

ST PETER'S CHURCH, MEAVY, DEVON

by Peter Hamilton-Leggett

St Peter's stands proud above the village green which itself nestles in the valley of the River Meavy. The church has a Norman core although the outside is best described as Perpendicular in style.

INTERIOR

Upon entering the church one is immediately struck by the numerous Roborough Stone pillars and granite arches. The stained pitch pine pews with oak ends replaced the old high pews in 1878. They are the work of local woodcarver Philip Blowey who charged a total of £225. Pauline Hemery organized the kneelers that were stitched and donated by the parishioners in the late 1980s.

East of the door is a fine stained glass window designed in the workshop of William Morris. The south aisle leads through the transept with its memorial tablets and window. This window, designed by Burlison & Grylls, depicts the nativity with Mary & Jesus in the central pane. Next comes the Drake Chapel named from the third Baronet, Sir Francis Drake (1647-1718) who had purchased High House (now Meavy Barton) immediately to the west of the church. (He is a distant relation of the famous Sir Francis Drake of



The south side of Meavy church



The Drake Chapel window given by Lord & Lady Seaton in 1923

Armada fame). In 1705 the family had the external door to the chapel constructed. The stained glass window was given in 1923 by Lord and Lady Seaton, of Buckland Abbey, in memory of her Drake parents. To the left of the window can be seen a hagioscope (or Squint as the Victorian ecclesiologists liked to call it), a sloping rectangular opening where the priests celebrating mass at the high altar could be seen by the priest at the Lady Chapel altar.

There are 73 bosses on the wagon roofs. The origin of the boss was a piece of wood that covered up the joins in the wood. Carpenters were often allowed a free rein to show off their skills. The most visible are in the Drake Chapel and include a lion with his tail curled up, a dying deer, the face of Christ and, supposedly, a bearded man with a mouse emerging from his right ear, its tail being in the other ear. This boss is unique and no other has been found in the UK. In 1873 the Rector, James Catton, suggested it represented 'cunning leaving the brain'. In 1948 C J P Cave (*Roof Bosses in Medieval Churches*) suggested it symbolized 'someone with an empty head'. A more modern authority (*M W Tisdale, 1998, God's Beasts*) thinks it might be the 'head of St Colman who was kept awake in the scriptorium by a mouse nibbling his

ear'. In *Medieval bestiaries* mice and rats represented greed. Sue Andrew (PhD thesis 2011) favours the idea of 'foolishness of those who do not recognise God'. We will probably never know what was in the mind of the carver who did this boss but perhaps the best suggestions comes from a Middle English sermon—'it cometh in the one ear and goyeth oute at the other'. Other parts of the roof also have most interesting bosses which can only really be seen with a pair of binoculars and a powerful torch. The preservation of these bosses must go to James Hine who examined them in 1873, as part of his restoration survey and decided to restore them.



The mouse boss in the Drake

The chancel was altered in 1888, the back wall being dressed in marble and alabaster. Messrs J & E Goad of Plymouth laid the marble flooring in 1891 at a cost of £74. The main altar, of Derbyshire alabaster and Devon oak, is by Harry Hems of Exeter. It was carved in 1896. It is complimented by a fine Reredos, also of Derbyshire alabaster carved by G W Searle to a design by John Sedding, the architect in charge of the late Victorian restoration (1884). This ornate reredos depicts Christ on the cross flanked by the Blessed Virgin Mary and St John. The two outer compartments are St Peter (with his keys) and St Paul. To the right of the altar can be seen the original credence where the bread and wine was kept. The east window tracery is the oldest in the church dating from the thirteenth century. The stained glass, dated 1857, is in memory of Catherine Abbott, second wife of the rector John Abbott rector of Meavy for forty years.



Oak carvings in the choir



The carved oak choir stalls were dedicated in 1882. The carvings include the patron, St Peter, common plants, an eagle, owls, blackbirds, cockerels, squirrels, rabbits and foxes as well as symbols of the Passion. The work cost £764 and was by William Micklewright of Traske & Co, Somerset. The priest's desk is mid-twentieth century. The lectern, an angel with uplifted arms, is believed to have been carved in Oberammergau and was dedicated to the Reverend Richard Tyacke in 1908.

The pipe organ, costing £100, was made by Hele's of Plymouth in 1886 to replace a harmonium that had been given in 1874 by Albert Prowse who lived in Dousland, and was accountant to Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The organ has a total of 634 pipes and was fully restored in 1985.

One of the more interesting features uncovered in the 1873 restoration are the carvings on the pillar opposite the priest's desk. The two human heads and accompanying decoration are late Norman in date. The pillar, unlike any other in the church, comprises alternating layers of pink and white stone similar to that found at Plympton Priory.



The wounded traveler in the top right-hand panel



High altar and Victorian reredos



Norman carving of a human face on the left and right (opposite) sides



Much of the north wall is considered to be Norman. On this wall are two further windows. The first one's tracery is unlike any to be found in this area. The stained glass dates from 1890 and is the work of Westlake. It was given by Lt Col James Webber Smith in honour of his wife who died in childbirth on Roborough Down whilst following her husband on the famous Dartmoor Manoeuvres. Her somewhat ornate gravestone is in the graveyard the other side of this window.

The other window depicts the story of the Good Samaritan and was placed here in 1880. Note the wounded man lying on a bed in the top right panel.



One of the encaustic tiles showing the maker's name



The fifteenth-century font

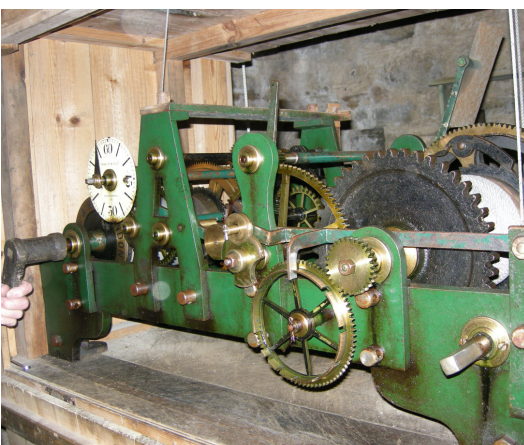
The Victorian encaustic tiles in the nave are by Henry O Webb whilst the present carpets were laid in 1997 by Stephen Thrall of Yelverton Carpets.

The fifteenth-century octagonal Roborough Stone font has sculptured panels depicting the crossed keys of St Peter, plain shields and pointed arches. The large carved wooden cover dates from the 1880s. The dove surmounting the top is probably by David Thompson of Herbert Read Ltd and was carved in 1979 when the cover was rededicated to the memory of Laura Mary Peek who was vergers for thirty years. Just behind the font is evidence of a stairway that would have led to the musicians' gallery which was removed in 1874.

The original ringers' gallery was at the base of the tower (now used as a kitchen). On the floor can be seen some seventeenth-century memorial stones. The ringers' gallery constructed in 1972 in memory of the aptly named Bellringer sisters is now on the first floor. According to a 1553 inventory, the church originally had four bells. In 1778 the Pennington brothers of Cornwall cast a peal of six bells on site. The fourth bell fell and broke and was recast by John Pennington in 1814. One by one the bells cracked and another fell. By 1874 they had become silent. The fifth bell still dates from 1779 but the other five were recast in 1876 by Mears & Stainbrook of Whitechapel, London. The cost (£140) was paid for by Mark Northmore, a farmer at Brisworthy. In 1933 Philip Blowey's wooden bell frame had become worn and riddled with deathwatch beetle. The bells were lowered and laid out on the church path. A new frame was constructed and the bells retuned and rehung. Meavy has its own team of bellringers whose peals can be regularly heard on a Sunday morning and for weddings.



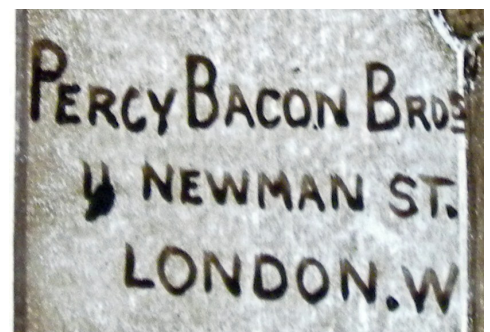
One of the Mears & Stainbrook bells



The clock workings

The flat-bed clock is by Thwaites and Reed and was purchased in 1887 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. It was started by Blanche Gray, the rector's daughter, on 29th November 1887 at 2.59 pm, just before Evensong at 3 pm. It is still wound by hand twice a week.

Turning towards the entrance door, and passing one of the Victorian radiators, we come to the last window and the only one to bear a makers name—look carefully in the bottom right-hand corner for the name of Percy Bacon Bros. The window, dated 1910, shows Christ the Consoler flanked by his mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary (lily in hand) and Mary Magdalene (holding a pot of ointment). As you leave the porch note the medieval holy water stoop carved in the shape of a grotesque face.



The glass-maker's signature



Interior of the church showing the kneelers



North view of the Graveyard and tower

EXTERIOR

The churchyard, which was extended in 1935 and again in 1995, contains numerous headstones from the seventeenth century onwards of local families including Atwill, Bowden, Brown, Moses, Northmore and Williams.

Outside the lych-gate stands the thousand year old oak tree and its associated inn that was once the church-house. Just outside the gate, on the churchyard wall, can be seen four iron rings dating from the 1820s which were for tethering horses. The ancient preaching cross was restored in 1891.



The broken cross-base before restoration c1905

Meavy joined with Sheepstor In 1921. In 1985 Walkhampton was added becoming the United Benefice of Meavy with Sheepstor and Walkhampton. Two years later, in 1987, Yelverton joined to become the United Benefice of Yelverton, Meavy, Sheepstor and Walkhampton. Today we are a Mission Community adding the parishes of Horrabridge, Sampford Spiney and Princetown.

For more information see our website:-



Above: A sketch c1910 showing the church, oak tree, cross and inn
Right: the cross and Meavy Oak in 2013

