

The Big ‘Ole

Some months past, I (the thinner churchwarden) was not a little worried to find a hole, about the size of a large foot, had appeared in the floor of the StJohn chapel of St Mary’s, Bletsoe. My immediate instincts led me to believe that a certain large individual in our congregation had again put his foot in it, but literally. However, try as I might, I was unable to apportion blame in that direction since, upon inserting my arm into the orifice, I found that I could move my forearm in almost any direction without my hand touching the sides of the underlying cavity.

My churchwardenly instincts raced into overdrive; my mind whirled with nightmarish spectres of structural problems, diocesan faculties, architects’ schedules, builders’ tea breaks, heritage professionals’ clipboards, and archaeologists’ muddy boots, all accompanied by the sound of a thousand church treasurers simultaneously sucking their teeth in a sharp intake of breath.

Once I had regained my senses I (the thinner churchwarden) called the attention of the other churchwarden to the opening whilst keeping him well away in fear of further collapse or having to explain his disappearance (a trick on a scale that would defeat even Penn & Teller) to the PCC Secretary. We decided that an urgent investigation was required in order to determine the cause of the collapse, and the full force of the diocesan conservation process was fired into action at full speed. Six months later, with all the paperwork completed, the builders have been and we now have a big hole some six feet long and four feet deep by the east wall of the chapel.

To some it may just be a hole in the floor, but it is a very important hole inasmuch as it tells us a lot about the construction of the building, its history, and Victorian standards of workmanship.

The chapel forms the north transept of the cruciform church building, and is entered from the main body of the church through glazed doors at the base of the tower. The chapel is on two levels with a short flight of steps leading to the upper level beyond an ornate stone balustrade. The floor is covered with Victorian encaustic tiles, which probably came from Ironbridge in Shropshire. On the lower level, beneath the balustrade at the western side of the chapel, there is a large slate slab covering steps leading down to the vaulted crypt occupying the western half of the space beneath the raised floor area - we know this from an inspection of the crypt carried out ten or more years ago.

However, we knew nothing about what occupied the space beneath the eastern side of the chapel, other than a vague reference on the Cavendish memorial referring to Lady Lucy Cavendish being ‘interred in the vault below’, although we had conjectured that there may be another sealed crypt on the eastern side, similar in size and layout to that on the western side. After all, the chapel had been a mortuary and chantry chapel since the 12th century, but the remains in the western crypt only date back as far as the 17th century.

As the builders set to work excavating the hole, the cause of the collapse was readily apparent; the Victorian contractors responsible for laying the floor and installing the balustrade (probably during the restoration undertaken by architect J T Wing in 1858) had filled the void beneath with a loose, uncompacted mix of clay, sand, and building rubble. Over this they had laid a layer of sharp sand and a thick layer of hard lime cement on which the encaustic tiles were bedded. As the loose infill had settled over time a large void was created over which the floor remained suspended but unsupported.

The big hole, in truth, only covers a very small area of the chapel floor, but its position halfway along the eastern wall could not have been more revealing. The first thing of note that came to light was a bricked-up archway at ground level which could only have been an exterior entrance to a crypt beneath an earlier floor level. Adjacent to this is a cill line indicating the original floor level, below which is a rectangle of disturbed earth containing human remains, probably a pre-plague underslab burial. However, at the eastern end of the hole the excavations uncovered a retaining wall running from west to east, supporting an area of brick vaulting which presumably covers a crypt which may contain the remains of Lady Lucy Cavendish. Although Lord Cavendish is interred elsewhere, we know from the memorial inscription that it was his intention to be interred with his wife, so presumably there was a means of access to allow for this. At present we are not certain about the location of an entrance, but it is likely that there is slab-covered opening concealed beneath the remaining area of as yet unexcavated Victorian tiled floor.

We now await the architects report, an estimate of the cost of repairs, and the funds to carry them out.