

Statement of Significance

Church of St Edmund or St James, Blunham

A Statement of Architectural and Historical Significance prepared by the Late Mr Richard Allen for Blunham PCC, December 1998 (copies of the material referred to by Mr David Baker, viz. VCH (Victorian County History), Pevsner and Pickford were made available to the PCC Committee at that time, with later amendments by Churchwardens and Church Council.

Blunham church is grade 1 listed and in 2022 was registered as heritage at risk by English Heritage. The particular concern internally is the poor condition of some floor platforms and, externally, parapets which were repaired using cement. Water got behind these repairs and ate away the stone until not much is left in some places. Recently, masonry has fallen from the east end and that area of the churchyard has been cordoned off.

This document is in support of the removal of the pews against the wall in the north aisle and the first two pews across the church. This was agreed in principle with the DAC and Historic England in 2017.

We would now also like to remove the remaining pews in the south aisle. Once the pews are removed, the floors would be made level with the tiled floor, and finished in oak to match the floors on the south side of the church. The pew platform in the north aisle would remain, with a railing to protect from falls.

Part 1

Setting and Environment

Blunham Parish Church occupies what is still the centre of a long straggling village. Its bulk dominates 'The Square' and it has a public house and thatched cottages at its feet. However, because it is closely bordered by the River Ivel to the east and hemmed in by the railway embankment to the south and the Hill to the west, it is difficult to get a view of the church in the village itself.

The WI surveyed the churchyard in 1978 and a copy of the list of extant grave inscriptions is in the County Record Office. Between the south wall of the church and the boundary wall are three 'table top' tombs and the Thornton Mausoleum, which contains the remains of those members of the family who are commemorated in the chancel. At the southeast corner of the churchyard are the tombs of Dr Mountain and his family.

During the time before Richard Allen ceased to be Churchwarden (1988) he discussed the Thornton Mausoleum with Mrs Thornton, the widow of the last male Thornton of this line. As a family, they had no funds to maintain the mausoleum. Subsequently it was listed in 1986 by Mid Bedfordshire District

Council under the Town and Country Planning Act and also the Ancient Monuments Act.

The Thornton family used to own Moggerhanger Park, but worshipped in Blunham, as at that time there was no church in Moggerhanger. This connection has led to the mausoleum being maintained by the Park – it has been painted, the railings have been painted and a tarpaulin put over the roof after lead flashing was stolen. No funds have been available to repair the roof – as it does not belong to the church, church insurance does not cover the loss.

As to the ecology of the churchyard it is important to keep in mind that the Parish Council maintains it. A certain rare kind of saxifrage grows in 2 or 3 places; these areas are demarcated so that they are not mown when the plant is in flower. Many of the old headstones have been moved to the boundary of the churchyard and the cottages on the High Street.

A faculty was granted in 1988 to set aside an area of the churchyard for the interment of cremated remains. In 2022 a faculty was granted to make this into a formal area, with hedging, benches, paving and horizontal gravestones to commemorate those ashes buried there. It is maintained by a volunteer from the village.

The soil removed during the establishing of the disabled access through the north porch, has been placed in a corner of the churchyard near the Garden of Remembrance and been planted with flowers by volunteers from the village.

Exterior

Facts known are included in the three works mentioned above and in the Church History. Major gaps in knowledge are

- (i) The appearance of the Church before the Reformation.
- (ii) The appearance of the Church before the Restoration of 1862.
- (iii) The Late Richard Allen searched the Ely Diocesan records in the Cambridge University Library and was unable to find the faculty details for the 1862 work or any drawings, prints or paintings of the church before that work was carried out.

The most detailed architectural study of the church is in the VCH but even that does not explain the appearance of the outside of the north east corner. Clearly a lot of rebuilding has taken place here and it would be worthwhile to have this part of the church re-examined sometime by an architect or archaeologist. Richard Allen wondered whether a two storey vestry could have been there, giving access to the rood over the North Chapel.

The 1862 restoration aimed to provide a building for the performance of Sung Matins with choir and organ (installed later) for a congregation of about 200. The South Chapel became the vestry and the organ mostly occupied the North Chapel.

It would seem that the north side of the church was more heavily restored, included the addition of the porch; the north porch is clearly a well-built 19th century representation of an ancient porch. The north door closes against a gentle slope from the porch into the church, enabling disabled access. The south porch has the air of being the real thing and traces of the past. That may have been because the south side was traditionally the Moggerhanger-side and those inhabitants were responsible for the upkeep of the South Porch but by that time Moggerhanger was becoming a separate parish with its own church (built 1860-1). The South Porch has been renovated with a Covid grant from Historic England (2021). The roof has been rebuilt, with some stonework repairs to the south wall of the church.

Interior

The post 1862 appearance of the interior has been preserved in a number of photographs, the last of which were probably taken in 1943 by Mr Collard of Bedford as a record in case of wartime destruction. (Photocopies of the originals, which are held by the Council for the Care of Churches, have been deposited in the Country Record Office).

The arrival after the end of the Second World War of a new incumbent, The Revd T C Teape-Fugard (1946-1953), led to some internal reordering for which faculties were obtained. The North Aisle became a war memorial, called St George's Chapel; the vestry, which was moved to the west end of the South Aisle, became the Lady Chapel (the texts over the entrance to the former vestry and the Bell Tower were obliterated).

A faculty was granted in August 2018 to convert the Lady Chapel back into the vestry, by installing an oak partition with glass doors. This partition supports a splendid glass memorial screen, designed by Derek Hunt, depicting a prayer of John Donne and John Donne himself. The vestry was previously located at the west end of the south aisle. This has now become a much-admired kitchenette with a disabled toilet.

Research by Miss P Bell, County Archivist, led to the discovery that there had existed in Blunham a Guild of the Holy Trinity and that its guild house had been marketed since 1908 at least as "The Old Manor House". The guild had its own priest and chapel. We do not know where the chapel was. However, the upper part of the South Porch could be reached through a door (now blocked up) in the south wall of the South Aisle and this 'parvise' could have been the guild priest's lodging. Also, Pevsner thinks that the stone screen between the south choir stalls and the south chapel must have belonged to a monument or a chantry chapel. The dedication of the North Chapel is unknown.

The interior of the church is dominated by the woodwork of the 1862 restoration. However, the remaining 17th Century woodwork: pulpit, back pews and screen to the tower, is in good condition.

With the exception of the pews to the west of the main door, the seating dates from the Victorian period. The pews are characteristic of those found within the Diocese, with rectangular bench ends with carved top rails and supporting buttresses. These pews are of good quality and represent the ecclesiastical tastes of the nineteenth century.

In his report, Dr Charles Tracey states that the pews were probably made up at the time of the 1862 re-pewing.

These pews consist of seven rows either side of the Nave Aisle and three rows in the North Aisle, four having been removed at some earlier date. The Log Book, which dates back to 1961, shows no mention of the removal of these pews from the area in the North Aisle which is now used as a children's play area. A faculty was granted in 2017 to permanently remove the seven shorter rows in the South Aisle and replace the pew platform with an oak floor, level with the tiled floor.

In May 2006 following the installation of the new heating system, permission was granted to remove and dispose of three pews from the 1862 restoration which were stored in the area around the font; we can probably assume that these were the pews that were removed from the North Aisle. At the same time a pew was also removed from the rear of the chancel on the south side and moved to the base of the tower as this was restricting the heat flow from the new radiator; this was granted under an archdeacon's letter of authority dated 18th May 2006. In 2021 permission was given to sell three further pews of little merit. One of the pews from the north aisle was discovered hiding behind the Jacobean pews in front of the tower and has been returned to the north aisle with its back to the other pews, to provide seating in the children's area.

The chancel still bears a great resemblance to the photograph of page 135 of Pevsner. The high altar has been replaced by a table which we have discovered (advice from Revd Dr Lynne Broughton, 2016) dates back to about 1620. The rest of the woodwork was a gift from Lady Lucas solicited by Teape-Fugard and more in scale with the choir stalls. The altar furnishings date from the incumbency of Revd D K Williams (1981-1986). The old Lady Chapel has now been converted into the vestry, with a new floor of handmade clay pannets, on top of glass insulation. The two windows were completely renovated, with the east window winning a prize for the conservation work done (Natural Stone Awards, 2018). The walls and roof timbers were also refurbished. With the John Donne window visible, the refurbished and re-glazed windows, new floor and ancient stone screen, this is a very special space in the church.

The Tower

The tower is the oldest part of the Church. The internal and external arches are both Norman, dating perhaps from the 12th century. There are also two Norman windows which are visible only from inside the tower on the ground floor. Apart from these features, the appearance of the tower dates from the 16th century

There are six bells. The earliest was dedicated by the maker to the 6th Earl of Kent and his wife in 1580. Two were cast in Leicester in 1602. The fourth dates from 1609. The fifth was cast in 1740 by Thomas Russell of Wootton. Finally, in 1953, a Coronation Bell was presented by Charles Harding. In 2023 a faculty was granted for the restoration of the bell roller boxes.

The wooden screen and doors to the nave are judged to date from the 16th century and were probably moved here from elsewhere in the Church during the 1862 restoration. Before that time, there was no access from the tower to the nave, the way being blocked by a singing gallery.

The base of the tower is higher than the interior of the church and is reached inside by three uneven steps. The west door is seldom used, apart from when services or events are held in the churchyard.

The tower has four floors and is now kept locked. The base is used as a choir vestry as well as having the fixtures of the old kitchenette – a double sink, and some base and wall cupboards. There are storage cupboards for the large stock of crockery and cutlery, as well as things for Messy Church.

The first floor is the ringing floor and is accessed by a steep ladder. The hatch is kept locked.

The second floor accommodates the clock and is accessed by a vertical ladder. The clock is now protected inside a wooden structure.

The third floor is the belfry, which is again accessed by a vertical ladder. There are six bells with space for two more. However, the tower is not strong enough to support additional bells (Steven Stanford of Elstow, 2021). The bells are some of the heaviest in Bedfordshire.

A final vertical ladder leads to the roof where there is a newly refurbished flagpole (2022).

The clock mechanism is a rare example of a striking clock. It originally would not have had clock faces but would have struck one of the bells in the belfry. The Victorians added a frame to the clock, the two clock faces we see today on the west and north sides of the tower, and the mechanism to drive the hands.

It is described as a field gate framed clock dating from the late 1600s to early 1700s with later additions.

The clock is of historical significance.

A faculty was granted in 2023 to renovate the clock, fit it with an automatic winder and self-regulating mechanism. As part of this restoration, the clock faces have been refurbished and the hours between 8am and 10pm are struck.

Associations

Although the de Grey family of Wrest Park were lords of the manor until 1908 and their descendants were patrons until 1921, the visible signs of their association with Blunham are few. Dominating the west wall over the screen to the tower are the arms of the first and last Duke of Kent of that creation which are much larger than the royal arms of Queen Victoria beneath them.

The most important memento of the de Greys is a tomb of Lady Susanna Longueville in the south wall of the sanctuary. Bosses in the roof of the chancel that may represent other associations are barely visible to the naked eye; others have disappeared.

The association most often recalled at the present time is with John Donne, and the glass memorial window above the vestry screen celebrates this. An area behind the font is dedicated to information about Donne. Perhaps surprisingly, no publicity has been given to the church's association with George Joye (Rector 1549-1554), son of the soil, born in Renhold, who was an important figure in the English Reformation.

There is no doubt that the correct dedication of the church is to St Edmund, King and Martyr. (See Pickford pages 136 and 137 and VCH page 231). The unsolved puzzle is who decided to introduce St James and when. Someone at present unidentified, writing after 1886, referred to St Edmund (St James) and the question must have arisen again with the result that at a PCC meeting on 15th July 1943, while the rest of the world was engaged in other matters, "Mrs Judd proposed and Mrs Kitchener seconded that the Magazine should bear the name of St James and not St Edmund. This was agreed by all". It seems likely that other examples of this kind can be found in Bedfordshire, e.g. Husborne Crawley.

Blunham was in the diocese of Lincoln for centuries until it was transferred to Ely in the nineteenth century and again, later, to St Albans on the creation of that diocese. The laity does not seem to feel much attachment to their cathedral and there are no representations to the dioceses, ancient or modern, in the church. Only on the west wall of the Old Rectory are the arms of Ely displayed.

Part II

The proposal document is to remove the pews against the wall in the north aisle and the first two pews across the church, and also the remaining pews in the south aisle. Once the pews are removed, the floors would be made level with the tiled floor, and finished in oak to match the floors on the south side of the church. The pew platform in the north aisle would remain, with a railing to protect from falls.

Note: This Statement of Significance was circulated by email to the PCC on 7 May 2024 and was accepted by all as fit for purpose.