

## THE PEWS IN THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL, KIRKBY MALHAM

The building of the church of St Michael the Evangelist in Kirkby Malham dates from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Early in the life of this church there may have been stone benches round the walls, similar to these in the porch, with moveable seats, open benches, chairs or stools in the nave. People in the early days also sat on the floor to hear the preaching.



After the protestant reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century rules were laid down particularly by Bishop William Laud (1537 – 1645), about how the church services should be conducted. Sermons became longer, dogs were no longer allowed in church. The church wardens had long poles to keep the dogs under control, and also to make sure the congregation stayed awake during the longer services and throughout the sermon.

Because of the longer time spent in church, the congregation wanted to be more comfortable so this was when the box pews were installed, plain oak box pews in the nave, and more elaborate Jacobean style pews for the gentry. These Jacobean pews may have been situated towards the east end of the church, but were moved to the north side during a later, Victorian rearrangement. The cost of the new pews was met by subscription, some members of the congregation paying for their pew. This led later to some misunderstanding, people felt that they owned their pew, and would want to hand it down to their descendants, or include their pew with a sale of a property.

### The box pews in the body of the church



These box pews probably date from late 17<sup>th</sup> century or early 18<sup>th</sup> century. They are quite roomy, and square, and originally had seats on three sides, so that more people could be accommodated. They were originally higher, so that the congregation was more enclosed, but were cut down to their present size in the Victorian restoration. At this time (1880) the back and side facing seats were removed, and kneeling platforms were installed. This reduced the available accommodation for worshippers, but this was found to be adequate for the needs of the congregation.

People who had paid to have their pew installed often carved their initials on the sides of the pew, as well as the date. Subsequent members also carved their initials so that there are many records of past members of the congregation. Some initials are merely incised into the wood, but many others are more elaborately carved.



On the north side of the church an interesting pew door appears to have been made from an old piece of furniture, perhaps a chest - note the typical Jacobean carvings, linenfold, feather, twist borders.



### The Jacobean pews in the Chantry of St John the Baptist in the North side of the church

Church attendance during the 17<sup>th</sup> century was compulsory, so the more elaborate pews allowed the rich and powerful of the district to demonstrate their status to the lower orders. The pews are carved with traditional Jacobean style designs, for example the whorls and diamond patterns, the rope twist borders, and the spindles. Notice the handmade hinges, maybe 300 years old but still functioning.

The largest of the Jacobean pews is the one dedicated to James Ward. It has more decoration than the others, with tulip shaped borders, feather borders, and the date of 1631 which is one of the oldest in the church.



Apart from the re-siting of the Jacobean pews there seems to have been little other alteration made to them during the Victorian restoration. The occupants were quite well hidden from the other worshippers. They were made comfortable with cushions and padded seats.



Some families have had several pews, perhaps different members of families, and different generations. For instance the name Josias Rimmington crops up several times, with different spellings: Rimington, Rimmington, Remington - as in this example in the Jacobean pews with the date of 1649,



and number 18 on the north side of the body of the church



and also box pew numbered 6 on the south side of the church.

On the pew numbered 6 the initials inscribed on the inside of the box pew have been erased so that the pew commemorates only Josias Rimmington.



### The church wardens' pew

This is situated towards the rear of the church, just in at the door. It has a high back, to protect from drafts. The designation "the church wardens' seat" is simply inscribed into the back of the seat, with the date 1723. The seat is higher than the other pew seats to give a good view of the congregation. In the church wardens' pew are the church wardens' poles, originally to keep the dogs and congregation under control! One set was carved by a local craftsman, Bill Wild, in the last century.



### The Esquires' pew

Across from the church wardens' pew is the esquires' pew. This is dated 1724. The carving is more skilled, being in relief, and includes the initial of some of the occupants. The title "Esquire" is a courtesy title, indicating someone above a gentleman, but lower than a knight.



### The Victorian Restoration, 1879 to 1880

The extensive Victorian restoration programme began on February 24<sup>th</sup> 1879, the church being re-opened on Saturday May 15<sup>th</sup> 1880. Essential restoration work on the roof, floors, pillars and arches was carried out and new pews were installed.

### The old box pews

The old box pews were replaced in their former position and shape, but the backs and sides were cut down by a few inches, and only one bench per pew was retained instead of the three sides for sitters.

### The new box pews

New pews were erected during the Victorian restoration at the front of the church and were paid for by Walter Morrison on condition that they be assigned to himself and the vicar. They match the old pews in style.

The one on the south side being inscribed "W.M.1880",



the one on the north side inscribed "THE VICAR'S SEAT".



The **choir pews** were installed in the chancel, they are inscribed, the one on the north side by:

Te deum laudamus, Te deum confitemur Te aeternum patrem omnis Terra venerator



That on the south side by:

Tibi omnes anden: tibi con et universa potestates cherubim et seraphim incessabili doce proclamant



These are the words of the Ambrosian Hymn, or the Song of the Church, very suitable for the choir stalls, which can be translated as:

Oh God we praise Thee, we acknowledge Thee to be The Lord  
Everlasting Father all the earth doth worship Thee  
To Thee all Angels, the Heavens and all the Powers  
All the Cherubim and Seraphim proclaim  
Holy Holy Holy, Lord God of Hosts