

The Parish Church of All Saints Holbeach

A Lecture delivered in the Church Hall, Holbeach

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by

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This is probably the most familiar view of Holbeach Church. William Burgess drew something like it nearly two hundred years ago, postcards have reproduced it since, and although this particular photograph was taken in the eighteen eighties, most of us see a view very like it every time we walk down the High Street. It was first published in 1890 in a booklet imposingly entitled **Architectural and Ecclesiological Notes on Holbeach Church**, written by Henry Peet, a Liverpoolian druggist, who had been born, 1856, in the predecessor of the house just east of the Mansion House. He was the son of Major Flintham Peet a wine and spirit merchant of this town, and married a member of the Tinsley family - all are buried in Holbeach Cemetery.

Henry Peet's work originated in a paper he read on the evening of Tuesday 18th November 1890 to the members of the Holbeach Literary Society. In seventeen closely printed pages, supplemented by a number of illustrations, Peet provided the fullest description of All Saint's Church available to date, and outlined his account of the history and development of the building. In many ways it is an excellent work - marred, alas, by a plagiaristic claim to other people's drawings - but the two more recent booklets on the church, by Canon Hutchinson and Kathleen Major, are heavily dependent upon it.

Peet saw the church as a finely built building, uniform in style, constructed in the course of a few decades during the fourteenth century, and little altered since. Indeed, this is the case, but it lulled Peet into a false sense of security, to the extent that he wrote:

"... it fortunately presents few difficulties to the student, being one of those architectural books in which he who runs may read."

In his implication that the fabric of the church contains most of what we can learn of its history, Peet is correct, but the reading is done by walking carefully, rather than by running, and the story we can read is confusing and incomplete. I hope, today, to take you through the architectural book that is Holbeach Church, and to reveal a little of the history of the building, and of our town.

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Retaining the metaphor, Chapter One of the book is found under a trap-door beside the first pillar on the left as you enter the church from the High Street. At first it looks like the foundations of the pillar, but closer examination shows that this is no rough-hewn stone, intended to be hidden, but a well-finished disc, with a chamfered circumference. I have measured it and calculated that the diameter is about seven feet, and that its centre is not the centre of the pillar that stands upon it. We have here the base of a pillar from the church our present building replaced. When the floor of the western end of the church was resurfaced a few years ago, I saw similar bases under the next pillar to the west, and under the respond near to the tower, although, short of digging under the tower, there seems no way of deciding whether the base under the respond is a half disc, which would mean that the west end of the former nave was in a similar position to that of the present nave, or a full disc, in which case the former nave would have extended some distance further west.

The floor was completely re-laid in 1871, at which time these bases were first recorded, and, although the surviving accounts are somewhat ambiguous, it would seem that the next pillar of the northern arcade, that is the third from the tower, also has a like base, but the fourth probably does not. I have seen the fifth base, and despite the masking effect of modern and Victorian concrete, it is clear that its base is conformal with the pillar. No older bases seem to have been recorded for any pillars in the southern arcade, indeed, the first pillar, the one beside the font, is certainly founded on two conformal square blocks of increasing size, as was revealed in 1990.

Unfortunately the further fragments of this building, which are recorded as existing in the Vestry as recently as 1940, seem to be lost, and without them, the dating of the earlier church is quite difficult. Comparable round bases can be seen in Whaplode church, supporting pillars of the last quarter of the twelfth century, but these are only four feet across and square edged, being secondary to the rolled mouldings around the base of the quatrefoil pillars. In the same building, at the older east end, there are chamfered discs, but composite, and smaller too. These are dated c1140-50. The arcade of the earlier building at Holbeach was much more massive, probably made of simple drum-shaped pillars - a scaled down version of lowest stage of the nave arcade at Gloucester Cathedral would probably serve to give an idea of how it looked, but the position of the bases would widen the arches in proportion. So we must take a date somewhat later for this earlier All Saints, 1130-40 would be a reasonable guess. Nothing in the visible fabric will take us back beyond this date. We must temporarily use a different technique, relying to a large extent on conjecture and inference.

Holbeach, and the other towns and villages ringing the Wash were probably first settled in the seventh century AD. The silt ridge on which they lie would, at that time, have been dry enough for those sufficiently deperate to eke out a living. The whole of Holland was then a sort of no man's land between the kingdoms of the East Angles, Lindsey and the Middle Angles. Criminals and outlaws probably made up a large proportion of the first dozen or so Holbeckians and they were almost certainly pagans. In the eighth century, monks from Croyland would have converted these people to Christianity and served their spiritual needs at infrequent intervals by rowing or paddling across the fens to hold services, to marry and to baptize. The dead most likely made the journey the other way, going to Croyland for burial. An element of law and order would also have penetrated this wild, isolated frontier zone as Mercia began to dominate central England.

The arrival of the Danes in the ninth century no doubt weakened the influence of Christianity in the short term, but in the long term it seems to have brought greater stability to the area, and the Danes of the Five Boroughts probably held some sort of control west of the Nene. When, in the tenth century, King Alfred's children reincorporated the Danelaw in the new, united kingdom of England, Holland, including Holbeach, was secured as part of the sub-kingdom (later the earldom) of Mercia. A meticulous division of villages into hundreds and wapentakes regularized both the administration of law and of taxation, but an echo of the old frontier state remained in the huge size of the wapentake of Elloe, which covered the whole triangle between Pinchbeck, Crowland and Tydd. There is also some evidence that all of Elloe formed a single estate in the ownership of the Earls of Mercia. This unified ownership probably enabled the large scale drainage of both marsh and fen, which was to continue on and off for the next four hundred years. Part of the estate was settled on the refounded Croyland Abbey, which no doubt restored the religious life of the area on an even more regular basis than before.

This was the standard pattern throughout most of rural England. There were no parish churches, only mother churches, often called minsters, which served a group of villages. A parochial system only began to develop in the eleventh century when land owners began to set up churches for their manors. The churches and churchyards were owned by the lords of the manors, they could be a source of profit, and if the land was wanted for some other use, the church would be moved. We know, for example, that the church which served Sutton and Tydd was moved twice, and later Spalding church was relocated to serve the interests of the then owners, the monks of Spalding Priory. At this time, that is the first half of the eleventh century, proprietorial churches were

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probably established in Spalding, Holbeach and Sutton/Tydd; Gedney and Moulton might also be included in the list.

Apart from Ketill's church at Tydd, this list must be conjectural, albeit on reasonable grounds. Only Ketill's church is mentioned in Domesday Book, and that because of a dispute over ownership. It may well be that the "Men of Holland" did not bother to declare churches to the Commissioners - in which case we might well ask where the first, possibly early eleventh century church of Holbeach might have been.

The main manor of Holbeach was that of Holbeach Hall, granted by the Conqueror to Alan, Count of Brittany. Its administrative centre was almost certainly located at the first bend in Hallgate, where Hall Hill Road joins Hallgate, opposite the old Council Depot. A substantial mound still marks the position of the original fenced enclosure and the name Hall Hill comes from the farm house which occupied the site, and which had earlier been called Holbeach Hall. To this day the farm just over the road is called Manor Farm.

Close beside Holbeach Hall, between Hallgate and the old Holbeach River, there was a chapel on another mound, dedicated to St Peter. It ceased to exist as a chapel before the Reformation, but in the twelfth century it was intimately associated with All Saints. The chapel was discovered in 1719, when bodies were found during the construction of a ditch. William Stukeley recorded the excavation. The site was rediscovered in April 1868, including a stone which may have formed a door sill for the largely wooden chapel. Although an attempt was made to preserve the site as a burial ground, the mound was cleared and the plot sold in 1899 - St Peter's Villas were built there - and most of the remaining bones reinterred in Holbeach Cemetery.

The mere discovery of a chapel would not be very significant, there were several more in medieval Holbeach. It is the bodies that make the matter important. We can reject the claim that the burials followed some ancient battle, for the bodies included women and children as well as men. The burial ground was that of a whole community, and since it is associated with a Christian building, with no recorded finds that indicate a pagan Saxon cemetery, we must assume it to be a parochial burial ground, probably of an early date, and presumably before the present churchyard came into use. Burial was a jealously regarded privilege in the medieval period. Burials produced fees for the parish priest, and such fees could represent a significant portion of his parochial income. Even as late as the eighteen-fifties Canon Morton, then the Vicar of Holbeach, conducted a heated dispute with the Vestry over their plans to close the churchyard and establish a cemetery, because it would diminish his income, and he wanted adequate compensation. No early Rector of Holbeach would yield up burial fees to the chaplain of St Peter's.

The conclusion must be that St Peter's was the original parish church of Holbeach, built as such in the first half of the eleventh century. In that simple structure of wood, wattle, daub and reed thatch, I believe we have the beginning of the history of Holbeach Church, the subject of our study today.

The change in location may well have come when the vast pre-Norman estate of Elloe was broken up and distributed among those who followed William the Conqueror. In Holbeach, Count Alan's manor was handed over to Landric, one of Alan's Breton vassals. He may well have used it as one of his residences, perhaps his principal residence. Landric's great grandson, Conan, certainly spent a great deal of time in Holbeach, probably at Holbeach Hall. He fathered at least two illegitimate children in the town, one of whom he set up as Rector of Holbeach - William FitzConan, the first named Rector of whom we have knowledge. If Holbeach Hall was a major residence of an important baron, the adjacent church would have seemed eminently suitable for conversion to a private chapel. The villagers, however, would have needed a parish church, and so All Saints was built. The land under and around the High Street was, and no doubt technically still is, part of the manor which Landric then held, so there the new church was built, perhaps on an open or less used plot between the highest land and the river.

When did this happen? I do not know, but the end of the eleventh century seems a likely answer, in which case the arcade we can see today would represent the extension of the original All Saints by the formation of a north aisle. A reasonable guess would be that the first church was a simple two-celled structure with a nave about half the length of the present nave, and a small, possibly apsidal chancel, reaching roughly to the line of the present pulpit. The original church of Whaplode was about this length. Population growth in the twelfth century stimulated the enlargement to its present length.

Similar pressures must have operated at Holbeach, producing first the north aisle, and later an extension in length with, presumably a south aisle too. In 1200, the Holbeach River would have been wider, taking up part

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of the western side of the churchyard, so an extension at Holbeach would have been towards the east. At Whaplode, the river was east of the church, making a westwards extension more convenient. If the later extensions at Holbeach came late in the eleven hundreds - as did the extension at Whaplode - the style would have been transitional between Norman and Early English, with less substantial pillars, and consequently less substantial foundations, of no use to those who built the present structure.

This description is purely conjectural, "perhaps" and "possibly" have figured large in my text. Only a thorough excavation of the present church could decide for or against my view, but it does fit in with all we know of the surviving fabric of All Saints.

One further piece of evidence does survive, which also conforms to my account. At the east ends of the two aisles, the walls are cracked just over half way from the nave arcades to the aisle walls. Similar subsidence can just be detected two thirds of the way along the north and south walls of the chancel. It is as if we can see the ghost of the original church showing through into the present building. Close to the nave, the original foundations of the walls had already settled; when the length of the walls of aisles and chancel was increased to make the present walls, the new foundations settled a little further, and so the walls were strained and deformed. Within the north aisle, the floor was also cracked, roughly along what must have been the line of the north wall of the north aisle. The same phenomenon cannot be seen at the west ends of the aisles because their line is not that of the west end of the original church. From the position if the Norman base under the western respond, the original line must have been level with the responds, or a full bay further west, somewhere inside the present tower.

The question remains as to what happened to St Peter's. Although Conan had an illegitimate son, he had no legitimate heir by any of his four wives. Early in the thirteenth century his manors were sold to a neighbouring baron, Thomas de Multon, who had a perfectly adequate residence, and chapel, just south of Moulton. Holbeach Hall would remain only as an administrative centre, with no need for a chapel, which, being so close to All Saints, had no function, and so was presumably left to decay, a short process for a building of wood and thatch. Graves then had no markers, and the bodies would be too deep to bother the shallow ploughing of that time. Memories might live longer than the buildings, but a century or two would destroy all trace.

Beyond this guesswork, there is little evidence of the original church. Written sources merely confirm what we already know - that a church existed at Holbeach. The earliest known mention is in a deed of Pope Alexander (1159-1181) in which he confirmed the possessions of the Priory of Spalding, including:

"ecclesiam de Holbech cum omnibus pertinentiis suis"

that is the Church of Holbeach, what we would now call the Advowson, with all pertaining to it.

There is a further mention in Dugdale's *Imbanking and Drayning* (1662), where we read on page 211 a story he obtained from one of the Cottonian MSS:

"... it appears, that the Inhabitants of Holand (bordering on the North-side of Crouland) having drayned their own Marshes, and converted them to good and fertile arable land, wherof each Town had their proper portion, wanting pasturage for their Cattel, took advantage of a false rumour then spread of King Henry the second's death (it being the xxxv. and last year of his Reign, and he then beyond Sea) and bearing themselves not as little on their strength and wealth, thought that they might oppresse the poor Monks of Crouland, without any controul. Whereupon Gerard de Bamvill, Fulke d'Oiri, Thomas de Multon the elder, and Conan son of Helyas, who were much displeased with the said Monks of Crouland for other respects, associating to themselves Richard de Flet, and Walter, with many others, came to Nicholas then Prior of Spalding, and moved him to be their Leader: and to augment the number, all the chief men of Ellow Wapentake, some few excepted, conspiring with them, sometimes had their meetings in the Prior of Spalding's Barn at Westone, and sometimes in the Church at Holbeche."

These meetings would have occurred in the year 1189.

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The Prior of Spalding must soon have sold the Advowson of Holbeach Church, for there is a further mention, in 1194, of a settlement between Fulco de Oiri and Conan fil Elie de Holbeche, by which the latter acquired

"the Advowson of the Church of All Saints, Holbeche, and the chapel of St Peter in Holbeche"

for a pair of gilt spurs at Easter. This is the earliest known reference to the dedication of the Church.

We also know the names of the Rectors of Holbeach from about 1200 when William FitzConan was presented by his father Conan FitzEllis. The exact date is not known, but the presentation of his successor, William de Hal, by Thomas de Multon in 1225 survives in the Register of Bishop Wells in Lincoln. The list of Rectors, and later Vicars, would seem to be complete from that date. Thanks to the publication of some documents by Kathleen Major, we even know that a Rector before William FitzConan, had a name beginning with "G", and that the name may well have been Galfridus. Without doubt Galfridus was the name of a priest in Holbeach prior to 1200.

The mention of the change in title of the incumbent of Holbeach Church from Rector to Vicar, leads us to the second Chapter of the book we can read in the fabric. When we look at All Saints, we see a church completely rebuilt in a comparatively short space of time, and that rebuilding is closely linked with the change in title.

The uniformity of style is one the most obvious feature of the building. If you walk around the exterior, you will see a distinctive, continuous band of mouldings that circles almost the whole of the church. It has subtle variations in structure and it has been cut away in one or two places, but except for three features - the tower, the south porch and the turrets of the north porch - these mouldings physically and stylistically unite the bulk of the church. Where we find this moulding, we also find distinctive windows, fairly broad with sinuous tracery. Those in the chancel are more elaborate and varied, but those along the aisles are quite uniform, and all are clearly of one style, conceivably even designed by one man. Only where the moulding changes - in the tower - do we see markedly different tracery - and higher up, in the clerestory.

Inside the church there is a similar uniformity in the form and mouldings of the window recesses and the nave arcades, and comparison of these features with those of other churches puts all of the mouldings and forms in the Decorated or Curvilinear style, which in England was used from about 1300 to about 1350. From the elaboration of the forms at Holbeach, we can even claim a date, for the bulk of the church, to the end of this period, somewhere between 1330 and 1350.

The windows of the clerestory and the tower show signs of the later Perpendicular style, which began at Gloucester about 1330, and influenced work at lesser churches from that date. The style was dominant from 1350 or so, after the Black Death, but transitional work such as that at Holbeach gives no more precise a date than after about 1340 and not to far into the thirteen-fifties.

All this is in good accord with the one date we know for certain, 1340. Seven years before the Bishop of Lincoln had purchased the advowson of Holbeach Church, and soon after was given permission to appropriate the Great or Rectorial tithes of the parish - worth 180 marks in a good year - leaving the lesser tithes as the stipend of a substitute, a Vicar, who would serve the religious needs of the parish. For the Bishop it was a sound financial move, the only drawback being the responsibility for the repair and upkeep of the chancel that went with ownership of the advowson - a vestage of the proprietorial nature of early parish churches. This responsibility was often ignored - even more so after the Reformation - hence the poor condition of many chancels. It is usually reflected in the extensive restorations needed in the nineteenth century, or the older architectural styles that show they were not rebuilt when the parishioners improved their part of the church, the nave.

It would seem that the parishioners of Holbeach, in the thirteen thirties, were contemplating work on their church, and they wanted the chancel to reflect their plans. To achieve this they had to persuade the Bishop to spend money, and they seem to have succeeded, for in 1340 the Bishop agreed.

"... to build on the Southern side of the church a house ... assigned for the Vicar's use and to find new books, chalices and vestments, at his proper costs

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and charges, and repair the same as often as need be. The Bishop shall completely rebuild the chancel *de novo* . . ."

Reading between the lines, the Bishop would pay for both chancel and a new Vicarage, if the parish made no objection to the Vicarage being in the church-yard - this would free the site of the old Rectory of its sitting tenant so increasing its value to the Bishop.

A Vicar had been collated to Holbeach in May 1335. The delay of five and half years before the Bishop's agreement to build the chancel must in part reflect the time needed for difficult negotiations, but it may also indicate that the paritioner's building plans did not mature until some years after 1335, 1338 or 1339 would be a reasonable guess. It also matches the architectural style of nave and chancel, with the features transitional to Perpendicular coming a decade or more into a very lengthy building programme.

Henry Peet offers us a plausible chronology for the work, starting with the west end of the nave and aisles (without the clerestorey) around 1340. This would allow parochial worship to continue in the chancel and screened off eastern portion of the nave of the earlier church. When a few bays of the new nave had been completed, worship could transfer there while the old chancel was demolished and the new building extended eastwards to complete the body of the church.

Peet surmised - on what grounds I cannot discover - that this work was finished about 1360. Tower, spire and clerestorey he says were begun about 1380, presumably being completed by c1390, although he does not explain the twenty-year gap. As evidence of some delay between the completion of the nave and the addition of the clerestorey, he describes some markings above the chancel arch, but I cannot see them. He states that the north porch is a puzzle, and that the stairs to the rood screen formed no part of the original building. In this last point, he agrees with an earlier writer, Edward Moore, who also dated the nave to c1340, and the clerestorey, spire and tower to c1380.

The only writer to have contradicted this view is Pevsner, who noted that the style of the responds of the tower arch is early rather than mid fourteenth century, although he also noted that the mouldings of the tower arch are very like those of the arches of the nave arcade. We must further note that the mouldings around the base of the tower, and, oddly, of the south porch also, are earlier in style, as is the very acute arch of the south porch. Even more significantly, a close look at the stonework shows that the tower was built with all eight buttresses complete. The walls above the nave arcades and at the aisle ends meet the buttresses in straight joints. Indeed, the buttresses that start the nave arcades could never have been built without the arches of the first bay being demolished or falling down.

The only explanation is that the tower was built before the nave, all four corners buttressed and complete to allow for settlement without tilting of the tower. The thin side walls of the tower, and the windows above them (which offer the only hint of the Perpendicular style) were added later when the tower had settled. Traces of the irregular join of the later walls can still be detected.

Since the tower overlies one of the Norman bases we discussed earlier, the western end of the old church must have been demolished before the tower was started. There is just room between the tower and the old first piers for timbers to have shored up the old arcade, and a wooden screen would have allowed the rest of the church to be used. The bases of the responds to the arcade were built with the tower, for they settled with it and, in the north, with the old Norman base beneath. The distance I have measured as about 25mm. We do not know, and probably never will know if a rebuilding of the church was contemplated when the tower was begun. One bay in a different style, linking the old Norman arcades with the new tower would not have upset a medieval architect.

I believe that rebuilding was not in the original plan, for the style of the south porch is also earlier, and much closer to the style of the tower. If this is so, the porch was built, contemporaneously with the tower, to shield a Norman or Transitional south door, and that being new, it was moved to serve the new south door after the total rebuilding was completed, but I cannot prove this.

Sometime, 1338 or 1339 would fit my earlier argument, the decision was made to rebuild the church, including all of the nave arcades. the tower was then not built as far as the capitals of the arch responds - it would, in fact, have consisted only of the four corners, with less than a fifth of the final tower weight. Building the nave arcades from the west would have led to severe stresses as the tower became heavier, so they were