

Willoughby Church of St. Nicholas

Willoughby like most other parish churches, is a complete hodgepodge of surviving bits and pieces that have by chance, been left alone by repairs and alterations over the centuries,, It follows, therefore, that the building cannot even in the hands the, most experienced interpreters: given more than a series of clues to exactly happened throughout the course of its history Many of the conclusions must inevitably be hypothetical and it can quite easily happen that a whole period of intense activity, say a considerable rebuilding is not at all represented in the surviving structure.

By 1215 we have our first positive indication from the records that a church already existed in Willoughby, Ralph son of Wigan who had received a holding of land from, Henry I, died in 1215, leaving a widow Aubrey who held the Church and one acre of land, in dower. At this point, however, we can take a look at our first bit of tangible physical evidence. Perhaps, the most outstanding and unusual object a architectural interest in the whole church is the Font

The font is of sandstone shaped like an upturned squat ball. Elementary mouldings pass around the top and one segment below the four designs carved in relief. The outer two are similar and although to some extent worn can be made out as an oval head with drilled eyes, from the mouth of which spring, absolutely horizontally, and on either side, a plant like form ending in a branched leaf. The head appears to be resting on a short half-round bar which does not appear to have originally carried the font, The centre two motifs are again vegetable and appear to be formalised trees.

About one third of the way round the bowl the much damaged remains of a further carving can be made out, However this has been too defaced for recognition. The Font has been set a square block of stone obviously not originally intended for this purpose as it has mouldings on three arrisses, and itself set, probably in relatively recent times on a stone. bade It is believed that this Font is of Norman work, and is probably earlier than 13th Century. The oval faces and formalised Vegetation seem to be more characteristic of mid-12th Century work, but decorative work is usually repeated around or across all sides it is difficult to explain the fact that the Font at Willoughby is carved on one side only,

This then is the earliest feature remaining in the Church. And it probably survives, albeit in a new position from before the time of the widowed Aubrey.

The next mention of the church is in 1242 when on the death of one, IVO, the whole manor and the advowson was enfeoffed to the Hospital of St. John the Baptist the forerunner of Magdalen College,

Oxford. About this time the, grant for a Tuesday market (held until--1830's) and the Whitsun 2-day fair was made suggesting that in the middle of the C13 Willoughby must have been a place of some importance and no doubt prosperous

The last, decade of the C12 and the first half of the C13 are easily recognised throughout most of the country as one of the most active periods of English architecture as Indeed it was in sculpture, ceramics, literature etc. in fact it is a period when civilisation can be said to be taking a big stride forward. But here; is the first of our anomalies. Surely with this activity and prosperity Willoughby should have been building at this time as were so many other parishes There is, however no record either in the archives or on the ground of any such activity. Had there been much one could have reasonably expected to have found some indication but in its absence we are left with the choice either (a) the existing Norman building be it in Stone or quite probably wood was large enough and sufficient for the needs of the Parish or (b) Any rebuilding of this period has been totally swept away leaving no trace. As with the exception of the font the Norman church has been swept away without trace this a firm possibility,,

The next phase of development of the Church would take place around 1280-1290 with the construction of the west tower It has previously been said in the V.C.H. and elsewhere that the tower is later than the rest of the church However there seems no basis for this assumption other than the date on the western buttresses (which is a date of repair). The tower rises four storeys separated by heavy string courses and has chamber windows with decorated period tracery and a lower window with good tracery of the last quarter of the CI3 (see Stoke Golding, Leics. where the South Aisle windows of very similar design are, dated to 1280-1290). One of the distinctive features of. this period of building however is the curious and not very attractive bend outwards of the hood-mould over the windows terminating in a square label-step carved with a rosette.

This feature occurs again on the internal face of the tower, in the nave and also. on the North Porch, This is somewhat, surprising as the North Aisle appears,from the' tracery of its windows to be of a later date. However there are here again two alternative explanations

- a) That the porch was added to the still existing Norman work consisting of a nave, and at least, a North Aisle, later replaced

or

- b) The windows of the North A-Isle have been inserted into a pre-existing wall.

It could also be argued here that it is also probable that as the South Porch is Identically placed and Is of the same overall dimensions that this porch was also originally added at this time.

Thus at the end of the C13 the church may well have reached its present plan form with possibly the exception of the East end for which there is no evidence whatsoever.

On typological grounds the next feature in order of date are the North Aisle windows. The tracery, known as panel tracery, in the heads of these windows is early 'perpendicular' in date that is to say roughly 1350. Had it been of the same date as the tower a more flowing type of tracery would, without doubt, have been used as the style we see in these windows with its strong vertical mullions extending to the head of the window arch was not yet known. However the arches of these windows are still strongly pointed, in fact they are particularly well proportioned windows, and this probably indicates that they should be dated to before 1380 when there was a universal tendency for the window head to become more depressed, that is known technically as four centred.

At this point must be mentioned the nave arch to the tower, which as can be seen from the aisle, has a form different from other features in the building. On purely architectural grounds this could be placed in the latter half of the 14th Century, but as it is an integral part of the tower - although the mouldings to the capital at first suggest an early Perpendicular - the fact that the capitals have more mouldings than the usual capital of the Early Perpendicular period, must suggest that this arch is of one date with the rest of the tower

Finally, in the medieval period, we come to the interesting NAVE ARCADE That this essential part of the building is later than other features, is at first: some cause for surprise However this is not particularly unusual and the fact that both arcades and the chancel arch are of one build must indicate one or two alternatives

- a) Did a large sum of money suddenly become available to the church, which, struggling to this date with, perhaps an outmoded heavy Norman Arcade decided to take courage in both hands. and make a resolute bid for the modern
- b) Could there have been a decorated period STEEPLE on the tower, which blown by prevailing winds collapsed on the Nave, or other such calamity.

Neither of these suggestions is particularly convincing. Decorated spires are frequent, but one would like more evidence before putting the suggestion forward seriously, and in either case it would be reasonable to expect some record to be kept a such an

event. In the absence of such records there seems to be no explanation of this major rebuilding.

The arcade, of three arches on either side and the chancel arch suggests a date on typological grounds to around 1500 - 1530.

Architecturally speaking, very late PERPENDICULAR. The main points note are

1. the four centred arch.
2. the absence of capitals, and
3. the very smooth undulating profile of the moulding.

The absence of capitals is of particular note as it is an unusual feature in this part of the country. It permits the arch mouldings to descend down the columns to the plinth which in this case is very plain. Capitals can be absent from fairly early on for instance 1330-1350 at Newcastle Cathedral, but it is not until late that this treatment is handled to give a feeling of lightness and airiness that has been so successfully achieved at Willoughby. The very fine and late Gothic church of Lavenham in Suffolk has somewhat similar arcading

The REFORMATION in the C16 brought about a lull of activity at Willoughby as everywhere else. Not until the recorded date of 1622 is there any more activity but then activity seems, to have been considerable. Firstly it set down that the Chancel was rebuilt, (although no indication why) and we may assume furnished out, with choir stalls, altar table, lectern and pulpit. It is believed present pulpit is now the only survivor of this period of refurbishing and it can be seen from illustrations that stylistically the pulpit belongs to the period 1620 - 1640. Prior to this date one expects to see what are conveniently termed 'Elizabethan' features, .e.g. strapwork worked into the decoration, and after 1630 the enrichments become simpler but bolder.

Without the documentary evidence a date around 1630 could have been suggested but it is most probable that the pulpit belongs to the rebuilding of 1622. Incidentally in the Victorian period the Reading Desk is stated to have still been in position

It is suggested by Thomas Deakon in 1828 that the South Aisle was also built at this time. Certainly work seems to have gone on, on the aisle at this time, but the degree to which the original walls remain is debatable. There is no reason to doubt that the present outer walls are in the original position, and by looking at the character of the masonry and the positions of the window it could be suggested that the original walls stand to at least some 5 feet

Next comes the contentious date on the tower buttresses and the repeated error in the reading of this date on the face of the buttresses. V.C.H. appears to be the first to

1. misread the last two digits as 50 instead of 56 still clearly visible now and
2. assume the missing digit was 1 (5) Instead of 6 quoted by Thomas Deacon when the inscription must have been easily legible and inferred on stylistic grounds

This date, 1636 must of course refer to a period of repair on the tower, and it is not impossible that this was still part of the major renovation work initiated in 1622.

Until late into the 17th Century the church seems to have been playing an active part in the life of the parish for since 1625 Parish Register has been kept, and many of the monuments in the interior were set up. John Clark 1655 in the Chancel, George Watson off the Coast of Guinea in 1674 and the tomb behind the organ of 1663 There is also record of brasses, half of one remaining, on the Nave floor in 1828

The bells seem popular in the early 18th Century for it is recorded that Bells 4-6 were hung in 1713. In 1549 an inventory of all goods belonging to the church had to be returned to the Bishop of the diocese, and apparently another inventory was made in 1552

At this latter inventory it was revealed that Willoughby had three bells and a saunce or sanctus bell.

As the existing tower was not added until 1663 and there was no chancel it is more than likely that these four bells hung in a turret probably at the east end of the church and would be fitted with shafts or levers with ropes attached with which to ring them, Half wheels followed then full wheels, which allowed the bell to swing a full circle.

When Joseph Smith set up in business in 1701 the first bells he cast were for Handsworth in that year, and his latest a bell at Smethwick in 1732. The total number of bells he cast in that period was 150 five of which were cast for Willoughby in 1713.

So it was fifty years after the tower was built that the bells, which made a minor peal were installed.

In 1781 a sixth bell was added making the peal into a major one.

This was cast by William Chapman of the Whitechapel foundry, which earlier during the life of the older partner Lester Pack - died 1768 had cast the first bell of Wolfhamcote Church. The foundry now belongs to Mears and Stainbank.

It seems rather odd that Joseph Smith was commissioned to Install five bells only, and that a minor peal because the frame was made to accept six bells and it has not been discovered why 68 years elapsed before the Sixth was added It has been suggested by Mears and Stainbank that William Chapman might have recast an existing tenor! but in 'Church Bells o Warwickshire' it is -recorded that in 1750 there were only five bells in the tower, which rather refuted that suggestion.

Founders had their own distinctive design and foundry mark. Joseph Smiths' design is in the form of scrolls which terminate in the centre with a flower. He also had a trade mark in the form of an inverted shield with scrolls and two bells. The decoration or border is to be seen on Willoughby bells,.

There Is a Inscription starting with a cross on each bell* The inscription is:-

No.1. Mr. Robert Watson Farmer and Mr. William Clarke, Church Wardens 1713 with a running border below.

No.2 Joseph Smith in Edgbaston made mee 1713 There is no running border and after the cross and interspersed with the inscription he has eight coins and a border

No.3. God Save His Church. Here again he has his border and seven coins interspersed and running border below.

No.4 Mr. Robert Watson, Farmor and Mr. William ClArke Churchwardens 1713. On this bell there is no border and only three coins,.

No.5 Mr. William Turton Minister M Robert Watson Farmor and Mr. William Clarke Church
and below

Wardens 1713

There is one stop between the christian and surname of the Minister and a running border.

No.6 is inscribed John Malling and Henry Mills Church Wardens, Wm. Chapman of London Fecit 1781

There is a short border before Chapman's name and one after the date. At the waist of the bell is inscribed 'My mournful sound doth warning give that here men cannot always live" Whether by accident or design the word tamer on the treble bell, is spelt ae we know it but on the fourth end fifth bells It is spelt 'farmor'.

The frame in which the bells hang is made of oak beams and it ts quite possible that it is the original one. It is quite likely too that the headstock and wheels lasted for over two centuries.

From old records we find that the bellringers were paid 6/- each at Christmas this was paid until about the time of the 1914-1918 world war. The bells must have been rung regularly from the depth of the indents made by the clappers, during the XVIII and XIX centuries We do know that there was a band of bell ringers in 1858 and It is fair to assume that there always was a band as the art of ringing a bell is usually handed from band to band Also if the bells had not been rung for a very long time they would not have been ringable in 1880 for bells fittings and frames deteriorate much more quickly if they are not rung.

In the second decade of this century the headstocks and wheels, through age began to show signs of decay. The 'go' was bad because the frame became loose in the joints!, and the bells had get very thin on the bow where the clapper struck and they were condemned as being unsafe to ring.

They had been rung regularly on festival days, and during the 1914-1918 world war on the occasions of the Allies winning a battle and half muffled to the memory of the fallen. As far as we know the last time the bells were rung before being condemned was on Peace Day July 19th 1919.

In 1923 a committee was formed to raise money to put the bells in ringable order Expert advice was sought and John Taylor & Sons of Loughborough Gillett & Johnson and Mears & Stainbank of London were Invited to give estimates Taylors' and Gillett & Johnson's estimates included a new cast iron frame Mears and Stainbank suggested that as the wood in the frame Was sound they could strengthen it and quarter turn the bells at a cost which was accepted of £230 as against £1,000 by the other firms.

Before the work of restoring the bells could be started it was necessary for the tower to be repaired. The battlements were in a crumbling condition and the joints in several courses below the roof were open, The roof was also in a leaky condition^o

The 'battlements were renewed and the open joints grouted with liquid cement and a new roof built at a cost of £150 This money forthcoming from the extraordinary repair funds, which is a fund maintained by a yearly payment from the Willoughby Charity, the amount credited at that time being £10 per annum.

The restoration of the bells took place in 1926 and they were rung for the first time on Boxing Day of that year and the entire work was carried out by one man.

As the bells were not taken out of the Church no rededication was necessary and as far as is known no service was held to mark the successful-completion of this important work*

Willoughby bells cannot lay claim to be an outstanding peal, with the exception of possessing a rare bell, the tenor but their tone is pleasing, they are of medium weight and the 'go' is, good.

The go of a bell can be good when rung on its own but should there be any defect in the frame which holds all the bells, It could react differently when all the bells are in motion so we can deduce that there is not much wrong with the bell frame in our own belfrey.

The work entailed in putting the bells in ringing order consisted of first detaching the bells from the headstocks thus allowing them to rest on blocks. While in this position they were turned on their mouths through 90° fitting new headstocks and wheels made from teaks and ball bearings,

Fitting mild steel angles into the corners of the frame and mild steel upright supports between the top and bottom members of the frame. New guide pulleys were added also new ropes.

An interesting and perhaps earlier Carrillon of bells was brought from Southam and installed in the tower in 1724,, This carillon is surely a thing of interest today and it is sad to think that it is not in working order, The Clock, also of the 17th Century is, I hope also safe from the vicissitudes of time

To round off the history of the structure two more events which had considerable effect on the existing building must be mentioned

Firstly In 1779 the presbytery Chancel was rebuilt. Again the reason for this second rebuilding is not recorded and the cavalier treatment received by the church generally during the period of the early Georges may well be to blame,, However the East window is recorded in 1829 to be modern,

Secondly Thomas Deacon sets down the sad state of damp ,and decay that existed in his day and exhorts the village to do something about it. In 1850, however we read that the building has been recently restored the floor raised (formerly two feet below the porch and the cause of the dampness) •are the replacement of what must have been box pews of the 17th Century by the present stalls, Pieces of the old stalls in odd places amongst the present stalls in particular near the pulpit and at the East end of the North Aisle can still be noted

Maintenance repairs have of course continued down to the present time.