

The Modernisation of Goring Church 1887-8

In this Journal a year ago I described the contentious and in some ways heavy-handed refurbishment of the village's oldest and most significant building in 1848 during the incumbency of the newly-arrived Rev. (later Dr) George Hunter Fell DD, then fresh from Oxford but later Fellow and Vice-President of Magdalen College. It was therefore something of a surprise to find that another extensive modernisation was embarked upon only 40 years later. Even more surprising was the discovery that the same redoubtable Dr Fell, by then the Vicar of East Worldham in Hampshire but still the owner of several properties in Manor Road and Ferry Lane and always a keen observer of all that went on in his old parish, was at the heart of a fresh controversy over the new changes being proposed for the ancient building.

The Rev. Henry Littlewood came to Goring as incumbent in 1885 and about the same time Charles Weare Gardiner succeeded his late father as Patron and Lay Rector of the Church. It was these two men who took the lead in the new and ambitious re-ordering of the building, although Littlewood always credited Gardiner with the leading role as "one of the heartiest supporters of the scheme, indeed the whole scheme originated with him."



Before - looking east showing the 1847-8 square east wall and window, the deal rood screen and pews and the "hideous" new font (GSLHS collection)

The 'scheme' as Littlewood always called it, was certainly ambitious. The ancient east wall and window of the 13th century north aisle was to be removed and replaced by an arch opening into

a new organ chamber. This would be similarly linked to the chancel by a matching arch cut through the ancient and original north wall. Into this newly-created chamber would be built a substantial new pipe organ to replace the small and unsatisfactory harmonium which had provided congregational music since the demolition of the west gallery in 1848. At the same time, the square wall which bounded the chancel on the east, along with its new gothic lancet window installed only 40 years earlier, were to be removed and the chancel lengthened by a few feet to a new apsidal east end in conscious imitation of the long-disappeared 11th century original. The entire floor of the church was to be resurfaced with encaustic tiles (that is, tiles decorated in the antique way with the coloured pattern inlaid in the clay before firing) replicating the few tiles that still survived from the pre-Reformation priory church. A new boiler and central heating system would replace the inefficient stove. Two new stained glass windows were to be installed in the tower and the 1848 softwood rood screen was to be

replaced by a stone screen. The massive ancient font thrown out in 1848 was to be restored to the ground floor of the tower. A new marble reredos (altar screen) was to be erected on the new curved east wall behind the altar and new oak furniture for choir and clergy was to be installed in the chancel. To transform these bold ideas into a set of working drawings, Littlewood turned for help to his cousin, the Birmingham architect Ben Corser. When all was ready the entire scheme was put before a crowded meeting in the National School (now the Community Centre) on 13 April 1886.

Whether Littlewood and Gardiner anticipated any opposition is not clear but they certainly got it. There were several sticking points. The easiest to resolve amicably was the problem of the two recent graves that would be disturbed by any chancel extension eastward. The original hope was that the families, both local, would allow the graves to remain undisturbed and permit only the surface monuments to be re-located. In the event both families preferred the complete relocation of coffins and monuments and this was duly undertaken at the church's expense, apparently without too many hard feelings.

More problematic was the location of the new organ chamber. An influential parishioner and later churchwarden, General James Fife RE of Clevedon, objected at the meeting to what he regarded as needless interference with the ancient structure of the church. Why not simply re-locate the organ to a new chamber on the other (that is, south) side of the chancel? According to Fife's account later, this apparently reasonable compromise suggestion was met with what he called "rude contradictions" from the Vicar, who declared that he would oppose any such idea. And so he did. Unfortunately for him, a series of unexpected developments conspired to provide Fife with powerful allies and kept the controversy bubbling on for the next 15 months. For the moment however, a temporarily compliant majority of the parishioners followed their Vicar and Lay Rector and gave the complete scheme their backing. A small working committee was elected to raise money for what soon became known as the Jubilee Memorial Fund (in deliberate association with Queen Victoria's imminent Golden Jubilee celebrations) and it was agreed that the necessary Faculty should be applied for at once so that the work could be started as soon as funds were available. The Faculty was granted in full soon afterwards.

A loan of £200 was sought from the Public Works Loan Commissioners and supplementary grant applications were made to the Incorporated Church Building Society in London and its diocesan equivalent in Oxford. Both caused unexpected problems. But first, there was a faintly comical interlude when the application papers from the Incorporated Church Building Society arrived at the Vicarage. For some reason, the Rev. Littlewood seems to have taken too literally the standard small print requirement that churches in receipt of grants from the Society should previously commit themselves to support the Society in return by annual collections. It was patently obvious that this commitment would only be valid if a grant was made but for some reason Littlewood decided to take issue with it as "manifestly unreasonable". In what must have been one of the strangest letters ever written by a would-be grant applicant, Littlewood fumed at length and quite needlessly, ending with an extraordinary attempt to impose conditions on the Society. His willingness to sign the form would only be given if the Society committed itself in advance to a grant of at least £30. He even managed to make pointless difficulties over the standard condition that grant-

seeking churches should also apply to their diocesan building societies. No-one reading the correspondence will be in the least surprised that, eventually and unusually, no grant was forthcoming from this source. The whole episode raises questions about Littlewood's patience and common-sense and it adds some weight to Dr Fell's later judgment that much of the opposition to his scheme was avoidable and partly of his own making.

The application to the diocesan society in Oxford brought trouble of a different kind, this time in the person of Mr J. Oldrid Scott, the diocesan architect. In a preliminary report based on the paper plans alone, he was cautiously but ominously critical. Later however, after a site visit in the spring of 1887 (at which he accidentally or deliberately managed to miss both the Vicar and the Birmingham architect), he fleshed out his earlier criticisms in a lengthy report. The wording was measured but the criticisms were damning. Scott conceded the validity of restoring the original apsidal east termination of the chancel but only if its original position could be first established. To put it anywhere else on speculation, as was being proposed, he considered to be "a great mistake". Moreover he disliked Corser's proposal to make



Benjamin Corser, architect

the new east wall both narrower and lower than the massive walls of the rest of the building and he criticised the choice of materials proposed for the domed roof of the apse as "altogether inadmissible". Worst of all from Littlewood's point of view, he condemned the proposal to create an organ chamber by the demolition of the 13th century east wall of the north aisle. This, he believed, was "an infringement on the ancient part of the church" and therefore "undesirable". He suggested instead, in words that could have been written by General Fife himself, that the organ be located in a new chamber created on the other side of the chancel.

Scott's concern to preserve as much of the original structure as possible was wholly admirable and it probably saved several Oxfordshire churches from the worst of the destructive vandalism so evident in other Victorian restorations of this period. He also insisted that all new building work must match the original detailing exactly. So, for example, he recommended that Corser should follow precisely the original window quoins (cornerstones) which were laid alternately in freestone and chalk. He also insisted that the new arches should be framed in chalk stone and, interestingly, that the rough-cast render then existing on the external walls should be matched in all new building work. Just how and why this sensible advice ultimately resulted in the bland and unattractively coloured pebbledash, then at the height of fashion and still visible on many Goring houses of the period, is not clear. It is perhaps the one really regrettable feature of the 1887-8 restoration.

Littlewood was staying in Bristol when this bombshell reached him in late April 1887. No record has survived of the anguished discussions which must have followed as soon as he returned to Goring. Littlewood claimed later that they decided that Scott's critical report would have to be made public. How he must have regretted that they did not get on and do it! Because shortly afterwards he and his planning committee were badly wrong-footed

when the still formidable Dr Fell, did it for them. Fell later claimed, fairly implausibly, that originally he had been entirely favourable to Littlewood's plans and had even offered his help. But, according to the equally implausible judgment of Littlewood, Fell was turned from supporter to implacable opponent when he discovered that all the pews in the re-ordered church were going to be free for all and no longer available for the great and the good to rent. Whatever the real truth, Fell somehow got wind of the contents of Scott's hostile report. Without saying a word to anyone, he went to Oxford, saw Scott and obtained his permission to publish it. In no time, printed copies were being posted through the door of every house in the village. It would have been more honourable if Fell had let the document speak for itself. Unfortunately he could not resist the temptation to cover it with a personal letter addressed to every recipient. "Your earlier support for the church restoration," he suggested, "has been given in ignorance of Mr Scott's criticisms." Fell implied, though without actually saying so, that those criticisms had been deliberately suppressed by the Vicar and his planning committee. The entire scheme, in his view, had now lost all credibility and should be abandoned in favour of new plans designed *ab initio* in the light of Scott's recommendations.

Dr George Hunter Fell (Courtesy the President and Fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford)



The unhelpful effect of all this on local opinion can be easily imagined. The fragile unity which had been evident at the outset disappeared at a stroke. Fund-raising all but dried up just when the likely cost was soaring. Worst of all, confidence in the good faith of the church authorities was seriously compromised. It could easily look as though they were raising funds under false pretences. Not surprisingly, Littlewood was incandescent at what he regarded as Fell's malicious and deliberate misrepresentation of the situation. What made it all so much worse was the fact, to use Littlewood's bitter words, that the opposition was being organised by "this same gentleman ... [who] some years back was instrumental in carrying out a so-called 'restoration' of the church, in which among other vandalisms, the old Norman font was removed and given to the contractor and a hideous modern one put in its place, all the old oak was taken out of the church and deal seats and a deal screen put in, and an old brass of 1615 was removed from the chancel wall and taken to a farm-house in the neighbourhood." Dr Fell was just as uncomplimentary in return. The Vicar, he claimed to the diocesan authorities, was "most unpopular", particularly for appointing a relative as architect, hatching his plans in secret and then presenting them fully formed and brooking no suggestions for change. He was, concluded Fell, neither prudent nor wise.

The church planning committee met in late April 1887 and again in May but was unable to find a way forward. There were some who were gung-ho enough to forfeit any financial help from the diocesan society and proceed with the original scheme in defiance of Mr Scott's

suggestions, relying on the grant of the original Faculty. That would have risked a total breakdown of relations between supporters and opponents of change and the possibility of litigation and bad publicity. Fortunately, the Vicar and Lay Rector were more cautious and continued to explore ways of meeting as many of Scott's suggestions as they could without undermining the rationale of the original scheme. One matter, however, was for them non-negotiable. Their expensive new organ was not going to be stifled by enclosure in a second-best and walled-off organ chamber on the south side of the chancel. Only on the north side could its acoustic potential be fully achieved by opening it into the nave from two directions. All Mr Scott's other very sensible suggestions could be accommodated within the original scheme. Nor had they any quarrel with the idea of locating the new apsidal east wall on the original Norman foundations. The only trouble was that they had no idea where they were located and preliminary excavations seemed to suggest that the chancel would need to be extended eastwards by as much as 40 feet! Quite apart from the huge and unnecessary cost, the Lay Rector understandably balked at the idea of such an enormous increase to his financial liability for chancel maintenance.

Another public meeting in June generated more heat than light. Both Dr Fell and the Rev. Littlewood addressed the crowded meeting and the latter scored a small tactical victory by quoting (with permission artfully gained in advance) a letter from the diocesan society critical of Fell's unofficial publication of the Scott report. It may have made him feel better but it did nothing to bridge the gulf in village opinion. There could be no agreement on how to proceed and the meeting broke up with nothing decided.

The breakthrough came unexpectedly in July 1887. It seems that the early exploratory excavations had been far too superficial. Failing to find the original apse foundations, they were drawn away eastwards following the younger footings which Percy Stone was later to identify as the foundations of the north and south chancel walls of the old priory church. Now, in July 1887, chance discovery revealed the remarkable eight-foot thick chalk foundations of the original apsidal east wall which were clearly traceable from end to end. Not only that, but these foundations were located only about four feet further east than the speculative position drawn on Ben Corser's plan. The excitement and relief in Littlewood's letter to the diocesan society on 19 July is almost palpable. Now they were in a position to meet nearly all of Mr Scott's requirements. Moreover, "a very generous" new offer of the necessary funds, doubtless from the equally relieved Charles Gardiner, made it possible to push ahead. With all the intractable difficulties now apparently removed, the committee resolved to proceed with the necessary building work just as soon as the imminent village celebrations marking Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee were out of the way.

Unfortunately the solution of the east wall problem merely focused attention more starkly than ever on what Dr Fell called "the destruction of part of the 14th century aisle". By the summer of 1887 he claimed that this was now opposed by "a large majority" of the parishioners. Their principal spokesman right from the very first meeting had been General Fife and he now took up the fight with renewed determination. First, he tried again to persuade Charles Gardiner to change his mind. The normally unruffled Lay Rector responded in July 1887 with a long and unusually forceful letter in which he adduced eight reasons why it was now "too late" (his underlining) to amend the scheme.

A less determined man than Fife would have accepted defeat at that point, as Dr Fell seems to have done. Not the General. He now broadened his attack by alleging to the diocesan authorities that the building work, which by August 1887 was proceeding apace, was significantly at variance with the original Faculty approval and Ben Corser's drawings on which it was based. When pressed to substantiate these very serious allegations, he claimed that the organ chamber was a foot too far to the east, a clerestory window not shown on the original plan at all had been blocked and the chancel apse was being extended seven feet further east than permitted. It is not clear whether Littlewood was just too irritated by these last minute challenges from a person he now regarded as simply vexatious or whether he misjudged the very real danger to his scheme that Fife posed. Whichever it was, he gave a very off-hand explanation when asked by the diocesan society and, even when pressed, claimed that he could see no reason why he should take the trouble to answer Fife's assertions in detail. There was in fact every reason. In mid-August 1887 Fife formally petitioned the Diocesan Chancellor in Court to revoke the Faculty and order the destruction of all the building works that had already taken place in breach of the original Faculty.

The Chancellor reviewed all the evidence in early September. His ruling seems to have been most influenced by the fact that, when the Faculty was first applied for, nobody knew exactly where the original east wall had been located. The position on Ben Corser's scale drawing was no more than an intelligent guess, which is precisely why the diocesan architect had criticised it in the first place. Once the church authorities had agreed to accept his argument that the east wall had to be built in its original position when located, there was bound to be some significant departure from the dimensions and positions marked on Corser's speculative plan. Moreover, for all his huffing and puffing, Fife completely failed to prove that there had been a deliberate attempt to evade the terms of the Faculty. The Chancellor therefore had little choice but to reject the application and decline to bring the matter to Court. Fife was told that in the Chancellor's opinion and the circumstances of the case "a certain latitude had to be allowed to the Vicar and Churchwardens in carrying out the work".



Looking back over these two years of sharp controversy, it is easy to see how the near unanimity of purpose visible at the outset in April 1886 could dissolve so quickly into such disagreement and rancour. Dr Fell's role in the affair – indeed his continuing involvement in village affairs – was, to put it mildly, unhelpful. But he was probably right in his judgment that the Rev. Littlewood had played a strong hand very badly. Fell thought that the Vicar could probably have avoided much of the ill-feeling which so divided village opinion for two years. It is at least good to report that the friction between Fell, Littlewood and Fife does not seem to have lasted very long and soon they were seconding each other's motions at the annual Vestry meetings as though there had never been any disagreement at all.

At Christmas 1887 the new oak pulpit, clergy and choir stalls, altar table and lectern were dedicated and used for the first time. The chancel extension was still blocked off behind screens at that time and not inaugurated until Easter 1888. Later that year, at Whitsun, the new organ was officially opened. The impact when it was first heard at full volume after the painful years of the small harmonium which had preceded it, must have been dramatic. It can still be impressive in the hands of a master today.

Later in the summer of 1888, the plain new central window in the apse above the altar was replaced with a delicate stained glass window dedicated to the memory of Littlewood's popular predecessor for 33 years, the Rev. W.H. Stokes, and his wife. Then at the end of the year the choir appeared for the first time in their new black and white surplices and cassocks. The new rood screen did not arrive until 1909 and was built of oak, not stone as originally planned. It was dedicated to the memory, not of Littlewood who had striven for it at such personal cost, but to that of his immediate successor, the Rev. Lionel Wallace. For reasons that are not yet entirely clear, the intended return of the Norman font was delayed until just before the Second World War. There was never a marble reredos (altar screen) and nor is there any memorial in the church to either of the principal architects of the 1887-8 restoration, the Rev. Henry Littlewood or his Lay Rector, Charles Weare Gardiner.

Oldrid Scott and Ben Corser both deserve much credit – the former for his insistence on authenticity and minimal interference with the original structure, so unlike the gung-ho attitude of many other Victorian restorers of the time, and the latter for adapting his original design so sensitively to accommodate Scott's suggestions. His deep three-windowed apse and the soaring romanesque arch which separates it from the chancel, as well as the skilful openings into the organ chamber by two subtle gothic arches are all very well conceived.

Together these four men, along of course with countless unnamed subscribers large and small, achieved radical structural change without the destructive ruthlessness of 40 years before. Their joint and considerable achievement was to ensure that the church building remained fit for modern worship for the whole of the 20th century right up to the latest re-ordering of 2008-09. That too was not achieved without controversy. It is almost inevitable when a much-loved and ancient building needs adaptation to preserve its usefulness into the unknowable future.

Garry Alder

Note on Sources

The information in this paper is based primarily on documents in the Oxford History Centre (especially those in the series PAR115 and DCBS), at Lambeth Palace Library (the ICBS series), the records of the Public Works Loan Board at TNA, Kew, and the remarkable archive collection of our own Local History Society, with grateful thanks to Jenny Emerton and Angela Hall for their willing co-operation.