an enormous Gothic style church to be built on Norton Way North to replace St. Nicholas. The hall was built but the church did not follow. For many years the hall was used for services. In 1964 St. George's church was consecrated as the new parish church and St. Nicholas became a chapel of ease. St. Nicholas is still used for services, especially in the summer, and is very popular for weddings. The church is not a museum piece but continues to be an important part of the Christian witness of Norton.

2 GUIDE

St. Nicholas church is usually approached from Church Lane through the modern lych gate. This was erected both as a memorial and as a thank offering. It is a memorial to a former vicar, George James Pierson, and to the men of Norton who fell in the First World War. It is also a thank offering for the 16 men of Norton who returned safely from that war.

The avenue of yews leading to the South porch was planted in the 1950s to replace those put in early in the 19th century. At the South porch the path divides. To the right it goes past the priest's door to Churchwick field. To the left of the priest's door is evidence of a window which has been blocked up. It cannot be traced inside. Churchwick field was once part of the "built-up" area of the village. The hollow of the old road, house platforms and a side street can still be traced in there.

The grave stones are 19th and 20th century and belie the great age of the cemetery. On the North side there are two gravestones to R.A.F. men who fell in World War 2. There are also graves of Belgians buried here in the First World War. Near the Northern edge is a large stone in memory of Polly and Cornelius Smith, parents of the travelling evangelist Gipsy Smith. It is the same as his own which stands

in his native Epping Forest. In the North wall can be seen the outline of the North door, which was blocked up in 1814. As you can see it is at ground level.

Entering the church through the South doorway it is necessary to descend several steps. This indicates the great age of the cemetery. Until the 19th century burials took place only on the South side of the church. Over the centuries the ground level on that side was considerably raised above the floor level of the nave. The horse shoe shaped iron work on the South door is unusual but very fitting for Norton. The Chamberlain family were both the blacksmiths and the landlords of the local inn - "The Three Horseshoes". Immediately opposite the South door is the blocked North one.

Facing East you can see that the chancel arch takes up only about a third of the East wall. The relatively wide spaces either side would have been where the medieval chapels once were. When there was a rood screen these chapels would have been separated off by parcloles or half screens projecting from the rood screen. The term rood comes from the crucifix - the "rood", and sometimes other figures of the passion, which stood on top of the screen.

The access to the rood loft, the stairway and the door all remain, in the North wall. Above the chancel arch is another small arch. This probably held the sanctus bell mentioned



Looking up and out through the South door.

in the Inventory of Edward VI. This was rung as the bread was lifted up during the mass, in pre-Reformation times. It would have been reached from the top of the rood screen. This arch was hidden by the Royal coat of arms for some time. These now hang over the South door.

The pulpit and its canopy, called a sounding board, are seventeenth century but the steps and rail are modern. The oldest pews date from the 15th century and are much repaired. The font dates from the same time. It has been defaced by graffiti of which the only legible item is W.S. 1694. The organ came from Lambeth Palace. The screen between the nave and the tower is 20th century and in memory of a parishioner. The fittings in the sanctuary are also 20th century, except for the medieval piscina.

The church has a peal of eight bells. Three of these are pre-20th century. The oldest is a 15th century one probably cast by Joanna Hille widow of the bell founder Richard Hille. It is inscribed "Sancte Petre ora pro nobis". Next in age is the one probably cast by Robert Oldfield who was practising his art 1605-40. Thirdly is the one inscribed "John Briant Hertford fecit 1815". The five new ones were all cast by John Taylor and Co. of Loughborough in 1946 and are variously inscribed. The first peal on the 8 bells was rung on 6th November 1948 in memory of Hilda Bailey, late wife of the then vicar.



The fifteenth century font.



The pulpit and sounding board

Plaques in memory of this event and of the work of Thomas Werrett in bringing about the hanging of the present peal hang on the West wall of the nave.

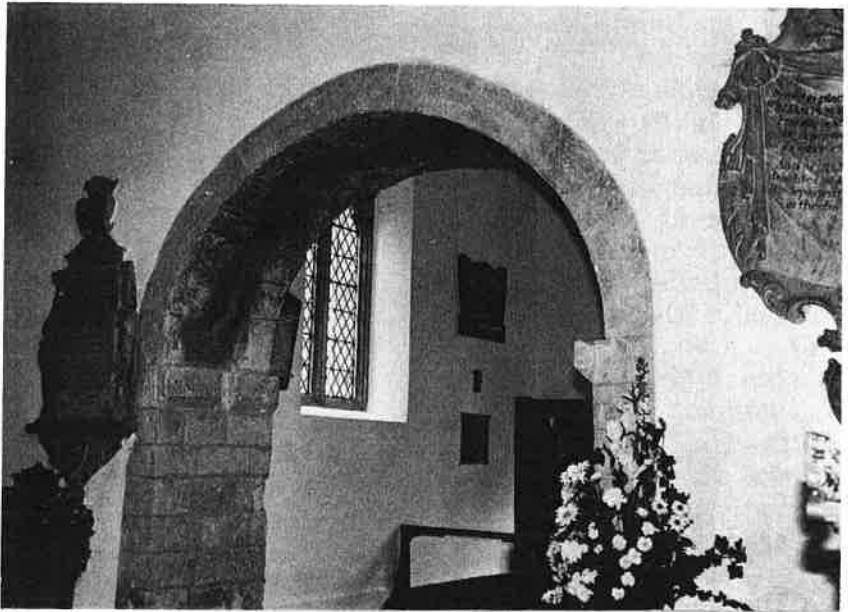
On the North wall there is a memorial plaque to those who fell in World War I. Also on that wall are memorials to the Watsons - the father who was the patron of the living and the son who was the Vicar.

On the East wall of the nave are two memorials, one each side of the chancel arch. That on the left is in memory of the three little daughters of Thomas and Katherine Cole. Katherine Cole was the daughter of Richard Cleaver, lord of the manor of Norton. Until 1752 each year ran from Lady Day to Lady Day (March 25th) so that is why little Anne was born 12 September 1652 and died 15th February also 1652.

The 18th century memorial on the right is to William Pym and his wife Elizabeth. The Pym family were by this time lords of the manor. In the floor in front of the chancel arch, a bit to the right, is a memorial to Guy Pym, who died aged 2 months, in 1685, of the same family.

The memorials in the chancel are to members of the Pryor family of Baldock who owned land in Norton in the 19th century. On the South wall of the nave there is a list of previous vicars but due to lack of information it is very incomplete in the early centuries.

Such an ancient building does require a considerable amount of upkeep. The Garden City, as Rector, is responsible for the chancel. The St. Nicholas Preservation Trust do sterling work in maintaining the building, and, with some help from English Heritage, have done much restoration as well. The Friends of St. Nicholas do a great deal in the way of day to day upkeep of the building and churchyard.



The chancel arch from the West.

VICARS OF NORTON

Lack of information means that the following list of the vicars of Norton is necessarily incomplete. The names included in this list are of those for whom the author has seen documentary proof of their existence. The dates given are those when they are known to have been incumbents here but do not necessarily reflect the date of their arrival or departure.

c1258	Laurence Clerk or the clerk - the last clerical Rector.
1327	Adam de Newenham.
1347 de Clifford.
1353	Robert
1384-91	Walter possibly Wilcock.
1410	William Lyncock.
1449	Thomas Colwell.
14..	John Clapham.
14..	Simon Wilde.
1468	Hugh Smith.
1471	Nicholas Brettune or Bretenne.
1474	Thomas Hether.
14..	"Richard Beby"
1476	Thomas Trylle.
1478	Roger Calcot or Caldecot.
1478	Laurence Nicholl.
1483	William Preston.
1497	Richard Slade.
1535	Thomas Wyn.
15..	John Wiseman.
1561	Augustine Laurence.
1562	Thomas Syrleby.
1567	John Smith.

1570	Thomas Longley.
1588	John Pratt.
1634	Jonathan Francis.
1637	James Fish or Fisher.
1651	John Whisson.
1662	Roger Tuthill.
1670-80	Luke Saunders.
1680-1739	Samuel Sparhauke.
1739	Jeffery Archer.
1741	Theophilus Martin.
17..	Jeremiah Griffiths.
1782	Thomas Roberts.
17..	Thomas Wilkinson.
1795	James Butterfield.
1819	Edward Paske.
1826	Robert Wooding Sutton.
1831	Joseph Burges Watson.
1842 -1909	George James Pierson.
1910-50	John Bailey.
1951-60	Garnet G.S. Kenyon.
1960-65	David Caldwell Ritchie.
1965-72	Michael Clement Otway Mayne.
1972-83	Denys Graebe.
1984-	Christopher Frank Liley.