Transcription of a talk given by Walter Brown
in Peasemore Church in January 2000 on

ST PEADA AND PEASEMORE CHURCH

Ladies and Gentlemen

Peasemore has a very old tradition that our early church here was dedicated to St Peada. It was thanks to Peada that Christianity came from Northumbria down to Mercia in the middle of the 7th century, and then very shortly after Peada's untimely death it came to this part of Berkshire with the Mercians, under Peada's brother Wulfere. Christianity coming from Northumbria at that time came here in the Celtic form.

Peada unfortunately died as a very young man and was never officially canonised as a saint. Not that that worried the Celtic Church which frequently called its Christian benefactors saints; as one sees down in Cornwall, for instance, where so many of those attractive country churches are dedicated to obscure Celtic saints whom most of us have never heard of. But here both the Roman Catholic Church and then the Church of England were much more particular; and so the ecclesiastical authorities have always preferred to call our church after more authentic saints. At one time it was St Mary's, back in the days when we still came under the mother church of St Mary of Chieveley, and now St Barnabas. In spite of that, our ancient tradition of St Peada has lasted here for some thirteen hundred years.

Peada was the eldest son of the famous King Penda of Mercia and when he was Crown Prince he went to Northumbria to marry the daughter of the King of Northumbria . He arrived there at a time when Northumbria had very recently been converted to Christianity by the monks who had come across from Iona. Peada and his knights and followers were all baptised by Bishop Finan. When he returned to Mercia he took with him four priests and between them they succeeded in converting most of the Kingdom of Mercia to Christianity. This included Peada's brothers and sisters but not his old father King Penda, who died a heathen. However, Penda thought a great deal of Peada; he had already made him King of the Middle Angles and he allowed him to have his way in spreading Christianity.

Although Peada had married the daughter of the King of Northumbria there was continual fighting between the two Kingdoms. King Oswald, the first Christian King of Northumbria was killed in battle and finally Penda himself was killed. Very shortly after Peada came to the throne in that very unsettled period, he was assassinated in what appears to have been a Northumbrian conspiracy. In spite of Peada's early death and short reign, all the historians of that time - the Anglo Saxon Chronicles, the Venerable Bede in his great history and others - all speak very highly of Peada and his fine character and how he had brought Christianity from the north. He had already founded the great Monastery at Peterborough and very shortly after his death it was

very lavishly endowed by his brothers and sisters: as the Anglo Saxon Chronicles says 'out of the love they had for Peada'.

He was succeeded by his brother Wulfere, who reigned for the next seventeen years, and then after him by his second brother Aethelred who also had a long reign. It was during that period that the Mercians extended their conquests south to include the whole of Berkshire and most of Hampshire, Surrey and Wiltshire. Two battles were fought near here, when the Mercians under Wulfere defeated the West Saxons. The first one was on Ashdown. At that time all the downland adjacent to the ridgeway between Compton and West Ilsley was known as Ashdown. The second one was at Beedon. It seems extremely likely therefore that Christianity came here to Peasemore at that time when Peada's name was still so very famous as the bringer of Christianity. Christianity may of course have come here originally with the Romans, but if so it would almost certainly have died out during the dark ages until the 7th century.

Regarding the Battle of Beedon, the Anglo Saxon Chronicles say that it took place at Beedon heaford which, as Victor Pocock says in his interesting history of Beedon Church, means Beedon at the head of the valley near the source of the stream. Donald Lindsay tells me that old memories in Stanmore said that years ago when the springs were high, a little winterbourne used to run down beside the road which goes from Stanmore to Beedon. It ran into 'Halfpenny Catch' pond down in the dip there and then across the road and down the valley. Where it crossed the road there was a ford and the boys from Stanmore used to earn a few coppers in those days helping to push the carts and wagons through the ford. There is an old map of about 1700 which shows this stream and we know that a thousand years ago, when the water table here was much higher, many of our little winterbournes ran far more frequently. 'Halfpenny Catch' itself runs north-east at the head of that valley and near to it we have the famous field of Bannaga - literally 'blood acre' - and through the centuries often described as the 'field of slaughter'. There are one or two theories about it, but it may well be the site of the Battle of Beedon.

When the Mercians came here they brought with them as I said, Christianity in the Celtic form, the Celtic form having come from Ireland to Iona to Northumbria and then brought south by Peada.

I must now say something about St Birinus because I remember reading an article in the Oxford Diocesan magazine a few years ago which described St Birinus as the Apostle of Berkshire. St Birinus was a monk who came from Rome to Canterbury early in the 7th century; and then onto Dorchester-on-Thames as the first Bishop of Dorchester. St Birinus coming from Rome brought with him Christianity in the Roman tradition. Most historians now agree that the spread of Christianity from Dorchester in the time of St Birinus did not go beyond the immediate Thames Valley area there. Although he is credited with baptising King Cynegils, King of Wessex - tradition says they met up on Churn Nob on the ridgeway - Cynegils' son and heir refused baptism; and when the Mercians came south, Dorchester for a time became a Mercian Bishopric.

Last year a very interesting article on the Anglo Saxon Minsters of Berkshire was published by the Berkshire Record Society and I will quote you a couple of sentences

from that article. It says that ' the best clues to the beginnings of Christianity in Berkshire lie in the frustratingly muddled and mutilated documents of Abingdon Abbey'. It then goes on to say that 'just recently some of these documents have been disentangled and have been shown to refer not to Abingdon but to Bradfield where a Minster was established in about the year 670. The Foundation Charter of that Minster was written in the Celtic form and was witnessed by three Mercian Bishops'. So here we have some strong evidence that this part of Berkshire was evangelised by the Mercians coming here very shortly after Peada's death. So while St Birinus undoubtedly did great work up at Dorchester in bringing Christianity in the Roman tradition to the Thames Valley area up there and also to that northern fringe of old Berkshire - now regrettably called South Oxfordshire; this part of Berkshire had Christianity brought here by the Mercians in the Celtic form brought south from Northumbria by Peada.

There were some awkward differences between the two forms of Christianity, the Celtic form and the Roman tradition. In particular they each had a different date for Easter. These differences were then solved at the Synod of Whitby when the Roman tradition won the day. So Peasemore then became a Roman Catholic church for the next 800 years until the middle of the 16th century.

When Christianity came here in the 7th century, Minsters such as the one at Bradfield were set up in strategic centres. Later there were three others near here, at Compton, Bucklebury and Thatcham. These Minsters contained a small collection of clergy who then went round the surrounding country preaching the gospel and taking services in the various villages. To start with, preaching crosses were set up in these villages where the services were held. The earliest crosses were made of wood but they were soon superseded by stone crosses and some of these ancient preaching crosses are still in existence. There is a very famous one up at Rothwell in the north, known to date back to 680 and there are several other complete crosses throughout the country. Many other churchyards still have a part of their ancient churchyard cross. In fact, at the time of the Reformation many of them were mutilated and later a law came in saying that they should be cut off at a height of about four foot from the ground. This occasionally took place, probably to the one we see in Farnborough churchyard. Many other churchyards still have a part of their ancient cross; sometimes it is just the base and occasionally the head of the cross itself was brought within the church.

After a time, back in those Saxon days, small chapels were built adjacent to these crosses, usually to the north so that the shadow of the cross fell across the chapel. These early chapels were nearly always made of wood or wattle and daub and so very little, if anything, remains of them today.

We then come on to the 10th and 11th centuries when more permanent buildings took their place. Leckhampstead had its first substantial chapel built in 1050. It was in the grounds of Chapel Farm and was dedicated to St Edmund, but it did not have a churchyard. At that time Leckhampstead, Peasemore and Beedon all came under the mother church of St Mary at Chieveley and Chieveley came under the Abbey of Abingdon.

Here at Peasemore our early Norman church was built in about 1090. We are not certain of the exact date but it was within a year or two of 1090. It was built by Richard of Peasemore who was the chief Lord of the Manor at that time. When the Domesday survey took place there were three halls here within the parish but by 1090 Richard had amalgamated two of the properties; and he was very likely living just across the road where Peasemore Manor still stands today. He was a very astute man and, having had our church built and the churchyard laid out with a surround, he arranged for the Bishop of Salisbury, the great Bishop Osmund at that time, to come here and consecrate our church and churchyard at a time when he knew that the Parson of Chieveley and the Abbot of Abingdon were both going to be away. As soon as the consecration had been completed Peasemore said 'we are now an independent parish and we will pay no more dues to Chieveley'. Well that of course raised one hell of a row and this went on for many years. This period of our history was written up in some detail in the Chronicles of Abingdon Abbey, which goes on to say that after the dispute had gone on for some time, the See of Salisbury became so fed up with the continual complaints coming in all the time from the Parson at Chieveley and the Abbot of Abingdon; that eventually it issued an edict saying that divine service in Peasemore Church would have to be discontinued unless we came to some reconciliation with the mother church. Finally in 1104, as the Chronicles of Abingdon Abbey put it, Richard of Peasemore had become old and infirm and was getting near the end of his life; and he was finally persuaded to go, together with his son, and appear before the Abbot of Abingdon. There it was agreed that Peasemore should pay to the monks of Abingdon two shillings and to the Parson at Chieveley, two acres of corn: one of wheat and one of oats.

Now - as Canon Colin, Vicar of Chieveley is not around - I think perhaps it might be safe for me to mention that the Chronicles of Abingdon Abbey do in fact include an additional word regarding this payment - '*annually*'! Anyway, I think we paid up for a few years and then said 'that's enough, honour is satisfied' and we have been an independent parish since that time. Leckhampstead on the other hand, remained under Chieveley for the next 800 years and without a churchyard. So the dead from Leckhampstead were carried all the way along the burial path which goes from Chapel Farm through the southern part of our parish to Chieveley churchyard; and it is the deuce of a long carry! That went on until 1860 when the old Saxon chapel was demolished and the present church of St James was built over the far side of the Wantage road where most of Leckhampstead stands today. That was the first time that they got their own churchyard.

Our church here at Peasemore looked as you can see it in this picture in front of me, but to start with it was without the tower. This picture by the way, was sketched by Dorothy Brown and it is an enlargement of a small picture of the old church which Donald Lindsay found in the British Museum. Before we had the tower, we had a steeple and there is an inventory of our church goods dated 1552 which states that at that time we had, ' three small bells and one little bell in the steeple'. The tower was built in 1737 by William Coward who was a great benefactor to Peasemore. He had our tower built and he gave us our communion chalice and paten, still in use today. He also gave us what was always known as the great bell, which is our present tenor bell, the heaviest of our ring, weighing over 8cwt. Finally in his will dated 1739, the year that he died, he left the village £40, the interest of which was to be distributed to

the poor of Peasemore each year 'until the worlds end', as it says in his will. We still distribute Coward's charity and recently we have been giving it out as gifts of bottles of sherry or wine or something similar, to three or four of our oldest parishioners as Christmas presents. We hope this doesn't upset our forebears here, because early in the 1800's there was a vestry meeting when the rector and church wardens were discussing Coward's charity, which at that time was given out in cash. They decided that in future it should be given out as gifts of coal or blankets to the poor, the reason being that it was greatly feared that the recipients had been spending the money on drink!

In the same year that we received William Coward's great bell we had one other new bell. Both those bells were cast at the Whitechapel Foundry in London and they both have the initials RP engraved on them. The initials RP stand for Richard Phelps. He was a native of Avebury in Wiltshire but spent the whole of his career at the Whitechapel Foundry in London and was acknowledged to be the greatest expert of his craft during the whole of that century. He was responsible for many other famous bells, including the great clock bell in St Paul's Cathedral which weighs four tons. Our other three bells were all re-cast at the same time. All the experts who have looked at our bells over the years agree on that, and I am sure they are correct because we have no record of any other new bells. We certainly could not have afforded any more new bells in 1737. It was only a year after the great fire of Peasemore and the village was still pretty broke. Also the weights of those three bells is similar to the weights of the three small bells and one little bell which we had in the steeple in 1552. We don't know how old our bells were in 1552. They may well have been of considerable age at that time, so it does mean that although those bells have been re-cast, they are ancient bells. Today we have a very fine ring of six bells, and the sixth, the treble, was given in 1923 in memory of George Hedges. George Hedges had been Captain of the Tower here for a great many years, going back to 1890. He came from an old Peasemore family although his descendants today live in Brightwalton. He was a fine old Peasemore character whom I just remember. He lived up at Parsonage Mead - now erroneously called Meads Close.

Our church history from that time, the 1700's, up until recent times was covered in another talk on some more history of Peasemore. But we haven't so far recorded anything about our church records; so I thought I would say a word about them. They go back to 1538 when registers were first introduced and they are all in extremely good order. The earliest volume which is a fine old leather bound book which today we have to keep in the Berkshire Record Office at Reading, is out here this evening and you will see it up in the chancel. The entries in it are written in that early script which takes a bit of reading so some years ago I had a transliteration made of it by an old friend, Mr Thomason of Newbury, who was an expert at reading that script; and you will find it next door to the old volume. Looking through our registers of the last 450 years, there are several entries of interest, mostly of a historical nature rather than being peculiar to Peasemore; although the first one that I am going to mention was probably peculiar to this part of the country. It is in our Marriage Register, dated 1st February 1684. It says 'John Townsend of Brightwalton to Mary Hedges of Peasemore, widow; he taking the said Mary in her smock only without a groat'. There was a belief round here in those days that if somebody married a widow and he took her 'in her smock only without a groat' then he was not responsible for her debts! I

don't think this had any legal force whatsoever but it was accepted here in Peasemore, which was all that mattered.

There are several entries in our Burial Register of the late 1600's which have against the entry the words 'in woollen'. This was a period when the wool trade was in the doldrums, as it is again today, and a law came in saying that in future the dead should be buried in woollen shrouds. For a time the parson and one of the church wardens had to confirm this and enter it into the church register; hence these words 'in woollen'.

In the early 1700's, during the first three months of the year we find the double dating. This was the period when the country was moving from the old Julian calendar, where the year used to start on Lady Day, March 25th, into our present calendar, the Gregorian calendar when of course the year starts on January 1st. Many people were already using the new calendar. Pepys' diary did; but the church continued to use the old Julian calendar. So one sees an entry in our register such as the 17th February 1709/10. Because for most people the 17th February was already 1710, but as far as the church was concerned it was still 1709, until March 25th. Almost as muddling as today trying to decide in which of these two years our new Millennium starts! The Government finally went over to the Gregorian calendar in 1752, when, in order to correct the new calendar we had to lose eleven days; and those eleven days were lost in September 1752. When March 25th 1753 came along, the church had accepted the new calendar but the financial establishment in London had refused to lose their eleven days. Thus, for them March 25th had become April 5th; and so our financial and tax year has remained ever since.

The next entry which I am going to mention will no doubt shock you; but before we criticise our predecessors here in Peasemore they were in fact behaving in accordance with an act of parliament. The entry, dated 1678, says that 'Henry Wyatt aged about forty years and Mary his wife and child named George were whipped through Peasemore according to law and were then sent to Chaddleworth where he says he was born, with a pass'. After the dissolution of the monasteries, the responsibility for the maintenance of the poor passed to the parishes and the first of the various poor law acts came in during the time of Queen Elizabeth when overseers of the poor were appointed. The church wardens and the overseers of the poor in each parish were then required to raise rates and were responsible for the relief of the poor and anybody else needing assistance in their various villages. Looking through the overseers of the poor accounts, now in the Reading Record Office, we see how through the centuries, when anybody here in Peasemore, or a family, required assistance for whatever reason, they were helped in various ways. Sometimes it was with food or fuel or clothing; occasionally with cash or medical assistance, and so on. But it did mean that each parish was responsible for its own people. If poor travellers, vagrants as they were called, or people from another parish came here asking for assistance then they were to be sent back to where they belonged. The act of parliament of Queen Elizabeth's time does actually state that they should be whipped out of the village. Whether they were always treated quite as harshly as that I don't know, but there is an entry in the Ramsbury register where a family of five were whipped out of Ramsbury; and they had come all the way from Dover! So while undoubtedly moved on from place to place, they must at least have been given some food and shelter en route. They were

very hard times for the poor, there is no doubt about that; and there are two entries in our Burial Register both in mid-winter back in the 1500's when on two separate occasions the entry says of two poor men ' found dead under a hedge'.

I have mentioned once before in another talk that the name of our church does not normally appear in the church registers; because the pro forma in these registers just says that the event took place in the church of the parish of Peasemore or wherever, without giving the name of the church. In 1864 as our new church was being completed and was about to be dedicated to St Barnabas by the Bishop of Oxford, our curate of the time, the Reverend Wyndham Shakespeare (and we had a curate in those days, because Catmore came under Peasemore), our curate went out of his way on several occasions to enter into our church register, that the event had taken place in the Church of *St Peada* of the Parish of Peasemore. He and many other people here in Peasemore were very upset at the prospect of our new church being dedicated to St Barnabas and they wished to ensure that our ancient tradition of St Peada should not be forgotten. While today we are happy to have our present dedication of St Barnabas, we too must ensure that our long tradition of St Peada must always be remembered. Perhaps we should have a re-dedication: to *St Peada & St Barnabas.*

When this new church of ours was built in the middle of the last century - and it is an extremely fine church - very little of the old Norman church was retained unfortunately. There are however two or three items, which I will mention. When you leave the church you will see outside the door on your right, an old gargoyle which we have mounted on a staddlestone. That gargoyle comes from the old Norman church; so it has been around here for the last 900 years. Of recent times it was used as a stepping stone to get over the stile into the meadow opposite, until one day somebody recognised it and rescued it. The meadow opposite is called the 'pightle'. Pightle is a Saxon word for an enclosure and during the middle ages the word pightle frequently became 'piddle'. That meadow was occupied for many years by a rather famous old carthorse we had here called Punch; and there are still a few of us around who refer to that meadow by its old name of *Punch's Piddle*. Incidentally, looking through the postcard sized photographs which you will see up in the chancel, I notice there is a rather long distance photograph of old Punch standing by the stile there with the church in the background. For anyone interested in old Peasemore those postcard photographs show the whole of the centre of Peasemore from the Chieveley road up to Mell Green as it was one hundred years ago.

When the chancel here was rebuilt the chancel arch from the old Norman church was retained and it is now the arch over the organ, leading into the vestry. It is only half the height of this lofty arch because the old chancel was only half the height and in fact only half the size of this present chancel and it did not have a vestry. The two narrow Norman windows which you will see in the vestry also come from the old church and they used to be one on either side of the Norman chancel. The centre of our east window, again comes from the old church, and it is in the middle of the five light window you see there. It used to be sited a lot lower but it had to be raised when we received that fine reredos which you see behind the altar. That reredos was given in memory of Mrs Archer Houblon, the widow of the Reverend Archer Houblon who was responsible for rebuilding our church. In 1910 it was decided to enlarge the east window by adding an extra light on either side of the old window, making it into the

five light window which you can see now. Some extremely fine glass was inserted at that time made by James Palmer of the Whitefriars glass company in London and, as you can see, it makes a very handsome window of the right proportion for our much larger chancel.

When the nave here was rebuilt in 1842 it was rebuilt on the old foundations of the Norman nave. Those foundations consist of large flintstones. When we were repairing the back of the church a few years ago, it looked as if the lower part of the wall back there incorporated some of the old Norman walls. Everything else was thrown out as rubble to make up the village street, which at that time was just a muddy lane.

This brings me on to the story of our old Peasemore stone cross. We knew the outline of this story but the details have been filled in for us by Olivia Hall-Craggs of Brightwalton. Apparently, while the rubble was being thrown out, the rector of Brightwalton was passing through the village and he noticed lying beside the road, the head of our old stone cross. Realising that it was likely to be broken up and thrown into the ruts with everything else, he very sensibly picked it up and took it home with him to Brightwalton rectory. There it lay for many years, more or less forgotten, until at the end of the first world war Brightwalton were putting up their war memorial. They had the square base of their own ancient churchyard cross, they had a new shaft and put our old Peasemore stone cross on top; and a very fine war memorial it makes too.

We are not certain of the complete history of our stone cross. It was undoubtedly part of our ancient churchyard cross and then at some time, perhaps during the Reformation, the head of the cross was brought inside the church. Of recent centuries it was said to have been on the apex of our nave or chancel arch.

Bearing in mind how we believe that Christianity came here to Peasemore in the 7th century and how it came here in the Celtic form brought south by our St Peada, it is of interest to see, ladies and gentlemen, that our fine old Peasemore stone cross is in fact a *Celtic cross*.