

From ruin to rebuilding: a study of Pulloxhill church after the fall of the steeple in c.1653 to its rebuilding in 1845-6.

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SUMMARY

A plan of Pulloxhill church prepared before the building of the present nave and tower in 1845-6 shows that only the ancient chancel remained in the ruined shell of the mediaeval church. The nave and tower were virtually abandoned after the chancel was adapted for use as a church in about 1745. Research in 1980 showed the history of the building during the two centuries following the collapse of the tower in the 1650s to be particularly well documented in a range of archival sources. This account draws on those sources and a study of the physical evidence of the building to chronicle the disaster and subsequent attempts at repair. The case is interesting in the more general context of illustrating the problems faced by the ecclesiastical authorities and parish officers in maintaining church buildings in the period before the religious revival of the nineteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

According to the petition for a faculty to sell the bells dated 1713, the tower of Pulloxhill church fell about 60 years previously (1). This gives us a date of c.1653 (2), and although we cannot be certain that this is accurate it is known that the tower was in ruins by 1668 when the Churchwardens reported in their presentment to the Archdeacon that “the Steeple is fallen down” (3). Presumably some temporary repairs were carried out more or less immediately after the tower collapsed. We know a good deal about work carried out between 1687 and 1746, but the church remained a partial ruin until the site of the nave and tower was cleared and the present building erected in 1845-6.

THE STATE OF THE BUILDING IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

It is perhaps best to begin a study of the history of the church after the fall of the tower by examining it as it was immediately before the rebuilding in the mid nineteenth century. Archdeacon Bonney described it in the 1820s as, “the Remnant of what

was once standing, and consists of the chancel and part of the Tower on which is a wooden Bell Chamber containing one Bell – the nave has been demolished upwards of 150 years, and the Chancel, which is large, serves for the accommodation of the Parishioners at Divine Worship” (4). Writing in 1827, the Rev G R Boissier of Chiddingstone in Kent commented that “the Tower & Chancel only remain of the original building. The nave is destroyed” (5). There are no illustrations of the church at this date, but the wooden bell turret can be seen in the distance in a view of the village street drawn in about 1820 (6).

The most valuable record of the old church, however, is a plan drawn by the Bedford architect James Tacy Wing (Fig 1) (7). It is dated 1st January 1845, and it shows that the chancel was entered through an open wood porch at the west end. The internal dimensions of the chancel were about 18 feet by 39 feet, and a gallery had been provided at the west end to give additional accommodation. The walls of the nave had entirely gone, but there was a wood rail fence on both the north and south where the walls once stood, each with a gate in the centre. At the end of the site stood the walls of the western bay of the nave, and the base of the tower. Of the latter, only the east wall with the tower arch, and parts of the north and south walls remained. A spiral staircase in the south east angle of the old tower is shown on the plan, but its entrance had been blocked up.

The wooden bell chamber described by Archdeacon Bonney is also shown on the plan, but it was built in the western end of the nave and not on the ruins of the tower as he suggested. Wing’s plan shows a four inch wall spanning the nave and standing some 7½ feet to the east of the tower arch, and a similar wall stood in the centre of the tower arch itself. These walls, together with those of the old nave and tower, formed the base for the turret which was weatherboarded with a pyramid roof (possibly tiled) and topped with a wrought iron weathervane or finial. The “Steeple” was 40 feet high (8).

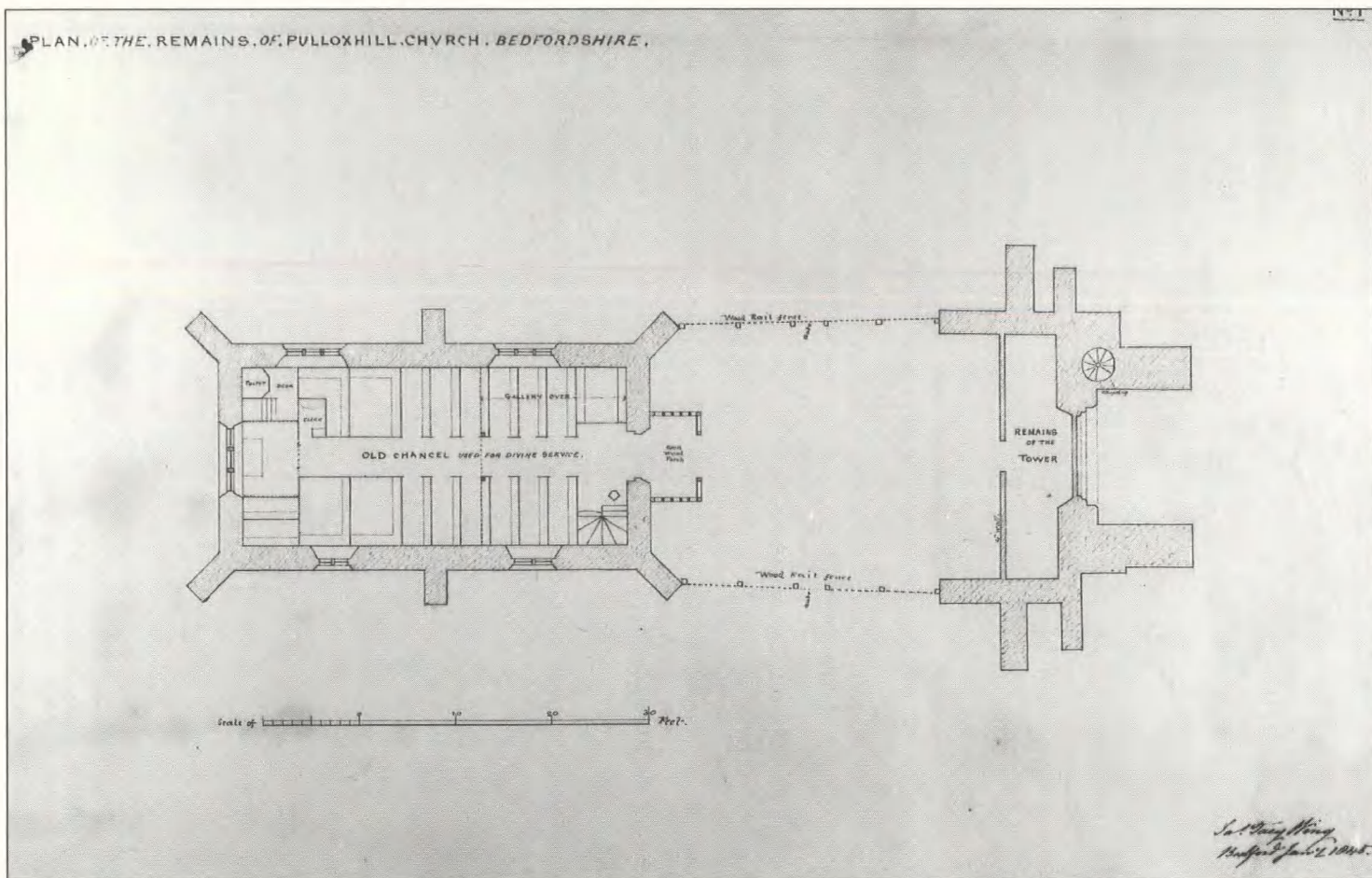


Fig 1 Plan of Pulloxhill church by James Tacy Wing in 1845 prior to rebuilding

THE AFTERMATH OF THE FALL OF THE TOWER

To return to the Seventeenth century, it is clear that the mediaeval church consisted before the fall of the tower in 1653 of a chancel, aisleless nave, south porch, and a western tower (9). There may also have been a porch on the north side unless the main entrance was originally, as now, through the West door under the tower. The collapse of the tower must have caused considerable damage to the nave, although no contemporary account survives to show the extent of the devastation or the nature of the immediate repairs undertaken. In 1665 the Churchwardens bought 500 tiles (10), but the early Churchwardens accounts give no other indications of work done. It seems likely that the roof of the nave was made good, the west end of the church made weathertight, and a small vestry made in the base of the tower (11).

Evidently the repairs were of a temporary nature, but over thirty years elapsed before the church authorities began to press the parish into taking further action. In 1687 the Churchwardens were ordered by the Archdeaconry Court to levy a rate of the parishioners and landowners for the repair of the steeple and bells described in the monition as "out of repayre" (12). The summary accounts of William Bishop and Lewis Plummer, Churchwardens in 1685, 1686 and 1687, are entered in the account book from which it seems that the Archdeacon's order was not complied with (13). The disbursements in 1687 amounted to £2 11s. 8d., and the total sum raised by rates in the three years was only £9 4s. 4d. Certainly no major repairs were carried out, and in 1708 it was reported that the four bells were still lying "in the south porch of the Church..., all crack'd & ye clappers of all but one sold." (14). Presumably successive Churchwardens felt the task too great for the resources of a small parish.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY REPAIRS

Some work was done when William Fisher and Thomas Handscombe were wardens in 1708, and over £33 was spent on the church (15). By this date all hope of rebuilding the tower had been abandoned, but under the influence of Archdeacon Thomas Frank the parishioners embarked on a scheme to tidy up the ruins. Since the fall of the tower most of the reusable materials had been sold or otherwise disposed of, including the lead, timbers, stone, and the clappers of three of the bells (16). In 1713 the Vicar, Churchwardens and parishioners applied for a faculty to sell the bells

themselves and with the money "...to prepare One or Two new Bells, and to build a Frame over the Vestry belonging to the sd Church or in some other convenient Place in which to hang them ... & with the Remainder of the sd Money, if any shall be, to repair the Breach in the West End of our sd Church." (17). The faculty was granted, and in 1714 Thomas Mastin and Richard Allen spent £109 3s. 5d. on the church (18). Unfortunately their detailed accounts have not survived and even the new bell put up in 1714 has since been recast, and so one can only speculate as to what was done. It seems that a wooden structure was built over the remains of the tower to house the bell (19), and that further repairs to the west end of the nave (apparently still in use) were carried out at the same time.

By the late 1730s the church was again in poor condition, and in 1739 it was reported that "...the Church ... is by length of time become very ruinous & decay'd; almost all the Roof having some time since faln down; and the chancel, which remains cover'd, is so small that it is not near sufficient to contain the Inhabitants of the said Parish; and also so ruinous in the Foundation & Walls thereof, that the same cannot longer be supported, but must be wholly taken down & rebuilt;" (20). Although there is a good deal of "standard form" in the wording of this statement, which was incorporated in a petition to the Lord Chancellor for the issue of a brief, it is clear that the alterations carried out in the early 1740s left the church in the form represented on Wing's plan of 1845.

FUND-RAISING BY BRIEF IN 1739

With the tower in ruins, the nave roofless (probably since the 1720s), and only the chancel in use, something had to be done. The task was a daunting one, and the Vicar and Churchwardens decided to apply for a charitable brief in order to raise money. As Philip Birt, the Vicar, was a Justice of the Peace sitting in Quarter Sessions where applications for briefs were first considered, and Philip, 2nd. Earl of Hardwick, was Lord Chancellor of England responsible for issuing briefs under Letters Patent, it seems likely that the application had an easy passage! (21).

Before a brief was granted, it was necessary for the authorities to have statements of "able & experienced Workmen" (22) to show that the work contemplated was essential and to give some idea of the cost. The estimate for rebuilding Pulloxhill church is preserved in the Quarter Sessions rolls, and the total cost was computed to be £1083 6s. 6d.

(23). Dated 16th January 1739/40, the estimate prepared by Thomas Bishop, carpenter, and endorsed by Joseph Neale and John Heath, carpenters, and Thoroughgood Fann and Robert Wildman, masons, appears to relate to the rebuilding of the whole church although we know that the work eventually carried out was completed on a much smaller scale. It included £14 "for a new arch betwixst the Church & Chansill", new stonework for the walls with "5 new windos & gams [jambes]" and "4 new Doars & gams", and a new roof with "17 tun & 1/2 of Lead" costing £437 10s. resting on "32 sqr of Boarding". The church was to be paved with "1800 foot of Kettun stone", and the internal furnishings included "Pews & Seats" at £65 10s., the "Pulpit, Desk, Rails etc" at £15, and the painting was estimated at £21. The old materials were valued at a meagre £44 8s. However, it must be borne in mind that this estimate was prepared in order to establish a notional cost of repairs, and although the workmen who drew it up may have been employed on the building it would be dangerous to attempt to correlate the details in the estimate with the work eventually done.

The petition for a brief was sent to the Lord Chancellor in January 1739/40 but it seems that the brief itself was not circulated until almost four years later. There is apparently no record of the total sum raised, nor of the amount paid to the parish after the deduction of the collector's fees (probably about 50% of the total), but we do have some information on the collections made in individual parishes. Northill, for example, contributed 3s. on 11th March 1743/4, (24) and outside the County the collection at Dowles, Worcestershire, on 20th May 1744 raised 4d. "for ye Briefe of Pulloxhill Ch. in Com. Bedford" (25). The net gain to the parish from the brief was probably about £300 or £400, a sum far short of the estimated £1083 mentioned in the petition but nevertheless sufficient to enable a considerable amount of work to be done. Efforts were concentrated on enlarging and repairing the chancel, clearing away the ruins of the nave, and building a new timber bell turret. We shall examine the various stages of the work in detail.

ADAPTING THE OLD CHANCEL AS A CHURCH, c.1745

The chancel was described in 1739/40 as "... so small that it is not near sufficient to contain the inhabitants of the parish" (26). It seems, however, that part of the money raised by the brief was used to enlarge the chancel by extending it westward on

the site of the old nave. Wing's plan of 1845 shows that the chancel was disproportionately long in relation to the nave, and its regular plan suggests that the work done in the 1740's amounted to rather more than a simple remodelling of the mediaeval chancel. There can be little doubt that the west wall of the chancel with its diagonal buttresses, together with the open wood porch, dated from this period, but what of the rest of the building?

Several mediaeval features survive in the chancel as it stands today, including the roof and the window tracery. According to the *Victoria County History* (27) the windows in both the north and south walls of the chancel are of fifteenth century date and the three light east window dates from the mid fourteenth century. Wing's plan of 1845 shows the positions of the windows before the chancel was shortened by some ten feet in 1845-6, and there were two three light windows in the south wall and two two light windows in the north side. The chancel had diagonal buttresses in the four main angles, and buttresses half way along both the north and south walls. Although the fenestration of part of the present chancel is undoubtedly mediaeval, the positions of the buttresses and western windows of the pre-1845 chancel, together with its overall size, suggest an eighteenth century date.

In the absence of any definite documentary evidence, these features indicate that the chancel may have been mostly rebuilt (at least from the central buttresses westward) in the early 1740s, using old materials and mediaeval window tracery from the old chancel and from the nave which, as we shall see, was then finally demolished. The crown-post roof with two original trusses may be partly original, and may repay closer study.

The internal arrangement of the chancel shown on Wing's plan clearly dated from the 1740s. The altar beneath the East window was flanked on the left by two stalls, probably for the choir, while the Vicar's desk and the pulpit stood in the South East corner on the right. In front of the altar rails on the south side of the aisle there was a desk for the clerk, and there were two large box pews and six rows of open seats on each side of the aisle in the body of the church. The font stood just inside the door at the back of the building near the stairs leading to the wooden gallery above. The gallery itself occupied the western 15 feet of the building, and it was supported at the east end by two stout wooden pillars on either side of the aisle. Unfortunately there are no illustrations of what must have been a delightful eighteenth century interior, but the plan

suggests that it bore some resemblance to the church at Old Dilton in Wiltshire (28).

THE ABANDONED NAVE AND TOWER

It is not entirely clear when the nave was finally abandoned, but the available evidence indicates that it remained in use for some time after the fall of the tower. By 1739/40, however, the roof had gone and services were held in the chancel (29), but in all probability the walls of the nave and south porch were still standing. We know from Wing's plan that no traces of the nave walls (except those round the bell turret at the west end) remained in 1845, and it seems likely that they had been demolished in the 1740s. The wood rail fence and gates shown on the 1845 plan were doubtless erected at about the same time.

As we have already seen, a wooden structure was erected in the ruins of the tower in 1714 to house a new bell. However, this was entirely replaced in the early 1740s by the wooden bell turret which existed until 1845, already described. The new turret was completed by February 1746 when Philip Birt wrote to the Earl of Hardwick on the matter (30). He wrote:

"... the difficulty about the steeple at Pulloxhill still subsists. As the timber part had not been long erected, I hoped it might be taken down and put up again at the end of the Chancel without much charge, but upon the mensuration it is found to be too wide for it, and must be new framed, which, I fear will cost a good deal: Mr. Bishop (31) has been directed to make a distinct estimate of that: if it should remain at a Distance from the Chancel, it would be of the same use to the People but it would still have the appearance of a Ruin..."

Birt seems to have wanted to have the turret directly at the west end of the newly refurbished chancel and to clear away the ruins of the old tower, and such an arrangement would undoubtedly have improved the appearance of the church. But his suggestion came too late, and so the turret remained at a distance from the chancel. The bell cast in 1714 was probably hung in the new turret, but it later became cracked and in 1800 it was recast by Thomas Mears of London (32).

MINOR REPAIRS IN 1816-17

The repairs carried out in the 1740s left Pulloxhill with a small church which served the needs of the

Parish for a little over a hundred years. No more major work was carried out, but the surviving Churchwardens accounts for the early Nineteenth century give some idea of the minor repairs undertaken from time to time. In the year from Easter 1816 to 1817, the expenditure included: (33)

Paid W Taylor a bill for Repairs			
Done to the Church	£4	8s.	0d.
Pd J Neal a Bill for Ditto	1	2	0
paid G. Rich for 1 Dozen Basses			
[kneelers]	15	0	
Pd Mrs. Rees bill for Repair Church			
windows	18	3	
Paid for pair of New window Curtains			
for the Church & making &c.	1	0	8
Paid for a matt for the parsons Desk	1	0	

The Glebe terrier drawn up in 1822 includes a list of the furnishings of the church then in use (34).

THE REBUILDING IN 1845-6

Despite the attention given to the church by the Churchwardens its condition was gradually deteriorating. In 1833 Archdeacon Bonney ordered that "the weeds be removed from the Top of the Bellfry" and in 1836 he specified that "... the walls be cleaned and washed stone colour, ... the weeds be taken out of the Buttresses and the crevices pointed, the turrut be painted stone colour, & the Churchyard Fence be repaired" (35).

Ten years later, in 1845, the condition of the building was giving rise to serious concern and eventually the Bedford architect, James Tacy Wing was called in to prepare plans for rebuilding the nave and tower and restoring the chancel (36). In 1845-6 Wing's plans were put into execution (Fig 2). The remains of the old tower were finally cleared away, the chancel was shortened by about ten feet and restored to its original dimensions, and a new church rose in place of the "remnant of a ruin" (37) which had occupied the site for almost 200 years (Pl 1). Wing produced a neat and simple building in the Gothic style, and even the fiery "W.A." commented favourably on the design and on the condition of the chancel (38) although the *Victoria County History* later made scathing comment on the loss of the old work (39). The church was re-opened for worship on 1st May 1846, and the *Bedfordshire Times* of 9th May carried a report of the event giving a brief account of the work undertaken, which stated: (40)

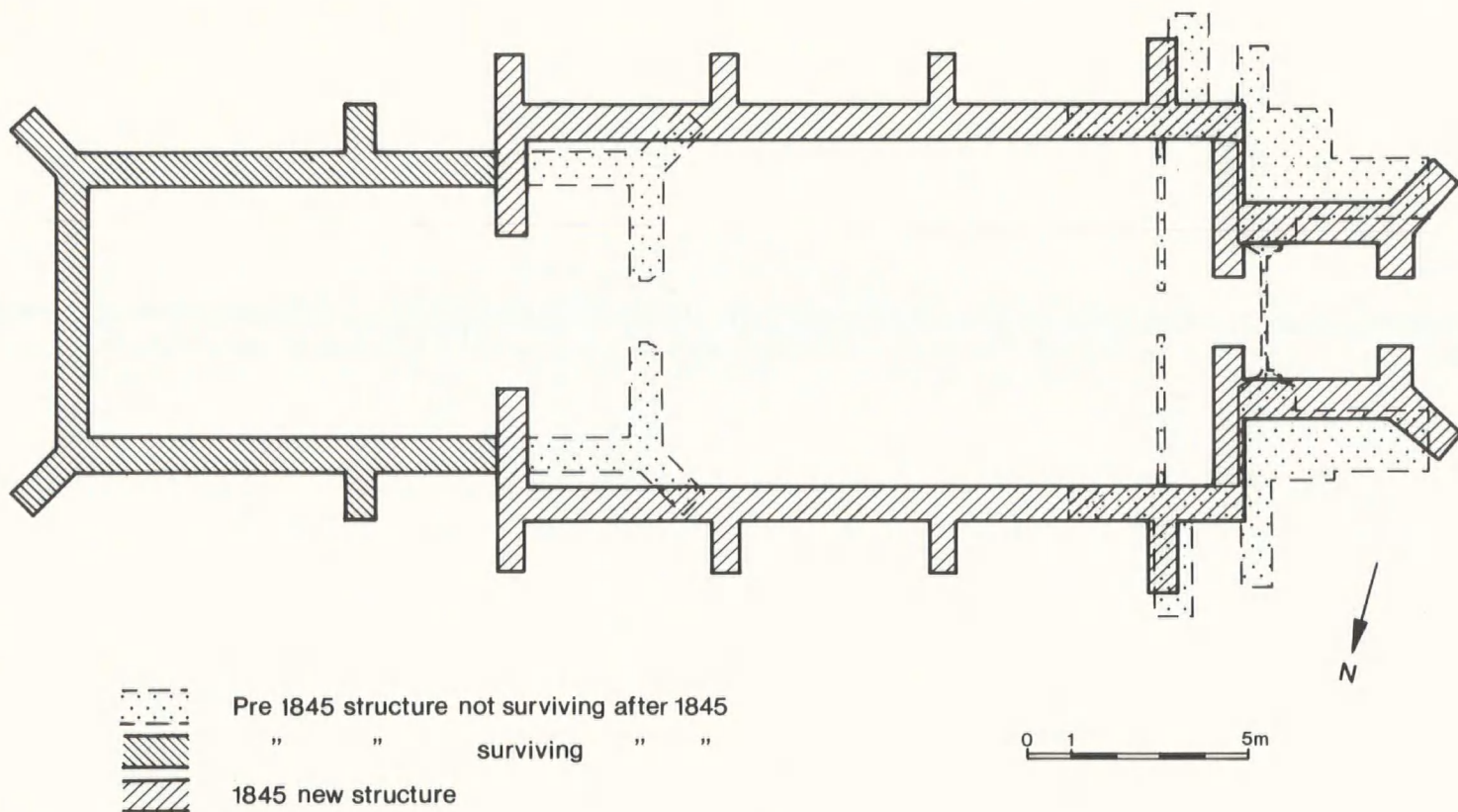


Fig 2 Plan of Pulloxhill church after rebuilding in 1845

RE-OPENING OF PULLOXHILL CHURCH

This ceremony took place on Friday the 1st inst. as we briefly announced in our last publication. The whole of the Church has been re-built, with the exception of the Chancel, at a very considerable cost, but this was rendered absolutely necessary in consequence of the dilapidated condition of the old edifice. The new Church is a plain, but very neat structure, and the principal entrance is at the west end, under the Tower. Very great credit is due to the parishioners for the zeal and liberality they have displayed about the sacred building, and it is worthy of remark that, notwithstanding the great expense which has been incurred, there is only a deficiency of about £100; which, it is confidently expected, will shortly be made up. The opening ...

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the history of the church is particularly well documented, there are a number of questions

which cannot be satisfactorily answered from the available evidence. Further information is needed on the deterioration and abandonment of the nave in the early eighteenth century, and the writer's suggestion that the chancel was virtually rebuilt in the 1740's using old materials needs to be substantiated by fuller documentation on the work done at that time.

There is scope, too, for further examination of the structural evidence as and when parts of the buildings are exposed in the course of repairs and alterations. The chancel roof could repay further study, and excavation in the eastern part of the nave and at the west end of the church may shed light on the history of the building.

Doubtless additional information on other aspects of the history of the building will cast a new light on matters covered in these notes, but at the time of writing the above account incorporates a great deal of material previously ignored and helps to build up a picture of a rural church which struggled to survive.



Plate 1. Pulloxhill church in 1977

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Faculty petition, 1713, ref: ABF 3/175
2. Simon Houfe points out that the monument to Sir William Briers, buried in the chancel on 7 June 1653, was erected shortly afterwards – perhaps in 1654 – by his widow. He considers it unlikely that she would have erected the monument if the church had already tumbled down, and suggests a slightly later date of 1654-5 for the collapse of the tower. Perhaps significantly there is no monument to Lady Briers who died in 1662.
3. Visitation presentments, 1668, ref: ABC 7 f.33d. (or p.27 of typed transcript by Mr. J. Thompson on searchroom shelves, c.f. 170)
4. This quotation is an amalgamation of two separate descriptions of the church by Archdeacon H K Bonney, one in the Visitation notebook 1823-39 (ref: ABV 28), and the other in his church notes of c.1840 (ref: Li/Lib B 1/19/12)
5. Notes on Bedfordshire churches compiled by the Rev G R Boissier of Chiddingstone, Kent, in 1827 (British Library ref: Add.Ms. 48977 f.415d)
6. Photograph of watercolour of village street, c.1820, ref: Z 102/62 and slide 279
7. The framed plan at the church is a copy of the original now held at the Record Office (ref: P 13/2/2). A reproduction of the plan appears in the booklet "Pulloxhill Church and Village" (1978) p.26
8. Glebe terrier, 1822, ref: FAC 35/11
9. The South porch is mentioned in the 1708 Glebe terrier, ref: ABE 2, Vol.ii, p.546
10. Note in Churchwardens' account book, 1665-6, ref: P 13/5
11. There is no other likely place where the vestry can have been, and certainly in 1713 it was proposed that the new bell should be hung over the Vestry. See the faculty petition, ref: ABF 3/175
12. Monition to Churchwardens, 1687, ref: ABF 3/174
13. Churchwardens summary accounts, 1685-7, in P 13/5
14. Glebe terrier, 1708, ref: ABE 2, Vol.ii, p.546
15. Churchwardens summary accounts, 1708, in P 13/5
16. e.g. "the greatest part of the materials have long since been disposed of" 1713 (in ABF 3/175), and "ye clappers of all but one [of the four bells] are sold" 1708 (in ABE 2, Vol.ii, p.546)
17. Faculty petition, 1713, ref: ABF 3/175
18. Churchwardens summary accounts, 1714, in P 13/5. The papers concerning the 1845-6 rebuilding also state that the church was "last repaired in 1714" (Lambeth Palace Library: ICBS file 3426)
19. It seems that only one bell, weighing about 6 cwt., was provided for the church in place of the four old ones in 1714. It may have been cast by Thomas Russell of Wootton, but there is no record of its inscription as it became cracked and had to be recast by Thomas Mears of London in 1800.
20. Petition of Quarter Sessions to the Lord Chancellor for a brief, 16 January 1739/40, ref: QSR 1740/103
21. Philip Birt was Vicar of Pulloxhill from 1728-1742, and as a Justice of the Peace he attended Quarter Sessions when the brief was discussed. He resigned the living before the repairs to the church were completed, but evidently retained an interest in the proceedings (see note 29 etc.). Philip, 2nd. Earl of Hardwicke, the Lord Chancellor, was Patron of the living.
22. Brief petition, 1739/40, ref: QSR 1740/103
23. Estimate dated 16 January 1739/40, ref: QSR 1740/116
24. Northhill brief register, ref: P 101/3
25. Extracts from Dowles brief book by J.Steele Elliott, ref: CRT 110/15
26. Brief petition, 1739/40, ref: QSR 1740/103
27. *Victoria County History*, Bedfordshire, Vol.II, p.379
28. The church at Old Dilton is a good example of a small mediaeval church with Eighteenth century fittings and furniture.
29. Brief petition, 1739/40, ref: QSR 1740/103
30. Letter from Birt to Lord Hardwick, 5 February 1746, original at British Library, ref: Add.Mss.35.693.1, and transcript at CRO, ref: CRT 100/27/3(i), p.3
31. "Mr. Bishop" was presumably Thomas Bishop, carpenter, who prepared the estimate to accompany the brief petition, 1739/40, ref: QSR 1740/116
32. T North, *Church Bells of Bedfordshire* (1883), p.177
33. Churchwardens accounts (detailed) 1816-17, in P 13/5
34. Glebe terrier, 1822, ref: FAC 35/11
35. Archdeacon's Visitation order book, 1823-1839, ref: ABV 28
36. The Incorporated Church Building Society records at Lambeth Palace Library (ref: ICBS 3426) include papers relating to the rebuilding and a plan by the architect J.T. Wing of the new church. Although submitted as a record of the new church, the plan differs in several respects – notably in the overall length of the building and in the positions of buttresses – from the church as actually built.
37. Archdeacon Bonney's description, in church notes (Li/Lib B 1/19/12)
38. Articles by "W.A." from the Northampton Mercury, copy at CRT 120/34
39. *Victoria County History*, Bedfordshire, Vol.II, p.379. It was pointed out that as the church was dedicated in 1219 the original fabric may have been "a valuable dated example of thirteenth century work"
40. Brief mention of the reopening also appeared in the *Bedfordshire Times* of 2 May 1846, but the main report is in the issue of 9 May 1846, p.3

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