

## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, HOLBEACH

started from the east. The proof of this can still be read in the building for although the arcades look totally uniform, there are subtle variations.

The base mouldings of the western responds, which must have been built into the tower because they have sunk with it, are rather sinuous in form and based on a dodecagon. They are very different from the corresponding base mouldings on the first pillars of the arcade which are much more angular and based on an octagon. The earlier sinuous, dodecagonal mouldings are, however, found on the eastern responds of the arcades, and as one moves westwards, allowing for some later repairs, the forms move closer to the later, angular, octagonal forms.

Some further confirmation comes from the capitals, those of the eastern responds again being more sinuous, all those to the west being more angular. The western respond capitals are of the later angular form because they were not carved with the tower, they were set level with those of the nave arcade when the tower had settled, the arches of the first bay being the last to be built. Measurement of the shafts of the western respond shows them to be some 15mm longer than the shafts of the first pillar. I said earlier that the tower has settled 25mm, and simple arithmetic shows that there is a discrepancy of about 10mm. This further settlement, which has distorted the clerestory window arches will be explained later.

Difficult though it may be to accept, it looks as if the work on the church, having demolished the west end, then went on to demolish the east end of the nave, leaving only three or four central bays standing to continue the life of the church. For a while, the chancel too would have been largely intact, probably sufficient for the Vicar to perform the daily offices with a handful of his congregation. Even this additional accommodation would have gone when the parishioners persuaded the Bishop to pay for a new chancel!

Since the new aisles were to be wider than the old, disruption could have been reduced by starting work outside the old walls, to north and south for the aisles, and eastwards for the chancel. We can see this clearly in the north wall of the north aisle. The two eastern bays were completed with a more or less vertical edge, and made of fine new stone. The discontinuity can be seen clearly both inside and outside the building. When the two bays of nave and aisle and the chancel were complete, just possibly without a clerestory, another wooden screen would have given a truncated new church in which to continue worship.

The rest of the old nave could then have come down and the new church gradually extended westwards towards the tower, work on which would have also continued. The mouldings of the tower arch are like those of the eastern bays of the nave because they were built at about the same time.

One feature, however, I cannot fit in. The chancel arch was built a little later than the eastern arches of the arcade, but not much later, and yet its style is Perpendicular rather than Curvilinear. It might be that, since the Bishop was paying, he wanted a more modern style than the conservative parishioners of Holbeach. I have no explanation for the later style of the clerestory which, as we shall see, was built with the arcades below.

By the time the nave arcade reached the tower, work on the tower must have passed the stage of the ringing chamber, yet that room has a passage leading to the top level of the north clerestory wall. It was built with every intention of giving access to a roof above the clerestory level, probably with the actual clerestory nearing it daily. The building of that passage, for reasons to be given later, was contemporary with the building of the ringing chamber, and so the clerestory must have been built along with the nave arcade. At some time - there is no indication when - the thin walls around the tower the west porch, and the windows above must have been inserted. From the style of the west porch, it was one of the later features to be built.

The final stage of this continuous building programme should have involved the top of the tower, the north porch and the building or possible rebuilding of the south porch. The last of these certainly happened, and the north porch was begun, although not quite in its present form. But the north porch was not finished in the fine ashlar that characterizes the rest of the church - after a few feet, we find rubble walling for most of the remaining height, followed by a few further courses of ashlar. In the tower, the last few feet of the stair-well are lined, not with ashlar, but with brick, and the final courses of the walls are formed of long thin stones, different in character from those used before.

It is as if the quality of workmanship suddenly degenerated in the final stages of the work, to recover a little later, possibly in the hands of different workmen. And of course, in the mid fourteenth century we have the perfect solution, for the Black Death would probably have reached Holbeach about 1349-50. In the south

## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, HOLBEACH

transept at Weston church, building about the same time, there is evidence work stopped when a few feet of the walls had been built. After an interval of time, different hands finished the building. With the smaller work-force the Weston project required, one or two deaths could well have stopped all work. At Holbeach the larger numbers seem to have given time for a slight decline before the cessation.

If the Black Death did halt the building work at Holbeach, we can fix the dating of the building fairly accurately to a period no longer than 1335-1350, and, from the late date of the agreement with the Bishop, more probably 1338-1350. The final touches would probably date from about 1352 when masons were again in the town to build Sir John Kirton's Hospital of All Saints. This may also have been the time when the spire was added, for, as we saw above, there was a further subsidence of about 10mm after the nave arcade had joined the tower. The same additional settlement can be seen most clearly at the junction between the north aisle and the tower, where the very ends of the mouldings have been distorted by the downward drag of the tower.

Whenever the spire was started, and it may have been after 1352. It is highly likely that it was finished by May 1361. In that month, Bishop Gynwell of Lincoln spent about a fortnight in Holbeach: the consecration of the completed new All Saints together with the accompanying festivities would provide an adequate explanation.

I cannot claim that the whole of this account came solely from an analysis of architectural styles. The chancel, arch and the clerestorey are clearly much later in conception than the nave arcade, and yet, by my account, they must have been built at the same time. It is in the footnotes to this Chapter of our supposed book Chapter of our supposed book that the origins of this chronology lie - the eight hundred and fifty footnotes that can be found all over the church, linking us directly with the men who built it. These are the masons' marks, sometimes called banker marks.

Six hundred and fifty years ago, the rough-hewn stone from Barnack would have travelled by boat down the Welland, and along the Holbeach River to be unloaded at a wooden wharf beside the bridge. In the north west corner of the churchyard would have been a long thatched hut, the masonic lodge. Building contracts of that period would include requirements such as this from Catterick in 1422:

"to make a luge of tre ate ye said brigge in ye quilk ye forsaides masons  
schall werke"

In the lodge the "mestre mason de franche pere", the master mason of free stone, and his journeymen (cementarii, latomi, mazonos, Fre macons - the names vary) would have worked, dressing the stones. Labourers would have carried the stones to the church where skilled layers (cubitores, ligiers, settres) would have built them into level courses.

Contemporary accounts show that for every ten free masons, each earning about 5½d a day, there would have been about five layers with about 4½d a day, one carpenter on 6d and over twenty labourers paid 3d to 4d, some of whom might have been women, in which case the pay would have dropped to 2d or less. The master mason, who would have been the architect as well as site manager and carver of the more intricate mouldings, would have been paid about six shillings a week.

In so lengthy a project as the complete rebuilding of a parish church, an extensive workforce would be needed - fifteen free masons seems to have been an average for Holbeach until the east end was completed. That means about sixty workers at any one time, and although the labourers may have been locals, the masons were notoriously itinerant. Evidence from other projects indicate that meticulous records were kept of those who worked. Wage registers would have been kept on parchment, or on wooden tallies. Masons' marks seem to have been a kind of quality control.

Each free mason would put his mark on the stones he dressed. If those stones did not fit when they were layed, the master mason would know who was responsible. He could also maintain some record of an individual mason's output. With at least eight hundred and fifty marks still visible, it is possible that every one of the stones cut in the thirteen forties has its mark, but of course, with six faces to a stone, at most one sixth would be exposed, and layers may well have deliberately hidden marks inside the wall for æsthetic reasons, thus reducing the number of marks visible still further. This last point is confirmed by the larger proportion of visible marks in the stair-wells where the curved surfaces left no choice of the position in which a stone could be laid.

## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, HOLBEACH

Having so many marks visible enables us to work out the masons engaged on the various parts of the building. Some are only found in one area - they presumably moved on after a few days, or weeks, or months. Others stayed longer and worked on more than one part of the church. Where several masons worked on two parts of the building, it is likely that those parts were built at the same time or consecutively. Looking at the overall pattern of the various workforces, it becomes possible to establish the sequence in which the various sections of the church were built. The picture fits in very well with the sequence established on stylistic grounds.

Work seems to have begun with the lower stage of the tower and a workforce of about six to eight free masons. When work was about half way up to the springing of the tower arch, the number was cut to one or two, rising to about three for the stone vault, then dropping to only one at a time for the rest of the tower. As an example, one mason alone cut all the stones for the ringing chamber including the passage to the clerestory. Another alone cut those for the lower two thirds of the bell chamber. While individual masons were engaged on the tower, they seem not to have done much work on the rest of the building.

When the tower workforce was cut, some masons seem to have left, the other two or three started on the east end of the nave and aisles, with about ten additional masons. This larger workforce maintained its size throughout the building of this end of the church, including the chancel. Clearly it was seen as urgent to finish this part of the work. It must also be noted, that, despite Peet's claim, the rood stairs were contemporary with this work. For building the nave and aisles from the east end back to the tower, the workforce seems to have been cut to around half a dozen free masons. No marks have been found on the aisle walls, which accords with the idea that they were built from ashlar recovered from the older building. This would also account for the reduction in the number of free masons needed - the number of labourers and layers may not have been reduced. By the time the north porch was started, only three masons remained, two for the porch and one for the tower.

Particularly interesting is that two of these remaining masons had also been working on the start of the tower. The other had come to Holbeach sometime after the tower had passed the height of the aisles, but before it reached the vault, probably just before work started at the east end of the nave. This serendipity enables us to calculate a time scale for the work.

Two medieval building projects at Eton College and London Bridge have sufficiently detailed records surviving to calculate roughly how long a given percentage of a total workforce remained on a project. For two men at Holbeach, that is four percent of the workforce, that gives a period of between nine and fifteen years, say twelve years as the mean. With the Black Death giving 1349-50 as the terminal date of the work, this would give 1337-38 for the start of the tower! For the three men working together from the start of work on the nave, the calculated figures are seven to thirteen years, a mean of ten, putting the start of work at 1339-40 - a remarkable agreement with the dates we determined earlier!

The third Chapter of our stone book is, of course, what happened to the church after it was built, and fortunately this has involved little change. William Stukeley records, from old accounts of the Churchwardens, that William Enot of Bishop's Lynn and Henry Nele gave a sanctus bell in 1453 - the bell-cote over the chancel gable must date from this time. But the major alteration is the addition of turrets to the north porch.

Clearly they are a later addition to the structure, they were not even bonded into the earlier walls - which is why they both tilted in later years. Some have said they came from Moulton Castle, which had been the home of the Thomas de Multon mentioned earlier - William Foster was an ardent advocate of this view. Military they might look, but the turrets are too thin for defensive work, and two points make it highly likely they were built at Holbeach. Firstly the mouldings around the bases of the turrets, whilst simpler than the mouldings around the church, are so close to them in size and form that the chance of their having come from elsewhere is minimal. Above them the first few courses of ashlar are so close in size to the courses in the pre-existing north porch wall that they must have been made from stones used in the buttressed corners demolished to make way for the turrets.

When they were built is not, however, clear. The interior of the stair tower shows only one mason's mark - oddly the same as that of the man who continued work on the south transept of Weston Church after the interruption mentioned before. If they were built by the same man, this would mean that the turrets were put up in the thirteen fifties when the church was completed after the Black Death. Were his mark to be found inside the spire, we would have confirmation of this, but I have not yet been able to look for marks inside the spire. The other possibility is that the turrets were put up about 1526, when the will of Thomas Callow bequeathed.

## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, HOLBEACH

"... towards the bildinge of the Northe side of the Churche of Holbiche to be doone by the discrecion and by the handes of myne Executors thre score poundes."

About that time there had been a theft from the church of money and jewels to "the value of above 300 marks". A plausible response would have been the construction of a strongroom, the upper chamber in the eastern turret, only reached from the parvise, which in turn was only reached via the stairs in the western turret - three stout locked doors in all. A watchman living in the lower chamber of the eastern turret, with iron gates to seal off the porch would have given even greater security. It is certain that the parvise postdates the original building, for its floor clearly cut into the mouldings over the north door.

If we look at the south side of the chancel, we can see the defaced mouldings and roof line which indicate the existence of a sacristy entered by a doorway from the church, now blocked. The exterior is covered by a fine but decaying eighteenth century monument. Peet claims it existed before 1530, and was taken down in 1567, but I do not know his grounds for these claims.

The reformation brought great changes to the interior of the church, but little to the exterior. At least six altars, richly furnished, were destroyed, and the ornaments sold in 1547. Their dedications are recorded in William Callow's will - Our Lady, the Trinity, St John, St Thomas, St Steven and St James. There was also a statue of St Anthony. The painted walls would have been whitewashed and even memorials might have been defaced. One brass survived intact, one was partially destroyed, and one - interestingly that of a Bishop or Mitred Abbot - was left only as a matrix. Others may have been lost completely, for in 1547, 410 pounds of "latyn", a kind of brass used for memorials, was sold. Some might have come from candlesticks, but we can only wonder what treasures were melted down.

Painted glass seems to have survived, recorded by Gervase Holles shortly before 1640, but most is supposed to have been destroyed by Cromwellian soldiers based in Crowland. A little lasted into the eighteenth century for Dr Stukeley recorded one shield - of the De Holbech family - in the clerestorey windows, and a Virgin a Child, said to be from a window in Holbeach Church, was drawn by him, although it is not known where it was located. Neglect by eighteenth century churchwardens lost even these, and now only two tiny fragments remain, incorporated into the twentieth century window at the east end of the north aisle.

In 1603 it was recorded that:

"The churche ys in very good repayre and very decently kept. The chauncell ys in grete decay by the fault of the Lord Bishop of Lincolne as the churchwardens say."

You will remember that the Bishop was responsible for the repairs to the chancel. The chancel seems, however, to have survived, and the parishioners certainly took good care of the nave. A surviving rainhead in the clerestorey bears the date 1673, and no doubt represents a rereading of the nave roof. This may also be the date at which the pinnacles on the tower, and along the north clerestorey roof were removed.

Those familiar with the engraving from Stukeley's *Itinerarium Curiosum* - used to illustrate the publicity leaflets for this lecture - have claimed that it shows that the pinnacles had survived until 1722. This engraving is more or less as Stukeley intended it to be, as his original drawing shows, but this drawing was, I am sure, a reconstruction of the church as Stukeley believed it to have been built. The true state of the church is more likely to have been that shewn in his drawing made sometime before 1710. In this we can see that the pinnacles had gone, and indeed the top of the eastern turret of the north porch had gone too. Looking at it today, it is obvious that the upper part has been rebuilt, and this drawing shews that the repair was sometime after 1702. In Stukeley's day Farmer's Free School was held inside the church, but sometime in the eighteenth century it moved into the parvise in the north porch. The repair may well have been to make the parvise fit for use. It is also clear from the drawing that the windows of the north porch did not have the tracery, of which the lack of evidence caused problems for Henry Peet. It is interesting to see that the tower, even then, had a clock, and we know that it must have been an old feature, for churchwardens' accounts from 1470 include an item for the repair of a clock.

## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, HOLBEACH

Although this is the first useful depiction of the church, it is not quite the earliest. In 1702, aged fifteen, Stukeley drew an aerial view of his father's house, seemingly from several hundred feet above the Old Rectory. There in the bottom left hand corner, in a rather distorted perspective, is All Saints' Church.

The other eighteenth century changes are rather vague. From various sources we know that nave was filled with box pews, and a triple-decker pulpit put up in front of the chancel arch, lit by a large chandelier, now lost. The building of the pews may have been the cause of moving the Littlebury monument from its original location beside the chancel, at the east end of the north aisle. The man who lies in the tomb saw the church when it was new, and his mutuary chapel must have been a splendid sight - but contrary to popular opinion, the man was not Sir Humphrey Littlebury. The armour of the effigy dates no earlier than 1380, and the church itself was not ready for a memorial until the mid thirteen forties. Sir Humphrey died in 1339! His money may well have started the rebuilding of All Saints', but, if he was buried within it, his tomb is unmarked and unremembered. The tomb would seem to be that of Sir Humphrey's grandson, Sir John Littlebury, who died c1392.

Either in the seventeenth or the eighteenth century, probably the former, one of the windows in the south aisle collapsed and was rebuilt with tracery not quite authentic in style. Comparable tracery can be seen in an aisle window of Gedney Church. I suppose we must be grateful that the tracery of the rest of the windows was of sufficient quality not to suffer the fate of nearby Moulton, Whaplode and Fleet, where almost all the original work was destroyed. The Victorians may have repaired much of the stonework, at Holbeach they followed the original designs, several windows were recorded in the eighteen forties, and their form is unchanged.

Again, solely from written sources, we know that the eighteenth century chancel was paved in black and white tiles, and that a painting of the Last Supper was mounted behind the altar, flanked by paintings of Moses and Aaron. Drawings made in the seventeen nineties show that the lower parts of the eastern chancel windows were blocked. This indicates the possibility of wooden panels around the altar, as can be seen still at Whaplode. The Vestry then was in the tower, the windows again being blocked off. In there was the Parish Chest where the registers and other valuable documents were preserved. The Natte drawing of 1791 also shows the survival of the tracery in the arch of the south porch. Vestiges can be seen still, including the grooves for glazing.

Several engravings were made of the church in the first half of the nineteenth century, but they show little change. The lack of a resident vicar from 1745 to 1832 meant nothing much was done to the church except essential repairs when the top of the spire became unstable, or fell down as it did in 1751. It was the arrival of James Morton that began the fourth Chapter of our book, the age of restoration, as opposed to repair.

The Reverend James Morton was a weaver's son from Kelso. Earlier he had been tutor to Earl Grey's children, and when the appointment of Edward Maltby, Vicar of Holbeach, to the Bishopric of Chichester, put the presentation of the living into the hands of a Whig government, Morton was given his eight hundred a year, but only on condition that he resided in the parish and became a magistrate, a Whig counter to the local Tory dominance. Forced to live in Holbeach, Morton soon began to change things. He began by rebuilding the Vicarage, probably not much repaired since John Stukeley, William's father had had it put in order in the sixteen eighties.

Inside the church, he soon raised funds to build a new gallery in the tower, above the old vestry. it contained seats and a new organ, completed in 1835. Part of the gallery reused timbers from the old rood loft, traces of which still remain. With the organ came an organist, Charles Coop, a local schoolmaster whose school occupied the house which is now P & M Fruits, and part of the shop next door, and with the organist came a choir of singing boys, a sad substitute for the orchestral quire of men, evicted from the old rood loft. Morton also tried to raise funds to restore the nave of the church but failed to do more than replace the old pulpit. Later in his incumbency, he did persuade the Church Commissioners, who had inherited the Bishop's responsibilities, to put a new roof of deal on the chancel.

The major work came with his successor, Arthur Brook. This man not only organized the building of three new churches and three chapels in the outer parts of the parish, but he set in motion a major programme of work on the church of All Saints'. He began in 1866 with the perennial repairs to the spire. Then, in 1868 the nave roof was re-built of oak to the design of Ewan Christian. Christian had an ambitious plan for angels all along the roof, but although their cost was only fifteen pounds each, only three were put up, and one of these was removed and burnt in 1871 because no one would pay for it! Amazingly, a photograph survives showing the third angel in place. Christian also thought of carrying through the same roof line into the chancel, but Brook

## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, HOLBEACH

restrained him and got the Church Commissioners to pay for yet another chancel roof in oak (on the old lower level), by finding that the deal roof would just fit his new church at Holbeach Hurn.

The old Vestry, and almost new organ gallery were stripped out of the tower, and the box pews were cleared from the nave and aisles. The organ was put up in the south aisle, with the present Vestry, although the original intention was to put them in the north aisle. The Choir Vestry (recently reworked) was also built, and five hundred chairs bought for seating. The nave was refloored in 1871, and the chancel too, memorial slabs being destroyed or relaid. The monumental brasses and the matrix of the lost brass were put beside the Littlebury monument, that of Joanna Welby being fitted to a new altar tomb at the expense of the Welby family. Edward Moore of Spalding paid for the cleaning of the Littlebury tomb. Even the Church Commissioners were persuaded to produce yet more funds to restore the sedilia in the chancel. The last act of his seven year residence here was to re-pew the nave.

Fielder Hemmans followed Brook, and continued his work, re-roofing, re-flooring and re-pewing first the south aisle, then the north. Sadly the new roofs lacked the tie-beams of the old, with the subsequent leaning of the nave arcades, worse in the south because the new roofs were defective, and had to be repaired soon after they were built. Hemmans too moved many memorial slabs, but he did at least record the original positions, and where he replaced them. In the eighteen eighties, Hemmans had a new organ built. In the nineties, to commemorate Queen Victoria's Jubilee, he had the north porch restored, loosing the parvise (quit by the school in 1814), and restoring the western turret to the vertical by a dramatic use of hydraulic jacks in front of a large audience. Finally, towards the end of his forty years in Holbeach he rebuilt the top ten feet of the spire in Portland Stone, which accounts for the changed colour.

The restorations were far-reaching, and modern ideas, one hopes, would have done much more to preserve ancient features of the church. Yet compared with the fate of many churches - the chancel at Spalding springs immediately to mind - Holbeach Church came through better than most. Far worse damage has come with the lesser efforts of the twentieth century, with the return to piecemeal repairs and improvements.

Replacing the heating system in the twenties disfigured the south porch with the boiler house. Council care of the churchyard has destroyed many monuments and ruined a splendid piece of natural woodland. A new bellows chamber for the organ has spoiled the junction of chancel and south aisle. The re-flooring of the west end in 1990 cracked memorial stones, and collapsed an eighteenth century vault. Repairs to the mouldings of the nave arcade were superficially acceptable, but out of sympathy with the fourteenth century forms. We must hope that the story our descendants will read finds no worse a tale.

This lecture was delivered by Maurice Tennant to an audience in the Church Hall, Holbeach, on 12 January 1994, under the auspices of the WEA.

## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, HOLBEACH

restrained him and got the Church Commissioners to pay for yet another chancel roof in oak (on the old lower level), by finding that the deal roof would just fit his new church at Holbeach Hurn.

The old Vestry, and almost new organ gallery were stripped out of the tower, and the box pews were cleared from the nave and aisles. The organ was put up in the south aisle, with the present Vestry, although the original intention was to put them in the north aisle. The Choir Vestry (recently reworked) was also built, and five hundred chairs bought for seating. The nave was refloored in 1871, and the chancel too, memorial slabs being destroyed or relaid. The monumental brasses and the matrix of the lost brass were put beside the Littlebury monument, that of Joanna Welby being fitted to a new altar tomb at the expense of the Welby family. Edward Moore of Spalding paid for the cleaning of the Littlebury tomb. Even the Church Commissioners were persuaded to produce yet more funds to restore the sedilia in the chancel. The last act of his seven year residence here was to re-pew the nave.

Felder Hemmans followed Brook, and continued his work, re-roofing, re-flooring and re-pewing first the south aisle, then the north. Sadly the new roofs lacked the tie-beams of the old, with the subsequent leaning of the nave arcades, worse in the south because the new roofs were defective, and had to be repaired soon after they were built. Hemmans too moved many memorial slabs, but he did at least record the original positions, and where he replaced them. In the eighteen eighties, Hemmans had a new organ built. In the nineties, to commemorate Queen Victoria's Jubilee, he had the north porch restored, loosing the parvise (quit by the school in 1814), and restoring the western turret to the vertical by a dramatic use of hydraulic jacks in front of a large audience. Finally, towards the end of his forty years in Holbeach he rebuilt the top ten feet of the spire in Portland Stone, which accounts for the changed colour.

The restorations were far-reaching, and modern ideas, one hopes, would have done much more to preserve ancient features of the church. Yet compared with the fate of many churches - the chancel at Spalding springs immediately to mind - Holbeach Church came through better than most. Far worse damage has come with the lesser efforts of the twentieth century, with the return to piecemeal repairs and improvements.

Replacing the heating system in the twenties disfigured the south porch with the boiler house. Council care of the churchyard has destroyed many monuments and ruined a splendid piece of natural woodland. A new bellows chamber for the organ has spoiled the junction of chancel and south aisle. The re-flooring of the west end in 1990 cracked memorial stones, and collapsed an eighteenth century vault. Repairs to the mouldings of the nave arcade were superficially acceptable, but out of sympathy with the fourteenth century forms. We must hope that the story our descendants will read finds no worse a tale.

This lecture was delivered by Maurice Tennant to an audience in the Church Hall, Holbeach, on 12 January 1994, under the auspices of the WEA.