



A Brief History of Rickmansworth

Rickmansworth lies on the north-west edge of Greater London, separated from it by a slender and vulnerable strip of Metropolitan Green Belt. The town sits in the Colne Valley and beyond it is the slow rise of the wooded Chiltern Hills.

By road from London, through Northwood, across Batchworth Heath and down the steep hill, there is still a sense of 'arrival' in Rickmansworth.

Rickmansworth was once a small market town by a river crossing. It now spreads across the valley and with many new and taller buildings around the distinctive parish church of St Mary the Virgin.

Crossing the bridges over the River Colne and the Grand Union Canal brings one immediately to the church set in its loop of Church Street. Around it is the historic core of the town, including the Bury manor house, several other timber-framed houses and The Old Vicarage (the oldest of all, with parts dating from about 1460). Church Street meets the High Street, where the Market Hall once stood.

The town was never large, as it served the many scattered hamlets in the surrounding area. The rivers Colne, Chess and Gade, the 'Three Rivers' that give its name to the local government District, provided the water for the famous watercress trade and motive power for corn milling, silk weaving, paper making and brewing, all long gone. Now there are commercial offices and the homes of a commuting population, and the rivers, canal and flooded gravel pits provide for recreation.

Cardinal Wolsey, in his capacity as Abbot of St Albans, held the Manor of le More in the valley, now vanished but superseded by the hill-top mansion of Moor Park, once the residence of Admiral Lord Anson and the Barons Ebury, and now the Golf Club House.

The wider area, including Croxley Green, Moor Park, Batchworth, Mill End, West Hyde and Chorleywood, formed the original parish of Rickmansworth. In 1851, this had a population of only 4,800, but even that represented great growth necessitating division of the parish.

So St Mary's Church today serves a parish area concentrated around the town and extending over Batchworth and parts of Moor Park. Today

the town has an ever-growing number of residents in many new apartments and houses.

Around the time of the Domesday Book, that great Norman survey of 1086, there may have been as few as 200 people in the vicinity; then it was called Prichemareworth, one of the five local manors with which the great Abbey of St Albans had been endowed when founded in 793 by King Offa. Local tithes supported the abbey, which in turn provided clergy to serve local people until the Dissolution of 1539.

During that period, the parish became defined and a church was founded on a gravel bank, above the flood level, near the river crossing. This may be the explanation of the dedication of a chapel to 'Our Lady de Insula (of the Island)', though one may prefer to think of the name as a reference to the Isle of Britain. In 1219 the existence of a church was documented, and a 'chaplain' slightly earlier; but it is very likely that a permanent Christian presence was already long-established.

And that Christian presence continues today, witnessing both through St Mary's church building and through its members who are closely involved in the life of the town.

The church building one sees today is the outcome of two rebuildings in the 19th century, and reflects the changing architectural styles of the period in the 'Gothick' of the aisles, and the Late Victorian Gothic Revival of the chancel and nave.

Only the West tower is earlier, of 1630, rebuilt on its mediaeval base, possibly to accommodate the newly fashionable change-ringing of bells. This very substantial tower, surmounted by its Hertfordshire 'spike', now has an extensive ring of ten bells.

In 1982, with its Methodist friends who share in the church life, St Mary's added a Church Centre, which is the venue for many local organisations and events.