

NOTES ON THE BENCH ENDS IN SHEEPSTOR CHURCH

The Oak Benches in Sheepstor church were part of a restoration which started with the replacement of the Rood Screen at the beginning of the C20th. The Bench Ends were carved at the same time as the central isle seating was fitted in oak. The ends were carved by the Pinwill Sisters' company in Plymouth, one of three significant firms in Devon undertaking church carving in the late C19th and early C20th

This restoration was part of a renewed interest in Carved Benches in Churches which developed in the late C19th. Anyone interested in the History of Bench Ends in Devon will find Todd Gray's Devon Ancient Bench Ends (The Mint Press) a valuable introduction. A fuller account is now available in Helen Wilson's "The Remarkable Pinwill Sisters" which gives a full and generously illustrated account of the life and work of these remarkable ladies. The oak seating in the north aisle was added later, at the same time as the screen to the vestry, using ends which had been carved at the same time as those in the central block, apart from the one on the front bench.

The bench end designs follow a number of themes. Some are symbolic and some pictorial. There are three main groups:

- Stories from the History of the Church. These are Pictorial;
- Signs of the Passion;
- Symbols of the Kingdom of God.

The signs and symbols largely follow established traditional designs. Those interested can see some very similar Mediaeval ones in other churches in Devon and Cornwall such as St Keverne on the Lizard, Bodmin, Launcells, and St Braddock. Some of the pictures have specific local relevance, for example Hugh Breton, the Vicar behind commissioning the carvings, moved from St Leonard's to St Morwenna's church at Morwenstow in Cornwall and one of the carvings depicts St Morwenna looking across the Severn Estuary to her native Wales.

Interpreting the symbols and pictures is a source of enjoyable debate. Many of the explanations came from my father, Edward Bayly, who was alive when they were installed. Additional information was provided by Helen Wilson, an acknowledged expert on the Pinwills. Anyone with an interest in bench ends in general, and specifically in the pin will carving, should obtain a copy of her excellent book "the remarkable pinwheel sisters". One, showing the coat of arms of the vicar at the time they were commissioned – Hugh Breton, was identified by a visitor with a deep knowledge of heraldry. On the other side of this note is a generally accepted explanation of most of them. But some are less clear than others. For example: is St Patrick on one of his voyages, or earlier in his life being captured from Cornwall by Irish pirates? Insights from visitors would be welcome!

SHEEPSTOR CHURCH: Pew Ends (From Front)

A/. North Isle	B/.North Side Centre Isle	C/.South Side Centre Isle
1. Arms of the Bayly Family	Vine and Dove Symbols of Christ and Holy Spirit	History of the Church: St Augustine arrives in England to convert King Egbert
2. History of the Church: King John Signs Magna Carta. The first clause declared that the Church in England would be free from interference by the Crown.	History of the Church: The dying St Morwenna, held by her brother St Nectan, looks across the Bristol channel to Wales – her beloved homeland.	Vine and Dove Symbols of Christ and Holy Spirit
3. History of the Church: First four Councils of the Ancient Church: Nicea 325: Divinity of Christ and Nicene creed Constantinople 381: Opposition to Nestorianism Ephesus 431: Opposition to Nestorianism and Pelagianism. Jesus one person. Chalcedon 451: Human and divine nature of Christ	History of the Church: Stoning of St Stephen the first Martyr	Symbols of the Kingdom: Christ the Good Shepherd
4. Signs of the Passion: Christ on the Cross -Sour Wine on Sponge -Pierced hands and side	Signs of the Passion: “ and they cast lots for his coat”	Signs of the Passion: Scouring of Christ -Scouring Post -Whip
5. Symbols of the Kingdom: The Second Coming/ The Last Trump: -Empty Graves -A Great Shout	Signs of the Passion: Preparation for Crucifixion: -Crown of Thorns -Hammer and Nails	Signs of the Passion: Peter’s denial -Faggots for the fire -Cockerel
6. Signs of the Passion: - The Sacred Heart, sometimes the image is shown shining within the bosom of Christ with his wounded hands pointing at the heart. -The Holy Grail, the chalice used by Jesus at The Last Supper, and which some traditions say Joseph of Arimathea used to catch his blood at the crucifixion, and brought to England.	Signs of the Passion: Christ’s Burial -Pitcher, Basin and Cloth -Pierced hands and Feet	Signs of the Passion: Judas’ Betrayal -Money Bag -30 pieces of Silver
7. Symbols of the Kingdom: -Pentecost (Holy Spirit as Wafer and with wings of fire) -Ascension (Feet lifting into cloud)	Symbols of the Kingdom: The Love and Peace of God: -The Crown of Glory -Christ’s life. Given for us	Signs of the Passion: Arrest in Gethsemene -Lantern -Weapons
8. Signs of the Passion: The Crucifixion: -Hammer -Ladder	Impaled arms of Breton: Azure bend between 6 Molets Or impaling Moyle of Buckwell = Gules a mule passant within a bordure Argent.	History of the Church: Peter the Hermit preaches the first Crusade
9. Symbols of the Kingdom: God the Creator and Judge, the beginning and the end -Alpha and Omega	History of the Church: Voyages of St Patrick, (or is it him being captured by Irish pirates from Cornwall)	Symbols of the Kingdom; The Gate to the Kingdom: -Keys and Sword