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THE CONDITION OF KENTISH CHURCHES BEFORE VICTORIAN RESTORATION

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Among the recent acquisitions of the Kent Archives Office is a series of notes made by a local ecclesiologist, W.P. Griffiths, F.S.A., of his visits to churches in the County in the period immediately prior to their restoration from the 1840s onwards.¹ Griffiths' notes complement those of a much more celebrated ecclesiologist, Sir Stephen Glynne, whose observations on Kentish churches have also been recorded.² Like Glynne, Griffiths was an advocate of restoration and was clearly a supporter and possibly a member of the Cambridge Camden Society, founded for this purpose in 1839.³ Like Glynne, he was generally more interested in the fabric of the churches than their fittings, but his notes are considerably more detailed than Glynne's and have thus preserved a fairly specific account of the way in which these churches were ordered at the time of his visits. They throw considerable light on the substantial survival of medieval fittings in Kentish churches up to the 1840s, and on the generally conservative and modest adaptations that seem to have been made to most Kentish churches in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They also suggest that many alterations to church interiors were being made in the first three decades of the nineteenth century that prepared the ground for the more radical alterations of the Victorian restorers.

Altogether Griffiths visited a total of 72 churches beginning with Beckenham on 11th September, 1838, and finishing with Wrotham on 9th June, 1856; all but seven of these visits, however, took place

¹ Kent Archives Office, U2189 Z1-6

² (Ed.) W.H. Gladstone, *Notes on the Churches of Kent*, London 1877; for a discussion of these see W.N. Yates, 'Sir Stephen Glynne and Kentish Ecclesiology', (Eds.) A.P. Detsicas and W.N. Yates, *Studies in Modern Kentish History*, Maidstone 1983, 187-202.

³ See J.F. White, *The Cambridge Movement*, Cambridge 1962.

before 1850.⁴ In most cases the descriptions are very detailed, consisting of notes on each part of the church and drawings of significant features, bound together in a folder. For some churches visited during 1844 Griffiths opted instead to use the forms provided for recording churches by the Cambridge Camden Society, including only the details of monumental inscriptions and his drawings in the main folders. These forms were used at Detling, Aylesford, East Farleigh, Barming and Sturry and contain less detail than Griffiths' descriptions of other churches. At Otham the form was used but is now missing. The folders for Milton-next-Gravesend, Herne and Ightham contain only drawings and ground plans with no supporting descriptions or notes.

The descriptions of church fabrics by Griffiths follow the analytical approach adopted by Glynne. The additional information which he provides on church fittings includes, almost invariably, the existence or otherwise of an organ; the erection of galleries; the condition of pews; the position of fonts, pulpits and reading desks; the decoration of the buildings with scriptural texts or other paintings; the survival of screens and other pre-Reformation fittings. All this information gives a very good picture of the liturgical arrangement of Kentish churches at the time when Griffiths wrote, which for a County with relatively few surviving plans or contemporary illustrations is exceptionally

⁴ The dates of visits were as follows:

- 1838 – Beckenham (Z1/1)
- 1839 – West Wickham (Z1/2)
- 1840 – Chevening; Seal; Sevenoaks; Kemsing; Otford; Sundridge; Westerham; Brasted; Bromley; St. Lawrence-in-Thamet; Margate; St. Peter-in-Thamet; St. Mary, Sandwich; St. Clement, Sandwich (Z1/3–16)
- 1841 – Swanscombe; Hoo St. Werburgh; Cobham; Cuxton; Chalk; Ifield; St. Nicholas, Rochester; Wouldham; Lower Halling; Shorne; Rochester Cathedral (description of nave only); Erith (Z2/1–12)
- 1843 – Darenth; Eynsford; Farningham; Dartford; Shoreham; Hartley; West Kingsdown; Foot's Cray; St. Paul's Cray; Southfleet; Fawkham (Z3/1–11)
- 1844 – Detling; Allington; Aylesford; East Farleigh; East Malling; Boxley; Otham; Barming; Sturry; Bridge; Westbere; Patricxbourne (Z4/1–12)
- 1845 – Nackington; Blean; Littlebourne; Bapchild; Borden; Teynham; Sittingbourne (Z5/1–7)
- 1846 – Boughton-under-Blean; Selling; Luddenham; Graveney; Leaveland; Badlesmere; Preston-next-Faversham (Z5/8–14)
- 1847 – Stansted (Z6/1)
- 1848 – Offham (Z6/2)
- 1850 – Milton-next-Gravesend (Z6/3)
- 1851 – Herne (Z6/3)
- 1854 – Ightham (Z6/3)
- 1855 – Trottscliffe; Addington (Z6/4–5)
- 1856 – Nurstead; Wrotham (Z6/6–7)

valuable. In the pages that follow an attempt has been made to analyse Griffiths' descriptions and to extract from them the information that they contain relating to church fittings and liturgical arrangements.

1. THE SURVIVAL OF MEDIEVAL FITTINGS

Griffiths noted the survival of medieval screens at no fewer than thirteen of the churches he visited. At Shoreham the former rood loft had been converted into an eastern gallery, with the Royal Arms erected over it.⁵ At St. Cosmas and St. Damian in the Blean only the lower section of the screen survived with the Royal Arms placed on a beam above it. At Erith nave and chancel were separated by a screen and tympanum, as were the south aisle and the south chapel. The Creed, Lord's Prayer and Commandments had been placed on the tympanum at the entrance to the chancel in 1707; that at the entrance to the south chapel was painted with the Royal Arms and the symbols of Justice and Eternity. At Cobham also the screen ran across the east end of both nave and north aisle. At Foot's Cray there was no screen but the division between nave and chancel was marked with a tympanum painted with the Royal Arms. A number of churches also retained medieval seating. There were stalls in the chancel at West Wickham, Hoo St. Werburgh, Cobham, Southfleet and also at Dartford where new pews had been 'grafted' on to the ancient seats. At Halling there were remains of medieval seating at the west end of the nave, at Southfleet in the north aisle, at Stansted and Offham in the main body of the nave. At Southfleet, Blean and Wrotham later pews had been 'grafted' on to earlier benches.⁶ Medieval lecterns had survived in the sanctuary at Swanscombe⁷, and at Shorne where it supported a chained copy of the *Book of Homilies* given in 1815.

2. GALLERIES AND ORGANS

There is now a growing body of evidence that the parish orchestras which were generally thought to have provided the music in most Anglican Churches before the middle of the nineteenth century had been abandoned well before the 1830s. Griffiths' evidence for Kent

⁵ The screen has survived and the loft has been restored to something approximating to its original condition.

⁶ The stalls and benches have survived at Cobham and Southfleet.

⁷ This lectern still survives, but not that at Shorne.

would certainly confirm this view. Virtually every church he visited had a gallery for choir and organ at the west end of the nave or one of the aisles. He noted organs, usually barrel organs, at a total of twenty-two churches, and the absence of an organ at only three churches, West Kingsdown, Bridge and Bapchild. Except at Wouldham, where it was placed on the north wall of the chancel in a small recess, the organ was always housed in a gallery at the west end of the church. At West Kingsdown Griffiths states that 'there are 1 base, 2 violins, and 2 clarionets (*sic*), played by the villagers, with village choristers, and a few years back so highly was their singing estimated that they were invited to sing at the churches for miles around.' Clearly, however, this was an exceptional survival in Kent in the 1840s.

Apart from the need to provide accommodation for musicians and singers relatively few Kentish churches seem to have been provided with other galleries. Griffiths notes in many cases the dates when galleries were erected, mostly towards the end of the eighteenth century or even later, and this provides further evidence for the replacement of orchestras housed in pews at the west end of the church by organs which were normally housed in the new galleries. The following dates of erections of galleries are noted by Griffiths:

- Chevening – west end of south aisle, 1766.
- Sevenoaks – west end of nave and both aisles, 1798.
- St. Lawrence-in-Thamet – west end of nave, 1733.
- Margate – east end of nave, 1714; west end of nave, for organ, 1725; south aisle 1796, extended 1811.
- St. Peter-in-Thamet – south aisle, 1810; west end of nave, for organ, 1824.
- Swanscombe – west end of nave, 1771.
- St. Nicholas, Rochester – west end of nave, 1822.
- Shorne – west end of nave, 1817.
- Shoreham – west end of nave and south aisle, 1841.

Four churches had double galleries at the west end of the nave: Beckenham, Eynsford, Dartford and Foot's Cray. At Beckenham there was a barrel organ in the upper gallery, and the Royal Arms adorned the front of the lower gallery. At Eynsford the Royal Arms was placed on the upper gallery, designed to accommodate thirty singers, and there was a skylight in the nave roof over this gallery. At Foot's Cray there was, in addition to the double gallery at the west end, a further gallery on the north side of the nave.

3. THE POSITION OF THE FONT AND PULPIT

The position of the altar, at the east end of the chancel, had been established during the seventeenth century, and there were very few churches in which it was still placed centrally in, or towards the west end of, the chancel after 1700. The same conventions did not apply in the case of the font and pulpit. In the seventeenth century the tendency had been to retain the font at the west end of the nave or one of the aisles, near to the main door of the church, baptism being the sacrament of admission. Similarly, pulpits had most frequently been retained in their medieval position towards the east end of the nave, though they were combined with a reading desk and frequently the clerk's seat as well, the so-called 'three decker' pulpit. From the late seventeenth century advantage was frequently taken of programmes of church restoration or re-pewing to place both fonts and pulpits in a more central position in the church where they, and their occupants, could be more clearly seen by the congregation. Despite these trends the evidence of Griffiths' observations is that in the majority of Kentish churches he visited both fonts and pulpits had either remained, or occasionally been replaced, in their traditional locations. There were, however, exceptions. At Erith, Darenth and Offham the font was placed in the chancel; at Eynsford it was now in the chancel, but had previously stood near the pulpit. At Dartford the font was in the south chapel, and at West Wickham in the north chapel; at Graveney and St. Clement's, Sandwich, it stood at the east end of the north aisle. At Seal and Shoreham the font was at the west end of the nave but stood in a pew used by the baptism party, a practice common in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At Beckenham it was noted that a new octagonal font had been installed during a much praised repair of the church in 1832, but that previously 'the christenings took place in the altar, when a silver plate was employed to contain the water'.

The variation in the position of the font was paralleled by that of the pulpit and reading desk. In most of the Kentish churches visited by Griffiths pulpit and reading desk stood together in either the north-east or south-east angle of the nave. At Bromley and Wrotham pulpit and reading desk were at the east end of the nave but separated from one another on either side of the entrance to the chancel. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries several churches were liturgically re-ordered so as to place the pulpit and reading desk more centrally in the body of the church. A classic re-ordering of this type was noted by Griffiths at Farningham: there were galleries at both east and west ends of the nave, the pulpit and reading desk being placed in the middle of the south wall. A similar

re-ordering had taken place at Seal, Shoreham, St. Paul's Cray, Barming and Milton-next-Gravesend, with the pulpit and reading desk on either the north or south wall of the nave, and at Chevening where they were on the north side of the south aisle. At St. Paul's Cray the date of this arrangement was noted as 1832, and at Seal it was presumably contemporary with the re-pewing of the church in 1828. Another type of arrangement, apparently not very common in Kent, was the placing of pulpit and reading desk in the centre of the nave, either at the east end, as at Westerham, or at the west end, as at St. Clement's, Sandwich. At Selling pulpit and reading pew were placed under the central tower, with pews facing them in the nave and north transept; there were no pews in the south transept but a loose arrangement of 'forms and mats'.

4. PAINTINGS IN CHURCHES

The impression given by some nineteenth-century critics of the overall drabness of unrestored churches requires very considerable modification. Griffiths' reports suggest that the element of colour in Kentish churches was considerable, though it was clearly not of the type of which he could approve. At Erith the pews and altar rails were painted 'sky blue'. The painting of scriptural texts on the walls of the church was noted at Chevening, Kemsing, Cobham, Sturry, Bridge, Westbere, Nackington and Luddenham. At West Kingsdown these texts were painted on wooden tablets, and at St. Clement's, Sandwich, 'on each side of the nave are boards suspended having quotations from Scripture painted on them'. Pictures of Moses and Aaron were also very common. Griffiths noted these at Chevening, Otford (where they flanked the Ten Commandments on the north wall of the nave), Foot's Cray (on either side of the east window 'in gilt frames'),⁸ and St. Paul's Cray.

5. THE GENERAL CONDITION OF CHURCHES

The overall impression conveyed by Griffiths' notes is that most churches were well kept and carefully arranged. In some churches there had been a clear anticipation of liturgical arrangements which

⁸ These paintings still survive; J. Newman, *The Buildings of England: West Kent and the Weald*, Harmondsworth 1969, 276, states 'they will have been part of an altarpiece of c. 1700', but Griffiths' description of them suggests that this was probably not the case.

were to become subjects of controversy when they were associated with Tractarian teaching. At Wouldham, Erith and Darenth the altar was raised on three steps, and at Luddenham the sanctuary had been paved with encaustic tiles. New reredoses were noted at Fawkham and Patribourne, the former containing the Ten Commandments inscribed in characters copied from Old English manuscripts. At Bapchild the altar was a 'new gift of the clergyman, at Stone, a slab supported by an insulated angular column in front', erected in 1844, though here Tractarian sympathies must be suspected.⁹ At Wrotham the altar piece was decorated with '7 imitation candles above the altar'.

There were, however, churches in which the arrangements were not, from Griffiths' standpoint, so satisfactory. At Brasted and Hartley there were stoves in the centre of the nave, and in the latter case the funnel went right through the roof. At St. Mary's, Sandwich, the north aisle was separated from the nave 'by modern wooden columns and arches unworthy of notice', and at Patribourne a similar division had been formed by 'modern cast-iron columns'.¹⁰ At Shorne the south chapel was used as a vestry and the south aisle for a National School, established in 1816, the arches separating these from the nave and chancel having been boarded up. Griffiths' complaints, however, were relatively modest compared with those of some more vociferous contemporaries.

It has to be asked how typical was the state of Kent churches, as revealed by Griffiths, compared with that of those in other parts of the country. To some extent the churches visited by Griffiths were not an entirely fair cross-section of those in Kent. He visited fewer town churches or remotely rural ones than Sir Stephen Glynne, and therefore missed those that so distressed Glynne at Deal and Walmer and on Romney Marsh.¹¹ But with this caveat, and from similar accounts of churches in other counties at this date, it would seem that the conditions described by Griffiths of the churches he visited in Kent were not untypical of those elsewhere in England and Wales. By the standards of ecclesiologists like Griffiths the arrangements he found were only rarely to be commended, but his complaints fall a long way short of the wild allegations made by some Victorian critics of the attitudes of their Hanoverian predecessors.

⁹ Exactly contemporary was the gift to Bapchild, by the same clergyman, of a chalice and paten of medieval type, designed by Pugin and made by Hardman, see W.A. Scott Robertson, 'Church Plate in Kent', *Arch. Cant.* xcvi (1887), 257-9.

¹⁰ Both these arrangements still survive. That at Patribourne dates from the addition of the north aisle in c. 1824.

¹¹ *Notes on the Churches of Kent*, 101, 117-18, 253-5, 263, 265, 268-9.