

THE BENCHENDS

Time and custom have transformed the use of church naves. Today it is normal to solicit silence, for contemplation and prayer. In medieval times that would have been considered astonishing. The nave, at that time, played a central role in community activities and was constantly in use for purposes which would be considered rather too boisterous today. A major source of revenue, for upkeep of the church fabric, were the regular church ales, held, of course, in the nave of the church. Celebrations took place regularly on high days and holy days.

These activities required a large open space, so early churches had no seating in their nave. The chancel was often separated from it by a rood screen, which maintained the sanctity of that holy part of the church. Even dogs were once permitted to roam freely within the nave. Services were in Latin, they were fairly short, had little or no hymns or sermons, and there was, therefore, little need for seating. The church nave was effectively the village hall.

Gradually the needs of the elderly and the infirm became recognised. Benches were provided along a wall, or round a pillar or two. As most people know, this gave rise to the saying, “the weakest to the wall,” but it still left the remainder of the nave free for revelry.

Then came a fairly dramatic change in church attitude. Latin texts were translated into the vernacular, sermons were preached, hymns were introduced, all of which tended to extend the length of church services, which increased the demand for universal seating to be introduced. As that would have curtailed many of the pleasures enjoyed previously in the nave of the church and, as attitudes to the use of the total church building modified, Church Houses were often built close-by to retain the significant benefit provided to the church by the finances and the fun, but also to ensure that the revelries were conducted in what was now seen as a more appropriate setting, though exactly where this was done in Brent Knoll is uncertain.

Some local benches were introduced as early as the thirteenth century, but most Somerset churches had none until the second half of the fifteenth century, or even later in some cases. Here we will discuss the siting of both pews and benches, followed by a look at a selection of most of the fascinating carvings. However, the most intriguing examples, the Fox and Goose benchends, are given a chapter own as they are amongst the most famous examples in the country and have rarely been analysed in sufficient detail previously. A suggestion concerning their probable origin will be offered and that will include some potential dating of all the benchends in this church.

Siting of pews and benches

In his *“A Walk Through Some of the Western Counties of England,”* the Revd. Richard Warner remarked that, *“The only curiosity of South-Brent is its little church,”* and described how, *“Instead of pews, it has (like the Russian churches) a regular series of plain oaken benches, with a back to each, running from either side towards the middle of the church, at right angles to the wall.”*

These comments clearly demonstrate that the pews, which can be found in the north aisle and against the south wall, were not in place when Warner published his book in 1800. Eleven years earlier Collinson/Rack also noted, *“the Ends of the Old Beech benches next the Middle passage.”* Neither gives any idea as to whether the benches extended beyond the central aisle into either the south or north aisle. What does appear certain is that the benches were moved when the pews were introduced. Pews are differentiated from benches, in this instance, by having enclosed seating, with doors opening on to the aisles. Close inspection of the benches reveals a number of clues regarding those changes. Some of the inside faces of the benchends have filled-in mortices. These appear in front of the current joint holding the back of the bench. Examples can be seen (counting from the chancel end) at the south end of the eighth bench and the north end of the tenth and eleventh benches, at the front of the church, and on the south end of the second, third and fifth benches going towards the rear of the church. It is clear that these benchends were originally attached to the other end of a bench.

Other indications of change occur where scarf joints on the backs suggest that benches may have been elongated or shortened to fit a specific space (though this could potentially be caused by replacement timber due to rotting, for instance). At the rear of the church, near the tower, there are two sawn-off benchends; one in the centre of the second row from the back, the other at the far end of the bench in front. They were obviously mutilated to fit a space other than their original spots. On the northern end of the first of these is a plain end, presumably this benchend was taken from somewhere where it would have been obscured originally, e.g. it may have been hidden next to a pillar.

Glynne, writing some half century later (1855), says, *“On the south side, new benches have been erected...with well carved ends and poppy heads so as to be tolerably uniform with those opposite, but these have low doors added.”* In spite of his allusions to poppy heads, which certainly do not exist on the current pews, the description suggest that changes had taken place shortly before this time. The low doors exist only on the side pews against the south wall and within the north aisle, though he does not mention the latter. Maybe they were added somewhat later. Notably the north aisle pews have recently been removed (October 2021), to enable some redecoration work in the aisle, and discussions are currently taking place regarding the future layout.

But what about those poppy-heads he mentions? Could they have originally been a part of the pews which are still there and have they, therefore, been subsequently removed from them? A close inspection of the upper parts of the bench ends demonstrates that all those closest to the wall are carved from a single block of timber, from which the uppermost part has been moulded. All those facing in to the centre, however, both on the south wall and the north aisle, have been capped, using a stepped lap joint, and it is in this cap that the moulding has been carved. These mouldings are, however, identical to those of the wall facing ends. This does seem to suggest that Glynne reported accurately and that there were poppy-heads on the new pews, but that someone has taken them down at some time and replaced them with a new moulded top.

In 1894 the Weston-super-Mare Gazette suggested that it was, *“in this church of Brent Knoll (lately South Brent) that are to be found some of the most singular freaks of fancy of ancient ecclesiastical carvers.”* It refers to them as ‘stall ends,’ and suggest they, *“are the most curious and noteworthy of all [in Somerset] The conceits of many of the stall ends here are of unique design and boldly executed. Among them are the winged bull, the camel (and a funnier camel never had four legs), the lamb and the ‘pelican in her piety.’* It then goes on to discuss the fox and goose bench ends, which will be mentioned in a separate chapter. Unfortunately, it does not discuss the arrangement of the bench ends.

Clearly there are problems about using the current locations of benchends for assessing historical chronology within the church. It had been suggested, for instance, that the extension of the central benchends beyond the arcading, into the north aisle, indicates that the benchends were introduced after this extension had been built. If the benches were re-sited in the nineteenth century, this hypothesis cannot be substantiated.

Complicating matters further, a major problem arose with the setting of these benchends during 1921, when it became necessary to raise a considerable sum for restorations within the church. On the second of April the Weston Mercury announced that, “*St. Michael’s Church, a landmark for miles around, famous for its charming situation and beautiful tracery and carving, is in need of some very necessary repairs. There is an ominous crack in the tower, and the floor supporting the pew ends, which came originally from Glastonbury Abbey, is a mass of fungi and dry rot. In order to start a fund for the work, the parishioners are having a garden fete in the Vicarage grounds on July 20th. Gifts in money and kind will be gratefully received.*” Whatever would the British church have done without garden fetes?

Presumably the comments about Glastonbury Abbey refer to the benchends, rather than to the floor supporting them. Quite why Glastonbury Abbey should have had bench ends of the rather poor-quality carpentry as those in Brent Knoll church is hard to comprehend, always assuming they had any at all. Although monks did spend quite a lot of time at their devotions, it is unlikely they would be amongst the earliest worshippers to be provided with the luxury of seating. The story may have arisen because of a single benchend, which may have replaced an earlier one, and was of a higher standard of craftsmanship. More of that later. Mind you, I have also been informed by differing people that the benchends are from Bath Abbey, that they are from Bristol and that they came from Wells. Which does not leave many other local major sites in the vicinity to choose from!

Returning to the sorry plight of the 1921 church, it was reported almost four months later, on the 23rd July, by the same newspaper, that, “*Some time ago, on its becoming apparent that repairs to the floor and fabric of this sacred edifice were no less a matter for urgency than of necessity, the Vicar [Revd. R. T. Gardner Hon. C. F.] with characteristic energy, promptly took the matter in hand, requesting the Diocesan Board to appoint a Commission of Inquiry, and this body called in the Diocesan Consulting Architect (Mr. W. D. Caroe). As a result of their investigation a detailed report was submitted and an estimate obtained of the cost, the latter amounting to £783 10s. [£783.50p] for re-flooring the church and replacing the seats, and £155 for structural and exterior repairs, making a total of £938 10s. [938.50p] to be raised. The work was at once commenced, being entrusted to Mr. John Merrick, of Glastonbury, and it was then found that the dilapidations were more serious than had been anticipated, making an additional expenditure of £312 necessary, & bringing the total amount required to £1,250 10s. [£1250.50p].*”

The Vicar put up a total of £467 for the tower exterior and extras. “£100 was granted by the Diocesan Board of Finance and a similar amount by the churchwardens. The Garden Party was to be the main fund-raising activity for the balance of £583 10s [£583.50p]. By June 11th it was noted that “*restoration is now in progress,*” although the Garden Party was still over a month away. Looking at the base of the benchends today the work of this period is obvious. There is herring-bone parquet on the platform supporting the main benches, and the benchends sit slightly uncomfortably on ledges used to raise them above the level of the platform. Only the final benchend (at the south rear of the church) and a plain one (second from back on the north side) seem to have suffered any excessive damage; the southern one having lost its entire lower section (though that may have an alternative explanation, see below).

Where the seats butt against the benchends there is, in most cases, a front and rear notch, against which they were presumably intended to be set. New frontal strips on the benches have obviously distorted this somewhat. A number of benchends do not have the notch, some having elements such as a squared-off lower section, a plain chamfer, or a hollow chamfer. Some of these mix differing elements on their front or their back. This work would have entailed the temporary removal of all benchends and their subsequent replacement – another reason for caution in assessing their contemporary layout.

In his “*brief but apt address,*” the newspaper continued, regarding the Vicar’s address at the opening of the Garden Party, which stated “*They were gathered there that afternoon to try and make something like £450 to pay for the new flooring of the church and the replacing of the seats, some of which were very valuable and required most careful handling. So, in the words of the old drill sergeant, ‘Don’t you forget it,’ you have to make £450 this afternoon.*” In spite of this the Garden Party only raised £225, though that was not such a bad

amount when you compare it with an advertisement in the same newspaper which advertises raincoats at 25/- (£1.25p) and overcoats at 35/- (£1.75p).

Until relatively recent times churches practised segregation. This took two forms: the first whereby men and women were separated and the second whereby the rich and the poor were separated. In fact, it was considered not only that you were born into one or other sex, but also in to one or other class, rich or poor, and that you remained in that class for the remainder of your life as that is what God had decided was right for you. Obviously, the seating in the church had to reflect this. Men were allocated the sunnier south aisle, whilst women were confined to the colder north side of the church; the rich occupied the front seats, nearest the altar, whilst the poor were accommodated at the rear of the church. These arrangements were also likely to be reflected in the benchends. It is noticeable that the poor appear to have been left with those which did not quite come up to scratch or were purely decorative. A number of the carvings on their benchends have significant problem areas, but there is one benchend which belies this rule. It is the very last one before the tower which has lost its lower section (as mentioned above). Its positioning there may be noteworthy but, as that is related to a more complex story, its potential significance will be included in the separate chapter which discusses the triptych of Fox and Geese benchends.

As far as the male and female benchends are concerned there may well be specific ones designed to appeal to each sex, but, as the benchends have been moved around quite a bit, it is purely speculation as to which is which. Nevertheless, as there is a larger pious pelican on the southern end of one bench and a smaller version on the last bench before the central aisle, that may well be designed for the women. Another is a rather splendid Agnus Dei, whilst the other benchends on the northern end do seem to be decorative, which may mean that they were also intended for the women. Most of the pictorial carvings appear on the benchends in the southern aisle and were, therefore, likely to be aimed at the men, even though they may originally have appeared either in the central aisle or the southern end.

Before looking at a selection of the benchends in more detail, there is one other aspect of them which needs some discussion and that is the poppy-heads. Poppy, in this case, has nothing to do with the flower of that name, but probably comes from a French word "*puppis*," meaning 'figurehead,' or 'poop,' though it is often stated to be derived from "*poupée*," (puppet), which the Concise Oxford Dictionary says "*appears to have no foundation.*" They consist of carved finials on the top of benchends and were particularly popular in East Anglia, where some had very intricate designs, often based on a fleur-de-lis, which denoted purity and was said to represent the Virgin Mary. In Somerset they are less flamboyant and less frequently found. Poppy-heads became common in East Anglia in the fifteenth century and most of those in Somerset seem to have been influenced by the East Anglian models. Does this indicate that they are early Somerset bench ends?

A selection of the carved benchends

There are twelve benches in the front half of the nave and eight in the rear half. Out of these seven benches have pictures, one has stylised lettering and two have pedestals from which, it would appear, some small statues have been lost. Each contains a main body, which is frequently broken into smaller panels, with the poppy-head above providing a neck display (occasionally integrated into a lower panel) and a small design at the top. Starting with the south ends of the benches, from the chancel end, the following details can be seen:

1. Floral design. Three plain cinquefoil panels each contain trefoiled tracery enclosing a floral or arboreal design. The neck contains foliage and the face of an owl is on the poppy-head.
2. Pious Pelican. Pelicans have a red spot on the ends of their beaks. This led to a story, often related in medieval bestiaries, that the young flap their wings in their parents faces, to which they retaliate by killing them. After three days, however, the young are resurrected by their mother plucking her chest and drawing her own blood to nourish her chicks back to life. The three-day allusion is obvious, making this a popular icon in many churches throughout the whole country. The pelican and her brood are set within a twisted wreath. In the spandrels are grapes with two pointed leaves. The neck contains a green man, another very popular symbol, which appears in many guises throughout St. Michael's church and in many other churches both here and abroad. Often considered a pagan symbol, the Green

Man only acquired that name in the 1939, yet it is fairly clear that it had become an (adopted?) Christian symbol from the early medieval period at least. As many variations exist it is possible that it has differing manifestations. What makes this example even more intriguing is that he is wearing what could well be a mitre. Interestingly, Bishop Fox adopted the pious pelican as his personal emblem, though, in spite of stories concerning the Fox and Goose benchends related later, it is uncertain whether there is any specific connection to Brent Knoll. The top of the poppy-head is foliate.

3. Eagle. Various symbols were used to represent the four evangelists, three of the most common are found in St. Michael's. St. John is depicted as an eagle, here set in a twisted wreath, with a book in his claws and a scroll supported by his lower wing. Comparing the wings used for this eagle, with both pious pelicans and some of the birds in the fox and goose trilogy, clearly demonstrates that they were carved by the same person. Other features, such as feathers, feet and tails, and sometimes even beaks (though that does change between bird species), are almost identical, enhancing that belief. There is a difference between the main pious pelican panel and this eagle, in that the pelican has four feathers to the eagle's three, but even that fails to hold true for the smaller pelican panel, where the pelican only has three feathers. However, the way they hold their wings does differ substantially, for the pelican holds both wings aloft, whilst the eagle has one sweeping down to the ground. Another green man adorns the neck of this benchend, this time with a plain hat with dotted sides, which could well be another mitre. The poppy-head is foliate and roses decorate the spandrels, each with two pointed leaves, decorated at their edges.



4. Angel - St. Matthew is associated with an angel and is shown here kneeling, holding an unfurled scroll set in a twisted wreath. His wings are remarkably similar to those of the eagle and the pelican, which demonstrates that this panel was almost certainly carved by the same person as both of the others. Each spandrel has a stunted leaf, with buds or fruit growing from either side. The main body of the benchend is divided into two main panels, with the angel at the top and a panel divided down the middle below, both sides of which contain a quatrefoil supporting a four-petal floral design. In the neck are three similar, but more elongated leaves, interspersed with three of the same buds or fruit. The poppy-head contains some rather worn foliage.
5. Plinths. On this benchend there are two lights, side by side, both having double ogee crowned trefoiled heads. At the base of each is a plinth, shaped like fonts or pillar piscinas, which, presumably, once supported a small statue. At either side and in the centre are columns with pedestals and capitals. Above the ogee heads are super mullions; the main ones triple columned; all richly carved with crocketed pinnacles. This particular benchend stands out from nearly all the others in the church by the superior quality of the workmanship displayed on it. It has a richly decorated border of vines (John

15: 1-5 Jesus said “I am the true vine”), unlike the fairly simple borders elsewhere, and also the rich decoration mentioned above, over each of the panels. It is patently not by the same artisan who carved nearly all of the others. Of particular interest is the neck as it contains a Green Man, with normal foliage emanating from his mouth, but here despoiled on both sides. What is remarkable about this particular Green Man though, is the fact that he is undoubtedly wearing a mitre! As most of the benchends in the church are well preserved, and this one has no other damage, the disfigurement of the foliage does seem to suggest an intentional action. Various sources have suggested that the benchends in St. Michael’s were acquired from either Bath Abbey or Wells Cathedral, and Wickham even suggested Glastonbury Abbey. As this benchend is patently different from all the others it may well be that the story originally related to this specific benchend, rather than applying to all of them. Its high quality does indeed suggest an origin in some higher status ecclesiastical building. There is a similar benchend in East Brent church, which may indicate that they were acquired at the same time and that it was when one of the aforementioned buildings was having major changes. The obvious choice would be Glastonbury Abbey, though that is not proven. As the Abbot of Glastonbury was entitled to wear a mitre (discussed in more detail under discussion regarding the Fox and Goose benchend), could it be that this took place when the Abbey was destroyed after the Reformation and that the benchends were then distributed around various local churches? That could also explain why someone, opposed to the abbot and his right to wear a mitre, disfigured the foliage.

6. Ihocyc. Various symbols were used by the early church to depict the Christian religion. A number of these utilised letters of the Greek alphabet as abbreviations for aspects of the faith. Chi Rho are the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ (Xpictoc), whilst IHS, or IHC, stood for the Greek version of Jesus (Ihocyc), though often referred to as Jhesu. This benchend utilises the latter as its central theme. The letters IHC have flourishes, culminating in leaf motifs, curled round inside the encompassing twisted wreath, from either their upper or lower ends. Below, the area is divided into two, with a plain shield filling the space in each side (these are very similar to the stone shields on either side of the main door of the tower). Like most of the other wreathed benchends branches spring from the twined branches into the spandrels, where they expand into foliate designs. There is a leafed design in the neck and a very worn head in the poppy-head. Interestingly, this is the only benchend in the front half of the church which does not have a design on the rear of the poppy-head. All of the others have plain foliate designs. At the rear of the church things are quite different, as there are three without designs and three more which only have the outline of a border, suggesting that the inferior quality benchends, or those with mistakes in the carving, were assigned to the rear half of the church.
7. Calf. A winged calf standing on a scroll is shown on the superior part of this panel. This is the normal symbol used to depict St. Luke. The calf has its head turned to look out from the benchend. As with the other evangelists, it is set in a twisted wreath from which foliage spills into the spandrels. It is noteworthy that only three of the four evangelists are represented in St. Michael’s, which is similar to the situation in East Brent, though the missing evangelist differs. In Brent Knoll it is the lion of St. Mark which is missing, whilst in East Brent it is the eagle of St. John. As both churches also have a benchend which is of far superior quality to any of the others (though East Brent benchends in general are of a higher quality carving than those of Brent Knoll), it is tempting to suggest that the missing evangelist was replaced by the higher quality benchend in both churches. Below the calf of St. Luke is a curious animal. It was described in the Weston Mercury in 1894 as a “*camel (and a funnier camel never had four legs).*” It looks remarkably like a horse, except that it has two humps on its back. Was it, perhaps, based upon the description of a camel in a bestiary by someone who had never seen an original? A camel could be described as a beast of burden with two humps, which could sound to anyone unfamiliar with a camel, as a variation on a horse, often used here as a beast of burden. Below

the head of this animal is a plant, which may be a flower or a small shrub. Both the neck and the poppy-head have foliated designs.

8. Decorative three light. Though patently the work of the same craftsman, this design appears to owe much to the detail on the super-mullion extensions in the fifth benchend mentioned above (it has been suggested that many of the features of the Brent Knoll benchends derive from this higher quality benchend, but, if that were so, it is possible that the inspiration came from the original source of the better quality benchend prior to its move to Brent Knoll. As Glastonbury owned the local area except for the church, that could be the most likely source, as people from South Brent would have had to visit there regularly to pay rents and attend courts) There are three lights, with a four-petal floral design at the bottom and cinquefoil ogee-crowned heads, from the apex of which sprout super-mullions, with leaves sprouting from them and culminating inside two-centred, trefoil cusp arches. Like most of the other benchends, except the fifth one, the perimeter is plain (though some others do have well-spaced roses around them). The neck is foliated, but the poppy-head has a man (a Green Man?) with his tongue sticking out. Note that, on the opposite side of this benchend, there is a filled-in mortice which suggests that it was originally used at the opposite end of a bench.

9. Fox Preaching. This is the first part of a trilogy of cartoon benchends which will be dealt with in detail in a separate chapter because of their importance. The Poppy-head has a worn image of a bearded man. The neck will be considered along with the remainder of the panel.

10. Trial. This is the second part of the cartoon trilogy, which has foliage on its poppy-head.

11. Hanging. This is the third part of the cartoon trilogy, again with the image of a bearded man.

12. Half end. As this is the last benchend before the cross passage, only a front half exists. It is another example of one that has similarities to the imported benchend (no.5). It does only have a single light of double ogee-crowned trefoiled heads but, unlike No. 8, this does have a pedestal incorporated. In fact, this pedestal is rather more elaborate than that of No. 5.



In the north aisle most of the benchends have tracery or foliate designs, only two have pictures. Another pious pelican appears as the last one before the centre cross passage and it is very similar to that on the south aisle, though, as this is only a half panel, there is no wreath; instead, the pelican's nest is balanced on the top of a leafed tree.

There is only one other pictorial benchend in the north aisle and that has ogee-headed trefoil tracery in its lower half. Above this is an Agnus Dei, with the very fleecy lamb looking over its shoulder at the Saxon, or Pomée, cross, which has a pennant streaming from it. There is no halo on the lamb and its right front foot is raised underneath it, almost touching the base of the sword-shaped shaft of the cross, which peeps below its belly. A curious feature of this panel is a head which appears in the top right-hand corner, which seems to be a woman's face, though this is by no means certain. No hair can be seen, mainly because there is a band circling the top of the forehead and the eyes are cast down. In contrast to the well-crafted eyes, the mouth is rather crude. All in all, there is a slightly uneasy feel about the face and it is not known what it is supposed to represent.

Almost all of the benchends in the rear of the church have tracery and foliate designs, except for one, which has no engraving at all, and another which will be discussed later, in the chapter concerning the Fox and Goose benchends. Many of the benchends show signs of having been placed at the rear as they have mistakes in the carvings, or do not come up to scratch in some way. This area would have been where the poorest people sat, so those who sanctioned the production of the benchends would have had little concern about the quality of the workmanship and would expect the poor people to be thankful that they did in fact have seating.