

CHURCH OF ST MARY BLETSOE – RESTORATION OF CHANCEL AND VESTRY

Progress report 4

1 This **fourth** report covers the period September – December 2018. Main contractor progress has been slow mainly due to manpower shortages, but our architect has maintained appropriate pressure. The original contract ran until July 2018 but is unlikely to be completed before Easter 2019. Delays to such specialised conservation work bring neither penalties to the contractor nor extra costs to the parish. That said, technical problems on some specific major tasks have generated extra costs calling upon the contingency provision, so we are beginning some further fund-raising. A last task for 2018 gave the Heritage Lottery Fund proof of expenditure for the first half of its grant in order to claim the second half. We have also taken forward some of the community tasks which formed part of the HLF application.

2 The main focus of work has been within the chancel, fully scaffolded since the summer. Progress Report **3** was written just as access was gained close up to the **eight carved angels** forming part of the 1866 roof structure. We do not know who carved them. Basic cleaning has shown the quality of workmanship and confirmed their apparent good condition under several decades of cobwebs and bird droppings **A**. They will be much more visible now that the roof slope behind them has been lined out with white-painted insulating plaster-board **B**.



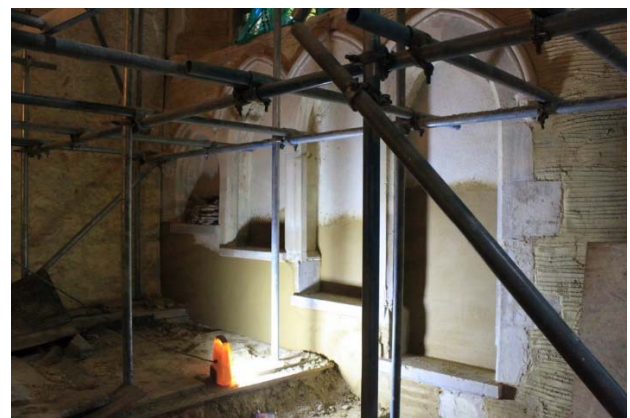
Angels in the chancel roof showing *left* sculpting craftsmanship **A** and *right* one of the full figures with ceiling lining above **B**

3 The main purpose of the scaffolding was to provide access for repairing and painting the **wall plaster** which we now know was entirely renewed in the mid-1860s. We had hoped that its apparent generally good condition would make this a small task but close-up inspection from the scaffolding showed that large areas had become detached from the walls by water through the defective roof of the 1970s and over forty years of unchecked rising damp. A risk that large sheets might suddenly collapse as the chancel began to dry out properly could not be ignored. A more extensive replacement with two coats of new lime-plaster **C D** has used more than half the contingency budget.

4 A positive gain was discovery of a blocked **aumbry** in the north wall under the plaster at the east end **E**. This cupboard for keeping the sacred vessels used in the Mass / Communion service related to the *piscina* for washing them still surviving on the opposite wall next to the *sedilia* or seats for the priests – all part of 14th century pre-Reformation arrangements **F**. The aumbry may have been blocked when covered by re-plastering in the 1860s restoration, or earlier, during the 16th / 17th century Reformation.

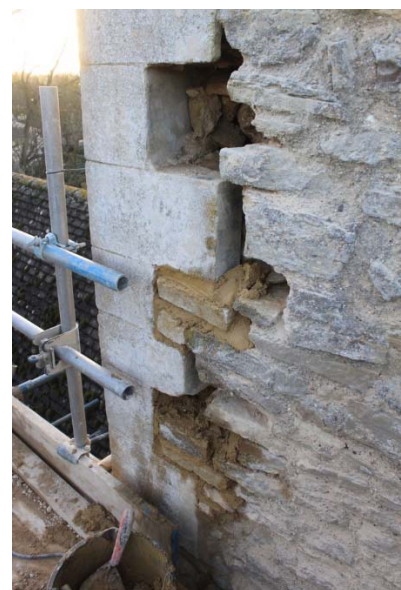


C D High-level wall plaster renewal. *Left* showing defective area stripped at left; *right* wet replacement lime plaster



Re-plastering: **E** *left* north wall showing blocked *ambry* at right centre; **F** *right* south wall *sedilia* with top coat within niche seats arches, *piscina* at left; at extreme right base-coat plasterwork scratched with key for application of top coat

5 Minor cracks had already been noticed within the **1860s turret** giving the bell-ringers access to the tower, near to its junction with the chancel. Scaffolding erected to deal with other minor external defects gave a vantage point from which small cracks by the quoins of the south-east corner of the tower could be seen. The old adage of ‘a stitch in time saves nine’ justified using the opportunity of access to pin the corner blocks more securely into the tower, thereby preventing a major future problem developing.



High-level external repairs: **G** *left* at junction of 1860s turret and chancel; **H** *centre* fixing across the crack between the (later) tower quoins with pins at left hand side; **J** *right* replacing poor quality stonework on the site of the crack

6 At a more domestic subterranean level there were a few days of excitement in November when Bletsoe was blessed with three-way road-works traffic lights (at first wrongly signed as *four-way*). These enabled connection of the outflow pipe from the WC in the vestry and the kitchenette in the chancel south-east corner into the main sewer running along the north side of Coplowe Lane. What looked like an extremely messy job while it happened ended with little more than an appendix scar on the tarmac.

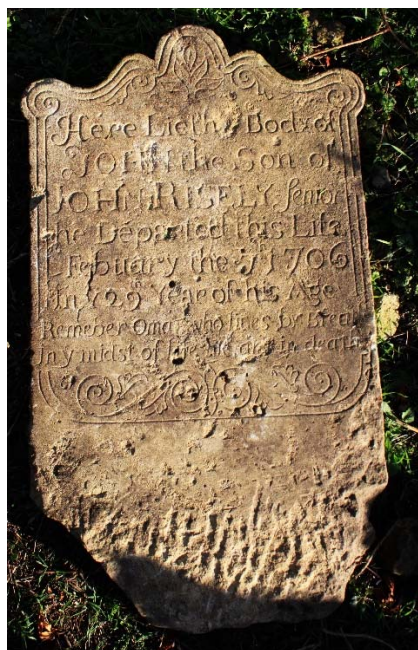


K Pumped drainage from north side of chancel L The other end - 'invisible' sewer connection in Coplowe Lane

7 The grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund in part supports various related community activities designed to increase village participation in using our most important historic building.

- The **community archaeology** programme described in earlier bulletins is now in its report-writing stage.
- Two **site tours** have already happened; at least one more will be arranged when the chancel scaffolding has been removed; we hope the grand opening / re-dedication will be sometime in late Spring
- The **project video** by media students of Sharnbrook Academy is being accumulated by Ellie Gauntlett and her team as a training exercise, including some drone views.
- **Guiding material** for visitors and villagers is being collected for up-to-date accounts of the church and its history in paper and digital formats. A list of sources and a detailed account based upon them will be the basis for considering how best to devise outline and more detailed pamphlets.
- There is a wealth of material for a **village historic archive** collected by individuals and organisations in the parish, as well as what is in county and national archive sources. The late Edward Bean had accumulated a considerable amount covering the last two centuries in particular, complemented by David Baker's material on sites and buildings from prehistoric times onwards for his regular village history and archaeology talks. We hope to provide access to as much of this material as possible, on line through the village web-site, and physically in the church building itself, subject to further discussions. It will be a maintained archive of past activities and events for supplementing with new records of future activities.

8 '**Hunting the headstones**' is perhaps the most ambitious HLF-related project. In 1962 the churchyard was largely cleared of headstones to facilitate grass mowing. 112 were laid flat neatly around the edge of the churchyard. Fifty-five years ago, churchyard and family history research were undeveloped, so neither the inscriptions on the stones nor their original locations had been recorded. The project aims to rediscover these headstones, record surviving inscriptions, and re-erect good intact examples in a part of the churchyard yet to be determined, having obtained all the necessary diocesan consents. The task will continue in the New Year when the work of the main contractors has been completed and their secure materials compound removed from around much of the north edge.



M One of the best re-discovered headstones, to John Risely, who died on 7 February 1706 aged 29. **N** Recording inscriptions

9 So far, the west and south edges of the churchyard, as far north as the twin wrought-iron gates, were investigated before Christmas. Strong men – notably George Baxter, Mike Gibbons, Bob Latham, Mike Grimes – found slightly buried headstones. Kenny Pickering and his neat little Kubota mini-digger, a key contribution from Bourne End, carefully turned over face-down headstones **M N O P**. Our recording team, Monica Hetherington and Essi Baxter, are transcribing the inscriptions so that they can be related to the parish burial registers. There are interesting and well-designed headstones erected by families such as Risely and Neale, well known in the pre-1950s estate village.



O P George Baxter (in green) watching Kenny Pickering and his mighty mini-machine turning over headstones

10 These community projects must be completed or properly set up by August 2019. We need all available memories, skills and help for them to be successful. This generation of villagers with its particular talents and interests has an opportunity to bring its glimpses of the past into an undeniably different present for the benefit of those who will follow us. People interested in contributing are invited to contact David Baker (781179 dbb@suttons.org.uk) or Mike Gibbons (781161 or mike.gibbons@bletsoe.net).

David Baker, for the Friends of St Mary Bletsoe

31 December 2018