

ST EDMUND'S CHURCH,
MANSFIELD WOODHOUSE,
NOTTINGHAMSHIRE
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PEWS

John Minnis



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ENGLISH HERITAGE

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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PEWS

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ST EDMUND'S, MANSFIELD WOODHOUSE

This report was undertaken following a request from Louise Brennan, Historic Buildings Inspector, Northampton to investigate the significance of the pews at St Edmund's, Mansfield Woodhouse.

The Church

The church was rebuilt following a fire that engulfed the village in 1304 but the nave and aisles were further rebuilt between 1804 and 1810. By 1847, the church was reported to be “so damp and uncomfortable that numbers are deterred from attending Divine Worship especially in an evening” that, while funds were collected for the restoration and enlargement of the church, the National School was granted a licence for services to be held there.¹ The provision of new seating was contemplated at the same time when it was announced that “a subscription, now amounting to £600, has been opened, for repewing Mansfield Woodhouse church”.²

The restoration is attributed to George Gilbert Scott.³ However, further investigation in the records of the Incorporated Church Building Society indicates that the architect was not Scott but William Bonython Moffatt (1812-1887), Scott's former partner. The partnership was dissolved in 1845, three years before the ICBS application was submitted. Moffatt was working nearby on the restoration of St Mary, High Pavement, Nottingham, a job he had taken from the office when the partnership was dissolved and it is possible that he obtained the restoration work at Mansfield Woodhouse as a result although there is no evidence to prove this. Besides the Nottingham restoration, Moffatt is only credited with two solo church projects: St Peter, Askern, St John, Fenwick, both of 1852 and both in the West Riding, together with probable involvement in St Blaise, St Blazey, Cornwall (1839) while in partnership with Scott.⁴

There are no faculties relating to the restoration but some details and a plan were provided when an application, dated 16 March 1848, was made for a grant to the ICBS.⁵ Moffatt is first mentioned in a letter of 4 April 1848 and signs a financial statement as “W. B. Moffatt, 9 Spring Gardens”. The work included a new north aisle, reseating, a new tower gallery and repairs to the roof, walls, etc. In the event, more work had to be undertaken than was originally expected with the chancel arch, south aisle and south porch also being rebuilt. The restoration was completed by 1853. The work, which had originally been estimated at £2,035, ended up costing £2,700, the certificate of 27 June 1853 to the ICBS being signed by Moffatt.⁶

Subsequent alterations include the enlargement, reroofing and restoration of the chancel, the conversion of the vestry into an organ chamber and the erection of a new vestry on the north side of the chancel by the prominent Nottingham architect T. C. Hine at an estimated cost of £1100 in 1875.⁷

The Pews

The layout of the pews clearly relates to those shown on the ICBS plan of 1853, showing the works as completed. The new seating accommodated 607, of which 348 places were free. Over the years, they have been reduced in number, especially in the forward part of the nave and in the north aisle where they were replaced by the choir stalls. However, there can be no doubt that the present pews date from the restoration by Moffatt in 1848-53 for which the ICBS grant was obtained.

They are of high quality, in mahogany, rather than pine or oak. The poppy heads are individually carved and fall into two broad categories - fleur-de-lis pattern composed of foliage and more elaborate designs incorporating figurative or other decorative carving. It has been stated that the carving is the work of a Mr Eastwood and that the poppy heads date from 1800.⁸ No independent confirmation of the carver's name has been found and, as has been noted above, the work would date from the reseating of 1848-53. There is a hierarchy to the distribution of the poppy heads: those of leaf form are located on the pews adjoining the north and south aisles and to the west of the north and south porches while the more elaborate examples are to be found in the central aisle east of the porches. This rule is not absolute; there are some simple shield designs in the pews to the rear.

The decoration is evidently intended to emulate the lively and humorous carving found in medieval pews, choir stalls and misericords. The subjects depicted include a boar, a beehive, a fox jumping to catch acorns, an eagle killing a snake, strange two-headed faces, an alligator. The carving is carried out with considerable skill and succeeds in capturing the spirit of medieval work. In terms of choice of subject, the figure work is based on medieval precedent, grotesque heads, strange creatures and familiar animals being frequently found.⁹

The Interior of St Edmund's

The pews are one element in an interior that, although the basic structure is medieval, is in appearance principally of the nineteenth century. The walls, if not entirely renewed

are refaced, the arcading, mouldings and roof are renewed and the only obvious signs of medieval fabric are the mouldings of the tower arch. We are therefore, to all intents and purposes, looking at the work of Moffatt.

The interior, although a simple parish church, has much carving of good quality with heads as label stops and foliage on the nave capitals. There is a large tall stone pulpit supported on a massive and ornate corbel depicting Eve holding an apple with the Serpent entwined around her, again the carving of high quality. The pulpit is entered through steps hidden from the body of the nave with an opening, surmounted by a vestigial porch, between the chancel arch and the nave arcade. The roof is open of plain boarded construction. The chancel too has some rich carving but, in the absence of evidence in the form of plans or early photographs, it is unclear how much of the work should be attributed to Moffatt or to Hine.

Other than the removal of some pews and the placing of the choir stalls in the north aisle, the interior has seen little change since Hine's rebuilding of the chancel and remains a good example of a nineteenth century restoration.

Pews in restorations by Scott and Moffatt

There has been little research carried out on nineteenth century seating schemes, the only comprehensive survey being carried out in the neighbouring counties of Leicestershire and Rutland.¹⁰ Poppyheads were used in the early and mid Victorian period rather than the later nineteenth century and were never particularly common, amounting to 9% of nineteenth century seating in the two counties.

To assess the significance of the pews at St Edmund's, photographs held at the National Monuments Record of the interiors of twenty-eight other restorations of medieval churches carried out between 1842 and 1855 by both the Scott and Moffatt partnership (1835-45) and by Scott working alone were examined.¹¹ Two had seating provided by chairs, four had some poppy heads and the remaining twenty-two had had either rectangular bench ends or shaped ends.

Scott designed what amounted to a standard form of seating (based on medieval precedent) where the bench end was rectangular with a simple roll moulding running along the top and two thin buttresses forming the sole decoration. This was employed at nine of the sample churches, principally between 1846 and 1852 with the earliest example noted at Betley, Staffs. (1842). Other designs were more elaborate, incorporating tracery as at Audley, Staffs (1847) or St Peter, Northampton (1850-2)

while some were even simpler such as the shaped bench ends at Barnwell, Northants (1851).

Poppy heads were only used extensively at two churches, St Michael and all Angels, Chesterfield (1842-3) and St Mary Magdalene, Newark (1852-5), both important town churches but here the design is plain fleur-de-lis with none of the humorous carving. Elsewhere, at St Mary, Aylesbury (1850-1), St Margaret, Canterbury (c. 1849-54) and St Mary, Harrow (1846-9), they were used to demarcate groups of pews by provision at cross aisles in conjunction with rectangular bench ends for the remaining seating. St Edmund's differs from these examples by the quantity of the seating provided with poppy head bench ends and by the quality of the carving. From what can be seen in the photographs, none of the churches covered in the sample had carving of the calibre of St Edmund's, almost all being of simple fleur-de-lis pattern.

Conclusion

The provision of poppyhead bench ends in parish church seating of the 1840s and 50s is relatively rare, on the basis of the available, albeit limited, evidence. Certainly, Scott rarely used them in his restorations of modest churches as opposed to major town churches and, where they were employed, it was to give emphasis to groups of seating and in conjunction with rectangular bench ends rather than on the scale seen at St Edmund's. St Edmund's is exceptional in that many of the bench ends display elaborate carving of high quality inspired by humorous and lively medieval work rather than the simple fleur-de-lis designs more commonly found. Although these do make up a proportion of the bench ends at Mansfield Woodhouse, the integrity of the seating scheme, despite some nibbling at the edges in the past, is still largely complete, representing a hierarchical arrangement with the bench ends in the central aisle the most ornate and those to the rear of simpler design. This seating scheme complements an interior largely of the nineteenth century with good quality carved stonework and an impressively large ashlar pulpit.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lincolnshire Archives PET 251/69 Petition for Licence for Divine Service in Schoolroom 3 November 1847.
- 2 The Builder, Vol. V 26 June 1847, p. 306.
- 3 David Cole, The Work of Sir Gilbert Scott, 1980, p. 218 giving as authorities C. R. Baker King's letter of 27 May 1879, Scott's 'Personal and Professional Recollections' and The Builder xxxvi p.360. N. Pevsner, Nottinghamshire, Second Edition 1979, pp. 174-5.
- 4 Pevsner Architectural Guides Architects Index compiled by Michael Good, www.lookingatbuildings.org.
- 5 Incorporated Church Building Society file 4036. I am indebted to Dr Geoff Brandwood for inspecting the original documents at Lambeth Palace.
- 6 Incorporated Church Building Society Minutes Vol. 13 pp. 102, 157, Vol. 14 p. 306, Plan, www.churchplansonline.org.
- 7 Lincolnshire Archives FB 7/870 pp. 870-4 Faculty dated 10 June 1875 and Faculty Papers 1875/9 Correspondence from T. C. Hine relating to the work.
- 8 Southwell Churches DAC Church History Project. www.southwellchurches.nottingham.ac.uk
- 9 F. E. Howard & F. H. Crossley, English Church Woodwork, Second Edition, 1927, p.162.
- 10 Geoff Brandwood, Anglican Congregational Seating: A Study from Leicestershire and Rutland. N. D. Unpublished draft prepared for Sarah Brown, English Heritage.
- 11 Photographs held in county 'red boxes', National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon. The sample covers only restorations; there were few photographs of new churches by Scott held in the collection.



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