

The Parish Church of St Mary, Bridgwater, a Study of the Nave Seating and its Context

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Report K/742

1 - The Brief

The Parochial Church Council of the Church of St Mary, Bridgwater, is proposing alterations to the church including the removal of the existing nave/aisle seating. An initial response from English Heritage in November 2006 asked for a report on the historic importance of the seating proposed for removal. Jo Cox of Keystone was approached with a view to undertaking the work.

The Church of St Mary is in a Conservation Area. It is listed Grade I with three separate listings covering gate piers and railings. The list description, which is not designed as a comprehensive inventory, does not mention the nave seats.

2 - Project Design

Many churches are seeking to remove 19th-century fixed congregational seating to provide more flexible spaces in church naves. The wish to remove seating often follows the introduction of a nave altar. This change to the liturgical arrangements of the church has a major impact on the typical architectural ranking of the parts of the church, found in both Victorian new and restored churches. It reduces the use of the chancel and emphasises the use of the nave. It is often followed by a proposal to clear the nave, partly or wholly of old seating. Removing fixed 19th-century seating raises conflicts of interest between the historical and architectural interest of church interiors and the wish for a church to have unencumbered floor space for multiple uses and/or more comfortable seating.

The debate is not helped by a general lack of knowledge about the complicated historical background and, particularly, the chronology of the design types of 19th-century church seating. There is plenty in print about medieval congregational seating, but little about the Victorian inheritance. The list descriptions of churches rarely cover Victorian congregational seating, especially when it is found in medieval churches. When the

church is medieval in origin, the description of the medieval fabric is seen as the priority, as was the case with the list description of the Church of St Mary. The only county-wide work on church seating to date has been undertaken by Geoff Brandwood in Leicestershire (including Rutland), summarised as a draft report for English Heritage.

An unusually full account of the 19th-century and later phases of the church in a guide by Tony Woolrich, *Saint Mary's Church Bridgwater, how it came to be the way it is today* (2002) and local expertise and knowledge of the documentary sources prompted Jo Cox to suggest a collaborative report. An outline of proposed content was supplied to the Reverend Charles Chadwick and agreed. Jo Cox has worked on this report with Dr Peter Cattermole and Tony Woolrich, who have a serious interest in and extensive knowledge of Bridgwater history. The text was drafted by Jo Cox, who takes full responsibility for any errors. The draft was substantially improved following corrections, comments and suggestions from Dr Cattermole and Tony Woolrich. Dr Cattermole's sharp eye identified the marks of carving machinery and he has been assiduous in searching primary sources and finding answers to puzzles raised by observation of the benches and the church woodwork in general. Tony Woolrich's knowledge of the church, its documentation and 20th-century alterations to its woodwork provided an important foundation and his specialist knowledge of the history of technology proved invaluable.

Four blocks of nave benches survive in the church, two to east of the cross alley between the north and south porches and two to west (Fig.1). They are built round the arcades and extend into the north and south aisles with north and south alleys along the north and south walls of the nave. These benches were made and installed in the church in between the 20th December 1849 and were completed by 31st March 1852 and perhaps before. They were one element in an extended period of restoration. William Hayward Brakspear was the architect for the restoration work after June 1849, John Wainwright of Bridgwater won the contract to provide the benches. The benches have been amended, including reduction of numbers of rows, at various dates from the 1870s to the late 20th century.

The historical assessment of the nave benches has been produced by considering:

- The benches in the wider context of the church, particularly its rich inheritance of woodwork of different dates. This is noted in the list description.
- The restoration of the church in the late 1840s and early 1850s, including the re-seating which was undertaken after Dickson and Brakspear had won an architectural competition for the work in 1849.



Fig.1. The nave benches seen from the north parvise, looking over the cross alley between the east and west blocks of seats.

- A close consideration of the design and craftsmanship of the benches, including evidence for amendment.
- A brief consideration of selected comparisons.

The evidence for this approach was gathered by searching and revisiting local sources, including the Somerset Record Office and Somerset Studies Library. Contemporary newspaper accounts proved particularly valuable. Copies of Brakspear drawings that were formerly in the Somerset Record Office had fortunately been made by Dr Cattermole before the originals were removed from the archive. Where additional material was needed, 19th-century publications and reference books were consulted and contact made with institutions for advice. Tony Woolrich researched the history of 19th-century carving machines (see Appendix Two). The seating was looked at carefully and photographed to identify evidence of change. Plans to visit other large medieval Somerset town churches for comparisons had to be abandoned due to limited time and the absence of available information which would have made it possible to select churches to visit. A gazetteer of selected documentary sources is provided at Appendix Three.

3 - The Nave Benches in the Context of the Church Woodwork

The Church of St Mary is a large town church, most of its medieval fabric dating from the 14th and 15th centuries (Fig.2). The church had an intimate relationship with the Corporation of Bridgwater, which became patron of the living after the Reformation and responsible for the upkeep of the chancel.

The existing benches proposed for removal are part of an interior that is unusually rich in carved woodwork dating from the medieval period onwards. Most of the woodwork, whether structural or furnishings, is stained and varnished, giving it a superficial consistency of appearance. The following is a summary of the major woodwork elements in the church based on a brief inspection and selected documentary evidence.

Medieval Woodwork (Figs.3-10)

- **Elements of the late medieval chancel roof.** According to the *Victoria County History*, the carved bosses are dated 1385-1416. An 1852 document in the Somerset Record Office states that the roof was 'wholly renewed and decorated' to the designs of William Hayward Brakspear, with William Shewbrooks the contractor for the work [1]. It is not clear whether Brakspear retained any of the medieval structure of the roof apart from the bosses. The roof is richly-decorated (Fig.3).
- **North and south parclooses.** These are late Perpendicular in style and might be parts of the late medieval rood screen (Fig.4), but this remains unproven. The rood screen was begun 1414-15 and finished in 1419-20 according to the *Victoria County History*. There is general agreement that it was moved in the Brakspear restoration but uncertainty as to whether it was re-used as parclose screening and, if so, when this occurred. Woolrich considered that this was done as part of the 1850s restoration [2] but the *Victoria County History* identifies this as having occurred in 1902.
- **The pulpit.** A high quality Perpendicular polygonal pulpit with blind traceried sides (Fig.5). This stands on a stone wineglass stem. The pulpit was re-sited from a position in the nave to its present location against the north respond of the chancel arch during the late 1840s/1850s restoration.
- **Remains of clergy stalls, some used**



Fig.2. The Church of St Mary from the north east.



Fig.3. The chancel roof. Compare with Fig.18.



Fig.5. The pulpit.



Fig.4. The north parclose screen seen behind the choir stalls.

as **sedilia**. These are late Perpendicular in style with simplified poppyhead ends and unusually grand, even for a major town church (Fig.6). They included misericords (hinged seats which, when upturned, gave some support to the clergy when they were in a standing position). The misericords have been replaced with plain seats.



Fig.6.

- **The credence table.** This is an extraordinary and unusual piece of Gothic woodwork, to which various dates have been assigned. It is an open traceried cage-like structure and is 14th- or 15th-century in style (Fig.7). According to Dilkes it was removed from the church to the Wemdon Road Cemetery Chapel (designed by W H Brakspear) and was returned in the 1930s and made into a credence table [3]. It appears to be shown in the nave alley on the 1834 engraving of the church interior.



Fig.7.

- **Two Perpendicular poppyhead ends to what may have been a former reading desk.** This is currently in the nave and has blind tracery carved on the ends (Fig.8).

- **Panels of medieval tracery, both**



Fig.8.

open and blind, incorporated into the frontals of the existing east blocks of choir stalls. The source of the panels has not been identified (Figs.9 & 10). The date of the existing choir stalls has not been established for sure, but they appear to be Victorian and shown on Brakspear's 1853 plan (an additional row of stalls on each side has been added since). They are recorded as having been restored in 1904 [4].



Fig.9.

Decorative elements of the medieval woodwork appear to have influenced the design of the 19th-century benches, which include simplified poppyhead finials similar to those on the clergy stalls and brattished cornices, found in the decoration of the parclose screens.



Fig.10. The north range of choir stalls.

17th-century woodwork

- **The panelled ceiling to north aisle.** This is identified as 17th-century in the list description.
- **Parts of the carved communion table.** This is lavishly carved.
- **The Jacobean screen with associated Corporation pews.** The pews and screen were formerly in front of the chancel arch, west of the rood screen, the pews facing west. The quality and ambition of the screen is exceptional (Figs.11,12). The screen and seats were altered and re-sited in the south aisle in 1849. This work was both designed and supervised by Brakspear. Unused parts of the screen were made into a sideboard which was dismantled in the 1930s and the panels re-used in the sanctuary at Moorland Church, Northmoor Green.



Figs.11,12. The Jacobean screen and a detail of the carving.

c. 1800? Woodwork

- **Pews and dado in the parvise.** Recycled benches and ramped panelling survive. They may be constructed out of former box pews. However, there are two possible alternative origins: they might represent an early Brakspear design, abandoned in favour of the carved oak ends. A more likely source is the 1832 west gallery by John Evans. A surviving drawing shows a ramped panelled gallery front which was of red deal, according to the specification in the Somerset Record Office. The porch seats in the former baptistery below the parvise are similar in style and probably from the same source. Some of the parvise woodwork was recycled in c.1980 to provide an extra row of seats in the choir stalls [5].

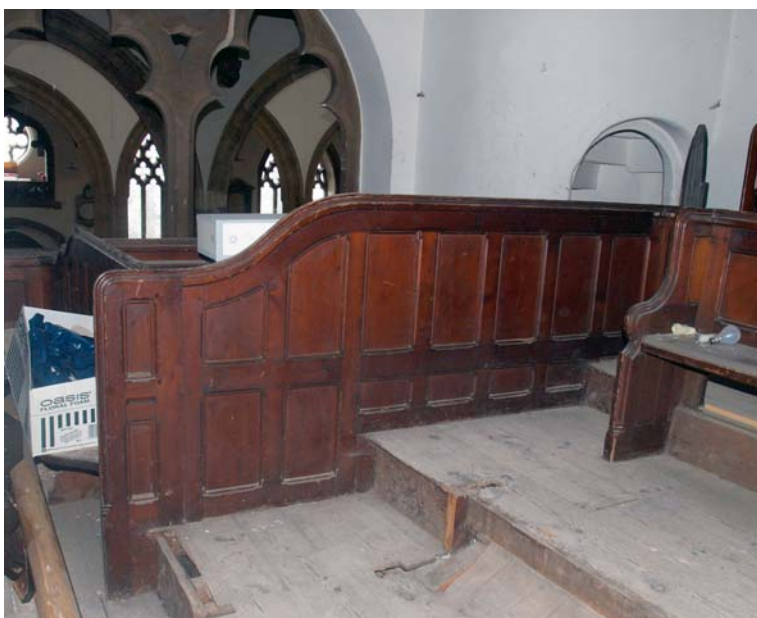


Fig.13.

Surviving woodwork installed 1849-1852 as part of the Brakspear restoration

- **Hammerbeam nave roof.** This was designed to make use of recycled material. The rafters of the former roof were re-used along with other elements constructed out of the floor beams and joists (probably galleries and tower floors) previously in the church [6]. The nave roof was completed by 1852 (Fig.14).
- **Four blocks of open benches in the nave.** These have two types of carved ends. The backs of the benches and frontals that line the cross alley between the north and south porches have shouldered ends decorated with simplified poppy-head finials (Fig.15). Tenders for the seating contract were out in December 1849 and the work was definitely completed by 31st March 1852. The benches were reduced in length in the 1870s when the nave alley, cross alley and aisle alleys were widened



Fig.14. Brakspaar's nave roof incorporating re-cycled timber.



Fig.15. The two different types of ends and a frontal end shown in the north east block.

and re-paved. The north and south aisle benches at the west of the nave, extending roughly for the length of the two western bays were left untouched. The floor of the aisle here remains limestone grave slabs. The benches have been reduced in number at the west and east ends of the blocks by selective removal at various subsequent dates.

- **The wainscot of the west screens to the chancel chapels**

These were low screens to Brakspear's designs. The wainscot has rectangular panelling and miniature buttresses (Fig.16) which match the frontals of the nave benches and low screen across the north transept. They were raised to their present height by the addition of fenestrated screening above in 1904 [7].

- **A low screen across the north transept.** This appears to be the same date as the nave benches (Fig.17), its panelling matching that used both on the benches (frontals and backs, where these back on to the cross alley) and the wainscot of the west screens noted above.

1904

- **Upper portions of screens to the north and south chancel chapels.** This work was undertaken by the Culliford brothers of Bridgwater [8].



Fig.16. The west screen to the north chancel chapel. The wainscot is to Brakspear's designs.



Fig.17. The low screen across the north transept. Photograph by Dr Peter Cattermole.

4 - The Restoration of 1846-1852: the Architectural and Historical Context of the Nave Benches

The open benches in the nave were part of a major scheme of restoration that extended from c.1847-1852. This radically altered the appearance of the church interior. An idea of the interior before this work can be pieced together from an engraving of 1834 (Fig.18), supplemented by a description of c.1785, although there were some known major changes between these dates.

The engraving shows a c.late 17th-century vaulted plaster ceiling to the nave, a keeled, ceiled wagon roof to the chancel and the east end dominated by a Jacobean screen, behind which, according to the c.1785 description, the corporation pews were sited. Further east, the medieval rood screen can be glimpsed. This was associated with an organ loft in c.1785, but the organ had been moved to a west gallery before 1834. There are known to have been galleries in the south aisle and north chancel chapel in c.1785. The pulpit is shown as the dominating fitting in the nave, attached to a north arcade pier two bays west of the chancel arch. It was elevated above the seating and provided with a sounding board.

The engraving shows relatively regular, east-facing, box pews flanking the nave alley. Some were provided with small attached seats within the alley, probably for servants, or perhaps for ushers, known as 'pew-openers', who were sometimes employed to direct the congregation to their seats. The c.1785 description refers to 192 pews 'many of which are large and good, but mostly of old painted wainscot and some small and ordinary' [9]. It is not clear whether the pews shown in the engraving are those referred to in 1785. The box pews in the engraving are probably 18th-century, and are likely to have been a replacement of one or more previous schemes of re-seating in the church since c.1500.

References to the poor state of the repair of the church can be identified from 1846. There were also complaints about the box pews. In September of that year *The Bridgwater Times* described the old seating: '...cumbrous pewings are dissightly, inconvenient and absorb the sounds of the clergyman's voice, rendering the effective performance of divine service physically impossible to many, and at all times painful to the officiating minister' [10].

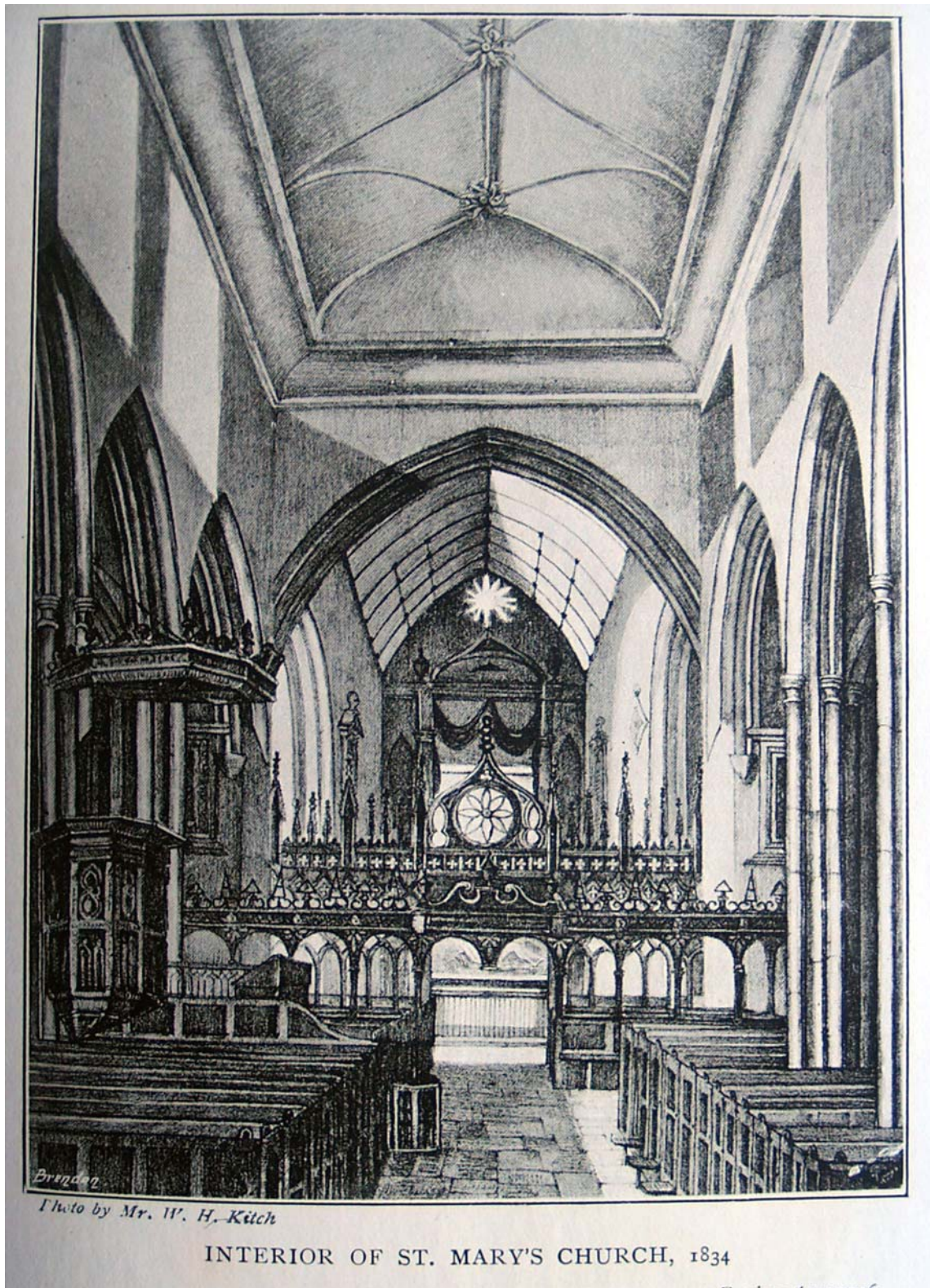


Fig.18. The interior of the church looking east in 1834, showing box pews with doors and the interior dominated by the Jacobean screen to the Corporation pews. Reproduced from Powell, 1907.

The first recorded work of restoration in the 1840s was stripping the render from the exterior of the church. This was planned in 1846 and completed by 1848. The contractor was Mr Hutchings and his bill for the work proved controversial. It received some attention in *The Builder*, a national journal, whose editor (an architect) argued that the parish had been mistaken in failing to employ an architect [11].

In April 1847 it was calculated that there were 800 sittings (seats for individuals) in the church. The vestry passed a motion agreeing that the practice of appropriating the pews to the wealthy was 'productive of great evil' and the churchwardens should claim possession of all the pews in the church 'as soon as the present possessors die or leave the town, and that the word "free" be painted upon the door of each pew as soon as it falls into hand' [12]. This is a reference to the practice of individual pews being rented and becoming exclusive to individual families, or the tenants of individual properties.

In most churches with rented pews, some families had a right to a pew based on a faculty. Other families or 'properties' rented pews from the churchwardens (especially in town churches) by custom, without a faculty. Rents were higher in desirable locations in a church and the poor were often seated on simple benches on the draughty margins of an interior. Seating for the poor could be quite limited in number, if rented box pews filled most of the nave. The editor of *The Bridgwater Times* commented that the church would be improved if the galleries and pews were removed altogether. He referred admiringly to the 'regular and uniform' free seats in the newly-built St John's church. St John's, built in Blake Place to the designs of John Brown, surveyor to Norwich Cathedral, was a model of up-to-date thinking in church design and would have made the interior arrangements of St Mary's church, including its seating, appear old-fashioned.

Woolrich notes that in 1848 a new incumbent, the Reverend T G James, was installed. James had been educated at Oxford during the rise of the Oxford Movement, which argued for liturgical reform in the Anglican church, emphasising the theological inheritance of the English medieval church. Opponents argued that this drew the Anglican church uncomfortably close to Roman Catholicism.

The subsequent restoration of St Mary's follows a familiar early Victorian pattern of a new incumbent, inspired by new ideals in both liturgy and architecture, bringing change to his church. This was re-planned to suit the new ritualist liturgy promoted by the Oxford

Movement and re-Gothicised in accordance with the contemporary architectural revival. Both elements of change, liturgical and architectural, looked back to the pre-Reformation period for inspiration. St John's church is a good example of a new Victorian church embodying the principles of the Oxford Movement. The same principles were applied to the restoration of St Mary's church.

A competition for 'the complete restoration' of the church required architects who could combine 'correctness of architecture with the smallest outlay and greatest increase in accommodation'. The wish for more accommodation for congregational seating was prompted not only by Bridgwater's expanding population, but was also a national Anglican desire. It was felt that if Anglican churches could not accommodate everyone in the parish, particularly the poor, parishioners would seek the meeting house as an alternative. This strengthened the argument against box pews, which were an extravagant use of floor space compared with 'open benches'. At Bridgwater only fourteen of the 200 box pews were for the poor, providing free seating for only 56 people. The committee statement reported in the local paper described the church as 'disfigured by an unsightly mass of pewing, varying in height, and concealing from view some of the most striking features of the building' [13].

The Manchester architects, Dickson and Brakspear, won the competition and were contracted by June 1849. Their plans promised to increase the number of sittings in the church from 583 to 1,383, half of which were to be free seats. It was difficult for a church to abandon appropriated seats at one stroke. Pew rents were a valuable source of income and given up with reluctance and the users of rented box pews expected to be supplied with an equivalent appropriated seat in any new scheme.

It seems from the documentation that, once the competition was won, it was Brakspear alone who undertook the design work. He also functioned as Clerk of Works for the restoration. By October 1849 the organ had been moved from the west gallery to the north chancel chapel, the choir moved into the chancel and the Jacobean screen and Corporation seats moved into the outer south aisle. The box pews had been removed and temporary seating was evidently installed [14]. In the same month there was discussion about the design of the new seating.

On 2nd October the Diocesan Architect commented:

‘The works proposed in this undertaking are so well conceived that I see no objection to them. I would however suggest whether the seat ends might not be treated more in accordance with medieval examples’ [15]. He also suggested that the font should be placed near the north or south entrance.

The Bridgwater Times reported that tenders for the new nave seats were received in December 1849. The six quotes included Thomas Hutchings, who had carried out the stripping of the external render in c.1847, William Shewbrooks, who was the contractor for the chancel roof and John Wainwright of Bridgwater, who was awarded the contract. His price was £416, just £1 more expensive than George Pollard of Taunton. The leader in *The Bridgwater Times* stated that: ‘the works are to be prosecuted with the greatest vigour and activity, and that the whole of the re-seating is to be completed by Easter next’. Pollard complained to *The Builder*, who agreed that the tender process was not fair and he deserved compensation, but also understood preference given to a local man.

By early April it was reported that there had been objections because the new pews were not so comfortable as the old, but it was not fair to judge as they were unfinished [16]. A letter to the same paper had been published in October 1849, when the old pews had been removed and, by inference, temporary seating installed. It nicely illustrates local dissatisfaction with the alterations to the church and is a reminder that liturgical and architectural changes were often imposed on a reluctant and conservative congregation by zealous incumbents. The correspondent (who might be a newspaper fiction) laments the loss of the box pews:

‘I don’t like the going on in our old church. I’d as sooner sit in a barn as there just now. I used to have a cosy comfortable seat, where as sure as Sunday came I used to go without let or hindrance and where I looked round and saw lots of neighbours met together for public worship in decent and respectable order, and now I cannot find a place for myself or see where my old neighbours are poked to but am poked about on some rickety stool jostling against nobody knows who in a most uncomfortable manner’ [17].

The completion date for the re-seating is not entirely clear. Brakspear’s account was divided into two periods. The first period, which included personal supervision of the works, was June 1849-April 25th 1850. It could be inferred from this that the project was completed to time and the seating contract completed by Easter 1850. However, in December 1850 a newspaper account refers to ‘unfinished seats’ below the tower arch

[18] and in 1851 the Diocesan Church Building Association reported 'extensive variations' in the plan for re-seating [19]. The nave seating was certainly finished by 31st March 1852 when the Rev. James wrote to the Diocesan Society stating that 'The Nave of the Church was now completed and the whole of the seating fixed, stained and varnished' [20]. The 'variations' may have been prompted by the church seating controversy at Yeovil in 1850-51. The churchwardens there had found themselves embarrassed by the trade in pews at this church. There was a long history of auctioning appropriated pews, some of which had been sold as part of bankrupts' estates. Individuals had acquired as many as eleven appropriated pews and there was not enough space to sit legitimate parishioners. The case was taken to an advocate and his judgement that: 'all this fabric of ancient custom was bad in law' had been put before the Bishop of Bath and Wells [21]. This was support for the reformers' insistence on free seats.

The work at Bridgwater received a grant of £200 from the Diocesan Association tied to the requirement that 834 seats 'should be set apart and declared free for the use of the poor for ever' [22]. Most grant-aid for re-seating in the period was calculated on the number of additional free seats provided. This was a financial incentive to an architect to squeeze in as much accommodation as possible, whether or not it was needed by the regular congregation. After the works, rents continued to be paid for the appropriated seats. Writing in 1885 but perhaps referring to an earlier period, Jarman notes that pew rents provided £60 per annum 'toward the salary of a curate, the salary of the organist, lighting the church attendants etc.' This report has not established when pew rents ceased to be paid.

Plans and drawings of the seating by Brakspear consulted for this report need to be treated with some caution as they are not all consistent with one another, or with what survives. His plan dated 1853, at least a year after the seating was completed, labelled 'Accommodation' is considered here to show what was actually done (Fig.19). This plan was sent to the Incorporated Church Building Society, in connection with grant-aid [23]. It shows that the surviving nave/aisle benches in St Mary's church represent about half only of the congregational seating that was installed. The west blocks of the existing benches originally extended right up to the west wall of the church, with nineteen rows of seats in each block, where there are now only eleven. The benches were longer and the alleys flanking the blocks were narrower. Two of the benches in each block were set back to allow for a stove positioned in the centre of the alley.

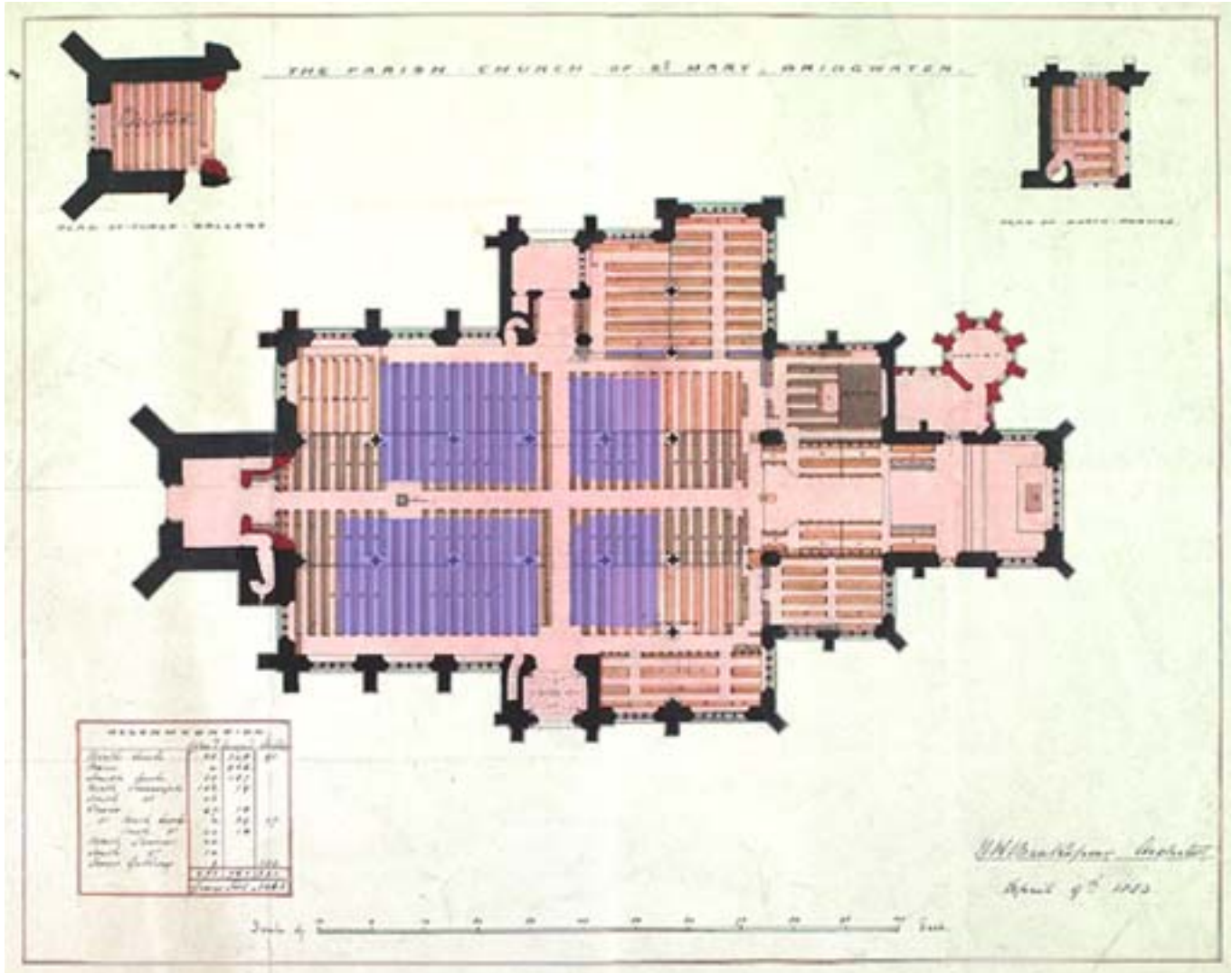


Fig.19. Brakspear's plan of 1853, sent to the Incorporated Church Building Society for the purposes of grant-aid. In this report this plan is considered to show the seating plan as executed by Brakspear. An approximate indication of his seats surviving in 2007 has been superimposed by Jo Cox on the plan in blue. This does not show any of the subtleties of what has been re-used or moved. Plan reproduced with the kind permission of Lambeth Palace Library, ICBS 4183.

The plan shows eleven rows of benches in the front blocks with short sections of free benches attached to the frontals. There are now only seven rows. In addition, there was seating in the north transept, the north and south chancel chapels and two galleries. These last were in the tower and south west corner of the church and seated schoolboys and schoolgirls. The parvise over the north porch was also filled with seats.

Brakspear's plan shows that the two west blocks in the nave/aisles were free seats. The blocks east of the cross alley had free seats in the centre, inside the arcades and two rows of free seats at the west ends of the blocks. The centre seats gave the best view of the east end to those who could not afford, or chose not to rent seats. There were also free seats in the north chancel chapel which was shared with the organ. Smaller free seats, probably benches without ends, were attached to the frontals of the east blocks, one attached to the front of the screen of the Corporation seats and, rather surprisingly, two free benches in the chancel, one facing north and one south. The other seats were, presumably, either rented or rentable. These included, again rather surprisingly, the seats in the schoolchildren's galleries.

The reconstruction of the nave roof, the rebuilding of the south porch and other works to complete the restoration were carried out after the re-seating had begun. Brakspear's report on the condition of the church was submitted in May 1850. The work required temporary closure of the church which was re-opened on Easter Sunday, 1852. Wainwright was the contractor. Subsequent proposals for the tower by Brakspear came to nothing.

Brakspear's work was criticised by the antiquarian, the Reverend F Warre at a public meeting of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain for having destroyed 'many of its ancient features' in the name of restoration, in spite of protests by the Somersetshire Archaeological Society. Warre's views were supported by another member of the Institute, Mr Freeman, who had visited the church. Freeman had nothing to say personally against Brakspear, who he had found 'a courteous and agreeable person', but considered that the the institute should oppose architect's claim that he had a right to 'innovate upon old buildings', which was a 'monstrous' doctrine [24].

Brakspear's restoration work concluded in a prolonged public quarrel about the bill for the works. The president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Donaldson, was drawn into the argument and Brakspear defended himself against both Warre and Donaldson in letters to *The Builder* [25].

5 - Later Alterations to the Nave/Aisle Seating

• 1877-78 – reduction of length of the nave/aisle benches

A further restoration of the church took place in 1877-1878. This seems likely to have been supervised by architect members of the congregation. The piers of the arcades were scraped in 1877 and this was followed by a major scheme of re-paving and the widening of the alleys in 1878. It seems that the crowding of the church with benches during the Brakspear scheme had restricted circulation. The installation of a new heating system at the same time must also have required changes. The central alley down the nave and the aisle alleys were widened and the old stove in the nave alley was removed. The church was re-paved with encaustic tiles by Maws replacing the blue lias paving, except at the west end of the nave, where grave slabs survive in the north and south aisles. Messrs Simpson and Son of London superintended the work. The tile designs were most elaborate and expensive in the chancel, where they included the borough arms and the sanctuary was given a mosaic dado 'of Italian workmanship' (probably by Salviati) and a mosaic floor 'believed to be unsurpassed in any church in the kingdom'. The church was closed from February to July of 1878 for this work [26].

The work to widen the aisles required amendment to the nave/aisle benches, which were reduced in length, but maintaining the carved bench ends. In 2007 it was noted that the legs supporting the seats flanking the nave alley were angle-nailed to narrow boards, in contrast to the south aisle legs, which were spigoted into wider boards. This suggests that the 1878 work required the replacement of the floors of the nave alley blocks (*pers. comm.* Tony Woolrich). No doubt this was required to lay the gas pipes servicing gas standards in the nave. On 31st July 1878 the *Bridgwater Mercury* reported that:

'It need only be added that while a considerable improvement has been effected by the widening of the centre, south and cross-aisles, the space in the church has been so economised that the number of sittings have not in any way lessened, and that nineteen inches will still be allotted to each seatholder, the sacred edifice being capable of accommodating about 1,500 persons'.

- **c.1900 – removal of benches at the west end of the north west block**

Brakspear's scheme had created a baptistery in the inner bay of the north porch, as recommended by the diocesan architect in 1849. Woolrich notes that in c.1900 the baptistery was re-sited at the west end of the church [27]. This required removing four benches on the inner side of the south west block.

- **1920s – removal of benches from the south chancel chapel**

This chapel was converted into a memorial chapel for the dead of World War I and the benches were removed [28].

- **1967 – removal of two rows of benches at the front of the east blocks**

Woolrich notes that this was done to give better access to the pulpit, reading desk and south chancel chapel [29].

- **1976/77– Removal of benches in the north transept**

Woolrich notes that these were removed in 1976. This provided a space for a social area [30]. The boiler was replaced at this date and removing the benches also allowed access for lowering the new oil tank into position in the boiler house (*pers.comm.* Tony Woolrich). The faculty is dated 1977.

- **c.1980 Some benches from the north parvise were moved to the choir**

Woolrich reports that this was done to provide an additional row of choir stalls on the north and south sides of the choir [31].

- **1996 Five rows of pews in the nave removed**

The construction of the nave altar in 1996 required the removal of five rows of pews at the east of the already truncated east blocks. The floor was reinforced with concrete and tiled with plain red tiles, which can easily be distinguished from the 1878 tiling [32].

- **By 2000 Two rows of benches removed from the nave**

These were west of the cross alley from the north door in the north aisle. Their removal provided a space for literature and notice boards. At the same time the inner porch doors were glazed. The floor was made good with reinforced concrete and the edge of the original pews marked by a narrow black tile band (*pers.comm.* Tony Woolrich)

- **2002 Four rows of benches removed from the nave**

These were in the north aisle at the west end of the church, next to the font and were removed to permit the construction of a curtained storage area. The floor was made good with reinforced concrete and grave vaults found were filled with rubble. The edge of the original line of pews was marked by a narrow black tile band.

(*pers.comm.* Tony Woolrich).

6 - The Nave Benches in Detail

The benches are deal with oak ends. The ends are typically 14½ inches wide. They have concave corners and are carved with two tiers of blind tracery and a hollow-chamfered border. There are two types of bench ends (Figs. 20, 21). The differences between them are minor. Type One has quatrefoils rather than trefoils in the lower tier, and foliage-carved rather than simply moulded spandrels in the top tier. The westernmost bench in the north west block has an end which is a wider version of a Type One bench (Fig.22). It may be a survivor (re-sited) of the churchwardens' benches, which are shown as stalls on Brakspear's plan, tucked against the responds of the tower arch.

The benches sit on a raised boarded floor, ventilated through grilles in the moulded plinth (Fig.23). They have sunk panelled seat backs with narrow chamfers to the panel framing, capped with an oval-section rail. The seat backs include angled book rests for the bench behind. Below the seat backs the framing of the benches is open above a low rail and consists of vertical chamfered posts with shaped diagonal brackets to the seats (Fig.24). Cast iron grilles forming the word 'free' are discreetly set into the boarded floor for the free seats (Fig.25). Some of the centre aisle bench ends have hinged umbrella-holders of twisted brass and drip boxes. These are likely to date from the 1870s or later.

The benches that back on to the cross alley and the frontals with book rests that front on to the alley have a moulded plinth, two tiers of sunk moulded panels, a brattished cornice and are divided up by slender timber buttresses with set-offs (Fig.26). The bench and frontal ends here are more elaborate with simplified poppyhead finials (Fig.27), and the bench ends have single shoulders (Fig.28).



Figs.20, 21. Type one on the left (this is a bench that has been stripped of its varnish), type two on the right. Photographs by Dr Peter Cattermole.



Fig.22. The wider bench end close to the font may be a remnant of the churchwardens' seating.



Fig.23. The boarded floor to one of the blocks of benches showing its neat relationship with the 1878 tiling.



Fig.24. A bench with a type two end showing the construction of the seat back.



Fig.25. One of the discreet cast iron plates indicating the free seats.



Fig.26. The panelling along the back of the east block benches, defining the cross alley.



Fig.27. A poppyhead end to a frontal.



Fig.28. A shouldered bench end at the junction between the nave and cross alleys.



Fig.29. Decorative elements at the junction between the nave and cross alleys.

In the centre of the cross alley the blocks of benches are set back at the corners (Fig.29). This provides a spacious turning square for the congregation. This is clearly an amendment associated with the 1878 alterations as proved by the relationship of the floor tiling to the benches and the re-use of a section of Brakspear's panelling (presumably moved forward) to form the back of the end seat in the penultimate rows. Careful examination of an individual bench in the north west block showed that the seat back has a wider panel adjacent to the bench end. This seems to be evidence of the 1878 shortening and is quite neatly managed (Fig.30). Other amendments, probably also of 1878 can be identified, including the addition of single seats attached to the east blocks.

No design drawings for the existing benches have been found. An undated long section of the church by Brakspear shows bench ends of a different, asymmetrical design,



Fig.30. The wider panel of the seat back on the right hand side is part of the evidence for shortening the benches in 1878.

shouldered on one side. The scale of the drawing and quality of the copy seen does not provide enough detail to see if this design included blind tracery or simple sunk panels. The ends of the choir stalls, moved from the parvise, relate more closely to the shape of Brakspear's design than the existing nave benches. The comment of the diocesan architect in October 1849 is relevant to the bench design. Having commended the proposed works overall, he wrote: 'I would however suggest whether the seat ends might not be treated more in accordance with medieval examples' [33].

The carved ends are clearly based on late medieval models. Not every church could afford carved ends for its 19th-century seating and, in the opinion of Jo Cox, Bridgwater is a relatively, although not exceptionally, early Victorian example of an expensive, large-scale programme of benches with carved ends.

Any 1840s church architect was likely to be interested in church archaeology, as Brakspear evidently was (see Appendix One), and likely to visit good examples of medieval churches for design inspiration. An architect could also examine drawings of medieval bench ends in a number of contemporary journals (Fig.31). In the 1840s, as part of the heated discussion about the appropriate design for church seating, journals published a number of line drawings of medieval bench ends as source material for Gothic Revival church architects. These provided useful models for proportion, tracery and detail.

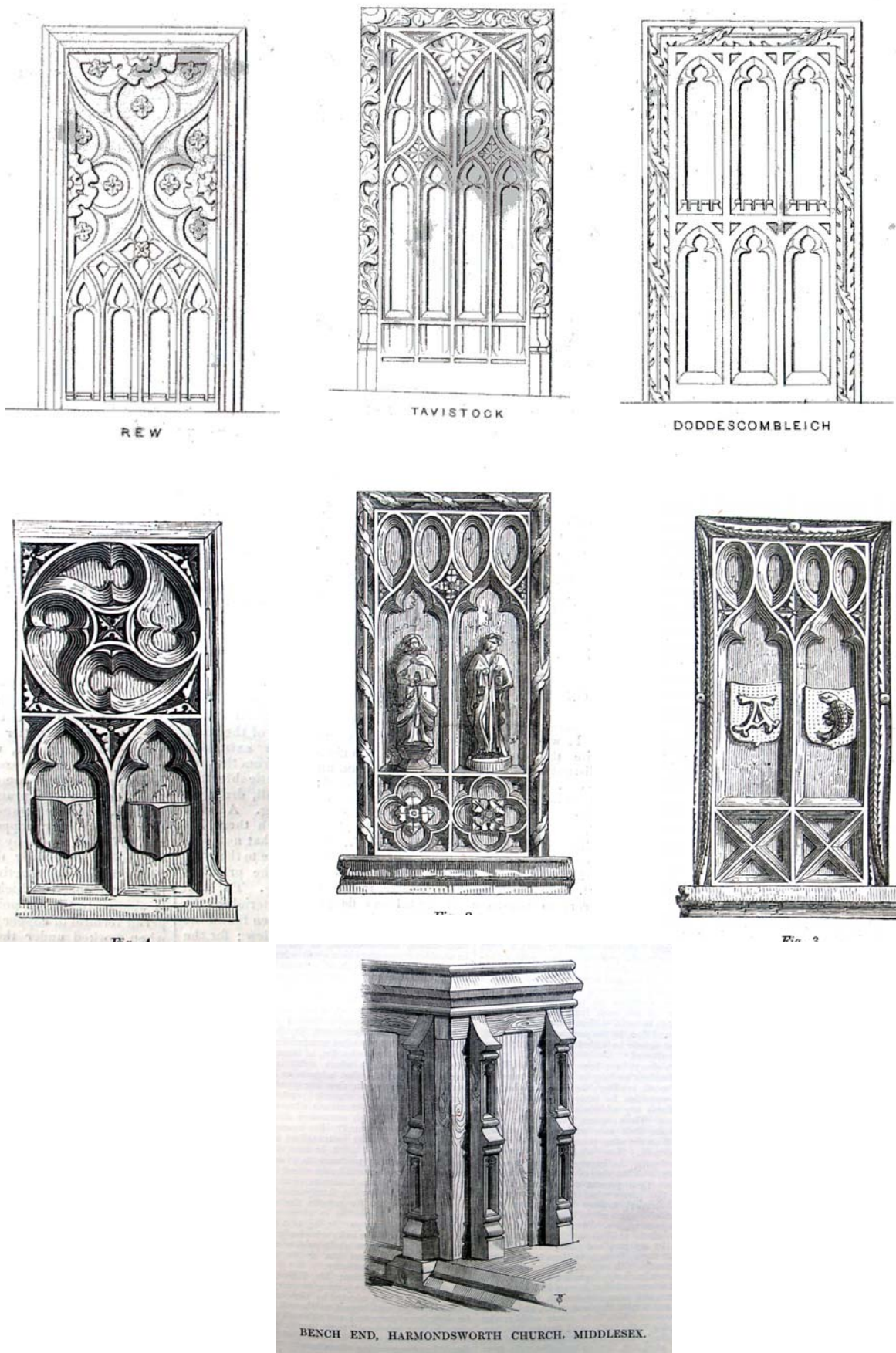


Fig.31. Medieval bench ends published as models for architects in the Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society in 1843 (top) and in The Builder in 1847 (middle row) and 1848 (bottom). Brakspear was familiar with both publications as a member of the Exeter Diocesan Society and contributor of letters to The Builder.

It was possible to examine some of the details of the construction of the benches during a visit by Dr Cattermole and Jo Cox on 17th March. Following an Archdeacon's faculty, several rows had been temporarily removed at the west end of the south west block to make space for an exhibition. In addition Tony Woolrich had looked closely at the benches when temporarily removed in the past. A rough tenon at the base of the bench end went sideways into a slot made in the raised wooden platform. The back and seat were nailed together, the seat resting on the batten, as shown in Fig.32. The other end of each seat was supported by a similar batten fixed to the central partition. The bottom of the back support legs went into small tenons in the north aisle. However, the legs of the benches in the central aisle were angle-nailed. The shaped angle brackets below the seats were nailed to the support legs and the bottom of the seats. Woolrich considers from this evidence that the seat, backs and angled supports were all nailed together, then fitted to the bench ends, employing two plugged wood screws, before being slotted into place on the platform. Some of the bench ends in the south aisle had additional nails. The north aisle bench ends were fixed with larger woodscrews of a coarser thread pitch than those in the centre aisle and are assumed to be the original fixing between bench end and bench. Once assembled the mode of construction made a firm structure.

One of the bench ends in the south aisle has been cleaned of its varnish, revealing plugs and machine marks at the centres of some of the tracery, noticed by Dr Cattermole (Fig.33). The marks show traces of a flat bit used to rough out the circular part of the moulding and indicate that the ends were produced with the help of a carving machine. The evidence for machine-carving is rarely remarked upon in 19th-century church seating and is not likely to be visible unless the woodwork is stripped of any varnish and/or stain, although it may be common, especially in the 1840s and 1850s. Later in the century the influence of Ruskin and the development of the Arts and Crafts movement provided a critique, in both theory and practice, of machine-produced objects and encouraged a revival of handwork in carving.

A brief account of the history of carving machines by Tony Woolrich is given at Appendix Two. Two machines received attention in *The Builder* in the 1840s, a journal with which Brakspear was familiar. One was known in the journal as Pratt's machine [34], which seems to have been a development of a machine patented by Irvine. The other machine, one of several patented by Jordan, was described in *The Builder* as in use by 1845. In contrast to Pratt's machine it worked on the principle that the material to be carved was



Fig.32. A detached bench end (inner face). Photograph by Dr Peter Cattermole.



Fig.33. The evidence for machine carving noticed on a bench that has been stripped of its varnish.

moved while the tools remained virtually stationary (see Appendix Two). This machine has been described as ‘able to carve patterns of considerable complexity’ including attempts at undercutting [35] but carved items still apparently needed hand-finishing.

The Builder claimed that use of Pratt’s machine:

‘will obtain at a tenth part of the usual expense better carving than can be procured by other means without incredible labour and great waste of time. The carvings for the church at Camberwell are being cut by this instrument’ [36].

In practice, the claims for Pratt’s machine seem to have been exaggerated. It was criticised by a correspondent to the journal, who had asked Pratt for a screen, carved on both sides, to be produced. He reported the machine was only economical when numerous repeated elements were required and was no cheaper than hand carving in other circumstances. All eyes and mitres required hand-finishing [37].

The Builder reported the use of one of Jordan’s machine in the new Palace of Westminster in 1847, by which date it had been used there for 18 months. There were

accompanying engravings of the House of Lords, one showing panels of blind tracery in the screens to the chamber [38]. The use of the machine in this exciting national project must have given it, and carving machines in general, respectability in the 1840s.

Brakspear is known to have provided what may have been the first contract drawings (exterior elevations) for the Palace of Westminster, presumably when working for Barry, and may have encountered Jordan's machine through his connection with the project.

Dr Cattermole and Tony Woolrich both consider that the marks on the bench end are consistent with a moving tool rather than a moving piece and therefore of the Irvine/Pratt type of machine, rather than Jordans. Woolrich notes that it is likely that more than one template was used to make the bench end. The first would have allowed a small hole to be drilled to locate the flat bit. The bit would have had a cylindrical end to locate in the small hole and the wings would have sheared the wood at the circumference of the hole. The traces of the cuts made by the wings clearly show in Fig.33. Once the holes had been roughed out a different template was substituted and the cutter changed to allow the cutting of the moulding. A third template would have been substituted to allow the machining of the recessed flat part to the side of the deeper cut curved section. The templates would be short enough for the cuts to have stopped short of the areas that needed to be hand-worked.



Fig. 34. Variations in the detail of the acanthus-carved spandrels indicate hand-finish and perhaps the work of different carvers. Photographs by Dr Peter Cattermole.

The use of templates, expensive to produce, would be consistent with the design of only two variations in the types of carving on the ends, providing enough repeated elements to make the manufacture of metal patterns economical. If Pratt's machine, or something like it, was employed, there would have been an element of hand-finishing and there is clear evidence of a hand finish in the variations of the carved spandrels of the type one bench ends (Fig.34).

The use of a carving machine may have influenced other aspects of the design of the bench ends. Presumably the asymmetry of the bench ends shown in Brakspear's undated long section would have been more difficult to achieve mechanically than the square-ended type that was actually executed. The use of machinery helps to explain the hard-edged character of the bench ends. This does not have the same appeal for the 21st-century eye as hand-carving, but is a typical early Victorian quality. It has parallels with other mass-produced objects and features in an age of huge progress in technology, e.g. the shiny and even character of encaustic tiling in contrast to medieval two-colour tiles.

7 – Comparative Information on Carved Bench Ends

Geoff Brandwood's draft paper: 'Anglican Congregational Seating: A study from Leicestershire and Rutland' is based on visits to all the c.375 churches between 1980 and 1983, looking at church work between 1800 and 1914. No doubt some of the seating schemes identified have been removed since, but the data remains extremely valuable. Brandwood identifies 42 re-seating schemes undertaken between 1845 and 1854, compared with only thirteen undertaken 1835-1844. The rectangular bench end is the dominant type in Leicestershire/Rutland throughout the period 1800-1914. Bench ends with tracery ornament do not appear in the county until the mid 1840s, the earlier schemes favouring the poppyhead. This is the type found in St John's Church, Bridgwater (Fig.35).

Brandwood expects that 19th-century benches with carved traceried ends are most likely to be found earlier than 1845 in ecclesiologically advanced places. The small church of St Andrew, at Exwick, near Exeter confirms this. It was newly-erected in 1841 to the designs of John Hayward and considered by reformers at the time to be the best new church in the country embodying the principles of the Oxford Movement [39]. It had open oak benches with carved ends with simple blind tracery. These examples and the evidence from



Fig.35. The benches in St John's Church, Bridgwater. Photograph by Dr Peter Cattermole.



Fig.36. Bench ends in the church of St Mary Magdalen, Taunton. Photographed by Dr Peter Cattermole.

Leicestershire establish that the benches at St Mary's Church Bridgwater were by no means the 'first' of the tradition of revived carved ends.

The fairest comparisons for date and survival would be the large medieval urban churches of Somerset. As explained earlier in this report, research on the date and survival of Victorian bench types in Somerset churches can only be undertaken by fieldwork, for which there was insufficient time in the course of preparing this report. However, Dr Cattermole visited the Church of St Mary Magdalen in Taunton, which has been partly-cleared of fixed seats but retains some Victorian benches with carved ends, unlikely to be earlier than 1858 (Fig.36). The variation in the carved designs makes it unlikely that these benches employed machinery. All the fixed seating at the large medieval church of St James in Taunton has been removed in 20th-century re-ordering programmes.

8 – Conclusion

The nave benches are one element of carved woodwork in a church with an unusually rich inheritance of timber fittings and carpentry. This is noted in the list description and contributes to the distinctive character of the church. The pre-Victorian woodwork is more valuable, historically and aesthetically, than the nave benches, but some of its present form, location and presentation are also the work of Brakspear. The benches are part of a suite of furnishing to Brakspear's designs, the other elements being the low screen across the north transept and the lower portions of the west screens of the chancel chapel. All these items are linked by the use of sunk moulded panels and miniature buttresses.

The 1840s/1850s restoration of St Mary's was radical. It imposed a new liturgical and architectural order on the interior of the church. The nave seating played an important part in the liturgical change, fulfilling the requirement of church reformers that rich and poor alike should be equal in the House of God, architecturally at any rate, even if some benches were still rented and exclusive. The form of the open benches was part of the revised arrangements of the key liturgical fittings in the church, with a renewed emphasis on the east end and away from the pulpit. The benches in the nave all faced east (contemporary and re-used seating in the transepts and chancel chapels faced north and south). They were low enough to expose the minister to the congregation and vice versa.

They provided space for kneeling and, without doors, allowed for speedier and quieter movement than box pews, in and out for taking communion.

Most Victorian church restorations received admiring descriptions in the local press. Brakspear's work at St Mary's church, however, was principally noted for public criticism of its character by the contemporary archaeological establishment, and the dispute about his bill, which dominated the local press and found a place in the national building press.

His restoration was not a particularly sensitive project, even by the standards of the time. The removal of the rood screen was a destructive element of the work and a surprising one given that it was a major Gothic feature distinguishing the nave from the chancel. His removal of the unusually grand hagioscope arrangement from the north porch was another serious loss. The re-siting and alteration of the 'secular' Corporation pews and their screen to a less prominent position is a pity, but much more easily understood, given the ideals of the Anglican reformers. His re-cycling of much historic timber in his fine nave roof is particularly interesting, and his claim that he had been able to re-use £1,200 worth of old materials does seem exceptional. However, it must be concluded that the nave benches at St Mary's Church are not part of a notably fine restoration.

Research, necessarily limited by time, on Brakspear has raised only a handful of buildings in which he had a hand outside Bridgwater (see Appendix One). He contributed two other known buildings to Bridgwater, both identified by Tony Woolrich, a cemetery chapel and the old vicarage in Durleigh Road and he also provided the design for the mayor's chair in the town hall. The best surviving example of his church work appears to be the medieval church of St Mary the Virgin at Bowdon, Greater Manchester, which he rebuilt 1851-1861. The bench ends at Bridgwater, which we assume were to his design, were architecturally ambitious, including traceried ends and some poppyheads. These must have been expensive to produce, by whatever means, relative to plainer ends. The design was influenced, as would be expected at the date, by surviving late medieval examples. As far as the authors of this report are aware, they were not an exact copy of any particular bench. The poppyheads may have been inspired by medieval furnishings in the church and/or an understanding that this was a form of ornament commonly found on late medieval Somerset bench ends. The model of the poppyhead bench ends at the Church of St John may also have been a consideration.

Aspects of the design of the bench ends, particularly the symmetry, the confinement to two basic types and the limited variation in the elements, are likely to have been determined by the use of carving machinery, for which there is evidence. This in itself is historically very interesting, but until more detailed work is undertaken on other Victorian schemes of carved benches, we really have no idea of how rare it is. The carved spandrels of type two were definitely hand-finished, as there are variations in detail. These no doubt reflect the limitations of 1840s carving machines.

Only about half the number of the Brakspear benches survive and these are the 'standard' design he provided in the nave (with their frontals), with the exception of the wider bench end close to the present font, which is likely to have been part of the seating for churchwardens at the west end. The benches shown facing north and south on his plan have been removed as have the smaller free benches (probably without ends) shown on the 1853 plan. The only benches that are complete in length are those in the north and south aisles to the west, the others having been reduced in 1878. This work carefully preserved the carved ends, which are the most interesting element of the benches.

The 1878 tiling scheme has an impact throughout the church interior. The inclusion of the Borough Arms in the chancel is an unusual example of a Victorian scheme making reference to a locality. The tiling is carefully matched to the existing blocks of seating, but has itself been altered east of the east blocks and at either end of the western north aisle, where seating has been removed in the 20th century. In the nave, the square cross-route where the cross alley and nave alley intersects is a decorative combination of the tile work (which incorporates a large patterned lozenge) and the set-back arrangement of the blocks of benches, emphasised by the poppyhead finials at the four corners. It gives the church a strong architectural sense of 'entrance' from the north and south porches, tied to the Victorian circulation arrangements that originated with Brakspear but were adjusted in 1878.

Limited consideration of comparable examples makes it clear that the nave bench ends at St Mary's church fall into a common category of the Victorian rectangular form. Their blind traceried design is not exceptionally early. They may be the earliest surviving Victorian set in a large Somerset medieval urban church, but fieldwork would be needed to establish this.

It is worth noting that there is a suite of modern needlework, produced in the 1960s and 1970s, in the Church of St Mary. This includes pew runners, one showing local Bridgwater scenes.

Endnotes

- ¹ Somerset RO D\I\bw.m8/4/1
- ² Woolrich, 2002, 17
- ³ Dilkes, c.1938, 2
- ⁴ Powell, 1907, 115-116, f.n.1
- ⁵ Woolrich, 2002, 23
- ⁶ *The Builder*, No 410, 14 Dec. 1850, 597
- ⁷ Somerset RO D\D\cf/1904/74
- ⁸ Dilks, c.1938
- ⁹ Description by Rack, quoted by Woolrich, 2002, 3
- ¹⁰ *The Bridgwater Times*, 10th September, 1846
- ¹¹ *The Builder*, No 293, 16th September 1848, 449-450
- ¹² *The Bridgwater Times*, 13th April, 1846
- ¹³ *The Bridgwater Times*, 7th June 1849
- ¹⁴ Letter to *The Bridgwater Times*, October 1849, quoted by Woolrich, 2002, 8
- ¹⁵ Somerset RO, D\D\WBf8/2
- ¹⁶ *The Bridgwater Times*, 4th April, 1850
- ¹⁷ *The Bridgwater Times*, October 1849, quoted by Woolrich, 2002, 8
- ¹⁸ *The Bridgwater Times* 5th December 1849
- ¹⁹ Somerset RO, D\DWBf8/2
- ²⁰ Somerset RO, D\DWBf8/2
- ²¹ *The Ecclesiologist*, No 82, Feb. 1851, 16-19
- ²² Quoted in Jarman, 1885, 4
- ²³ Churchplansonline ICBS 04183
- ²⁴ *Proceedings of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1853, liv-
- ²⁵ *The Builder*, no 450, September 20th 1851, 597 and no 646, June 23rd 1855, 298
- ²⁶ *The Bridgwater Gazette*, 6th Feb 1878 and 26th June 1878
- ²⁷ Woolrich, 2002, 21, 22
- ²⁸ Woolrich, 2002, 22
- ²⁹ Woolrich, 2002, 22
- ³⁰ Woolrich, 2002, 22,23
- ³¹ Woolrich, 2002, 23
- ³² Woolrich, 2002, 23
- ³³ Somerset RO, D\D\WBf8/2
- ³⁴ *The Builder*, No 54, 4th May, 1844, 232
- ³⁵ *The Builder*, No 54, 4th May, 1844, 232
- ³⁶ *The Builder*, No 54, 4th May, 1844, 232
- ³⁷ *The Builder*, No.114, April 12th 1845, pp.177-178
- ³⁸ *The Builder*, No.213, 6th March, 1847, 108; No.220, 34th April, 1847, 189-190
- ³⁹ Archives of the Devon Nineteenth-Century Churches Project, Exwick folder