

A report on the state of knowledge
about the
Charnel House, Crypt and Nave Burials
in
Saint Mary's Church, Bridgwater
for
Mark Richmond
and the Reordering Committee

By
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THE BRIEF FROM MARK RICHMOND

As you know we have to assemble further understanding on the area below the Swan Transept, in particular the crypt area. This will be both a desk study and an opening up of the floor to get a view of the voids beneath. I would be grateful for any assistance with the archival info we need to gather and your advice on the archaeologist we should bring in to direct the opening up and recording.

Dr Cattermole has responded comprehensively to Mark on the form of the archaeological report and has suggested several names of archaeologists.

REPORT

Summary

This report summarises the published information about the charnel house and crypt, Bridgwater's graveyards, the heating system, nave burials, the construction of the pew bases and suggestions for further investigation. It is illustrated by a plan and photographs

THE CHARNEL HOUSE AND THE CRYPT

The charnel house is under the north transept, at the eastern end, and now houses the heating boiler and oil tank. The crypt's extent is not now known, for an entrance from the charnel house was blocked off many years ago. Figs 2 and 3 (Verbal communication from Frances Pearce and Decima Harper). Steps to it were reputed to lie in the vicinity of one of the niches in the north aisle. (Jarman, 1885, p 6) Part of the crypt is reputed to lie under the western end of the north transept (Conibere, Pearce and Woolrich, c2000 p. 9). The crypt was reputed to have been stopped being used for its proper purpose and to have been filled with concrete early in the nineteenth century. (Powell, 1906, p 114) Whether this formed part of Brakspeare's work is not known, but he did remove the wall dividing into two the transept which contained the famous squint, substituting a pair of pillars. See the drawing of the medieval layout. Before this was done the floor between the porch and the squint wall was rubble stone. (Jarman, 1885, p 8)

The extent of the crypt is unknown, but probably extended under the nave and maybe the chancel. It may have been filled in later centuries by brick-lined coffin vaults.

The charnel house had its origins in the fourteenth century and in 1420 the churchwardens' accounts record much work to lower the stone floor and construct a wooden floor over the void. (SRO 1938, No 475) It was used to house bones found when making new graves in the churchyard and in the body of the church. In 1420 a man worked for 5 ½ days, at a cost of 1s 10d, to remove the bones for burial elsewhere. (Ibid) The two low arches in the eastern wall of the transept overlooking the grass are undoubtedly blocked-off ventilation holes to draw off the smell of disinterred bones. Fig 1

Above the charnel house was the chapel of the Holy Cross and above the crypt in the other half of the transept was the Chantry of Saint Katherine. These were among the number of chapels contained within the church in the middle ages, and their use ceased at the Reformation.

BRIDGWATER'S GRAVEYARDS (Woolrich, 1994 chapter 3)

Bridgwater's population grew from an estimated 1600 inhabitants in 1440 to 3634 in 1801, the date of the first official census. The churchyard of Saint Mary's was the only burial ground until the late seventeenth century when some dissenting chapels were founded. The Quakers, for instance, had their own burial ground off what is now Albert Street. But Saint Mary's churchyard remained the only burial ground of any size until the middle of the nineteenth century. Graveyards were formed round Holy Trinity and St John's Churches, consecrated in 1840 and 1846 respectively.

The bodies interred in Saint Mary's churchyard over the centuries had caused the soil level to rise by several feet, and in 1827 £134 2 3 was paid to level it.

From 1801 to 1851 the population of Bridgwater grew threefold to reach 10,883, and the annual burials in Saint Mary's grew in proportion, with more at times of epidemic. In the 1840's the burials averaged 190 per year, but 264 in 1840 and 237 in 1842. The opinion of public health experts of the time held that an acre of ground could give decent burial to 136 bodies annually. The whole area of Saint Mary's churchyard, including the building, walks and walls was barely that. The area actually available for burial was under half an acre.

In order to make room for more bodies, after about six months the sexton drove an iron bar into the ground above a grave and by the smell it gave off was able to judge the state of decomposition. If it was advanced enough the remains were dug up and the bones taken to the charnel house. By the 1850s the position was intolerable and people sitting in the transept sometimes left services early since they became unwell. Wembdon Road Cemetery was consecrated in 1851 and Saint Mary's churchyard closed for new burials.

The charnel house was emptied of bones, cleaned and whitewashed.

THE HEATING SYSTEM

In 1878 a coke-fired boiler was installed in the charnel house (Jarman 1885, p 12.) Hot water pipes and radiators were installed in the nave and aisles of the church. After 1964 the boiler was converted to oil. The tank installed through a trap door in the floor in front of the present serving counter. The tank was contained in a concrete block bund to contain the oil in case of spillage. (Information from Decima Harper) In 2002 the asbestos lagging was removed from the hot water pipes and replaced with fibreglass. The roof was clad in non-asbestos fireproof sheeting so was not removed. (PCC Minutes) In 2007 the old boiler failed and was renewed with two smaller ones capable of simple conversion to gas. (Contract file in the church office).

BURIALS IN THE NAVE

The medieval churchwardens accounts show periodic payments for burials within the church, and the floor was covered in grave slabs. By the nineteenth century these were largely covered by box pews. The restoration of 1850 saw the installation of the present pews, with grave slabs remaining visible in the aisles. The 1878 restoration and the widening and tiling of the central aisle caused the slabs from there to be moved to the south path of the churchyard. Names were Grove, Manchip, Balch, Burroughs, Codrington, etc. (Jarman 1885, p 37) These slabs were subsequently removed from the churchyard, maybe when the District Council repaved the churchyard walks in the 1980s. It is assumed they were destroyed.

The north and south and west aisles towards the tower end of the church all are paved with grave slabs. Names include Woodward (1717), Coles (1729), Standfast (1774 and 1805), Galpine (1705), Prior (1707 and 1709). The Anderdon slab (1707) is fixed to the wall by the south door. This used to be on the east wall of the Chancel (McDermott and Berry, 2011 p 00) The floor of the St George's chapel has four or five slabs to the Sealey and Axford families, (Shepherd 1920, pp 6-7.), all but one now covered by fitted carpeting. The Sealy vault is in the Chancel roughly under the Vicar's stall and the west end of the south choir stalls.

During the recent removal of some of the pews and re-tiling the floor several graves have been uncovered. In 1967 when two rows of pews were removed to the East of the nave, one such grave was found in the vicinity of the organ screen with the remains of Revd Wollen (vicar 1786-1844) and his daughters. Wollen's coffin was covered in fragments of black velvet. (Conibere, Pearce and Woolrich, c 2000, p14) In 1996 when five rows of pews were taken out for the nave altar at least one grave vault was found with wrecked coffin. Figs 7, 8 and 9. This was to the east of the north pillar. The brick pew support by the south pillar showed signs of subsidence indicating a collapsed vault beneath. Fig 6. By 2000, when two rows of pews were taken out by the North door, a damaged

ledger stone with Axford on it was exposed. Figs 10 and 11. It is not known if there was a vault. In 2001 when the pews were removed by the font, graves were found but no details have yet been discovered. It is not known if any archaeological investigation and report was ever carried out for any of this work.

THE PEW BASES.

The photographs taken when the pews were removed in 1996 and 2000 clearly show the construction of the pew bases. Shallow brick walls, some four or five courses thick were the built the length of the church from east to west at perhaps six to eight ft intervals. These may be the bases of the box pews. On these were placed longitudinal bearer timbers. At right angles to these were joists and on top of these were the pew-base floor boards. Fig 5 The 2000 photograph of the work by the north door clearly shows the Axford slab cut back to make room for the brick wall. Figs 10 and 11. The 1996 work shows no complete grave slabs, but a number of what appear to be fragments of them. Whether they were destroyed in Brakspear's time or earlier is not known.

The tops of the brick walls are just below level as the present tiling. Assuming the grave slabs were slightly below that level and were about four inches thick, the slabs beneath them covering the entrances to any vaults are quite close to the present floor line, and are likely to be exposed in the work of installing the under-floor heating, though this will depend on the depth of excavation required for the work plus the thickness of the stone floor slab.

FURTHER SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

The published transcripts of the Bridgwater Borough Archives cover 1200 - 1485. Unpublished transcripts covering 1485-1603 are in the County Record office. They contain a wealth of material about Saint Mary's, but will need translating from the Latin. In addition, the Borough Archives for the nineteenth century could well have material of value, since the Corporation had an interest in the work on the chancel and the movement of the Corporation pews.

The Brakspear drawings of Saint Mary's church were loaned to the County Record Office in 1980 by Oswald Brakspear, (W.H Brakspear founded a dynasty of architects). They remained there until 2009 when they were accepted with the rest of the Brakspear collection by the government in lieu of death duties. The collection is now in the library of the Royal Institution of British Architects. It comprises a large archive of drawings, pocket books, albums, drawing instruments and correspondence by William Hayward Brakspear (1819-1898) as well as an album of drawings and tracings from the office of Sir Charles Barry. When at Taunton, apart from pencil drawings of the church exterior as it was before the restoration, there was nothing at all about the church before Brakspear began his work. At the time I thought it odd there were no drawings of Brakspear's work in the transept and the re-pewing and surmised that perhaps Oswald Brakspear overlooked them when he delivered the drawings to Taunton. It is equally possible there is material in his pocket books or correspondence that awaits discovery. I suggest an enquiry to the RIBA library would be useful.

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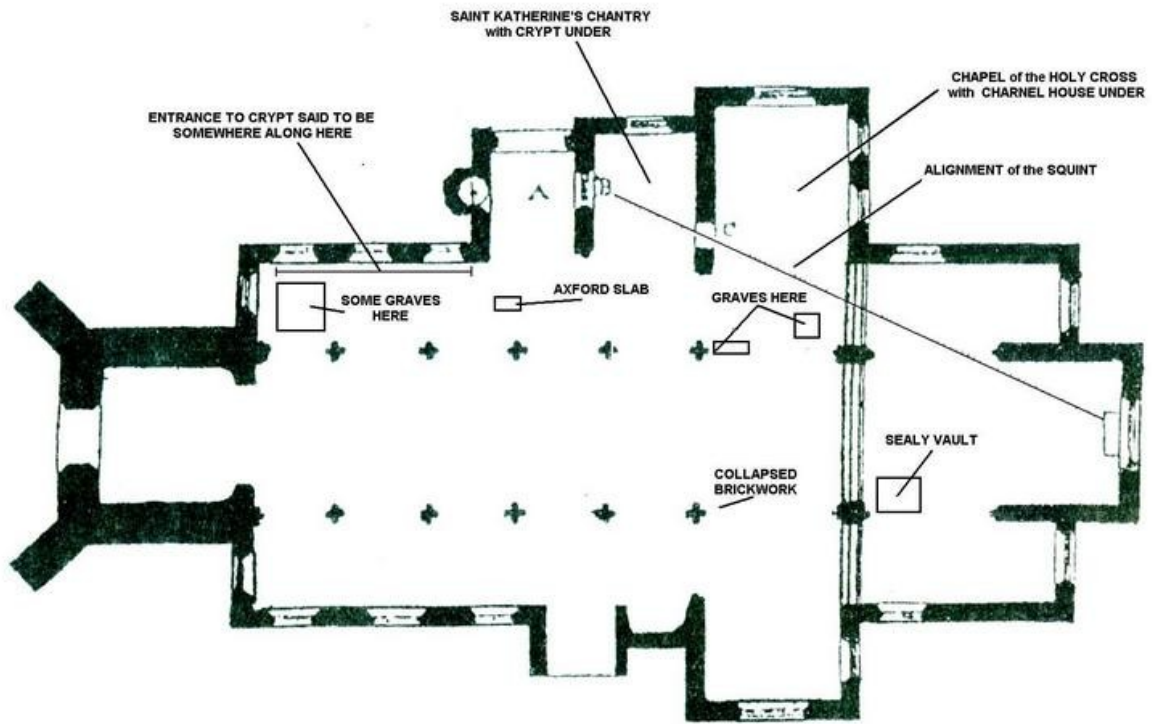
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MEDIEVAL LAYOUT with ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES



Fig 1 Vents low in the east wall of the Transept



Fig 2 Blocked off passage way on the charnel house



Fig 3 Early stonework in the charnel house



Fig 4 Blocked arch by the boiler in the charnel house



Fig 5 Bearers and joists under the pews in the south block



Fig 6 Collapsed brickwork in south block



Fig 7 Slabs covering the burial vault in the north block



Fig 8 Coffin and remain in vault in north block



Fig 9 Lead coffin in north block



Fig 10 Axford grave slab by north door



Fig 11 Axford grave slab by north door