

CHURCH OF ST MARY BLETSOE – RESTORATION OF CHANCEL AND VESTRY

Progress report 3

1 This **third** report covers the period between the late May and August Bank Holidays. The tempo of work has slowed slightly due to contractors' holidays but progress is being made on all fronts. The main below-ground archaeological work has been completed, inside and outside the church building; 'writing up' and reporting the results is the next stage. The interior of the chancel itself has been scaffolded in preparation for high-level work on the roof slope and repairing the plaster on the walls. This has required a cunning plan to achieve acceptable co-existence with the local, fairly small, bat population. Much of the time of Craig, Underwood & Weston's stonemason, and his colleague Tom has been taken up with the delicate task of widening the outside door to the 19th century vestry for wheelchair access. Villagers are now getting used to the presence of builders in the church, but the site tour arranged for the weekend of the annual village Country Fayre on 17 June was well-attended (**A, B**). All this would have been impossible without generous local and national grants and donations and the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund.



A, B: Site tour, inside and outside – the day after the annual Country Fayre (which raised £2,500 for the project)

2 The **13th century grave marker** described in **Progress Report 2** has with the agreement of the diocese been transferred to the premises of accredited conservation specialists. They have prepared a report and recommendations for its conservation, for which funding will have to be found. The proposed methodology may be of interest, and can be summarised:

- *carefully clean the marker using soft bristle brushes and clean water under good light using magnification where necessary to prevent loss of any polychromy which may be present*
- *re-adhere the three smaller fragments by 'spot fixing' using a proprietary polyester resin stone adhesive. The resin will be applied in several spots to provide a strong bond to hold the fragment in place while still being reversible*
- *consolidate the cracks around the re-adhered fragments by injecting mortar to further stabilise the repaired area while remaining reversible*
- *use fine lime mortars to fill the cracks to match the colour and texture of the stone as closely as possible, using a mature lime putty and finely sieved stone dusts such as Clipsham*
- *tone-in the score marks to a similar colour to the surrounding stone using artists' acrylics to reduce their visual impact*
- *provide a record of works undertaken for the church's archive and return the object to site*
- *determine an appropriate method of display. If in the church, accessible or at least viewable from both sides, possibly requiring a stainless steel dowel (or two) set into the break surface of the shaft, itself set into a suitably immovable base. Security against theft, and protection against damage, will be important.*

3 We have learnt more about the complicated **development of the 14th century chancel** from studying evidence shown by the drainage trenches dug around its walls. An important indicator is the height of the chamfered offset to the base of the outside wall face, at a relatively fixed level above the ground surface when originally constructed. That surface has been rising due to continuing burials, so the

different levels of the chamfer on various parts are a clue to the sequence of building (**C, D**). Taken with the very slight bend visible half way along the inside of the north wall and the change in the character of the exterior stonework half way along the south wall, this evidence confirms the chancel was doubled in length in the 14th century, from a one-square to a two-square plan, reflecting the prosperity and piety of the Pateshull family, lords of the manor, at that time. It also explains why the angle of view through the *squint* between the chantry chapel in the north transept (now the St John chapel) and the chancel, described in the last report, points at an altar position at the east end of the earlier half-length chancel. This complex story will be explained in more detail in the new guide to be prepared as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund's contribution to the project.



South side of chancel showing (left - **C**) different stonework coursing on the doubled length to the right of the buttress, and (right - **D**) in the drainage trenches the chamfered offset at a lower level on the original shorter chancel to left of the buttress.

4 The last piece of excavation lowered the ground between the west side of the vestry and the north side of the chancel, so that level wheelchair access will be possible from the new floor in the chancel to the disabled WC in the vestry. This also enabled digging the service trenches from the kitchenette and WC out to the sewer in Coplowe Lane and inserting the pump mechanism, all below the future finished ground level. Part of this exercise involves widening the two doors, and **work on the main entrance to the vestry** has been virtually completed. It was a delicate task, propping the wall above the door head, partly dismantling the stonework and then reassembling it in the wider position, with a new keystone (**E – J**).



Vestry door enlargement: **E** before



F propped during work



G nearly complete.



H measuring the enlarged arch

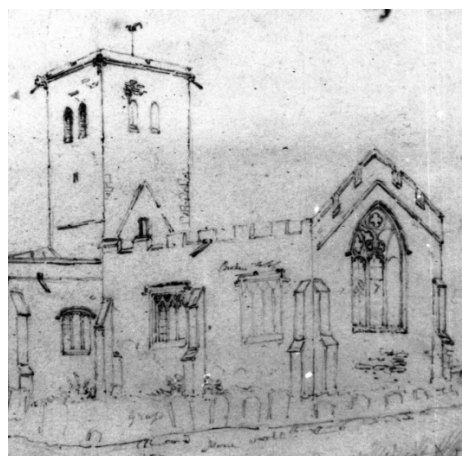


I preparing to cut new stone



J easing the new keystone into position

5 Another example of ‘doing things in the right order’ is putting up the **scaffolding in the chancel** for getting access to the roof and re-plastering the walls, before building up the new floor, so that its weight, however carefully spread, does not damage it before the limecrete used in its construction has fully set (**K**). At the time of writing, the electricians have extended the wiring already installed at ground level so that it will be able to serve the new lights in the chancel, but the main work from the scaffolding has not yet begun. One exception is recording the **eight carved angels** which form part of the 1866 roof structure in their ‘before’ condition, cobwebs and bat droppings and all (**M – Q**). The main timbers of the roof structure appear to be in good condition, as might be expected after only 152 years, despite the problems of the 1970s which led to the current project. It is interesting that the 1866 roof structure, with its fairly steep pitch, replaced a much flatter, presumably 14th century, predecessor, itself replacing a still earlier steep-pitched roof whose gable-end line can be seen on the pencil sketch of c1810 by Thomas Fisher (**L**). The whole cost of the Victorian restoration and re-roofing of the chancel is recorded as £460-17s-0d.



K Chancel interior scaffolded for ceiling lining and wall plaster repair. L Thomas Fisher’s sketch c1810 showing original pitched medieval roof line against the tower; its flatter pre-1866 successor is invisible below the level of the parapets.



M The angels up in the eaves.



N Preliminary recording ‘as found’ by volunteers



O, P, Q 'Before' record of each of eight angels, showing good condition despite several decades of neglect due to inaccessibility

6 **Problems with bats** appear to have been largely resolved. They are a protected species under strict controls regulated by Natural England, favouring old buildings like churches as a roosting habitat, and not to be disturbed during the hibernation period from autumn through to April. Required specialist surveys confirmed what we knew already from droppings found throughout the building, that it is used by bats. Fortunately the use seems relatively low-level; guided by a licenced specialist bats consultant we are able to work round them and outside the hibernation season, without the need for the complicated and expensive process of obtaining a licence from Natural England. Bats need a space only about 15mm wide to get into a building, often at eaves level or at the gable end, and these will be accommodated at high level in the chancel. More information for the curious at <https://www.batsandchurches.org.uk/> (R).



R Not one of ours, but you get the message



S Advertising the Time Capsule project on the village noticeboard.

7 The proposal to commemorate completing the reclamation of the derelict chancel with a **time capsule** is moving forward, attracting interest and support. The likely position subject to the necessary consents from the diocese is under the paving in the tower crossing. Contents is being debated because space will inevitably be limited, but it is hoped to include the recent village photograph, coinage of 2018, and records of those who are now the children of the village, to be retrieved by them in their old age or by their children (S).

David Baker, for the Friends of St Mary Bletsoe

31 August 2018