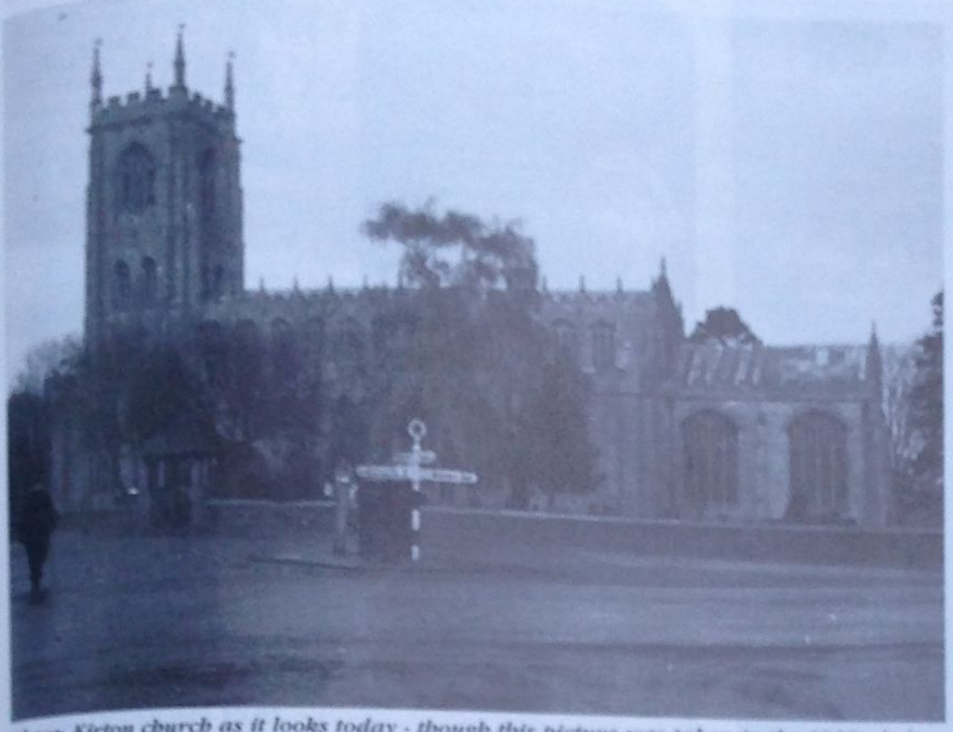

Above: Kirton church as it looks today - though this picture was taken in the 1930s; below right: The old church at Kirton, after the Burgesses' engraving of 1797 (drawn by Ken Pearson)

The Gunpowder Plot of Kirton

Ken Pearson reveals the true story of the mutilation of Kirton's 'fenland cathedral' in the last century

THE CHURCHES of the 'townland' settlements - the ancient villages along the Wash shore-line - have been called a string of architectural pearls. For more than half of this millennium one of the largest was at Kirton: a cruciform structure which, though but a parish church, had been dubbed 'the cathedral of the fens' because of its size and impressive appearance.

When William and Hilkiah Burgess drew and made an engraving of Kirton church in 1797 they wrote that it was "reckoned the most magnificent village church in the kingdom". At the time, however, all was not well; their notes added that the church was "dangerously decayed, as is instanced in the reclining state of its tower and south transept."

That view was confirmed a few years later in 'Views in the County of Lincoln' by Howlett, which reported that one of the four massive pillars on which the tower stood was "in a dangerous state of decay, so as to threaten instant destruction to this venerable pile." The bell-ringers of the late eighteenth century must have been a fearless band; ignoring a warning of 1789 which mentioned a crack in the tower which closed and opened a distance of three inches when the bells were rung, they continued pulling the ropes with that colossal tonnage of rickety stonework swaying above them.

Nothing was done until 1803 when, the churchwardens having been excommunicated for neglect of the church's fabric, the services of William Hayward, architect, of Lincoln, and Samuel Knight, stonemason, of Gosberton, were enlisted. The contract between them and the new churchwardens specified that the tower and transepts should be dismantled, the materials "to be kept and used again to the best advantage."

At this stage, perhaps a difference arose between what the people of Kirton expected and what was possible within the church's financial capability. The physical result was a church no longer cruciform in plan; the dismantled tower was rebuilt from new foundations at the west end of the nave, with a smaller chancel to the east. A public outcry ensued, and William Hayward was declared the villain of the piece. He became a local Guy Fawkes, accused of "blowing up the central tower" of the village's beloved church.

The local indignation found its way into Murray's 'Handbook of Lincolnshire', which stated that the rebuilt church "excites more indignation than admiration, having been barbarously hacked in 1804 by a savage architect named Hayward, who, by the aid of gunpowder and ropes, pulled down the noble central tower".

If there was a gunpowder plot by Hayward, no historical evidence of it has come to light. The local historian Ron Drury, formerly a Kirton resident, examined the contracts and records of the restoration and found no mention of gunpowder. Even had there been, it would be no surprise if an experienced architect and a practising stonemason had decided that, in the interests of workers' safety, parts of the unstable structure they faced would best be felled by controlled charges of explosives. Canal engineers and quarrymen had long been familiar with such methods.

It is understandable that the Kirton of 1804 smarted from the loss of its 'fenland cathedral', though it was perhaps inevitable that such a loss should occur. The local importance of the place had declined: it was no longer the head of a wapentake, its courthouse and jail had ceased to operate, and the recent turnpiking of the main road now enabled produce and livestock to be taken more easily to the bigger market in Boston. Kirton was faced with the prospect of becoming a village rather than a town.

So perhaps the real gunpowder plot was one hatched by local people - an attempt to pay back Hayward by discrediting him in the eyes of church authorities and to warn others against employing an architect who would blow up their church. The legend had been echoing around for almost two centuries; writers of guidebooks and other publications tend to ignore the church Kirton now has and concentrate instead on the story of the "magnificent church... so strangely altered and mutilated by a ruthless architect called Hayward..." ('Highways and Byways in Lincolnshire', by W F Rawnsley, 1926). And the gunpowder plot story persisted right up to October 1987, in a Lincolnshire Life article.

When Nikolaus Pevsner viewed the present Kirton church for his 'Buildings of Lincolnshire' he wisely declined to mention gunpowder. His immediate reaction was simply: "A town church in a village." He recognised that the building is still very impressive, rich in both architectural detail and historic interest.

Perhaps between now and the bicentenary of the restoration somebody will hatch another gunpowder plot, to blow up some of the massive churchyard trees and let passers-by on High Street see the results of it. ❑

(With acknowledgements to Mr Ron Drury's letter to the editor of Lincolnshire Life, December 1987.)