

Building the Parish Church, c. 1000-1450

To walk round St Peter's is to visit several medieval churches in turn, one imposed on another, each expressing a slightly different aspiration and aesthetic. The overall impression on entering is of a fifteenth-century building, with its large impressive



The Chancel

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windows, the rectangular clerestory windows up high, the wall paintings and the impressive tower, now also visible from inside the church. But as you approach the main body of the church (the nave) and look right towards the altar at the east end, you will see evidence of two much older churches. Most obvious is the chancel, which (except for the window in the east wall at the far end) is dominated by Norman features nearly nine hundred years old. But, in addition, there is also evidence of an even earlier church, built before the Norman Conquest.

The Anglo-Saxon Church

Traditionally the origins of the church have been described as Norman in style and its building has been dated as after 1066 A.D. However, excavations of the part of the church close to the chancel and north transept (on the left, as you look at the altar, above) by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1982 found evidence that the Norman church was built upon a substantial Anglo-Saxon church: truncated buttresses, blocked round-headed windows, long and short quoins at corners, and prayer crosses cut in the masonry. Little is now visible, presumably because these indications were later concealed by thick plaster. However, from the outside, at the

point where the chancel joins the north transept, the Victorian pebble-dashing has been removed to reveal long-and-short stones typical of Anglo-Saxon building. Further excavations outside the north wall of the chancel in 1988 revealed the foundations of part of a Saxon chancel and what is possibly the remains of a recluse's cell. However, a further geophysical survey in 2022 found the ground so disturbed that no remains can now be mapped.¹

Other archaeological observation – of the work done in 2012 to improve the church's outside drainage – discovered Anglo-Saxon evidence also at the junction of the chancel and *south* transept, and suggested there may possibly have been an even earlier church, running at an angle across the present nave, from the north-west corner to the angle of the chancel and the south transept. It was even suggested that this may have been built as early as the late 7th or 8th century, but on the basis of little evidence. For the present, much doubt must surround these suggestions, however excited the archaeologist concerned. The distinguished architectural expert and Anglo-Saxon historian John Blair recently estimated that the primary building on this site was done about 980-1080, recognising the persistence of Anglo-Saxon styles in the years immediately following the battle of Hastings.²

The Anglo-Saxons distinguished between Minsters or mother churches – major monastic centres where marriages and funerals and other important services could be held – and subsidiary parish and private churches. Some have suggested that the Hook Norton church may have been a minster, but there is no evidence that Hook Norton housed a monastic community. However, before the Norman Conquest Hook Norton was one of several substantial parish churches that were developing a status just below a minster, and may have exercised some functions of a minster, as indeed befitted a village that was larger than most of its neighbours. Such status and distinctions disappeared after the Norman Conquest, and the church then faced a considerable makeover at the hands of the new rulers.³

¹R.A. Chambers, "Hook Norton: [St Peter's Church]," *South Midlands Archaeology*, no. 13 (1983), pp. 130-31, and no. 17 (1987), p. 90; Abingdon Archaeological Geophysics, survey, April 2022.

² John Moore Heritage Services, "Archaeological Watching Brief at St Peter's Church, Hook Norton, Oxfordshire, Feb. 2012," NGR SP 35510 33123 (Oxford Museum Services, accession no. 2012.8); Blair, private report on survey conducted on December 1, 2021.

³ John Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 1994), pp. 56-77, 111-16, 136-38.

The Norman Church

Even today, the chancel still reveals to us something of the inspiration behind the creation of the Norman church. Traditionally we are told the new church was begun in the decades immediately following the Conquest, initially by Robert I d'Oilly, a great builder, to whom William the Conqueror had granted the manor of Hook Norton. At a glance we can see the solidity of the new build. The windows on the north side of the chancel are small and high, reminding us that in Norman times every church was potentially a defensive position. It is not clear whether the Normans had a window at the east end behind the altar; if they did, it too was probably fairly small because when a larger, pointed window was inserted about 1350, the builder put in an extra buttress on the outside to support the wall. The window to the right of the altar, in the south wall of the chancel, was filled in at some point, perhaps because of structural weakness; the present one is a Victorian reconstruction.

Recently John Blair has proposed more specific dates for the building of the chancel. He has suggested that the church underwent a major make-over between 1160 and 1180, when it was transformed into a model Romanesque church.⁴ This presumably was a delayed consequence of the decision, in 1129, of Robert d'Oilly's nephew and heir, Robert II, to grant the church at Hook Norton (and its associated property) to the Augustinian monastery of Oseney Abbey, which he had founded in Oxford, near the castle. The indications are that, for decades thereafter, Oseney Abbey treated Hook Norton as an outlying colony, fostering the Augustinian missions of spiritual contemplation and evangelical outreach. In deference to Oseney's patron saint, the church was known for centuries thereafter as St Mary's.⁵ About 1160-1180, Blair argues, the church underwent a "lavish enlargement ... to produce a transeptal cruciform church", together with Romanesque devotional features, which probably expressed the determination of visiting canons from Oseney to make their new outlying parish church worthy of their abbey.

⁴ Blair, private report on survey conducted on December 1, 2021.

⁵ *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire*, vol. 21: *Chipping Norton, Hook Norton and Great Rollright* (due 2024), in draft at <https://www.history.ac.uk/research/victoria-county-history/county-histories-progress/oxfordshire/oxfordshire-vol-xxi-chipping-norton-and-environs> : Religious History, page 2.

Its Romanesque features become more interesting when put into the context of similar churches of the same period. The development of the chancel was accompanied by the building of the transepts, which has been slightly obscured from the southern (i.e., the pub) side by the later broadening of the southern aisle to the



*Arched doorway in
north wall of chancel*
© David McGill

same width as the transept. The transepts turned the church into a cruciform (or cross-shaped) building, and was probably associated with the erection of a chapel off the north transept. Behind the curtain and the organ, in the present vestry, the remains of a rounded archway may be seen in the east wall; this led to a chapel – demolished centuries ago – that ran alongside the chancel and had access to it. The archway into the chancel can still be seen from the outside, in its north wall, and in the photograph on the left. ⁶

Blair's study of similar churches built in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries points out that many of them were based on Anglo-Saxon minster churches, and almost all of them at this time expanded the area of the church that was the preserve of clerics, monks and canons, who were committed to the contemplation and regular worship of God. The "transeptal cruciform" layout, with enlarged chancel and side chapels, created a privileged area for them, distinct from the work of catering to the needs of the laity, who were largely confined to the nave. Most of the churches undergoing this transformation at this time were urban churches; Hook Norton was not. Similarly, most of these churches had a connection with a monastery or a college, but Hook Norton had not. Clearly the monastic impulse introduced by the church's new ecclesiastical owners helps to explain why Hooky's church received "the treatment normally given to collegiate and small monastic churches", especially in towns, a hundred years ahead of most rural churches.⁷

⁶ In 2022 the Hook Norton Local History Group organised a geophysical survey looking for the footprint of this chapel, but the ground has been so dug over that nothing was found. There may also have been a balancing chapel off the south transept, but no evidence survives.

⁷ Blair, "Clerical Communities and Parochial Space: the Planning of Urban Mother Churches in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries", in T.R. Slater and Gervase Rosser, eds., *The Church in the Medieval Town* (1998; Abingdon, 2016), pp. 272-294.

This new inspiration can now be seen most clearly in the chancel, but not as clearly as was possible forty years ago:

First, note its size: as the famous architectural historian Nicholas Pevsner pointed out, Hook Norton's "impressive Norman chancel suggests that the church has always been large"⁸ – though that does not necessarily apply to the nave (where the laity stood and sat), which is comparatively short. The chancel was twice as deep as it was wide, much deeper than in most parish churches, thus giving more room for those in holy orders.

Secondly, note the entrance to the chancel: before the present entrance arch was built in the fifteenth century, a lower, rounded Norman arch fronted the chancel,



The Aumbry
©Joan Lawrence

standing between the two carved stone capitals you can still see behind the present arch.

Thirdly, just inside the chancel on the left, the inside of the archway between chapel and chancel can be seen (as above), but inside the chancel it was later turned into a recess used as an aumbry (as in the drawing on the left by Joan Lawrence), where chalices and consecrated elements from the Eucharist were stored.

To the right of the altar, in the south wall, can be glimpsed a niche with two basins (or *piscinae*) where the communion vessels were washed. Next to it is a blocked-in two-seater *sedilia* (or stone-seats), one of the oldest in the country. This feature is mysterious because at the present day it looks rather like the outline of a small door to the exterior. However, John Blair remembers seeing the *sedilia* in



The Piscinae
© Joan Lawrence

⁸ Jennifer Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974; rev. ed., London: Yale University Press, 2004), page 651.

the 1980s when the old plaster had been removed, and at that time he was impressed by the quality of the carving, which helped to make the chancel “liturgically rich”. So, too, Joan Lawrence’s drawings of features of the chancel show it in the late 1980s before the thick modern re-plastering gave it its current austere look. Also in this wall originally was a priest’s door, giving direct entrance from outside into the chancel; the outline of the door can still be clearly seen from outside. Both the two-seat *sedilia* and the priest’s door have long been ascribed to the need to provide appropriately for the convenience of visiting canons from Oseney.⁹

Similarly luxuriant in its carving was the font – which Arthur Mee called the “treasure of the church”¹⁰ – which originally stood in the nave, probably near the crossing-point, before being moved in 1848 to its present position near the south



The Norman Font, showing the figure of Sagittarius.

Photograph by Henry W. Taunt, 1905.
© Oxfordshire History Centre (HT9586).

door. The font is thought to date from King Stephen’s troubled reign (about 1140), though the present cover is Jacobean. Around the font you will see a most eloquent mixture of Christian and apparently pre-Christian symbols: Adam, Eve, Sagittarius, Aquarius, the Ram and the Serpent. This ambiguous

symbolism demonstrates in part how across Europe, after a thousand years of Christianity, the Zodiac had ceased to be

associated with pagan astrology and come to symbolise the months and seasons and the agricultural year: the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man expressed in everyday terms. But this graphic example in Hook Norton goes farther and

⁹ Blair is preparing an article for *Oxoniensia* on this subject. His drawing will appear there and possibly in the new volume of the *Victoria County History*, vol. 21, and may then be made available through the Village Museum. For Joan Lawrence, see “Joan Lawrence’s Pictures of Hook Norton”, in the *Total War and Anxious Peace* section of this website.

¹⁰ Arthur Mee, *Oxfordshire: County of Imperishable Fame* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1942), page 130.

associates the Zodiac with baptism in what has been seen as an iconographic deviance deriving from pre-Christian culture, as transmitted mainly through monastic channels.¹¹

As a sign of the church's increasing focus on contemplation, between about 1180 and 1220 the church housed an *Incluse*, that is to say, a person who decided to be walled up inside the church for the remainder of his or her life, devoting themselves to prayer and receiving daily food as alms. As the Incluse had to be able to observe the church services, it is likely he or she was housed in the chapel that lay between the north transept and the chancel, though other possibilities have been suggested by local historians.¹²

The critical feature of the Romanesque church was the crossing, the place where the space that was the preserve of the ordained clerics and the focus of their



This late nineteenth-century photograph, taken from the old gallery in the north transept (N.B. the entrance door), graphically illustrates the awkwardness with which the north aisle connects with the transept.

Is there any sign here of masonry supporting a higher structure?

Photograph in the possession of the Village Archive.

spiritual contact with the Almighty came into contact with the humbler religious concerns of the laity. Blair has pointed out that most of these updated twelfth-century churches crowned the crossing with a tower, and he has suggested that Hook Norton might not be an exception. The blank stub of stone wall on each side at the head of the nave, next to the crossing, could well have been built – or retained -- in order to support such a tower. Historians of the church have often wondered why

¹¹ Mary Charles Murray, "The Christian Zodiac on a Font at Hook Norton: Theology, Church and Art", *Studies in Church History*, vol. 28 (1992), pages 87-97.

¹² Dickins, 108.

these “ugly” stubs of solid wall, which they assume were probably part of the original solid walls of the Norman nave, were left next to the transepts. The central tower provides an answer, but that is scarcely proof that a tower existed.¹³

We can still observe so much of the reconstruction of the chancel in the late twelfth century because, in the later centuries of Oseney’s long ownership of the Hook Norton property – right through to Henry VIII’s dissolution of the abbey in 1539 – Oseney Abbey came to see Hook Norton less as an opportunity to spread its religious mission into the outback, and more as an opportunity to maintain and develop a valuable source of income. Thus, though the abbey retained responsibility for the upkeep of the chancel, it increasingly proved unwilling to spend money on it. As a result, the chancel remained, for the most part, the essentially Romanesque part of St Peter’s, while the rest of the church was left to local laymen and secular patrons to “improve” in the changing Gothic styles of the later Middle Ages.

The Gothic Aisles

The Anglo-Saxon and Norman churches had been marked by square and round shapes and a cruciform layout. In the early thirteenth century the church began its transformation into the Gothic style associated with the High Middle Ages, with its emphasis on height, on the pointed arch, and its aspiration of reaching ever upwards. By this time, too, the body of the church was probably broadened by the laying out of the aisles, thus providing more space for the lay congregation. In the process the church lost its strict cruciform shape and perhaps began to change the balance between contemplation of higher spirituality and ministry to the lay congregation’s needs.

The church may have begun this process as early as the late twelfth century, almost as part of the creation of the Romanesque church. Some local experts have argued that there is no evidence for aisles on either side of the nave before 1200 and have pointed out that the pediments of the pillars on the north side of the nave are square with blunt edges, as though they marked the line of the original walls of

¹³ Dickins, 108, suggested that the include was housed in a room behind one of these stubs because the altar could be seen from there, and that prevented the line of arches being continued to the transept. However, there is no evidence for this unlikely scenario and in any case the chapel on the north side of the chancel seems a much more appropriate place.

the nave. However, there is a door in the present northern wall of the church, visible from outside, which Blair has identified as probably late twelfth-century in its style of construction. Presumably the door is evidence of the line of the outside wall at that time, this confirming that a north aisle existed about 1175. Otherwise, the present outside wall on the north side of the nave dates from the fourteenth century, and the pillars that separate the north aisle from the nave are constructed in the “Decorated” style of that period.



The single pillar, showing the style of the earlier design of the southern range of arches.

© David McGill

The southern aisle may possibly have been built as early the early thirteenth century. A sense of its simple “Early English” elegance may be gained at the western end of the southern range of arches that divide off the south aisle from the nave: there you can see a slim round pillar reinforcing the arch, a single example left over from the days before the south aisle was “modernised” in the next century. The south porch (through which we entered) has some early thirteenth-century features as well as fifteenth-century, but unfortunately it has been spoiled by a rough restoration in 1825. There are many marks on the stone in the porch, some perhaps made by men sharpening their arrows. By the inner doorway there are also tiny crosses scratched on the stonework; Miss Dickins suggested they may have been cut by men going off on dangerous expeditions, dragged off to serve with their lord in Scotland or Wales or France.¹⁴

The south aisle was further rebuilt in the fourteenth century in the new “Decorated” style of the time, but now it continued straight through into the south transept, thereby destroying the cruciform shape of the church. The new aisle was as wide as the transept, making it a metre wider than the nave. This represents a significant increase in the capacity of the church, perhaps suggesting an increase in population in the 150 years before the Black Death struck in 1349.

¹⁴ Dickins, *Hook Norton*, pp. 109-110.



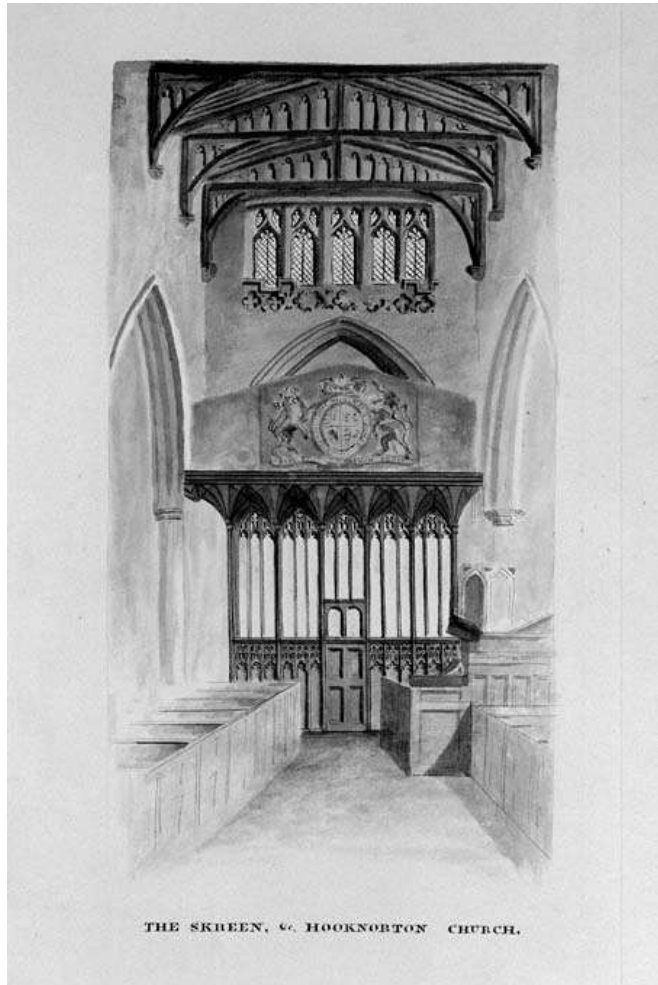
*The chancel eastern window,
inserted in the fourteenth century.
The stained glass is Victorian.*
© David McGill

The rebuilding of the arches on the southern side of the nave in the more elaborate and confident Decorated style of the fourteenth century involved increasing their height, making them taller than those encasing the north aisle. The windows in the south aisle were all replaced about the same time and are, in their evident variety, fine examples of the Decorated style as it developed; the large window at the east end of the aisle has very rich Decorated tracery. The windows in the north aisle and the east window in the chancel were also all changed about the same time, about 1350. They probably had stained glass, though none of it has survived. This was a visual enrichment of the church that would be taken further in the next century.

The Perpendicular Church

The church as we now see it reflects most clearly the further “modernisation” of the fifteenth century. Growing wealth, probably resulting from the expansion of the wool trade, created the means to further improve the church and so satisfy the spiritual needs of a society that was recovering from the ravages of the Black Death. The great desire seems to have been for more light, perhaps because a few of the wealthier could now follow services from illuminated manuscript books. The great window at the west end of the south aisle belongs to this period, as do the window in the north transept, the clerestory (“clear-story”) windows high above the nave, and, above all, the great arch that now frames the chancel. So too do the two transept arches, the northern one being the loftier. All are built in the Perpendicular style that was becoming fashionable at that time, with arches flattening out and windows taking on a squarer shape.

Most significantly, a fine Rood Screen and Rood Loft were added at this time across the chancel opening. The Loft was a wooden gallery that crossed the chancel arch and held a great crucifix, roughly above where the coat of arms appears in this painting, which was done four hundred years later. Access to the gallery (and the roof) was gained by the little staircase that still remains behind the pulpit, on the right of the chancel arch; you can see where the gallery door is now blocked in. The painting is misleading because the box pews were not inserted until after 1660, but it also clearly shows how, together, the Screen and Loft effectively shut the chancel off from the nave, turning the chancel into a “Holy of Holies” beyond the eyes of the congregation.



The fifteenth-century Rood Screen and Loft across the opening into the chancel remained until the late nineteenth century. The box pews were added after 1660, and this view painted by George Clarke in 1840.

Beesley, History of Banbury (1841), 6:126.

The addition of the clerestory required the raising of the walls and roof to their present height, which gave the masons opportunities to amuse themselves. Outside, as Arthur Mee saw, “winged gargoyles run round the 15th century walls.” Inside, corbels were carved at the foot of roof beams in the aisles: some of the faces could be seen as threatening and frightening – like those carved in the south aisle, notably those of the king and bishop – yet they were also joyous, grumpy, satirical and irreverent. Arthur Mee was especially charmed by



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one unusual corbel which shows a little man's head peeping through another man's beard!

As was common in North Oxfordshire in the Late Middle Ages, wall paintings decorated the church, especially around the chancel arch. The wall paintings at Hook Norton were whitewashed over during the Reformation (probably after 1538), and only in 1938-39 were some of the paintings recovered; possibly more remain.



*The southern half of the painting over the chancel arch.
To the right of the window stands St Paul, and below him an angel.
The mark left by the cross bar of the great rood or cross is visible above the point of the arch.*

© David McGill

There are differences of interpretation surrounding the paintings, both as to their date and the subject-matter. Some think the paintings date from the late fourteenth century and that the later clerestory window chopped through the painting. Others think the painting was fitted around the clerestory window at the same time as the window was inserted in the fifteenth century. The latter appears much the stronger view mainly because the paintings would have been well in view (and not hidden by whitewash) at the time the clerestory window was inserted. John Blair, for example,

has privately expressed the view that paintings and the clerestory windows are probably all part of the same improvement.

Such a painting over a chancel arch was commonly a “Doom”, picturing the Last Judgment, but, some argue, there was no room over the chancel arch because of the window. Instead, there are pictures of St Peter and St Paul on either side of the window, with two angels below swinging censers; this raises the possibility that at the time the church was dedicated to Paul as well as Peter. At the base of the painting a plain mark indicates the position of the crossbar of the great crucifix. How does the prominence of St Peter in the painting relate to the fact that the church was still referred to as St Mary’s in 1495 and the earliest known use of St Peter’s came in 1742?¹⁵



*Fragment of painting on the south wall of the nave.
Does it depict the Seven Deadly Sins
or Christ’s Harrowing of Hell?
© David McGill*

Another painting, rather mutilated, of the same period as the other, adorns the south wall of the nave. It is said to show The Seven Deadly Sins and the Jaws of Hell, though some argue the subject is Christ’s Harrowing of Hell. Across the nave on the north wall there is a small painting which is thought to be a St Christopher.

For a fuller account of the paintings and discussion of their date and meaning, see “St Peter’s Wall Paintings” later in this section. For

a fuller appreciation, see <http://www.paintedchurch.org/hnorton.htm>

The Church of the Late Middle Ages luridly emphasised the fate that awaited sinners, doomed to a painful afterlife. The portrayal of Hell was fearful, and yet the wall paintings, illuminated by the clerestory windows, the (probable) stained glass of

¹⁵ VCH Oxfordshire, vol. 21, draft at <https://www.history.ac.uk/research/victoria-county-history/county-histories-progress/oxfordshire/oxfordshire-vol-xxi-chipping-norton-and-environs> : Religious History, page 2.

the lower windows, and the corbels must on a bright day have made the nave of



© David McGill

1500 a blaze of colour and visual entertainment. But while the laity enjoyed the decoration, they were separated by the rood screen from the central religious miracle of the Mass that was celebrated in the secluded chancel. That was to become a key grievance of the reformers of the next century.

The most pleasing contribution of the fifteenth century was the feature by which we best recognise the church now – the tower, erected at the west end between 1430 and 1452. The old central tower – if there was one – may have fallen down or needed repair, but by this time the fashion had changed toward building towers at the western end of a church. In a similar spirit of up-to-date improvement, the new tower was erected using a rich green limestone, in contrast with the ironstone of the old church itself. Round the base runs an unusual deeply-cut quatrefoil decoration similar that runs underneath the clerestory window above the chancel arch. The tower has a fine entrance from the outside, now much



The tower seen from the south west, about 1840.

Watercolour by George Clarke of Scaldwell,
reprinted in Alfred Beesley's extra illustrated copy of his
History of Banbury, vol. 6, page 124.
© Oxfordshire Historical Centre (D293644a)

ravaged by time, and inside there were two staircases, one for the lower floors, the other to the top storey. (In the niche above the spacious west window a statue possibly once stood, but of which saint?) The tower is topped by eight fine pinnacles, making the whole edifice most pleasingly proportioned.

Because of these improvements the church is sometimes called a “wool church”. In fact, Hook Norton parish was marked by general or mixed farming rather than by flocks of sheep, but those

who financed the work may well have made their fortunes off the backs of sheep reared elsewhere in the early fifteenth century. Possibly much was paid for by Alice Chaucer, who came into her father's property, including the manor of Hook Norton, in 1434, and her husband, the first Duke of Suffolk; together, they did a lot of church building on their extensive properties, always in Perpendicular style. Since Oseney's approval was needed for some works, notably the chancel arch, it helped that between 1430 and 1452 the Abbot of Oseney was a Hook Norton man named Thomas Hokenorton! It was this generation, on the eve of the Wars of the Roses, which completed the final building of Hook Norton's parish church so splendidly, creating the building we admire today standing four-square and high in the old centre of the village.

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