

## THE RESTORATION OF WEST BRIDGEFORD CHURCH

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In 1871 West Bridgeford was still a pretty country village, and the railway had not done away with the footpath through the fields leading to the church, which hitherto had not undergone the ordeal of "restoration." Living then at Snenton, I frequently took a walk across the Trent Bridge to West Bridgeford church. The restoration of the church took place in the latter part of that year, and I made constant visits to it during the progress of the work, and took careful notes about it on each occasion I was there. It may be of interest to those who have only known St. Giles' Church in its present restored condition to have some account of its former state, and the restoration which was carried out under the direction of a local architect.

The church was, no doubt, in want of considerable repair, and the interior was disfigured by high deal pews of irregular shape, whilst a singing gallery, erected about seventy or eighty years ago, blocked up the tower arch. The chancel was filled with square pews, put up some time in the twenties or early thirties, at a time when the use of a chancel was pretty well forgotten, or was viewed as an anachronism, or, at best, a survival from "Roman" days. The chancel appears to have been new-roofed then, and was generally "beautified," a process which was as destructive in the days of our grandfathers as "restorations" are now. A flat ceiling had been put in, blocking up part of the two beautiful east windows of the chancel, as well as the curious triangle window above them. The easternmost lancet window on the north side of the chancel was then walled up, and the exterior stuccoed to represent masonry. Benches - taken, it is said, from St. Mary's, Nottingham - formerly existed in the chancel, but these were replaced by the pews already mentioned. Over the chancel screen had been a singing loft, but this was done away with, as well as the staircase on the south side which led up to it. The architect during the restoration pulled down some portion of the north wall in an unsuccessful attempt to discover the stairs to this rood loft. Whitewash covered the whole of the interior, but, depressing in appearance as whitewashed walls are, many will agree in the opinion that bare rubble walls, roughly pointed, are not a bit better in appearance.

There were several fragments of stained glass of considerable merit still left in the windows. A fine medallion in a window on the north side of the nave was broken shortly before the restoration. Other glass was destroyed in the course of the process; amongst it was the coat of arms of the ancient lords of the manor - the Luterels, who died out in the male line as long ago as the year 1418. That so interesting a relic - their sole memento in the place - should have been thus destroyed, is a fact which reflects great discredit upon the architect, rector, and others responsible for the restoration. In the same window was also the shield of the Alfreton family, and this shared the fate of the Luterel coat.

But those who wish for a fuller description of the unrestored church will find it on a couple of little pamphlets written by the late Mr. S. Dutton Walker a few years before. We are now more concerned with the restoration. The first steps were taken on the 11th of August, 1871, when the workmen, without any adequate supervision, commenced to remove the fittings and to strip the plaster from the walls. My first visit was made on 21st August. By that time, a little window in the gable of the porch, which had been plastered up, was exposed to view, and the lancet window in the chancel before mentioned had been opened out. In connection with the latter, a most interesting discovery was made. The window jambs and arch were painted in a sort of distemper to represent sienna and white marble in a somewhat conventional manner. On the western side was a large shield of early form outlined with a broad black line. It was in height 2 ft. 8 in., and 1 ft. 9 in. wide, and bore argent, five fusils gules, each charged with an escallop of the field. The fusils, which were 17 in. long, were painted in vermillion, and the escallops were outlined in black. These appear to have been the arms of the ancient Nottinghamshire family of Aslacton, of Aslacton, though no mention

of this family is to be found in the pages of Thoroton in connection with West Bridgeford. The day after these particulars had been noted, this interesting painting was scraped off by the workman.

All the pews in the church were taken out, and numerous fragments of the ancient oak bench ends and poppyheads - many of them handsomely carved in various designs - were found worked up in the modern pews. What became of them ? They might have been utilized as patterns for new seats, which would have had a far more handsome appearance than the present vanished pine benches. But restorers like to have a clean sweep and to have everything quite new, spick and span, all complete for the opening ceremony. Money is never too plentiful, and the natural result is that much of the new work thus hastily put in is of a cheap and flimsy character. Far better would it be if they could be induced to follow an old motto, "*festina lentè*," and carry out church restoration by degrees. An opportunity was lost at West Bridgeford. Of several of these bench ends the Writer made sketches before they disappeared.

The space between the top of the chancel screen and arch was filled up with a lath and plaster partition, on which were the royal arms. This was removed, thus revealing the fact that the chancel roof was lower than the arch. Here was a clear indication that those who rebuilt the nave in the Perpendicular period contemplated also the rebuilding of the chancel. As that, of course, was not now to be thought of, the restorers were obliged to raise the chancel walls, and the roof as well, a couple of feet to enable them to clear the arch. This, though a decided improvement to the interior, has, unfortunately, somewhat injured the external appearance of the church, since the apex of the chancel roof over-tops the nave. The triangular window at the east end was raised two feet six inches, and the old red stone tracery, being much decayed, was replaced by new work in white stone of similar design, though executed in a somewhat mechanical manner. It is open to question whether it would not have been preferable to have raised the chancel walls still higher, and then to have placed upon them a flat roof of perpendicular character to better accord with the nave, both inside and out, than does the present arrangement. A series of small clerestory windows in the chancel would have obviated any objection which would have arisen had the raised walls been left blank.

The removal of the plaster and fittings disclosed several features belonging an earlier building than the present. Thus the floor of the nave had evidently been raised, and it appeared that there was formerly a doorway on the north side of the nave, though this must have been disused some centuries, since the lower part of the jambs only remained, the upper having been removed in the Decorated period to make way for a window. The width of the door was 3 ft. 9 in. In this south aisle, a little west of the entrance, was found a small doorway, perhaps leading to a parvise over the porch; it was nearly square-headed, about 5 ft. 2 in. high by 1 ft. 10 in. wide. There was a heavy mediaeval oak door to the porch, evidently having been removed from the inner doorway, which the workmen were allowed to bum for firewood, though it might well have been repaired. What became of its ponderous key, some fifteen inches long?

At the east end of the aisle were uncovered some foundation walls, which doubtless carried some sort of a screen, parting off from the church a side chapel, which a double piscina with ogee arches showed must formerly have existed here. The carved stone corbels carrying the struts of the roof were somewhat decayed, and though they were of good design were ruthlessly cleared away.

On the nave wall, between the two north windows, had been painted the Commandments, and below them were traces in red of some earlier mural decoration. The chancel screen was temporarily removed. One feature should be noted about the double east widow: part of the sill of the more northerly one was formerly a foot lower. Coloured decoration remained on the arch on the north side; the crest was painted a sea green, and the mouldings green and vermillion. It is clear

there must have been some brilliant colouring in the mediaeval Bridgeford church; too striking, no doubt, for the sober taste of an age which delights in sage-greens and old gold. Traces of colour, a dull red, were found on the jambs of the east window of the aisle, as well as on the south wall of the chancel; in fact, the whole of the chancel was painted in colour, even the exterior.\*

The middle north lancet window in the chancel was converted into a doorway for the vestry, and the westernmost lancet, which had been cut away and altered into a square debased window, 1 ft. 6 in. by 2 ft. 6 in., gave way to the arch of an organ chamber, in which was eventually placed an old organ discarded from Snenton Church. This organ chamber was roofed with the tiles raken from the chancel. Only about twenty inches of the lower part of this lancet remained intact; the window itself had been eleven inches wide. It may be worth while noting that in the demolition of the chancel wall old arched stones of some earlier building were found. By November one of the doves in the stained glass of the east window of the aisle had disappeared, as also the stained glass, a crown in the second south window. The two alabaster sepulchral slabs in the chancel were cut up to form the communion step; one of the slabs, that which lay next to the chancel door, was found to be inverted, thus indicating some earlier disturbance of the floor.

It may be worth while to record some traditions about the church told by a workman in 1871, then aged about 74. The chancel, he stated, had been re-roofed about fifty years before, and the easternmost lancet then bricked up, as well as the upper part of the two east windows. In place of the pews in the chancel, there were benches which had been brought from St. Mary's at Nottingham. Over the chancel screen was a singing loft, though little used, as it was unsafe, and the wooden stair at the south end of the screen was removed. One singular assertion he made was that the original site of the church was in Barrack (?) Close, near the pinfold.

Though not relevant to the subject of this article, the restoration of the church, a question may be put which perhaps some reader may answer. It is: what is the correct reading of the black-letter inscription on the south side of the tower, some twenty feet or so from the ground, on the left-hand side? Singularly enough, it seems to have escaped Mr. Godfrey's notice; at any rate, he does not refer to it in his "Churches of Notts."

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\* Since writing the earlier portion of this article, I have had an opportunity of consulting Mr. Godfrey's excellent monograph on the churches of Rushcliffe Hundred, and the list of rectors therein contained shows that John de Aslacton, junior, was instituted 28th July, 1349, on the presentation of Sir Andrew Luterel, and was succeeded on his death, some twenty years later, by Thomas de Owthorpe. In this fact we have a clear confirmation of the identification of the arms painted on the jamb of the chancel window with those of the Aslacton family. They were doubtless put during the twenty years (1349-1369) of this rector's incumbency, and may, perhaps, indicate the date when the north wall of the chancel was rebuilt. It is an apt illustration of the way in which interesting antiquities are frequently destroyed through the inadequate supervision given by those responsible for church restoration.

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