

St. Michael's, Booton

There has been a church on the site at Booton since the 14th century. The fabric of the original church was not of any great interest in an architectural sense. The nave was perpendicular in style and the chancel was of an earlier date. The windows were filled with stained glass and depicted donors of the church with their coats of arms. The original roof decayed and was replaced with one created by a churchwarden. Unfortunately, this work cost the church its four bells, they were sold to cover the cost of the new roof. Various changes to the church during the five hundred years to the mid-19th century and general decay and lack of attention had left the church in an extremely sorry state of repair.

Whitwell Elwin had been rector of Booton for a number of years when in the 1870s he began at his own expense a complete rebuilding of his dilapidated church. Whitwell Elwin was an amazing man with an output of writing, so prodigious that the letterbox still to be seen in the boundary wall of the church was put there as he produced so much post. He was editor of the "Quarterly Review" for seven years and was a friend of the author William Makepeace Thackeray.

Whitwell Elwin had initially built himself a fine rectory, which stands next to the church, his son persuaded him that since a fine rectory could not stand next to such a ruin as the church, he should extend the architectural skills he had just used and build another church.

The Rector was not trained as an architect or a draughtsman, but he became one through trial, error and constant alteration during the 20 years or so it took to complete the church. He depended on a well-stocked architectural library, many details of which he had collected from his tour of churches and cathedrals throughout this country and France.

If the church is to be given a style, then it is basically Early English but jackdaw-like he stole designs from other buildings near and far.

The nave was copied from a Warwickshire church, the west window from St. Stephen's chapel, Westminster, the north door from Burgh-next-Aylsham. Most of the workmen used were employed from local unskilled available labour and they and Whitwell Elwin proceeded to build by trial and error, with many amendments, for 24 years.

The slim, twin, diagonally placed towers, so striking when seen in the distance over the trees, and possibly inspired by those of Milan Cathedral, had to be re-erected on the stronger foundations.

The walls were constructed of knapped flint and Bath stone. All the pinnacles and florid decoration were unfortunately of this soft stone, presumably chosen by Elwin for ease of carving by his workmen.

In the nave the glass of the windows, with greens and blues predominating, represents on the north side female saints and attendant angels, and on the south side angels with musical instruments.

The Church is dedicated to St. Michael, the armed Angel of Light who strikes down the dragon of evil. So, he is represented in a niche over the north door, standing on a dragon headed serpent, re-sheathing his sword in its scabbard, triumphant.

The angel theme is continued in the chancel, where the windows depict angel stories from the scriptures, and huge wooden angels with upswept wings launch themselves from the hammer-beams.

Above the chancel arch there is an enormous, rounded triangle of a window, lighting nothing and giving no light.

Whitwell Elwin wanted to build a church which would influence everyone that entered into it that they were in the house of God, the house of prayer. He said he wanted to build a church that "would withstand an earthquake", unfortunately the soft stone, which he found easier to use, and the passing of the 20th century has deteriorated the church at an alarming rate.

The parish is now faced with a similar task and an appeal for money to repair the worst of the deterioration needs to raise £28,000 by the end of the year. Total restoration will cost about £300,000. It is indeed sad that the church has recently been closed due to the danger of falling masonry, and that the House of God can only now be entered at the visitor's own risk.

The late Sir John Betjeman, a great champion of Victorian Gothic (and all things Victorian), became a patron of the restoration appeal, stating of St. Michael's, "There never was so strange an upheaval on the Norfolk landscape as that which caused the stones of Booton Church to be placed one on top of the other until they reached the sky. Such a chapel as Booton will never be built again, long may it dominate the East Anglian scene."

Rodney Mason

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