

THE PANELLED CEILING

St Michael's Church, Brent Knoll, has a number of interesting features. Perhaps the best known are the benchends, especially the three panels depicting the Fox and Goose and the Somerset Memorial. Additionally, the Norman doorway, with its Gothic centrepiece, is of particular historic interest. However, one feature which is less well recorded is the panelled ceiling, which is the glory of the interior of the north aisle. Glynne, in the mid-nineteenth century, notes that the roof of the aisle is "*flat and panelled elegantly with enriched bosses and brackets and figures of angels and saints,*" which, for someone noted to have an exceedingly fine memory, is accurate but a little sparse.

A century later, in his 1949 book "*St Michael's Church, South Brent – An account of the Parish Church of Brent Knoll, Somerset,*" A. K. Wickham, commented, "*of the same period as the bench-ends and a far greater feat of workmanship and art is the North Aisle with its splendid roof. Towards the end of the 15th century English medieval architecture was coming to its fruition and, in Somerset and East Anglia, it can be seen at its best.*" Wickham considered this roof in Brent Knoll to be a superb example of the best in architecture and, in particular, noted that the carpenter employed to execute this roof had a calling which was "*more independent and honourable than it is today...almost the mason's partner,*" and that, "*we shall not begrudge him that position when we contemplate a design and execution like this.*" He spoke of the same roof as being, "*panelled elegantly with enriched bosses and brackets,*" which does suggest he may have read Glynne's report.

In the original edition of Nikolaus Pevsner's, "*The Buildings of England: South and West Somerset,*" it is merely stated to be a "*Good panelled aisle roof,*" though the updated version, by Julian Orbach, is rightly much more enthusiastic, claiming it is "*a very good panelled aisle roof of the richest Somerset type. Spread-winged angels above a wall plate with fleurons [medieval floral or leaf ornaments carved in a hollow rectilinear band]. Each panel sub-panelled, and each of these sub-panels differently ornamented. Stone angel corbels*"

Wickham suggested the north aisle was from the end of the 15th century, whilst Pevsner similarly suggests late 15th century. This was a time when the wool trade had made much of the West Country very rich and that is reflected in the intricacy of the patterning. It was also a transitional period between the last of the

Plantagenets and the start of the Tudor period. It has what is often considered a typical Tudor style ceiling, though examples of a similar style are known prior to the reign of Henry VII.

The ceiling consists of six bays, each separated by a cambered, low-pitched tie-beam. Within each bay there is a main, longitudinal beam and a slightly less prominent, transverse beam, dividing it into four main groups and each of those groups have smaller groups dividing them into four panels, giving sixteen panels per bay and, as there are six bays, that means ninety-six panels overall. Each of the tie-beams rests on a corbel and their intersections are adorned with bosses. Every panel is decorated and beautifully carved, but the highlight of the ceiling is the fact that every one of the ninety-six panels is unique. Wickham commented on this when he said, "*I cannot find that the same design is ever repeated, as is done in a similar roof three miles away at Mark.*" In fact, the Mark church repeats the same pattern throughout.

To achieve a unique design featuring human, animal or floral illustrations would be fascinating; to do so utilising only a limited number of basic motifs and designs is much more amazing. As Wickham noted, "*Here the same motif reappears frequently but is subtly varied.*" Quatrefoils were very fashionable when this ceiling was built, so that motif features extensively. Other common motifs include circles, stars, mouchettes, shields, foliage, etc. Each panel utilises a selection of these motifs in its own unique and subtle variation. Since at least the nineteenth century (which is as far back as mention is recorded of the ceiling) unsuccessful attempts have been made to find two panels which are identical. Please let us know if you succeed!

This is obviously not the same carpenter who made the bench ends, as the quality of work is far superior, though it is possible that the need for the north aisle arose due to the insertion of those benches in the nave. Previously worshippers would have taken part in services standing up, which would have been acceptable as the services were much shorter than they became when many of the attributes of a modern service were introduced. Hymn singing and sermons, for instance, were not a normal part of early Christian worship. But as they became accepted more people would require seating, hence the introduction of the benches. However, when people stood, all the internal space in the nave could be utilised, but, when seating came to be used, the benches would have taken up quite a lot of space in their own right, and, of course, passageways would also be required for access to the benches. Add to that the fact that the population continued to increase, then additional space within the church would become essential to ensure that everybody could find a place within the church. As benches arrived in Somerset around the second half of the fifteenth century, then these problems would materialise towards the end of the century, which fits with the dates suggested by Wickham and Pevsner noted above.

As mentioned above, bosses are placed on all intersections of the panelled ceiling. Where the intersection is of comparable sized beams it is a full boss, larger on the main crossings, smaller on equal sized lesser beams, but where the intersection is between any differing sized small beam and a larger beam there is only a half boss. All, except one, of these bosses are of floral design. The exception is at the western end, where the end boss is a green man with the top of his head against the wall. This is a previously unrecorded green man, due to the fact that it had, until they were removed recently, acquired a camouflage of cobwebs.

"*Wall plates on either side are surmounted by angels with outstretched wings,*" Wickham continues, whilst Pevsner notes they are, "*Spread-winged angels above a wall-plate with fleurons.*" What neither mention is that the angels are each holding a shield, with a raised centre piece dividing the shield into two plain halves. There is one angel to each group of four panels on both the north and south side of the aisle. This theme extends to the corbels, which consist of angels with folded wings and hands held in prayer. Like the spread-winged angels, these angels are fairly uniform in appearance. However, looking closely at these corbels it appears that parts of them may, in some cases, have become obscured by the plastering on the walls against which they are placed.

Glynne made a special note that, “*at the east end of the north aisle and in the very angle is a figure on a bracket.*” What he did not mention is that it has a shield “*showing the five wounds,*” as Pevsner records. The five wounds depict two hands, two feet and a bleeding heart superimposed on the lower front of the angel and represent the wounds that Jesus suffered on the cross. Just above the wounds the angel has been damaged at some time, apparently intentionally, though it is uncertain when this happened; possibly shortly after the Reformation, though it could also be during the heyday of Victorian reform.

Recently, damage was caused to this ceiling, when the lead was stolen from its external roof, but, luckily, that has now been restored and hopefully the ceiling will be preserved into the future and certainly deserves to be far better known.