

In 1630 the people of Wheatley refused to contribute to the cost of repairs to Cuddesdon church, the following year Abraham Archdale, who had been brought up in Denton, but who now lived at the Manor House in the High Street, petitioned the bishop to consecrate the chapel in Wheatley “and ground Adioyninge” so that he could be buried there, and a memorial erected to him inside the building.³ The application failed, but there appears to have been some *de facto* relaxation over the long term, and in 1742 Joseph Sims said that christenings “always” took place at Wheatley, and added that both weddings and confirmations had sometimes taken place there too.⁴ At this point the bishop of Oxford, Thomas Seeker, agreed to allow burials to take place in the grounds of the chapel, and undertook to pay the curate in Wheatley £10 per year if the villagers would do the same, the Wheatley curacy was further augmented by the purchase of a farm at Charlton on Otmoor with money from Queen Anne's Bounty. From this time on there are no gaps in the list of the names of the clergy appointed by the bishop to serve in Wheatley. Nathaniel Forster (1745) was succeeded by Thomas Bray (a colourful Whig who was appointed in 1756 and became Rector of Exeter College in 1771), and he in turn by Henry Ford (1781), and Robert Holmes (1784).

Bishop Seeker had also contributed to the upkeep of the chapel building, but by the 1780s “the roofs, Chancel, dower, and every part of it” were “falling into decay and ruin”. Rescue came from a native of Wheatley, Thomas Sims, who had made a fortune (presumably as a contractor to the armed forces) in Gibraltar, and had now retired to Denton. He drew up a will leaving £5,000 to pay for a new church (this is the point at which it is convenient to begin to refer to the building in Wheatley as a church even though it was still, technically, a chapel of ease). Fears were expressed that the proposed building would be too large for the inhabitants to maintain, and when Sims died in 1785, the administration of his will fell into the hands of the Court of Chancery. Wheatley emerged with authority for a smaller building and (sensibly) a modest Church Repair Fund with a capital of £500 to maintain it. It was not until 1792 that the decayed chapel could be pulled down, and in 1794 two architect-builders, Stephen Townsend and Henry Tawney, from Oxford, started work on the new church.

The old chapel had been dedicated to St. Michael and the new church is said to have been dedicated to St Swithin. Certainly it was “opened for service” on St. Swithin's day, 15 July 1795, but it seems to have been known to the diocese as St. Mary's.

(Extract from J. Prest, *The Most Difficult Village*, p.12)