

# Rood Stairs

## - an analysis based upon a systematic sample from three English counties

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*This paper explores a long-neglected subject; this detailed survey examines the identification of rood stairs and rood screens, their numbers and positions and the reasons for their survival in west Somerset, west Cornwall and part of north Norfolk. It discusses their relationship with chancel, nave and tower, turret forms, stair types and numbers, the placing of windows for lighting as well as postulating their function, date and who they were for. The author is currently working on a survey of all the rood stairs of Somerset.*

### **Introduction**

The use of a screen to separate nave and chancel dates at least from the 13th century in English parish churches. It probably relates both to the long-standing split in responsibility for the structure of the nave and chancel between parishioners and clergy and to the increasing reverence accorded to the service of Mass from the 4th Lateran Council of 1215 onwards (Cook 1970, 23; Cross and Barnwell 2005, 13). By the 15th century it had become normal for these screens to be crowned by a loft or 'solar' (Vallance 1936, 66), whose original function was probably to house altars to serve the rood, the image of the crucified Christ flanked by figures of St Mary and St John, which hung in or above the chancel arch, but which also served a safe place for guild chests, a housing for organs and in some cases as a place for singing or preaching (Peters 1996, 69; Alston 2003).

At the reformation lofts and roods were condemned by the authorities but the screens were meant to be kept (Vallance 1936, 86). However, screens began to be demolished in the 1560s and many of them have now been lost to iconoclasm, to changes in fashion whether liturgical or secular, or to simple neglect. For instance, only 98 out of about 490 Somerset churches which existed before the Reformation retain even parts of their rood screens – a survival rate of about 20% (Bligh-Bond and Camm 1909, 141-142).

The chancel screens of medieval English churches attracted interest from antiquarians as early as the 1780s and had accumulated a considerable literature by the first half of the 20th century (Gomme 1894, 67; Bligh-Bond and Camm 1909, Bond 1908, Howard and Crossley 1919, Vallance 1936). Since then there has been an hiatus of work on screens according to Peters (1996, 69). This is surprising as these screens were, and still are when they survive, large and imposing pieces of church furniture.

Although lofts are largely gone and screens vastly reduced in numbers, there is often archaeological evidence for their former existence, such as damage to the mouldings of the chancel arch, stone brackets to support the loft or the rood figures, or, most substantial of all, the 'rood stair' which led up to the loft. These stairs were built into the wall or into little turrets projecting outside, or occasionally inside, the church. They survive in much greater numbers than the screens that they served. For instance, in the Taunton Archdeaconry there are 87 churches with rood stair remains out of 185 churches of medieval origin - a survival rate of about 47% - whilst in Suffolk approximately half of the 400 surviving medieval churches retain rood stairs (Suffolk Churches 2003).

Rood stairs survive more often than the screens they served for a number of reasons.

Firstly, they had no theological significance in themselves and so were not obnoxious to reformers, though Vallance (1936, 85) suggests that there was some pressure to block up rood stairs in the 1560s and 1570s.

Secondly, they did not impede views of the chancel or interfere with liturgical activities so were less likely to be swept away by 18th or 19th - century church restorers.

Thirdly, their substantial nature made actual destruction difficult so it was easier to block them up than totally remove them.

Fourthly, in many larger churches, the stairs had to remain open as they also gave access to aisle or nave roofs, or to the bell-tower. Even where the stair turret has been removed (eg Cudworth, Somerset; Little Witchingham, Norfolk) the door cases or scars on the external masonry often remain. Only where there has been rebuilding do rood stairs totally vanish.

Despite their relatively high survival rates, rood stairs have attracted only passing interest from ecclesiologists. General books on church architecture mention them in passing (eg Cook 1970, 156). The most thorough discussion available is to be found in the chapter on rood lofts in Vallance's excellent work on rood screens (Vallance 1936, 70 -76). Though more recent archival and archaeological work will have revealed more information concerning particular rood lofts and stairs, there seems to be no contemporary reviews of stairs (eg Peters 1996, 69). Vallance's discussion of rood stairs is based upon a relatively small number of examples, chosen because of their particular architectural interest, rather than for their representative nature. This inevitably means that his conclusions are open to challenge. For instance, he asserts that there are very few, if any, examples of rood stairs being entered from the chancel of the church rather from the nave (Vallance 1936, 70). From this he deduces, logically enough, that whatever purposes the lofts served, it was unlikely to be something regularly involving the priest or else the stairs would have been entered from the chancel - but around 20% of the stairs in the various samples discussed in this paper were accessed from the chancel, suggesting that this claim needs to be reconsidered.

### *The Survey*

This paper presents a discussion of rood stairs based upon systematic samples of churches from three different counties. The data was gathered on visits to 287 churches, of which 154 either still had rood stairs, or had substantial archaeological or archival evidence for lost rood stairs; for example blocked doors, scars on outer walls, 19th-century illustrations clearly showing now vanished rood stairs. Twelve churches had two stairs, making 166 stairs in all though differential survival means that there are rarely 166 examples of all features.

The churches visited were in three areas:

**West Cornwall** (15 out of 25 churches with stairs, 18 stairs in all),

**West Somerset** (Archdeaconry of Taunton) (87 out of 178 churches with stairs, 92 stairs in all),

The **North Norfolk** coast from the Wash to Cromer (51 out of 84 churches with stairs, 56 stairs in all).

General details (position, type, location, dating) were gathered for all areas, detailed measurements only for Somerset.



Plate 1: Ranworth, Norfolk - upper & lower doors in different walls

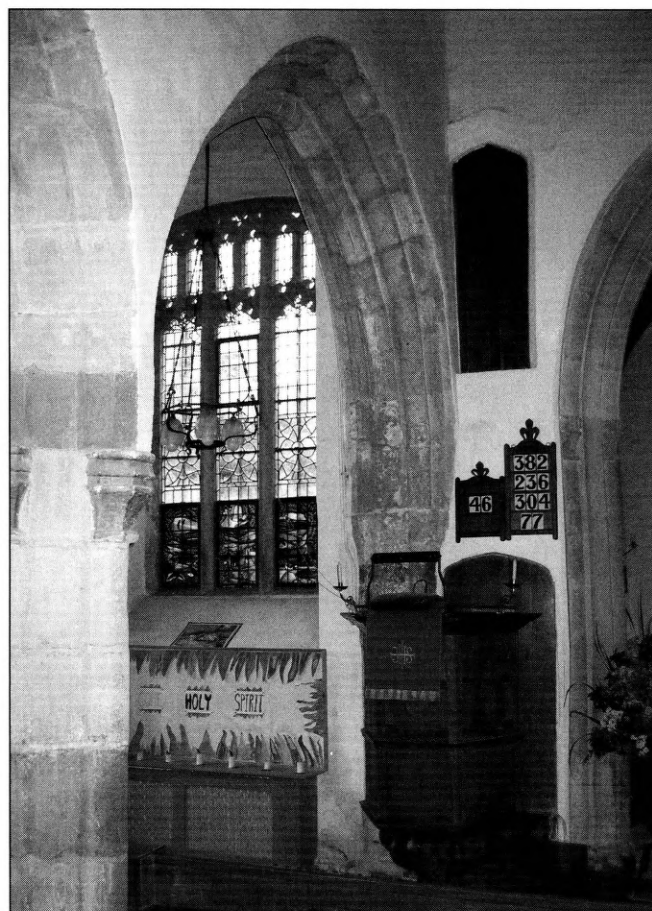


Plate 2: Winsford, Somerset - upper & lower doors in the same wall



Plate 3: West Buckland, Somerset - upper & lower doors in aisle wall

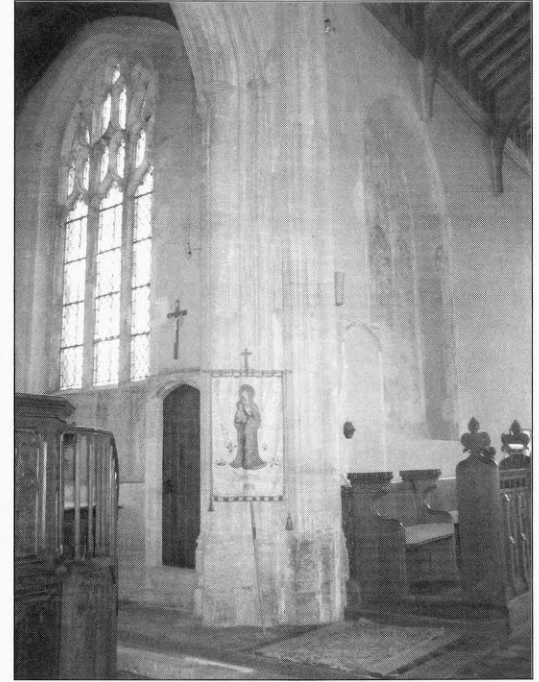


Plate 4: Wiveton, Norfolk - two lower doors giving access from aisle & chancel

### *Analysis: Location of stair*

Rood stair locations are dictated by the position and nature of the rood screens which divided the chancel, and chancel chapels, from the parochial nave and aisles, and upon which the loft virtually always stood. In most cases the screen ran straight between the outer north and south walls of the church. Hence the stairs are normally constructed either within one of these outer walls or, very occasionally, within one of the internal piers that the screen touched as it crossed the church. In an un-aisled church with a chancel arch, the loft above the screen ran across the western side of the chancel arch but could project eastwards into the chancel as well. In such cases the lower door into the stair and the door from the stair to the loft can be in either the nave or chancel side walls, in the nave east wall, or in the chancel west wall. The lower and upper doors can be in the same or different walls as at Ranworth, Norfolk (Plate 1).

Where there were aisles to the nave, but not to the chancel, it appears that the screen and loft did not continue across the east wall of the aisles - which would have had no functional purpose and would have blocked the aisle east window - since in such cases the upper door is always in the region of the chancel arch rather in the aisle walls, as at Winsford, Somerset (Plate 2). Where the church had chancel chapels as well as aisles, the screen usually ran across the aisles as well as the nave. In such cases the stair is in one of the aisle walls as at West Buckland, Somerset (Plate 3).

Table 1 shows that the majority of stairs have both doors in the same wall (shaded diagonal). Thus 37% of lower doors are in nave side walls, and in 32% of cases both lower and upper doors are in nave side walls. Twenty-one percent

of lower doors are in aisle side walls, and in 14% of cases both doors are in aisle side walls. Thirteen percent of lower doors are in chancel chapel side walls, and in 14% of cases both doors are in chancel chapel side walls. Table 1 also shows that 67% of stairs are entered from the nave or its aisles, 10% from transepts and 19% from chancels and chancel chapels. This, considered by itself, might suggest that whatever the rood loft was used for, it is likely to have involved lay people in a majority of cases, except perhaps for Cornwall where the nave/chancel proportions were almost reversed. However, other considerations such as the evidence of lockable lower doors might suggest otherwise (see below).

Regionally there were some variations. Table 2 shows that 50% of Somerset lower doors are in the nave walls and 22% in aisle walls. Forty-five percent of Norfolk lower doors are in the nave walls and 41% in the aisle walls. In two cases in Norfolk, the rood stairs can be reached either from the aisle or from the chancel as at Wiveton, Norfolk (Plate 4). Most of the lower doors in Cornwall are in chancel chapels.

### *Orientation of stairs*

Rood stairs are more likely to be located on the north side of a church (64% across the total sample) than on the south (36%). Examination of the two bottom lines of Table 3 shows that the disparity occurs to very similar extent in all three areas. Table 4 presents the orientations of the rood stair and of the main entrance for 92 churches in West Somerset. This confirms the common assumption that churches are usually entered from the south (72% of sample) rather than from the north (16% of sample). Of the 15 churches with north entrances, the rood stair was also on the north in 11

**Table 1 A & B – Numbers & percentages of doors**

ACTUAL NUMBERS														
UPPER DOOR														
1A	N	Ne	A	Ae	A&Ch	Tr	Trw	Tre	Ch	CCh	CT	U	Total	%
LOWER DOOR	Nave	53	4						2			2	61	37
	Nave east	2	4									1	7	4
	Aisle	8		24					1			2	35	21
	Aisle east	6										1	7	4
	Aisle and Chancel		1						1				2	1
	Transept	2											2	1
	Transept west	3											3	2
	Transept east	2						3	4			2	11	7
	Chancel	3	1						3			1	8	5
	Chancel Chapel	3							2	17			22	13
	Central Tower										2		2	1
	Unknown												6	6
													166	100
Total	82	10	24					3	13	17	2	15	166	
%	49	6	14					2	8	10	1	9	100	

**PERCENTAGES**

UPPER DOOR														
1B	N	Ne	A	Ae	A&Ch	Tr	Trw	Tre	Ch	CCh	CT	X	Total	%
LOWER DOOR	Nave	32	2						1			1	37	
	Nave east	1	2									1	4	
	Aisle	5		14					1			1	21	
	Aisle east	4										1	4	
	Aisle and Chancel		1						1				1	
	Transept	1											1	
	Transept west	2											2	
	Transept east	1						2	2			1	7	
	Chancel	2	1						2			1	5	
	Chancel Chapel	2							1	10			13	
	Central Tower										1		1	
	Unknown												4	4
													100	
Total	49	6	14					1.8	78	10	1.2	9	100	

**Table 2 – COUNTIES**

	Norfolk	%	Cornwall	%	Taunton	%	Overall	%
Nave	21	39	0	0	40	45	61	28
Nave east	3	6	0	0	4	5	7	4
Aisle	15	28	2	11	18	20	35	20
Aisle east	5	9	0	0	2	2	7	4
Aisle and Chancel	2	4	0	0	0	2	1	
Transept	2	4	0	0	2	1		
Transept east	1	6	2	2	3	2		
Transept west	1	2	2	11	8	9	11	7
Chancel	1	2	0	6	7	7	4	
Chancel Chapel	1	2	13	72	7	8	21	27
Central Tower	1	2	0	0	1	1	2	1
Unknown	2	4	0	0	4	5	6	4
Totals	54	96	18	100	92	100	164	102

Table 3A - Tower Orientation

Figures with % of each sample											
TOWER TYPE	West Somerset			West Cornwall			North Norfolk			Total	%
	North	South	%	North	South	%	North	South	%		
Projecting	14	5	21	3	1	22	3	1	7	27	16
Sloping Projection	5		5				2		4	7	4
Rectangular Tower	8	7	16				3	3	11	21	13
Multangular Tower	11	7	20	1	3	22	8	6	25	36	22
Quarter Tower	4	2	7		1	6	1	1	4	9	5
Multangular/Buttress							2	4	11	6	4
Multangular Interior								1	2	1	1
Round Tower							1		2	1	1
Central Tower	4	4	9				1		2	9	5
Wall Stair	6	4	11	7	2	50	7	2	16	28	17
Pier Stair	2		2				6	3	16	11	7
Lost Tower	7	2	10				1		2	10	6
North	61		66	11		61	35		63	107	64
South		31	34		7	39		21	38	59	36

Table 3B - Tower Orientation

Figures with % of whole sample											
TOWER TYPE	West Somerset			West Cornwall			North Norfolk			Total	
	North	South	%	North	South	%	North	South	%		
Buttress	14	5	11	3	1	2	3	1	2	27	
Sloping Buttress	5		3				2		1	7	
Rectangular Tower	8	7	9				3	3	4	21	
Multangular Tower	11	7	11	1	3	2	8	6	8	36	
Quarter Tower	4	2	4		1	1	1	1	1	9	
Multangular/Buttress							2	4	4	6	
Multangular Interior								1	1	1	
Round Tower							1		1	1	
Central Tower	4	4	5				1		1	9	
Wall Stair	6	4	6	7	2	5	7	2	5	28	
Pier Stair	2		1				6	3	5	11	
Lost Tower	7	2	5				1		1	10	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>166</b>	

instances, on the south in four. Rood stairs reduce the amount of wall space available for windows so it may be that a northern orientation was preferred since churches lose less light by having fewer or smaller windows to the north.

### *Form of stairs*

The basic architectural requirement was that the stair rose to a sufficient height to allow entrance to the rood loft. Among the factors that influenced the means by which this was achieved will have been the height of the screen, the thickness of the wall from which access was to be obtained, the amount of outer wall space available between windows, and finally the availability of stone suitable for quoins and mouldings on any projecting structure, and for the construction of newel stairs.

At this point it is important to note that a great number of the lower doorways to the rood stair are some way above

ground level. In Somerset the average height above present floor level of the lower door is about 17" [43cms], but this varies between nought and 53" [1.35m]. It is hard to see rood stairs being used conveniently or regularly without the provision of temporary or permanent wooden steps to them. This can be seen at Wiveton, Norfolk (Plate 4) where the aisle door is about 18" [48cms] from the (current) floor level but the bottom of blocked door in the chancel is nearly at the top of the current choir stalls.

### **Wall Stairs**

If the wall is thick, the screen low and windows few, then the stair can rise in a relatively straight run within the wall. Where the stair is at the corner of nave and chancel the stair may start in the nave side wall but rise into the wall between nave and chancel. Wall stairs comprise 17% of the total sample, being 50% of the (small) Cornish sample, 11% of

Table 4 – Stair Location							
		ENTRANCE					
		North	South	West	North and South	Total	%
STAIR	North	11	43	5	2	61	66
LOCATION	South	4	23	3	1	31	34
	Total	15	66	8	3	92	100
	%	16	72	9	3	100	

the Somerset sample, and 16% of the Norfolk sample (Table 3).

**Projecting Stairs**

Where the wall was not thick enough a projection was added to accommodate the outer side of the stair. In Somerset these tend to be neatly finished with angle quoins as at Lyng (Plate 5) whilst in Norfolk the projections tend to be more roughly finished as at Sparham (Plate 6) – no doubt because of the scarcity of decent freestone. Normally these projections are rectangular with a single sloping roof, often continuing that of the main nave or aisle roof. Occasionally they are more complex in form reflecting the rising stair inside, and having two or more roofs at differing angles as at Lyng (‘Sloping Projections’ in Table 3). Very occasionally the screen rises from a window bay and, or, ends up in a high window opening which also served to light the rood loft as at Porlock, Somerset. Projecting stairs comprise 20% of the total sample, being 22% of the small Cornish sample, 26% of the Somerset sample, and 11% of the Norfolk sample (Table 5).

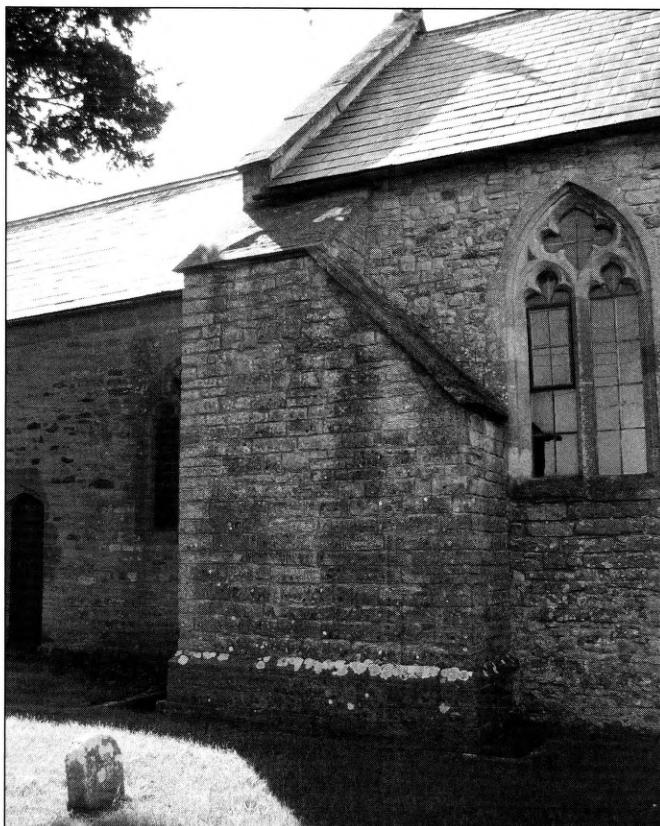


Plate 5: Lyng, Somerset - neatly finished projecting stair with sloping roof

**Rectangular Turrets**

Where the screen is high or the length of wall available is restricted, a newel stair may be used. Such stairs need greater depth than stairs which rise in a straight line, so they need a substantial projection on the outside wall of the church. Such turrets are distinct from projections, especially where they rise on the corners of large naves as at Wiggshall St Mary, Norfolk, though the distinction may be a little strained in smaller buildings. Table 5 shows a comparison of the measurements of a selection of Projecting Stairs and Rectangular Turrets from West Somerset (the numbers of stairs in each category is not the same as in preceding tables as the former include examples destroyed since they were drawn in the early 19th century). Turrets have been defined as those projecting 30” or more. ‘Ratio’ is width divided by depth. It can be seen that virtually all rectangular turrets have a lower ratio than do projections, and the average ratio for turrets is 1:8, that for buttresses 4:2. These figures support the general validity of the distinction between the two forms.

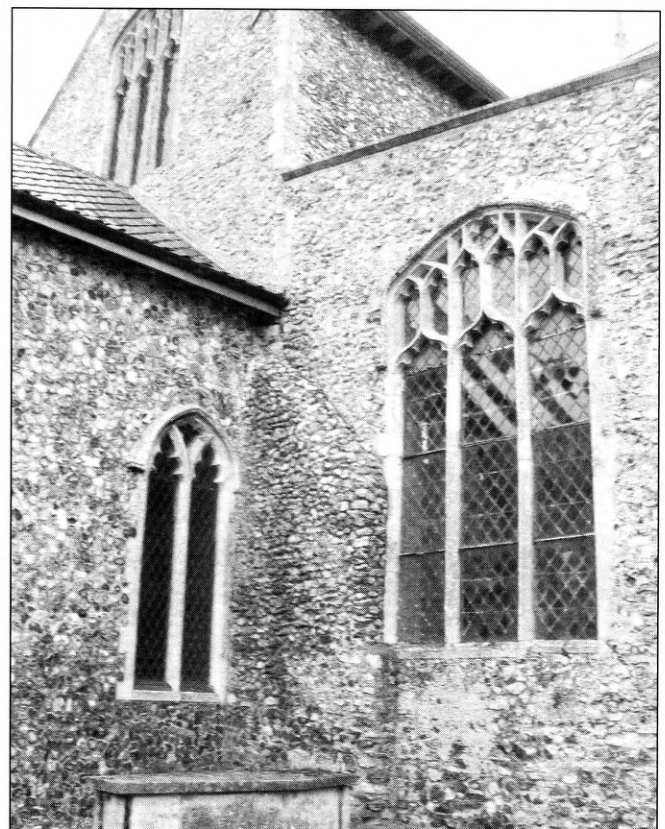


Plate 6: Sparham, Norfolk - rough projecting stair

Table 5 A, B, C – Buttresses; projecting stairs in Somerset; rectangular turret stairs in Somerset

Buttresses			
	Width	Depth	Ratio
Timbercombe	91.0	7.0	<b>13.0</b>
Curry Mallet	35.0	12.0	<b>2.9</b>
Durleigh	112.5	14.5	<b>7.8</b>
Goathurst	58.0	15.0	<b>3.9</b>
West Buckland	54.0	16.0	<b>3.4</b>
Cothelstone	90.0	16.0	<b>5.6</b>
Lopen	49.0	18.0	<b>2.7</b>
West Bagborough*	74.5	19.0	<b>3.9</b>
Combe Florey	62.5	20.0	<b>3.1</b>
Elworthy	38.0	21.0	<b>1.8</b>
East Quantoxhead	101.0	23.0	<b>4.4</b>
Brompton Regis	76.0	24.0	<b>3.2</b>
Runnington	80.3	24.0	<b>3.3</b>
Ash Priors	70.0	25.0	<b>2.8</b>
Ashbrittle	70.5	25.5	<b>2.8</b>
Tolland	70.0	26.0	<b>2.7</b>
Isle Abbots	51.5	30.8	<b>1.7</b>
Raddington	65.0	32.0	<b>2.0</b>
Churchstanton (not B & W?)	83.0	32.0	<b>2.6</b>
Bradford-on-Tone	33.0	33.0	<b>1.0</b>
Selworthy	89.0	34.0	<b>2.6</b>
Shepton Beauchamp	27.0	36.0	<b>0.8</b>
Ruishton	62.0	36.0	<b>1.7</b>
Nettlecombe	75.0	37.0	<b>2.0</b>
Kilve	87.0	38.0	<b>2.3</b>
Thornfalcon	84.0	41.0	<b>2.0</b>
Pitminster	63.0	43.8	<b>1.4</b>
Clatworthy.	78.0	44.0	<b>1.8</b>
Thurlbear	79.0	44.0	<b>1.8</b>

Projecting Stairs in Somerset			
	Width	Depth	Ratio
Timbercombe	91.0	7.0	<b>13.0</b>
Curry Mallet	35.0	12.0	<b>2.9</b>
Durleigh	112.5	14.5	<b>7.8</b>
Goathurst	58.0	15.0	<b>3.9</b>
West Buckland	54.0	16.0	<b>3.4</b>
Cothelstone	90.0	16.0	<b>5.6</b>
Lopen	49.0	18.0	<b>2.7</b>
West Bagborough*	74.5	19.0	<b>3.9</b>
Combe Florey	62.5	20.0	<b>3.1</b>
Elworthy	38.0	21.0	<b>1.8</b>
East Quantoxhead	101.0	23.0	<b>4.4</b>
Brompton Regis	76.0	24.0	<b>3.2</b>
Runnington	80.3	24.0	<b>3.3</b>
Ash Priors	70.0	25.0	<b>2.8</b>
Ashbrittle	70.5	25.5	<b>2.8</b>
Tolland	70.0	26.0	<b>2.7</b>
Max	112.5	26.0	13.0
Min	35.0	7.0	1.8
Av	70.8	19.1	4.2
Median	70.3	19.5	3.3
Mode	70.0	16.0	N/A

Rectangular Turret Stairs in Somerset			
	Width	Depth	Ratio
Isle Abbots	51.5	30.8	<b>1.7</b>
Raddington	65.0	32.0	<b>2.1</b>
Churchstanton	83.0	32.0	<b>2.6</b>
Bradford-on-Tone	33.0	33.0	<b>1.0</b>
Selworthy	89.0	34.0	<b>2.7</b>
Shepton Beauchamp	27.0	36.0	<b>0.8</b>
Ruishton	62.0	36.0	<b>1.8</b>
Nettlecombe	75.0	37.0	<b>2.1</b>
Kilve	87.0	38.0	<b>2.3</b>
Thornfalcon	84.0	41.0	<b>2.1</b>
Pitminster	63.0	43.8	<b>1.5</b>
Clatworthy	78.0	44.0	<b>1.8</b>
Thurlbear	79.0	44.0	<b>1.8</b>
Max	89.0	44.0	<b>2.6</b>
Min	27.0	30.8	<b>0.8</b>
Av	67.4	37.0	<b>1.7</b>
Median	75.0	36.0	1.8
Mode	N/A	32.0	2.1

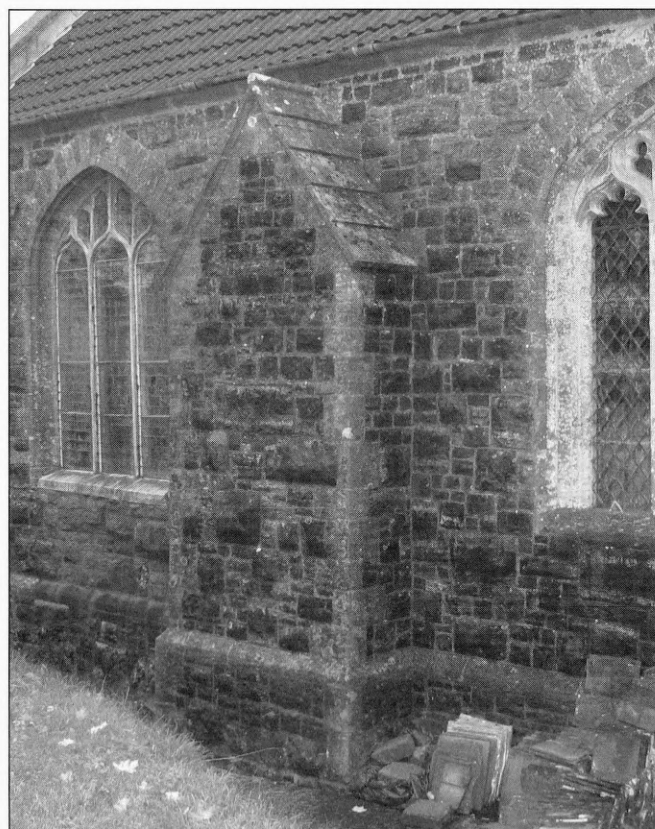


Plate 7: Ashbrittle, Somerset - gabled rectangular turret

Rectangular turrets usually have a sloping roof, though a few in Somerset have a little gabled roof such as that at Ashbrittle (Plate 7). In Norfolk there are a small number of such turrets standing at the junction of nave aisle and chancel and these, taller and more imposing than the norm, may have conical roofs like the more elaborate multi-angular versions (see following section). Rectangular turret stairs comprise 13% of the total sample, ranging from 16% of the Somerset sample, to 11% of the Norfolk sample, there being none in the small Cornish sample.

### Multi-angular Turrets

In larger churches a newel stair may be housed in a finely built multi-angular turret such as that at Combe St Nicholas, Somerset (Plate 8). This is normally a half octagon, but may occasionally be hexagonal as at Terrington St John, Norfolk or round as at Worsted, Norfolk. When the stair rises at the junction of nave aisle and transept, or at that of a nave aisle and aisle-less chancel, the turret may be reduced to a quarter-turret as at Curry Rivel, Somerset (Plate 9). In one very unusual case at Sedgeford, Norfolk, a complete multi-angular turret stands just to the south of the chancel arch totally enclosed by the south transept.

In a few cases in Norfolk there are a number of 'hybrid' rood stair turrets where a shallow multi-angular turret – hardly more than a buttress – stands behind a normal Perpendicular style buttress with set-offs as at Cromer, Norfolk (Plate 10). Multangular Turret stairs comprise 27% of the total sample, and 27-29% of each area sample. Twenty of these stairs (44%) rise to above roof level, giving access to the leads as well as the loft as at Combe St Nicholas, Somerset. If one includes the hybrid forms some 44 % of Norfolk turrets fall into this category.

### Pier Stairs

In a small number of churches the stair may rise inside one of the responds of the chancel arch. In large churches, this becomes a pier, shared by the last arches of the nave and chancel arcades and by the arch spanning the junction between nave aisle and chancel chapels. Where the pier is a block of walling there is room for the stair within the wall, though it may be very steep as at Wiggenhall St Germans, Norfolk. More often a small diagonal thickening is needed to contain it as at Castle Acre, Norfolk (Plate 11). In a few cases it is housed in a small, finely constructed internal turret. At Newton in south-west Norfolk, the stair emerges into a small corbelled platform in the eastern corner of the aisle before passing through the spandrel of the last nave arch into the main nave space (Plate 12). In one or two cases the stair has been cut through the actual mouldings of an earlier chancel arch as at Walsoken, Norfolk. Pier stairs comprise seven percent of the total sample, ranging from two percent of the Somerset sample, to 16% of the Norfolk sample, there being none in the (small) Cornish sample.

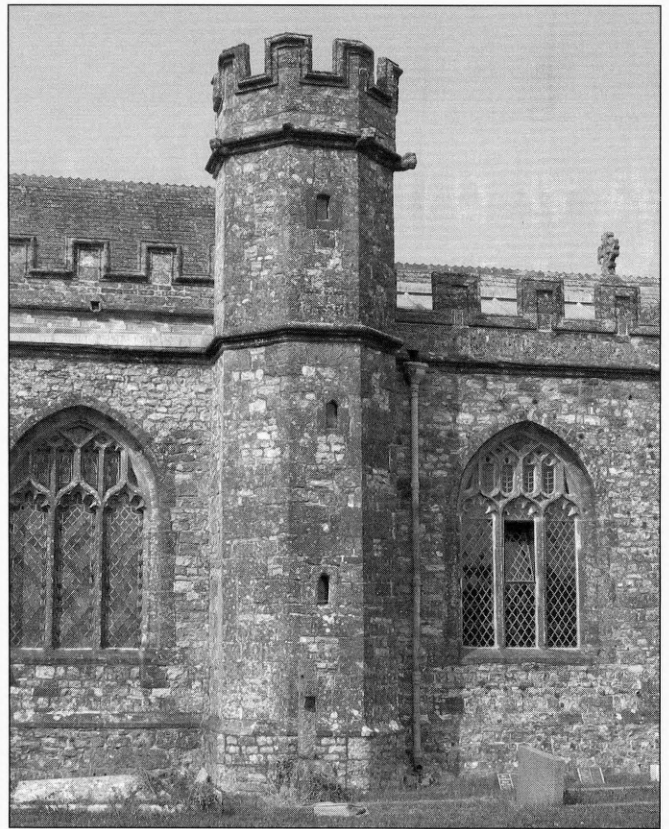


Plate 8: Combe St Nicholas, Somerset - multi-angular tower

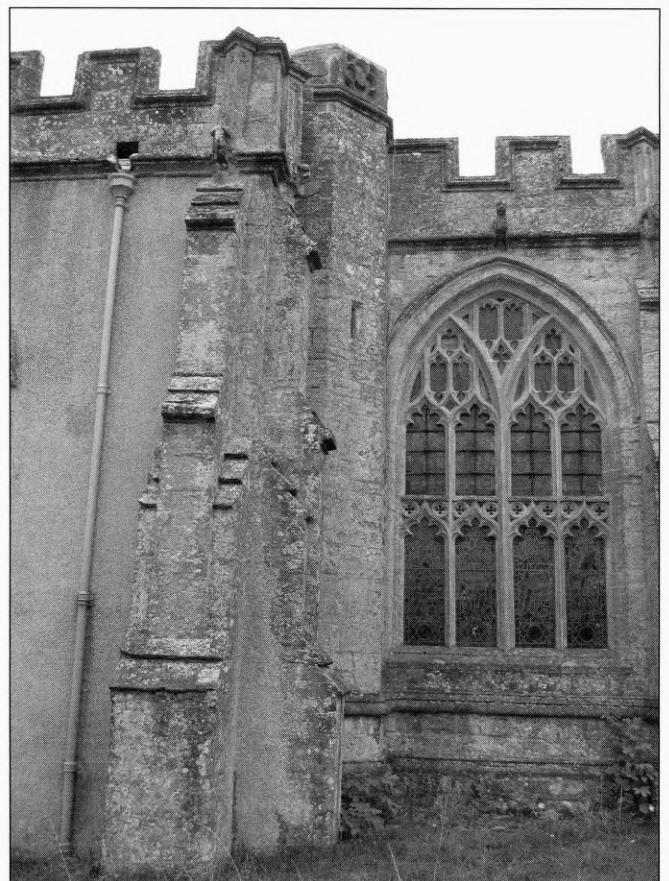


Plate 9: Curry Rivel, Somerset - quarter turret





Plate 10: Cromer, Norfolk - shallow multi-angular turret below buttress

### Central Towers

Where there is a central crossing tower the screen was usually placed against either its west or east side and the loft reached from a door off the tower stair or, occasionally, from the ringing chamber. In larger churches the loft appears to have extended below the crossing, as at Crewkerne, Somerset; Crewkerne exhibits another unusual feature, that of a second upper door (Plate 13). Because of the great height of the crossing arches it appears that the rood was so high that it could not be reached from the loft below the crossing. This loft was reached by a door leading off the stair located in the south east pier of the tower. The upper door was reached by a short stair descending from the ringing chamber located above the crossing vault. Central Tower stairs comprise five percent of the total sample, ranging from 11% of the Somerset sample, to two percent of the Norfolk sample, there being none in the (small) Cornish sample. This reflects the scarcity of central towers in Norfolk and Cornwall as compared to Somerset.

### Wooden Stairs

In all three areas surveyed substantial numbers of churches (51% Somerset, 38% Norfolk, 40% Cornwall) have no evidence of rood stairs. In most cases this could be accounted for by rebuilding but there were instances where the relevant masonry seemed undisturbed, or the pattern of windows left no room for stairs in walls. One might expect



Plate 11: Castle Acre, Norfolk - pier stair with upper & lower doors

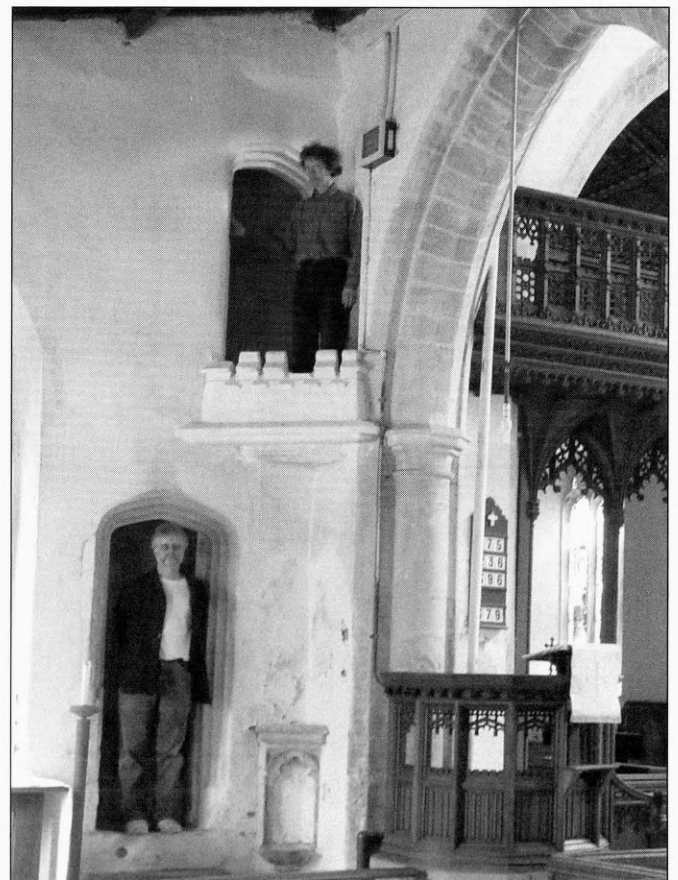


Plate 12: Newton, Norfolk - pier stair with upper & lower doors & balcony



Plate 13: Crewkerne, Somerset - high second door (one of the brackets for the lower loft can be seen on the rear right lower pier)

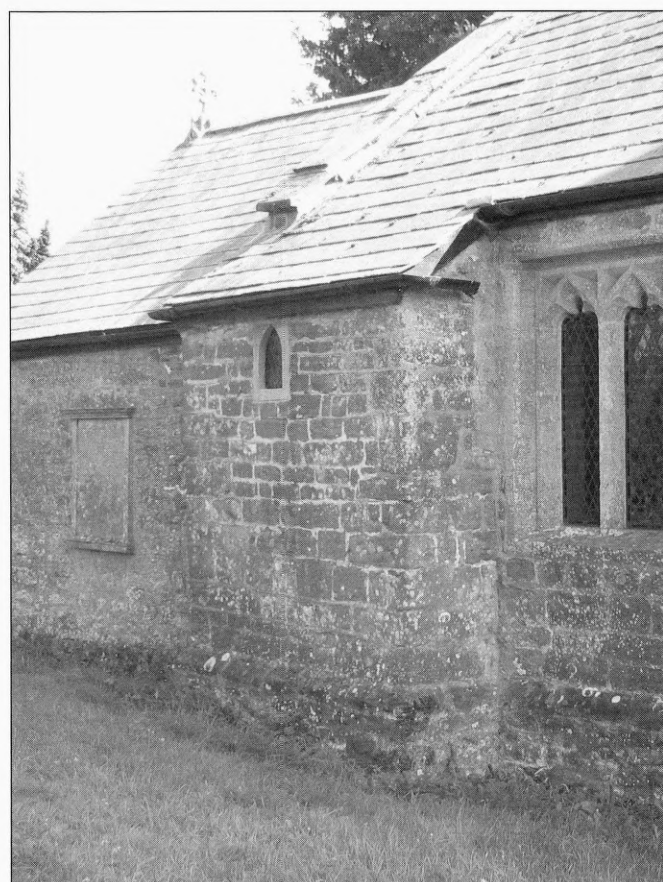


Plate 14: Runnington, Somerset - buttress stair with window

very small buildings to have made do with a ladder but these anomalous structures included substantial buildings such as Norton-sub-Hamdon, Somerset, Swanton Morley, Norfolk, and St Nicholas, Kings Lynn, Norfolk. One has to assume lost internal staircases of wood, though none survive in English churches. Bligh-Bond and Camm (1909, 84) claim that traces of a wooden rood stair rising around a pillar exist at Yetminster in Dorset but this appears to be merely the remains of a spiral decorative design curling up the pillar. Valance (1936, 73) cites documents mentioning a ladder to the rood loft at St Mary's, Chester in 1543. Some continental churches retain wooden or stone internal stairs (Pugin 1851, 59).

In all three areas surveyed, wall stairs are common, as are multi-angular turrets. projecting stairs are found in Somerset and Cornwall, rectangular turrets in Somerset and Norfolk, pier stairs in Norfolk, and central tower access in Somerset.

### *Windows*

Rood stairs are sometimes lit with small, loop windows, typically about 15" [38cms] high and three inches [0.08cms] wide. About 40% of Somerset stairs have windows, about half that amount in Norfolk and none occur in the Cornwall sample. Windows occur in most types of stair but are obviously more common on larger stairs.

In the smaller buttress stairs there is often only one window, placed near the top as at Runnington, Somerset (Plate 14). Multi-angular turrets on aisles typically have more than one window, usually placed on the outermost face of the turret so as to light the two doors. Where the stair continues to a door to the roof there may be a further window to light that door from the rear as at Combe St Nicholas. Finally a few Somerset turrets have larger, traceried, windows, most notably the very large turret at Minehead which has six windows (Plates 15 & 16). This extraordinary structure contains a very substantial stair with large doors to top and bottom. It is more like a domestic oriel than a rood turret.

Pier stairs, multi-angular or rectangular turrets at the nave/chancel junction, and central tower stairs frequently have tiny internal windows, which may be the standard loop but which can be delightful miniature quatrefoils, or roundels of mouchettes as at Cawston, Norfolk (Plate 17).

### *Number of stairs per church*

Most churches have just one rood stair, but there are occasionally two. Two stairs occur in five churches out of 51 in Norfolk, three churches out of 15 in Cornwall, and five out of 87 in West Somerset. When there are two stairs, one might suppose that it was to enable numbers of persons to visit something on the screen, perhaps a particularly venerated altar, rood or even a relic of some sort. However, there does not seem to be any documentary evidence for such especially holy items in any of the double stair churches

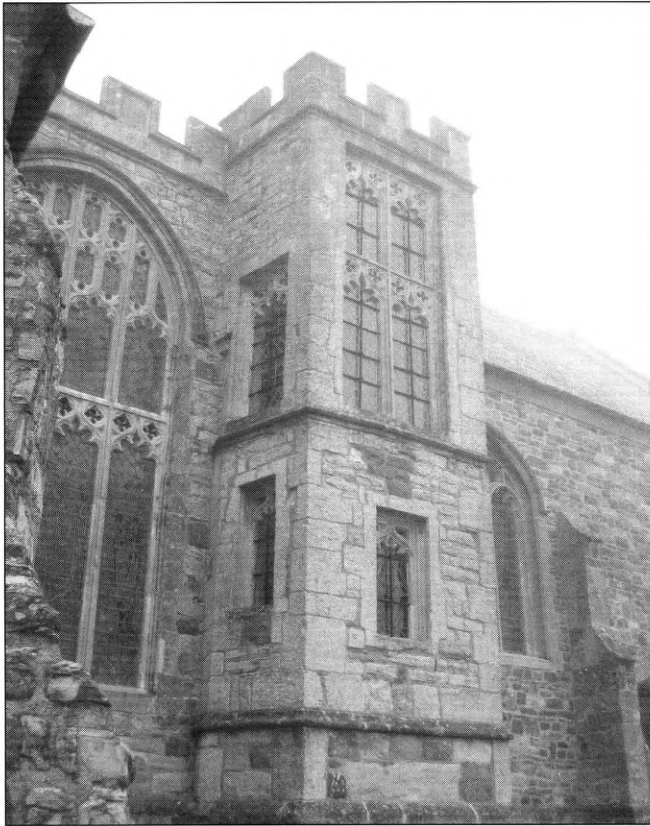


Plate 15: Minehead, Somerset - many-windowed turret

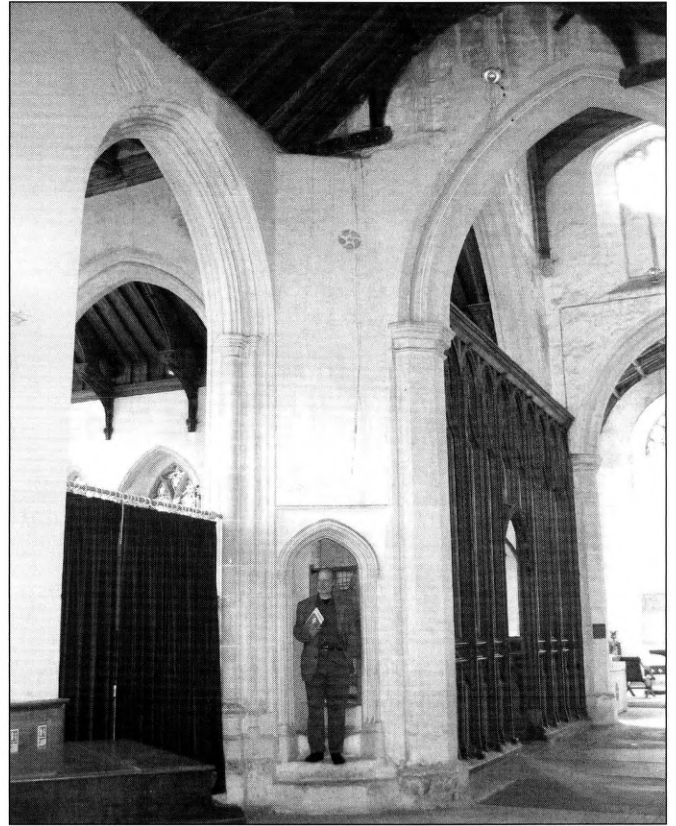


Plate 17: Cawston, Norfolk - lower door of pier stair with small internal window & screen



Plate 16: Minehead, Somerset - view of vault of turret & upper door, from stair

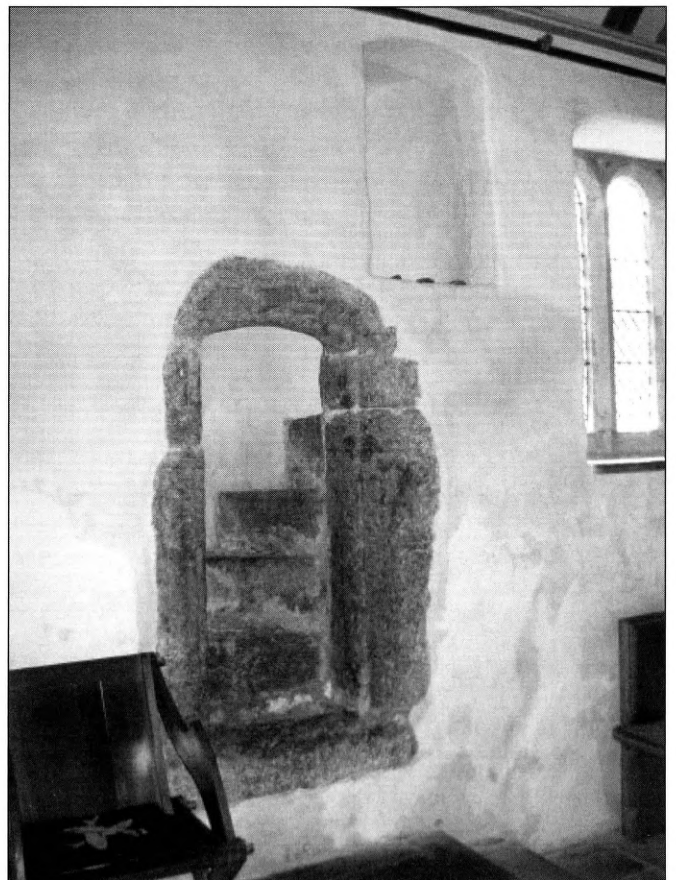


Plate 18: St Levan, Cornwall - roughly formed upper & lower doors

in this sample. There is considerable variety in the double stairs: three grand Norfolk churches with un-aisled chancels have a pair of matching turrets at the junction of nave and chancel as at Walpole St Peter; this arrangement also occurs outside of Norfolk in churches beyond this survey, for instance Banwell, Somerset. Pairs of turrets occur where the church has continuous aisles to nave and chancel; at Combe St Nicholas in Somerset a pair of handsome, nearly identical, multi-angular turrets rise on north and south aisles. At St Just-in-Penwith, Cornwall wall stairs rise from north and south aisles.

In many cases the double stairs do not match. At Wiggshall St Mary, Norfolk the turrets are not identical, one being multi-angular and one rectangular. At Madron, Cornwall, one stair rises in a multi-angular turret, the other in the wall. At Cromer, Norfolk, stairs rise in differently shaped multi-angular turrets even though they appear from internal door mouldings to be of a similar date. At Perranuthoe, Cornwall, one stair of the tiny church rises in the transept east wall, the other in a buttress in the north aisle. Finally, at St Decumans, Somerset, one stair rises in a multi-angular turret at the junction of nave and chancel chapel whilst another stair which has now lost its turret, rose one bay to the west on the south aisle. Perhaps these non-matching stairs are of different dates.

**Dates of stairs**

Documentary dating evidence seems almost non-existent for rood turrets, so dating has to be attempted from the door mouldings and the relationships of turrets to the walls in which they are situated. Occasionally documentary evidence allows the dating of the erection of a screen which presumably would have gone with a stair. Unfortunately, although stairs obviously imply a screen, they may not belong with the surviving screen or one, whether surviving or not, for which there is a date. For instance, at Great

Worstead, Norfolk, there is a clear mismatch in the north chancel chapel between the current screen and stair. In addition, so many screens have been extensively reconstructed that mis-matches or good matches between screen and stair may not be original.

Table 6 shows that a majority of lower doorways are four-centred with or without a chamfer. A number of the un-chamfered ones are have a rectangular rebate for a door opening outwards into the church, presumably because there was no room inside the stair for the door to open inwards. A small number have wave mouldings and a very few have decorated spandrels or other ornaments; a few have an ogee shape. Upper doorways are similar though often simpler, many being little more than rough rectangles as at St Levan, Cornwall (Plate 18). Presumably they would often be hidden from public view behind the loft parapet; where the doorways are two-centred they usually have chamfers. All these features are compatible with dates in the 15th to 16th centuries (Table 7).

Projecting Stairs and Rectangular Turrets rarely have any distinctive dating features, most windows being minimal. One or two have more elaborate windows. Ruishton, Somerset has a small Decorated style window, but the lower door is four-centred with a wave moulding which seems more likely to be 15th century. At Kilve, Somerset the stair rises from a recessed window bay into a turret lit by a large traceried window. Both windows are perpendicular in style, the lower one being straight headed.

Multi-angular turrets tend to be more architecturally elaborate than other rood stair housings and so easier to date. Often they can be seen to be of one construction with the adjacent aisle or chancel chapels. In Somerset no multi-angular turrets appear to be earlier than the 15th century, whilst a number are associated with work in the 16th century – as late as 1546 in one instance. A number of rood stairs appear to be of one build with the walls to either side,

**Table 6 Turret Door Mouldings**

	West Norfolk		Cornwall		Somerset		Total	C/S Tot
	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper		
<b>4 Centred</b>	16	11	3	1	7	18	56	<b>29</b>
<b>4 Centred Chamfered</b>	1	2	4	1	24	14	46	<b>43</b>
<b>Rectangular</b>	1	6		8	2	16	33	<b>26</b>
<b>4 Centred Rebated</b>	5	2	7	1	6	1	22	<b>15</b>
<b>4 Centred Wave</b>	4	1			10	1	16	<b>11</b>
<b>2 Centred Chamfered</b>			2	1	6	4	13	<b>13</b>
<b>4 Centred hollow</b>	3	0	1		4	1	9	<b>6</b>
<b>2 Centred</b>	0	1			2	1	4	<b>3</b>
<b>Open</b>					1		1	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Centred Rebated</b>					1		1	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Centred sqd</b>					1		1	<b>1</b>
<b>Ogee wave</b>					1		1	<b>1</b>
<b>Wave</b>					1		1	<b>1</b>
<b>Ogee Chamfered</b>					1		1	<b>1</b>
	30	23	17	12	60	38	205	<b>152</b>
<i>[Norfolk Details dubious]</i>								

Table 7 – Stair dates

	TW	DATE	1399	1400-50	1451-75	1475-1500	1501-25	1526-50	15th	Perp
East Quantoxhead	B	VCH Screen late 14th? Door 4C ch.	1							
Raddington	RT	VCH Screen poss pre 1400 - stair bay undatable	1							
Ruishton	RT	Early Perp - window could be 14thC	1	1						
Bicknoller *	W	Nave is dated to early 15th		1						
Dunster (N)	CT	Guide Book 1443 tower		1						
Stogursey	RT	Pevsner - after 1414		1						
Thom Falcon	B	Early perp		1						
Brushford	W	Guidebook dates screen to 1460			1					
Creech St Michael	CT	Pevsner N. Transept 1452			1					
Curry Mallet	W	VCH late 15th early 16th				1	1			
Curry Rivel	QT	Guidebook suggests rebuilding of aisle in early 16th or later				1	1			
Dowlish Wake	W	Perp. porch has badge of Abbot of Glaston 1493-1524				1	1			
Goathurst	SLB	VCH. Chancel arch and windows late 15th early 16th				1	1			
Ilminster	CT	VCH late 15th early 16th				1	1			
Kilve	RT	Guide book claims 1490 date for nave, aisle and screen				1				
Lopen	M	VCH dates church to later 15th, possibly 1460s-1480s				1				
Lyng	B	Guide book suggest 'around 1480'				1				
North Petherton	M	GuideBook - Screen `1470, aisles mid 15th				1				
Old Cleeve	M	GuideBook - Screen `1470, aisles mid 15th				1				
Shepton Beauchamp (N)	B	c1500				1				
South Petherton	RT	Pevsner c1500				1				
Thurlbear	M	c 1500				1				
Charlinch	M	Guide - late 15th				1				
Cheddon Fitzpaine	M	VCH - 15th -early 16th				1				
Chedzoy	It	VCH - 15th -early 16th				1				
Chilton Trinity	M	Screen early 16th. Turret integral to aisle					1			
Brompton Regis	M	VCH rood turret by early 16th century					1			
Cannington	M	Guide Book - screen 1500, south aisle 1520					1			
Combe Florey	M	Pevsner - LATE Perp					1			
Combe St Nicholas (N)	It	Guide claims windows 1520					1			
Combe St Nicholas (S)	M	Pevsner - 1500 or later					1			
Durleigh	M	South porch (and aisle?) 1508					1			
Isle Abbots	SLB	VCH turret and chancel arch 16th					1			
Lydeard St Lawrence	M	VCH North aisle 1546 John Harris D/P/Hal 4/1/3						1		
Minehead	M	VCH Aisle after 1534 possibly with bits from Barlinch priory						1		
Watchet (N)	RT	VCH loft there in 1530						1		
Watchet (S)	RT	1530s?						1		
Bishops Lydeard	B	Guide book 1520-30						1		
Cudworth	M	15thC							1	
Dunster (S)	B	15thC							1	
Kingsbury Episcopi	QT	Pevsner - screens earlier than most. Guide book Mid 15th C							1	
Kingston St. Mary	CT	VCH 15th							1	
Stogumber	B	VCH 15th C							1	
Taunton St Mary	RT	VCH 15th Century							1	
Whitestaunton	B	VCH 15th C							1	
Halse	SLB	VCH 15thC							1	
Huish Champflower	M	VCH 15thC							1	
Nettlecombe	It	Pevsner 15thC							1	
Selworthy	W	15TH							1	
Timberscombe	CT	VCH south trans and nave 15th and tower then heightened.							1	
Ash Priors	RT	Guide book - 15th C							1	
Ashbrittle	M	VCH 15th							1	
Barrington	B	Aisle arcade and windows are Perp; turret linked to aisle build by plinth								1
Bickenhall ^	RT	Aisle arcade and windows are Perp								1
Bradford-on-Tone	SLB	Both doors 4 centred								1
Broadway	RT	Nave Perp								1
Chard	W	Presumably Perp - not criterion features								1
Clatworthy.	QT	Perp								1
Cothelstone	B	VCH late middle ages								1

	TW	DATE	1399	1400-50	1451-75	1475-1500	1501-25	1526-50	15th	Perp
Crewkerne	B	Perp								1
Cutcombe	RT	Perp								1
Donyatt	M	Perp								1
Elworthy	It	Pevsner Perp								1
Enmore	CT	Perp								1
Fivehead	RT	Perp								1
Ilton	QT	Perp								1
Kingstone	QT	Perp								1
Langford Budville	CT	Perp								1
Luccombe	QT	Pevsner Perp N Transept								1
Milverton	RT	Perp								1
Monksilver	W	Perp								1
North Curry (N)	W	Perp								1
North Curry (S)	SLB	Perp								1
North Perrott	CT	Pevsner - perp								1
Nynehead	RT	Perp								1
Pitminster	Pi	Perp								1
Porlock	It	Perp								1
Runnington	RT	Perp								1
Sampford Brett	B	Perp windows								1
Shepton Beauchamp (S)	Pi	Perp								1
Spaxton	W	Perp								1
Stocklinch Ottersley	CT	Pevsner - Perp								1
Stoke St Gregory	W	Nave has Perp windows but is early 14th								1
Tolland	B	?								1
Trull	B	-								1
Wellington *	B	Nothing in VCH								1
West Bagborough *	It	VCH removed 18th C								1
West Buckland	It	?								1
West Monkton	It	Perp								1
Winsford	RT									1
Winsham	B	Undatable								1
Withycombe	RT	VCH claims 14th C!!	1							1

and Table 7 outlines available dates for such churches. A few screens may be pre 1400 but whether their stairs are of a similar date is not clear. A few stairs are very late, 1530s-1540s. A dozen or so are dated to the late 15th century and another dozen to the early 16th; five seem to date from the period after 1525. Most are dated only as '15th century', or 'Perpendicular', thus placing them somewhere in the late Middle Ages.

### Discussion

Rather than attempting to summarize this material it seems more useful to offer some suggestions as to how it may cast light on the possible uses of rood lofts. The existing literature suggests a variety of possibilities.

For attending to the rood and shrouding it in Lent (Bligh Bond and Camm 1909, 85) for housing an organ (Bond 1908, 123)

For an altar in front of the rood (Bond 1908, 122; Cox and Harvey 1907, 97)

For a lectern (Bond 1908, 121 - but Cox and Harvey 1907, 99 suggests this is:-  
For music book), for a chantry (Cook 1970, 155)

For singing (Long 1922)

To house a chest for the safekeeping of goods entrusted to churchwardens (Peters 1996, 69)

For the reading of the epistle and gospel (Alston 2003, originally 1912)

It has already been noted that nearly half of all multi-angular turrets also gave access to areas of the church roof. At Walpole St Andrew and Wiggenhall St Mary (both Norfolk) one of the pair of rood turrets also gave access to a

pulpit. Occasionally rood towers would house a sanctus bell (Bond, 1908, 115). Given this extraordinary range of functions one should, perhaps, question the assumption that all lofts served the same functions.

### *What can the stairs tell us?*

Various commentators have suggested that the stairs themselves are often so narrow and steep as to cast doubt upon the likely-hood that they were in frequent use, especially during ritual activities (Cox and Harvey 1907, 95; Vallance 1936, 70). The current research programme found that the stairs were indeed cramped. As already noted, many of the stair lower doors would have needed additional steps or even ladders for safe use. Where there was a lower door it often opens outwards because the stair is so constricted inside. Systematic measurements from the Taunton Deanery show the normal lower door to be about 67" [1.7m] high, with a range of 54" [1.37m] to 79" [2m] – quite restricted, especially for a priest in vestments. Stairs are often steep with little headroom, down to 55" [1.4m] in some turrets. Those turrets in which the stairs carry on to the roof tend to be more generously proportioned than those that only give access to the loft. The door openings onto the loft are typically even smaller than those by which the stair is entered from the ground – sometimes one has to crawl. All this suggests that most stairs were used infrequently, but on the other hand Cox and Harvey (1907, 95) point out that many rood loft stairs are considerably worn.

What of the location of the lower doors relative to the screen? The 67% of stairs opening from the nave or nave aisles would have been potentially accessible by the laity whereas the 19% opening from the chancel or chancel chapels would not. Some transepts would be liturgically part of the chancel. Stairs in the transept west wall suggest that the screen cut the transept off from the nave, those in the east wall might suggest that the screen was to the east, and so the stairs were in the 'lay' part of the church.

An examination of surviving door cases suggests that most of the lower doorways had lockable doors. However, Cornish stairs rarely had doors and it is surely relevant that most of these stairs are reached from the chancel rather than from the nave. So lofts were not open to just anybody – entrance was restricted either by a door or by the chancel screen

which would, presumably, have had a lockable door. Where the loft was reached from a central tower there may be evidence of a door on the stairs restricting access above the level of the loft as at Dunster, Somerset. There was little evidence of upper doors – the modern one at Bishops Lydeard, Somerset is clearly designed to safeguard persons ascending the turret to the roof from stepping out on to the screen which has lost its parapets.

In all, then, the physical evidence of the rood stairs in this survey suggest that most lofts were used for informal activities and were also regarded as essentially private spaces, whether for the clergy or for churchwardens. This would be compatible with the playing of organs, occasional devotions at an altar, or the storage of valuables. It would be of interest to know whether the stairs were larger than normal which gave access to those lofts mentioned in the literature as containing chantries (eg Cox and Harvey 1907, 97).

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