

THE CHANCEL

In his notes concerning churches in Somerset Glynne was not very complimentary about the chancel at Brent Knoll. *“The chancel is modern, (of rather meagre imitation of Perpendicular), but is fitted with stalls,”* he commented. Does that *“but”* imply that the stalls were its only redeeming feature? Pevsner, in his original “South and West Somerset” volume of “The buildings of England” does not mention the chancel at all, though the later revision by Julian Orbach states, *“The chancel is rebuilt with an incongruous queen-post roof. Victorian tiles on the sanctuary floor and E wall.”*

Perhaps the most scathing of all was the vicar, the Revd. Schofield, whose comments were reported in The Bath Chronicle and Herald for 20th August 1932, during a visit of the Bath & District branch of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (SANHS) in 1932. *“As for the chancel, the less said about it the better, he remarked. It was rebuilt in 1843. One could only be thankful that it was fairly spacious and broad, and that was all that could be said for it.”* Unfortunately, he appears to have been unable to carry out his plans, whereby *“he had a scheme which must, however, wait for better times, for making the sanctuary and the chancel generally worthy of the church.”*

Wickham refers to the chancel only whilst discussing the former rood screen. *“If the imagination substitutes for the dreary Early Victorian chancel the noble sight which greets the eye when one enters the churches of Banwell or Queen Camel or many others in the county, especially in the West,”* he says, *“we can measure what we owe to Puritanism or later neglect.”* The churches mentioned still have rood screens across the chancel arch, similar, he suggested, to that originally in Brent Knoll, which was *“almost certainly worthy of the bench-ends and of the aisle-roof.”* Although the rood screen is no longer there, the rood stair does still exist, with a door which would have given access to the rood loft.

Today the stair continues upward to the roof over the north aisle. The staircase is set in a fine octagonal tower which, from the outside, is interestingly situated. It squeezes into a recess, behind the buttress, at the east end of the nave and must have been built after the nave was completed. The buttress is of the perpendicular style, so this part of the chancel wall was not a re-use. The turret overlaps the east window of the north aisle, but the string course below the parapet is continued round it, as is its base. There may well have been an earlier

entrance to the rood loft, but this one is built of ashlar and has the same lozenge pattern as the north aisle parapet, inset into a squared motif, so is roughly contemporary with the north aisle.

There are some steps in front of the chancel arch, set two and two, with a platform between. This is where the rood screen would have been located, supported upon a platform. A transverse beam would have given additional support to the loft itself. At the back of the rood screen would have been the chancel arch. Glynne noted that, "*the chancel arch is similar to that of the north arcade, i.e. of light, clustered piers of 4 shafts, which are stilted and have octagonal, separate columns.*" This suggests that the chancel had been replaced before, at roughly the same time as the north aisle was being built.

So, was the earlier chancel, which was replaced by, or considerably modified by, the mid-nineteenth century chancel we see today, any better? The comments by Collinson/Rack do not seem to suggest so. Rack was obviously of an opinion with Pevsner, his comments taking no notice of any distinction in the architectural work of the chancel. "*Between Chancel and Nave is an old organ now disused and over it is an Emblematical painting of moderate execution, with Divers texts of scripture applicable to the subject.*" That was all he could find to say!

The organ will be discussed further when we look at its current home, in the gallery of the tower. The painting has long since vanished and does not appear to be a great loss, though it may have been interesting to know what was meant, in this case, by "*emblematical.*"

The stalls, referenced by Glynne, are choir stalls, three-deep on either side, and have trefoil-light decorations, mixed with a few quatrefoils. Quatrefoils, however, appear in abundance along the front rail. They are normally a style associated with the Tudor period, but were also copied, as here, in the nineteenth century. All designs are foliated and the central row on each side has, at the east end only, some grape and foliage design on its edging, strikingly similar to that depicted on one of the benchends discussed in the section relating to them ("Benchends" No. 5 – south end).

Behind the altar the wall is tiled, though this is normally hidden from view today by curtains which are strung across from wall to wall. Early pictures show an even more elaborate tiled panelling, obscuring the lower part of the east window. These are almost certainly Victorian period tiles. The original height can still be detected at the sides of this window and from the fact that the glass in the lower part of the window is a fairly modern, patterned, in-filling. In the centre was a roundel surrounding a cross, which had the altar set before it. Two free-standing diamond shaped pieces were set above the lower side panels.

Dominating the chancel, as in many churches, is the Perpendicular style great east window. There was obviously a similar feature in the earlier chancel and this window was recreated in a style in keeping with that of the former period. In fact, the rebuilding of the chancel probably has a lot more to do with absentee vicars in the eighteenth century, which meant they did not maintain their part of the building, which would, in consequence, suffer considerable deterioration. However, the east window is identical in its period style to the windows of the north aisle. Both this window and the contemporary chancel arch endorse the view that an earlier chancel had been rebuilt somewhere around the period when the north aisle was erected; probably around the end of the fifteenth century.

During the nineteenth century rebuild a large number of re-used stones were utilised. On the northern exterior wall that part below the windows is coursed, whereas that alongside and above is rubble, although the stone used in both cases is similar and has weathered equally. The coursed work could easily be original Perpendicular, whilst the upper part may have needed relaying.

On the east wall there are also courses at the lower level and indications that the wall below that window was left intact. Jagged cracking has been in-filled to either side and is still apparent at the lower edges of the window frame. The rubble starts at a lower level outside the in-filled cracks than it does on the inside, where it rises almost to the base of the window.

The south wall is very different from either the north or east walls. There is little or no coursing here and the stone has flaked more than elsewhere. As the south side is normally considered the “best” side, this is a little surprising; though, in some ways, it does give it a brighter appearance than the other walls. During the nineteenth century a quarry was established on the top of Brent Knoll. Stone from there was locally reputed to have been used for repairs to the chancel of the church, though this now appears to be incorrect. However, some from there does seem to have been used within the graveyard (See the Associated Features chapter). Along the tops of the walls, nevertheless, both here and on the nave, there is evidence of new stone being used.

Offset buttressing occurs at the east end. At the nave abutment only a single buttress is possible, although it is set as one half of an offset buttress. On the north buttress of the east wall there is an elaborate marking on one of the stones. In the first edition of this book I had suggested it may be a mason’s mark, but, having looked into mason’s marks a little more I now feel it appears to be rather too large and flamboyant for such. There are also markings on the stone below it, which may suggest that these are re-used stones, having previously formed part of some larger mural decoration.

This roof is now leaded, as is the remainder of the church. Inside there is a queen post roof, of a heavy Victorian style, offering little in the way of inspiration. The corbels are moulded, but there is no sculpture and the only decorative feature is on the inside top of the queen posts, where the spandrels of a straight brace contain trefoiled circles. Pendants hang below the two queen posts.

There are two windows in both the north and south walls, the latter being separated by an exterior door. They are executed in Victorian neo-Gothic style. All four, plus the main east window, have nineteenth century stained glass. The uppermost stained glass in the tracery lights of the east window commences with the Holy Name in Hebrew characters at its apex (this is known as the tetragrammaton, YHVH, transliterated as Yehovah). Below this are four kneeling angels, all looking towards the centre. Going down another level, the window is divided into three lights, each having a major character, followed by a subsidiary scene and a text at the base. The three major characters have haloes, identifying them as members of the hierarchy of saints and are identified specifically for the first time in Kelly’s Directories for 1894, where it states, “*the east window is stained and represents the three Archangels.*”

At first glance the archangels appear to be female, with long flowing blonde hair and full-length gowns. Closer inspection suggests they are not. The confusion is probably deliberate as archangels are not supposed to be distinguishable by sex, even though they have male names.

Not surprisingly, the central figure is that of the dedicatee of the church, St. Michael, who is, in traditional style, slaying a dragon with a lance. On Michael’s left (our right) is Gabriel, who was the angel associated with the annunciation (he told Mary of her conception, celebrated on March 25th, Lady Day). He is shown here bearing the lily of the Annunciation and with a scroll in his left hand bearing the words “*Ave Maria*”, as he is recorded as introducing himself with the words, “*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*” On Michael’s right (the viewer’s left) is a figure holding a staff and a pitcher, travelling along a road and carrying a locket, or pouch, with its strap passing over his shoulder. Raphael is considered the patron saint of a number of things, amongst which is that of being the patron saint of travellers, which accords well with the symbolism depicted here.

Below these three figures are circles containing angels who are, from left to right, an angel playing a mandolin, twin angels carrying a scroll inscribed “*ALLELUIA*” and an angel stepping on to a plinth whilst playing a trumpet. Finally, three texts cross the bottoms of each light. The first reads, “*We Worship Thee,*” the next “*We Praise Thee, O God*” and the third, “*We Glorify Thee.*”

Below this some additional glass has a geometrical pattern and is rather insipidly coloured. During the Victorian period it would have been hidden behind tiles, which probably means that the original lower part of the window was lost at that time. Traditionally the chancel has always been the responsibility of the rector of

the parish, whilst the nave was a communal centre and looked after by the churchwardens, acting on behalf of the parishioners. At the end of the nineteenth century the incumbent was the Revd. Augustus Otway FitzGerald (1876 - 1898) who was responsible for some major changes which took place in the chancel and may well have been the one who introduced the tiling. On 22nd October 1892 the Weston-super-Mare Gazette recorded that *“the east window of the parish church of St. Michael, Brent Knoll, Somerset, has just been filled with stained glass.”* Then, after discussing the imagery mentioned above, it concludes, *“the design and execution of the work have been carried out according to the instructions and specifications of Archdeacon Fitzgerald by Messrs. Wailes and Strang, of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.”*

Archdeacon Fitzgerald also replaced the windows on both sides of the chancel with what are clearly his own designs. Both the window in the east end of the south wall and the opposite window in the north wall commemorate, respectively, his first and second wives. The first of these offers two pictures of the Virgin and child, the larger above the smaller. At the base there is a dedication, *“In memory of Sarah Anne FitzGerald. Aged 21 years and Sarah Anne, her infant daughter. Buried together at Fledborough Notts Feb^{ry} 13th 1841.”* In an earlier edition I mentioned that, in a family tree I have seen, Sarah is not credited with any children, so one assumes that she died in childbirth. Recently Rosemary Keele has discovered that there is an alabaster memorial to Sarah Anne in Fledborough Church which gives some greater detail. It states that, *“In a vault beneath are deposited the mortal remains of Sarah Anne, the beloved wife of the Rev^d Augustus Otway FitzGerald B.A. Rector of this parish and only child of the Rev^d Richard Proctor M.A. Vicar of Laxton in this county, She died on the second anniversary of her wedding day, February 7th 1841 aged 21 years, Her bereaved husband and parents desire here to record, as a small tribute to her memory, the irreparable loss which her early removal from them has occasioned. None were ever blessed with a more loving and attached wife, or with a fonder and more affectionate daughter. A guileless simplicity and self-denying modesty, a winning sweetness of disposition and tenderness of heart, a meek and quiet spirit, a benevolent charity and a lowly humility – these, not merely as moral virtues, but as Christian graces – characterised her daily life, secured to her the enduring love and esteem of all, by whom she was known. Weep not, she is not dead but sleepeth. Luke 8, 52.”* She and the Revd. FitzGerald were married in 1839, he was then 26 years of age but, as he did not become vicar of Brent Knoll until 1876, it is obvious that he carried the memory of that tragedy with him throughout his life. At the foot of the memorial it becomes obvious that she did indeed die in childbirth as it records, *“And at the same time, and in the same grave, was laid the lifeless corpse of Sarah Anne, infant daughter of the above. She survived her sainted mother but four days. Of such is the Kingdom of God. Mark 10, 14.”*

The north window depicts another two pictures of the Virgin Mary, though the upper figure does not have the Christ child. Instead, the Virgin bears a cross with flowers in front of it and looks directly at it, whilst also holding a heart inscribed *“IHS.”* Below is another picture of Mary teaching the Christ child from a book on a lectern. Here the dedication reads, *“In memory of Theresa FitzGerald Baptized Aug 16th 1815 Buried September 28th 1867.”* This marriage took place two years after the death of Sarah. By 1867 the Revd. FitzGerald had been Archdeacon of Wells for four years, but was still nine years away from becoming the vicar of Brent Knoll, though, as Archdeacon, he did have the patronage of the parish. He did not marry again, though he lived for another thirty years after the death of Theresa.

Both of the other two windows are dedicated to female saints. On the north side there are intertwined initials at the top – a large *“C”* and a smaller *“S.”* These initials, alternating with a decorative motif, are repeated round the edging. Under the main initials is a dove in a circle, then comes a saint, with a halo surrounding her crown. In her raised left hand she holds a large sword and a palm leaf. Her gown is cream coloured and a mauve skirt is wound round her waist, displaying its blue lining. Continuing down, a circle, containing a spiked wheel crossed by palm leaves, makes it obvious that this window is dedicated to Saint Catherine, whose martyrdom is still remembered in a popular form of firework. At the base of the window is the message, *“Blessed are the pure in heart.”*

In the south window the initials are a large “B” and a small “s.” The upper figure here is an angel, set in a circle, holding a wreath in her left hand and a palm leaf in her right hand. Below her the main figure is also a woman, wearing both a crown and a halo. She holds a chalice, from which arises a cross set in a sphere. Her red cape is worn over a long cream coloured gown. Holding the cape in her left hand she reveals its silver lining. Around her waist is a green belt. Underneath a circle contains a chalice resting on a communion plate, with crossed palm leaves set across it. The legend at the base is “*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*” Robinson claimed this figure represented the Blessed Virgin holding a chalice and the host. This seems unlikely given the initials surrounding it. A more likely contender may be Saint Barbara, who can be represented by a cup and wafer, though she normally has a tower as well. Six other windows in Somerset have dedications to Saint Barbara, so she does seem a popular subject. In Volume 39 of the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Local History Society, F. W. Weaver suggested that her popularity was due to the fact that, “*St. Barbara presided as a patron saint over hills.*” That makes her particularly pertinent to Brent Knoll, though Christopher Woodforde, in his “*Stained Glass in Somerset 1250 -1830,*” offered an alternative explanation. “*It is said that St. Barbara and St. Christopher were often engraved together on rings, the former to protect men against sudden death, the latter for protection against perils of sickness, tempest, flood and earthquake.*”

Are these windows dedicated to the favourite female saints of the wives of the Revd. FitzGerald? Or is it the protection against sudden death which is an apposite reflection of his continuing grief? Or is this window perhaps a reminder of former days in South Brent, as for many years the manor was held by the St. Barb family. They were also known as ‘de Barbara.’ Maybe this had some influence on the vicar’s choice.

On the north wall a benefactor of Brent Knoll, George Northcote, is remembered on a brass plaque. It reads, “*In loving memory of my husband George Barons Northcote Esq^{re} of Somerset Court in this Parish and Manor House, Cove, Hants. Born Jan 16th 1845, died Oct 23rd 1915 aged 70. He brought the great boon of good water to Brent Knoll and Wick.*” On the same plaque his son is also remembered: “*Also of our dearly loved only son George Barons Northcote Captain 2nd Battalion Norfolk Regiment. Born Nov 14th 1884, wounded in action when leading his men at the Battle of Ctesiphon, Mesopotamia. Nov 22nd and died at Amara for King and Country Dec 4th 1915, aged 31.*” It continues beneath, “*They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, And in their deaths they were not divided.*”

The Revd. George Northcote was rector of Feniton in Devon. He resided at Somerset Court before taking holy orders, but presumably moved to Devon to undertake his duties there. His son, who inherited from him, largely resided at the property in Cove. So, neither father nor son spent much time at Somerset Court after the 1880s, leasing the house to various people, amongst whom were the Misses Brain, one of whom is remembered on the foundation stone outside the Parish Hall. Earlier, to obtain a constant supply of fresh water at the Court, the father piped water from a spring on the Knoll. As this required running a pipe through parts of the village, standpipes were raised at various points on the way, for the benefit of the people of the village. One of the standpipes still exists in the wall outside Pen Close in Brent Street and another stood in Battleborough Lane until recently, whilst a horse-trough was taken from it onto the green, which has now become Portland Place. His inspiration for this may have come from the Revd. Dennison of East Brent, who had earlier arranged a similar supply for his Rectory in East Brent, whilst providing a similar benefit to the whole of that village.

When it was feared that the Turks would enter the First World War an attempt was made to defend oil supplies in the Persian Gulf, leading to the tragedy of Ctesiphon. Amara had been captured by General Townshend on 3rd June 1914, but the ill-equipped Indian based army soon became overextended in an attempt to reach Baghdad. The Battle of Ctesiphon took place near that capital but was a disaster and, having retreated to a town called Kut, the British forces were eventually starved into surrender when relieving forces were unable to rescue them from a Turkish siege. David Lloyd George, in his memoirs, noted that this area, between the Euphrates and the Tigris, is the traditional site of the Garden of Eden!

Another vicar’s wife has a memorial close to the chancel arch. Anne Ditcher was, “*The beloved wife of the Reverend Joseph Ditcher M.A. Vicar of this Parish. She departed this life September 23rd 1859 aged 69 years.*”

The text following is taken from Titus Chapter 11 Verse 13, "*Looking for that blessed hope and glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.*" We are then informed that, "*The remains are interred in a vault in the Chancel of this Church.*"

A small inscription nearby records that, "*The Sanctuary carpet was given to the Glory of God and in memory of 'Babs' Newman who died 20-4-79*" (that is 1979).

Perhaps it would be appropriate to conclude this chapter concerning the chancel with a note about the Communion Plate. Wickham tells us that, "*it was purchased in 1800, but at some time the Chalice and Flagon appear to have been stolen and sold to a Silversmith in Frome, who, in his turn, sold them after filling in the inscription with alloy. The Chalice then came into the possession of a Mr. Parfitt, who won it as an Athletic Sports prize at Cardiff. By constant cleaning the inscription became visible, and on discovering its origin, Mr. Parfitt wrote to the Vicar of South Brent. The inscription on the Flagon which had been presented to a Frome solicitor also became visible at the same time and both Chalice and Flagon were subsequently restored to the Church.*" Unfortunately, in more recent times, the old parish chest has been stolen. We can only hope that a similar salvation awaits that.