

# THE VESTRY

Today this area is known as the vestry, but that is probably not what it was when it was first built. Glynne, Wickham and Pevsner have all suggested it was originally a transept. Others suggest it was a chantry chapel. Collinson/Rack, at the end of the eighteenth century, did, however, refer to it as a vestry, which implies it had already adopted that role by then.

Normally a transept would be paired; that is, a south transept would be sited opposite a north transept, giving the church a cruciform shape when seen from above. Even a quick investigation of the north side of the church reveals that the slope of the hill prevents any matching transept. Given the same length as the current vestry it would project well beyond the width of the north aisle, where the hill is rising quite sharply. This would require substantial excavation to provide an extension, of which there is no evidence, and such a transept would suffer from very poor lighting. In fact, a wall has been created to retain slippage from the hillside whilst providing a service path around the church.

One-sided transepts are not unknown, though it has been argued that this would normally be due to some historical disaster, fire, war or funding problem. In this case the vestry appears to have been added to the original structure of the nave, as there are straight abutments on both sides where they join. This suggests that either it was an earlier build than the nave or that it was added after the nave was completed, rather than being an integral part of the overall design.

Another feature which needs to be taken into account with regard to the original use of the vestry are the three windows, whereby each have their own distinct period style and are each set in a different exterior wall. In the west wall is a single lancet, ogee headed window with cinquefoil cusping. Glynne refers to this as having, "*its rear arch feathered, according to a Somersetshire practice.*" This style is normally associated with the early fourteenth century. In the south gable wall the window has a Y-shaped tracery (also known as Intersecting tracery), with stretched cinquefoil cusps in the intersections of the lower tracery. It is a three-light window with a two-centred drip moulding above it. Warwick Rodwell, the leading ecclesiastical archaeologist, informed me that such windows can be dated fairly accurately to the year 1300, plus or minus ten years, which means that it is slightly earlier in date than the west window, Glynne also refers to this window as having interior feathering. The third window, in the east wall, is a three lancet, square-headed

window with cinquefoil cusping. It has a horizontal drip-mould with fairly short vertical arms and is typical of windows from the late Perpendicular period, around the end of the fifteenth century, or the early sixteenth century.

This gives three differing windows built at three different times. As the first two were built reasonably close in time to each other, they may be transitional and the end of the first decade of the fourteenth century would be a date consistent with this. Not so the third window, which is well over one hundred, and possibly as much as two hundred, years later. Although it is possible that it was a replacement for an earlier window, it is more likely that it was a later insert. So, what could be the reason for this?

Buckler's picture of St. Michael's church, drawn in 1831, has no door shown at the gable end of the vestry, but it does appear in the picture by Robert Gillo dated c1870 (Brent Knoll legend has it that it was to provide access for the local gentry without having to mingle with the villagers). One aspect of Buckler's picture is very striking, the south window is set very high in the wall; so high, in fact, that a full size neo-Gothic doorway was inserted underneath it without the need to raise or alter any part of it. There obviously must have been a good reason why this was done. Warwick Rodwell informed me that the normal reason for this is to accommodate a tomb or monument on the interior wall, which seems eminently reasonable. That could also explain why there was no window in the east wall, which could well have been the site of an altar accompanying the tomb or monument.

If the vestry was built in the early fourteenth century it is likely that there would have been a chantry chapel somewhere within the building, to support priests saying prayers for the souls of the dead, who were expiating their sins in Purgatory before being able to enter Heaven. That would require an altar, but, as chantries were banned shortly after the Reformation, that altar would have been removed and a window inserted. This accords well with the timing of the east wall window. As there seems to be no other place in the church where a vestry could be located, it would also seem reasonable to convert the now redundant chantry chapel into one.

It is probable that the person who endowed the chantry chapel originally was the person whose monument was located within it. Collinson/Rack gives us a potential candidate for this. "*This manor was held of the Abbots of Glastonbury, for a long series of years, by the ancient and very respectable family of St. Barb, otherwise called de Barbara, the place in Normandy from which they originated.*" A deed, which identifies Robert Saintbarbe, was signed 23 Edw. I, which is only a few years before the end of the thirteenth century. He and his son, Richard, were granted, "*for their respective lives, a yearly pension of ten pounds, to be paid out of the exchequer of Glastonbury, at the feast of Easter and St. Michael, by equal portions, and also a winter robe yearly to either of them, during their lives, of the same suit that the said lard abbot's esquires were wont to wear, with convenient fur thereunto belonging.*"

There was also a family of Brent in the parish, though they had major holdings elsewhere and it seems likely that the two families inter-married. It could, therefore, be either of these families, or both, who established the chantry. As with many other chantries the intentions of the founders were not always complied with. Though no specific information is available concerning that in Brent Knoll, some funds certainly disappeared from the chantries in Axbridge, for example, so the fact that neither of these possible founders appear in the following lists does not mean that they were not involved.

By the time of the Reformation some surveys took place with the intent of acquiring the assets for the crown and that does give us some idea of what was still extant in this parish. In "*Chantry Grants, 1548-1603,*" published by the Somerset Record Society (Vol. 77) an annual rent given to maintain an obit at Brent Knoll is mentioned, amongst sales to a number of people in London. Chantry chapels and obits were dissolved by a bill passed on the 25<sup>th</sup> December 1547, during Edward VI's reign. This was seen as an act of religious reform, initiated by the Reformation. An earlier Somerset Record Society book, "*The Survey and Rental of the Chantries, Colleges and Free Chapels, etc. in the County of Somerset*" (Vol 2, edited by Emanuel Green) listed this entry as "*Obitte foundyd w<sup>i</sup>n the paryshe church ther. One annuall rent to be levied and recyued [received] of the Issues and Revenues of the lands and tente [tenements] of John Gilling, lyinge in the borough*

of Axbridge – xiiij.” A marginal note explains that this is the yearly worth. This document provides a basis for the dismemberment of the chantries, as part of the Reformation, with some earlier incomplete surveys initiated under Henry VIII, though this particular one was started by him, to correct earlier omissions, but it was put into effect during the reign of his son, Edward VI due to his father’s demise.

In addition to the Gilling rental, there was some, “*Rdy money given to the use and maintenaunce of a priest celebratyng w<sup>in</sup> [within] the paryshe Church ther.*” (that is, Southbrent), which comprised xiiij s [9s = 45p] from Richard Tille, xs [10s = 50p] each from Willm Syme and Nicholas Bybbyll xiiij s from Thomas Bonnche, xs from Johane Palwebbe and xiiij again, this time from William Watkyns. Making a grand total of this ready money equalling lxxij s [72s = £3.60]. Presumably these were some of the wealthiest residents of Southbrent, in the late medieval period, though little is known about them. A note added a little after this suggests, “*the saide somme [sum] of lxxij s is thoughte desperate, forasmoch as the occupio<sup>r</sup>s of the same be verray poore psones.*” Normally, properties would be granted in wills so that the rents could be used to pay for a priest to say prayers for the souls of the dead. This suggests that those living in these properties are now poor people who may not be able to pay their rents promptly, if at all. On the other hand, it could be an attempt to hide their true value, as the locals were not keen on the crown sequestering all their assets, which was the original intention.

There was also the sum of xxli [£20] “*in thandes [the hands] of John Burton, Executo<sup>r</sup> of the last will and testam<sup>t</sup> of the late pson [parson] of Bryan [Brean] of the bequest of the saide pson to the vse [use] aforesaide.*” This is a far larger sum and requires a more explicit explanation. “*The foresaide John Burton allegeth that he hathe paide out of the foresaide some of xxli for the debte of the saide Testato<sup>r</sup> xli.xjs.viiij [£10.11s.8d = c£10.58p]. And further that he standeth in sute w<sup>t</sup> the nowe incumbent of the saide benefice of Bryan for delapidacions of the same. And so moche of the said money as shall remayne (the foresaide delapidacions discharged) the saide John Burton is content to aunswer unto the Kinges ma<sup>tie</sup> at all tymes.*” Or, in other words, there is not much that will be left of this either. Notably, a slightly later survey only includes the rental from the properties of John Gilling.

We may conclude, therefore, that there was a chantry chapel and it would seem that the only reasonable location for that was the modern vestry. When the use was changed, i.e. when it became a vestry, a new window was knocked through the south wall, which had formerly supported an altar. In a single page handout, outlining the features of Brent Knoll Parish Church (kindly shown me by Sue Boss), the authors, the Revd. A Chisholme Schofield (Vicar of Brent Knoll) and J. Griffith (ex-Schoolmaster of Brent Knoll School) state that the Vestry was originally the Chapel of St. Joseph. This is the only reference I have seen to that dedication and I have not been able to detect the source of their information, but I quote it for what it is worth. The Revd. Schofield was Vicar from 1923 to 1947.

In the same document there is also a mention of an aumbry on the east wall. It is also mentioned in Kelly’s Directories, from the early twentieth century to the final edition in 1939. An aumbry is a cupboard, or recess, containing items such as an altar plate, relics and other sacred objects. There is nothing like that on the east wall of the Vestry today. All that is there is a rather nice capped bowl sitting on a stone shelf. It is pleasantly decorated, with a small angelic figure surmounting the lid, but it is certainly not a recess or cupboard. However, the aumbry is still there but now on the south wall and it has a piscina set within it. It has a trefoil design with ogee head and is typical of the design of the Decorated period. Which means it is contemporary with the early fourteenth century windows in the south and west walls. Positioning an aumbry and piscina in the Vestry would add considerable weight to the idea that this was originally a chancel, as they would normally be placed close to an altar.

On the front exterior corners of the Vestry wall are some buttresses. On the eastern side there is a single buttress, set at right angles to the front of the wall, whilst, on the western side, they are angled buttresses. Angled buttresses consist of a pair of buttresses set at an angle of 90° to the wall and to each other and meeting at the corner of the wall. All three have a consistent width and are two-staged, with the stones capping the

lower stage having their ends shaped to give the appearance of a four-level tiling, whilst the higher level offset is shaped to suggest a seven-level tiled finish. All are consistent with an early fourteenth century date, which is compatible with the earliest windows.

Above the gable end of the Vestry the roof is surmounted by a cross. Or so it seems. In actual fact it is a piece of masonry from a window frame. A closer look reveals moulding on both the upright and the arms, which indicate that the upright was a mullion whilst the arms were a transom. Beneath both arms the remnants of trefoil tracery are evident. A nice touch. It was erected during the mid-nineteenth century, as demonstrated by the fact that Buckler does not include it but Gillo does. Its moulding and fractured trefoil tracery indicate a re-use from some earlier architectural feature of around the thirteenth century.

From Glynne we note that the “*transept is tiled.*” In 1896 the Churchwardens Accounts report that the “*State of [the] Vestry roof was discussed.*” It appears that it had not been included in the restorations when the porch roof was leaded, but “*restoration [was] deferred for the present.*” One year later the subject was revisited and the church benefited once more from the generosity of their vicar, Archdeacon FitzGerald, who “*offered to find [the] money provided the parish find £60.*” Presumably they did so as, in 1898, it was reported that “*Barnstaple hoped to finish repairs to the Vestry agreed by Midsummer Day.*” That was the year in which a new vicar came to St. Michael’s.

Glynne also states that the “*transept opens to the nave by a low, continuous pointed arch and is in great measure cut off from the church and appropriated as a vestry and approach to the pulpit.*” Pevsner, arguing that the “south” transept is of an early fourteenth century date, states as proof “*the ogee-headed west lancet of the transept, its triple-chamfered small w[est] doorway, and the cinquefoiling of the windows inside.*” Orbach has modified this slightly to read, “*in the transept the ogee-headed w[est] lancet and the three-light s[outh] window with cusped intersecting tracery, both with cinquefoiled rere-arches,*” and later mentions that the, “*low triple-chamfered arch to the s[outh] transept [is] infilled with C19 stone tracery.*” This last point is significant in that it suggests that the Vestry was originally open to the nave but was closed in the nineteenth century to create a Vestry. The nineteenth century tracery consists of four flamboyant inverted cinquefoil mouchettes (like daggers but with curved sides) around an elongated trefoil centre with, on either side, blind cinquefoil tracery.