

Historic Building Recording

at

**THE CHURCH OF St JOHN THE BAPTIST,
WOODLAND, DEVON**

By R. W. Parker

**RICHARD PARKER
HISTORIC BUILDING RECORDING & INTERPRETATION**

11 Toronto Road, St James, Exeter, EX4 6LE.

E-Mail: rwpark@btopenworld.com

Tel: 07763 248241
01392 423233

REPORT No. 2012.03

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Fig. 1 Woodland Church from the north, showing the aisle and nave roofs extending unbroken to the east end and the proximity of the manor house to the west.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of archaeological observations undertaken by Richard Parker Historic Buildings Recording and Interpretation, working on behalf of Exeter Archaeology (EA), at the Church of St John the Baptist, Woodland (Fig. 1), near Ashburton, Devon (SX 79136875). The recording was commissioned by Heighway Field Architects on behalf of the Parochial Church Council of Woodland, in advance of repairs to the roofs and churchyard walls. The repairs involved the repair and re-slating of the roofs of the nave and aisle and the reconstruction of a collapsed section of the churchyard wall, into which a post box and a memorial slab had been built.

1.1 Method

The archaeological recording was undertaken by Richard Parker in September 2010. Three site visits were made at the request of the building contractors, to establish the extent of survival of historic fabric in the roofs, to observe the works to the churchyard wall and to record any features of archaeological interest likely to be disturbed or exposed during the building works. A photographic record was made, in digital format, with manuscript notes which form the basis of this report. The report builds on earlier work undertaken by the Author, J. Crocker and S.R. Blaylock for Exeter Archaeology in 2001 (Parker & Crocker 2002; EA Report 02.33), which included detailed documentary research into the likely periods of construction, restoration and repair at the church. The present report and photographs constitute the project archive, which will in due course be deposited at an appropriate archaeological record centre.



Fig. 2 View of the underside of the nave roof showing modern ribs and boarding, with ?reused bosses ornamenting the ridge rib and forming a celure over the sanctuary



Fig 3. View of the underside of the aisle roof showing ?reused bosses ornamenting the central rib.

2. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

St John the Baptist at Woodland is a small parish church lying in remote country just south east of Ashburton. The church stands in a small hamlet consisting of only a few houses, farm buildings and a 19th-century church room. The church is first mentioned in Bishop Lacy's register in 1424, at which time it was a Chapel of Ease to the nearby village of Ipplepen (Hoskins 1954, 518). The church appears to have gained its independence from Ipplepen after a long-running dispute in the late middle ages and the present building was finally consecrated as a parish church in 1538 (Evans 1960, 174-5). Nothing is known of any earlier churches on the site, though there is a possibility that the church originated as a manorial chapel attached to the manor house, the close proximity of which, within a few metres of the west wall, would seem to support this conjecture.

The existing church is believed to have been rebuilt in the early 16th century, possibly following its change of status. It consists of a nave, aisle and western tower with a small porch on the southern side. The nave and aisle extend to the same length without any interruption of the roofs and there is no structural chancel. Some inconsistency in the geology of the windows (some are of granite and others of Elvan or Roborough stone) may reveal different building phases, suggesting that the nucleus of the church is the present nave and that the aisle and tower are additions of the early 16th century (Parker & Crocker 2002, 14).

The churchyard wall

The ground levels in the churchyard rise considerably towards the western end of the church and bury the porch almost to the level of its eaves. The high ground continues to the west of the tower, partially blocking a former doorway at the base of the tower, suggesting that the ground levels in the yard must have been raised by a considerable depth since the middle ages. The churchyard wall forms a revetment to the higher ground in the churchyard. It extends eastwards from the boundary of the manor house, curves around the southern and eastern sides of the church and then returns parallel with its northern wall in the form of a stone revetment within the present churchyard. This may have been the original churchyard boundary and it is presumed that the area to the north of this, now colonised with graves, is an extension to the churchyard of late 19th- or 20th-century date.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS: THE ROOFS

Early antiquarian sources for the church (*Ibid.*, 11) describe the roofs as retaining medieval fabric. When Sir Stephen Glynne visited in 1845 he noted that the north aisle had a cornice with vine leaves but that the nave roof was simply 'coved' (Cann Hughes 1934, 88). James Davidson, visiting in 1847, noted that both roofs were coved but that the aisle was 'ribbed, with bosses of foliage at the intersections of the ribs' (Davidson 1847). A cutting of an article by Charles Worthy of Ashburton, dated 24th April 1874 (framed and displayed in the church), records that 'some mutilated portions of the lower part of the screen and the ancient pulpit, with a portion of one of the old benches, still remain' and that 'the nodi (bosses) in the roof of the aisle are well carved in foliage, with the exception of two grotesque heads about the centre of the ceiling'.

The present appearance of the roofs, and many of the existing furnishings, may date from a late 19th-century restoration undertaken in 1877-8 under the supervision of Mr G.S. Bridgeman, architect, of Torquay. Contemporary reports insist that, though 'the copings, springers, finial blocks, and roof plates have all been renewed' the work was carried out sympathetically and that elements of the medieval roofs, including the decorative bosses and wall plates were retained (WCSL Parish Cuttings File: *Western Morning News* 26/10/1877).

The roofs appear to have been restored again in a subsequent phase of restoration in the late 19th- or early 20th century, at which time elements of the early roofs are known to have still survived (Evans 1960, 229). These repairs may have been less sympathetic and it was unclear until the present works were undertaken whether or not any of the medieval roof structures had been preserved.

Roofs, exterior,

From the exterior of the church it is clear that there has been much late 19th- or early 20th-century intervention. The south-facing eaves of the nave and chancel retain an ovolo-moulded string course or cornice of relatively modern appearance, above which is a single course of white bricks probably dating from the late 19th or early 20th century, discreetly masking cast-iron ogee-profile rainwater goods. The corbel at the south-eastern corner of the chancel is probably a recent replacement but the coping blocks and finial crosses of both the eastern gables are perhaps of late 19th-century date. The ridge of the nave is decorated by pierced ridge tiles of the same period, which appear to foul a small window in the east wall of the tower. All of these details tend to suggest that the present roof over nave and chancel is a modern structure with a marginally steeper pitch or higher eaves level than the original roofs. Precisely the same treatment is evident on the north side of the church, suggesting similar alterations to the aisle.

Roofs, interior

Both the roofs of the nave and the aisle are boarded internally, and divided into panels in the manner of a traditional Westcountry ‘wagon roof’ by moulded ribs. The boarding and the ribbing all appear to be of 19th-century or perhaps early 20th-century date. Both roofs retain some bosses, which might be medieval and reused in these positions. Most of these are disposed along the ridge ribs; others are fixed to the side ribs near the east end of the nave to form a ‘celure’, or canopy of honour, over the sanctuary. There is no evidence of vine scroll carving on the wall plates or cornices of either roof (Figs 2, 3).

Following the removal of the external slating, laths and other roof coverings over the aisle, the interior roof space above the ceiling boards could be observed. The medieval roof of the aisle appeared to have been completely removed and a new roof substituted, of a different form superficially imitating the original, but with many of the typical structural elements of a medieval wagon roof omitted.

A traditional wagon roof consists of common-rafter trusses, each with a full set of arch braces, set at closely-spaced intervals along the length of the roof (Fig. 6). There are many variations in form in roofs of this type: the arch-braces may be seated in decorated wall plates and the roof is often divided into bays by ‘principal’ trusses expressed within the church by projecting mouldings. There are rarely any purlins; racking was restrained by moulded ribs applied to the curved underside of the roof structure, often replicating the mouldings of the ‘principal’ trusses and thus dividing the underside of the roof into square panels. The intersections of the ribs were often ornamented by bosses. The original roof of the aisle at Woodland (as described by Davidson, Glynne and Worthy) was clearly of this type. Earlier wagon roofs seem to have had less ornament and in many of these examples there was no ribbing, all the trusses being identical. It is possible that the nave roof at Woodland, which appears to have had neither ribs nor bosses, was of this type. Boarding or ceiling over these roofs with timber or plaster appears (in almost every case known to the author) to be a post-medieval addition, except in those cases where a celure occupied the area over the Rood.

The present roof over the aisle imitates the appearance of this type of roof, but is wholly different in structure (Fig. 4). It is divided into bays by ‘A’-frame softwood trusses set at wide intervals, with high-level collars secured to the principals by metal straps. The ridge-



Fig. 4 View of the inside of the aisle roof at Woodland, above ceiling level, showing a 19th-century roof structure of widely-spaced 'A'-frame trusses supporting a boarded ceiling imitating the curved form of a traditional wagon roof.

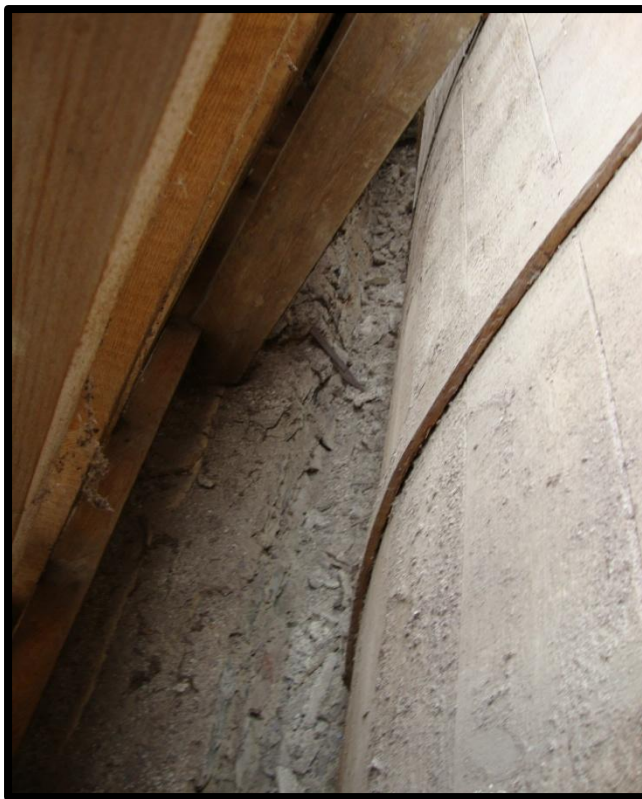


Fig. 5 Detail of the eaves on the northern side of the aisle showing the absence of arch bracing and the slight rebate in the wall top, perhaps for the former wall plates.



Fig. 6 An authentic C15th wagon roof (at High Bickington), showing the regularly-spaced, closely-set arch-braced trusses forming a curved roof structure above a later ceiling



Fig. 7 View of the churchyard wall prior to rebuilding, showing the collapsing section of walling containing the Victorian post box and the Harris memorial. The church, under scaffold, lies in the background ($\frac{1}{2}$ metre scale).



Fig. 8 Detail of the recess in the raised section of walling, designed to accommodate both the Harris memorial and the Victorian post box. The Harris memorial is shown temporarily supported during the works ($\frac{1}{2}$ metre scale).

tree is a narrow timber of slight scantling supported by a yoke at the apex of each truss. The principal rafters are marked with boldly-incised carpenters' marks in Roman numerals. The common rafters, of slight scantling, are supported on purlins slightly trenched into the principal rafters, approximately mid-way up the roof. The feet of the trusses appear simply to rest upon the wall tops (Fig. 5) and there are no arch braces. The wall tops appear not to retain earlier wall plates or cornices, but a rebate which may have been intended to house these timbers remains, filled with debris, and it is possible that some fragments of the original wall or eaves plates may yet survive in parts of the roof not yet examined. The structure of the barrel ceiling remains uncertain, and its relationship with the 'A'-frame trusses is unclear. Bands of curving timber are visible at intervals in the upper side of the ceiling, and it is likely that these represent curved timber 'hoops' supporting the boarded ceiling. Although these hoops may be expressed as ribs on the underside of the ceiling they do not appear to retain any medieval fabric.

Unfortunately, the nave roof was stripped, re-felted and battened before it could be observed archaeologically. The contractors observed that the roof structure of the nave was identical with that of the aisle (Ian Hughes, Pers. Comm.) and it is certainly true that both appear identical from below. It is probable that the early roofs of the church were entirely, or at least substantially, replaced during the 19th- or early 20th-century phases of restoration.

4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS: THE CHURCHYARD WALL

The churchyard wall is constructed of randomly-coursed limestone rubble, bonded with a mixture of earth and lime mortar. The wall contains no dating evidence and the period of its construction is unknown. As it represents the churchyard boundary, which is likely to be of some antiquity, it may either be of early date in itself or perhaps has superseded an earlier wall on the same alignment. The wall rises to revet the higher ground in the western part of the churchyard which, as has been noted above, appears to have accumulated since the late middle ages, when the ground-level around the church was certainly lower. This suggests that the existing wall structure may be substantially of post-medieval date.

The wall is interrupted by a handsome 19th-century lychgate in line with the church porch. Beyond this the wall continues at a high level as far as a cast-iron, wall-mounted post box decorated with the initials VR (and therefore dating to before 1901). A short distance to the east of the post box the wall is stepped down to a lower level and continues around to the east of the church.

The post box and a large memorial slab immediately behind it were accommodated within a raised section of walling which, by 2010, had begun to collapse. This section of wall contained larger blocks of masonry than the other parts of the wall and had perhaps been rebuilt in the 19th-century when the post box was inserted into the wall. There were no signs of any building breaks suggesting the wall was earlier. To the rear of the post box was a larger recess in the wall surface incorporating a large, early 19th-century memorial slab to members of the Harris family of Pulsford Farm. The slab had presumably been built into the wall with the post box, since the rear of the slab was in direct contact with the rear of the box. The reason for the inclusion of this slab with the walling is uncertain- perhaps it had been built into an earlier wall on the site, or had been ejected from the church during a period of restoration. Disturbance to the earth during the reconstruction of the wall was very limited in extent and no evidence of a cut for the wall was observed. The lower part of the slab was entirely obscured by the raised ground levels, which suggests a considerable amount of accumulation against the wall since the slab was set in position, and the excavation did not go lower than these levels.

As it was necessary to remove the memorial slab during the reconstruction of the wall, a transcription was made of the epitaphs (reproduced here showing, as far as possible, the character of the text and its vagaries of punctuation):

SACRED to the Memory of Thomas Harris Jun^r of
Pulfford. in this Parish: Who departed this Life the 27
Day of Sep, 1807, in the 12, Year of his Age.

*Pray drop a tear each Parent that has loft A Child like this by Death's untimely Froff
Snatch'd from his Parents while a tender Youth, Adorn'd with Virtue Honefity and Truth.*

Alfo Jane the Wife of Thomas Harris Maternal Parent
Of the above named &c (Sifter of Mr William Venning
Of Younghouffe in Broadhempfton who departed this
Life Auguft the 27, 1811, Aged 57 Years.

*Afflections fore long time I bore. Phyficians were in vain
Till God was pleas'd Death fhould me feize, & eafe me of my pain.*

And alfo of Thomas Harris the above named, who departed
This Life the 22. Day of April 1824, aged 70 Years.

The slab has now been reset in the same position and the wall rebuilt around it. No other observations of archaeological interest were made in these areas.

5. CONCLUSION

The archaeological works at Woodland Church have demonstrated that the 19th or early 20th-century restoration of the church involved the replacement of the wagon roof of the aisle, and almost certainly that of the nave, with new structures retaining little, if any of the medieval fabric. The 19th-century antiquarian descriptions may imply that the nave roof had formerly been a simple wagon roof without ribs and bosses (though it is of course possible that these were concealed by a later ceiling), whereas the aisle roof was more ornately decorated with vine scroll cornices, ribs and bosses. Assuming a plain wagon roof to be earlier and a more richly-decorated roof later in date, this would fit the interpretation outlined by Worthy in 1874, and Parker and Crocker in 2002, that the nave was the nucleus of the church and the aisle an early 16th-century addition.

The present roofs may date from the restoration of 1877-8, at which time it is assumed that the medieval roofs were destroyed, preserving only the bosses from the aisle roof in the new structure. These bosses are now distributed between the nave and aisle, decorating both. It is possible, however, that parts of the early roofs survived until a second restoration later in the 19th- or early 20th century, when evidence of a dormer window, installed in 1752 to light a loft or gallery in the nave was observed (Evans 1960, 207, 229). If this is the case it may be that the restoration proceeded in two phases, the aisle roof being replaced before the nave and the latter following as soon as funds were available.

The section of the churchyard wall rebuilt during the present works is interpreted as a 19th-century rebuild contemporary with the insertion of the post-box, and constructed to incorporate an early 19th-century monument. There was no evidence of any fabric of earlier date and it is assumed that at least the upper section this part of the wall is contemporary with the post box.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was commissioned on behalf of the Parochial Church Council of St John the Baptist, Woodland by Heighway Field Architects. The project was administered by Paul Heighway for Heighway Field and John Allan for Exeter Archaeology, until EA ceased trading in 2012. The recording work was carried out on site and the project brought to completion by R.W. Parker. Mr Parker is grateful to the contractors, Hughes of Halwell, for assistance during the works and also to D. Cook and S.R. Blaylock for advice and discussion of the development and decorations of the building.

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