



BRENT ELEIGH CHURCH

An Illustrated History and Guide

by

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| Peter Burton

BRENT ELEIGH CHURCH : A HISTORY AND GUIDE

FOREWARD

Welcome to St Mary's, Brent Eleigh.

Here is no museum, but an old and singularly unspoilt country church, rich in history and interest. Here today, as for centuries past, the living God our Father, source of all love, goodness, truth and beauty, is worshipped through Jesus Christ his Son in the fellowship of his Holy Spirit. Here his word is preached, his Gospel proclaimed, his sacraments administered, his children christened, married and buried, and prayer and thanksgiving offered to Him, by some, at least, of the people of this tiny Suffolk parish.

Our Church stands, as of old, in quiet, shady seclusion, above and a little aloof from the village it exists to serve. Over the churchyard hedge looms the impressive classical bulk of Brent Eleigh Hall, whose successive masters in days gone by appointed the parsons, and occupied the Squire's pew on Sunday mornings when living and (their bones) the Chancel vaults after death.

Seen from a distance in winter when the trees are bare which most of the year hide them from the village below, these two old neighbours, Church and Hall, epitomise the ancient rural establishment of Church and State, squire and parson, so familiar to our forefathers. Even in the changed world of today, Brent Eleigh Church, like countless others in the length and breadth of England, still stands, mute but precious witness to unchanging truth, ultimate reality.

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I hope this little book will help visitors to make the most of their visit and those who live in Brent Eleigh to value our Church still more, as, with me, they unravel its history - experience its atmosphere. It belongs to us all : ours in trust for the future. And, as with the village shop, "if we do not use it, we may lose it".

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This book is in two parts - first the history, then the guide. Apart from its long history this church, perhaps more than most, cannot be properly appreciated or understood. So, if you have time, sit down and read the history before you go round with the guide. That way you will get most out of it. Otherwise read it when you get home, and then come back again another day!

February 1986

John Fitch
Rector

PART ONE : HISTORY

The Village : Its Name and Origin

There are two Eleighs, quite separate, each with its own church, village and identity. Two miles East is Monks Eleigh, the larger of the two; 'Monks' because in the Middle Ages it belonged to the monks of Canterbury Cathedral. 'Eleigh' or 'Illeleya' (one of its many early spellings) is said to derive from 'leah' the 'estate' or 'land' (later 'manor') of a Saxon landowner called Illa. In the Domesday Survey, 1086, the entries headed simply 'Illeleya' make no clear distinction between two communities, later differentiated as 'Monks' and 'Brent'; only one church is mentioned.

The earliest clear reference to Brent (i.e. Burnt) Eleigh separately is in the Norwich Taxation of 1254. There was evidently a bad fire here some time before that. The name appears regularly as Ely (or Illeigh) Combust(a) (compare Bradfield Combust 10 miles away) - in Archdeacon's Visitation Books as late as 1771.

When was the present Church built?

In the absence of clear documentary evidence, we have to rely entirely on that of the building itself to enable us to give even an approximate answer to this question. Apart from the octagonal Purbeck marble font bowl with its pairs of shallow blank arches on each face - a type not uncommon in Suffolk and usually dated 13th Century ('Early English') - the predominant style is clearly that known as 'Decorated' and dateable roughly between 1280 and 1320. Despite a few later medieval alterations¹ (windows on the North side of the Nave) and one major Victorian one (the Chancel East window in 'Decorated' style), the fabric itself is all of a piece, homogeneous.

Thus it looks as if, unlike most old churches, it was erected, more or less as it now stands, towards the end of the 13th or beginning of the 14th Century. The most obviously 'Decorated' features are the South doorway, its elaborately traceried door itself, the three bay arcade of the South aisle together with its parclose screen and East window; the Tower arch, West doorway (exterior) and window above; and most striking of all, the paintings, revealed in 1960, on the East wall of the Chancel, especially the original reredos/altarpiece with the figures of the Crucified Redeemer between his mother and St John. These graceful, swaying, stylized figures are strongly reminiscent of those we encounter in illuminated MSS and stained glass (as well as in other murals) of this period around the turn of the fourteenth century, enabling them to be dated with a fair degree of accuracy and assurance.

¹ A bequest in a will of 1440 is of 3s 4d "to the emendation of the new work of the church, for new bells."

Who built it ?

As with the previous question, (when was it built?) we can give no certain answer. But there are two possibilities. The most likely is, the Shelton family, based at Shelton, near Pulham Market, South Norfolk. They were Lords of the principal Manor in Brent Eleigh, (which they inherited by marriage with an Illeigh heiress), throughout the late Middle Ages and until 1558. We may conjecture that the former Chantry chapel in the South aisle was originally set apart for masses for the repose of Shelton souls, though their tombs are to be found in the exquisite church they rebuilt at Shelton. An alternative possibility is the Monks of St Osyth's Priory, Essex, who owned the other manor (whence Abbot's Hall) and the advowson (patronage).

Seven Centuries of Continuity and Change

This Church, then, is some 700 years old. If its exterior has changed little over the years, the same cannot be said when we step inside.

Our first impression, confronted with a sea of high box pews beyond the ancient font, and, beyond those again, a towering high pulpit and (beyond that) a glimpse of a large Baroque monument in the Chancel, together with, in the Nave, an old, uneven brick and pavement floor, a plaster ceiling and a set of Royal Arms, is that here is one of those all too rare survivals, a "church which the Victorians forgot", one which somehow miraculously escaped the insensitive miscalled "restoration" for which the 19th Century is renowned. This is true of the Nave, but a little less so of the Chancel.

Here we have a beguiling medley of incongruous liturgical and aesthetic styles and ideals - medieval, classical (late Stuart and early Georgian), Victorian and twentieth century, each good in itself but superimposed on the preceding, with 19th Century medievalism and 20th Century antiquarianism largely responsible for the present melange. This tangled skein requires patient unravelling if we are to understand how this Church came to be as it is now.

Basically what has happened is that (as with every old church in varying degrees), successive revolutions in Christian doctrine, liturgical fashion, and aesthetic taste have each left their mark on the building, modified by local circumstances and influences, such as the preferences of squires and parsons.

The first and most drastic of these upheavals was of course the 16th Century Reformation, depriving this church of its most prominent medieval feature, its rood, rood loft and screen. Only the rood loft stairs remain, in the North wall, behind the pulpit, to show where it once was. And whereas the medieval church had been a blaze of colour and imagery in glass and painted wood, stone and plaster, (the illiterate Poor Man's Bible), all this fell victim to Protestant reforming zeal and destructive fury.

In Elizabethan times "godly" texts were inscribed on the whitewash obliterating the old "popish" murals. Thus at Brent Eleigh, over and in place of the medieval reredos painting appeared these words framed in a scrolly cartouche, typical of the period:

"My {flesh} {blood} is {meat} {drink} indeed John 6:55"

This text, hidden in its turn by a handsome classical altarpiece of the late 17th or early 18th Century, was once again revealed when, in 1960, the remains of the altarpiece were dismantled for repair. It (the text) was photographed for the record, and then, the coating of whitewash on which it had been inscribed, skilfully removed, flake by flake, to reveal the medieval painting we see today. This extremely delicate conservation work was expertly done by Mrs Eve Baker in 1960. (Another text, so faded now as to be practically illegible, is faintly discernible on the North wall of the Nave next to the War Memorial tablet. Can you decipher it?)

The Reformation began by leaving the Church ravaged, bare and colourless, as well as bereft of its treasures of altar plate and vestments. But before long came reconstruction. It gradually came to be refurnished for the austere Reformed worship according to the Book of Common Prayer. The new emphasis was on preaching, Biblical exposition and edification, and, with an oak Communion Table replacing the old stone altar in the Chancel, the focal point was now the pulpit and reading desk. It was no doubt at this time that the Chantry Chapel in the South aisle, no longer needed for private masses, was converted into the Hall pew for the squire and his family, with two rows of seats facing North towards the pulpit.

Seemliness, order and edification were the keynotes, or at least the ideals, of "classical" Anglicanism as it came to be established in the early Seventeenth Century and it is from this Early Stuart period (1603-1642) before the Civil War, that some of the most prominent furnishings of our church date - viz. the pyramidal font cover, the tall, commanding pulpit, with its latched door and wide carved and bracketted book board,² and the front two pews on the north side and one in the South aisle. Our three bells, all cast locally, at Bury St Edmunds, in 1612, 1629 and 1632 respectively, replaced the medieval ring at this same period. (The bell-founders were James Edbury and Thomas Cheese - their names appear on the bells). Pews, pulpit and font cover all have characteristic early Stuart carvings, likewise the ironwork hinges of the pew doors.

It was at this time too that the Colman family acquired the Lordship of the Manor and came to be "seated" at the Hall, which, later that Century (c.1690) they rebuilt in classical style. (It was 'Georgianised' and extended in the 18th Century, and, finally, modified in his strongly individual style, by Lutyens in 1933).

Until their line became extinct with the death in 1739 of Edward Colman ("the last of that ancient Family"), the Colmans by their generous benefactions and enlightened taste, left a powerful and benign impress on both Church and village.

² No doubt it originally formed part of a three decker with tester or sounding board overhead. It can be seen with clerk's pew attached in an Edwardian postcard of c.1905.

In the course of the four score years following the Restoration of Church and Crown in 1660, Brent Eleigh Chancel was once again transformed - largely if not entirely (it would appear) through the munificence of successive Colman squires and by the monuments erected over the vaults in which their remains were interred. And in that same period the Nave took on very much its present appearance, only modified earlier this century when the "small gallery" (with a "small organ" on it), noted by D.E. Davy in 1826, was taken down, and the box pews and pulpit rearranged and tidied up.

Our handsome Church Plate, now, alas, in safe keeping in a bank and rarely in use, also dates from this period. As two of the four pieces of which it consists, the almsdish and flagon, are engraved with the Colman arms (Az. on a pale radiant or a lion rampant gu.), complete with crest (a caltrap or between two wings expanded arg.) and mantling, on the flagon, presumably they were a Colman benefaction of c.1700. The plain goblet shaped cup and matching paten have a maker's mark (RA over a rose within a shield) and hallmark of 1694.

Returning to the Chancel, it was "transformed" by being reclothed (so to speak) in the style made familiar by the contemporary genius of Wren and Hawksmoor in London City Churches rebuilt after the Fire³ and in some Oxford and Cambridge College chapels - a classical style peculiarly befitting the sober, sonorous dignity of the (restored) Book of Common Prayer.

Happily, vestiges of this "splendid"⁴ ensemble remain today - the panelled chancel ceiling of 1684, the three sided altar rails with elegant twisted balusters, the (painted) wainscotting round the North and South Chancel walls, Thomas Dunn's noble monument to Edward Colman, the twelve Colman black marble ledger slabs with their deep cut epitaphs. But sadly, the great altarpiece, and the Library built in 1720, have gone. Both remained intact until 1859, when the Library was demolished and a new one built in the North east corner of the Church, and built so badly, that it would now be in imminent danger of collapse were it not shored up.⁵ Part of the altar piece was then (1860) taken down in order that an East Window could be inserted, tracery, glass and all, in the position presumably occupied by the original one before the erection of the altarpiece.

But this is to anticipate. We have a tantalising description of the altarpiece when still intact, written by D.E. Davy, most painstaking and meticulous of Suffolk antiquaries, following his visit to the Church with his friend J.W. Darby on the wet morning of October 25th 1826. "There is no E. window, the Library being built up against the outside and the inside being wholly filled with a splendid altarpiece handsomely painted blue in panels, compartments etc and other parts gilt. In the panels are the Lords Prayer, Belief and Commandments."

³ e.g. St Mary Abchurch, St Martin Ludgate, St Benet Paul's Wharf, St Stephen Walbrook (all by Wren) and St Mary Woolnoth (the last by Hawksmoor) all of which survive almost intact inside and out.

⁴ The word uncharacteristically used by David Elisha Davy in 1826 to describe the altarpiece.

⁵ To be fair, a second World War German bomb exploding nearby aggravated the building weakness.

Besides this description, we still have, in the (Victorian) Library building, the dismembered remains of what was left of the altarpiece when it was dismantled for repair in 1960 - and three photographs showing part of it still in situ. Of these, the first two are Edwardian postcard interiors of the church facing East, taken c.1905. They show, somewhat indistinctly, the altarpiece still largely intact after the insertion of the East window in 1859/60; it reached up to the ceiling cornice on either side of the new window. The remaining photograph, taken in 1930, shows these two upper panels removed. They were partly reused c.1930 to form the tower screen which then replaced the small west gallery referred to above. A few years ago a small section of the brown paint was removed, to reveal the handsome gold lettering on blue which it had covered.

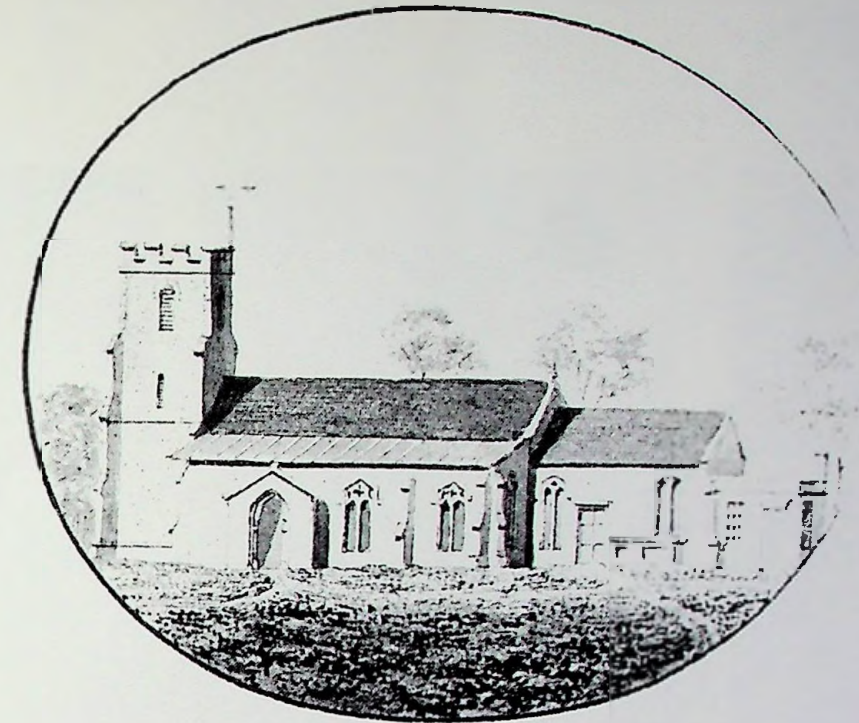
Such is the story of this 'splendid' altarpiece and its gradual disappearance.

We now turn to the final and perhaps most 'splendid' component of the classical Anglican renaissance of Brent Eleigh Church so largely due to the Colmans. A 'square, handsome'⁶ Parochial Library was built of brick, roofed with lead, against the East wall of the Chancel in 1720. Its purpose was to accommodate the 1500 or so volumes bequeathed by the Reverend Doctor Henry Colman D.D., squire of Brent Eleigh, Rector of Harpley and Foulsham, Norfolk and sometime Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. He died in 1715 and, with his wife Susanna, nee Hyde, who acted as his executrix, lies buried within the altar rails.

These books, of which a complete contemporary catalogue/inventory survives, on two huge sheets of vellum, were typical of the personal library of a scholar, divine, and country gentleman, a Justice of the Peace, a widely read man of affairs of his day. Strongest in classics, divinity and history, they included also law books, atlases, one book on 'chymistry' and much contemporary polemical and controversial literature including e.g. Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, 1704. There was originally also one medieval Ms (of Martial's *Epigrams*, now in Cambridge University Library) but more were added in 1727 by a gift from Fane Edge of Lavenham. They included the actual Gospels originally belonging to St Margaret, Queen of Scotland c.1090, now in the Bodleian. These books were specifically bequeathed by Dr Colman to the then incumbent (Nicholas Thurloe, second of that name, who had succeeded his father in the Living) and his successors 'for ever', under the conditions imposed by the Parochial Libraries Act, 1709. Thurloe bound himself and his successors in the sum of £1000 to be answerable to the Bishop (of Norwich in those days) for the care and preservation of the Library and his bond, also on vellum, is attached to the catalogue, and is in the Norfolk and Norwich Record Office.

The Library was equipped with a fireplace for the parson's comfort on a cold winter's day - the chimney on the North side can be seen in two contemporary pictures of the Church which have survived and are reproduced herein. One solitary book case which may have been in the original Library is in the present one, but its shelves are empty! Several books were stolen from the old Library in 1840, but, that apart, the rest remained inviolate, transferred to its replacement in 1859 or 1860, until 1887. In that year, Montague Rhodes James, Provost successively of Kings College, Cambridge and of Eton, and the most distinguished bibliophile of his day visited the Library with his friend the Archdeacon of Sudbury, Chapman. As a result the medieval MSS were sold, and found their way to

⁶ These adjectives are those of the Parish Terrier of 1801



Brent Eleigh - 7.



TWO EARLY 19th CENTURY PICTURES SHOWING THE OLD LIBRARY (BUILT 1720, DEMOLISHED 1860)

(above)
Pen and ink and wash drawing by Issac Johnson, surveyor of Woodbridge, c. 1818

(below)
water colour by J. Snape, whose father was Rector 1808 - 1860



Mary



Christ Crucified

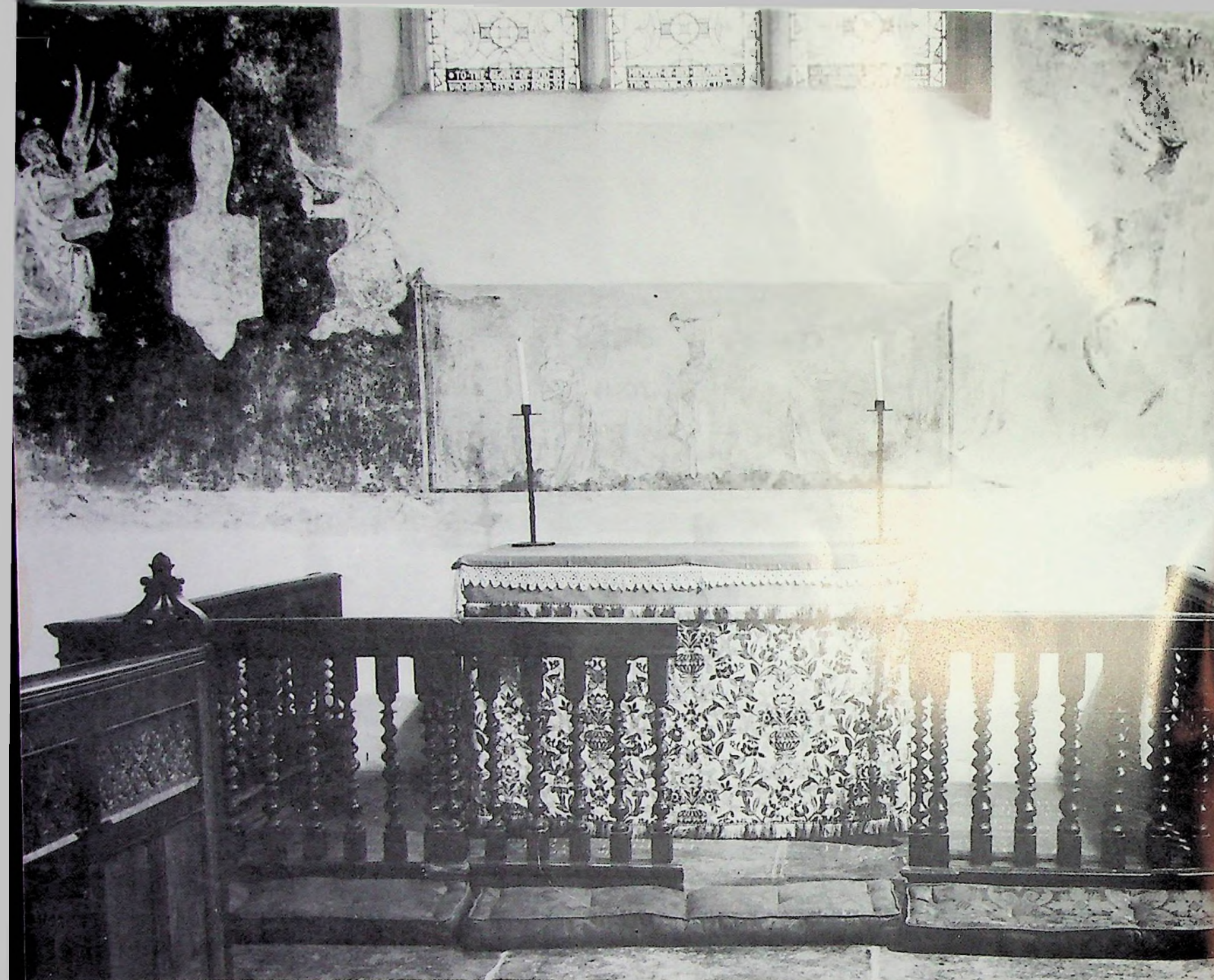


John

MEDIEVAL REREDOS : DETAILS



THE DONOR OF 'THE HARROWING OF HELL'



SANCTUARY

[Peter Burton



FACING WEST

[Richard Burn

Oxford and Cambridge Libraries. The printed books seem to have been disposed of piecemeal at various times thereafter (in contravention of the Law and of Thurloe's bond), the last disappearing as recently as 1942/43. There are still those living in the village who clearly recall seeing a good many large old books in the present Library building in 1942, but none have been seen since. Fifteen or so volumes have turned up in recent years, in places as far apart as Urbana, Illinois and Melbourne, Australia, but mostly in this country, several of them in University Libraries. They are readily identifiable by the inscription 'Brent Ely Library' (sic) handwritten c.1720 on the flyleaf with the shelf mark appropriate to that particular volume. Three out of the 1500 have actually been recovered and are safely in the Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds. The story of this library has been told in detail by the present writer (Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology vol xxx pages 69-74 in art. Some Ancient Suffolk Parochial Libraries to which the reader is referred if interested).

There was no significant alteration in the Church, fabric or furnishings, inside or out, for over a Century. At the Hall the Colmans were succeeded after 1739 by the Goates, two generations of them. Their restrained, uniform mural tablets with equally restrained inscriptions adorn the North wall of the Chancel. When Colonel Edward Goate died, suddenly, in 1803, he left no male heir but two illegitimate daughters. One, Sarah Dionesse, inherited the Hall. She married in 1821 a Dr Thomas Brown M.D. of Tostock Place near Bury St Edmunds. Ownership of the Hall passed to the Browns and their descendants until, eventually, between 1915 and 1922, the entire estate was sold up piecemeal.⁷

It was in memory of Thomas and Sarah Dionesse Brown's 34 year old son George James Edward, who died in 1857, that the Church received its first and only Victorian feature, the east and south east chancel windows. The former, by Michael O'Connor (1801 - 1867) of Dublin and later of London, and his son Arthur, two of the leading practitioners of the revived art of stained glass, is a three light window in the Decorated idiom of the early fourteenth century and depicts the Crucifixion with attendant figures. It is, in itself, unquestionably, by any standards, a striking, not to say outstanding, example of the revived art, in colour, draughtsmanship, composition and design, as it is also of the spirit of the romantic medievalism of the High Victorian Gothic Revival which inspired it.

The writer is much indebted to Birkin Haward O.B.E., F.R.I.B.A., of Ipswich, who has compiled over many years a comprehensive and percipient study of glass in Suffolk churches, especially that of the 19th Century, and of its makers/artists, for opening his eyes to a more just appreciation of the merits of the best Victorian glass, and for persuading him to abandon an ignorant prejudice against it. Mr Haward writes (3 Dec. 1980): "Brent Eleigh is particularly interesting for a very good O'Connor East window (personal tastes apart!). The general cheerfulness and vigour of the colour and design and the beautifully controlled graded blue background make it one of their best in Suffolk". That is exactly true, and no overstatement. The two-light South east window, also "probably O'Connor" (Haward), and good in itself, is grisaille pattern only but incorporates a shield with the Brown arms and the initials "G.J.E.B." so it is presumably a part of the same memorial as the East window, the insertion of which, as we have already seen, necessitated the removal and replacement of the handsome Georgian Library.

⁷ The Hall has changed hands several times since. It is now (1986) the residence of Sir David Barran, a good friend and neighbour of the Church.

Thus, until 1930, when the upper panels of the altarpiece were removed, and to a lesser degree until 1960, when the rest was taken down for repair, two outstanding Victorian windows co-existed uneasily with the equally outstanding classical furnishings of the 17th and 18th Centuries, two equally valid, but conflicting, aesthetic and liturgical ideals side by side.

Now with the rediscovery of the hauntingly beautiful medieval wall paintings, we have three such ideals coexisting, medieval, classical and Victorian, and we can compare the two depictions of the Crucifixion 13th and 19th Century, one above the other.

When we come, at last, to the present century, it has little distinctive to show for itself apart from (i) the oak Chancel stalls - excellent example of sound traditional craftsmanship and design of c.1930 (could they have been financed by the sale of books from the Library?) and (ii) the handsome tapestry Kneelers in petit point needlework, with designs echoing early Stuart arabesques on Nave pews and bird designs on medieval tiles, which are even now gradually replacing the old hassocks and adding a welcome touch of colour. The writer would dearly like to see a good modern figure of the Madonna and Child in wood or stone in the vacant space surely originally occupied by a medieval image of the Blessed Virgin to whom the church is dedicated, between the censing angels (at present censing empty space) on the North side of the East wall.

The characteristic contributions of the 20th Century have been the costly repair and conservation of our heritage, the introduction of an unobtrusive and sweet toned 19th cent. chamber organ in the Chancel, and the modernisation of our lighting and heating systems - the former a model of discreet efficiency.

* * * * *

The long history we have traced from c.1280 to the present day is one of continuous, sometimes drastic, adaptation of an ancient building to changing times, needs and circumstances. If we are to hand this old church on to future generations this process must go on. Just as, after centuries of familiar use, the age old Latin Mass gave way in 1549 to the first English Book of Common Prayer, and that in turn to subsequent revisions up to 1662, (interrupted by the brief return of the Mass under Mary I and by Puritan worship under the Commonwealth and Protectorate) so today the contemporary English of the Alternative Service Book is winning gradual if reluctant acceptance while it continues in double harness with the old familiar (but now archaic) Prayer Book.

As was said in the Foreward, this Church is no museum but a place where God is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth - and that surely must be not in the forms and language of a bygone era, however familiar to an older generation, but in those of today, even in this ancient setting. To achieve these transitions with sensitivity both to past and present is no easy task, but it is the responsibility of each successive generation. Unless we in our turn discharge it faithfully, this church will decay and die - become just a museum.

Exterior

Apart from hard cement pointing of the refaced East wall, carried out in 1860 when the old Library was removed and the new window inserted, the Church, with its partly rendered rubble walls and buttresses (some of brick) with stone dressings, has an agreeably mellow texture. Notice the South Chancel Door, no longer in use, but formerly a private entrance for the Hall family, and next to it, built on to the Chancel wall, a table tomb (of Robert Colman d.1730 and his wife Dionesse, nee Cullum, d.1697). On it, facing you as you come up the path to the porch, is a grinning skeleton, standing with spade and hour glass in its hands to remind you of your mortality.

On the East quoin of the Porch note the very worn scratch dial or mass dial on which apparently the medieval parson was wont to indicate the time of mass. Then go round to the West of the sturdy, heavily buttressed Tower, recently repointed. Its handsome deeply recessed doorway and three light window above remind us that medieval masons were not particular about symmetry! The non-alignment is of course partly due to the provision of windows to light the tower stairs.

Time now to go inside.

Interior

Enter the unpretentious Porch, with its open two light windows and plaster ceiling, glancing up at the statuette (not ancient) in the niche over the door. It represents the Virgin Mary, in whose honour the church is dedicated.

With hand on the bolt (no latch), pause to examine the elaborate, typically 14th Century traceried head of the door and its contemporary ironwork, including the "sanctuary ring" - is that in fact what it was?

Entering the church itself, the Purbeck marble font bowl, with Stuart cover, (described on page 2), set on a later pedestal, is seen in the traditional position against a pier of the South aisle opposite the door. Next notice the Royal Arms above the North (vestry) door. They are on wood, framed, the second coat of arms of Queen Anne, following the Act of Union with Scotland, 1707. But they were updated, probably at the accession of George I (1714), by having his 'G.R.' painted over the 'A.R.' (for Anne). The economical church wardens who ordered this alteration, perhaps to demonstrate their loyalty to the House of Hanover, forgot to change the motto from 'Semper Eadem' (unique to Anne) back to 'Dieu et Mon Droict'.

Turning West to the Tower Arch and noticing (i) the charity boards on either side of it, (ii) the beautifully inscribed list of Rectors from 1302 to the present day and (iii) the Brown/Goate hatchment nearby (which would first have been displayed, draped in black, over the entrance to the Hall after the Squire's death), if you look closely at the soft stone (clunch) of the arch and of the jambs of the West Door you will see plenty of interesting medieval, (and some later), graffiti, but none especially notable. In the tower the bellframe and floor timbers are all original though adapted for the hanging of the 17th century bells which replaced the medieval ring.

The box pews, complete with doors, in the Nave and South aisle have already been described. They are of various periods, shapes and sizes and some incorporate parts of earlier medieval open benches.

The 14th Century parclose screen enclosing the Hall pew at the east end of the south aisle repays careful examination. Especially notice on its west door the painted medallion with the eagle symbol of St John the Evangelist, and on the north door a painted coat of arms (whose?) (Fretty, on each joint a fleur de lys, on a canton gu, an estoile or: tinctures not reliable.) Also (seen from inside the Rectory pew) two more painted shields: (i) a lily in a vase, emblem of the Virgin and (ii) a long cross incorporating the Crown of Thorns - emblem of Christ's Passion. It is hard confidently to assign a date to these little paintings.

In the floor inside the parclose screen on the South side, are a few medieval glazed tiles.

So we come to the Chancel. Its complicated history has already been told. It only remains to record more fully two of its most notable features.

- (i) The iron railed Baroque monument commemorating Edward Colman, last of that family and founder in 1731 of the (still existing) almshouses in the village street. This is an eloquent composition in black, white and grey marble, the effigy reclining in vaguely Roman costume, hand and glance turned upwards, with weeping putti overhead under a classical entablature. The inscription tells us that when Mr Colman died in 1739 aged 72, he was "the last of an ancient and worthy Family, of which he was an ornament and support: whose great virtues need no recital in this place especially where he has left so many monuments of Piety to God and goodwill to men."

The monument is signed by, and is the chef d'oeuvre of Thomas Dunn (d.1746), builder (i.e. mason contractor) and statuary (i.e. sculptor) of Southwark, who earlier had built for the architect Hawksmoor two of England's finest Baroque churches, Christ Church, Spitalfields and St Mary Woolnoth in the City. Rupert Gunnis (Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851 page 134f) describes the Colman monument as a "dramatic and important work". C.L.S. Linnell (Suffolk Church Monuments in Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology vol xxvii page 15) writes: "By the middle of the eighteenth century the work of the Sculptor had not yet become wholly divorced from that of the architectural builder and with the reclining figure of Edward Colman in its elaborate but very well conceived architectural setting we have, in my opinion, one of the most valuable achievements of the builder-sculptor of the period". The monument blocks up what appears from the outside to have been a plain Elizabethan two light window on the North side of the Chancel, which is consequently dark.

- (ii) The medieval paintings on the east wall, discovered in 1960 and described by the distinguished art historian Lady Wedgwood as "among the most important in England". There are three paintings and their relationship to each other is not obvious.

(a) The central one designed as an altarpiece or reredos consists of the Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John "the three figures painted with grace and simplicity in red earth colours against a plain green background, the whole outlined by a rectangular frame. The early 14th century to which this painting belongs was the last period when high quality might be expected even in country churches. The figures are among the most beautiful surviving from that time". They are strictly comparable both to those on the (contemporary) retablo at Thornham Parva, near Eye, Suffolk, and to those on the strikingly similar reredos/altarpiece in the South aisle of Dorchester Abbey, Oxon, where the entire painting is in red.

(b) "To the North of the reredos are two kneeling and censing angels, once in attendance upon a carved figure, doubtless of the Virgin and Child, for which the space for the pedestal and the place where the lower part of the figure touched the wall are voided in the otherwise uniform background. This was originally of a bright turquoise, which survives where applique gilt stars protected it. Elsewhere it has darkened, not in the post Reformation centuries, but during the more than 200 medieval years that it was exposed to, above all, candle grease" (and smoke). "The stars would have been torn off when the

whole wall was whitewashed at the Reformation". Lady Wedgwood thinks that this scheme is likely to be earlier than the reredos and that the blue background appears to extend further than the (reredos's) border. "In any case", she says, "the appearance of the angels, with their concave faces and extremely angular wrists, depends upon the convention established at Westminster in the second half of the 13th century".

(c) To the South of the altar is "the most fragmentary, but perhaps the most important painting of the three. It represents a most unusual version of the Harrowing of Hell. Christ, bearing the Vexillum, (the Resurrection banner) is stretching out his hand in the usual way to pull Adam and his companions from Hell." (Compare the First Epistle of St Peter chapter 3 verse 19 and chapter 4 verse 6 for the scriptural origin of this today unfamiliar theme). "The hands and one of the feet of Adam, and the edge of what may be Adam's halo, with which he is commonly adorned, may be made out. Trees, a bird and so on around the Christ and above Hell's mouth can be discovered".

"There are three features of great iconographical interest. (i) the blood flows from the side of Christ - by his blood are the dead saved (ii) Christ treads on Adam's foot (iii) the donor of the picture, a tonsured priest, appears in the lower south corner. He has an inscription reading + RICA. Beside him is a wine barrel or jar. The Lombardic script of the inscription suggests a latish 13th Century date, which is in this case certain, since the further leg of Adam is now covered by the frame of the central subject '(the reredos/ altarpiece)'. That central subject is certainly early 14th Century, so this must have been a generation old, and no longer greatly valued, when it was in part obscured. Little though there is of it now, there can be no doubt the figure of Christ was once of very high quality. It is as close in style and colours as anything in England to the Doubting Thomas subject, painted on a similarly large scale in the south transept of Westminster Abbey. The date of that painting is disputed between the later 13th Century and c.1300. The Brent Eleigh Harrowing of Hell must be late 13th Century."

Lady Wedgwood concludes: "Taken as a whole the East wall reads as an exposition of the Creed, running from the Incarnation through the Passion to the Resurrection and Redemption of Man (Adam). All three paintings were executed within the time bracket c.1270 - 1330. No doubt in the case of the Harrowing of Hell a particular commentary was illustrated. It may yet be identified."

(These extracts, in quotation marks, are taken from notes written for the use of visitors to the Church by Professor Pamela Tudor Craig Ph.D., F.S.A. (now Lady Wedgwood) in 1979, and the writer is greatly indebted to her for permission to publish them here).

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Thus in this small Suffolk country church we have in close juxtaposition, in paint, stone and glass respectively, three outstanding but totally diverse works of art, each representative of a great creative period in English art - the (anonymous) medieval paintings, Dunn's Baroque monument and the O'Connor East window. These alone should suffice to give little Brent Eleigh an assured place in the distinguished company of Suffolk's, even of England's, historic churches.



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[Peter Burton