

St Nicholas Church, Little Chishill

A History and Research Record

Compiled from documentary sources, the parish registers, the Domesday survey, and a found local-history dossier. July 2026.

This record gathers what is known about the church and the people connected with it. Where a claim rests on a single source or on local tradition, that is said plainly, so the reader can weigh it. Sources are listed at the end.

At a glance

St Nicholas, Little Chishill, is a small but unusually rewarding medieval parish church on the chalk uplands where Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Essex meet. It sits on a steep path above the village, ringed by yews and a great cedar, with the perched, half-secret quality that the historic churches of this corner of England are known for.

- It is medieval at its core. The chancel is twelfth-century Norman, with a round-headed Norman window still in place; the nave is fourteenth-century; the tower and porch are late fourteenth-century. The whole building is listed Grade II*.
- It has a genuine local legend. On the south side of the nave is a tomb built half inside and half outside the church wall, said locally to hold the relics of a naughty nun.
- It sits on layered history. Recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086, it passed through the Soame and Crossman families, served a parish that has baptised generations, and was visited and described in 1902 by the novelist H. Rider Haggard, author of *King Solomon's Mines*.

Setting and parish

Little Chishill is a small village, now part of the combined civil parish of Great and Little Chishill, in South Cambridgeshire. It lies on the chalk downs of northern Hertfordshire and north-west Essex, between Royston and Saffron Walden, and is the southernmost village in Cambridgeshire, with Essex about a mile to the east and Hertfordshire about a mile to the west.

The parish has shifted county boundaries more than once. Until 1895 Little Chishill lay in Essex; in that year it was transferred to Cambridgeshire for civil purposes, though the church remains in the Diocese of Chelmsford. Today St Nicholas is one of seven village churches in the Icknield Way Villages benefice. The Icknield Way, said to be the oldest road in Britain, crosses the northern edge of the parish, and Bronze Age and Neolithic ring ditches along its line show settlement here long before the village existed.

The early record: Domesday and the manor

Little Chishill is recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086. Because the parish then lay in Essex, its entry is not in the Cambridgeshire folios but in Little Domesday, in the Hundred of Uttlesford. The Essex volume records the village, as Cishella, in **two holdings** rather than one. Before the Norman Conquest they were held by two free men, Sired (six hides and thirty acres, with 250 sheep, worth five pounds) and Godric. After 1066 both passed to a tenant named Wido, holding under Earl Eustace, that is Count Eustace of Boulogne, one of William the Conqueror's most powerful supporters.

The two Chishills were never a single manor. They were distinct holdings from the outset, each with its own line of lords and its own church through the Middle Ages, and were combined into a single civil parish only much later. For the record, St Nicholas's parish has been a named place in the written history of England since 1086, in its own right.

The building

Dating and fabric

The church is built of flint with limestone and clunch dressings, the usual local recipe. The principal phases are: the twelfth-century Norman chancel; a thirteenth-century eastward extension of the chancel; the fourteenth-century nave; and the late fourteenth-century west tower and south porch, in the Perpendicular style. It is listed Grade II* (Historic England list entry 1162491), a designation reserved for buildings of more than special interest, the top eight per cent of listed buildings nationally.

Tower

The west tower is short, broad and powerful, capped with a small tiled pyramid roof that visitors often say looks faintly French. Pevsner could not date it precisely but thought it probably older than the Perpendicular tower arch inside it. A nineteenth-century description records it as partly of stone and partly of wood, consistent with the timber-framed, tile-capped upper stage seen today. The tower holds a single bell, dated 1774 and cast by Pack and Chapman of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, whose successor foundry cast Big Ben.

Porch, chancel and font

The south porch is Perpendicular, solid and well proportioned, with stone doorways and some blind arcading inside; Pevsner admired its handsome tall porch with slender blank arcading. Beyond the surviving Norman window, the chancel's most prominent feature is the east window, Perpendicular in form, containing a stained-glass memorial by Kempe and Taylor of about 1916. The font is Perpendicular, with an octagonal bowl carrying quatrefoil panels, contemporary with the late fourteenth-century rebuilding.

The roof, and the later church

The roof of both the nave and the chancel was rebuilt in about 1908 and raised by around ten feet, which covered over the east window in the tower.

For part of the nineteenth century the church was closed for services, before being reopened and refurnished by the Crossmans in the years around and after their arrival at Cokenach, with the Kempe and Taylor east window following about 1916. St Nicholas escaped the heavier Victorian restoration that befell its neighbour St Swithun at Great Chishill, which is part of why its medieval fabric reads so clearly today.

The care of the fabric has continued into living memory. In 2016 the church was awarded a grant of £100,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, through its Listed Places of Worship Roof Repair Fund (the award to Little Chishill dated 28 June 2016), to repair the roof over the main body of the church. That work goes on. The church is now raising funds to repair its medieval tower, which after more than 600 years above the village is in need of urgent care. It is the next chapter in the long task of keeping this ancient building sound, and anyone who would like to help is warmly invited to get in touch.

The naughty nun's tomb, and Mincingbury

The feature visitors most often ask for is the tomb on the south side of the nave, built half inside and half outside the church wall, said to hold the relics of a naughty nun. The honest reading is that the story is folk-memory grown around a real medieval fact.

The physical tomb is genuine and unusual: it truly straddles the wall. The half-in, half-out motif is, however, a widespread English tradition, attached to churches across the country, where an unusual tomb built into consecrated ground gathers a story of someone not quite fit to lie wholly within it.

The nun herself has a plausible root. Local tradition places the nuns at **Mincingbury**, a house at Shaftenhoe End nearby. The name is telling: Minchen, or Mincing, comes from the Old English word for a nun (the same root as Minchinhampton and London's Mincing Lane), so the place-name records nuns. And the record bears it out: the Benedictine nuns of Chatteris Abbey held land at Barley, which included Mincingbury, from before the Conquest into the fourteenth century. The catch is that the nuns lived at Chatteris, not here. Mincingbury was their country estate, worked by tenants, not a resident convent. So real nuns did own the land up the road, but a community living at Shaftenhoe End, and a particular erring sister in the church wall, belong to legend rather than record.

One point should be made clearly, because it is easy to misread. When Rider Haggard passed this way in 1902 he noted, near the church at Shaftenhoe End, an ancient house with a carved beam and a 1624 inscription that he copied out. That confirms only that the old house of the tradition genuinely existed and was standing. It says nothing about nuns, and nothing about the naughty nun: it corroborates the building, not the legend.



Chapman and André, Map of Essex, 1777. Little Chishill by its church, with Minching Bury (Mincingbury), the old nuns' manor, to the west.

Lords of the manor

Manorial history gives the church much of its early context. The manor was held before the Conquest by the free man Sired, and granted after 1066 to Count Eustace of Boulogne. In the fourteenth century it was held by the Argentine family, and later by the Ufford, Effield, Boteler and Ayllif families. In 1517 it passed to Peter Soame of Heydon, and from the seventeenth century it belonged to the Soame family, seated in the adjacent parish of Heydon. In the 1890s the estate, as part of Cokenach, passed to the Crossman family.

The clergy, and a Civil War drama

The living of St Nicholas moved with the manor, and for long stretches was held jointly with Heydon. The dossier's rector lists trace the succession from the sixteenth century onward (Sheppard, Newcomen, Fearn, Willett, Baker, Herne, Newman and others). One point is unresolved and worth flagging: the first recorded rector is given as **John Martyn in 1333** in some accounts, but Rider Haggard, visiting in 1902, was told the first recorded rector was one **Alanus**. Both may be true at different dates; the record should not state a single first rector until this is reconciled.

The seventeenth century brought drama. **Thomas King**, incumbent here, was ejected in 1644 during the Civil War as a scandalous, malignant priest, the parliamentary label for royalist clergy removed from their livings; the episode is recorded in White's account and in John Walker's *Sufferings of the Clergy*. After the Restoration, **Robert Parr** was instituted rector in 1662, presented by Lucy, Dowager Countess of Huntingdon.

The Crossmans of Cokenach

The Crossmans were a London brewing family, partners in **Mann, Crossman and Paulin** of the Albion Brewery, Whitechapel (the firm became part of Watney Mann only in 1958). The family had risen from Robert Crossman of Holy Island and Berwick, whose marriage to Sarah Douglas explains the recurring first name Douglas.

Alexander Crossman (1842 to 1916), one of Robert's sons and a director of the brewery, bought the Cokenach estate in the 1890s, later adding the neighbouring Newsells to reach some five thousand acres. He lived at Cokenach, and it is Alexander who is credited with reopening and refurnishing the closed medieval church of St Nicholas. His memorial window in the church records his death on 4 April 1916.

His son **Douglas Crossman** (1870 to 1945), of Cokenach and of Little Chishill Manor, succeeded to the estate and is the man behind its famous cricket ground. A member of the MCC, in 1919 he laid out a high-class ground at Cokenach, reputedly prepared to the exact dimensions of Lord's. Two of Douglas's sons are commemorated in the church as war dead: Captain Richard Douglas Crossman of the Royal Scots, killed near Cambrai on 27 September 1918, to whose memory the reredos was raised; and Captain Geoffrey Crossman of the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars, killed over Ferrara in Italy on 3 July 1944. Douglas's wife, Kathleen Frances Crossman (buried 1969, aged 82), is remembered in the restored windows.

A local obituary of 1945 fills out the man. Douglas Crossman, J.P., was a noted sportsman: **Master of the Cambridgeshire Foxhounds** from 1906 to 1921 and Joint Master until 1935, and an owner and breeder of racehorses (in 1930 the family carried off a treble on the turf on a single day, and his horse Laughing Water was runner-up in the 1938 One Thousand Guineas). He married twice, which explains the family. His first wife, a daughter of Mr A. F. Dawson of Barrow Hill, Uttoxeter, whom he married in 1895, bore him two sons and two daughters before she died in a hunting accident; it was those two sons who fell in the wars. In 1912 he married secondly Kathleen Frances, a daughter of the Reverend G. Kirke Smith of Boxworth, with whom he had three daughters. He died in 1945, and after a service at Barkway was buried here at Little Chishill.

Rider Haggard and Little Chishill

In 1902 the novelist Sir Henry Rider Haggard, author of *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, published *Rural England*, a two-volume survey of the country's agriculture. In it (Volume I, pages 556 to 557) he describes being driven by Mr Crossman of Cokenach across the derelict land of the parish, and visiting the church on the way. He found it near-derelict:

A more desolate place I have seldom seen. In the flooring of the porch and along the bases of the stone seats, worn by centuries of use and carved with the names of boys who flourished perhaps in the time of Elizabeth, grew thistles and elders.

He noted the round window of the chancel, a decaying chest of Bibles in the vestry, and the Tudor names carved into the porch, marks that still survive and can be seen today. It is a vivid, first-hand portrait of the church at its lowest ebb, just as the Crossman restoration was taking hold.

The village that vanished

It is easy to forget, standing in Little Chishill today among its handful of houses, that the church was never built for so small a place. For most of its long life St Nicholas served a proper village, a good deal larger than the hamlet that surrounds it now.

Local folklore offers a dramatic explanation for its disappearance. The story goes that the village was burned to the ground after the last great plague, to rid the place of infection. The tale connects naturally to another local tradition, that the churchyard holds a mass grave of plague victims on its north side, the broad, empty expanse of ground that even today has no graves in it.

That empty north side fits an old English custom, for the north of a churchyard, the shaded 'devil's side' away from the main door, was long left unused, or kept for the unbaptised and the outcast, exactly where plague burials would have been placed. The mass grave, at least, is a tradition with good reason behind it.

The burning of the village, though, is another matter, and the evidence points elsewhere. The Black Death of 1348 and 1349 came four centuries before the near-empty village that the Chapman and André map of Essex shows in 1777, so the plague and the lost village belong to quite different ages. When Rider Haggard visited in 1902 he was told the plainer truth: the cottages, he wrote, had been pulled down to save the rates upon them, landlords demolishing tenanted cottages rather than pay the poor rates due on them. The village was not put to the torch; it dwindled, slowly, through changes in farming and the cold arithmetic of the rate book.

The vanished village also explains something that often surprises visitors: the sheer number of people baptised here. The parish registers record 253 baptisms between 1813 and 1997, a remarkable figure for a place now reduced to a few houses. Those christenings are the ghost of the larger community the church once served, and a reminder that this quiet building stood for centuries at the heart of a busy parish.

A living parish: the registers

The parish registers, now closed and transcribed, tell the human story of the church more plainly than any architecture. Against a hamlet whose population today is only a few dozen, the numbers are striking.

- **253 baptisms** are recorded between 1 June 1813 and 18 May 1997, across 184 years. The busiest era was about 1880 to 1916; baptisms thin sharply thereafter, with only a handful in the final quarter-century, a clear measure of the village's decline. The most persistent families at the font were the Reeds, the Neguses and the Greenhills.
- **63 burials** are recorded between 1817 and 1991.

A quieter echo sits in the archive too: a 1931 Diocese of Chelmsford finance appeal, annotated by hand for the Parish of Heydon with Little Chishill, recording the sum the parish was asked to raise. A fundraising drive of more than ninety years ago, for the same church.

The people in the churchyard

The burial register (1817 to 1991) records who is actually buried at St Nicholas. The notable figures are set out below. Ordinary and recent burials are not listed here, out of respect for families within living memory.

Name	Buried	Note
Sir Peter Buckworth-Herne-Soame, 7th Bt	buried 1860, aged 66	Lord of the manor; his tomb lies below the east window. The only member of the Soame baronets buried here; the title continued in a Shropshire branch.

Name	Buried	Note
Alexander Crossman	1916, aged 73	Of Cokenach; bought the estate in the 1890s and reopened the church.
Eliza Crossman	1920, aged 76	Of Cokenach; wife of Alexander.
Douglas Crossman	1945, aged 74	Of Cokenach and Little Chishill Manor; created the cricket ground in 1919.
Kathleen Frances Crossman	1969, aged 82	Wife of Douglas; the windows were restored in her memory.
Rowena Jessie Crossman	1970, aged 72	Of the Crossman family; exact relationship to be confirmed.

Also commemorated inside the church are the two Crossman sons killed in the World Wars, named above.

The church in the documentary record

St Nicholas has been noticed by antiquaries for more than two and a half centuries. Its manorial history is set out in Philip Morant's *History and Antiquities of the County of Essex* (1768). The Victorian directory tradition, most accessibly White's *Directory of Essex* (1848), describes it as a small but lofty edifice of great antiquity, with a porch of freestone and a tower partly of stone and partly of wood. Nikolaus Pevsner gave it a short entry in the *Buildings of England*, admiring the porch and its blank arcading.

Much of the deeper detail in this record comes from a **found local-history dossier**, roughly thirty documents compiled by an earlier researcher (the one name on it is S. Chappell), including transcripts of the Heydon and Little Chishill registers, notes on the rectors, an extract from the Churchwardens' Book of 1825 to 1836, and Latin transcripts of the sixteenth-century Heydon register (1538 to 1558). That dossier, the parish registers, the Essex Domesday volume and Rider Haggard's *Rural England* have all been transcribed and, where in Latin, translated, and they stand behind the account given here.

Honesty notes and open questions

- The naughty nun is folklore. The Mincingbury nuns owned, but did not live on, the land; the nun is not named in any record, and there was no resident convent.
- The first recorded rector (Alanus, per Haggard; John Martyn 1333, per the dossier) is unresolved.
- The Black Death mass grave is local tradition, not documented.
- Rowena Jessie Crossman's place in the family, and one or two faint register readings, remain to be confirmed.
- St Nicholas should not be confused with its larger neighbour, St Swithun at Great Chishill; online sources frequently mix the two.

Sources

- Domesday Book, Essex (Little Domesday), Hundred of Uttlesford: the two Cishella entries.
- H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England* (Longmans, 1902), Vol. I, pp. 556 to 557.
- Philip Morant, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Essex* (1768).
- William White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Essex* (1848).
- Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cambridgeshire*.
- Historic England, list entry 1162491 (Parish Church of St Nicolas).
- The found local-history dossier (compiler S. Chappell), including register transcripts and the Latin Heydon registers, 1538 to 1558.
- The parish registers of St Nicholas: baptisms 1813 to 1997, burials 1817 to 1991.

- Victoria County History, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire (Chatteris Abbey; Barley; Reed).
- thepeerage.com and Landed Families of Britain and Ireland.
- National Lottery Heritage Fund, project record for the Church of St Nicholas, Little Chishill (Listed Places of Worship Roof Repair Fund, 2016).
- Cambridge Daily News, obituary of Douglas Crossman, 1945 (via the Find A Grave memorial, image contributed by Tim Keirman).

Compiled July 2026. Claims resting on a single source or on local tradition are flagged in the text. Latin documents were transcribed and translated as part of this work; the full transcriptions are held with the parish records.