

NORWICH DIOCESAN FACULTY BOOKS EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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THE "Faculty" system, as part of the administrative structure of the Church of England, has an early origin, for traces of it, or something very like it, are to be found as far back as the thirteenth century. As time went on during the later middle ages it developed and became more stabilized. And surviving the Reformation period it has continued in force down to the present day.

In the diocese of Norwich the official "Faculty Books" start in 1633, during the episcopate of Bishop Wren and, except for the inevitable break at the Commonwealth, the series is complete. The granting or the withholding of a faculty rests entirely with the bishop of the diocese, though in this matter as in many others he usually acts through his Vicar General or Chancellor in the Consistory Court. Containing as they do full details of every faculty as it was applied for, and the decision of the court regarding it, these books preserve much valuable information as to the fabric and fittings of our parish churches which it would often be difficult to obtain from elsewhere, and apart from the churches themselves other parochial needs and activities come under notice in this way as well.

In this paper, passing over earlier faculties, we propose to deal only with those which were issued between 1700 and 1764, and which concern the churches in the Norfolk part of the diocese alone.

It is well known that a large number of our Norfolk churches went out of action and for one cause or another had become ruined in Elizabethan times. In these eighteenth-century faculty petitions we see these causes still at work and more churches disappearing. It must be confessed at the outset that during the period we are considering, some of them were in a very parlous condition and many more in a sad state of disrepair. In 1717 *Stanninghall* church had been out of use for many years, for it had lost its roof and the seats and pulpit had long been carried away. It was much the same in 1721 at *Beachamwell All Saints* where the roof had been "down" for thirty-three years, in consequence of which the windows, pulpit, reading-desk, seats and pavement had become "greatly ruined." The chancellor decreed a consolidation with the neighbouring church of St. Mary where the parishioners "mostly go to service, and which can seat all," stipulating however that the site of All Saints should be preserved, and that the bell, the communion plate and the books should go to St. Mary's.

There are cases in which churches, though not in quite such a bad state as these, were yet obviously in serious need of much repair. *Upton* church in 1727 was so ruinous that there was not a seat "but what is decayed." *West*

Harling church (1756) was in a similar condition, the tower was much cracked and in danger of falling, and a faculty was granted to take it down and to rebuild it "which is now adoin'g." A number of churches are described as being "ruinous" or "in much decay"; at *Fritcham* (1748) "very dilapidated and in great danger of falling"; at *Little Ellingham* (1729) "much decayed by length of time"; and at *Gillingham* (1747) where both the churches were "ruinous and decayed." In this case a faculty was granted to take down All Saints and to repair effectively St. Mary's. At *Melton Constable* (1742) the church is described as being "a very antique building and much decayed by length of time, and so ruinous as to require being wholly renewed. The pews through worm-eating and age are fallen into a rotting and decaying state, and the floor of brick pavement is bad."

Allowances of course must be made in these petitions for pardonable exaggeration of facts by those who were applying to the chancellor for a faculty. In several cases the petitioners seem bent on making the very worst of things, perhaps in the hope of moving the authorities to grant them more readily what they were asking for. From time to time this seems to have been sensed by the chancellor, and he appoints a small commission of inspection to inquire into the correctness of what is stated in the petition, and to report on the advisability of carrying out what is proposed. Such a commission generally consisted of two or three neighbouring clergy augmented sometimes by a land owner from the district.

STORM AND TEMPEST

The cause of the damage reported is sometimes given. It was because of the destruction caused by "the Dreadful Hurrecan of wind" on 8 September 1741, that the nave of St. Margaret's church, *Lynn*, had to be more or less rebuilt. The plan proposed was to rebuild "in a contracted manner, by erecting the middle or main Isle on new, strong and handsome pillars upon ye foundations of the old pillars, by reducing the two side Isles to 14 feet each, proposed to us by Mr. Matth. Brettingham¹ and recommended by very skilful architects, and approved by the Bishop as sufficient and fully commodious for assembling for God's Holy Worship."

From time to time many other churches suffered badly from storm and tempest. At *Rockland St. Mary* in 1710 it was reported that a great part of the chancel had been blown down by a violent storm of wind; in 1747 the east end of the church at *Colby* had been demolished in the same way, and at *Garboisthorp* (*Shouldham Thorpe*) "by reason of a violent storm of wind" the steeple was blown over, and with it went three bells. At *Haveringland* (1741), "the last part of the chancel roof was blown off and the walls shattered." The parishioners state in their petition that the church is large enough to contain above a hundred persons, "more than ever were known to attend divine service there," and they propose that a gable end should be built "in such manner as to include so much of the chancel as shall decently contain ye Communion Table." Similar damage was done at *Bircham Newton* by a "a dreadful hurricane on Sunday 15th March, 1752," while on 15 July 1762 at *Billockby* "a violent storm of thunder and

lightning, hail and rain, of long continuance" so shook the church that the whole roof fell in, and most of the furniture and fittings was destroyed.

TOWERS AND STEEPLES

In some cases serious damage had been caused by the fall of the tower. This was so at *Southery* (1747), and also at *Mundford* (1748), while at *Tuttington* (1749) it was feared that the spire on the steeple had become so decayed that unless it was taken down it must inevitably fall, and at *Matlask* (1741) the same fear is hinted at—"the steeple has become very rotten and the bell frame decayed. The bells are in danger of falling."

ROOF DAMAGE

These defects were often due to long time neglect, and the petitioners at times put in a plea to justify themselves. It was so at *Didlington* (1747) where both the lead and the principal timbers of the roof are "greatly decayed," but "not through the neglect of the parishioners." In a large number of cases the damage is attributed to defects in the roof. At *Ingham* (1726) the roof, partly thatched and partly leaded, had become so faulty that "the minister is forced to perform divine service in the chancel." In 1741 at *Mundesley*² the roof was in a very bad state, and in the same year there was a petition from *Felmingham* for rebuilding the old church where the whole roof had become so ruinous and rotten that the parishioners could no longer assemble there "without manifest danger of their lives." The proposal was that a smaller church adjoining the steeple should be built, and an estimate of £400 was submitted for doing this, excluding the chancel. It was stipulated that everything was to be done "such as a building ought to be."

If the church roof was covered with lead and it proved unsatisfactory, applications were frequently made for permission to remove it and to replace it by tiling or thatch. In 1702 the timber work and lead of the roof at *Brisley* was reported to be "much decayed." The estimated cost of the repair was £70, and the parishioners ask for leave to remove the lead and sell it "for the best price that can be gotten," and to substitute tiles in its place. At *Little Ellingham* (1729) the lead would sell for £49 and would help towards the expense of extensive church repairs. It was, later however during the period 1745 to 1764 that sales of this kind became particularly prevalent. In these twenty years no less than twenty-five applications were received for permission to sell lead from the church roof, and in almost every case they were granted. Various reasons for this were given. At *Griston* (1754) the lead was defective and "will not do again without being new run." At *Wickmere* (1755) it was "very thin and full of holes," and at *Tittleshall* (1760) "much decayed and rotten." *Twyford* (1756) and *Bradestone* (1760) both report that the lead was too heavy for the roof to carry. In sixteen of these twenty-five cases which came before the chancellor the proposal was to substitute tiles for the lead, and several different varieties of these are suggested. At *Erpingham* (1751), *Marsham* (1752) and *Antingham* (1764) they are to be blue pantiles, at *Wickmere* (1755) grey, while at *Twyford* (1756) the "best glazed pantiles" are specified.

This sudden urge to sell the church lead is suggestive, and leads to a suspicion that at this time the Consistory Court was dealing out faculties of this description perhaps too lavishly, and that parishes faced with heavy bills were taking advantage of this laxity and using it as a convenient way of getting out of their financial difficulties. The same tendency appears at this time in the matter of faculties for the sale of bells.

THE SALE OF BELLS

For bells figure very conspicuously in these Faculty Books. In the sixty-odd years that we are concerned with, no less than 105 Norfolk parishes applied to the chancellor for licence to sell one or more of their bells. According to the figures quoted in these 105 petitions there were 283 bells hanging in their respective towers, and permission was being asked to scrap far more than half of them (197), and as nearly all these faculties were granted, that apparently is what actually did happen. The reasons given in justification of this wholesale destruction of church bells makes strange reading. An astonishing number of the condemned bells are described as "split," "cracked" or "broken," or otherwise useless. No less than eighty-five are so described. And this seemingly abnormal damage leads one to suspect that some of it may have been wilfully contrived for the occasion. During this period the bells suffered grievously.

Occasionally there is a bright spot in this tale of loss. At *South Walsham* (1736) the tenor bell was split and useless, but a faculty was granted for it to be "run" and made into two bells. So that there would be five bells in the steeple instead of four. At *Tunstead* (1702) two split bells were "new run" into four bells, and at *Fundenhall* (1754), as three large bells were so great a weight that the steeple was "much prejudiced," it was decided to get the two largest bells re-cast into four smaller ones, and keep the other bell for a tenor, so that there would be a ring of five bells.

At *Foxley* (1751) William Copland, churchwarden, with every good intention melted down one of the three bells and with some additional metal had made three new bells. But he had done so "without consulting or having consent." The result was that he had to appear in the Consistory Court where he humbly prayed that no prosecution should be had against him, explaining that he had done it ignorantly and that no detriment had been done to Foxley church. So he pulled through. The three bells at *Saxthorpe* (1746) were reported as being in good order and made use of every Lord's Day to call the inhabitants to divine service.³

FURNITURE AND FITTINGS

With regard to the furniture and fittings of our Norfolk churches not a great deal of information is to be gained from these faculty petitions, but what there is is enlightening. At *Swanton Novers* (1752), after asking for permission to sell two bells "one cracked and the cannons of the other are broke off," the parishioners undertake to spend the proceeds on a new reading-desk, a pulpit and a church chest, together with "rails to divide the altar from the chancel." They

will also purchase a Common Prayer Book, a herse cloth and a hood for the minister. If funds will allow they also propose to paint or repaint the King's Arms and the Ten Commandments, and in general to "beautify" the church. The people of *Rougham* (1760) also think that the inside of their church "ought to be speedily beautified," and at *Saxthorpe* (1746) mention is made of "ornaments" for the church.

As to the form which these beautifyings and ornamentations might take this specification for the Norwich church of *St. Michael Coslany* (1739) may serve as an example. There was to be a new altar piece, eighteen feet high, divided into five panels, the middle one of which was to be "curiously painted with the Resurrection of our Blessed Saviour from the grave," flanked by the four Evangelists. On each side of the middle panel was a Corinthian column which supported an open pediment in which there was to stand a pelican on a pedestal. Round the top part of the whole there were to be seven golden candlesticks, "with other Ornaments answerable."

An *Ingworth* petition (1751) gives us a picture of the unsatisfactory internal arrangement of the church—"the north and south sides of the pavement consists only of clay, broken and uneven. The desk and pulpit are so placed as to render them inconvenient to the minister when officiating. And they are so very old that they cannot be removed without some necessary repairs and additions, in order to be erected in a more convenient place."

At *Great Ellingham* (1738) the walls of the church needed "new whiting," and the petitioners were not satisfied about the position of their pulpit "as now placed against the second pillar from the chancel where it is incommodious." They suggest that it would be "much better and more proper" if placed against the first pillar. At *Rainham St. Mary* (1734) also the walls needed whiting, and a pulpit and an altar piece are also included in the faculty. Other references to pulpits occur at *Tuttington* (1749) where a good pulpit is to be provided; and at *Arminghall* (1753) where the pulpit is "very bad," and the church is also in need of a Communion cloth and "several other ornaments." At *Kirby Bedon* (1748) where there were two churches one of which had been "from time immemorial unfit for use," the proposal was to sell the lead and two bells belonging to the ruined church and with the proceeds to buy for St. Andrew's "a new altar peice and other things as shall most contribute to the decency and neatness of the church and chancel."

There is a curious note in a *North Walsham* petition (1751) which illustrates a difficulty which arose in connection with the upkeep of one of these "ornamentations." The Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments at the altar "were never otherwise wrote than on the east end of the chancell wall with black ink." They were frequently renewed in this way, but "notwithstanding all the care which has been taken to prevent the same, the winter's rain continually forced its way in and defaced the same." To avoid this "they must be wrote upon canvas and put into a frame of woodwork," and the petitioners ask leave to sell the largest bell of the seven to meet the cost of this and other work.

SEATING ARRANGEMENTS

There is very little mention of actual pews and seats in these faculties except when they figure, in company with reading desk or pulpit, as being in need of repair or renewal. The state of the seating at *Upton* and at *Melton Constable* has already been quoted, but there are a number of other similar cases. At *Tittleshall* in 1760 the seats were "decayed and rotten," at *Longham* (1757) "greatly dilapidated," at *Rougham* (1760) "much out of repair," and at *Bradestone* (1760) it was reported that the desks together with the pulpit had become "indecent and unfit for use." At *Hassingham* (1755) both pews and pulpit were "greatly decayed."

Improvements and rearrangements at times were suggested. At *Whinburgh* (1756) there was a scheme to new pew and pave the church. At *East Dereham* (1746) a faculty was obtained authorizing the removal of "two ranges" of seats next the middle aisle and the rebuilding of them elsewhere "in a handsome and convenient style." At *Coltishall* (1750) the old seats were to be removed and new ones erected in a gallery at the west end of the church.

GALLERIES

During our period nine parishes applied for faculties to enable them to erect galleries in their churches. The reasons which led them to do so, as related in their petitions, are varied and enlightening.

The parishioners of *Great Yarmouth* (1704) say that "the church as now seated is not sufficient to contain the inhabitants." In area, Great Yarmouth church had the reputation of being the largest parish church in England. They propose therefore to build a gallery over part of the middle aisle. This will involve taking down one of the pillars, but they will supply the want of this by a substantial arch. A commission appointed by the bishop reported in favour of this scheme, and elaborate rules were drawn up for the control of the gallery, which was to be filled with "decent and convenient seats or pews." The churchwardens were empowered "to raise of the persons seated therein such reasonable sums of money as shall be thought fit," and they were also given power "to place and displace inhabitants in these seats, having especial regard to the qualities of the persons and their contributions." All such sums of money "as shall from time to time be raised from the seats" (less expenses) are to go for the benefit of the poor dwelling in the New Hospital.

Another church not big enough was *Wymondham*. At a parish meeting held on 16 July 1716 it was agreed "because the church is too little and has not seats enough to contain all the parishioners, from whence many take occasion to stay at home and absent themselves from church, whilst others that come are guilty of disorderly disputes about places to set in," it was decided to erect a gallery at the west end of the church. This has been done "and it is very ornamental to the church." But it had been done quite irregularly for no faculty had been granted, though a confirmatory faculty was issued six months later.

A few years earlier in 1710, the inhabitants of *Downham Market* were applying for a faculty. They pointed out that "by reason of improvement in trade and commerce" the population had increased, and the church being small had

not seats enough to accommodate them. An existing gallery in the south aisle held very few people and placed "so much out of sight of the congregation that boys and rude persons take advantage of that obscurity to commit great disorders." The remedy they put forward is to erect another gallery "large and capacious" at the west end of the middle aisle.

Quite different is the reason given at *St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich* (1706). The parish had contracted for a new organ, and it was agreed that the most convenient position for it would be in a gallery at the west end of the church next the steeple. This would necessitate some rearrangement, and permission is asked for the removal of the font and its canopy to the lower end of the north aisle, and for the gallery to be erected as proposed.

Musical considerations also influenced the people of *East Harling* in 1754 and led them to erect a gallery "for Psalmists and Psalmodyists at the west end of the great aisle near the steeple." This they did, but again, like the Wymondham people, they acted too precipitately without episcopal licence, and only acquired their confirmatory faculty two years later.

FACULTY PEWS

Apart however from the actual pews and galleries themselves, there are, during our period, no less than seventy-five applications received from individual parishioners asking that some particular seat or pew in the church might be allotted to them for the sole use of themselves and their families. These "faculty pews" were usually granted to the occupiers of particular houses or properties in the parish to which in the past similar privileges had been attached. At *St. Margaret's, Lynn* (1702) a pew of this description was allotted to Mr. Samuel Browne, merchant, who occupied a mansion "in Platea vocata Lath Street," at *Swaffham* (1740) to Henry Portler, owner of the White Swan Inn, and at *St. Nicholas, Lynn* (1706) to Charles Greene, "pharmacopulum proprietarius," who seems to have been the owner of a chemist's shop.

The seating asked for in these cases might be in some existing pew, though in many cases the applicant undertook to erect a new pew, the dimensions of which are generally stated and the position of the pew indicated. At *East Bradenham* (1743) it is to be "at the upper end of the south aisle adjoining the pulpit," at *Little Fransham* (1744) "adjoining the clerk's seat" and at *Swaffham* (1726) next to the seat "vocata ye Pedlar's Seat." In 1760, Thomas Hendry, gent., asks for a seat between the minister's desk and the mayor's seat in the church of *St. Nicholas, King's Lynn*, and gives the proposed dimensions. It is to be 6 ft. 6 in. in length, 3 ft. 3 in. in depth, and 3 ft. 10 in. high—a typical "box pew."

MISCELLANEA

There are of course many other matters relating to our churches and parishes which are touched on in these Faculty Books, some of which throw considerable light on parochial life in the past, and a few of these may be indicated in conclusion.

In 1757 there is a reference to the church plate at *St. George Tombland, Norwich*. Six years previously Stephen Gardiner, Esq. had given to the church a new set of communion plate consisting of two flagons, two cups and covers, a waiter, a bason, and a strainer, together with "a case covered with leather to keep them in." The silver weighed altogether more than 200 ounces, and the parish applies for a faculty to sell an old silver salver, and an old silver cup for the Communion table "now entirely useless," and to use the money for various parochial necessities.⁴

"There is a brass stand which is of no service"—and what may possibly have been a medieval lectern to be disposed of at *Little Walsingham* in 1748 in order to purchase a brass branch (candelabra) for the church.

Details as to the erection of organs both at *St. Nicholas* and at *St. George* at *Great Yarmouth* are given in confirmatory faculties granted in 1748; and in 1753 the organ presented by the *Lynn* corporation to *St. Margaret's* church, is dealt with.

VAULTS AND BURIALS

In quite a number of parishes applications were made for the construction of burial vaults in the church or churchyard. Between 1721 and 1764 the chancellor dealt with twenty-five requests of this description, eleven of them being for vaults in various Norwich churches. In 1725 Sir John Woodhouse, representing that the church of *Kimberley* had been for several generations the burying place of his ancient and numerous family, stated that he had lately built out into the churchyard on the north side of the chancel a large vault measuring 20 ft. by 15 ft. He was granted a confirmatory faculty. In 1734 licence was given to Dame Katherine Blount, to transfer from *St. Stephen's* church, *Norwich*, the body of her son to be re-buried in the family vault at Ridge, Hertfordshire.

Parsonage houses and glebe buildings figure from time to time. They may have become "decayed" (*Winterton*, 1703), "ruinous" (*Briston*, 1704), "totally dilapidated" (*Sparham*, 1763), or just "mean and incommodious" (*Hemphnall*, 1740). Others are too small, as at *Letheringsett* (1709) where the house had consisted only of two rooms, with chambers over them. Because of its smallness it was considered not fit for any rector to live in "nor has any done so within the memory of man," and it had been let to poor people at a small rent. At *South Repps* (1763) the house was too small, "and some of the rooms are so badly contrived as to render them extremely inconvenient." At *Crostwick* (1730) not a single room in the house was habitable. In all these cases proposals were made to remedy matters either by structural alterations or by complete demolition. At *Fornsett* (1729), *Garboldisham* (1729) and at *Thorpe St. Andrew* (1753) directions are given for complete rebuilding.

CONVENTICLES

Lastly, between the years 1752 and 1758 there comes a sudden spate of applications for permission to use certain specified buildings as "conventicles" for non-conformist worship. In 1752 three of these came from Norwich parishes

—from *St. Michael-at-Thorn*, for a licence to use a house which was in process of being built for Protestant dissenters, from *St. Mary Coslany*, where the dwelling-house of Mr. Dyball had been purchased for a Meeting House, where John Stearne ministered, while at *St. Augustine's* two garrets in the house of Henry Jermyn were to be used for this purpose. Altogether during these six years eleven applications came from Norwich, and twenty-seven more from various parts of the county, including *Great Yarmouth* (2) and *King's Lynn*.

Other matters dealt with include the sale or exchange of glebe land, the consolidation of two parishes, and sometimes the right of patronage had to be considered. All such matters as these rested on the permission of the bishop of the diocese, and were in normal cases dealt with by his chancellor by the granting or withholding of a faculty.

¹For an account of Matthew Brettingham and his work, see S. J. Wearing, *Georgian Norwich—Its Builders*, 1926.

²The curious pyramid which characterized the western end of Mundesley church until the early years of the present century, must have been erected at this time.

³L'Estrange. *Church Bells of Norfolk*, 1874, made considerable use of these Faculty Books.

⁴There is a full description of the church plate at St. George Tombland in *Norfolk Archaeology*, Vol. X, 84-5.