

# **BALSHAM PARISH CHURCH**

## **A GUIDE TO THE WOODWORK**

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If you wish to contribute to its cost  
(about 75p.)  
there is a box in Church.**

## THE WOODWORK IN BALSHAM CHURCH.

People often think that what they see in a church has been there "from the beginning" - that usually turns out to be no longer than the memory of the oldest inhabitant, add a few years or so ! Furnishings change over the centuries; in some Parish Churches a "Restoration" sweeps away everything from the past, or heavily "restores" it (look at John Betjamen's poem "The Church's restoration in 1853"); in others a mania for "conservation" ensures furnishing from the past is retained, be it never so inconvenient in use. While Balsham Church goes back to the mid 1200s and before, the time-scale within which present furnishings are set begins with the incumbency of John Sleford (d.1400) who re-built the Nave probably c.1384 which is where, for the purpose of this note, we find "the beginning."

### 1. In the beginning.

From before the 1380s there remain only the stone structure of Tower and Chancel. There were probably no pews, perhaps a few benches here and there set against the walls (hence the expression "the weakest to the wall), and a chair or two; altar or altars were of stone; the font had a flat cover pad-locked to iron staples which tended to expand through rust from the damp and broke the stone (look either side of the font and see the two new pieces of stone to repair the breakage). Tall Font covers were unusual (the Balsham example dates from the 1930s but is modelled on that at Ufford, in Suffolk, dating from the mediaeval era).

The Church was recorded for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments in 1951 but the Report for this part of Cambridgeshire has not yet been printed; these notes are partly based on the manuscript record held in London.

### 2. The contribution of John Sleford (1350s-1400).

The Brass of John Sleford records he "gave these stalls" and it is to him that the Parish Church owes the Chancel seating and the lower part of the Chancel Screen (about which more below). He became Rector c.1367 but until 1377-78 he was a "king's clerk" and served king Edward III in the "government supplies departments" as Keeper of the Great Wardrobe and Keeper of the Privy Wardrobe of the Tower, before that he had been Clerk of Works; a brother (?) William Sleford was Clerk of Works and later Dean of

the king's Free Chapel of S. Stephen at Westminster. In these positions, Sleaford was in contact with all the major craftsmen and suppliers of his time. He lost his positions when the young king Richard II came to the throne in 1377 and it was probably after this that Sleaford turned his mind to church fabric at Balsham.

The reason why the Parish Church has such magnificent seating is probably because of Sleaford's "connections" and also because the whole parish was "Church property" and there was a Bishop's residence that might have entailed occasions when a number of clerics might be in attendance and needing seating. The furniture blocks the south access door (no need then to make sure what was done was 'in keeping' with the rest of the church !). The Chancel seating in no way represents either the mediaeval staffing at the Parish Church or a large "choir" in the modern sense. At one time there were 28 seats but in the 1870s when the doorway in the North side of the Chancel was pierced to provide access to new vestries the seat on that side was removed and, to match, another was taken from the South side whose place is apparent as the moulding along the wall stops a "seat-space" from the remaining seats. After repair, the seats were replaced badly so that at the SW and SE corners the lower arm rests no longer coincide as they ought.

A key to the Chancel seating is detailed overleaf across the centre pages. As there is insufficient space above the narrative, the key to the description is given below. Otherwise the remainder of this note continues after the centre pages.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE CHANCEL SEATING

Start from the North-east corner of the furniture (facing altar, front left hand side) and then work round the U-shaped arrangement, ending at the South-east corner hand side (facing the altar, right hand side). There are four areas of particular interest:- (i) Haunches (Upper arm rests) (1U etc.); (ii) Elbow (Lower) rests (1L etc.); (iii) Desk ends (a. D.); and (iv) Misericord seats (i. M) (not all have survived). The numbering convention is taken from the RCHM notes. Notice that at either corner the related rests are given a single number (11N and 18S).





It is likely the seating was carved in East Anglia for one of the figures (on the north side, third from the front) is of a man wearing either a pleated "cotte," cloak or kilt; he has stilts strapped to his legs, his left hand holds a dog on a leash. That could represent a "Fen Fowler" going about his business catching fish, eels or water-fowl amidst the (then mainly) undrained fen.

The seats are called "Misericords" (from Latin "have mercy"). When first placed they were hinged and beneath each was located a small ledge which enabled an occupant to "perch" while seeming to stand, hence the seats "had mercy" on occupants tired of standing a long time during church services. Because the ledges were hidden, mediaeval woodcarvers had free rein to exercise their imagination and carve all manner of scenes, often ribald and sarcastic as they mocked pretension, hypocrisy, and current morality, especially that of the clergy, on the basis "out of sight, out of mind!" You will find some of the seats at Balsham can be lifted up; others vanished long ago.

There are two sets of arms to each seat for use when sitting (at lower level) and again when standing (at upper level). The carving has in many instances become mutilated over time but, with some imagination, figures of animals, birds, men and angels can be recognised. The desk ends have holes in the top, probably for candle sconces (like those on the riddle posts about the altar); the desks themselves bear graffiti from the centuries. The Screen across the Chancel Arch is contemporary with the seating but if you look carefully you will see it is "square headed" on the east side, but "round headed" on the west (note below).

### **3. The Chancel woodwork after Sleaford.**

At some time, probably after Sleaford (and perhaps during the incumbency of John Blodwell c.1430s-1462), a canopy was erected over the screen, ornate on the west side but plain on the east. At first all that was on top of the screen would have been the crucified Christ and the figures of SS. Mary and John either side, but it seems a balcony was later constructed (the holes for the banisters either side are still there). Some suggest this was for a group of singers and musicians, it could certainly have been used for that purpose. The canopy is a clever piece of adaptation: looking towards the Chancel the lines of the mullions by the seats merge into those of vaulting of the canopy; looking towards the Nave the square-headed tracery merges into the arcing of the canopy. A photograph exists of its state prior to the 1870s when it was heightened by the insertion of 21 inches. You can see where the

horizontal beam met the wall near the capitals of the Chancel arch north and south (there are marks in the stone) and if you look at the upright mullions you can see the pieces of inserted wood. The present colouring from the 1970s represents what was then thought to be a "traditional style," yet in the mediaeval era it was probably much more brightly painted.

#### **4. The Elizabethan era.**

The panelling about the altar in the north aisle is Elizabethan but it "migrated" here from the former Rectory, having been moved by John Burrell (Rector 1910-1935) who adapted it. On the one side there remains a door. The table now used as an altar may have come from this era; the candlesticks are modern, and the "paintings" are in fact photographs of Medici prints.

#### **5. The restoration of the 1870s.**

The Church photograph previously mentioned gives some idea of furnishing prior to the 1870s. Most of the Nave had 17/18th. century box pews and the pulpit was built on the north side, set against the first pillar from the screen. There were some pews from about the 1500s (these are noted in the 1950s notes) but they had disappeared by the latter 1960s, probably in the grand "clear-out" at the west end. In the 1870s the Nave seating was repaired and new pews, pulpit and large reading desk provided; for the Chancel came altar and communion rails (designed by Wm. Butterfield) as the brass tablet on the south wall of the Chancel records - "To the honour of God for benefits received through J.J. Halcombe Rector of this Church this Altar with the Communion Rail were placed here by a number of priests as a token of their sense of gratitude A.D. 1878." A barrel organ was located on the north side and the backs of the first four stalls were removed for purpose of light and sound (now replaced by movable ply panels stained dark oak so as to keep out the draught).

#### **6. The contribution of John Burrell (1910-1935).**

Among the many gifts of John Burrell, Rector at the beginning of the 20th. century, was carpentry which he put to good use not only by running woodworking classes for village boys but also by providing woodwork within the church most of which remains though one piece has been stolen.

**The Chancel:** The altar has about it "English use" screening with curtain

and decorated riddle posts surmounted by angels who, judging by their shape are female, an unusual choice ! There used to be a carved credence table/ cabinet but this has been stolen.

**The Nave:** By the dais stands the lectern with lions at the feet and the four evangelists standing about it were given by him in 1936, on the wall hangs an inlaid hymn board.

**The North Aisle:** At the eastern end is the "Chapel" dedicated to S. Nicholas (following the mediaeval Guild in the Parish) with a modern superstructure and statue carved by Burrell. On the north wall within the door aperture is a Rectors' Board (with no more space for further Incumbents). It has armorial bearings of the Bishopric of Ely and of the Charterhouse and an inscription recording the change of Patron, formerly the Bishop but since 1611 the Charterhouse. Nearby is a First World War Memorial cabinet and book-stand.

**The West End: Font Cover.** This is John Burrell's finest work. The mechanism is ingenious; set within the upper part is a counterweight made from a First World War howitzer shell which balances the weight of the lower part, when lifted. Round about the cover are carved the figures of S. Nicholas for children; S. Augustine; S. George for England; S. Felix, Apostle of East Anglia; S. Etheldreda, Foundress of Ely Abbey; Bishop Hugh of Balsham, founder of Peterhouse; John Sleaford; and Thomas Sutton, Founder of the Charterhouse. Nearby is a **Print stand.**

**6. The Bier.** Though not strictly speaking "woodwork" the bier presently in the North Aisle is a fine example of what was used before the arrival of black limousines. A coffin can be placed on the carriage and walked up to, and into the church, and out again; the "stretcher" on which the coffin rests can be detached so the coffin can be carried into church or to the grave side.

**7. More recent woodwork.** The statue of Mary and the child Jesus on the North side of the Chancel arch was carved in Lime wood by Gwyneth Holt and the Nave altar of Cedar of Lebanon were introduced during the late 1960s; at one time the altar was moved back and forth from the South Aisle to stand before the Nave; more recently it has remained within the Nave.