

THE STORY OF
BRIDGWATER PARISH CHURCH

by

T. BRUCE DILKS B A , F.R.Hist.S.

With Illustrations (9th Edition)

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Editorial note

This text was digitised from the 9th edition. As this contains photographs by Douglas Allen, who did not begin working in the town until the mid 1950s, and also an organ fund of 1961 was mentioned, it is presumed publication was in the mid 1960s. The illustrations have been omitted.

Edited by Tony & Jane Woolrich, 28/09/2019



THE Parish Church of Bridgwater, in Somerset, is dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin. The living is in the gift of the Sovereign, acting through the Lord Chancellor. The tithes are in the hands of the Corporation of Bridgwater.

THE TOWER AND SPIRE

No-one approaching the town can fail to be attracted by this tall slender spire standing on its four-square tower of red sandstone. Nor can one fail to notice the unusual proportion existing between the heights of spire and tower. Contrary to the Continental practice an English spire is somewhat longer than its tower, and in some churches the ratio is as much as three to two. But the spire of St. Mary's is almost twice the height of the tower and in this matter of proportion is, I believe, unique.

Within twenty years of the terrible plague known as the Black Death, the parishioners decided to build a spire on the summit of the old tower. Much money was collected and the work began on the 28th of June, 1367, when the first timber for scaffolding was hoisted to the tower top. The timber was felled in the royal forest of Petherton, which skirted the parish boundaries on the south. The stone used was the fawn-coloured Ham Hill stone brought down the river in barges and forming a pleasing contrast with the red sandstone of the tower quarried in the neighbouring parish of Wembdon.

Those two strong buttresses at the corners of the west side were not in the original scheme, but may have been added at this time or soon after—possibly in 1383-5, when much " walling " to the tower was done — in order to strengthen the base for the added weight of the spire. The turret also at the south-east angle, in which there is a spiral staircase, lends

stability to the structure, while a third device to the same end is the huge heavily-weighted pendulum which hangs in the spire.

Work on the spire continued for a good many years and was a constant source of expenditure. That small door which leads on to the roof of the nave is mentioned in the accounts of 1447-8, and earlier still " the small door in the church near the campanile " underwent repair. If I am asked to date the west doorway and the two-light window above it, I would suggest the fifteenth century or, possibly, the late fourteenth.

On the morning before the battle of Sedgemoor, the Duke of Monmouth ascended the tower and by the aid of a spy-glass observed the King's army encamped on the plain by Westonzoyland. His heart was heavy, for he knew something of the value of those troops as a fighting force. The same night he led out his poorly armed followers in a lost cause and within a few hours was a fugitive.

THE BELLS

At one time, though now no longer, bell-founding was carried on in Bridgwater, and in America there is at least one bell which was cast here. There is, I believe, no earlier account of the casting of a great bell than that which was made here for the parish church in the early years of the fourteenth century.

To-day there is a full peal of eight bells, but, after a careful examination of the wardens' accounts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, I have concluded that there were only three in mediaeval times—great, second and little. In Elizabethan days there were probably more—perhaps four or five.

The ringers are all lovers of their craft and give their services freely. They number thirteen and of these six or eight are called on to ring a peal. Each ringer is able to ring any one of the eight bells. Grandsire triples and Stedman's triples are the peals we are accustomed to hear from them.

No. 6 bell carries the prayer engraved on it, " From lightning and tempest Good Lord deliver us," reminding us of the practice of ringing the church bells during a storm in order to assuage it.

The tenor bell weighs 1 ton 7 cwt. 3 qrs. 41b., and the clapper 60 lb.

THE CLOCK

Although St. Mary's was furnished with a clock as long ago as 1383-5, probably resembling that which may today be seen in London and which came from Wells Cathedral, it has long since ceased to exist.

In 1869 the present clock was placed in the tower. The mayor of 1867, John B. Hammill, had obtained the necessary money. The makers were the Nottingham firm, S. & W. Cope, and the works are constructed on the principle of a double three-legged gravity escapement which was invented for the great clock at the Houses of Parliament, and is considered the most perfect escapement ever devised for use in turret and all large clocks subject to weather and wind pressure.

THE NAVE

We may reasonably suppose that there was a Saxon building, but there is no vestige of it and even Norman remains are very doubtful. But in the days of William Briwer, the builder of the castle and founder of the borough, the Norman gave way to the Early English design and the area of the church was extended to its present size so far as concerns the nave and aisles. Early English work may be seen all along the north aisle and north transept and it is noteworthy that the area thus indicated is much greater than was usually to be found in the parish churches of those days. Side chapels were not added until many years later.

The arcade of six arches on the north and its fellow on the south belong to the late fourteenth century. The clerestory windows are modern.

The roof in early days was probably timbered, but in the early nineteenth century it was of plaster replaced in the middle of that century by the present fine hammer-beam or variety, of hammer-beam roof, called by some a Somerset waggon roof. The figures at the base of the principals—the great beams—are of course equally modern and so are the figures of the evangelists in niches at the four comers. The western arch, leading into the tower, is Early English.

The font is mentioned in the later years of the fourteenth century. It was in 1598

that Robert Blake was born in a house not far removed from the church and was here received into the Church of his fathers. The font cover was restored early in the present century. The Greek inscription is a palindrome and spells the same words whether read forward or backward.

The carved oak pulpit is one of the chief glories of St. Mary's. It dates from the early years of the fifteenth century, and is considered a fine specimen of the wood-carver's art.

At the apex of the arch where the nave ends and the chancel begins is a large iron hook. From that hook the crucifix known as the High or Great Cross, or Rood, depended in mediaeval days. It rested on the Rood Screen. On either side stood figures of the Virgin Mother and St. John the Beloved.

These tragic figures were removed in the course of the sixteenth century, and later a Jacobean screen of rich oak carving was extended across the church, so that the pulpit stood on the west of the two screens, and the mayor and his brethren sat in pews within the enclosure and faced westward. To-day this latter screen forms a parclose of the chapel in which the mayor and corporation sit on occasion.

The lighting of the mediaeval nave must have been beautiful. Before the rood was the "beam" on which candles, few or many, could be placed. The real, rowel or trendal, was a circle of lights hung from the roof. It might contain 12 to 20 tapers and was kept burning on feast days. On All Hallows' Eve the nave was lighted also with the All Souls' candles placed before the Great Cross, and the bedeman made his round of the town calling on all men to pray for the souls of the departed. Money was collected for these lights, as well as for the maintenance of the rowel, the font taper and the Easter candle.

THE AISLES AND TRANSEPTS

The moulding of those Early English recesses in the north aisle is of exquisite simplicity. Note the lid of a child's stone coffin, the so-called "crusader's" coffin with sword and cross, the beautiful "decorated" window at the west end on the south side, possibly of the later part of the fourteenth century, though so much restoration has been effected in the fabric that it is most difficult to say what is old

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and what is modern. Note also the fragment of an old font with finely carved pedestal, built into the wall within the north porch. The " parvise " —to use the word adapted in modern times—above the north porch, was the clerk's room. Here he had his temporary abode while he was in charge of the lights and the sanctus bell.

The tympanum of the north door is worthy of notice and above it the beautiful rose window, flanked by canopied niches, though here again it is difficult to say where restoration has crept in. The visitor may amuse himself by discovering in the tracery of the windows the four emblems of hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades. It is at the north door that a gift of loaves to poor parishioners is made every Sunday. The opening in the inner wall through which the gift is made is one of three, which formed a hagioscope or squint, through which the clerk might view the elevation of the host and time the ringing of the sanctus bell at the right moment of the ceremony. A Victorian " restoration " made away with the other two apertures and we are deprived of seeing what was perhaps a unique sequence of squints penetrating three walls.

THE CHAPELS

The chapels came in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries to broaden the area of the church east of the transepts and beautify it greatly.

On the east side of the north door, probably, stood the chapel of St. Katherine, which existed in 1385. We are fortunate in having a list of the vestments and ornaments belonging to this chapel, containing complete sets of vestments as well as odd copes and chasubles ; altar cloths, fallings, fringes, banners and towels, a mass book with silver clasps ; chalice, corporals, sacring bells, candlesticks, cruets and a book containing the names of the members of the guild. This is followed by a rental of St. Katherine's property.

There were two altars of the Holy Cross, of which one was placed on the great Rood Screen erected in the early fifteenth century. The other was in a chapel above the charnel house, a separate building outside the church walls.

Doubt has long existed regarding the

respective sites of the chapel of the Holy Trinity and the chapel of St. George. These with Our Lady's chapel survived till the dissolution brought the whole system of chantries to an end in the English Church, and they were the three most important in St. Mary's. The discovery of the sign of the Trinity on a boss in the ceiling on the south side of the chancel had already led to the supposition that the chapel of the Holy Trinity lay on the south side of the altar, when fresh light was gained from the inspection of a will dated 1551 — three years after the dissolution— showing irrefutably that St. George's must be placed on the north side, probably where the organ is to-day.

The important chantry of Holy Trinity, which finally surpassed Our Lady's in wealth, was associated with the Gild Merchant, as is found not infrequently in mediaeval town history. It is mentioned first in a document of 1403, and in 1408 Mistress Joan Hert left to Mistress Joan Fote a tenement which she was to enjoy for life and which was then to pass to the guild of Holy Trinity. In 1415 Mistress Iseult Cave directed that she was to be buried in the Chapel of Holy Trinity in front of the " image," which may mean picture, of the Holy Trinity.

Behind the High Altar, possibly, was the ancient Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of which we first learn in the thirteenth century when pious burgesses left property for its maintenance. The High Cross of which the church-wardens were also wardens was the second object of pious gifts in those days. The borough is fortunate in possessing fourteenth-century accounts of St. Mary's Chantry ; the earliest is dated 1369 and I believe that they are some of the oldest chantry accounts extant. The chantry was refounded in 1393 and valuable documents relating to its customs have been preserved. It was the most ancient and important of all, though that of Holy Trinity seems to have become the more popular during the fifteenth century.

The modern chapel of St. George is where the mediaeval chapel of the Holy Trinity stood. It has been recently restored and on 11th November, 1920 was dedicated to the memory of the men of Bridgwater who sacrificed their lives in the

Great War. The inscription is placed in an ancient recess, of which there is a duplicate in the chapel facing it. We have already referred to the parclose screen which divides this chapel from the chancel. The screen on the west side is modern and like that on the west of the organ is the work of the brothers Gulliford of Bridgwater.- In this chapel are many interments of the Sealey and Plowman families.

There is no clue to the locality of the Chapel of All Saints. I have ventured to place it next in order on the south side, and possibly that of St. Ann filled the remaining space up to the south porch. There is now one large enclosure on the supposed area of these two chapels which is occupied on special occasions by the Mayor and Corporation. The most noteworthy feature is the fine Jacobean screen which formerly crossed the nave, an unusually great specimen of wood carving of the early seventeenth century. There is a piscina on the south wall.

Besides these chantry chapels, to which must be added that of St. Erasmus, altars were erected in the church of St. Sunday, St. Gregory and St. James.

THE CHANCEL .

The east window is in the Perpendicular style, but is modern. Of the two screens that on the south side is not in such good condition as that on the north, and some think that it is at least a part of the old rood screen. Perhaps we shall be nearer the truth in surmising that these fifteenth-century screens are by the same carvers as the rood screen. Access to the pulpit is gained by means of an old oak doorway at the west end of the north screen. Note the fine bench end and the mediaeval misericord on the south side of the sanctuary. In the corner is a piscina.

The vestment and ornaments of the middle ages we know only through inventories, accounts and wills. Not a shred nor a piece remain to us. There is now nothing dating earlier than the latter years of the sixteenth century. The church has one Elizabethan cup and cover by Jons of Exeter, dated 1584. The rest of the plate is all later.

THE ALTAR-PIECE

We know something of the story of this great picture, though we do not know the

secret of its origin. That is hidden from us. Even what we do know is not based entirely on documentary authority, but partly at least on tradition.

It has been handed down that Lord Anne Poulett, being at Plymouth, was present at the dispersal of the spoils of a prize taken in the wars which were waged in the earlier years of the reign of George the Third. Among them was this picture, though whence it came—from what ship, what town, what country—we do not know. Lord Anne bought it and eventually gave it to Bridgwater and the gift must have been made in or before 1785, the year in which he died. And that is all we know.

Who was the creator of this great work of art? There is no final consensus of opinion on the answer to this question, though all the critics are agreed on the magnificence of the work. Much can be said in favour of attributing the picture to the brush of Murillo. Dr. Russel Forbes has pointed out the strong likeness existing between two of the women in this picture—the standing figure and the woman supporting our Lord's head—and those in "The Adoration of St. Catherine," apart from the colour, manner and naturalness of the composition.

Other critics will not allow that it is even Spanish, let alone Murillo's. According to them it is more like the work of Tiepolo or of his school, while Von Haden, the author of *The Drawings of G. B. Tiepolo*, altogether rejects the idea of it being produced by that artist.

After all, what does it really matter whether it is the work of Caracci or Le Seuer, of Guido or Tiepolo, or of Murillo ! It is the picture itself, when all is said and done, that really matters. Whoever may have been the artist, we can enjoy its rare technique, as Sir Joshua Reynolds is said to have done, breaking his long coach journeys between London and Plymouth, in order that he might sit before it and study it. We can enjoy its wonderful colouring and the quiet restfulness which pervades it. We can look upon it until we find a deeper movement of the mind and heart than any admiration of technique or colour or repose can effect. The mind is purified by the terror and pity of the scene before us, and we realize that "nothing but the Infinite pity is sufficient for the infinite pathos of human life." After all,

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does it matter who painted it !

THE ORGAN

In 1448-9 we find the first mention of an organ in St. Mary's, when the churchwardens paid 18s. 3d. for making " ij bilewes pro les organes."

The instrument whose glorious notes fill our church to-day was built in 1871 by " Father " Willis, and was modernised and brought up to date in 1922. Yet further improvements have been made in 1938.

In 1961 a Fund was opened for a still more complete renovation to be carried out.

THE CHURCHYARD

The large round stone lying at the east end of the churchyard near the gate is part of the base of the old Pig Cross which was standing in Penel Orliou till well into the last century.

A rectangular tomb which will be noticed at the southeast corner of the church was formerly pointed out as that of John Oldmixon, the historian, who lived from 1673 to 1742. It certainly belonged to the family, but his name does not appear on it and he was probably buried elsewhere.

The last burial that took place here was that of James Hartnall in 1866, who had lived to be 102. His grave is by the south porch.

Lastly, you may care to visit the recumbent effigies lying on the north side of the church by the Chapel of the Holy Rood, under the five-light window. They are weather-worn and mutilated, but are not without interest for they are probably of fourteenth-century date. They are of Ham Hill stone. One of them probably represents a civilian in hosen and cote, hands raised in prayer, head on bolster and animal at feet.

Such is a brief answer to the possible questioning of the visitor to St. Mary's.

T. BRUCE DILKS.

POSTSCRIPT

In the ninth edition of this handbook it is fitting that a note should be added on the recent work done on the fabric and furniture of the church. A building, dedicated as this is, has in it a certain life and growth, almost as if it were a living

creature, and each succeeding age impresses on it something of its own artistry and inspires it with something of its own feeling after the beautiful.

Some ninety years ago our grandfathers, by ejecting galleries and raising the roof of the nave, greatly increased the space of the building, and at the same time they introduced certain decorations which were distinctively Victorian.

In 1937 a wide scheme, costing nearly £3,000, raised entirely by voluntary subscription, was devised and has since been carried out by Messrs. J. Dawson & Sons of Clutton, Bristol, under the supervision of Mr. Colthurst, of Messrs. Samson & Colthurst, Bridgwater. Valuable advice was given by Dr. Eeles, Miss Scott and others. This in its turn reflected the attitude of our own age towards the church decoration. This attitude seeks after a restoration of the spirit which permeated later mediaeval architecture.

Before the interior decoration, however, could be considered, the condition of the stone surface of walls, tower and spire called for immediate and drastic treatment. This was done most thoroughly and the corrosion due to weather may now be disregarded for many years to come. The whole of the parapets were taken down and rebuilt with red sandstone, similar to that used in the great cathedral at Liverpool. In addition to this, lime stone, Doultling stone, Ham Hill stone and Bath stone were material for other parts of the restoration.

This work on the exterior is, of course, entirely material in value and has made no aesthetic change. With the interior it is altogether otherwise.

Let it be at once acknowledged that the wish to give back to the church its mediaeval character cannot be entirely fulfilled. Later additions, such as the Jacobean screen, the Kingsmill monument, and the great picture, all of the seventeenth century, have become too much intrinsic parts of the interior beauty to allow of their removal, even if such a devastation could be imagined.

Yet some things could be done without disturbing these.

Such stonework in the walls as

remained bare and in its native colouring, particularly at the west end, has been plastered and the whole of the interior walling has been coloured in an ivory white, which enhances the lighting of the building and particularly that of the roof.

The altar has been lowered by the height of two steps and fitted with dossal and riddles, while both these and the frontal have been chosen of such colours and texture as might best harmonize with the altarpiece.

Yet one more opinion on the date of the great picture, that of a distinguished German expert, may be added. The work may be placed, he judges, about 1650, but not more than twenty years earlier.

The altar rail, which was of conventional brass, has been replaced by one of antique carved oak, more in keeping with the surrounding screens. The coloured tiles of the sanctuary floor have been removed and plain Clipsham stone substituted.

In some of the windows new glass has been introduced, and an additional inner door has been placed at the north porch.

Two recent discoveries are of special interest to the antiquarian. It was believed that the bosses in the roof of the chancel were of mediaeval workmanship. This judgement has now been confirmed by the finding of an inscription on one of them recording the name of Brother William Patehulle, Master of the Hospital at the East Gate. We know from a MS. in the possession of the Corporation that Wm. Patehulle was Master in 1393, and as he died in 1422, the date of the work can be fixed approximately.

The second discovery was made in the Cemetery Chapel. A desk, which had been relegated there many years ago, has been found to be of very early date, possibly of the latter end of the fourteenth century.

The eight sides are carved tracery of the Decorated style. What the original use of this lantern-shaped piece of church furniture was is a moot question. It may have been suspended to the roof with the pyx tabernacle hanging from it, or it may have formed the lower portion of a lectern. The considerable bulk of the base favours the latter guess, the carving under the base suggests the former. It is now used as a credence table and stands in the sanctuary.