

No. 33: "Holy Trinity's 'naughty' churchwardens"

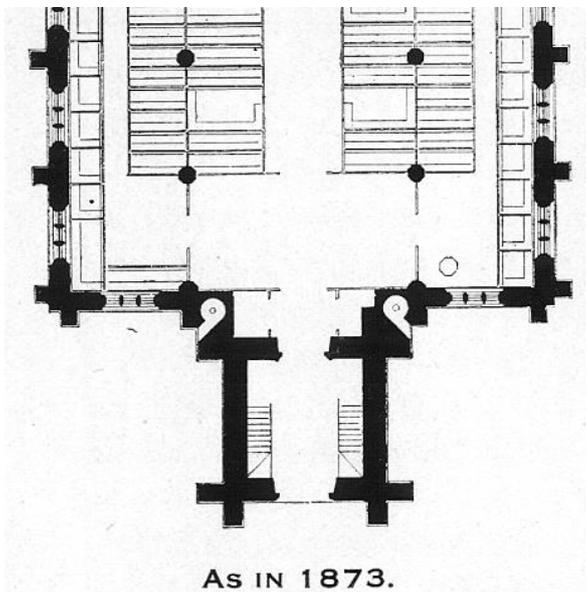
Sometimes I feel a bit overwhelmed with the responsibility of being churchwarden. It is easy to feel burdened with a large, 200 year old listed building, churchyard, growing congregation with a worshipping community of well over 200 people, an employed staff team and 6-figure budget. The Church of England is governed by canon law which in some cases replicates or replaces the law of the land, particularly regarding its buildings. Churchwardens are the bishop's officers, elected annually by parishioners and are required to work co-operatively with the vicar and to take legal responsibility for all the church property.

When alterations (and even quite minor alterations) are proposed to church buildings, an application for a 'faculty' has to be approved by diocesan advisors. Canon law is overseen by the diocesan Chancellor and a Consistory Court. Although many of the historic powers of Consistory Courts have now passed to other courts (including for divorce, probate etc.) they still have the same powers as the High Court.

One of the most major restorations of the church was proposed in 1880 and it is this story I am writing about in this month's blog. Spoiler alert – this story involves one of my predecessors being summoned to the Consistory Court and a public enquiry followed....



Consistory Court - Chester Cathedral



In 1873 the pews beneath the central part of the original west gallery were removed and an entrance lobby created. There had been a lobby in this area originally but it had been opened up and pews for 30 people put there in 1845 when the singing gallery was removed and the organ placed in the west gallery. As the church rarely needed this additional seating, it was permitted to remove them to make more space at the back of the church.

The general feeling of the time was that the church interior was 'dark and dreary'. The Victorian taste was for elaborately decorated church buildings and Holy Trinity was considered

'dreadfully plain'. Further changes occurred in 1878 when the pulpit was moved to the north-side in front of the chancel, to allow the choir to move into the chancel from their previous position in front of the organ in the west gallery.

It appears that moving the choir improved the worship in church and attendance increased. Sarah Allen, the sister-in-law of the church's founder promised the church £1000 if the organ could also be moved from the west gallery into what was then the north vestry. Permission was granted by the Bishop of Ripon for the moving of the organ in December 1879.

Then it seems the church committee and churchwardens got a little over-excited and carried away... They proposed the removal of the north and south galleries and a whole-scale redesign of the chancel, nave and west gallery; works, that it seems, were far beyond that covered by the Bishop's 'faculty' permission.

The organ builder, Jardine of Manchester won the contract for the building of a new organ, using some of the previous instrument, the rest of which was sold to a church in Burnley. The north vestry roof was raised in height to accommodate the new organ and the part of the north gallery nearest to the organ removed.

The church committee presented its new plans for the reordering of the church at a meeting at the Portland Street School on March 2nd 1880. The works included the raising of the chancel floor by 19" and the provision of new furnishings, the removal of the side galleries and the provision of new pews in the nave and side-aisles. The church was legally required to provide 500 free sittings, so it was proposed that 'All seats were free after the bell stops'. A sign saying this was placed outside the church door. Many pews or sittings were leased to parishioners at this time as a way of raising church income, a practice that continued until the 1960s but was already falling out of favour by the 1880s.

There were only 7 pew-holders in the side galleries. They were all offered alternative pews or compensation for the loss of their pews. Two of them claimed £10 compensation, one claimed £15, one gave up his pew and the others took pews in the nave. However, Mr William Hick, a teasel merchant, rejected the proposal and refused to relinquish his pew. Hick said that his pew had been sold to his father in the 1820s for £64.16s and thus must be worth at least £65, but that he was refusing more for the principle, - he had sentimental attachments to the pew and could not possibly allow its removal, despite it being 'the most inconvenient pew in the church', - the 4th row at the easternmost end of the south gallery (in what is now the Parish Office).

Hick was offered £20 compensation and a pew elsewhere, but this was not accepted. Hick was supported in his rejection of the scheme by Mr Halstead the organ blower, who presumably feared for the loss of his job on the removal of the organ to the chancel and the purchase of a hydraulic engine to blow the bellows, - he was subsequently dismissed from his duties for supporting Hick.

Citation was published for the removal of the galleries and William Hick objected to the scheme, filing a special proxy through his solicitor. Two other parishioners appeared in person at the Consistory Court in Ripon to object. (Huddersfield was part of the Diocese of Ripon between 1836 and 1888).

The case opened on April 29th 1880 in Ripon Cathedral. The objectors presented a 48 name petition against the removal of the galleries. The case lasted throughout the spring and took place over 9 days. On July 29th it was adjourned to a public enquiry at the Portland Street School.

The objectors argued that they were acting in the best interest of the church. They calculated that the church practically would accommodate 1128, but with the removal of the galleries would only hold 798, - enough they admitted for a normal Sunday, but completely inadequate for the Whitsun services when the schools' children completely filled the church to capacity.

The argument for the church ran that the church would realistically hold 884, not including the benches at the back of the galleries. They argued that the new scheme with the new pews and with increased numbers of seats in the west gallery where the organ had been and in the nave, where the lobby had been, the church would now seat 886.

Both parties accepted that neither calculation of the seating adequately provided 500 free sittings, as stipulated by the original act of Parliament in 1816, but in practice it was noted that it was rare that more than a half-dozen of free-sittings were ever required. It appears that the stated capacity of 1500 had always been something of an over-estimate, and included benching at the rear of the galleries, in the aisles and in the (removed) singing loft and was based on a minimal number of inches per sitting (17" per person rather than the preferred 20" – and few people's bottoms are less than 17" across!). An actual study made for the Public Enquiry stated the capacity being 884.

The objectors also argued that the architectural quality of the building would be upset if the galleries were removed; - and they complained that already the original pulpit had been replaced by one that was too small and was located where it could not be easily seen from the galleries, on the north-side of the chancel.

An inspection of the church was carried out on August 9th 1880 and at the enquiry the objector's case was upheld; - the galleries were not to be removed. The church was ordered to pay Hick's costs, - £137 12 10d legal costs and £6 7 10d surveyors and architects costs, which the church was slow in providing, invoking an additional £7 13 2d.

Attendance was quoted as being about 300, of whom 80-120 were Sunday school 'scholars'. The smaller children were kept at Sunday school rather than being expected to sit through the morning service. It had proved difficult for them to hear in the galleries and to sit still. "*The congregation was scattered and caused the service to be a dull one*" stated the churchwarden, Edward Taylor Sykes, during the enquiry

The galleries, upon inspection by the architect John Rowbottom for the Public Enquiry, were considered the worst he ever saw, possibly against the better judgement of the original designer, since they passed in front of the windows and were not even tied into the actual structure of the building.

Despite the case being on-going, during April 1880 tenders for the work were sought and in May, subscriptions were received for the work. Church was closed on August 29th for work to proceed, although by then a Faculty had not actually been granted.

The Faculty was eventually granted by the Bishop of Ripon on November 11th 1880 authorising many of the alterations (which were in fact nearly complete by this stage) - except for the removal of the galleries. At a meeting of the church committee on November 22nd the churchwardens were requested to ascertain from the Diocesan Chancellor, whether or not the church was at liberty to re-open, without first replacing the removed bay of the north gallery. It was accepted that it need not be rebuilt.

All the seats and pews in the nave and aisles were replaced with new ones of pitch pine. 'Minton' tiles were laid in the central aisle and perambulatories. The side aisles were made using the best of the Yorkshire stone flags.

The church re-opened on December 6th 1880. The children of the parish presented the eagle lectern to the church. Over the coming few years the galleries were rebuilt and improved, new choir stalls, pulpit and vicar's stall put in and the church completely

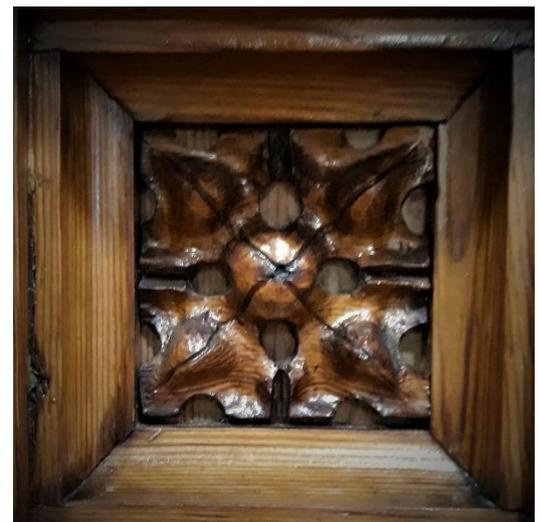
redecorated. In the photo below, you can just make out the elaborate paintwork on the walls of the chancel, including the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. (I'd love to know what colour-scheme was used!) The east window and other stained glass, the church clock, and lychgate also date from this time. New heating and gas lights were also installed.



Many of the features of the 1880s reordering can still be seen. Some, like the gallery fronts have been reused or repurposed. The photo below is from the dado on the second-floor landing, which was originally part of the side galleries which were eventually removed in 1994 in the next major reordering. To my knowledge there have been no further incidents where the churchwardens of Holy Trinity have ended up in the Consistory Courts.

Churchwardens and clergy are required to work closely together, however sometimes they have had a tendency to blame each other when things go awry, as was the situation in this story! In 1880 the vicar, Rev. Thomas Sharpe, aged 63 was seriously ill and left most of the running of the church to his son, Rev. Charles Molesworth Sharpe who was the curate. However, some might say the churchwardens at the time should have known better and followed the proper procedures and deserved to end up in court, following their negligence.

Despite the difficulties and heartache involved in getting all the reordering work done, the redesign of the church's interior worked well and was highly acclaimed for many years to come. The care of church buildings are often a heavy burden for churchwardens, but in my opinion, when our church is full of worshippers it's definitely worth it.



Detailing from 1887 gallery front

Andy Barber
August '19