

The Battle for Blythburgh Church. Restoration v Conservation in late-Victorian Suffolk.:

Talk by Dr Alan Mackley, Hon Research Fellow, School of History, University of East Anglia given to SIAH 11th February, 2017

In the 19th century Blythburgh church was 'mouldering into ruin', and was closed in 1881 by the bishop of Norwich as unsafe. The launch of proposals for restoration precipitated a 25 year long rancorous conflict between local vicars and restoration committees, and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Extensive documentation survives covering both sides of the dispute. This talk presented the story based on documents edited for the Suffolk Records Society volume 60, entitled "The Restoration of Blythburgh Church, 1881-1906," to be published in May, 2017.

Blythburgh itself is an Anglo-Saxon foundation. Christianity came to Suffolk early in the seventh century and Blythburgh was one of its most important centres. At the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 Blythburgh was part of the royal estate. It was one of Suffolk's twelve market towns, and its church was especially rich. Around 1120 Henry I granted Blythburgh church to the Augustinian canons of St Osyth's Priory in Essex.

Rebuilding took place in the 15th century and by 1480 the project was complete. The great new church, which retained an existing fourteenth-century tower, does not reflect either a large or especially rich community. The church's size, its extensive stained glass (now almost all gone) and its furnishings, reflected less the wealth of the community as a whole than the deliberately conspicuous expenditure of individuals who wished to be remembered after their deaths. They relied upon the prayers of the living to speed their souls through purgatory to salvation: their spending was, as one writer has put it, a form of post-mortem fire insurance. Such a lavish church would become an insupportable burden.

In 1537 King Henry VIII suppressed the priory. At its suppression the priory's properties were granted to Walter Wadelond of Needham Market and in 1548 reverted to the Hopton family, being combined with the Blythburgh manor they already owned. In 1592 they sold the Blythburgh, Walberswick and Westleton manors. Later in the 17th century the estate passed to the Blois family.

In 1577 a thunderstorm destroyed the spire and damaged the church structure. William Dowsing visited the church in April 1644 and with puritan zeal smashed crosses and carvings, figures and glass. The Archdeacon's parochial visitation of 1663 found a church falling into disrepair and disuse. A widespread village fire of 1676 was especially damaging, and Blythburgh shrunk to a very small hamlet, only reviving somewhat in the 19th century.

By the 19th century the majority of the village attended the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Dunwich Road, built in 1837. A report on the church in 1808 noted that many decayed windows were bricked up, and there were brick columns installed to support the canopy of John Hopton's tomb.

The fabric of Blythburgh church was in a very bad condition in the late nineteenth century, although not reduced to the shells that Covehithe and Walberswick had become. The Revd Henry Sykes became vicar in 1879. The Bishop of Norwich closed the church in late 1881 because the roof was unsafe, and Sykes set up a Restoration Committee. The architect George Edmund Street was approached for advice, and he visited in November, 1881, but died in December. His son Arthur took over the scheme. The Street scheme included re-leading the roof, replacing the windows, and extensive restoration estimated at £4,875. Funds in hand totalled £44, so a programme of fund raising events was instituted such as musical evenings and a bazaar.

Press reports were soon brought to the notice of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, (SPAB). It had been founded in 1877 by William Morris, George Wardle, his business associate, and the architect Philip Webb. They opposed the over-zealous restoration of medieval buildings, often involving virtual rebuilding, with the loss of original features and the use of inappropriate styles and finishes. The SPAB immediately sought details of the restoration plans drawn up for the local restoration committee by the architect George Edmund Street, and continued after his death in 1881 by his son Arthur. Webb visited the church in 1882 and prepared his own report for the Society.

The SPAB became extremely concerned about the restoration proposals, but their ability to influence the local committee was complicated by a public dispute between the incumbent, Henry Sykes, and the patron, Sir John Blois, over the latter's alleged responsibility for allowing the deterioration of the church, and his parsimony in response to the appeal for funds. Blois was responsible as patron for maintenance of the chancel, but its exact extent became another bone of contention, while Blois also claimed that one third of any funds raised should be allocated to the Chancel. Further bad feeling arose after a press report credited Lady Blois with being the prime mover in the restoration project, rather than Sykes.

The Bishop of Norwich suggested that proposals should be divided into three categories, with only urgent work going forward, while the Archdeacon headed off the building committee by insisting that only the Vestry could approve works on the church. This approval was gained in 1882.

By September 1882, Sir John Blois attended the Restoration Committee and formed a Building Committee to spend the £730 which had now been raised. A Southwold builder had submitted a tender of £1,049, and in Spring 1883, work began before all the money was in hand.

SPAB were alarmed by Street's proposals. Philip Webb, SPAB's architect, deplored fixed price contracts, which gave too much control to the builder, and preferred small blocks of work being let by a Clerk of Works, thus retaining detailed control. Webb suggested that decayed windows should be bricked up rather than replaced, also leaving other past repairs visible with their own history. Morris's dictum was "better a crutch than a lost limb."

The Revd Sykes suggested that SPAB was being unreasonable, and even kept their comments from the local committee until after the contract was let, suggesting that these were too late to be considered.

The existence of a London Appeal Committee, formed in response to press reports, added further confusion. The parties debated 'Preservation' v 'Restoration' in the national and county press. By the spring of 1883 the SPAB was expressing grave disquiet at events. Despite meeting Sir John Blois, and Blois dismissing Sykes as "a nobody", SPAB got nowhere. SPAB was anxious for work to be stopped to give time for the consideration of its own proposals. Letters to the patron, Sir John Blois, and the Earl of Stradbroke pressed the Society's case. The London Committee felt unable to claim any right to interfere in the matter. Work appears to have progressed according to the local committee's preferences.

In January, 1884, the Committee looked at the roof condition again, but there was no further money available. At Easter, 1884, the church was reopened, and Sir John Blois stepped down from the Building Committee. He had donated £100 to the appeal, which was probably a lot less than his liability for the chancel work. Events had raised £289, the local gentry contributed £208, members of the clergy found £200, and other local donors subscribed £320 of total contributions. The main work in the first phase was to repair the roof of the south aisle, the south aisle parapet, restore all but nine of the windows (that were left blocked up), repair the leads of the main roof and north aisle, and repair the floor with matching bricks. The box pews were removed as a supplementary job. The cost was £1064.

The press lauded Sykes's efforts, but there was no enthusiasm to carry on, despite dangerous issues still being outstanding. Lack of cash, rather than SPAB's efforts, had restricted restoration work.

SPAB's contact with Blythburgh was resumed in 1894, with a new incumbent Henry Oakes. No work was being done and funds were urgently needed. The south porch was crumbling and the remaining glass windows were in deep decay. William Morris visited the church in July 1895, with F. Thackeray Turner, the SPAB's secretary. They restated the rigorous SPAB position, including opposition to opening out any more windows, and urged that the south porch should be attended to without delay.

Revd Oakes seems to have followed the Sykes tradition of ignoring SPAB, falling out with his patron, disagreeing with the Bishop, and even with his own architect, Arthur Street. Oakes demanded ownership of Street's plans, which resulted in Street stepping down from further involvement.

In 1897, Oakes was replaced as vicar by the Reverend Woodruff, and in 1901 a new joint appeal for funds with Walberswick was launched, with plans drawn up by C Whitcomb. In September, 1902, a new and enthusiastic church warden, Claud Egerton, a civil engineer, was appointed. Egerton soon assumed control of the planning and the latest new vicar, the Reverend Richard Wing seemed content to let him do so.

When in 1902 the SPAB saw Whitcomb's new proposals for restoration work they were 'astonished and taken aback'. 'We have not seen such drastic and thorough-going "restoration" advocated for many a year.' Another bitter debate ensued.

In 1903, Joseph Southall visited on behalf of SPAB, and Wing told him to talk to Egerton, who still had faith in his own, unnamed, architect. At this date he could still have been referring to Whitcombe. Powell was a SPAB architect and Egerton would not employ him. By 1904 some £400 had been raised in the new appeal.

In 1905, the architect William Weir produced plans on behalf of SPAB, but the Archdeacon refused to consider them. A national appeal was now launched with a patroness in the person of Queen Victoria's daughter, Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll, supported by the Bishop of Norwich, and many other notable national figures. Prince Frederick Duleep Singh was not a member of the original appeal committee but was later proposed by the patron to bolster SPAB's influence on the committee. The aim was to raise £3,000 to execute the plans of the committee.

The Society did succeed in having the south porch repaired and not rebuilt. But the local committee insisted that overall the plans of its own architect and not the SPAB's should be followed. The SPAB would only endorse the work if it met its standards but an inspection in 1906 by William Weir was extremely critical of work on the roof, and general priorities and techniques. With the expression of deep regret and disappointment, the SPAB disassociated itself from the work.

The Society had remained at odds with the local committee for twenty-five years. In spite of having the patron on its side, and being able to field noble allies the SPAB was defeated by a determined local building committee. Although the avoidance of over-restoration at Blythburgh might have been seen as a success for Morris and the SPAB, it was probably the case that it was shortage of funds that really prevented further extensive restoration.