

THE NORTH AISLE

“This aisle...with its columns, windows and roof is the finest feature of the church.” In his article on St. Michael’s Church, Wickham eulogised about the North Aisle and, in particular, about its splendid roof. This extension was added somewhere around the end of the fifteenth century (c1490s) and has a set of fine, late Perpendicular windows gracing its north wall, set very closely together, with similar windows at both ends. All are three light ogee-headed windows with acute cinquefoils. The tracery is of ogee, alternate style throughout, with y-shaped splits. Some of the windows have superior cinquefoil cusps and similar inverted cusps; a feature normally associated with the Tudor period. Others have trefoil cusps; normally thought to be an earlier feature, though John H. Harvey, in his book on *“Somerset Perpendicular; The Dating Evidence,”* says that it may rather indicate the influence of the ‘Gloucester’ School. These have no inverted cusps. He also mentions that *“the use of cinquefoil cusping in narrow tracery lights is a mark of high-class work, carried out regardless of expense.”*

Even the stonework of this aisle caused Wickham to become poetic. *“It is built of the freestone of North Somerset,”* he says, *“with occasional traces of the warmer golden tints of the south.”* He contrasts this with the *“cheaper local blue lias”* of the earlier work on the tower and south wall. It is indeed neatly done, with its coursing almost of ashlar quality. Around it runs a ditch, becoming deeper towards the east end and draining from the steep slope of the hill rising above the church. There are buttresses at both ends, which are two-staged and offset, with an additional one in the centre. All are of ashlar masonry and capped on both of their two main stages.

There is no north door in this aisle due to the steep slope of the hillside, but there is a door at the west end of the aisle, which has been sealed for some considerable time. Inside this door is the font and Bruce Wingate reminded me that there is an old legend that a door was always provided close to the font to permit devils, released from a child being baptised, to escape from the confines of the church. The two-centred doorway has a double ogee moulding and a dipped triangular run-out on its chamfer.

There is a leaded roof over the aisle, as elsewhere (though this was the target of thieves recently and so had to be recovered in 2019). It lies behind a lozenged parapet. Glynne commented, *“The whole of the north aisle,*

though not on the show side, has a fine pierced parapet in lozenge work and the roof turret on the same side, which rises to some height, has the same ornamental parapet. In the same side the buttresses are pinnacle.” These pinnacles are all “crocketed,” that is, they have projecting knobs of flowers or foliage along their sides, but there are no true finials.

Where the stair to the former rood screen has been erected, at the east end of this aisle, it appears to be squeezed between the east end of the aisle and the buttress at the chancel end of the Nave. Although there must have been an earlier stair to the rood screen, this version was presumably built coevally with the North Aisle, as the base of the stair turret continues an extension of the string course which surrounds the lower part of this wall. It also now continues above the rood screen level to provide access to the roof of the north aisle. Any discontinuity occurs only at the join to the Nave buttress. It is also apparent that the parapet reflects the style of the aisle and the infill between the stair and the buttress at the roof level blends to the stair but not to the buttress.

Clinging to the upper part of the walls are three grotesques, one at each corner and one in the centre. Two are fierce four-legged animals, whilst the one at the east end has a human head. She has lenticular eyes, with deep holes for pupils, in a characteristic style of the period. I am uncertain who she represents but, whoever she is, she does not look very comfortable. She is biting her lip and looks as though she may burst into tears at any moment. Her head-dress is curious, having four-level striation, bordering her face and extending towards the back of her head. This could be referred to as concertina-like, or even bandaged and is closer to the style of the fourteenth century wimple than to sixteenth century fashion. One possibility could be that she is intended to be a nun. But why is she looking so distressed? Was she placed here as a comment on the Dissolution, by someone who disagreed with its objectives? That could have been a dangerous thing to do, though her position would not make the comment obvious to any but the locals.

In the centre of the aisle is an animal with a ribbed backbone, who is crouching with his tail between his legs and extending over his back, to terminate in split ends. He faces down and has pointed ears laid back, hollow pupils popping out of his large eyes and what may have been a snarling mouth filled with vicious teeth. The front of his face appears to have been mutilated at some time, so I cannot be certain, but believe his nostrils were flared – ready to spring on the unwary perhaps.

Another monster, similar to that in the centre, straddles the west corner, with one front foot on the west face and the other on the north face of the wall. The eyes of this creature are not as prominent as those on the centre animal and he has no ribbed backbone. Some teeth in the upper jaw are damaged. He is prominently barrel-chested.

Another curiosity can be found on the buttress at the west end of the north aisle. It is a scratch dial. Such devices on church walls are not uncommon, but why it was placed on the west end of the north aisle is the curious bit. As the sun rises in the east and travels overhead or, more commonly, towards the south it will rarely shine on this part of the building and then only at a late hour, when it has set very low in the sky. So, it obviously did not tell the time correctly very often. Whilst it is true that time was not such a critical factor in medieval life, it still seems extraordinary that it was not positioned on a south facing wall. Has it been moved at some time? There is no other indication of re-use around the adjacent area, but it may have been left over from an original part of the church, which had been altered or replaced, and was placed within the north aisle as a memento of the old structure. That is not uncommon.

Internally there are a number of interesting features within the north aisle, though they are rarely mentioned in descriptions of the church. The panelled ceiling is certainly one of them and it is the outstanding glory of the interior of the north aisle. As it is of such significance it has been given a separate chapter of its own (see “The Panelled Ceiling”).



Amongst the other items to be noted in this aisle is something that was mentioned by Glynne: “*an odd spiral shaft with octagonal capital and base having rather an Early English look and probably meant to support a statue. Near to it is the rood door.*” Others have referred to it as a pedestal piscina, or “*Pillar Piscina on a decorated shaft and with a scalloped top,*” as Pevsner originally suggested, though the later Pevsner, re-edited and extended throughout by Julian Orbach, modifies this to a more accurate, “*Pillar Piscina – On a spiral-mounted Norman column, with scalloped capital on a cable moulding.*” The spiral decoration on the shaft is rather attractive and, above it, the capital is divided into an abacus. (flat upper stone), which would normally contain the piscina bowl, and a lower section, with a spiral moulding between

this and the shaft. The lower section has the scalloped top, which is a typical development of the Norman period. However, I have some doubts about it being a piscina. Moving the metal object which now rests on it there is no bowl in the abacus, only small indentations, presumably meant to secure something which stood on it. Whilst that could have been a free-standing bowl, it does seem unlikely given the indentations. Perhaps, Glynne’s supposition that it was meant to support a statue does seem a more realistic choice.

Close by this pillar was a curious fragment of stonework, presumably coming from some monument originally, as it has a skull, with its lower jaw missing, and two crossed bones beneath. Could this be the only surviving remnant of the monument in the chantry chapel? Or did it come from an otherwise lost headstone in the graveyard? Today there is what appears to be an old corbel which presumably was originally one of those lost from the north side of the chancel.

During the twentieth century the eastern end of the north aisle has become a War Memorial Chapel. It contains a book with the names of those from Brent Knoll who gave their lives in the two World Wars and has a plate

on the altar shelf which reads “*IRBY THOMAS CHAPMAN A.R.C.O. H.R.S.T. Organist and Choirmaster.*” (A.R.C.O. Associate of the Royal College of Organists, H.R.S.T. unknown). Someone of that name is recorded as living from 1898 to 1961. He gave an organ recital in Kingsthorpe Parish Church in January 1914, where he is referred to as Master Irby Chapman, a Northampton student at the College for the Blind in York. Later, in 1932, he is mentioned as a beneficiary of a will, where he is noted as the organist in Halstead Church.

To accommodate modern usage of the church, the pews, which formerly stood along most of the North Aisle, have been removed, so that tables can be placed there,

Halfway along the wall of this aisle is a plaque, “*In affectionate Remembrance of Peter Whitfield Brancker M.A. Humble, upright, wise and true. For 12 years the trusted vicar of this Parish, who died at his work on April 9th 1919. This memorial is erected by his friends, the Parishioners of Brent Knoll in gratitude and praise to almighty God for his Faithful ministry in their Church and homes 1920.*”

At the western end of the aisle is the baptistry chapel, with its ancient font. Glynne commented, “*The font is curious and early. The bowl is a sort of quatrefoil form with the rim and base moulded, the stem octagonal with moulded sides to which are attached 4 marble shafts without capital or bases and set lozenge wise.*” It has been claimed that this is an original Norman font, though others have suggested that it is Early English. Pevsner states that it is, “*highly unusual. C13-C14, a wavy quatrefoil in plan, with flat cardinal faces and strong upper and lower mouldings. Shaft-and-hollow stem and quatrefoil base.*” More recently a book has been published containing the drawings of “*Ancient Church Fonts of Somerset*” by Harvey Pridham (Edited by Adrian J Webb, SANHS 2013). His drawings were made at the end of the nineteenth century and, in particular, the Brent Knoll font was examined and drawn in June 1887. He assigns the font to the period 1250 – 1272, labelling this as the Transition from Early English to Decorated, which accords with the earlier part of Pevsner’s assessment. Pridham goes a little further than either Glynne or Pevsner by stating, “*The outside form of this font is, as far as known, quite unique. It may be roughly described as a “waved” quatrefoil; only, instead of four arcs of circles, the curves are all ogees.*” He then refers to his “*Detail Book,*” whose whereabouts are now unknown, before continuing, “*The font is of very unusual size, of freestone, and would accommodate, for total immersion, a person whom the Prayer Book would describe as being of ‘riper years.’ The inside bowl is of the same shape as the outside; that is, the margin is equally wide throughout. The inside has vertical sides, lead lined; nearly flat plan; 32½ inches inside diameter; 11 inches deep. No cover.*” Although its depth is fairly standard, the interior diameter of this font is said to be the largest in Somerset.

Around 1800, Richard Warner did, *A Walk through some of the Western Counties of England.*” His walk included South Brent, where he was fascinated by this font, discoursing about it at some length. “*The font also lays claim to a considerable antiquity, being deep and capacious intended for the total immersion of the infant to be baptized. This, you know, was the ancient mode of performing the ceremony and only disused within these two centuries, when, good sense getting the better of prejudice, the custom almost universally disappeared, to the great benefit of the population since the chances must have been very considerably against any infant which was thus, within the month, unmercifully plunged over head and ears into a bath of cold water. Little accidents, indeed, frequently occurred, whilst the practice continued, to the poor half-drowned children; one of which has been thought of sufficient importance to be incorporated into the pages of medical history. It relates to King Ethelred, the miserable idiot whose inglorious reign saw the Danish power established in this country. Archbishop Dunstan had the honour of baptising the royal babe; but the shock or the fright, occasioned by the immersion, produced in the infant the most unseemly and offensive effects. The prelate, whose olfactory nerves were probably somewhat distressed by the circumstance, returned the child to its nurse in a passion, exclaiming at the same time, ‘Per Deum et matrem ejus, ignavus homo erit!’ [By God and his mother, this will be a wastrel when he is a man] a prophecy which subsequent events completely accomplished.*”

Above the now sealed door at the Baptistry end of the aisle is a modern stained-glass window with the following narrative below it: “*The Baptistry Window dedicated Dec. 1973 is a lively example of modern glass with a glory of colour. The theme is the Baptism of Jesus with related events showing the significance of Christian Baptism, and the necessary Confirmation of Faith in the following of Jesus with the cost of love (The Lamb) and the available Grace (Wheat). The tracery lights show the emblems of the four evangelists: Matthew (The Divine Man) because his gospel emphasises the human nature of Christ; Mark (Winged Lion) the royal dignity of Christ; Luke (Winged Ox) the sacrificial aspect of Christ; John (Eagle) because his gaze pierced further into the mysteries of Heaven than that of any man. The hand of God is over the whole window. Artist: James Crombie. This window is the gift of Mrs Gladys Lee Kimble of Short Hills, New Jersey, U.S.A. in memory of her parents and brother of Brent Knoll.*”

Below this window and to one side are displayed the flags of the British Legion, one for the Brent Knoll Branch and one for the Brent Knoll Women’s Section. Accompanying them is a plaque reading: “*In memoriam Brigadier Ralph P. Wheeler CBE 1899-1977. These legion standards were laid up in this church on the Legion being given royal status and were placed here in memory of Brigadier Ralph P. Wheeler by his wife and family January 1979.*”

A loose stone rests against the western wall of the north aisle. It is an old corbel, representing a male figure, presumably removed when the north aisle was extended into the nave and the corbels were removed to make way for the arcade.

A small plaque lists the names of “*good and faithful servants*” of this church who died during the twentieth century. They are:

<i>Fanny Margaret Louisa Webber</i>	<i>1890 – 1968</i>	<i>Sacristan and bell ringer</i>
<i>Dora Ellen Paul</i>	<i>1910 – 1976</i>	<i>Sacristan and loving friend to all</i>
<i>Gerald Thomas Steer</i>	<i>1903 – 1976</i>	<i>Faithful friend and servant of this church</i>
<i>Joseph Basil Morris</i>	<i>1899 – 1984</i>	<i>A faithful servant and benefactor of this Church</i>
<i>Henry Newman</i>	<i>1900 – 1991</i>	<i>Friend of St Michael’s</i>
<i>George Tanner</i>	<i>1902 -1994</i>	<i>Faithful servant and friend</i>
<i>Nancy Midgley Hill</i>	<i>1909 – 1996</i>	<i>Everyone’s friend</i>
<i>Emma Elizabeth Hames</i>	<i>1915 – 1996</i>	<i>A remarkable lady</i>