

ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATION OF EXCAVATIONS IN THE ST JOHN MEMORIAL CHAPEL, THE NORTH TRANSEPT OF THE CHURCH OF ST MARY BLETSOE BEDFORDSHIRE

1 The occasion for the works

The north transept in the Church of St Mary Bletsoe, known as the St John Chapel, is arranged at two levels, the southern third generally the same as the rest of the building, and the northern two-thirds raised up over burial vaults. Localised sinking of the tiled floor on the upper level, especially in the south-east corner, necessitated exploratory works in 2004 to identify the cause of the subsidence and determine what remedial action might need to be taken. A more substantial excavation was carried out in April 2010, removing sinking infill material, underpinning the balustrade at the south end of the raised part, and backfilling with competent material before relaying a levelled floor. This report subsumes an earlier note on the work in 2004.

2 The St John Chapel

The present appearance and arrangement of the St John Chapel derives mainly from the restoration of 1859-61. The Vestry Minutes for January 1864 (*BLARS* P38/8/1) record that “the North Transept had been done prior at the expense of the late Dowager Lady St John”, a funding arrangement that probably explains the lack of surviving documentation. This work appears to have been by the noted Victorian architect S S Teulon. Christopher Pickford (*BHRS* vol 73 [1994] 128-133) cites references by Matthew Saunders in the *Ecclesiologist* (vol 89 [1981] 17) to an inspection of plans for restoration on 25 November 1857. The same journal for that year (vol 18, 396) records that S -, Bletsoe, Berks (sic)

“... is about to be restored by Mr S S Teulon. The arrangement of seats is an improvement, but we should have preferred to see the crossing used as the choir. The architectural renovations seem careful, and the mortuary chapel is parted from the church by an open stone screen of somewhat heavy character.”

Saunders also refers to a sketch, presumably proposals, by Teulon in his second notebook (kept in the RIBA Drawings Library at the Victoria & Albert Museum) which mainly shows the proposed screen “with winged angels on all four external corners and gables on each elevation”. The existing low screen, though heavy in style, has none of the decorative detail described and divides the two levels *within* the chapel rather than chapel from tower crossing. The general specification for the main restoration of the church from 1863 onwards specifically excluded the north transept (*BLARS* P36/5/6), and Pickford notes that work on the family chapel, started first, had probably been completed by December 1861 (*The Builder* 28 November 1861). Inspection of Teulon’s second notebook did not identify any drawing relating to Bletsoe, and later recourse to Saunders elicited the *pers comm* that he might have got the information from another source.

3 Medieval origins of the mortuary chapel

The north transept had been the mortuary chapel of the St John family from their arrival at Bletsoe in the 16th century. An illuminated explanation hanging on the west wall, put there after repairs in 1951, ascribes the first use, and by implication the construction, of the chapel to Beauchamps c1200, then lords of the manor. However, there does not appear to be any direct documentary evidence and this may simply be a presumption based upon the descent of the manor as described in the *Victoria County History*. Certainly there is no obvious late 12th / early 13th century work in the chapel, and nave, against which it abuts, has probably 13th century origins.

- 4 A more likely origin is as the chantry chapel for the Pateshulls who held the manor from about 1250 until 1359, receiving licence to crenellate Bletsoe Castle in 1327 (*VCH Bedfordshire*, iii, 1900, 40-41). The present structure, if originating in the 14th century, may have been an enlargement of an existing north transept possibly originally only the width of the tower; the present east wall clearly abuts the north wall of the chancel, and the base of its west wall equally clearly rides up over the small offset footings for the north wall of the nave. The north face of its south wall has a piscina and an adjacent blocked squint looking through into the chancel, the latter concealed by the memorial for Sir John St John (d 1525) until it was relocated into the nave in the 1970s.
- 5 **The excavation**
In 2004, a small trial trench was excavated against the east wall of the St John Chapel in the south-east corner of the raised part. In 2010 this was contained within a larger excavation in the angle of the east wall and the balustrade at the south end, measuring about 2.30m west-east and 2.00m north-south. Its general maximum depth was 1.00m but there was a further sondage about 0.40m deep and 0.50m square in the north-east corner.
- 6 **Floors**
The existing thin decorated floor tiles, presumably dating from the 1858 restoration, had been laid in a whitish lime mortar. An earlier episode of floor settlement had resulted in some of them being relaid in hard cement, probably as part of the 1951 work. Tiles and mortar had originally been laid over a floor of bricks laid herringbone in 10-15 mm of white mortar; a whole brick was 3cm x 11cm x 21.5cm.
- 7 **Fills**
Beneath the white mortar was a brown earthy gravelly layer averaging 25mm in thickness, amounting to a make-up spread. It lay over a mortary fill with small pieces of stone rubble, some clay and earth, about 0.5m thick in the centre of the excavation rising to 0.3m thickness over the top of the brick vault in the northern part of the trench. Below that, and down as far as the area was excavated, was a mix of clay lumps, earth and mortar: this fill contained disarticulated human remains. The slumping in the tiled floor was caused by the upper make-up layers sinking into the loose mix.
- 5 **The north wall of the chapel**
The wall against which this area was dug, the north wall of the St John Chapel, was abutted at the south end by the balustrade and its brick footing, and at the north end by a wall of bricks 23cm x 11cm x 9cm probably marking the south side of a vault running further north. Seven courses of stone rubble walling were seen below the line of extant wall plaster. At the north end, below two courses of stonework was the south side of a two-course red-brick relieving arch for a low level entrance from the outside through the wall into the chapel. This had been subsequently blocked up with a coursed red-brick infill projecting one course into the chapel. These bricks blocking the east wall and those used for the vault appeared similar.
- 6 **The balustrade**
The architectural balustrade at the south end of the raised part of the chapel had extremely poor foundations. At the east end against the north wall of the chapel, there was a stub footing in brick of up to seven courses coming out one to four brick lengths. This may have represented the south end of the vault before the 1858 restoration. Most of the rest of the foundation was loose rubble acting as fill after removal of, or in place of, the rest of the brick wall. Only the horizontal integrity of the balustrade stonework

had prevented settlement more serious than the cracking already evident.. As part of the current repairs, the balustrade was propped and a new brick foundation constructed underneath it.

7 **The west side of the excavation**

This coincided with what would have originally been the west side of the vault occupying the eastern half of the chapel. 60cm below the modern floor tile level was the top of a stone wall with at least three substantial courses, perhaps representing an original arrangement of vaults, surmounted by two levelling courses of brick perhaps representing post-medieval arrangements. On this was the loose clay and rubble fill already described.

8 **The north side of the excavation**

Under the flooring layers and rubble fill was a red brick wall of nine courses seen, its top 35cm below modern floor tile level. On the east side it abuts the blocked entrance through the east wall; on the west side it appears to be cut into the stone and brick footing but the relationship was difficult to see with certainty.

9 **Observed sequence**

On the basis of limited evidence, a sequence in this part of the chapel can be proposed.

- (a) Original arrangements are unknown though the western stone wall may be part of the vault for early burials made in the chapel, perhaps dating from the 14th century and the Pateshulls.
- (b) Any burials in this part of the chapel were removed when new arrangements were accessed through the north wall, probably dating to the 16th century or later judging by the brickwork of the relieving arch.
- (c) The access was blocked and the burials presumably removed, some perhaps to the western vault, and a brick wall was inserted to the north. This may have been part of arrangements for the Cavendish vault further north. The emptied space was filled with clay and rubble. The floor above was presumably in herringbone-laid brick.
- (d) The 1860s repairs included erection of the balustrade and laying the decorated tiles floor.
- (e) Sinking of the tile floor led to localised resetting in hard cement laying in the 1950s filling up and raising the ground to achieve the present 19th century arrangements topped by a tiled floor, with the clay lumpy material possibly being cast-up from the excavation of the vault known to exist in the western part of the chapel.

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2010

This note should be read in conjunction with the report on the project of 2018-19 reclaiming the derelict chancel, which showed that the St John Mausoleum had been substantially rebuilt in the 1850s as a first stage of a more general church restoration.