

Oxfordshire

BURFORD PRIORY

The Lenthall Chapel, by Nicholas Cooper

History

The chapel was probably built in 1662, when Robert Skinner, bishop of Oxford, wrote to the bishop of London to ask for ‘an uniform order of consecrating Churches and Chapels ... [as he was] called upon to consecrate a Chapel at Burford, a most elegant piece.’¹ This was not Lenthall’s first venture into church building, since he had extensively redecorated and refurnished the church at Besselsleigh in Berkshire (his other major property) in 1657.

William Lenthall’s motives in building the Burford chapel are not known, and the Oxford antiquary Anthony Wood, who was not well disposed towards him, probably intended an element of sarcasm when he noted Lenthall’s own protestations that he died ‘a dutiful son of the Church of England, as it was established before the Rebellion broke out.’² In 1660, when Lenthall unsuccessfully sought election to Parliament for Oxford University, he was canvassed for by the Independents and Presbyterians and opposed by most college heads,³ and he was initially exempted from the Act of Oblivion (whereby the majority of the leaders of the Commonwealth were spared from penalties). But although there is a prominent Stuart royal arms on the entrance gable (see below), at the age of 71 it is unlikely that Lenthall had any expectation of political rehabilitation. His earlier work at Besselsleigh, the terms of his will, and his deathbed interview with Dr Brideoak (then vicar of Witney) imply that he was principally motivated by private piety.⁴ He died three months after the chapel’s consecration and a year after the death of his wife, leaving instructions that he was to be buried in Burford church under a plain slab bearing only the words *vermis sum* [‘I am a worm’].⁵

Whether the chapel was altered before the twentieth century is not known. The internal woodwork, restored in 1937, follows fragments found in the building, but in its style it appears rather later than 1662. It is possible that the building was not completely fitted-up when consecrated, and that the work was finished for Lenthall's son (died 1681), his grandson (died 1686) or his great-grandson (died 1763). Though presumably included in Borlase’s description of the house in 1752 as ‘in perfect repair’,⁶ following the house’s sale to an absentee in 1828 the chapel fell gradually into ruin. Some work was carried out at the beginning of the twentieth century to make the building weatherproof,⁷ but photographs of the interior taken around then show it derelict and empty. It was included in de Sales la Terrière’s purchase of the house in 1908, but until 1936 little else

¹ R H Gretton, *Burford Records* (1920), 278, quoting Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 48, f. 14.

² A. Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Bliss (1818), III, col. 609-10.

³ A. Wood, *Life and Times*, I (Oxford Historical Society, 1891), 312-13.

⁴ Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, loc.cit.

⁵ J G Nichols and J Bruce (eds), *Wills from Doctors Commons* (Camden Society 83, 1863), 111-16.

⁶ British Library, MS Stowe 752, f. 158.

⁷ Harry Paintin, *Burford Priory and the Lenthall Family* (1907), 15.

was done to the building either by him or by his successors, save for the removal of the royal arms from the north gable to the centre of the house's south front.

In 1936-7 the building was repaired and so far as possible restored by the architect Walter Godfrey, commissioned by Sir Archibald Southby MP; Southby had bought the Priory a few years earlier from the executors of E J Horniman, who in 1923 had employed Godfrey to carry out work on the house.⁸ Godfrey's work on the chapel involved *inter alia* the complete rebuilding of its western side,⁹ the replacement of the royal arms on the chapel gable, a new ceiling, and internal woodwork. No alterations have taken place since then.

Description

The chapel is a single-cell building lying south of the main house, and connected to it by a gallery which provides a covered route on the ground floor and a balustraded, open walk above. The chapel is aligned neither with the house nor with the gallery, and is oriented so that liturgical east is in fact SSW. It is possible that the building stands on earlier foundations, but these are not apparent and there is no other obvious reason for this unusual arrangement. The upper walk provides access from the house's former Great Chamber to two small gallery pews in the chapel, the lower walk to the body of the chapel on the ground floor. There is no internal stair between the two levels. It can be assumed that the gallery pews were for the use of Lenthall and his immediate family, the body of the chapel for servants. The external door to the ground floor would have made it accessible for outdoor servants as well as those from the house.

Stylistically the building is a mixture of renaissance and gothic forms. Each end has a shaped gable rising to a pinnacle; there are pinnacles to the angles, and originally a further pinnacle at the centre of each long side. Windows, which are recessed within rectangular frames, are gothic in overall form and inspiration, but renaissance in their details. The east window has a semi-circular head with five radiating, trefoil-headed lights; the easternmost windows on the east and west sides are round with ten similar lights, while the westernmost windows have pointed heads and geometrical tracery, but do not follow any medieval design. The parapet has a raised panel with a pediment over the northern window on each side. Early views show that each long side had two of these pedimented panels, one over each window.¹⁰ At the angles of the building and at the centre of the long sides are shallow pilasters, rising to Corinthian capitals and carrying pinnacles.

On the north gable a Stuart royal arms with supporters and mantelling is placed above a pedimented door from the upper walk. This achievement does not exactly fit the space it occupies, but drawings¹¹ of 1780 and 1821 show it in its present location, and it can probably be assumed to have been there since the chapel was built. La Terrière placed it against the south wall of the house, but it was replaced on the chapel by Walter Godfrey. Whether it was made for the chapel, or is an earlier piece placed here by Lenthall or others, is uncertain; possibly it was imported, since La Terrière noted that

⁸ Arthur Oswald, 'Burford Priory, Oxfordshire,' *Country Life*, 85 (1939), pp. 586-91, 616-21; W H Godfrey, 'Burford Priory,' *Oxoniensia*, 4 (1939), 71-88.

⁹ Shown demolished in a photograph; National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon.

¹⁰ J Skelton, *Antiquities of Oxfordshire* (1826), Bampton Hundred plate 3; Bodleian Library, MS Top. Oxon d 282, f. 164; British Library, Add MS 36372, f. 185.

¹¹ As previous note.

both the achievement and the mouldings of the building seemed to have been cut to make it fit.¹²

Inside the chapel, the floor retains an original area of black-and-white paving down the centre; benches against the two side walls were fitted in 1936-7, recreating an earlier arrangement. Panelling against the walls (behind these benches) follows fragments found in the building. A 'pulpit [and] pews etc.' were noted in 1799,¹³ and at that date the chapel ceiling was evidently intact; the same account describes it as 'full of stucco-work, in one compartment of which was the Adoration of the Shepherds, in another compartment, Abraham offering up Isaac.'¹⁴ At the north end are two small galleries, entered left and right from the central door; they are supported by Salomonic columns, whose Corinthian capitals have birds' heads for volutes. At the south end, commandment boards flank the window. Some fragments of medieval tile, probably from the Priory, have been re-set into the floor in the north-west corner of the chapel floor.

Beneath the galleries, the building is entered by a door between two figures of angels, standing on plinths with bucrania and plain swags. Over the door is carved a burning bush. Texts beneath the left-hand and right-hand angels read 'EXUE CALCEOS / NAM TERRA EST SANCTA' ('put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground') [Exodus 3:5], and 'QUASI PER IGNEM / SALVABIMUR' ('I shall be saved; yet so as by fire') [1 Corinthians 3:15].¹⁵ The left-hand text, which is associated in Exodus with the burning bush, is clearly appropriate to a chapel entrance, while the right-hand text can obviously be associated with the same image. Though it has been suggested that these figures may have been moved here from elsewhere, therefore, the texts make it clear that they are in their original position.

Architecture

Both the chapel and Lenthall's work in the house itself may be attributed to John Jackson (c.1602-1662), on the strength of similarities to Jackson's Oxford work: notably at Brasenose College, carried out under Jackson's supervision, and on the porch of St Mary's Church, which was worked by Jackson to the designs of Nicholas Stone.¹⁶ The college's chapel windows have tracery very similar in character to that of the chapel windows at Burford; the library has a deep parapet with raised, pedimented panels very close to those at Burford; windows at Brasenose incorporate scroll terminals into their mouldings, which closely resemble those on the drawing room chimney-piece at Burford Priory; and this chimney-piece carries heavy, carved swags of fruit similar to those on the Brasenose buildings. The Salomonic columns at St Mary's church stand on plinths with bucrania and swags, not dissimilar to those beneath the Burford angels.¹⁷

¹² La Terrière suggested that the arms were cut to celebrate James I's visit to the Priory in 1603. It is true that they could be of that date, but if so they must have been elsewhere before being placed on the chapel: B de Sales la Terrière, 'Burford Priory,' *Bristol & Gloucestershire Arch. Soc. Trans.*, 34 (1911), 90-6.

¹³ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 56 (2) (August 1799), 644.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Godfrey, 'Burford Priory', states that the ceiling (which had collapsed before the end of the nineteenth century) was originally of stone. Paintin, *Burford Priory*, 15, makes the same suggestion. As architect to the building Godfrey will have been in a position to see any structural evidence, but his claim seems unlikely and none shows in photographs taken at the time of the restoration.

¹⁵ The Authorised Version reads 'he' for the 'I' of the Latin and of the translation given here. Presumably the text had some personal significance for Lenthall.

¹⁶ H. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* (3rd edn, 1995), 532-3.

¹⁷ Paintin, *Burford Priory*, 15, notes a close similarity between the rose window at the south end of the chapel and 'the wooden framework under the central porch of the New Examination Schools'. The

COPYRIGHT

All rights, including copyright ©, of the content of this document are owned or controlled by the University of London. For further information refer to <http://www.englishspastforeveryone.org.uk/Info/Disclaimer>

Read more in the EPE book *Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* by Antonia Catchpole, David Clark and Robert Peberdy (published 2008)

Examination Schools in Oxford were built in 1876-82 to the designs of T G Jackson in a highly idiosyncratic mixture of English and Italian forms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is entirely possible that Jackson might have visited Burford and taken the chapel window as a pattern – if so, a neat return to Oxford of details that had been derived from Oxford two hundred years earlier.