



The Story of Willoughby Church

Before Towers and churchyards, before restorations and PCCs, there was a field and a flock. Willoughby's Christian story began quietly—likely under Norman lords, and possibly even earlier. The church was there by the 12th or 13th century, with a patronage unlike most in England: not a monastery, not a noble house, but Magdalen College, Oxford.

From the very beginning, Willoughby wasn't parochial—it was academic. The clergy sent here were university men: well-read, often ambitious, and shaped by the theological winds of the wider world. Some, like Richard Stokesley, served faithfully before moving on. His brother, John Stokesley, later became Bishop of London, known across Europe. Phaul Bacon, a satirical playwright and Oxford wit, passed through briefly—just eight months—before climbing the ladder. Brilliant names, all of them. And yet, today? They're almost entirely forgotten in the village.

The one who *is* remembered—etched in stone in the chancel—is Revd Nathaniel Bridges. He didn't write plays or chase promotion. He stayed in Willoughby for nearly half a century, from 1791 to 1834, quietly and faithfully preaching the gospel: Christ crucified, grace for sinners, hope for the broken. His memorial says it all:

“Faithful in showing the lost state of man as sinner...
Ardent in declaring the love and all sufficiency of the Saviour...”

That's the legacy that shaped Willoughby more deeply than high office or brief fame. The Methodists who later built a chapel in 1898 echoed that same emphasis: heartfelt preaching, personal faith, and the transforming power of grace. Bridges didn't just visit. He lived here. He was present—and presence matters.

Over the years, the church building shifted. The rood loft came down. The altar was moved, then moved again. Richard Tawney, a local man from Dunchurch and a fellow of Magdalen, brought in the vision of the Oxford Movement, restoring sacramental beauty and building a school. In 1863, the church was physically reshaped to reflect his theology. And yet, for all the change, one constant remained: this has always been a church shaped by the character of those who showed up, stayed, and served.

In recent years, a Heritage Lottery Fund project helped preserve the church building and left us curious and open to learning more about how our history can shape our future.

So what does this say to us today?

It says this: Gospel presence changes things. Not just fine theology, but flesh-and-blood lives shared over time. Bridges' 50 years of gospel ministry took root not because he was eloquent (though he

was), but because he *was here*. He lived it, walked it, endured with the people through decades of joy and sorrow.

That's a legacy worth honouring—not just in the past, but in the present.

So let us give thanks for those who have been present in Willoughby across the years—clergy, yes, but also wardens, organists, flower arrangers, bellringers, and quiet saints whose names aren't carved in stone because they left their mark through their presence. And let us also hear the invitation: to be present ourselves.

Because Willoughby's story isn't finished. And the next chapter may not be written by those who are most talented or most visible—but by those who choose to stay, to serve, and to love this place in the name of Christ.