

LOW SIDE WINDOWS IN SOMERSET CHURCHES

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The subject of Low Side Windows, which clearly were made for some particular function, has occupied the attention of antiquarians for more than a century, but no final answer as to the use of these mysterious openings has been obtained. Their existence was recognised as early as 1847 when J. H. Parker¹ gave examples of their appearance in churches all over England, and provided a number of suggestions as to their use.

There was some further comment at about that time by J. S. Cole, who found one of these windows in a purely secular building, the hall of Sutton Courtenay². J. Piggot has an account in the *Reliquary* of 1868³ and he claims to have found a Saxon example in Caister church. He tends to confuse porch squints (as at Loxton) with Low Side Windows. At the end of the century P. M. Johnston provided further evidence for the existence of the windows, but the most exhaustive study so far has been made by the Rev. J. P. Hodgson who devotes nearly a whole volume of *Archaeologia Aeliana*⁴ to the subject. In this article, Hodgson collects all the previously suggested uses of the windows and quotes a large number of examples in many parts of the country. He also gives a detailed analysis of his finds in the county of Durham. Here he quotes a large number: 25 certain and 27 doubtful. The article, however, contains much extraneous matter, particularly concerning the "Lanterne des Morts" theory, which has been discarded by all subsequent writers on the subject.

In an overwhelming majority of examples, these windows are found in the same position in a church, behind the priest's seat in choir, the sill being level with the top of the seat. Sometimes an example is found on the north side of the chancel, usually opposite another in the more orthodox position. If they were required for ventilation this would allow a through draught. They are occasionally found close to an altar in various parts of a church as if it were intended to put them within arm's reach of the priest.

The windows were probably always closed by a small wooden door, opening inwards. Many of these remain, and an even greater number of hooks for hinges. The Low Side Window is usually distinguished, being quite different in character from others in the chancel wall. Often, however, one of the latter has been extended downwards to provide the opening. This was easily done with lancets, in which case the upper part of the window was closed with glass, and the lower with a wooden door, the two often being separated by a stone transome (Plate VIa). Outside Somerset, the church of churches for Low Side Windows is at Bucknell near Bicester where there are no fewer than four examples in the same building. One is in the usual position, another opposite in the chancel, and one by each of the two nave altars.

The fourteen uses for Low Side Windows which have been suggested at various times are as follows:

(1) *To give a view of an altar or light* thereon from outside the church. Thus a person might kneel and pray when the church was closed or when for some other reason he did not wish to enter.

(2) "*Vulne*". It was thought that this small opening was somehow symbolical of the wound in Our Lord's side. This seems rather far fetched and does not explain the existence of a door.

(3) *Communication of lepers*. This sounds reasonable but, as with many other explanations, it had to be discarded when subsequently the windows were found in an upper storey many feet from the ground, specifically at Ely and La Sainte Chapelle.

(4) *Penance by the excommunicated*.

(5) *For the purpose of making an offertory*. Both this and (4) seem to be excluded for the reason given under (3) i.e. height from the ground.

(6) *Blowing up incense*. It would be easier to get the carbon base to glow brightly if the censer were swung in the open air, especially if there was a wind blowing.

(7) *To observe*, from inside the church, the approach of the priest, so that the congregation could stand as he entered.

(8) *Distribution of alms*, perhaps to lepers. There is no actual evidence of this use.

(9) *Provision of daylight* so that the priest, having the window at his side, might the more easily read the book he was using. This at first seems a very plausible suggestion but it is negatived by the use of a wooden door instead of a glass window.

(10) *Exposition of Relics*. There is no evidence for or against this use except that it would not appear very convenient.

(11) *Hearing of confessions*. This would seem inconvenient, although near the priest's seat, but might apply to lepers.

(12) "*Lanternes des Morts*". On the continent little towers are sometimes found in churchyards in which a light was kept burning for the double purpose of commemorating the dead and scaring evil spirits. It was suggested that lights behind these little windows in churches would have served the same purpose and this theory was so strongly held by its chief advocate (Hodgson)⁵ that he described all others as absurd. The use of a wooden door, however, does not support such an explanation, since it would have swept across any interior shelf and, if open, would have caused a draught to blow out the light. The interesting example at the Bishop's Palace Chapel in Wells is also evidence against this theory since it shows that the use was extra-parochial, there being no graves around from which to scare evil spirits. This window is found at the back of the chapel on the south side. This is what we would expect, since the building is virtually a chancel only, without nave, and the window easily reached from the back stalls. In a number of Somerset wills⁶ there is reference to money being left to maintain a Dead Light or Lumen Animarum and it is clear that this refers to a light burning before an altar, and not elsewhere. Also we would hardly expect a village like Buckley to maintain four such lights, for its four windows.

(13) *Hand Bell Ringing*. Many churches have a small bell-cote over the west end of the chancel in which a bell could be rung by a rope during mass, particularly at the Elevation. It is suggested that the Low Side Window was a substitute for this as the server could open the door and ring a hand bell. Moreover this is the only use for which there is real documentary evidence. Thus Archbishop Peckham, in 1281, ordered that "*In elevatione Corporis Domini pulsetur campana in uno latere ut populares seu in agris seu in domibus flectant genua*"⁷ — "At the Elevation of the Body of the Lord a bell should be rung *at one side* so that the people in the fields or houses may genuflect". It might be objected that windows on both sides of the chancel would invalidate this theory, but of course the verger could have crossed to both sides (Stoke-sub-Hamdon). The bell turret is never found in conjunction with a Low Side Window in Somerset, but both are present at Bloxham. There is a west country reference to a recusant priest at "olde Master Whygt's house at Poole. John Craddock hys man being clarcke to ring the bell, and to help the priest to mass, untill he was thretned that yfe he did help the priest use to putt hys hand owtt of the window too ring the bell . . ." ⁸ Thus it would probably be unwise to discard this purpose altogether.

(14) *Ventilation*. This utilitarian use needs little comment and the writer is inclined to accept it as being the most probable. In the days of many candles and incense, to say nothing of the lack of personal hygiene, chancels must have become very stuffy and the priest would have found a small window within hand's reach a great boon. If more air was required another window could be opened on the north side, an arrangement we find at Stoke-sub-Hamdon. It also seems the only possible explanation for such a window in a purely secular dining hall at Sutton Courtenay near Oxford. This brings us to the discovery of a small window, now blocked up, in the south choir aisle of Wells cathedral. It is at the end of the ambulatory behind the 12th century high altar. No positive evidence exists as to the exact nature of the old east end at Wells, but the ambulatory, of which the north and south walls remain, may well have had a low double vault and lean-to roof as at the contemporary church at Abbey Dore, and may have contained several altars. This arrangement would constitute a corner, even in a great church, requiring ventilation.

It remains to catalogue Somerset examples of Low Side Windows and to consider their bearing on the main problem. These are disappointingly few, although some are of exceptional interest. There are many more in Durham County, and the writer's observation shows the same state of affairs in the neighbourhood of Oxford. He has visited all pre-reformation Somerset churches.

With the exception of Lullington and Bleadon, which are not far away, the certain Somerset examples are closely grouped, as if the fashion may have spread from say, Stoke-sub-Hamdon.

(1) *Wells Cathedral*, see above.

(2) *Wells Cathedral, Bishop's Chapel*, discussed above.

(3) *Othery*. This is a remarkable example and is mentioned by all writers on the subject and Parker says that it has a shutter, which must have been removed during subsequent restoration. It forms a portion of a larger window, being separated by a stone transom, and is now glazed with modern diamond panes. Outside, however, is a large buttress used to support the central tower. This comes across the low side window and obscures any view of it except from the east. It would not however prevent the use of the window for ventilation or bell ringing. Nevertheless a large hole has been cut through the buttress so that the small window is exposed to view. It must be confessed, that in spite of our general conclusion in favour of the ventilation theory, it looks as if this window was somehow concerned with the passage of light.

(4) *Middlezoy* (the next parish) (Plate VIb). South aisle of *nave*. This nice example is generally

interesting because it is adjoining an altar in the south aisle of the nave. There is no such window in the chancel.

(5) *Mudford*. South of chancel and, exceptionally, in line with the high altar, a small square window with iron bars, but plastered up inside. (4) and (5) are the only certain *altar* examples in Somerset.

(6) *Stoke-sub-Hamdon*. A fine example of a pair, north and south of the chancel in orthodox positions thus giving a through draught. Inside are oaken doors. These look modern, however, and may be due to Ferrey when he carefully restored the church in the last century. Probably they are copies of older ones.

(7) *Bleadon* (Plate VIa). Here the window appears in a unique position in the middle of the south side of the chancel. In other respects too it is an interesting example. The chancel is lit on the south side near the altar with a typical 2-light 14th century window. Another, similar, is found further west. At about sill height, however, there is a transom. Below this and reaching down to the wall plinth are the two lights of the Low Side Window each with a trefoiled head. This forms the most elaborate example to be found in Somerset and perhaps elsewhere. Unfortunately the masonry has been renewed where the hinges would have come for the door. Further west in the chancel is a normal 3-light perpendicular window. These facts clearly show that the old chancel had its western termination with the Low Side Window and priest's seat just inside the chancel arch. It was extended westwards in the perpendicular period after an old central tower had been taken down. Thus the position of this Low Side Window contributes to an understanding of the history of the church.

(8) *Lullington*. This is some distance from any other example in Somerset but is a pretty little independent 14th century window. It may be compared with Bleadon, but the central tower here has not been removed, so that the window appears between it and the priest's door.

(9) *Milborne Port*. In the south wall of the Saxon chancel a tall 2-light lancet has been inserted behind the priest's seat. It is now fully glazed but, inside, hinges are in place to hold double shutters covering the lower portion only.

(10) *Isle Abbots*. This is a plain 2-light window with a square head and of uncertain date. There is no sign of a shutter and the large size would favour the "light for reader" theory.

(11) *Weston Bampfylde* (Plate VIc). Here the "window" is quite near the floor but within easy reach of the seated priest. It strongly supports the ventilation theory.

The following examples may be considered doubtful but should be recorded:

(12) *Dunster*. This is a small square window in the east wall of the chancel to the north side. It has been blocked with masonry from the inside.

(13) *Hinton Charterhouse* (*parish church*). There are signs of a Low Side Window which has been filled with masonry.

(14) *Witham*. On the south wall of the apse of the lay brothers' church of Witham Priory, now the parish church.

¹ *Archaeol. J.*, 4, 1847, 314.

² *Archaeol. J.*, 5, 1848, 213.

³ *Archaeol. J.*, 9, 1852, 9.

⁴ *St. Paul's Ecclesiological Society Transactions*, 4, 1894, 263.

⁵ *Archaeol. Aeliana*, 23, 1902, 43-235.

⁶ *Wells Wills*, Weaver, F. W., 1890, 81, 87, 93, 136. These are also called Dowell Lights, see *Somerset Record Society* 40, 1925, 31, 46, 68, 122, 144, 216, 253, 255.

⁷ Lamborn, G. L. *The English Parish Church*, 120.

⁸ Camden Society, *Narratives of the Days of the Reformation*, 1859.



Top Left: Low Side Windows.
Plate VIa. Bleadon: East half of Chancel destroyed.

Top Right: Low Side Windows.
Plate VIb. Middlezoy: Window to Aisle altar.

Left: Low Side Windows.
Plate VIc. Weston Bampfylde: Unusual position.