

ST CUTHBERT'S, WELLS, RECONSIDERED

The church of St Cuthbert is the parish church of Wells and the largest such church in Somerset. In the early-fourteenth century it had a nave with aisles, chancel, transepts and a central tower over the crossing. During the period 1426 to perhaps 1450 a new western tower was added to the structure, the nave being extended westward by one bay at the same time. The documentary evidence for this is very good: 'work . . . going on . . . and in 1426 the town paid for the carriage of the stone which the Bishop had given towards the erection of the tower.'¹ In the inventory of 1431 the churchwardens acknowledged receipt of two rings, one of them gold, given for the work on the new tower.² There are also the arms of two wives of Sir William Palton carved on the west face of the tower, the second apparently dying in 1450.³ (There is a dispute over the dates of these arms but this does not affect the argument here put forth). In addition there are five pre-Reformation statue niches (now empty) also on the west face of the tower. There is, therefore, no disagreement that the lower part of the tower is of the early-fifteenth century.

Everyone has assumed that the whole tower must also have been built at this time but this is open to question. The archaeological evidence in the upper part of the tower tells quite a different story. In fact had the present tower (122 feet high) been completed by say 1450 it would have completely dwarfed the central tower and looked most incongruous (cf. Wymondham, Norfolk, where the two towers are about the same height, and that is bad enough). On the other hand a much shorter tower then would have been quite acceptable and seems the most likely possibility.

The nave piers were heightened in the mid-fifteenth century and a new nave roof was provided whose weathering and gable survive on the east face of the lower part of the tower; it should be noted that there was then no clerestory. The roofs of the chancel and transepts were also raised in height and records show that the chancel roof dates from 1480. Following this the aisles were widened, a change which required new Perpendicular style windows, which remain today; the difference between these and the much later clerestory windows should be noted. The windows at each level are identical, the exceptions are the lower windows of the tower because they are earlier than either of the other designs.

A most dramatic event occurred in 1561 when the great central tower fell, having apparently been weakened by the raising of the roof levels. It fell in a westerly direction, demolishing its western arch and also, undoubtedly, destroying much of the fifteenth-century roof. At this juncture two decisions were made: because the nave roof was damaged it would be necessary to build a new one and this would also cover the former crossing, now open to the sky. But, at the same time, the opportunity was taken to add a clerestory to the nave, a very fashionable thing to do in the sixteenth century, and this has round-headed windows. The second

decision was to abandon the central tower and instead build a better western tower than that which existed at present; this too was a fashionable thing to do in the mid-sixteenth century. The earlier tower would have had bell openings just above the level of the old nave roof and these would have been in the wrong place if the tower was to be raised in height. The top of the tower was, therefore, partly taken down before building it up again; exactly the same thing was done at Great St. Mary's, Cambridge, in the late-sixteenth century, the events being carefully and fully documented in the Churchwardens' Accounts.⁴ Unfortunately, at Wells, the Churchwardens' Accounts do not survive for the post-1561 rebuilding.

The change from old to new occurs at the level of the present ringing chamber. Below this line the newel stair serving the tower is external in the north-west corner. When the ringing chamber is reached one passes through a short tunnel and the next stage of the stair is fully internal. It has smaller loops than the lower section; also the windows of the ringing chamber have pointed heads in the Decorated rather than the Perpendicular style, as was often the case in the sixteenth century, when Decorated and other earlier features were revived.⁵ The level of the ringing chamber was very carefully selected in relation to the new roof to form the start point of the new, higher, tower.

Both Pevsner⁶ and Brereton (p.128)⁷ make much of the point that it is the part of the tower above the nave roof line which is important: Pevsner states that 'The unification of the whole height above the roof ridge by the verticals of the mullions'; and Brereton that 'all that part of the tower which is above the nave roof is treated alike'. At St. Cuthbert's the ridge of the nave roof meets the tower at exactly the right place to give the most aesthetic satisfaction; at this point, just below the blind bell openings, the tower and roof are correctly proportioned, which would not have been the case if the much lower fifteenth-century roof had joined this tower – but, of course, it did not. Just above the roof ridge there is a door leading from the ringing chamber which gives access to the top of the roof for repairs and such like; it would have been useless for the fifteenth-century roof. The roof unquestionably postdates 1561, so this part of the tower must be of the same date.

The rebuilding of the upper part of church towers was, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, much commoner than has been supposed; it was usually done to facilitate bellringing, as is the case at Wells, but here, of course, they were compelled to act as they had lost their central tower.⁵

Acknowledgement

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References

- 1 T.S. Holmes, 1908, *Wells and Glastonbury*, London, Methuen, p. 126, Town Accounts cited.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 J.H. Harvey, 1982, 'The Church Towers of Somerset', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, New Series No. 26, p. 167.
- 4 J.E. Foster (ed.), 1905, 'Churchwardens' Accounts of St. Mary the Great, Cambridge, from 1504 to 1635', *Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 35, Cambridge, University Press.
- 5 A. Woodger, 1984, 'Post-Reformation Mixed Gothic in Huntingdonshire Church Towers and its Campanological Associations', *Archaeol. J.*, 141, pp. 269-308.
- 6 N. Pevsner, 1958, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol*, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, p. 37.
- 7 R.P. Brereton, 1905, 'On the Characteristics and Classification of the Church Towers of Somerset', *Archaeological Journal*, 62, pp. 106-131.