

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE FOR THE MEDIEVAL FABRIC OF S. MARY'S PARISH CHURCH, WILLESDEN

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The building history of many parish churches can be no more than an architectural survey from which a framework of dates is established. Very few churches are mentioned in documents which enable close dates to be given to the fabric or give the names of those responsible for a particular re-build or addition. There are, however, documents which refer directly to the fabric of the parish church at Willesden. As one of these has only recently come to the notice of the writer and the others have received little attention in print it seems useful to consider them briefly in these *Transactions*.

Land in Willesden was already held by S. Paul's, London, when Æthelstan renewed and restored the many privileges established by his predecessors;¹ ten pieces of land at Willesden and Neasden among them. There is, however, no evidence for a church at Willesden until 1181 when it is recorded that *ecclesia de Willesdona est in dominio canonicorum et reddit eis viij marc' per manum Germani clerici*.² Of this twelfth-century structure nothing survives, although there are tantalising references to the round arches of two Norman windows being discovered in 1872.³ The font, now placed in the tower, may have belonged to this church. The north and south nave aisles were evidently added in the mid-thirteenth century; the south aisle arcade has survived with modifications and one pier of the north arcade was discovered during the rebuilding of 1872. It is most curious that in 1297, a few years after the building of these aisles, a visitation⁴ should record that *campanarium melius cooperiendum . . . navis eiusdem (ecclesie) melius cooperienda . . . cancellum sufficienter coopertum*, 'the bell-tower could be better roofed . . . the nave could be better covered . . . the chancel is sufficiently well roofed'. This entry is even more surprising because the reference to the chancel being in a good state of repair is refuted by a document which suggests, on the contrary, that the chancel was very delapidated (Appendix I). The undated and unsigned document,⁵ which on the basis of the hand is late fourteenth to very early fifteenth century in date,⁶ is a complaint by the 'humble and devoted parishioners of Willesden' to the Dean and Chapter of S. Paul's, London, about the condition of the chancel. The document states that it was pointed out in 'various visitations' carried out 'that the chancel of the church . . . stands in a ruinous state as regards the roofing of its walls and foundations' and urges the Dean and Chapter to fulfill their responsibility and make it sound again. The visitation of 1297 says quite clearly that the chancel is well roofed. It is extremely difficult to reconcile the two documents since it is unlikely that the chancel would have fallen into such total disrepair in such a short space of time. Perhaps Willesden was unlucky in having some freak weather in the fourteenth century, as seems to have been the case at Ashwell, Hertfordshire in 1361. Violent weather in that year, in which people were suffocated, trees torn up by the roots, houses, towers, monasteries and woods laid flat, is recorded in the *Eulogium Historiarum* and at Ashwell by a series of remarkable graffiti in the tower which may have had to be rebuilt because of it.⁷

It is impossible to know what action, if any, was taken on the parishioners' complaint. Whatever happened structural work was not undertaken to the chancel until late fifteenth-

early sixteenth century, perhaps by Thomas Poulet.⁸ Before then, however, the church fabric is referred to in an Indulgence dated 1395 (Appendix II),⁹ which may have resulted from the parishioners' petition. The Indulgence of forty days is given by Nicholas, bishop of Christopolis and suffragan bishop of Salisbury,¹⁰ to all those who give, bequeath or provide for the upkeep or repair of the fabric of the church at Willesden, or who pray for the well-being of Ralph Roberdes¹¹ while he lives or for his soul and that of his deceased wife Johanna and for the souls of their children and all the faithful departed. The south-west tower, which is early fifteenth century in date¹² (the wooden door of the south porch is late fourteenth century), may have been built as a direct result of this Indulgence. The bell-tower referred to in 1297 may have been incorporated in the present structure which is only demonstrably fourteenth-century in the arches of the first stage and the bell openings of the third.

No major building operations seem to have taken place in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Indeed, the documents mentioned above suggest that it was extremely difficult to maintain the existing fabric in good order without contemplating new work. The building of the tower apart, it was not until the late fifteenth-early sixteenth century that any large scale work was undertaken. Then the chancel was renovated and the south chancel aisle built.¹³ The fabric underwent no further alterations until the nineteenth century.

NOTES

- 1 S. Paul's Library, 'W.D.4. Liber L, fol. 3t-4v (= 7r-8v) et seq. and W.D.1 Liber A, sive *Pilosus*, fol. 38b. The undated charter is printed in full in W. Dugdale, *History of St. Paul's Cathedral in London* (London, 1658), 184-85; J. Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus Ævi Saxonici*, V (London, 1847), 250-51; W. de Gray Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, II (London, 1887), 451-52. A marginal gloss on the Liber L copy gives the date 930 to which another hand has added *potius-989*. The witnesses include Æthelgar, archbishop of Canterbury, Oskitel, metropolitan of York, Alftan, bishop of London, Æthulf, bishop of Hereford, Ælfer and Brithnoth, abbots Ælfric and Ælstan and many others. Their dates span a considerable period but Aethelgar, archbishop of Canterbury 988-990 appears to be the latest. It would seem, therefore, that 989 is in fact the correct date for this copy of the charter which Æthelstan apparently drew up before his death in 939.
- 2 S. Paul's Library, W.D.4. Liber L, fol. 82v (= 85v), printed in W. Hale (ed.), *The Domesday of St. Paul's of the Year M.CC. XXII* (London, 1858), Camden Series (Old Series 69), 152.
- 3 J. Thorne, *Handbook to the Environs of London* (London, 1876), 698.
- 4 S. Paul's Library, W.D.16. Liber I, fol. 56v (= 60v), printed in W. Sparrow Simpson (ed.), *Visitations of Churches belonging to St. Paul's Cathedral in 1297 and in 1458* (London, 1895), Camden Series (New Series 55), 59-61 and in O. Lehmann-Brockhaus, *Lateinische Schriftquellen zur Kunst in England, Wales und Schottland vom Jahre 901 bis Jahre 1307*, II (Munchehen 1956), 622-23.
- 5 S. Paul's Library, A Boxes 26-40, no. 1368.
- 6 I have referred to this document elsewhere (note 8) as being early fifteenth century in date, which was a date suggested by the Historic Manuscripts Commission's '14th to 15th century' (*Ninth Report*, Part I (Report and Appendix) (1883), 40). I am grateful to the Staff of the Department of Manuscripts, British Museum, for examining a photocopy of the document and for their dating which is used here.
- 7 Bruce Dickins, 'Historical Graffiti at Ashwell, Hertfordshire' in V. Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti* (Cambridge, 1967), 181-83.
- 8 Laurence Keen, 'Some new light on the history of S. Mary's Parish Church, Willesden' in *The London & Middlesex Historian*, 2 (1965), 11-12.
- 9 British Museum, Harleian MS, 1859, fol. 218v. This is a small folio volume of some two hundred leaves written in a fifteenth-century hand and described as a Register in brief of the laws of Richard III. The end leaves have sixteenth-century notes, the copy of the Indulgence among them. Elsewhere is the signature of Edmund Roberts and the date 1582.

- 10 The text of the Indulgence shows that the episcopal seat was vacant in February 1395. J. le Neve, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae 1300-1541*, III (Salisbury) (London, 1962), compiled by J. M. Horn, shows that this falls between the episcopacy of John de Waltham and that of Richard Medford (Mitford). Medford was translated from Chichester 25 October 1395 and Waltham is said to have been bishop until 17/18 September 1395. Nicholas is not recorded by Eubel (C. Eubel, *Hierarchia Catholica Medii Aevi*, I (1913)) in the list of bishops of the titular see of Christopolis, Greece, who were also suffragans of Phillipi. The (F. M. Powicke and E. B. Fryde (ed.)) *Handbook of British Chronology* (2nd. ed., London, 1961), 267 notes that Nicholas is recorded as bishop *in partibus* of Christopolis for 1384-1406, as suffragan of Bath, 1385-1403 and as suffragan of Salisbury 1395-1406.
- 11 The Roberts family was very important in the parochial history of Willesden from the thirteenth century until the eighteenth. F. A. Wood records (Willesden Public Library, Wood MS, Folio 5, 254) that Ralph Roberts was constable of the parish of Willesden in 1390. He was also one of the jury empanelled in 1379 to make inquisition of the land held by John Peeche (*I.P.M.* 3 Richard II, 54) and his name occurs many times in deeds relating to property at Neasden which fortunately survive in a late compilation of deeds, rentals, etc. bound up in British Museum, Stowe MS, 862, fol. 38 *et seq.*
- 12 Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *Middlesex* (London, 1937), 133.
- 13 Keen, *op. cit.*, 11.

APPENDIX I

S. PAUL'S LIBRARY. A BOXES, 26-40 I, 368

Reverendis et nobilibus dominis Decano et Capitulo ecclesie Sancti Pauli London' vestri humiles et devoti parochiani de Willesdon' conquerunt et significant quod cum in diversis | visitacionibus per vestrum commissarium generalem ibidem factis compertum fuit in eisdem et delatum qualiter cancellus ecclesie de Willesdon' predicte existit | ruinosus in coopertura murorum fundamentorum ipsius muris et fenestris tam debilibus propter eorum vetustatem existentibus et per nonnullos annos | nullatenus correctis in tantum quod idem cancellus in terram ruere incipit pro eo quod muri et fenestre totaliter frangunt et rumpunt ita quod de | levi unus puer lapides murorum et fenestrarum propter ipsorum debilitatem valeret enervare et infirmare et quod per fissuras murorum et fenestrarum fracturas | tam magnas largas et apertas latrones sunt ingressi et bona illius ecclesie preciosa nimis abstulerunt et eandem ecclesiam spoliarunt | et de ulteriori spoliacione de diebus in dies verisimiliter speratur quodque frequenter propter pluvias ventos validos et tempestates horribiles | per huius cissuras et fracturas intrantes missa ad summum altare ibidem nullatenus potest celebrari nec divinum officium excerceri | et quod deterius est bubones corvi et cornices ceterique aves tam de nocte quam de die intus volantes singula altaria et | alia loca ipsius ecclesie cum eorum plumis et stercoribus maculant et villia reddunt quod absurdum et dolendum est valde de hoc | audire vel videre in magnum preiudicium et dampnum dictorum parochianorum et illorum qui huius defectus emendare tenentur | scandalum et vituperium manifestum in occasione visitacionum huius nondum aliquid est correctum unde immense dominacioni | vestri prefati parochiani humilitis supplicant quatinus ob dei reverenciam et prout ex vestro interesse debito astricti estis dignomini ad tam | evidentier rei indigenciam manus apponere adiutrices et huius defectus emendari facere cum effectum ne dicti parochiani | vobis amplius materiam super hiis habeant conquerendi

TRANSLATION

To the reverend and noble lords, the Dean and Chapter of S. Paul's London, your humble and devoted parishioners of Willesden complain and point out that in various visitations carried out there by your commissary general it was discovered and reported that the chancel of the church at Willesden aforesaid stands in a ruinous state as regards the roofing of its walls and foundations, since the walls and windows are in so weak a state through age and the fact that for some years they have undergone no repair whatsoever. In short the same chancel is beginning to fall to the ground in view of the fact that the walls and windows are entirely broken and burst open so that a single boy would be strong enough to weaken and render unsafe the stones of the walls and windows because of their weakness, and that through the gaps in the walls and the holes in the windows, which are so great, broad and gaping, thieves have entered and have stolen possessions of great value belonging to that church. They have ransacked the same church and there is from day to day a reasonable expectation of further spoliation and that frequently owing to rains and strong winds and appalling weather entering through its holes and breaches the Mass cannot in any way be celebrated in this place at the high altar nor the divine office be performed. What is worse, owls and crows and rooks and other birds, night and day alike, are fluttering about within, staining individual altars and other places of the church itself with their feathers and droppings and are ejecting their pellets; a thing which is unthinkable and most regrettable to be heard or seen in this connection to the great loss and injury of the aforesaid parishioners and those on whom the responsibility of making good its defects fall. A manifest scandle and reproach on the occasion of the visitations made to it as no repair has been carried out. Your aforesaid humble parishioners, therefore, do beg your infinite lordliness that, out of reverence to God and as you are bound by your duty to be concerned, you will deign to set a helping hand to a need so manifest and see that its defects are repaired with the result that the said parishioners may have no further ground for complaint against you on this account.

APPENDIX II

BRITISH MUSEUM, HARL.MS.1859, FOL.218V

Universis sancte matris ecclesie filijs ad quos presentes littere pervenerint Nicholas | miseratione divina Christopolitanus Episcopus ac Sarum diocese sede episcopali ibidem | vacante suffraganeus sufficienter deputatus Salutem in domino sempiternam | obsequium pium et deo gratum tociens impendere opin(i)amur quociens allectivis | indulgentiarum muneribus mentes fidelium ad opera pietatis propencius excitamus | de dei igitur omnipotentis misericordia et beate marie matris domini(s) patrone | nostre necnon beatorum apostolorum petri et pauli omniumque civium supernorum meritis et | precibus confidentes omnibus Christianis vere penitentibus et contritis quorum diocesan | habeant nostram indulgentiam ratam habuerint et acceptam qui ad | sustentacionem seu relevamen fabricae ecclesie beate marie de Willesdon' | London' diocese aliqua de bonis suis sibi a deo collatis donaverint legaverint | procuraverint seu quovismodo assignaverint subsidia caritatis vel qui pro | salubri statu Radulphi Roberdes de Willesdon' predict' dum vixit et | pro anima sua cum ex hac luce migraverit et presertim pro anima | nobilis mulieris Johanne quondam uxoris eiusdem Radulphi Roberdes | defuncte et pro animabus liberorum eorundem ac omnibus fidelium defunctorum orationem | dominicam cum salutacione evangelica dixerint mente pia quocienscumque | quandocumque aliquod premissorum devote fecerint de iniunctis sibi penitencis | quadraginta dies indulgentie misericorditer in domino concedimus per presentes in cuius rei testimonium presentes has sigilli episcopatus | nostri appensione fecimus comuniri dat' Sarum primo die mensis februarii | anno domini millesimo CCC nonagesimo quinto

TRANSLATION

To all the sons of our holy mother church to whom this letter shall have come, Nicholas by divine mercy bishop of Christopolis and duly appointed suffragan of Sarum, the episcopal see there being vacant, sends eternal greetings in the Lord. We do believe that it is our bounden duty, meet and pleasing to God to bestow indulgence as often as we rouse the minds of the faithful more readily to works of piety by the incentive of granting indulgences; in consequence of the mercy of Almighty God and of the Blessed Mary, mother of Our Lord and our patron and putting out trust in the merits and prayers of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul and of all the citizens above, to all Christians that be truly penitent and contrite, whose diocesan bishops are in possession of our indulgence and hold it as ratified and accepted, and who have donated, bequeathed or made available towards the upkeep or repair of the fabric of the church of Blessed Mary of Willesden in the Diocese of London some part of the wealth bestowed upon them by God or in some way have allocated charitable contributions or who for the well-being of Ralph Roberdes of Willesden aforesaid while he lives and for his soul after he departed this life and especially for the soul of the gentle lady Johanna deceased, formerly wife of the same Ralph Roberdes and for the souls of the children of the same and all the faithful departed, have piously recited Our Father and Hail Mary for each several occasion they have done anything of the aforesaid devoutly, we do grant in the Lord of our mercy forty days of indulgence by this letter, in testimony to which we have caused the present letter to be ratified by the application of the seal of our episcopate. Given at Sarum 1st. February in the year of Our Lord, 1395.

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