

## LITTLE MISSENDEN CHURCH STRUCTURAL FEATURES

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In the course of the work on the wall paintings, described by Professor Tristram, many highly interesting structural features came to light. The Vicar, the Rev. W. H. Davis, also took the opportunity of investigating certain parts of the church with a view to obtaining clearer evidence for dating and of supplementing and amending the Royal Commission's account. The results of these investigations, together with some points not previously recorded, are given below.

### ALTAR SLAB AND ENCAUSTIC TILES

In 1922 the memorial panelling was placed in the chancel and other work done, necessitating the taking up of some part of the chancel floor. In the course of this work several objects of interest came to light, the most important being a mediaeval altar slab. This was found buried in the floor of the chancel on the south side, and is a rectangular stone slab measuring 5' 6" X 2' 8", and being some 5½" to 6" thick, heavily chamfered on the underside in the usual way. None of the consecration crosses is now distinguishable. The stone now serves once more as the Holy Table.

A large number of encaustic tiles were also found in 1922, and these, in conjunction with several revealed in the 1931 work now form a most interesting series. Most have been set in the floor round the chancel and beneath the altar. There are nine or ten different patterns, all of the usual dimensions, between 4" and 5" square, and belonging mainly to the earlier 14th century type of red earthenware, having a light clay slip inserted in the stamped design, the whole glazed.

They do not appear to be keyed on the underside. Two of the most interesting designs consist of a spiked wheel (a Catherine wheel), four tiles going to make up the design, and an heraldic tile, with oak leaves in the upper part, and the shields of Molyneux, Clare and Bigod or de Burgh in the lower. There are several examples of this tile at Missenden, and they are being found in large quantities at the excavations at Hurley Priory, Berks. That house was possibly their place of origin.

Tiles showing a crowned female head and a fleur-de-lis motif correspond with specimens in the British Museum, while the other designs are quite usual—a double triangle, a man on horseback, a lion passant, with quatrefoils beneath, and various geometrical patterns.

#### SEDILE

The sill of the westernmost window on the south side of the chancel (early 15th century) is carried down low on the inside, and investigation proved that this had been a window sedile. It had been partly Riled up and plastered over. The old plaster surface was found and carefully followed and the sill cleared down to its original level. The dimensions of the sedile are—Height of sill from ground, 1' 8"; width, 3' 4", the splay narrowing to 2' 6" at the back. The seat is shallow measuring only some ten inches from back to front.

#### OPENING IN CHANCEL ARCH

In the wall above the chancel arch, on the south side, was found an opening that had been blocked with flint rubble and plastered over, at any rate, as early as the 14th or 15th century. The side facing the nave was left intact, as the mediaeval plaster and painting as well as the Elizabethan Royal Arms covered it; so the opening was cleared and explored from the chancel side. It proved to be a small doorway, 2' 3" wide and

about 5' high, going right through the wall from east to west, having an oak lintel and a wooden offset in the centre probably for a door frame. The head was flat. Its curious position precludes the possibility of its having had any connection with the rood loft, for the sawn-off end of a wooden bracket to hold one of the rood figures was discovered actually bedded in the material used to block the opening. Its shape and size are also against the idea of its having been a window at the early date that the circumstances suggest. The most likely explanation is that it was the door of access (gained by a ladder, one must suppose) to a priest's chamber over the chancel of the Norman church.<sup>1</sup> The chancel must have had a flat ceiling, with a steep-pitched roof above the room, the whole being opened out when the present early 15th century roof was built, as the tie beam comes across the opening at the west end.

#### SCREEN BEAMS, BRACKETS, &C.

In the north wall of the nave, the removal of plaster revealed a large beam sawn off flush with the wall. This is 9' from the ground and 3' 1" west of the face of the chancel arch. It measures 6" to 7" deep by 8" wide. No trace of moulding is now visible. This must have been the main beam of the rood-screen, supporting the rood-loft, its other end having rested in the opposite wall of the nave, which was cut away in the 18th century to enlarge the arcade.

In the west face of the wall above the chancel arch were found the sawn-off ends of two oak brackets, which, from their position 4' 6" below the easternmost tie-beam of the roof, and 2' on each side of the large central notch in that beam, which held the rood, must have been the brackets for the figures of St. Mary and

<sup>1</sup> See Bond: *Gothic Architecture in England*, p. 221. A. H. Thompson: *Hist. Growth of English Pariah Church*, p. 54.

St. John. We thus have an extraordinarily complete idea of the rood and its appurtenances at Little Missenden.

In the north chapel, in the north wall, was found the end of an elaborately moulded beam, showing that there must have been a screen there also. The beam is moulded on both faces and measures X 9". It is 6' 10" from the ground, and dates from early or mid-15th century.

#### DATING OF NORTH CHAPEL

The exploration of the north chapel and the paintings found there have provided valuable evidence for dating parts of the fabric. The Royal Commission states<sup>2</sup> that the chapel was added about 1360. In point of fact the date should be nearer 1260 or slightly before, as painting of about mid-13th century date was found on the east face of the wall above the arch opening from the north aisle. The decoration continues actually on to the stonework of the arch, which must therefore be at least coeval with, if not earlier than, the paintings themselves. Thus the arches and chapel, as a whole, may be assigned to the second quarter of the 13th century. The fact that the mid-14th century window in the north wall cuts into the wall painting of one of the Nativity subjects is additional proof that the window is an insertion in an earlier wall. The painting of the Majesty on the back of the tomb recess also helps to give a more definite date to that feature, as it was usual to decorate such recesses at the time of their building.

The position of the screen beam here, with other details, serve to contradict the Royal Commission's statement that the chapel was lengthened in the 18th century. The east end was restored or rebuilt, but there is no reason to suppose that the proportions were altered, for the following reasons:—(1) the 14th

<sup>2</sup> *R.C.H.M. Bucks.*, Vol. 1., p. 232.

century wall painting did not end where the 18th century work commences; (2) the distance from the screen beam to the beginning of the new work is only 4' 6", a space that could not have included room for an altar and steps. The total distance from the screen to the end of the chapel is only 11' out of a total length of 26'.

In the south wall much of the original stonework has been re-set, and this includes half the trefoiled head of a small arch, with plain chamfer ornament. This is probably part of the original piscina and would appear to be of 13th century date. Another stone is probably from a window splay, and still exhibits a piece of the original plaster with colouring on it.

#### 18TH CENTURY WORK

The valuable 18th century Churchwardens' account book of Little Missenden contains interesting evidence of the dates at which work was done in the church in the 18th century. The restoration of the east end of the north chapel and the re-building of the south aisle were probably done in June-September, 1711, as between those dates 13 loads of bricks, 12 loads of "gravill," 5 loads of tiles, 3 loads of timber and 1 of boards were purchased. In 1727, John Salter was paid 16/6 for "600 bricke and a sack of lime." There are numerous entries for mending the leads and the windows, whitewashing, small bills for bricklayers' and carpenters' work, purchases of lime, hair, laths, etc., but nothing indicating such extensive work as in 1711, the others being for upkeep and general repairs. Purchases of lath, timber, nails, hair and lime seem to indicate that the mediaeval roofs were ceiled in 1739.

In the porch were found names and dates deeply scraped in the plaster and filled with reddish paint. "John Duckett: Willm. Goodlen: Thomas Judge. Desember the 4. Yr. 1742," showing the porch to have

been re-plastered at that time. The actual porch was probably re-constructed in 1727 and 1729, as entries in the accounts show.

#### NORTH NAVE ARCADE, CLERESTORY WINDOWS, &C.

The easternmost arch of the north nave arcade was examined with the object of dating it nearer than the Commission's "possibly inserted in the 18th century." The square imposts were of plaster pegged on. The west portion of the arch is of stone—blocks of clunch similar to the other arches, but the individual stones are larger and differently set, indicating later work. The other part of the arch is of plastered brick of the 18th century. Part is thus clearly mediaeval, and it is possible that there may have been an entrance on to the rood-loft here at one time.

The blocked clerestory windows on the south side were examined in the hope that they might yield some evidence of Saxon origin, but nothing definite was established. It may be mentioned that the small trefoiled light (? 14th century) opening into the roof of the north chapel is now unblocked. Also, that the "niche" in the south wall described in the Commission as "mediaeval" is in fact the recess in which the font formerly stood. The bottom has been bricked up in modern times forming the sill of the "niche."

#### LATER PAINTINGS

The series of texts in elaborate frames revealed in the church is of quite exceptional interest, giving an unusually complete idea of the appearance of a church in the 16th and 17th century where the injunctions for "sentencing" and white-washing (to obliterate the "popish ymages") were zealously carried out. The following is a complete catalogue:—

NAVE

- (1) East wall of tower arch, south side, top: Thin black letter text in oblong frame, ornamented at top and bottom; blue and black outlines, with reddish yellow background filling. Isaiah xl., 6; and 2 Samuel xiv., 14. Late 16th century.
- (2) Below: Text in Roman lettering, with oblong scroll-type frame with semi-circular bays top and bottom. Heavy red, yellow and brown colouring, Jacobean ornament. Psalm xc. 17th century.
- (3) Bottom: Traces of third text similar to (1).
- (4) } North side: Similar scheme, with probably
- (5) } other verses from the same texts. Stronger
- (6) } background to (4). Blue line omitted at top.
- (7) North wall of nave: Over the head of the St. Christopher there was the Lord's Prayer, in Roman lettering, in a frame of similar type to (2), but round.
- (8) Traces of both Roman characters and black letter over various parts of the St. Catherine subjects.
- (9) Chancel arch, west face, top, north side: Heavy black letter text in blue and black straight line frame. Unidentified. Probably third quarter 16th century.  
Below: Ditto. Deuteronomy xvi., 11.
- (10) South side: Traces of similar texts and frames.
- (11) South wall of nave: Thin black letter text in blue and black oblong frame, with elaborate ornament at top. Haggai i., 8 et seq.
- (12) Traces of similar frame further east over 13th century paintings.

## CHANCEL

- (13) North wall: Roman lettering text in red letters, enclosed in heavy oblong red frame, apparently plain. Matthew xxvi., 26, or Prayer Book sentences from Communion Service.

## NORTH AISLE, WEST TO EAST

- (14) In vestry: Heavy black letter text in elaborate oblong frame of black and yellow. Ornamental urn finial in pediment, scroll brackets, etc., and black and white stencil design in frame. Unidentified; but the frame contains at least three texts.
- (15) Heavy black letter text in frame similar to (14), but brackets and outside ornament slightly different. Unidentified.
- (16) Apparently two frames super-imposed, yellow
- (17) and black, with curved brackets beneath, and an oblong red frame similar to (13). No lettering now visible.

The Royal arms painted over the chancel arch are interesting on account of their date. They are the Tudor arms (of Elizabeth) probably of about 1560, and are a valuable addition to Dr. Bradbrooke's list of the Bucks examples in the *Records*,<sup>3</sup> The arms are quarterly, 1 and 4 France, 2 and 3 England, enclosed in a garter; the supporters are a lion and dragon. The whole is in red and black, the fields in the arms, being coloured azure and gules, enclosed within a square frame, with a red between two black lines.

Much painting seems to have been done in the 18th century, in addition to whitewashing. Traces are to be seen on the wall above the chancel arch, the outline round the easternmost arch of the north arcade, over the south wall subjects, and on the north wall of the

<sup>3</sup> *Records of Bucks*, Vol. IX., No. 7.

south aisle. In the Churchwardens' book the following interesting entry occurs, which in all probability gives the date and the name of the artist for this work:— " Nov. 21, 1730. Paid Saml. Ward's bill for painting ye Ch. ----- £14-14-0." The painting consisted of blue and yellow curtains, with cords and tassels, with black outline and shading, probably framing additional texts, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, etc.

#### MISCELLANEA

Mention should be made of numerous small crosses lightly incised or scratched on the north-west return wall of the chancel. In an earlier day they would probably have been called " pilgrims' marks or crosses." They are, however, undoubtedly mediaeval, and were probably made to mark the taking of a vow or solemn resolution.

Several fragments of mediaeval glass were found, but none of importance save one quarry having a yellow quatrefoil flower on it, probably of the 15th century.

A staple hole, filled with oxidised material, in the west impost of the west pier of the north arcade probably indicates the means to hang a lamp before the painting of the Crucifixion on that face of the pier, as was usual in the larger churches like St. Albans.

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