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Buildings Archaeology

WELLS BUBWITH ALMSHOUSE
The Chapel of St Saviour

Archaeological Assessment

9 December 2019

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The topography and development of the Almshouse site

The original foundation of the almshouses in Wells by the executors of Bishop Bubwith occupies land on the north side of the churchyard of St Cuthbert's parish church, building on the site having begun in 1436. Further foundations by Bishop Still and his executors (first proposed 1612 and operating by 1615) and by Walter Bricke (1637) were made on or immediately adjacent to the same site, with the precinct also accommodating a further extension of the buildings in the form of Willes' Almshouse (1777) at the western margin. The other major almshouses in Wells, those of Henry Llewellyn (proposed 1614 and finally established in 1636) and Archibald Harper (1726) are on separate sites in Priests Row and Chamberlain Street, respectively.[1]

Brick's Almshouse occupies the centre south area of the Bubwith Almshouse precinct, but by 1819, when the Charity Commissioners reported on the Wells Almshouses, Brick's had lost its autonomy:

> 'It is considered that eighteen of these poor persons (men and women) are under Bishop Bubwith's foundation, six men under Bishop Still's, and four men under Bishop Willes' legacy... Under the old foundation, twenty-four was the number provided for by Bishop Bubwith, but the income seems not to have been sufficient to maintain twenty-four, and in point of fact only eighteen have been in general there supported.'[2]

[1] For the history of the delayed establishment of Llewellyn's almshouse see Scrase 2006, p.90-1. A further small foundation (Charles' Almshouse) was established in 1824 for two poor women.

[2] Report of the Charity Commissioners, 1819, quoted in Parker 1866, pp.84-5.

The development of the Almshouse site - The churchyard of St Cuthbert's parish church and its possible original extent

The church of St Cuthbert in Wells is the largest parish church in Somerset, with potentially one of the longest histories. There is documentary evidence for a dedication of the church of St Cuthbert during the episcopate of Bishop Godfrey (1122-35), but very little evidence for a pre-thirteenth century building can be assembled for St Cuthbert's, other than the remains of a pillar piscina (StC299 and unnumbered x2 recovered from the masonry of the North Transept during restoration work prior to 1862-3) and the dedication itself. It is almost inconceivable that the Normans would have dedicated an English church to a seventh century Northumbrian saint, and while it is clear from the iconography of the west front of the Cathedral that royal Anglo-Saxon saints were being celebrated by Bishop Jocelin in the fourth decade of the thirteenth century it seems probable that the dedication pre-dates his episcopate. The implication, therefore, is that a church was dedicated on this site prior to the Conquest as the parish church of the town of Wells.[3]

Scrase, in his consideration of the Chapel of St Etheldreda in Southover, concluded, using the same argument as that already advanced from the dedication to St Cuthbert, that the survival of the Southover chapel in the later middle ages implied

> '...that pre-conquest Wells had a Cathedral, a parish church and a chapel... [and] that Wells was already a substantial settlement. Continuity is now the fashionable hypothesis and certainly the old picture of the sequence at Wells from the isolated minster of A.D. 705 to the Cathedral and village of 1066 with urban status gained about 1160 seems more and more doubtful... Anglo-Saxon Wells seems to be becoming more substantial'.[4]

The early church in Somerset has few certain foundations. The evidence of Celtic church dedications and early Christian cemeteries suggests that the survival of the Celtic Christian church was centred on the western coast and the area around Glastonbury, where Irish influence was strong.[5] Warwick Rodwell has made a case for continuous religious activity at the cathedral site of Wells from the sub-Roman period,[6] and has suggested a possible scenario for the early Anglo-Saxon church of St Cuthbert:

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3 Unsupported speculation has in the past associated the dedication with King Alfred who had a special reverence for the Northumbrian saint.

4 Scrase 1982, p.110.

5 Philip Rahtz, in Aston and Burrow (eds.) 1982, p.103-4 and Fig. 10.4.

6 Most recently and comprehensively in Rodwell 2001

> Four hundred metres west of the minster gate at Wells lay St Cuthbert's Church which, from the road pattern around it, appears to have been the nucleus of a small and originally separate settlement. The church was built immediately alongside, or perhaps physically on, the Roman road which ran along the valley bench. This intimate relationship between an Anglo-Saxon church and a Roman road is a commonly observed phenomenon. Equally often it may be seen that when the church acquired burial rites (sic), or became a focus of serious sepulchral activity, the road was pushed away from the church in order to accommodate an adjacent graveyard. That is exactly what the boundary patterns around St Cuthbert's appear to indicate. Although not quite on the same alignment as the minster complex, St Cuthbert's could be regarded as part of the linear 'family' of ecclesiastical structures at Wells. The topographical development of the area calls for further research.'[7]

The topography of the town suggests a planned development of the centre of the later Anglo-Saxon city orientated on the alignment of the pre-Conquest Cathedral church,

> 'St Cuthbert's church was at the west end of this planned area, and its churchyard possibly originally occupied the entire block between Priest Row, St Cuthbert's Street, Tucker Street and Chamberlain Street.'[8]

This implies the possibility that the churchyard, together with those parts of it now taken up by the almshouse complex to the north, may have beneath it elements of Roman and early Saxon settlement from the early population centre west of the sacred area associated with the springs. In addition, there is the possibility of subsidiary buildings associated with a later Anglo-Saxon church within what may have been a very large churchyard, and there is, of course, the possibility that the Anglo-Saxon church itself may lie elsewhere within the churchyard than directly beneath its Gothic successor.

Of the physical remnants of the post-Conquest Romanesque church of St. Cuthbert all that can be assumed to remain is a fragment of a pillar piscina, which can give very little

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7 ibid. p.121 and Fig. 109. Rodwell suggests a possible parallel in the relationship of the church of St Benedict with Glastonbury Abbey.

8 Aston and Leech 1977, p.149, para. 32.23. Scrase, in his examination of the medieval housing to the east of the churchyard (Scrase 1989b, pp.42-4) concludes that the existence of church property in this area (recorded from c.1268) '...*does go some way to supporting Aston and Leech's suggestion that the church might have once occupied the whole block between St. Cuthbert Street, Priest Row, Chamberlain Street and Portway. Certainly the churchyard seems to have shrunk during the thirteenth century*'.

hint of the architectural pretensions of the structure.[9]

The plot upon which Bubwith's almshouse was built in 1436 was defined as possessing a frontage onto modern Chamberlain Street of 160 feet, stretching back to St Cuthbert's churchyard 119 ft on the east and 94 ft on the west; Tony Scrase points out that,

> 'On the 1885 1/500 scale O.S. the dimensions are 159ft frontage, 136ft eastern boundary and 94ft western boundary. So the Almshouse had crept forward at some time. As the Map shows this expansion was linked to the building of the porch and tailed off towards the west.'[10]

[9] Wells Cathedral Archive CBD Bundle 36 [Irvine Archive] contains a pencil sketch of a Romanesque scalloped cushion capital labelled '*St Cuthbert's Ch., Wells 1873*' in J.T. Irvine's hand. This may be no more than a drawing of the head of the pillar piscina, but could be a second 12th century fragment from the site.

[10] Scrase 1989a, p.744.

Introduction - the circumstances of the report

This report has been prepared at the request of Charles Cain and Marcus Chantrey, Director at Benjamin Beauchamp Architects, as a desktop study and brief fabric survey of the chapel of Bubwith Almshouse in order to provide background information to inform future proposals for its repair and conservation. The study has been limited to the chapel itself, and has not considered the residential parts of the building, the western Guildhall or the later additions except in the broadest of terms; nor has it attempted to set the building in the context of other contemporary foundations. It is based on two site visits in November 2019 by Jerry and David Sampson which generated a photographic survey of the interior and exterior of the building.

Documentary evidence has so far only correlated secondary sources, but it is intended to incorporate the transcriptions of material prepared by Jean Imray.

Access to the fabric was limited to areas directly accessible from the ground or the western gallery. Closer inspection was undertaken using 10x32 Swarovski binoculars.

Previous commentators

The first eyewitness account of the almshouse appears to be that of John Leland, 'Henry VIII's antiquary',

> 'There is an hospitale of 24. poore menne and wymen at the north side of S. Cuthbertes chirch, there is a cantuary preste. The hospitale and the chapelle is buildid al in length under one roofe from west to est. Nicholas Budwith Bishop of Bath was founder of this, and brought it almost to the perfection, and that that lakkid was completid by one John Storthwayt, one of the executors of the testament of Bubwith.' [Toulmin Smith vol.1, p.145]

The chantry priest and the possessions of the Almshouse in 1548 are recorded in the Survey of the Colleges, Chantries, Free Chapels, etc. for Somerset conducted in 2 Edw. VI,

> 'The Salarie or stipend of one priest celebratyng in the chapell scituate wtin the Almosehouse of Welles aforesayde wtin the sayde paryshe.
>
> Is yerely worthe in Redy money to be levied and recyud of the Issues Revenues and proffects of the landes and possessions belonging to the vicars of the foresaide Cathedrall churche of Sainete Andrewe in Wells .....

The East wall of the Chapel - the north-eastern quoin has been rebuilt - note the modern insertions around the window showing as paler blocks.

The north elevation of the north porch

General views looking NW (top) and SW

General views looking east

> iiij *li.* xiij*s.* iiij*d.*
>
> Plate and Ornamts. A chalice of silu' waying - xviij oz. do et do qrt. Ornamentes praysed at - xxiiijIs. viij*d.*
>
> Memord. John Dyble clerke of the age of lxx yeres incūbent ther. Ther ar belonging to this Almosehouse, lendes and teñts to the yerely value of xiij*li.*v*s.* iiij*d.* ob., ou' and besydes the foresaide priests Salarie.
>
> This Almosehowse was ordeyned and erected for the relief of one priest, and xxiiij poore men and women to praye for the sooles of the founders.' [Green 1888, p.154-5]

Revd. John Collinson's entry for the Wells Almshouses compiled in the last decade of the eighteenth century includes comments on Brick's, Still's, Willes and Llewelyn's foundations,

> 'On the north side of the church-yard is Bishop Bubwith's, or *Brigg-ftreet* hofpital.... This hofpital, or alms-house, was founded in a ftreet then called *Brigg-ftreet*, but fince *Beggar-ftreet*, for twelve poor men, and twelve poor women, and was endowed with confiderable eftates for their maintenance, and the fupport of one prieft or chaplain to celebrate divine fervice in the chapel there. This hofpital was dedicated to our Bleffed Saviour, the Virgin Mary, and All-Saints, and was augmented by Bifhops Beckington and Bourne. Bifhop Still added a houfe and fix poor people to the original foundation; and Bifhop Willes added fix people more. The hofpital and chapel are built all in length under one roof from eaft to weft; the chapel at the eaft end is fmall but very neat, and has in its windows, The name and arms of Bubwith; England and France; *Sable*, a bend *or* between fix plates, impaling *argent*, a chevron between three rams *fable*, *argent*, a chevron engrailed between three pellets voided.
>
> 'Near this is Walter Brick's alms-houfe, founded in 1638 for four decayed burgeffes; in Chamberlain-ftreet is Harper's almshoufe for decayed ftocking-makers; and in Prieft-Row, an almshoufe for fix poor women, founded by Henry Llewellin, whofe monument has been noted in the church.' [vol.iii, p.408]

Edmund Rack (writing in the 1780s during his research for Collinson) seems not to have visited the Almshouses, and the transcriptions of Sir Stephen Glynne's notes (McGarvie 1995) also omit mention of them.

The Almshouse not being generally publicly accessible features little in considerations of

the medieval architecture of Wells, and visits by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society - the accounts of which are so useful for churches - were limited to a single excursion in the 1860s. This, however, was led by J.H. Parker, who

> '...condemned the alteration which had been made, and which divided the beautiful open roof of the chapel by a screen wall, separating the chapel from the remainder of the edifice. The open roof ran all along the structure, and its fine appearance had been totally destroyed in this manner, and by the erection of cells above the original cells. These additions should have been made elsewhere. The old town-hall stood at the west end of the hospital. The visitors were shewn a rare and fine old painted chest, said to be the founder's chest.'

Parker partly reiterated these comments in his '*Ecclesiastical Buildings of Wells*', saying of the Almshouse,

> 'This is remarkably perfect and interesting, though much spoiled about a dozen years ago. The original plan was a great hall, with a chapel at the end of it and with cells along the side for the almsmen, which were open at the top to the lofty and fine timber roof, so that each old man had the benefit of many hundred cubic feet of air, and in case he became ill or infirm he could hear the service chanted daily in the chapel without leaving his bed, and so could always attend divine service however old or infirm he might be....' [p.34-5]

Parker and Serrel collaborated in their most comprehensive account of the Almshouse, which includes a record of the 1850 restoration,

> 'For many years the chapel was in a state of dilapidation and neglect. In the year 1850 the whole of the interior was thoroughly renovated, and the coats of whitewash and ochre removed. The roof and walls were repaired, and the wood seats or benches renewed. The floor of the eastern end was raised, and laid with encaustic tiles of suitable character. The eastern window was opened, repaired, and filled with stained glass (by Bell), in which are represented the armorial bearings of Bishops Bubwith, Still, and Willes, the three founders, together with the arms of Bishop Bagot, during whose episcopate the renovations in the chapel were made. In the upper part of the window the arms of the city were also represented, and in the lower part is a figure of St Andrew. In a small window in the north wall, and near the east corner of the chapel, are the arms of Bishop Bubwith, with his name in ancient characters, and three other shields, probably those of two of the founder's executors, or some other benefactors to the Hospital. The arms of one of the shields are very similar to those of Archbishop Stafford. These shields were removed from windows in the common kitchen. On a corbel, on the south side of the chapel, is a mitred

head, with the initials N. B., intended for Bishop Bubwith.

'The total cost of the repairs amounted to about £270 which sum was not taken from the funds of the Almshouse, but the whole was raised by voluntary contributions, obtained mainly through the efforts of the late governor, Mr. Edmund Davies, to whom the chief credit is due for completing the work.'

The extensive Heritage England listing (Listing NGR: ST5460945703) records the building as Grade II* (initially listed on 12/11/1953, with the south side described on 1/7/72),

'Also known as: Bubwith Almshouse Chamberlain Street.

Almshouses. Begun 1436, extended in 1614 and 1638, major restoration of 1884. Local stone rubble with Doulting stone dressings, Welsh slate roofs with stone ridge and coped gables, tall ashlar chimney stacks on rubble bases.

PLAN: complex plan of medieval north wing, with attached wings of 1884 and 1614 extending southwards, a detached south range of 1638 and additional detached central block apparently of 1884.

EXTERIOR: north wing of hall, chapel, and rooms is single storey with attics, with an elevation to Chamberlain Street of 13 bays. Bays 1 and 2 are the chapel, part of the C15 foundation. This has a large 5-light Perpendicular E window, heavily restored, and on the N side are a small single light with chamfered surround and a 3-light cinquefoil cusped window to bay 2. Bay 3 has the projecting gabled entrance porch with a pair of doors in a 4-centred arch with plain spandrels and square label under a statue niche; there is a cast-iron footscraper left of the doorway. Bays 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10 have 2-light chamfer-mullioned windows, probably C19 restorations, with small pane iron leaded casements, the attic windows have small gablets with carved finials; tall chimney stacks between each pair. Bay 8 has one similar window at mezzanine level. Bays 11, 12 and 13 are taller, with a bell turret to east gable-this is the hall, which had a second floor inserted in c1850, fenestration similar, but upper bay 13 has a 2-light cinquefoil cusped window.

The west gable of the hall has a 3-light Perpendicular tracery window at first floor level, with a C20 door and window below-thereafter is the first of the two 1884 wings, replacing a 1614 wing, and behind it the second wing.

The south range, 1638, building is a building of remarkable design. It is small in scale, of one storey with attic, in 5 bays, with a symmetrical

> elevation facing the churchyard of St Cuthbert (qv). 2-light ovolo-mould mullioned windows with labels to upper bays 2 and 4 and lower bays 1, 2, 4 and 5. Between bays 1 and 2 and bays 4 and 5 are cambered-arched doorways with labels and square recesses with labels over. Bay 3 has an ornamental 4-seat sedilia with a mixture of Gothic and Classical detailing. To the left of this range is a free-standing range of 1884, with its gable to the S, including a commemorative tablet indicating that the building replaces one of 1614.
>
> INTERIOR: the chapel has a 4-bay roof in heavy moulded arch-braced trusses carried on octagonal posts to stone corbels, with 3 purlins, and 4 ranges of curved wind-braces; in the first 3 bays the purlins are moulded, in bay 4 they are chamfered and stopped. This roof construction also continues to the W beyond the chapel. The 5-light east window of c1850 by Bell of Bristol. The lower part of the screen at the W end has C17 panels. To the right of the chapel entry is a bay with late C20 staircase and sub-division. The private rooms not accessible, but considerable C19 and C20 modification has been made. Medieval hall roof not seen. Chapel roof has having shafts supporting the truss foot similar but more elaborate than The Rib's at 3 St Andrew Street (qv).
>
> HISTORICAL NOTE: the original buildings were built in 1436 from an endowment by Bishop Bubwith, (d.1424), and had 12 inmates. They were extended by Bishop John Still's (d.1608) bequest in 1614, and again, for four people, in 1638. There were sundry C18 and C19 benefactions, with major additions in 1884. The range of buildings is extensive, closing off the N side of St Cuthbert's churchyard, and like the Vicars Close (qv) and The Rib was heated by fireplaces.
> (The Buildings of England: Pevsner N: North Somerset and Bristol: London: 1958-: 329).

The *Buildings of England* revision (Foyle and Pevsner 2011, p.700-1) is somewhat more succinct,

> 'The main range was probably erected c.1436-40, certainly by 1446, with Bishop Bubwith's bequest (1424). Chapel (E), then a gabled porch bridging the former course of a stream; four-centred door under square label with image niche above. Then a long one-and-a-half-storey range with half-dormers (largely rebuilt c.1850) high hall or Guild Room at the W. The CHAPEL roof has collar-beams, arched braces, and four tiers of ogee-shaped wind-braces arranged in two crosses one above the other. Five-light Perp E window with stained glass by *Joseph Bell*, c.1850. A small straight-headed N window has ex situ glass of 1434-43, with the royal arms and those of three founders. (The Guild Room was divided into two floors c.1850 and restored 1995-6; the roof is still visible.).'

The Somerset Heritage Environment Record has two entries for the Bubwith Almshouse (PRN 20326 and PRN 24797), the former incorporating the Heritage England listing text, the second a much shorter entry,

> 'St. Saviours hospital, Wells, situated outside the N wall of St Cuthberts churchyard, was founded in 1424 for 25 poor people and a chaplain. The building is early C15 and later, and is now known as Bubwith Almshouses, the bishop of that name being responsible for their foundation.[11]
>
> The almshouses were rebuilt in 1884 and now the only features of interest are the NW porch and some reused windows and doorways in the S.[12]

The entry ignores the fine mid-fifteenth century roofs and the chapel screen amongst other surviving medieval features.

The Wheatley drawings

In 1848 William Walter Wheatley visited Wells during which time he made coloured drawings of the recently discovered elements of the St Cuthbert's reredosses. It is likely that it was at the time of this visit that he produced three watercolours of the Bubwith Almshouse chapel, now forming part of the Braikenridge Collection at the Somerset Record Office (South West Heritage Trust) in Taunton:

- A/DAS/ 1/420/14: comprises two drawings - a general view of the interior of the chapel looking east, with a second illustration depicting the heraldic glass in the north-eastern window and three of the carved stone corbel heads supporting the ashlar posts of the roof

- A/DAS/ 1/420/15: a view of the exterior of the north porch from the north west 'about to be demolished'.

The latter shows the building much as it appears today, implying either that the demolition was not carried out as planned, or that the rebuilding was sufficiently careful that the overall form of the structure was accurately reinstated.

The interior view and details are therefore the most valuable elements of the collection.

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[11] Knowles, D and Hadcock, RN. Medieval Religious Houses of England and Wales. (1971), 336 and 401.

[12] Record card: Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division record card. Record ID: ST 54 NW 5 (1966) Copy in HER file.

W.W. Wheatley watercolour of the North Porch painted in 1848 prior to the major restoration.

The corbel heads represented are those of the Bishop (south side, centre - though without the initials on the mitre), the queen (north side, western) and the king - though being parts of a composite composition all are small details.

The interior view shows a sparsely furnished space dominated by the five light east window and the windbraced roof. There is a simple communion table with what appears to be a series of round-headed recesses decorating the area immediately beneath the table-top and suggesting a later sixteenth or seventeenth century date. In the south-east corner of the sanctuary is a small panelled enclosure, and against the south wall is a rectangular-panelled bench front - there are no furnishings visible on the north side of the chapel. Drawn on the eve of a major restoration, this view may not represent the furnishings of the chapel as they were usually deployed in the mid-nineteenth century.

Ephemeral as it is, one of the most interesting details of the watercolour is the area immediately to the south of the base of the east window, where there appears to have been an irregular of plastering. The form and position of this patch suggests that Wheatley was depicting a cut-back niche of the sort commonly found flanking east windows, and which would originally have held the southern of a pair of figure sculptures traditionally placed flanking the high altar.

Paired niches or brackets for images on the east wall behind the high altar were a customary fitting in the medieval parish church - for instance, well-preserved local examples survive at North Cadbury, Norton-sub-Hamdon and Milborne Port, with a heavily cut back example recently discovered at Podimore (2008) - and were generally intended to house the images of the patron saint of the building, i.e., in this instance St Saviour, (to the north), and the Blessed Virgin (to the south),

> 'The altar in a Christian church was the earthly representative of the throne of God. And as the right was the place of honour ("Sit thou on my right hand," etc.), it followed that the north of the altar was the more honourable position.... That being so, it follows that the normal position for the image of the patron saint of a church, or the representative of the like, was at the north end of the altar.'[13]

These two sculptures, of the major saintly intercessors, flanked the altar and the retable or reredos which stood upon or behind it, further embellished with figures of the saints and often with a scene of the crucifixion at its centre. Such images were central to the religious experience of the medieval inmates, particularly in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century,

> 'The cult of saints, according to Emile Mâle, "sheds over all the centuries of the Middle Ages its poetic enchantment", but "it may well be that the saints were never better loved than during the fifteenth and sixteenth

[13] Bond 1916, p.26.

> centuries". Certainly reminders of them were everywhere in late medieval England... Their images filled the churches, gazing down in polychrome glory from altar-piece and bracket, from windows and niches.'[14]

Such images operated as central adjuncts to the religious experience of layfolk prior to the iconoclasm of the mid-sixteenth century. In the west-country Hugh Latimer was already '*preaching against the veneration, adornment, and lighting of images*'[15] in 1532, and in the following year was at the centre of a series of divisive debates in Bristol, subsequently being recruited by Cromwell as a Reformation publicist. The Ten Articles of June 1536 accepted that images were

> "...'kindlers and firers of men's minds". They might therefore stand in the churches, but preachers were to ensure that the people were warned against idolatry. As for "censing of them, and kneeling and offering unto them, with other like worshippings"...the people were to be instructed that such worship was in reality not offered to the images, but only to God and in his honour "although it be done before the images, whether it be of Christ, or the cross, or of our Lady, or of any other saint beside"."[16]

The injunctions of August 1536 forbade the clergy to '*set forth or extol any images, relics or miracles for any superstitious lucre*', and it was such images, popularly held to be imbued with miraculous powers, which were initially the sole target for reformers. The 1538 Injunctions include the command that "*such feigned images as ye know of in any of your cures to be so abused with pilgrimages or offerings of anything made thereunto, ye shall....forthwith take down and delay*." This injunction was reissued and strengthened in 1547, when it commanded the clergy to proceed with the destruction of all images abused even by the simple act of censing - and since the censing of the altar at Podimore and elsewhere would probably have included the niches of the saints which flanked it, a reforming minister might have removed the sculptures at this point. The discord which this injunction caused had to be suppressed, '*and since the only places in the realm where there was no conflict were those where all the images had been removed, they* [the Lords of the Council, Feb.1548] *therefore ordered that all images in every church and chapel, abused or not, should now be taken away*'.[17]

The Injunctions of July 1559 under Elizabeth I provided for the abolition of images including those in window and wall, and it is often to this period that the common practice

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[14] Duffy 1992, p. 155, quoting Mâle, '*Religious Art in France: The Late Middle Ages*', 1986, p.147.

[15] Duffy 1992, p.380.

[16] Duffy 1992, p.392.

[17] Duffy 1992, p.458.

is attributed of hacking niches back and using the fragments of these and the sculptures themselves as rubble to fill up the holes. For instance, on December 21st 1571 the Queen's Commissioners wrote to the Dean and Chapter of Bristol Cathedral instructing, with regard to their pulpitum, to ensure that "*the tabernacles were defaced and hewen down, and afterwards made a playne walle with morter and plaster*". At St Cuthbert's, Wells, reredoses in both transepts were treated in just this fashion, being packed with fragments of the smashed statuary and plastered flush, to be exposed again in the restoration of 1848; the same appears to have been the case at Wells Cathedral, where 'the wall behind the high altar' was taken down in 1753 also exposing polychromed statuary, which has all been lost subsequently; and at Ottery St Mary, likewise, the great stone reredos and the niches of the choir were hacked back and plastered flush utilising painted fragments.

Thus it is likely that the destruction of the putative Almshouse figure sculptures took place at some time between 1547 and 1559. In the west country resistance to the mid-sixteenth century reforms (though seldom active) remained strong - a possible reason for the ferocity of the treatment of Richard Whiting, the last Abbot of Glastonbury, at the dissolution of his abbey. The turmoil of the 1550s and the sudden changes of policy under Mary and Elizabeth might have led conservatively minded (or even merely prudent) institutions to wait before removing the housings of the figures lest the wind change again and they were required to replace the images.

Preliminary Fabric Survey

Introduction

There is little doubt that the extensive nineteenth century restorations of the Almshouses have masked or renewed much of the original fabric, so that direct analysis is at best extremely limited, or at worst no longer possible. Recent repointing on the north elevation to the west seems to have been undertaken without archaeological supervision or recording. Repointing of the north porch was observed by the author, and clearly demonstrated that the latter was a secondary build - with straight joints against the chapel 'cross-passage' - though probably still part of the primary phase of construction in the 1430s.

The original configuration of the Almshouse, and the pre-1850 descriptions, imply a single storey building, so that second windows must be fictions of the mid-nineteenth century. However, the position of the 'cross-passage' probably belongs to the medieval ground plan, and on that basis the two major chimneys may also preserve an element of the original arrangement. This suggests that the Almshouses were subdivided into two sets of compartments separated by the cross passage and individually heated by two fireplaces, and that the western twelve 'cells' were reserved for women, and that the men occupied the eastern accommodation. Close examination of the roof trusses may clarify this hypothesis.

The close examination of the existing fabric of the chapel should also include the major medieval survivals:

- the chapel roof together with its supporting corbels

- the wooden screen which closes the eastern side of the eastern cross passage from the north porch to the south door

- the few surviving masons' marks on the ashlar, and their relationship to marks elsewhere on the building and on other contemporary buildings in Wells.

The Chapel Roof

The easternmost four bays of the continuous roof of the almshouse represent the extent of the chapel roof.

Between the plain narrow ridge-piece and the embattled wall-plate are three purlins with moulded edges each supporting a pair of curved braces with plain chamfered angles. The principle trusses have slightly cranked collars beneath which are a pair of curved braces supported on ashlar pieces which rise from corbel head-stops. The components are pegged from the west, and the western faces bear assembly numerals running in sequence from 'I' at the east wall to 'IIII'.

Parallels for the Chapel Roof

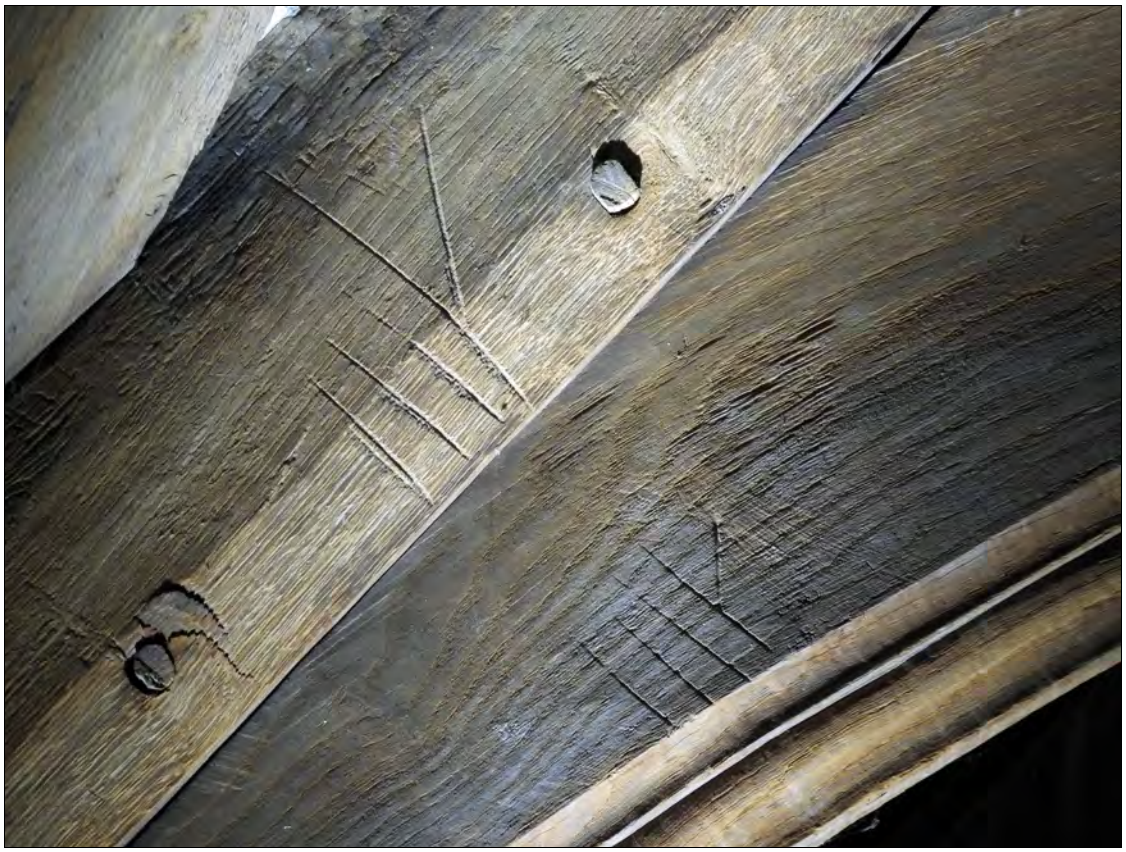
The houses of the *Nova Opera*

A group of roofs dating from c.1450 to the 1460s, probably associated with the Cathedral workshops, survives in and around Bishop Bekynton's *Nova Opera*, in the houses on the northern side of the Market Place and Penniless Porch.

These are closely related to the roofs of the Vicars Close which are also renewals from the episcopate of Bekynton, one of which has been dated to 1466 by dendrochronology. Having been made for much smaller buildings than the Almshouse and The Rib, their smaller spans imply fewer purlins and wind-braces - three tiers appears the most likely arrangement. The roofs have also been ceiled above the collars, conceiling the upper extent of the timber-work. Bishop Bekynton's *Nova Opera*, of 1451 to c.1460, was constructed only around 15 years after the Almshouses.

Here the roof structures of the front (south) range of the houses are well represented, only at No.13 is general replacement mentioned by the English Heritage inspectors responsible for their listing ('*the roof frame reputed to have been renewed in 1950s*'). Nos.3 and 15 (and perhaps No.25) were not inspected during the listing process, but two-bay arch-braced and collared principals with two ranges of wind-braces between the purlins are reported at No.7 ('*but the braces and collar have been removed from the second truss*'); No.11; probably No.19 ('*ceiled, but in the rear space parts of 2 windbraces are exposed; a tie has been added at low level to the centre truss*'); No.21 ('*collar*

The Chapel roof looking east (top) and west



Carpenters' assembly marks: Truss 4, west face, north and south with differencing.

Carpenters' assembly marks, Truss 3 - north and south sides with differencing.

removed from centre truss and later tie set lower'); and No.23. At No.5 it is reported that there is a '*suspended ceiling below the medieval roof structure*'. Thus it would appear that at least seven of the twelve houses, and possibly as many ten, retain a substantial proportion of their original fifteenth century roof structure.

The form of the roof structure in Penniless Porch is also very similar to that of the adjacent houses, though at a reduced scale and rising from massive corbels.

The carpenters' assembly marks on these roofs are of a different form to those at the Almshouses, the north-south differencing marks having compass-drawn circles rather than angled lines to differentiate the two sides of the roofs. This, the different patrons, and the later dates of these roofs suggests that they were products of separate workshops.

The refurbishment of the Vicars' Close under Bishop Bekynton

As well as the related roof in Penniless Porch, similar roof structures with arch-braced collared trusses and three tiers of wind-braces above the purlins were provided by Bekynton or his executors in the Vicars' Close, that in No.20 having been dated by tree-ring analysis to d.1466.[18] Some of the other aspects of the Vicars Close - such as the provision of chimneys and the associated heraldic decoration - which are also part of Bekynton's refurbishment - may also be relevant in reconstructing the original appearance of the Almshouses. Also comparable is the roof of the 'Exchequer Room' over the stair to the Vicar's Hall.

The houses in Saddler Street

Built at the same time as the Market Place development, three houses on Saddler Street also retain early features, and No.18, next to Brown's Gateway at the north west of Cathedral Green, has been surveyed by SVBRG. They differ in form to those of the Market Place, but some of their features may have been shared, and their roof structures appear to have been similar:

> 'The two-storey houses were built to a high standard with wide frontages (12m or 40ft) using type 2 plans, with a central passage between hall and service room. The most important room in these houses is on the first

[18] Penoyre 2005, p.119 and figs. 6.2 and 6.3.

Wells: the roof of Penniless Porch (c.1451) (top left); No.9 Market Place (the Nova Opera c.1450) (top right) and No.9 Vicars' Close (left).

The general similarities of the design: with arch-braced cranked collars, and the lower purlins supporting windbraces, suggests that the roof of the house in the Close belongs to the campaign of rebuilding under Bishop Bekynton and his executors - the timbers of No.20 having been dated by dendrochronology to 1466.

> floor, the main chamber, open to the decorative roof. This room is unusually placed centrally, rather than the more common arrangement with the chamber directly over the hall below. The large room had a turret stair access and a lateral fireplace and stack on the back wall. Most of the other rooms have framed ceilings. Later extensions on the back yard included a kitchen and date from between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.
>
> 'The street facade in Saddler Street is plain, the walls rendered and windows replaced. A small bay window at first-floor level is the same as the repetitive bays in Market Street, the sash windows replacing earlier mullioned casements. This exceptional group of houses has almost lost its identity due to later subdivisions, particularly in Market Street.'[19]

Penoyre also describes the typical town houses of Taunton and Wells,

> 'Taunton and Wells are both towns large enough and early enough to have had the restriction of expensive rents and narrow frontages. This restriction resulted in the adoption of the single front room plan, with a side passage leading to the rooms behind, all roofed at right angles to the street with a prominent timber-framed front gable.'[20]

The Rib

At The Rib on St Andrew's Street the magnificent mid-fifteenth century timber roof of six bays survives complete, and the south elevation, divided into three bays by original buttressing, has remodelled windows with Gothic moulded jambs, that in the east bay running to a lower level and probably defining the dais end of the hall. At the east end the feet of the principal truss of the roof retain corner posts supported on stone angel corbels, probably perpetuating the original arrangement of the remainder (from which the lower elements of the trusses have been lost). The principals are arch-braced with cambered collars, and between the butt purlins are four complete tiers of wind-braces. The timbers of the roof show no sign of smoke blackening, implying that an enclosed wall fireplace existed at this time, probably at the centre of the north wall.

The house lies at the east end of St Andrew's St. immediately east of the Cathedral's

[19] Penoyre 2005, p.129.

[20] Penoyre 2005, p.118.

Interior of the divided fifteenth century hall, looking east

The fifteenth century hall roof looking east (top) and west (below)

Lady Chapel, and was one of the medieval canonical houses in the gift of the Bishop. Predating the additions carried out during the tenancy of Canon Walter Osborn (from 1464), the mid-fifteenth century roof also has a similar form to the trusses, and the purlins bear four tiers of wind-braces, alternate sets being inverted as at the Almshouses. It is possible that this, too, was commissioned by Bishop Bekynton.

The corbels

At the bases of the ashlar posts supporting the principal trusses is a series of carved corbel heads in Doulting stone, three on each side beginning in the eastern angles of the chapel. Without direct access to these carvings it is difficult to be sure whether they are original fifteenth century carvings, competent nineteenth century copies or a mixture of both. The head of a bishop (at south centre), for instance, bears the initials of Bishop Bubwith on the front of the mitre, which, taken with the relative freshness of the finish of the carving might suggest a nineteenth century origin. The 1880s were a period when accurate copies of medieval carvings were being produced, and Wells had the services of carvers such as William Halliday to call upon.[21] The form of the forked-bearded head in the north-eastern angle, however, would certainly be appropriate for the first half of the fifteenth century.

However, the evidence of the 1848 Wheatley drawings suggests that heads are original, and there would be little incentive to have had them replaced during the mid-nineteenth century restorations.

Catalogue

Subject	Corbel head depicting a forked-bearded male
Position	South-east angle
Dimensions	not accessible
Material	?Doulting stone
Date	c.1435

Description

[21] Amongst other work Halliday carved the heraldic elements of the south-east entrance of the Wells recreational ground, as well as fine copies of medieval bench ends at Othery


N B

The chapel screen

The standard work on west country screens, Bond and Camm (1911), does not mention the Almshouse chapel screen, but it would appear to belong to their 'North Somerset Group', although in a very simple form. The developed designs of the North Somerset Group (**) have simple square tracery heads which consist of four parallel openings defined by a central vertical canopy head, usually with foliate crockets and a five-cusped arch head, with parallel rising mullions. At Wells, however, the canopy head is only three-cusped, and lacks crockets: this suggests Loxton as the closest parallel, although here the canopy is five cusped with crockets. The screen at Loxton bears pomegranates and Tudor roses, suggesting a date after 1508, while it seems likely that the simplicity of the Wells screen may be the result of an early date in the 1430s.

Their illustration in fig,86 (p.131) includes comparative drawings of the tracery heads of the North Somerset group from Nunney, Congresbury, Priddy, Compton Martin, Wellow, Pilton, Mells, West Pennard, Backwell and Yatton. These are classified as their 'A (2)' type, initially defined as,

> 'The north-east Somerset or Mendip group of rectangular-headed screens having tracery of a distinctive Perpendicular type and varying in date from about 1400 to the latest Pre-Reformation period.' [p.126]

In the subsequent discussion of this form the authors state that,

> 'The localities in which specimens of this order survive are practically all comprehended in the Mendip area.
>
> 'The churches of Nunney, Wellow, Compton Martin, Backwell, West Pennard, Priddy and Loxton, all have more or less perfect specimens remaining, whilst at Mells, and possibly in one or two other places, are fragments of work of a similar description.
>
> 'These screens though representative of the earlier type of roodscreen (i.e., flat-headed) are not all of early date, by any means, but in this part of the county the later work follows faithfully the older type instead of being supplanted generally by screen of the more elaborate "vaulted" type, as we find further west or south. The tracery heads which characterise this group of screens present a series of narrow compartments of rectangular shape in which appear canopies of ogee form.... enriched with foliage crockets and finial, the canopy open below with a cinquefoil cusping to the head of the light, and the space above the canopy filled with simple Perpendicular tracery. The design is varied within certain limits in the specimens extant, but a reference to the plate will show how strongly

Tracery heads in the screen at Wells and at Loxton (below)

marked is the unity of character pervading the whole group. In other localities we get something of a nature which recalls this type, but nothing precisely similar, so far as we are aware, exists outside the county limits - so that we have here a complete little school of design.' [p.131-2]

The masons' and carpenters' marks

The medieval buildings of Wells are particularly rich in masons' marks - the individual lightly incised designs which were the personal property of qualified banker masons and which were placed on finished pieces of work at the time of their manufacture. Those at the cathedral were recorded in the 1980s as a project overseen by the then archivist Linzee Colchester, and by Bert Wheeler, Clerk of the Works 1936-1978, in the course of his work; in addition marks have been noted on houses in the Vicars Close, the Bishop's Barn, the precinct gateways, St Cuthbert's parish church and elsewhere - all this despite the admonition by both John Harvey and Peter Poyntz Wright that there are no masons' marks in the Somerset Perpendicular.

At present only three masons' marks have been identified on the Bubwith Almshouse: two in the chapel and one on the southern jamb of the first floor doorway to the Guildhall. The chapel marks are lightly incised on the soffits of the two northern door-head blocks, which, being of Downside (Chilcote) stone, have rough surfaces, making the design difficult to read even under raking light. It is likely that taking a rubbing followed by further examination under raking light will be necessary to decipher these marks, but their relatively close dating (c.1434) renders them an important element in the emerging database, and their relationship to other near-contemporary buildings is of especial interest. For the future it may be of interest to encourage residents to report marks in other parts of the building and to record marks identified during future works in the almshouse.

Carpenters' assembly marks are also likely to shed light on the construction process of the almshouse. Those noted so far indicate that the roof was manufactured (and probably erected) from east to west, and it is reasonable to assume that the roof of the western parts of the building followed the same pattern. However, discontinuities in the numbering are usually indicators of hiatuses in the building process, At Yeovil St John in the period just before 1400 the erection of the west tower caused the western roof trusses to be erected out of sequence, and it is possible that the same could have occurred at Wells if the Guildhall formed a separate episode in the building process. At Wells also, in building the Bishops Barn in the mid-fifteenth century, two sequences of roof-truss numbers suggest two phases of construction. Again, it might be profitable to ask residents about numbers on the roof trusses.

The Great Storm of 1703

The almshouse accounts record a payment relating to the great storm of 26-27 November 1703, for the

> 1703-4 1st. Quarter: Picking up the tile wh. was blown down in the tempest & carrying of it in to preserve it: 4d.

This hurricane force storm seems to have been particularly severe in the south west of England, and in Wells caused damage to the west windows of the cathedral, killed Bishop Kidder and his wife as they slept in the Palace - a chimney stack being blown down and falling through the roof - and seems to have devastated the trees on Cathedral Green, since the Dean and Chapter were selling firewood in the aftermath of the gale.

At Ubley the churchwardens' accounts contain a vivid narrative of the hurricane force storm written in its immediate aftermath,

> 'It begun on Friday with rain which caused a great flow before it ceased. Towards the evening the rain abated and the wind arised and so continued rising higher and higher until about midnight, at which time it was so high the like was never known, the noise of it was like continual thunder which did awaken all of us out of sleep. And feeling our beds shake under us, none that was about to rise could lie in their beds. About four hours before day our houses began to break and in one hours time a sad distruction there was, but none could go forth from their houses nor rise from their places to see what hurt was done because of the darkness and the danger for four or five hours but late morning one with another and wishing for the day, but when the day was come that we could look forth; lo a nofull sight to behold; to see hips of healme at our doors. The streets filled with thatch and tiles of our houses, to see some houses blown down, many uncovered and all in general torn and broken more or less, to see the churches defaced, the towers was shaken, the windows broken, the lead blown off and the battlements blown down, to see a bundance of trees especially elms lying in the ways and in the fields with their roots turned upwards, a multitude of apple trees and many whole orchards wholly laid down, to see the corn mounds uncovered and blown about the bartens, the hay mows thrown down and carried into the ditches, a nofull sight indeed enough to make one fear and tremble, to see everything that was not blown down, the hedges and trees and everything moveable to quiver and shake, to see nothing but ruin and destruction on every side. If you look to the north it was all laid down before you. Off to the south it was all coming toward you. If you look to the east all was flying from you. Off to the west it was all ready to fall upon you: with a great roaring over your head and round

about you. Thus it was with us, but with many more much noise.'[22]

At nearby Badgworth John Gill, the churchwarden, noted payments

> '...to repair the breeches of the dredfull Tempest done to our Church and Tower, which apered with Wonderfull violence both by sea and land on the 27th of November, 1703. To our Tower was blown down all the west Batelment, and the to west Penicels and half ye Batelments South Side ye Belfery Window to peices. The Church tile blown al of, and all new lafted and laid; much of the Roucast Beat down all new laid, and a greadeal of ye Plaistering and all of it new done. This was Amazing, and God grant that there may never be the like while the world lasteth.'[23]

Daniel Defoe, in what must rank as one of the first major pieces of investigative journalism, described the effect of the storm on Compton Bishop church:

> "The tower of Compton Bishop was much shattered, and the leads that covered it were taken clean away and laid flat in the churchyard; the house of John Cray of that place received much and strange damages, which together with his part in the sea wall amounted to £500."[24]

Here the work of repair to the church took some considerable time to rectify, and it is likely that the extent of repairs required to the houses of the villagers took precedence over those to house of God. It is not until 1705 that the churchwardens' accounts for Compton Bishop record,

> "Mason pd. 2s. 6d. a dy. for 31 dys. mending Tower wh. was broke by great tempest Nov. 27, 1703.... ....£3 17s 6d"

Marks of this repair were probably unwittingly described by John Harvey, who notes that the parapet and pinnacles, '*are clearly of a different stone, along with the top few feet of the tower*'.[25]

Another church where repairs may have taken two years to complete is Priddy, where there is a limestone slab recording the repair of the tower in 1705, which, like Compton Bishop, was probably concomitant upon the Great Storm. It is placed on the north wall

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[22] I am indebted to Marilyn McLeod, for the transcription of this passage, 30/08/06.

[23] S&D Notes and Queries, vol.I, No.11, p.16-17, quoting the churchwardens' accounts for Badgworth.

[24] Defoe, 'The Great Storm', quoted in Knight *Heart of Mendip*.

[25] Harvey 1982, p.174, fn.13.

of the tower chamber and bears an inscription in six lines of rough Roman capitals:

THIS TOWER WAS
MENDED AND TO PINIKLS
AND THE GREAT PART OF
THE BATLMENTS 1705
WILLIAM YOUNG JOHN
CHANCLER CW

Severe storms are a matter of note to those who lived through them, but are soon forgot by a new generation tired of hearing old peoples' tales of natural disasters - Collinson, for instance, makes no mention whatever of the Great Storm - so that only where near contemporary records survive are direct references to its effects likely to be found. However, the examination of church fabric often provides tantalising suggestions of the storm's effects,[26] and occasionally more certain traces of its passing.

At Hinton Blewitt, for instance, Collinson noted that the church, '*consists of a nave, chancel, and north aile. At the west end is a neat tower lately rebuilt.*'[27] Cut into the south eastern buttress of the tower at approximately 6 feet from the ground is the date '1707' and beneath it the initials 'T.T.'. The size of their carving looks deliberate and official, but their position does not preclude a more ordinary origin as graffiti; however, the bells were recast in 1708, and it seems likely that the latter work completed repairs following the storm which were delayed here even longer than at Priddy and Compton Bishop. The extent of the rebuilding, however, does not appear to have been as great as Collinson was led to believe, since, as at Compton Bishop, there are ashlar repairs to the tower top comprising between one and four courses beneath the parapet, and further ashlar insertions on the south western corner, suggesting that the storm stripped the parapet and damaged the windward quoin.

There are several instances of what appear to be post-medieval rebuildings of tower tops in the Exmoor churches which could also be attributable to this cause. The somewhat anomalous terminations of several towers, and the prevalence of saddleback tower roofs could be the result of a local pre-Reformation stylistic preference, but the wooden top stage at Carhampton, for instance, could well be a response to storm damage.

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[26] At Otterhampton, for instance, the parapet rebuilt in the earlier 20th century has much older freestone framing the merlons; this, however, is of a different geology to the rest of the tower, and suggests a post-medieval rebuilding, perhaps in 1703/4.

[27] Collinson 1791, vol.ii, p.145.

The Victorian reorderings

In the current absence of documentary evidence it is particularly difficult to make definitive statements concerning the dating of the interior furnishings of the chapel. The two known Victorian reorderings of c.1850 and c.1884 are sufficiently close in date that they are difficult to separate stylistically.

The major structural work appears to have taken place at the earlier date, with the division of the accommodation into two storeys, and the separation of the chapel from the former by the erection of a cross-wall, the scars of which are plain to see. The Wheatley watercolour showing the chapel viewed from the west prior to the alterations suggests that the interior had been covered with a (Reckit's blue) coloured wash, that there was a single step in the sanctuary, and that the single light north window was positioned higher than it is at present. Little in the way of furnishings is shown.

The brief description of the reordering undertaken at this time confirms the evidence of the watercolour. The account begins by stating that '*for many years the chapel was in a state of dilapidation and neglect*', an opinion amply reflected in Wheatley's depiction. The work itemised included:

- the thorough renovation of the whole of the interior
- the removal of the interior ochre and whitewashes
- the raising of the sanctuary floor and the creation of the tiled paving
- the repair of the roof and walls
- the renewal of the seats or benches
- the opening, repair and glazing of the east window

Also belonging to this period, but not mentioned in the summary description , is the erection of the wall at the west end of the chapel, isolating it from the accommodation range to the west. In 1863 J.H. Parker,

> ''...condemned the alteration which had been made, and which divided the beautiful open roof of the chapel by a screen wall, separating the chapel from the remainder of the edifice. The open roof ran all along the structure, and its fine appearance had been totally destroyed in this manner, and by the erection of cells above the original cells. These additions should have been made elsewhere."

The extent of the repairs at this date, their cost amounting to £270,[28] suggests that the

[28] 'which sum was not taken from the funds of the Almshouse, but the whole was raised by voluntary contributions, obtained mainly through the efforts of the late governor, Mr. Edmund Davies, to whom the chief credit is due for completing the work.'

Repairs following the removal of the 1850 cross wall dividing the chapel from the accommodation to the west, showing as paler timber.

major reordering took place in 1850, and that little more may have been done in the chapel in the 1880s.

The washes shown on the walls in the Wheatley watercolour, and the conversion of the single sanctuary step to two steps, with the introduction of the encaustic tiles which now adorn the sanctuary floor, are all evident, and the description of the works includes '*the renewal of the seats or benches*'. Certainly, the Wheatley drawing suggests that little in the way of earlier seating survived into the mid nineteenth century, and that the present corpus post-dates the 1850 reordering. The extant benches have good-quality poppy-headed bench-ends including a handsome reading-desk at the eastern end of the north range. These stand on planked pew-platforms beneath which air-spaces have been excavated, with the joists supported on dwarf-walls. The gangway is composed of lias flags, and it is currently unclear whether these are laid on solid foundation, and if so of what date these may be. Thus it seems likely that little of the archaeologically sensitive deposits survive beneath the pew-platforms, though these may remain beneath the flagged gangways.

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