

## AN UNUSUAL MEDIEVAL BENCH END IN BROMPTON RALPH CHURCH

### *Introduction*

Brompton Ralph church is situated in a small village on the eastern side of the Brendon hills. The church was much restored in 1846–7 and again in 1879–81 according to the Select Vestry minutes (S.R.O. D/P/b ra. 9/1/1) but, despite the extensive renewal of the architecture, the screen and plain benches survive from the middle ages (the former, albeit, largely reconstructed from fragments).

The benches have received no more than a passing mention before (eg. Pevsner, 1958, p. 101; V.C.H., 1975, p. 25) but they are of some interest. Firstly, although appearing at a first glance to be all the same, they are of at least three periods. In the nave there are about 20 late medieval plain bench ends. At the rear of the nave there are about six Elizabethan (?) benches (see the detached plank under the tower, which carries the date 1596). Lastly, the north aisle is fitted with near copies of the medieval benches, no doubt installed in 1847 when the aisle was built (the Select Vestry minutes refer to a 'rearranging of seats' on 14 February 1846). Secondly, one of the otherwise plain benches carries unfinished carved decoration, apparently medieval in date. This bench forms the subject of this paper.

*General Details of the Medieval Benches*

Each bench end is formed of a single slab of oak, some 2.5" to 3" thick and between 32" and 34" high. The majority of them are the standard seat-and-desks, being 15"-16" wide, though narrower desk ends and seat ends also survive. The ends are plain except for the moulded chamfered edge. The medieval seats, desks and seat backs survive. The top rails of the latter have the same moulding as the bench ends.

A considerable number of the churches situated on the edges of the Quantocks have sets of medieval benches, though most of them have carved decoration. The only ones with surviving plain ends are Combe Florey, Norton Fitzwarren and West Buckland (and, further afield, at Fivehead). Decorated benches appear both with moulded chamfered edges (as at Lydeard St. Lawrence) and with carved foliage designs on the edges (as at Broomfield). Mouldings virtually identical to those at Brompton appear on benches at Bicknoller, Bishops Hull, Crowcombe, Bishops Lydeard and Lydeard St. Lawrence and very similar forms are to be found at Combe Florey, Monksilver, Spaxton, Stogursey and Cothelstone.

*The Partially Carved Bench End*

The bench end immediately to the right as one enters the door has the same edge moulding and proportions as the other medieval bench ends but, in addition, is covered with unfinished decoration (Plate 1). The decoration is in two sections, the top containing a half-finished foliage canopy made of plants whilst the bottom, which seems to be more or less complete, has a triplet of simply cusped blank lancets.

The foliage canopy (Plate 2) consists of two twisted stems which rise on either



Plate 1



Plate 2

side of the panel and then branch inward and intertwine into a central finial, apparently comprising two overlapping leaves. The space within the canopy is divided into two by a further twisted stem formed from two stems which originate in the two bottom corners of the panel and meet about one quarter of the way up in the centre. This stem meets the other two in the central finial but it is not clear whether it actually combines with them at this point.

The foliage has diamond shaped leaves, clearly incomplete; from the parallels cited below these would probably have been crude approximations to a vine leaf. From the left half of the panel, where all the background has been cut away but no detail has been filled in, one can see that there were to be three small leaves springing from the various stems, one big one in each of the top corners, plus the central finial of two overlapping leaves. On the right hand side of the panel even this basic work is unfinished. The bottom of the uppermost small leaf is clear, as is the stem and lower half of the top large leaf but otherwise the leaf shapes have only been outlined with deep grooves on the wood. A large chunk of the surface is missing in the corner. As the top moulding of this bench, a recent replacement, is intact here, one can surmise that the damage is ancient.

Parallels to this decoration are not hard to find. Many of the West Somerset churches have carved ends with a decorative panel above a row of blank tracery, Bishops Lydeard, Lydeard St. Lawrence, Monksilver and Combe Florey being the geographically closest examples. The best parallels for the simple triplet of lancets are at Lydeard St. Lawrence (Plate 3). Foliage canopies with twisted stems are to be found at Bishops Hull (Plate 4) and Bishops Lydeard (Plate 5). Twisted stem plants feature at Lydeard St. Lawrence (Plate 3) whilst the stem rising from a triangle formed of two independent stems occurs several times at Bishops Lydeard.



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5

### *Discussion*

As suggested earlier, this half-finished bench end seems to be of some importance to the study of bench ends in general. Firstly it is, as far as can be ascertained, the only surviving example of 'work in progress'; certainly an extensive literature search has revealed no other published examples. The carver seems to have worked from the bottom upwards, marking out the design, cutting away the background and finally filling in details. Secondly, it would seem to suggest either that in this church the benches were installed plain except for the moulded edge, and that carving began *in situ*, or that a half-finished (waste?) bench was included in an otherwise plain set.

A number of questions remain. Why was only one end carved? The end seems to belong with the other medieval benches and the decoration is unlike anything attempted in 17th-century (eg. Greinton or Othery) or 19th-century (eg. Bishops Lydeard) bench carvings. Did the carver give up because of lack of skill, shown in the damage to the top corner? Is it likely that already installed benches would be subsequently carved? Plain and decorated benches occur together only at Combe Florey and Norton Fitzwarren in this area, and at the latter church the decorated ends have foliage decorated edges. (There seem to be no examples of plain benches with foliage decorated edges, though so few plain benches survive as compared to carved ones that it is not clear how much weight should be placed upon this). The published churchwardens' accounts for Yatton, for example, suggest that pewing a church was a lengthy job (*N.Q.S.D.* 32, p. 537), though whether this was due to benches being installed and then carved or simply installed slowly is unclear.

*Bibliography*

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