

# ONE OF THE CHURCHES THAT CROMWELL KNOCKED ABOUT A BIT - OR NOT ?

*By Edwin Rose*

*In her article reprinted in the Glaven Historian No.3, Sarah Woodhouse describes the discovery of medieval stained glass in a north chancel window at Wiveton church. This is indeed an important and interesting discovery. However, it is not necessarily the case that the windows were 'bricked up by the desolate Wiveton parishioners after Cromwell's men had travelled the coast smashing statues and windows'. Other possibilities are examined in this paper.*

## **The Smoking Musket: Who is Guilty ?**

It is traditional nowadays (and has been for the past century or so) to blame any damage in parish churches on Cromwell - a term which one assumes encompasses his agents. In part this is due to a confusion with Thomas Cromwell and the Dissolution of the Monasteries. In fact there have been three periods in history when churches have been subject to despoliation.

The first is the Reformation and the break between the English throne and the Papacy. The destruction of this time is well analysed in Susan Yaxley's *The Reformation in Norfolk Parish Churches* (1990). This book gives details of the defacing of images, the removal of wallpaintings and so on. Of particular relevance to us is the record that the churchwardens at Weybourne paid for the 'defacing of the glass windows'; at St Michael at Plea in Norwich a considerable sum was expended on the new glazing of seventeen windows in order to remove 'profane histories'. In these, and in the other cases cited, it was the local churchwardens and parishioners who instigated the removal, and not some outside body. There were of course those who regretted the passing of the old religion, as evidenced by the careful burial of a statue of St Paul at Bergh Apton, and some other similar examples, but in the main it was the leaders of the local community who led the way, whether for religious or for political reasons.

Some attempt to reverse the changes was made in the reign of Mary I, but this was a brief interlude; by 1562, in the reign of Elizabeth I, the author of the *Second Book of Homilies* could lament the sight of 'so many churches ruinous and foully decayed'.

The second is indeed the Civil War. However in Norfolk this had little effect, for the county was almost solidly Parliamentary with the exception of King's Lynn and the occasional plot in Norwich. In 1643, Parliament ordered the pulling down throughout England of any crosses that had survived the Reformation; this was often fulfilled simply by knocking the head off. But there is little record of any specific destruction carried out in Norfolk churches, nor (as far as the writer is aware) is there record of any force sent by Cromwell along the coast to deface churches. Any such destruction which took place is, once again, more likely to have been a spontaneous act of local people.

It may be argued that the musket ball hole in the stained glass is evidence of a Civil War date. Yet vandals still take pot-shots at church windows today without any religious agenda being involved. It may well be that in the atmosphere of the Civil War a local trooper may have shot at what he regarded as an idolatrous image, but a bullet hole in one tracery light does not mean that the whole window was destroyed at the same time.

The third period occurred in the 18th century. The amount of destruction that took place at this time is rarely appreciated nowadays. The best source from which to learn about it is the *Church Notes* of the antiquary Tom Martin, dating from the first half of the century (they are now Rye Manuscripts 17 at the Norfolk Record Office). Martin's records are often a lament for the state of the churches he saw. At Gillingham, for example, he records how in 1748 the battlements were pushed off the tower; the chancel gable was then pulled down, the roof removed and the porch demolished. The workmen then went round the church smashing in one window after another, leaving only 'the shattered walls of the nave which are likewise threatened'. Today all that remains is the tower. He also records small details that illustrate the low regard in which the church was held at the time. For example: 'Take all the church of Filby together and 'tis a pretty building but the jackdaws and pigeons fowl it very much. I saw a very nasty sight in the bason of the font vizt near a dozen very nasty fowl pipes with tobacco in a pack and dirty candles ends, put in there by the ringers as I was told, quite shameful.'

Similarly at Tunstead in 1722 the churchwardens bricked up the east window of the church because the local children kept breaking the glass with stones.

In one sense the dilapidations of this period were worse than those that had gone before because there was not even a religious or political basis for it. The excuse was used that money could not be raised to maintain the buildings because people no longer cared for the established church. Much of the rubble from demolished or reduced churches went to fill holes in roads.

Thus, on the basis of examination of the Usual Suspects, one must in the first place be surprised that any stained glass survived the Reformation. That which did is more likely to have been removed in the 18th century than at the time of the Civil War, and any damage that did occur at the latter time is unlikely to be due to outside interference.

### **The Hard Evidence**

Let us now turn to the actual brickwork that forms the blocking of the window in question.

The bricks are well-made red bricks with few large inclusions. They have diagonal skintlings or hack-marks (pressure ridges formed when the wet bricks are stacked to dry before firing). Such marks are not found on bricks made before the 16th century; detailed research by Mrs E. M. James has found that diagonal skintlings cease to occur in Norfolk in the period 1770-1780, after which horizontal ridges are found due to a change in technique. These bricks therefore date to between c. 1500 and c. 1780. However, in size, fabric and appearance the bricks quite definitely fit with a date in the 18th century.

The tracery lights, where the glass was found, are too small to take whole bricks and are filled with small fragments and chips which, by themselves, are not dateable; but they are

not obviously different in fabric from the main blocking. An exception is a small group of fragments on the inner face of the lights, which may be of later date, but could belong to an over-fired brick.

There is, therefore, no doubt that the present brick blocking of the main lights of the window from which the stained glass came dates from the 18th century, before c. 1780. If the window had been bricked up after destruction of the glass in the mid-17th century, then this blocking would have had to have been removed and replaced by new bricks in the 18th. One might argue that the tracery lights alone were bricked over in the 17th century, and the remainder of the window left for another century. This does not appear to be a reasonable supposition.

### **Motive: why the chancel ?**

It is often forgotten that before the Oxford Movement and the rise of the Gothic Revival in the mid-19th century, chancels of churches tended to be disused. As one architectural historian has put it, the kind of glory-hole and junk store that one nowadays finds in the base of the tower was then located in the chancel. Often the chancel was put to alternative uses such as a school or even more secular use, as with the famous case of Benjamin Franklin's printing press at St Bartholomew the Great. From the Reformation up until the 1840s churches did not have an 'altar' but instead a communion table placed within the nave. This pattern was interrupted for a time when Archbishop Laud attempted to restore the pre-Reformation arrangement but in most cases this did not last. The thorough restorations of the late-19th century have removed and obscured the evidence for these periods of disuse in most cases. But in the 18th century, when as already described money for church repairs was hard to find, if there was a question as to which windows should be maintained and which blocked up, those in the chancel would be the first to go. In a situation such as Wiveton where the north wind blows off the sea, north windows were the prime candidates for blocking.

### **The Verdict**

The circumstantial evidence suggests that it may have been only the tracery lights of the window that survived the Reformation. The physical evidence appears to show that a musket ball was shot through one of the figures in the stained glass, and this may indicate a 17<sup>th</sup> century date for this incident, although this awaits confirmation. But the evidence also shows clearly that the main blocking of the window took place in the early- to mid-18th century, and there is no evidence for blocking taking place immediately after destruction in an event of the Civil War.

On this evidence no jury would convict Cromwell or his associates of the destruction of the windows.

Edwin Rose is Development Control Officer in the Norfolk Landscape Archaeology section of the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service.