

TWO VICTORIAN WOODCARVERS

The benches in the churches of Tuddenham St Martin, St Mary's Great Bealings and Rushmere St Andrew*by Cynthia Brown*

In the first half of the 19th century many churches were in a sad state of neglect and decay. Influenced by the Oxford Movement which stressed the Church's historical continuity with Catholic Christianity, the early Victorians endeavoured to restore their churches to the Gothic plan, enabling the revived rituals to be carried out in a reverent and dignified manner. Services were once again centred on the altar and chancels re-opened. Pulpits, which had been the focal point for Low Church worship, were moved to the chancel arch, and open benches of medieval pattern replaced the box pews. The general aim was to make the churches look much as they were on the eve of the Reformation and to repair the ravages of the following 300 years. There was no intention to deceive, but simply to produce buildings worthy of the worship of God.

The words 'Victorian restoration' have an ominous ring. However, when examining church woodwork, it is sometimes difficult to decide what is Victorian and what medieval. In the church of Tuddenham St Martin there appears to be a complete set of 15th-century traceried bench ends with grotesques on buttressed arm rests. The church, however, was restored in 1844. The *Ipswich Journal* for 18 January 1845, after lamenting the state of decay into which the building had been allowed to deteriorate, continued:

The unsightly and encroaching pews¹ have been removed and the antient [*sic*] seats (of which a considerable portion remained in the church) have been reinstated. As more seats were required, the carving of new ones was entrusted to Mr Ringham, of this town, who has executed them in admirable style and in exact conformity with the rest.

On close inspection it can be seen that there is a jig-saw of old and new. The 15th-century benches, originally lower than their modern counterparts, have had approximately one foot of new wood spliced on to the bottom of each standard, the matching tracery carrying the eye over the join. Conversely a few of the new tops have old bases. Grotesques were carved to pair with their opposite numbers and, as in medieval times, the poppy heads are all slightly different. The evidence is more apparent on the inner sides of the standards; there are marks where the old fittings were removed and the holes patched (Pl. XIXa), while the wood of the new standards is smooth and unblemished. Most of the one-third remaining from earlier days range the aisle, while all those against the south wall are Victorian. Cleaned or stained as appropriate, varnished, and after a century's dusting and polishing, it is difficult to detect the difference.

Henry Ringham (1806-1866) was acclaimed by many of his contemporaries as the greatest church restorer of his day. His determination to preserve every possible fragment of ancient woodwork² was matched by an unsurpassed skill in carving. The son of a Lincolnshire farm labourer, Ringham migrated to Ipswich in 1822 where he taught himself to read, write, draw and carve.³ Recognition came in 1844 when the Commissioners for Promoting the Fine Arts requested craftsmen who wished to work on the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament to submit specimens of their work. The woodcarvers were required to produce a scale design and carved section for the principal door of the House of Lords, the style to be in keeping with the rest of the building. Henry Ringham was one of only seven men whose work was acknowledged to be of the required standard. Although none of the seven was subsequently employed on the project, the exhibition of their work in Westminster Hall gave

wide publicity to their skills. In Ipswich Ringham acquired a hero's status; many commissions followed, so that on his death his obituarist was able to record his involvement in the restoration of more than 160 churches, 80 of them in Suffolk. St Mary's Woolpit was his first major commission and St Mary's Wherstead his last.⁴

A further example of his work may be seen in St Mary's Great Bealings. When Canon Moor was inducted to the living in 1844 the medieval benches were still in the nave. The few sound ones were placed at the west end and the rest restored by Ringham in a manner similar to those at Tuddenham. The extent of their dilapidation may be conjectured from the salvaged remains. Though services were now centred on the altar, the high-backed pews which filled the chancel almost completely obscured the view from the nave. The archdeacon in his 1848 visitation therefore recommended their replacement by open benches. On the advice of Edward Stanley, bishop of Norwich, that more art should be brought into the churches,⁵ Canon Moor chose for the poppy heads twelve crests of past lords of the manors of Great Bealings and Seckford Hall. These were finished in 1850; carved in the round and depicting the details of the blazon as far as practicable, they are an excellent example of Ringham's flowing style when not confined to the Gothic form (Pl. XIXb).

The work of another Victorian carver, William Polley of Coggeshall in Essex, may be seen at Rushmere St Andrew. By 1861 when this church was restored, the architects were more concerned with the spirit than with the letter of the Gothic style. The parishioners had hoped to see their new benches bearing replicas of the old grotesques, but were persuaded to accept E. C. Hakewill's designs for traceried standards with poppy heads and, on the elbows, the ubiquitous Victorian angels in different attitudes of prayer and praise, holding scrolls or musical instruments. The two near the door are different, one angel holding a representation of the tower and the other a model of the chancel.⁷ These are well designed and crisply carved, but do not have the artistic merit of Ringham at his best.

Churches contain an amalgam of art through the centuries; the artists are the interpreters of the thoughts of their time. Superficially the main theme of the Victorians is that the Gothic period produced the ideal church. The very success of their endeavours, as illustrated at Tuddenham St Martin, can easily trap today's unwary visitor. On the other hand, searching will sometimes be rewarded with examples developed from original ideas, as at Great Bealings. Inevitably some of their work has already disappeared, and much will fall victim to the rearrangement of church furnishings to meet the requirements of modern worship, making room for the contributions of 20th-century craftsmen. It is to be hoped that their skills will equal those of Henry Ringham and William Polley.

¹ Box pews.

² Day, *c.* 1895, 17.

³ *Ipswich Journal*, 14 April 1866.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ 'A charge delivered to the clergy, 1845', Stanley, 1851, 128.

⁶ B.L., Add. 19086, f. 60.

⁷ *Ipswich Journal*, 2 November 1861.

Notes

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