

INSCRIBED PEWS IN BARROW CHURCH

by DAVID SHERLOCK

THE PEWS IN the nave of Barrow church are Victorian, with the exception of two which are now at the east end of the south aisle. These are 7ft 6ins long and distinctive in having seating only 9½ inches wide, making them uncomfortably narrow for sitting on, and a rear shelf about as wide as the seating. They have one blank pew-end and one slightly taller pew-end, 3ft 6ins high, which is carved with blind tracery in Perpendicular style, rising to a horizontal rolled top (Fig. 115). The tracery does not continue to the foot of the pew-end, but there are slight marking-out lines on one pew suggesting it was intended to extend the tracery downwards. There is evidence for small repairs on one arm of each decorated pew-end. Running along the top of the back of one pew is carved a spiral leaf-like decoration with a twisted cord running through it, while beneath, on one pew only is a row of little battlements (Fig. 116). The decoration stops short at the right-hand end of this pew to allow for an inscription carved in relief which reads *Jhon prok karp dor*, presumably for the carpenter who made the pew or both pews since the decoration on their backs and ends is almost identical (Fig. 117). The pews stand unfixed on a Victorian pew platform, but one is now facing back-to-front so its blank end was presumably intended to be placed against the north wall of the church, where its decorated end would then be seen.

Church pews are currently the subject of much debate for the practical reason that many parishes wish to move or remove them in keeping with modern forms of worship. Part of their



FIG. 115 – Decorated ends of two pews in Barrow church.

significance, and therefore their preservation worth, hinges on their date, which is usually based on stylistic evidence, or on the existence or non-existence of the pews in question in dated pictures of the interior of a church. For example, at Mildenhall (where the pews are *not* under such considerations) a nineteenth-century engraving of the church shows a complete set of box pews in the nave which were replaced in 1959 by pews in medieval style, the gift of Munro Cautley in memory of his wife. On the backs of the westernmost pews are, unusually, the initials of the donor and his wife and the names of the carver and makers.¹ It is rare to find the name of a maker or a date



ABOVE:
FIG. 116 – Carving on the back of John Prycke’s pew.

LEFT:
FIG. 117 – Drawing by Thomas Lyus of the inscriptions ‘upon the backs of two old seats in Barrow Church’ (reproduced by kind permission of the Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich, ref. HD1538/63, fol. 157v).

carved on a pew, so can anything be found out about ‘John Prok carpenter’ and his pews at Barrow?

Before the carpenter is discussed it is worth referring to a drawing of the inscription made by Thomas Lyus now in Ipswich Record Office. Lyus was the amanuensis of the Revd George Ashby FSA, rector of Barrow from 1774 to 1808, and both of them are commemorated on a plaque on the north wall of the chancel. Lyus’s drawing of the inscription on the pew is accurate. What is tantalising is his other drawing of the lost carving on the back of another pew, the letters of which Lyus himself could not make sense of. The whole line appears to read *Jecdrops Thoms Plesa*. But if the second letter is an *e* it is unlike the *e* near the other end of the line. The end of the last word is presumably missing because there is no curved end to the panel as at the start of the panel, so Lyus has reasonably suggested ‘Plesa’nts’. Plesance and variant spellings is a common name in the index of probate records in the locality of Barrow from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries,² but a search through the index of probate records does not allow a guess to be made at the first name in the inscription. It is possible that the carver was illiterate and simply trying to copy what someone had given him to put on the benches.

The probate index has the names of several Barrow people called Prycke with variant spellings, including John the elder, trade unspecified, who died in 1470 and whose two sons were also called John;³ Alice Preke, widow of another John, who died in 1541; and John

Prycke, carpenter of Barrow, who died in 1551. Is he the carpenter who carved the pews? His son, William, was also a carpenter and died in 1567. The probate index also has a Thomas Plesance of Barrow who died in 1541. Is his the name on the missing pew? A search through the wills of the carpenters, John and William, and that of Thomas Plesance was therefore made to see if they had any connection with, or indeed made any bequests to, Barrow church.

John Prycke's short will,⁴ which he did not sign (perhaps further evidence that he was illiterate), makes bequests to his sons William and John. His goddaughter, Margaret (surname not given), and his daughter, Agnes, are each left a 'great hutch' and William's wife, Joan is left a 'little hutch'. Perhaps these were hutches that he himself had made for them; but there is no mention of the tools of his trade, unlike the will of 1472 of Thomas Vyell of Ixworth, which lists twelve different carpenter's tools.⁵ John Prycke's son, William, in his will proved in 1567, gives 'all my working tools to Robert my son and he [is] to be good to his brother and to let him have some'.⁶ Robert, one of William's sons, may have moved to Dalham, four miles away, where there is a carpenter of that name in a will of 1583. There were thus at least three generations of carpenters called Prycke in Barrow, where the family may be traced back to the previous century in the will of John Pryke of 1470 mentioned above. In 1617 the Bury St Edmunds feoffees paid another 'Pricke the carpenter' £1 6s 8d for repairing Stamford Bridge on Out Westgate.⁷ In the seventeenth century there were three Prick(e) carpenters at Bury, who might have moved there from Barrow.⁸ Finally an inventory of the goods and chattels of Charles Pricke of Barrow dated 1675 lists a number of carpentry tools as well as agricultural items, suggesting that this farmer could also turn his hand to carpentry.⁹ He may be one of the four Prickes listed in the Barrow Hearth Tax returns for 1674.¹⁰ All this information unfortunately sheds no light on the Barrow pews.

Thomas Plesance, whose name is on the missing pew, made a will 194 lines long, compared with John Prycke's will of only eighteen lines. Judging from his will, which was proved in 1541,¹¹ he was clearly a man of some standing in the village and he asked to be buried in his family's 'holy sepulchre' in the churchyard. After a gift of 6s 8d to the high altar of Barrow church and customary payments for prayers to be said for his soul, he makes numerous bequests to his family, his friends and the poor of Barrow, but no pews are mentioned. He does however bequeath 6s 8d to one Margaret Pricke, who could be the goddaughter mentioned in John Prycke's will. Apart from this unexplained bequest, John Prycke and Thomas Plesance seem to have no connection. The differing status of the two is also seen in the subsidy roll of 1523, when the latter paid £23 in goods while John Prike, carpenter, and another man together paid only £2; and in the subsidy returns of 1566, when Thomas Plesance was valued at £20 in lands, and John Pricke at £3 in goods.¹² Back in 1439, however, William Prykes and Geoffrey Plesawns were each left a bushel of rye and a bushel of wheat in the will of Margaret Warner of Barrow.¹³

The coincidence of the names of John Pryke and his contemporary Thomas Plesance on the pews makes it almost certain that the former was the carpenter of the pews, originally at least three of them – the inscribed pew, the uninscribed pew and the missing pew with Plesance's name recorded by Lyus. This is a rare opportunity to date church pews to near the end of the Middle Ages, in the years before John Prycke's death in 1551, made perhaps as a memorial to or gift of Thomas Plesance who died in 1541.

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NOTES

- 1 Bettley 2011, 280.
- 2 Grimwade and Serjeant 1984, *passim*.
- 3 Northeast and Falvey 2010, no. 531.
- 4 SRO Bury, IC500/2/23/11 and IC500/1/11/53.
- 5 Northeast and Falvey 2010, no. 723.
- 6 SROB, IC500/2/32/371.
- 7 Statham 2003, 249.
- 8 Grimwade *et al.* 1984, *passim*.
- 9 SROB, EL 13/13/1.
- 10 Hervey 1905, 14.
- 11 SROB, IC500/2/19/399.
- 12 Hervey 1910, 340; Hervey 1909, 247.
- 13 Northeast 2001, no. 57.

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