DEVON BUILDINGS GROUP

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 25

Summer 2007

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Decorated Plaster on Fireplaces, drawings and needlework: *Ann Adams, Exeter Archaeology, Trevor Miles, Richard Parker, John Thorp, Robert Waterhouse*
photographs: © *Ann Adams, Peter Child, Devon County Council, North Devon Maritime Museum, North Devon Rescue Archaeology, Plymouth Museums & Art Gallery, Totnes Museum, Robert Waterhouse*
Box Pews, engravings: *W Spreat*
photographs: © *Jo Cox*

SECRETARY'S REPORT

The last year began with our AGM at County Hall, Exeter, on 22 October 2005. This was followed by a joint meeting with the Friends of Devon's Archives, on the subject of 'Documents and Buildings'. The meeting was fully reported by Ann Adams in Newsletter No 24, so I do not need to describe again the excellent presentations we received. These were followed by a visit to the committee suite at County Hall and to the members' rooms in Bellaire, a brick Queen Anne villa which contains a stair with spectacular plaster decoration on a military theme.

Summer Conference 2006

The summer conference on 17 June was on the theme of 'Dartmoor Longhouses' and was largely organised by Jenny Sanders, to whom many thanks are owed for all her efficient hard work. The subject matter was predictably popular, and the day was enjoyed by over seventy members and their guests. The morning was based at Walkhampton Village Hall, where we had three particularly excellent presentations. The first was by Debbie Griffiths, of Dartmoor National Park, who described the archaeological and historical background to the longhouse tradition on Dartmoor, as well as explaining the Park's approach to the conservation of its longhouses – in particular its acquisition of Higher Upppacott, to protect it and make it accessible to the public. Jenny Sanders followed, with an overview of longhouses on the Moor and an exposition of their development, from fully open structures to fully floored ones. She highlighted the differences between longhouse types on either side of the Moor, and ended with a brief summary of longhouse types in the rest of Britain and in Brittany. John Thorp concluded the morning, speaking on specific longhouses with which he has been involved or had recorded, drawing out various points from these, such as the comparability in size between standing longhouses and earlier excavated ones, and such facts as the presence of a shippen necessitating the construction of wings, if a house were to be extended.

After lunch at the Walkhampton pub we visited three longhouses. The first was Higher Dittisham at Walkhampton, by kind permission of Mr & Mrs Miall, where the shippen had been converted to domestic accommodation; secondly Mr & Mrs Martin's fine group of longhouses at Pizwell, on the high Moor, which contains four longhouses in various states and uses; and finally Great Howton at Moretonhampstead, a relatively grand 16th century longhouse, with some good 17th century interior plasterwork, and which, unusually, still retains its original roof structure over the shippen. We are most grateful to the owners of these buildings, particularly Mr & Mrs Slater at Great Howton, who gave us all tea, which was most welcome after a long afternoon on a hot June day. An excellent set of illustrated notes was provided for those who attended the Conference, copies of which may be still available for sale from the Treasurer/Membership Sec. (all contact details on the end pages).

Newsletter No 24

This issue was published in time for the summer conference, thanks to our Newsletter Editor, Ann Adams. Members should all have had a copy and they will recall it has three principal articles: on scantle slating, by Terry Hughes; on the early 20th century Valuation Office Survey and its details of the farm buildings construction in the parish of Morchard Bishop, by Jo Cox; and the history and repair of the Sidwell Street Methodist Church, by Roger Thorne and Jo Cox.

Committee

The Committee consists of Ann Adams, Lyn Auty, Stuart Blaylock, Oliver Bosence, Stewart Brown, myself, Jo Cox, Dawn Honeysett, Richard Parker, Peter Roseveare, Jenny Sanders, John Thorp, Robert Waterhouse. It meets six times in the year.

Among casework which we have discussed has been the fate of the chapel at Wynards Almshouses, Exeter, which was auctioned without any planning permission for a new use. We made representations to Exeter City Council, about their having originally sold off the complex without making provision for the future of the chapel. Its fate is still not known. We were pleased that a much more satisfactory scheme was proposed for the Mount Dinham area in Exeter than that to which we had earlier

objected, and we supported the new scheme, which has now been approved though not yet started on the ground. We became involved in the issue of the possible removal, on structural grounds, of the font cover at St David's, Exeter, and believe now that this concern has been allayed. We have made representations to South Hams District Council, about the demolition of historic walls along Leechwell Lane in Totnes. We have been concerned with several minor issues in Crediton. Peter Roseveare, on behalf of the Group, raised objection to the potential effect of certain proposals for the new settlement at Sherford, on Listed Buildings in the area. We are currently concerned about the fate of Okehampton Workhouse and of Plymouth's 19th century churches, which are being lost at a rapid rate.

Finally, Dawn Honeysett and I attended a meeting of Devon history related societies at County Hall, in April. This was intended to build bridges between different organisations with common interests, and to see if they could help each other. Although it was a pleasant occasion, we came away feeling that this Group stood quite happily on its own feet. I hope you all agree.

Peter Child

Newsletter Editor's Report

AGM

Following on from the Summer Conference, reported on by Peter Child above, the final event of 2006 was the AGM, on 21 October. This was held at Topsham and proved to be another very popular day, with a near record attendance. The morning session was held at the Globe Hotel, with the reports of the Officers. The Committee remained unchanged but it was agreed that new blood should be co-opted, if it could be found. In fact, early in 2007, Caroline Garrett was co-opted onto the Committee.

Despite efforts to avoid other societies' dates, this one had clashed. It was proposed to set up a website for the Group which, among other advertising advantages, would allow our chosen dates to be put immediately into the public domain. Dawn Honeysett, the Treasurer and Membership Secretary, hoped members would use their e-mail addresses as much as possible, in future communication with her, saving both time and money.

Suggestions for venues and topics for summer conferences and AGMs included Victorian Churches in Torbay; Mills and Milling; Holcombe Rogus; Torr Abbey. It was suggested that DBG might also like to be involved in forthcoming conferences on Mining History in the Tamar Valley, and on Plymouth Architecture, to be held in Exeter. In the Group's new year, the Committee chose Nineteenth Century Churches in Torquay, as the topic and venue for the Summer Conference on 16th June, with the preferred option for the AGM being Holcombe Rogus on 27th October.

Research Paper No 2

The AGM saw the long-awaited launch of the second volume of DBG's Research Papers. It contains papers by Mike Baldwin, on the decorative plasterwork at the Customs House Exeter, attributed to John Abbott, and other related work about the county; by Christopher Powell, on the records of a Mid-Devon 18th century builder; by David Griffiths, on the iconography of the painted panels on the rood screen at Bradninch; and by Jo Cox, on the Devon invention of cast-iron roof tiles in the early 19th century. Despite some problems with the print run, which had eventually to be done again, this is a beautifully produced publication, full of interest, and a great credit to its authors and its very hard working editors, Jo Cox and Dawn Honeysett. All members received a copy as part of their membership: anyone wishing to purchase copies should contact the Treasurer/ Membership Sec. (see end)

After the business of the AGM, we had speakers on various aspects of Topsham. John Allan gave a brief overview of the very long history of the port, from the Bronze Age, through the Roman (where its strategic importance involved the building of a small fort), to its spectacular growth in the late 15th cent and in the late 17th cent, largely to serve Devon's vast woollen

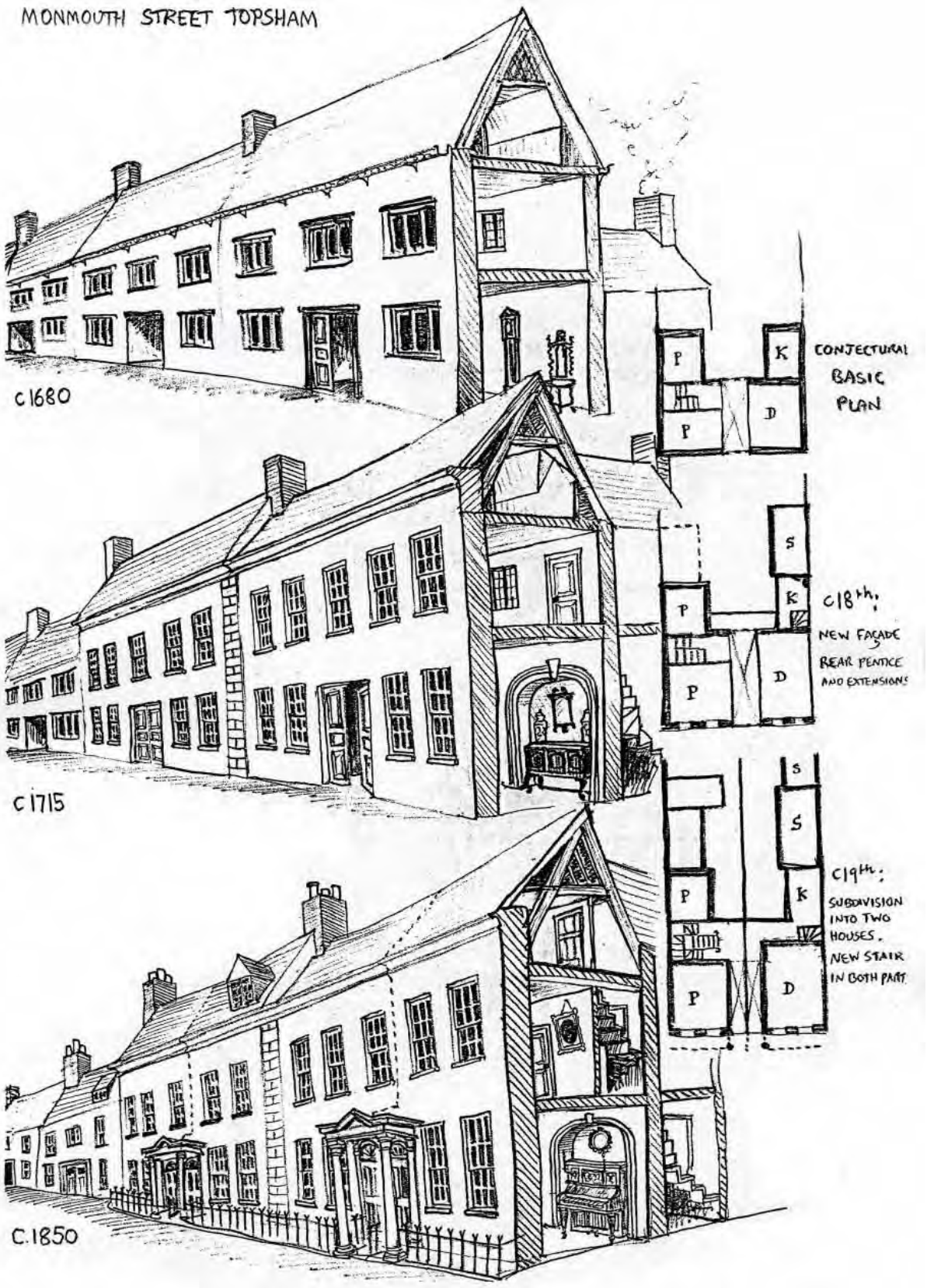
trade. He drew our attention to numerous studies of the port, both published and unpublished, including the Devon Archaeological Society Proceedings of 2004 and a variety of other books and papers which illuminated aspects of this long history specifically, naming papers by Marianne Kowaleski and Jackson (in TDA), W Stephen's transcription of the Exeter Port Books, A E G Clarke's huge thesis on the Exeter shipping trade, etc. He rounded off a whistle-stop talk with an amusing story, illustrative of Devon's vast international trade in the later 17th cent, and telling of three Devon men – from Topsham, Exeter and Lympstone respectively– who happened to meet each other on the quay at Alexandria, one day in the 1680s.

Our next speaker was Ann Musson, a long time resident and tireless campaigner for the greater understanding and preservation of Topsham's wealth of historic buildings and their rich interiors. She spoke on the late 17th cent merchants' houses along the Strand. In the absence of slides, she showed a series of scale drawings of these houses' street frontages, pieced together and suspended from canes. Although this unusual presentation somewhat resembled a line of washing, it gave, in fact, a remarkably clear view of the whole scheme, impossible by photography, and demonstrated that these houses were built very much to a pattern. This would have been entirely uniformly spaced, but for the presence of a very few already existing buildings at the back. Each house was built with its gable end facing the street (most still bearing their original stepped and shaped Dutch-type gables) and its entrance front facing storage buildings, across an enclosed yard. The house which is now the Topsham Museum, still retains most of this arrangement intact. Each property had its own section of foreshore, opposite its frontage.

John Thorp then gave us one of his superb slide-illustrated talks, on the buildings of Topsham which he has been investigating for many years.

After lunch, we had the privilege, thanks to their wonderfully tolerant owners, of seeing over Shell House, in the High Street, and three more developed late 17th cent houses in Monmouth Street (Nos 36, 37 & 38/39). Monmouth Street was shown and described to us by Richard Parker. We then saw Ann Musson's own house, 1 Higher Shapter Street (formerly Upper Lime Kiln Road), with its equally fascinating development from c1680, and with the mixed residential and commercial aspects so typical of that era and so soon to pass out of fashion. We are most grateful to all the owners, who so generously allowed hoards of enthusiastic DBG members to invade their homes – and to Jo Cox, Ann Musson, Richard Parker and John Thorp, who provided the notes.

A fragment of rare 18th cent. cotton rag wallpaper from upstairs panelling at Number 1 Higher Shapter Street, Topsham.


MONMOUTH STREET TOPSHAM
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C18th:
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REAR PENTICE
AND EXTENSIONS
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C19th:
SUBDIVISION
INTO TWO
HOUSES.
NEW STAIR
IN BOTH PART

A New Buildings Trust

Not a DBG event, but one which must be of interest to many members, was the launch on 16th March 2007 of Sebastian Fenwick's Fenwick Trust Rural Archive – apparently a new (and probably quite different in character) venture, to replace that of the same name once founded at Dartington but inactive for some years. An exhibition and reception was held in the former Assembly Rooms at the White Hart, Modbury (where DBG would have held its 2002 AGM, had it not been for the then ongoing refurbishments) and the new archive was officially launched by the Trust's patron, Lucinda Lambton. The principal aim is to reveal and record rural houses and garden schemes now no longer visible – which inevitably means that most of the subjects will be formerly very high status properties. Nonetheless, it is a most interesting and laudable venture, which includes a reference library. Members at the 2002 AGM will remember Robert Waterhouse's presentation on his excavation of the Hills' old mansion at Shilstone, and the amazing water features of the Hills' and Saverys' former gardens there – the discovery and current reconstruction of which has been the genesis of the new Trust.

There were most interesting displays, by the Modbury Local History Society, and by Robert, the retained archaeologist to the Trust. These showed old maps, drawings and paintings of various properties (mostly in the South Hams), with archaeological plans and excavated artefacts – including a large worked stone detail from the Halses' former evolved mansion at Kenedon, now reduced to a farm.

I represented DBG, along with Jo Cox and John Thorp – Robert, of course, wearing another hat on this occasion. There was a huge assembly of people and it was particularly pleasing to meet up with many less frequently seen members and friends, from both sides of the Tamar.

Newsletter No 25

In this issue, we are continuing a somewhat neglected specific subject, although one which is currently occasioning much planning controversy – that of church seating. Readers will remember Stuart Blaylock's report and comments (in Newsletter No 23, of 2005), on English Heritage's conference that year on *To Pew or Not to Pew?* That conference concluded that far too little research has been, or is currently being done on what is still actually *in situ* – its history, design relationship with its church, and even its degree of rarity – before, as too often happens, the existing seating is moved, or even swept away altogether. There is, at the moment, little to suggest that either of the categories of seating treated here – the late medieval carved-ended bench, or the box pew – is in much immediate danger; but the same cannot be said for that which Jo Cox hopes to consider in our next issue. In any case, the more we can know and put into the public domain, about all categories, the better.

We hope to offer a series of articles on carved bench ends, from the late medieval period to their revival in the 19th cent, which can tell us so much about the society in which they were created, if we can only interpret them correctly. We shall be featuring those of different eras and with different subject matter, and begin here with an introductory short paper by Jo Mattingly and a few examples. In a much more weighty related paper, Jo Cox gives us a history of the rather shorter-lived box pew, once such a prominent feature of churches but now only surviving in one or two.

Also in this issue, we are featuring another neglected topic, that of the sgraffito or painted decorative plaster of fireplaces. Here we offer a variety of examples, discovered and/or described by a number of people, over the past forty years or so, and we hope that readers will submit further examples and opinions on these fascinating but now rare domestic architectural ephemera.

Ann Adams

THE ORIGINS OF DEVON BENCH ENDS – the view from Cornwall

Medieval parish churches were originally built without benches, though misericords and sedilia could sometimes be found in the chancel. The nave and aisles of the typical church were open spaces, where people could congregate; only the east end of the church was screened off – the priest's 'sanctum'. Open plan worship meant that people could process round the inside of the church, on Sundays before mass or on major feast days. In effect, parishioners were free to do their own thing. Women who owned Books of Hours tried to follow the Latin service in their books, and stone seats along walls or round pillars might be provided for the old and sick – hence the saying, 'the weakest go to the wall'.

Town churches tended to get pews first – literate merchant or gentry wives being the moving force. Preachers of sermons, who came to town churches, also found pews useful as a way of controlling, or keeping their audience in one place (clergy in the 18th century sometimes referred to later pine pews, with doors, as cattle pens, for the same reason). Documents show that in Devon, pewing was underway by the mid-to-late 15th century at Ashburton, Chagford and Plympton, while Moretonhampstead had a pulpit and probably seats too. Seats were at first only in the eastern part of the nave and, if the aisles were also pewed, space had to be allowed for processions. St Pancras church, Exeter, ordered new seats for the recently built Jesus aisle in 1518, like those already in its nave.

Pews changed the way churches were used. Reputedly church ales had been held in some naves, during Whitsun week (although I have found little direct evidence of this, in surviving Westcountry wardens' accounts), but with the introduction of pews, in the 15th and 16th centuries, the ales were moved to purpose-built church houses.

Devon is fortunate in having a number of dated bench ends, although for sheer variety of design Cornwall is hard to beat. The earliest Devon bench end found, so far, is dated 1489 (Fig 1).

1. Dated panel from the Holiburton prayer desk formerly at Lifton, 1489.

This can now be found in Launceston museum but, when drawn by William Borlase in the 18th century, was still in Lifton church in West Devon. As the carved coat of arms is that of Patrick Holiburton, then rector of Lifton, this might be the end of a choir stall, rather than a pew from the nave. Similarly, a supposed 1511-12 bench end in Coldridge church, is actually part of a prayer desk that belonged to Sir John Evans, the Marquis of Dorset's park keeper there (Fig 2). Also, an early pair of bench ends at Colebrooke, dated by their armorials, were once part of a prayer desk of the Coplestone family (Fig 3); and one at North Tawton must be early, at it bears the arms of the Champernowne family. In all these cases, a chantry chapel original location at the east end of the church is likely here, too.

2. John Evans' prayer desk at Coldridge, c1511.

3. Breton panel from the Coplestone prayer desk at Colebrooke, probably 1480s.

Other dated benches in Devon span the years from 1529 to 1546, and similar evidence from Cornwall and Somerset confirms that the first half of the 16th century, and particularly the English Reformation, is the period when most Westcountry churches first got pews in their naves. In addition, as Pevsner states: 'benches, increasingly in demand as sermons became more important, were some of the few furnishings undisturbed by the liturgi-cal upheavals of the mid C16'. A few Tudor bench ends were attacked by iconoclasts (image breakers) during the Reformation, or in the mid-17th century Civil War. Losses might include bench ends that depicted the crucifixion, because these are now rare. A good example of a crucifixion still survives at West Woolfardisworthy, near Bideford (Fig 4). Many other Tudor bench ends survived, to be restored and reinstated by the Victorians. At Torbyan, in South Devon, later pine pews still encase the Tudor ones.

The date 1529 appears on a bench end at Broadwoodwidger (Fig 5), and 1530 at Hartland, on benches with the initials of Hugh Prust, a local gentleman. Northlew's benches date to 1527, and Dowland's to 1546. Both Broadwoodwidger and Dowland show some Renaissance design elements, as would be expected by this time. In contrast to Cornwall, there appear to be rather fewer symbols of Christ's Passion, and a greater number of bench ends merely with tracery designs, especially in south and east Devon, where Cornish influences were less strong. It may be that Passion symbols were more popular in Catholic areas that supported the Prayer Book rebels of 1549.

An unusual figurative bench end from Lew

4. Rare bench end depicting the Crucifixion at West Woolfardisworthy.

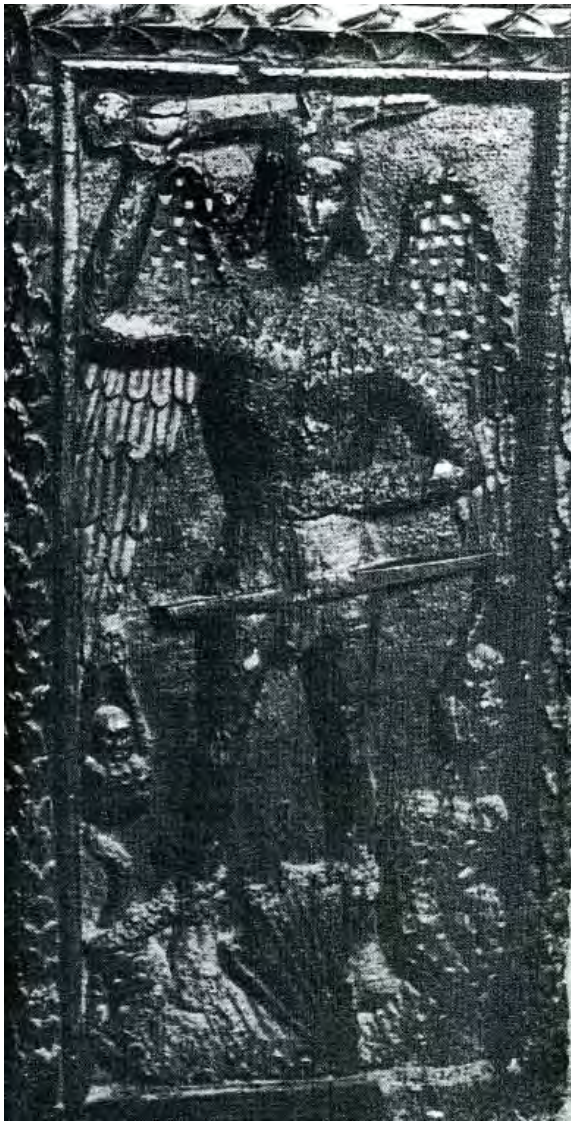
Trenchard, near Launceston, shows St Michael weighing the souls (Fig 6). This compares well with Cornwall's finest series of figurative panels, at Altarnun, and could be the work of Robert Daye. Daye was probably an East Devon or Somerset craftsman, and further examples of his distinctive and high quality work might be found in Somerset. Careful examination of the worn-away date on the Maker's bench at Altarnun, by Dr Martha Carlin of Milwaukee, suggests that it cannot be from the 1540s, as I stated in 1991. A date in the 1530s now appears more likely.

Other carpenters and carvers who made bench ends operated from bases in wooded areas, like the Tamar Valley, although imports of Welsh timber for benches have been noted. Devon

5. Dated bench end at Broadwoodwidger, 1529.

carvers included John Pares, a screen carver at Stratton and Atherington, in the 1430s to 1540s, who was from North Lew in Devon; John Kelly, who carved the rood loft at Winkleigh; and the Plymouth-based Matthy More, who carved the Bodmin pulpit and pews in the 1490s. Breton carvers made the Coplestone prayer desk ends at Colebrooke, as well as screens in Mid Devon and at North Petherwin, and a vestment chest at Bodmin.

Joanna Mattingly



6. St Michael weighing souls at Lewtrenchard.

7. St Katherine with her wheel of martyrdom at Combe-in-Teignhead.

For further information and specific references see:

Joanna Mattingly, 'The Dating of Bench-Ends in Cornish Churches', *Journal of the Royal Institute of Cornwall,* 1991, pp 58-72

Bridget Cherry & Nicholas Pevsner, *Devon*, Penguin 1989

John Stabb, *Devon Church Antiquities*, 1909, and *Some Old Devon Churches* (3 vols) 1908-1916

J C Cox, *Bench Ends in English Churches*, 1916

Paul Cockerham, 'Catacleuse, wood and plaster: markers for the Renaissance in Early Modern Cornwall', *Journal of the Royal Institute of Cornwall*, 2004, 43-63

PAINTED AND SGRAFFITO DECORATED PLASTER ON FIREPLACES

All classes of internal decoration are essentially ephemeral, prone as they are to being swept away by the predations of damp, damage and changes of fashion but, of the many kinds that were employed in past centuries to enliven the interiors of houses, the most fragile must be the decorations on walls. In the scale of survival, wall paintings and their successors, wallpapers, come near the bottom of the scale and fireplace paintings must be at the very end.

Nonetheless, a number of schemes have been seen, and some do still survive in Devon - albeit mostly in a very fragmentary condition. Very little has been written about them, and it seems time that something of the charm and possible origins of these now rare pieces of folk art should be put into the public domain.

Fragments of black & white decorative plaster have been recognised in old fireplaces, from time to time, ever since at least the 1970s, and there is still always the chance that more will appear, as chimneys are opened up. Decorative schemes do seem to survive more often in a relatively better state of preservation in chamber fireplaces, than in the parlours normally below them, and this is probably because fires were less frequently lit upstairs. It is interesting to speculate on the normal or expected life span, but one suspects that it could not have been very long, even if open hearths had remained in fashion – only five to ten years, perhaps, before heat and smoke and knocks from logs took their inevitable toll.

Here we show examples from various parts of the county, both urban and rural, and offer some ideas on their techniques, design origins, social status and dating range.

Techniques

There appear to be two types of decoration: those painted and those executed in sgraffito (one colour scratched through, cameo-fashion, to another). There is some evidence that the latter technique may be the earlier, as it is sometimes found over-painted. Fireplaces, in any case, were almost always lined with plaster, like the walls. In the case of sgraffito, it seems that a thick layer of black plaster (the black presumably derived from lamp black, or burnt tallow) was overlaid with a thin layer of white plaster and the decoration scraped through to the black base. It is probable that the opposite arrangement was also used. Where whole schemes survive, it can be seen that at least part of the back of the fireplace was treated decoratively, with the whole of the usually splayed sides (jambs), and an area of surround on the open wall.

Design Origins

Many of the designs found are purely geometric, made with rulers and compasses, and often with a variety of patterns used together. Others are floral, or geometric and floral combined. Their inspiration is probably Dutch tiles, both those used to create a mass effect and those used in schematic combination, to form vases of flowers, etc. It seems equally likely that the designs on German Westerwald stoneware vessels of the late 17th and early 18th cent were also influential. They were used in almost every household, as we can see from the ubiquity of their shards in archaeological excavations, and would have been familiar to all.

Sgraffito is a technique much employed on decorative Devon and Somerset pottery of the 17th and earlier 18th cents – and on special objects, such as ‘harvest jugs’, into the early 19th cent. It had also been used as an external wall decoration as early as the late 16th cent, and some examples still remain in Exeter. External sgraffito was also, of course, still widely used in Europe very much later, with many examples in towns in Italy and in Prague, for instance, dating to the early 19th century. However, it is only in its internal application, and specifically to walls and fireplaces, with which we are concerned here.

Of the painted schemes found so far, the vines design from South Molton, although probably one of the later ones, does have similarities with Westerwald designs, in its trailing stems and formalised bunches of grapes, and to other contemporary treatments of the theme, such as the carved storey post shown here, but harks uniquely back to Elizabethan mannerism, in its

conceit of its roots becoming birds, eating its own grapes.

Status

The houses in which decorated fireplaces have been found all belonged to those we might think of as 'middle class' – prosperous yeomen, merchants and minor gentry.

Dating

Even when the house, or even the fireplace, is dated, we can not, of course, be sure of the date at which anything so ephemeral as a plaster fireplace decoration was first put on – and some fireplaces, as we have seen, were decorated at least twice. However, the actual use of open fireplaces had a fairly limited fashion life. Except in castles and very high status homes, heated sleeping rooms would have been very rare before the end of the 16th century, and houses of the status of those in which these designs are found would probably not have had them until the 17th. Then fireplaces became increasingly enclosed with wooden surrounds, from the later 17th cent. (and this not-much-later blocking was, in fact, a likely vital element in such fragile decoration's eventual survival). A number were executed on brick chimneys, which makes a Devon dating of those examples before the second half of the 17th cent most unlikely, particularly in rural areas, where the tradition of using clays in the unfired mass of cob was strong. The bricks would have been locally made, usually clamp fired on site, rather than imported, as they sometimes were in coastal towns. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to suggest that some geometric schemes may date from the earlier 17th century, while the 'floral' schemes probably belong to the period between 1660 and 1710, with the second half of the 17th century the most likely date for most of them. One, apparently unique, figurative design from Exeter shows a sgraffito female caryatid – a supporter such as would have been found carved in stone or oak, in the very grand houses of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. As with provincial furniture, 'middle class' interior decoration can probably be safely assumed to be some fifty years behind the height of fashion, and the other designs in the same house are geometric. The South Molton vine scheme shows that an early style does not have to be an early work.

Examples

Those shown or mentioned here are from both town and rural buildings, and include examples from:

Dartmouth (Fig 1); Dawlish (not shown); East Portlemouth (not shown); Exeter (Figs 2 & 3); Hartland (Fig 4); Lympstone (Fig 5); Malborough (Fig 6); Newton Abbot (Fig 7); Plymouth (Fig 8); South Brent (Fig 9); South Molton (Fig 10); Sowton (Fig 11); Totnes (Fig 12).

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Exeter Archaeology, Plymouth Museums & Art Gallery, Totnes Museum, Peter Child, Trevor Miles, Richard Parker, John Thorp and Robert Waterhouse, and all others who have contributed their drawings and photographs and kind permission, towards this short paper. Thanks to the generosity of the owners, I had the privilege of being among the first to see the remarkable chamber fireplace design, when it was discovered at Honiton Barton in 1991. Trevor Miles's drawings from Middle Moor, in the Proceedings of the DAS of 1989, had first fired my enthusiasm for this fascinating domestic art form, and the Honiton Barton schemes fuelled it further. I photographed both fireplaces there extensively and experimented with reconstructing them in woollen needlepoint, to try to show what they had looked like when they were complete. I also took the opportunity to sketch the design, still visible under the whitewash, on the jambs of the chamber fireplace at the National Trust's Higher Brownsham, during the DBG's AGM visit to Hartland in 2004.

Those illustrated here are, of course, far from an exhaustive catalogue, but they show something of the variety of effects achieved, and some of the little known ways by which people gave vibrant decorative interest to their homes, before the days of paints and wallpapers. Comment and further examples from readers would be much appreciated.

Ann Adams

Published sources

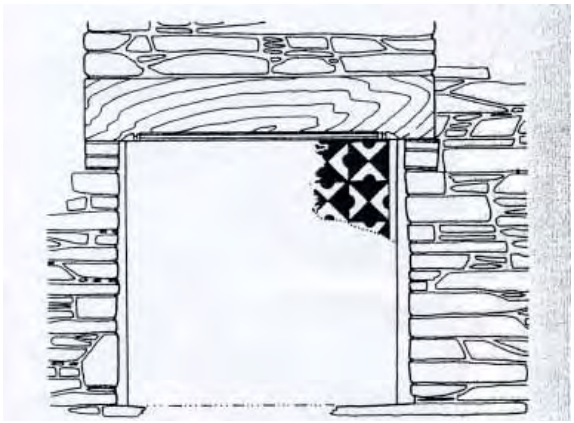
Michael Laithwaite, 'Middle Moor, Sowton: a re-assessment', in *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 103, 1971, 77-83.

James Barber, 'No 33 St Andrew's Street, Plymouth', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 105, 1973, 37-54.

John R L Thorp, '4 The Quay, Dartmouth: a Devon Town-House of 1664', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 41, 1983, 107-122.

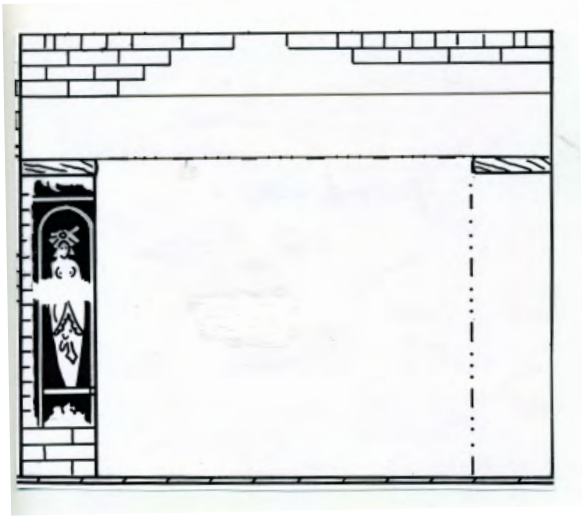
Trevor J Miles, ' The Seventeenth Century Sgraffito-decorated Fireplaces at Middle Moor, Sowton', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 47, 1989, 136-138.

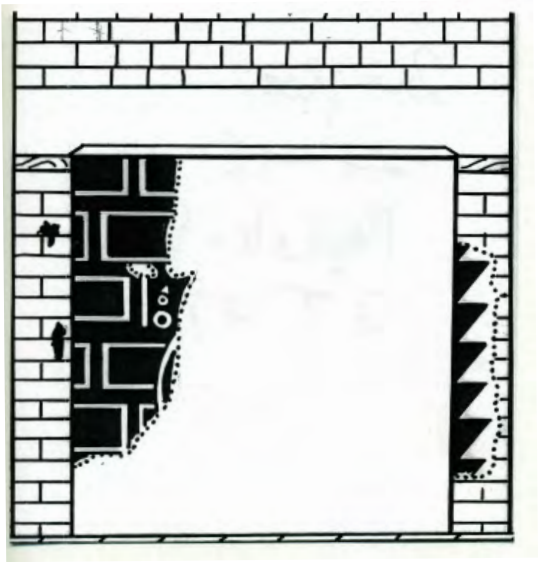
Fig 1a & 1b (below): **4 THE QUAY, DARTMOUTH**. Geometrically decorated sgraffito fireplaces on the first and second floors of a house bearing a date plaque of 1664 and apparently built by Robert Plumleigh, a ship's captain and/or owner, of the town. The designs are both standard, with interlocking circles on the first floor and diagonally quartered squares on the second; but the latter is made different by small semi-circular 'nicks' in opposing pairs of the quarterings.



(Not shown) : RIXDALE, DAWLISH.
Sgraffito work apparently in association with the date 1669.

Fig 2a, 2b, 2c & 2d: **44-6 MAGDALEN STREET, EXETER.**
Sgraffito decorated fireplaces of considerable sophistication on ground, first and second floors of a merchant's house (in 1660 the likely owner was Richard Westcombe, one of the two highest Poll Tax payers in the parish of Holy Trinity). Ground floor with extremely rare figurative supporter on the left outer wall face; possibly one of a pair representing 'Peace' & 'Plenty' - popular auspicious motifs. Ist floor also only surviving on wall face; an unusual pattern of alternating chequerboard and stripes. Second floor has a panelled pattern at the back, with traces of a curved 'fireback' (see Middle Moor ground floor) surrounded by smaller devices; the wall face a pattern of diagonally halved squares.





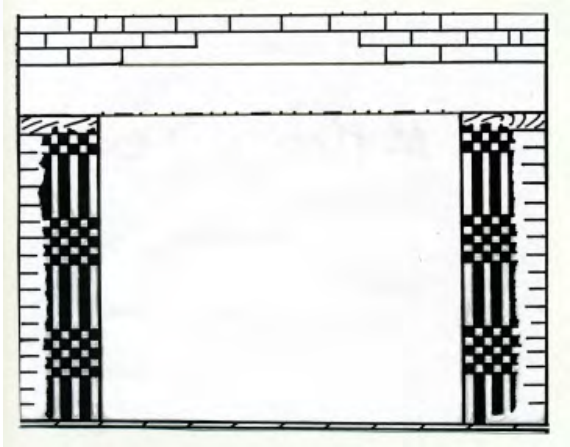
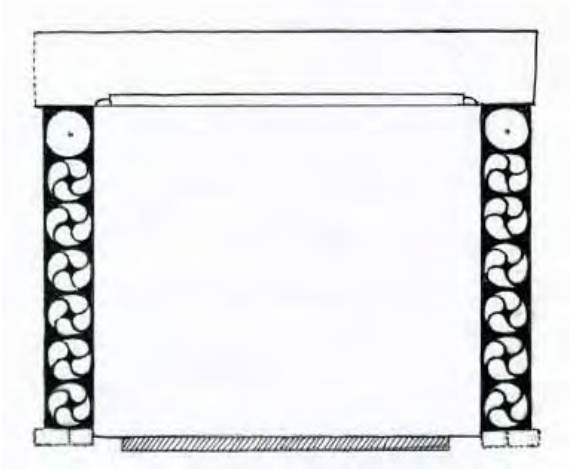


Fig 3a & 3b: **21 THE MINT, EXETER.**
Sgraffito decoration on ground and first floor fireplaces. Ground floor wall faces have an unusual design of ogee-quartered circles forming spiralling drops. First floor backed with large 'tartan' squares, which seem to have extended into the jambs, and wall faces with diagonally quartered smaller squares (see the different effect achieved at Newton Abbot, by diagonally quartering rectangles).



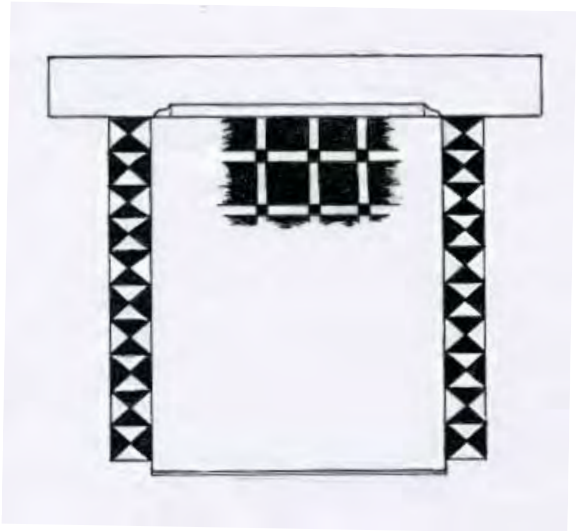
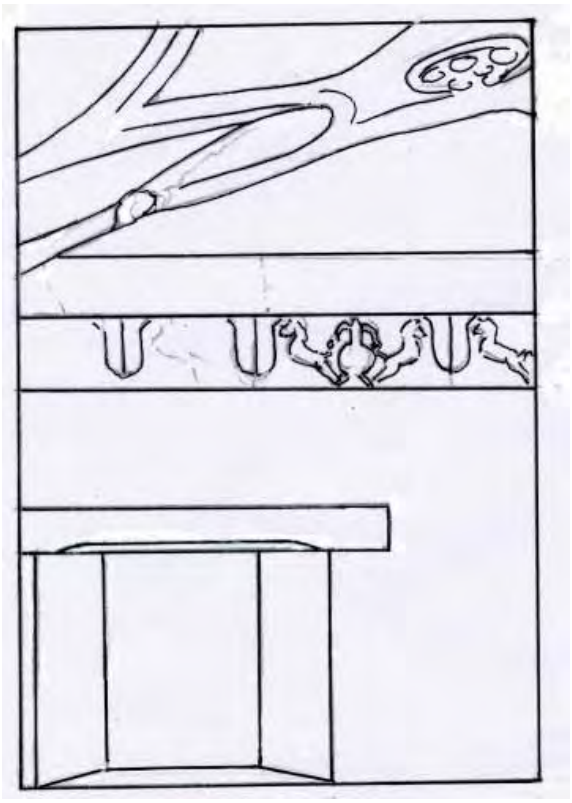


Fig 4a & 4b:
HIGHER BROWNSHAM, HARTLAND.
The corner fireplace in the first floor chamber, showing its relationship to the enriched rib ceiling and 'Pegasus' frieze; with the quite elaborate sgraffito floral circles in the jambs, as they appear under whitewash. The oak lintel has traces of red colouring (see Middle Moor, Sowton). The Nicholls family, of a glove-making business, were apparently the manor tenants in the 17th cent. (info. NT)



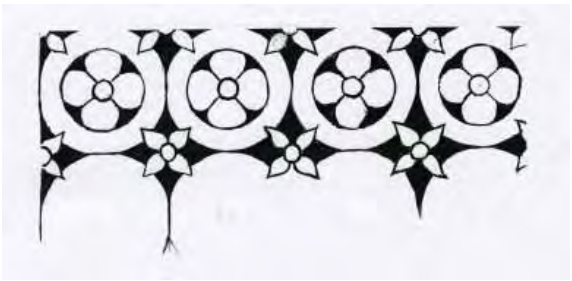


Fig 5a & 5b: **GULLIFORD, LYMPSTONE.**
Painted flowers from the ground, apparently under a curving frame, from right hand jamb of ground floor fireplace. Large half flowers at the sides probably extended outside the frame. The left jamb is similarly decorated freehand, with slight variation in the flowers and leaves. (Photograph enhanced for clarity).

Fig 6 : **ALSTON HOUSE, MALBOROUGH.**
Sgraffito design of interlocking circles from the fireplace jambs (pattern identical with one at Dartmouth), formerly below a moulded plaster overmantel depicting Abraham and Isaac.

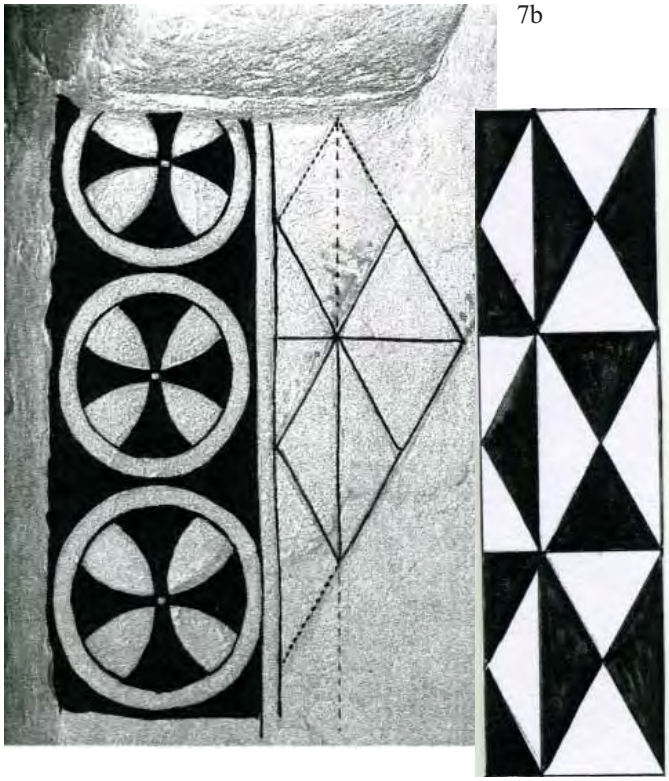
Fig 7 : **49 WOLBOROUGH STREET, NEWTON ABBOT.**
Sgraffito on right hand wall face of a fireplace, in the first floor principal room of an important town house. The designs are on both sides and have an apparent linkage with a moulded plaster flower, in the

5a

5b

6

7a

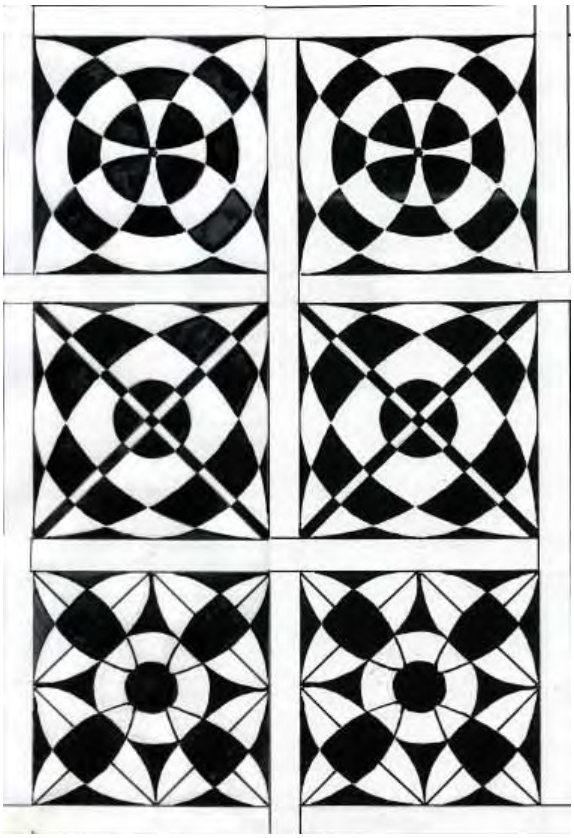


7b

centre of the breast. The plaster continues over the much earlier stone corbel, and all is heavily whitewashed. The inked photograph and the measured drawing show how alternative toning of the same outlines, according to whether the base coat is black or white, can alter the given effect.

Fig 8a & 8b: **33 ST ANDREW'S STREET, PLYMOUTH** (Merchant's House Museum).
The most elaborate of all the sgraffito geometric schemes, here in a first floor front parlour. The design is of large square frames, with different patterns in each of the remaining three (five?) surviving horizontal bands. The top has 3 concentric circles, and arcs deriving from the centre of the inner edge of the frames; the second has 2 concentric circles, and arcs deriving from the inner corners of the frames, plus a narrow diagonal cross; the third has 3 concentric circles, and arcs deriving from the width centres and inner corners of the frames. The top right square of the left jamb shows part of the later pattern of a bunch (in a vase?) of small flowers above a 'gallery' of *fleurs de lys*, while the right jamb also has traces of small cruder flowers.
17 & 21 HIGH STREET, PLYMOUTH (not shown: demolished 1960) and 29 SALTASH STREET, PLYMOUTH (not shown: demolished 1965) also

8a left
8b right



had decorated fireplaces.

Fig 9: **WEST MOORE, SOUTH BRENT.**
Sgraffito decorated fireplace in first floor chamber, with chequerboard small squares and diagonally halved squares, the whole in a black surround continuing over the lintel and, perhaps,originally streaked to resemble marble. Lightly decorated moulded frieze above, with a pair of coiled floral devices below the date 1653.

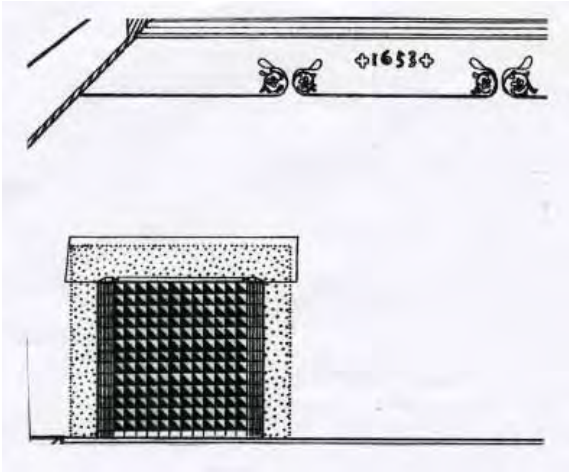


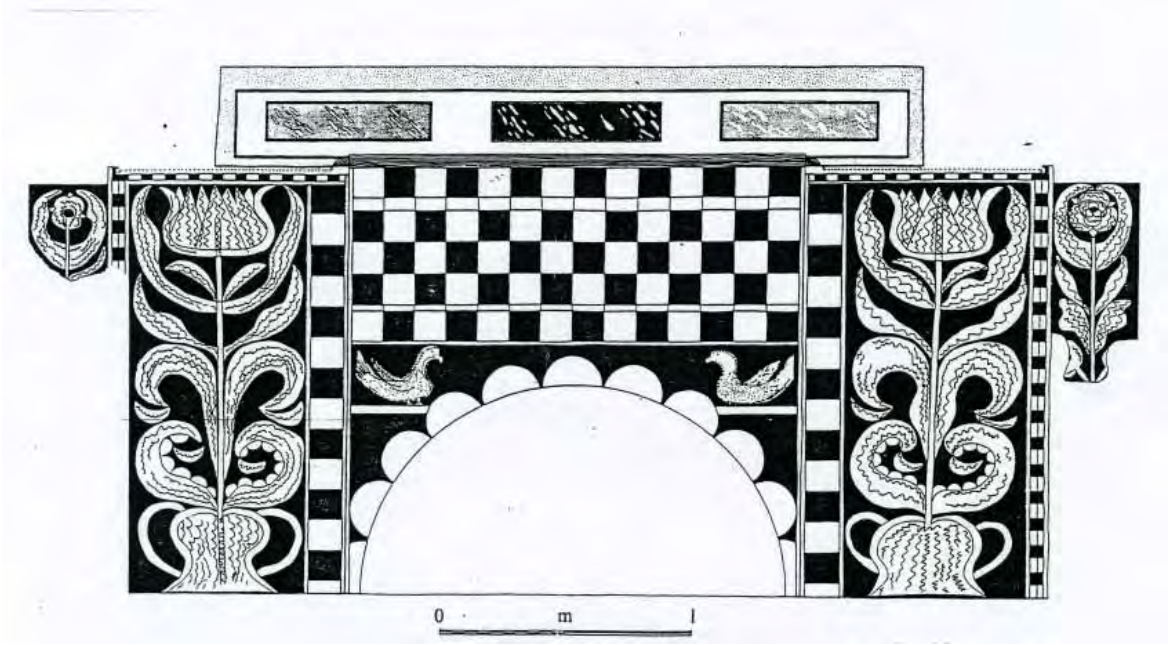
Fig 10: **HONITON BARTON, SOUTH MOLTON**.
This house is remarkable for its decorative features. All the door-posts are ovolo chamfered with vase and foliate stops - each pair different. The fireplace lintels are similarly ovolo chamfered with foliate stops and large rams-horn spirals. One fireplace exterior (without surviving hearth design) is treated

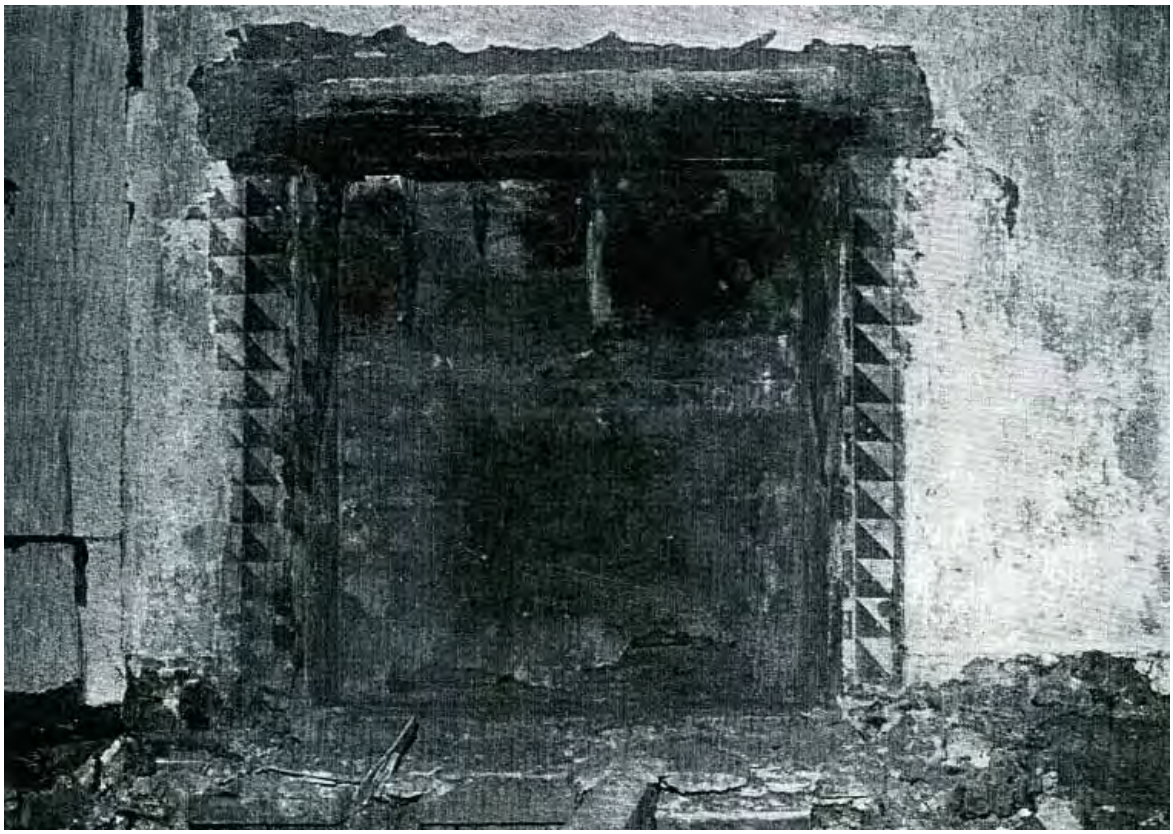
with a *trompe l'oeil* painted architectural scheme, apparently with pilasters, of which one capital with double flower above remains (10a, below). There are painted floral designs in a parlour fireplace and that of the chamber above it, in the new wing and front, built in brick (presumably derived from the large duck pond) by Anthony Paul, a South Molton merchant, and bearing the date plaque 1676. The ground floor

design is of flowers in a vase, which overlies a scheme of plain chequerboard (10b, below). The whole area immediately above the vase is void and, of the flowers just above that, only one remains. In reconstructing the scheme, a certain amount of licence had to be employed; the leaves and buds above the vase are a modern creation, the sole outlying flower has been moved (and paired) nearer to the centre, and initials added to the original blank ribbon (10c, overleaf). The initials are those of Anthony & Elizabeth Paul, from the date plaque over the front door, but the paintings may well be a little later. The first floor design, of fruiting vines with tendrils, survives sufficiently on both sides of the outer wall face and on both jambs to reconstruct the right half of the scheme entirely (10d & 10e). Of the parrot-like birds' heads developing from the roots, two images remain, on the right jamb and the left wall face – both of the left-facing bird.


A+EP.1676AA.1992

Fig 11a, 11b, 11c, 11d & 11e (below, above right and overleaf): **MIDDLE MOOR, SOWTON**.
Elaborate sgraffito designs of mixed floral and geometric patterns on the fireplaces of the ground and first floor gable end of the 17th cent north wing, the lintels coloured with panels in streaked black and red, apparently to imitate marble (see red colour at Higher Brownsham, Hartland). The flowers in the jambs are





in vases, the large blooms and in and everted leaves toned with wavy lines. The geometric parts are of diagonally halved squares, plain chequerboard and squares made very different by small quartered circles in every corner. The ground floor fireplace had further bands of flowers on the wall faces, and birds (swimming duck?) on either side of a curved and scalloped 'fireback' (see Magdalen St, Exeter). Schematic scale drawings bring these now demolished schemes to dramatic life. The owners were the Lee family: John Lee yeoman, d.c1671 and his son, Roger Lee gentleman, d.1695.

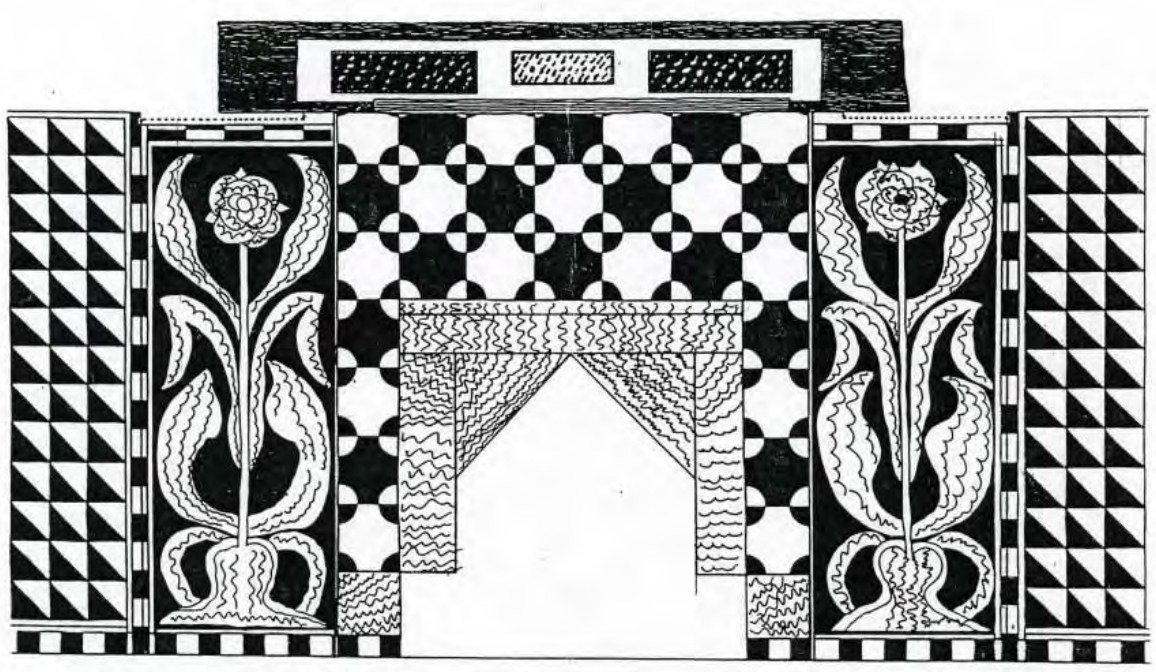
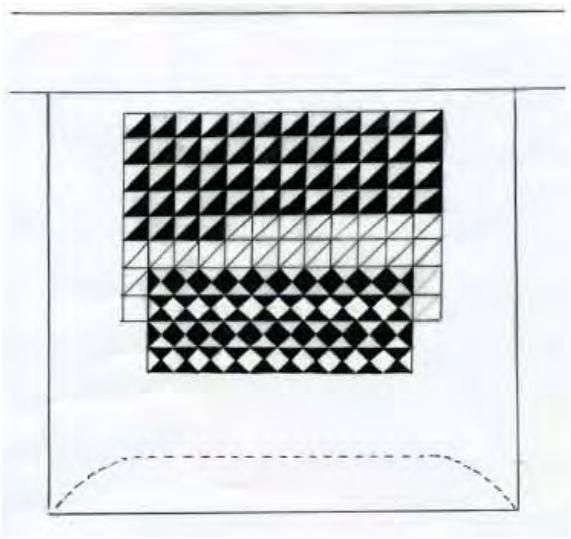


Fig 12a & 12b:**70 FORE STREET, TOTNES**.
(Totnes ELizabethan House Museum) There are three sgraffito fireplaces, all geometric, in this former merchant's house. Two are of the same common pattern of diagonally divided squares, but with alternative toning. The third is rather more elaborate,

with quartered squares in alternating bands (see 21 The Mint, Exeter). All are in curved hearths and the patterns appear to have continued around the curves. The property was owned by the Crown at the beginning of the 17th cent, and later by the Mayor and Corporation. In 1642 the tenant was Walter Mudge and, from 1652 to the end of the century, the successive tenants were Thomas and Henry Beere.



12b. Sketch of the two types of geometric schemes in 70 Fore Street, Totnes.

Fig 13a, 13b & 13c: **Contemporary decorative objects:**
Westerwald jug with semi-sgraffito mixed floral and geometric patterns. Early 18th cent.
Sgraffito plate from Barnstaple with flowers in a vase, the border textured with wavy lines (see Middle Moor, Sowton). 17th cent. Small floral sgraffito dish from Barnstaple, dated 1669.

Fig 14a, 14b, 14c, 14d & 14e: **Contemporary decorative objects:**
Painted Dutch tile with flowers from a ground; first half 17th cent. Painted Dutch tile with flowers in a vase; second half of 17th cent. Small Westerwald jug with moulded grapes and trailed stems; early 18th cent. Large Westerwald jug with trailed stems and moulded floral motifs, dated 1691. Fruiting vines with tendrils on an oak storey post from 4 The Quay, Dartmouth, dated 1664.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE BOX PEW

Surviving schemes of fixed seating in medieval churches are commonly late 15th or 16th century. Relatively little is known of earlier congregational seating but documentation shows that church naves were used for a variety of purposes and must have included plenty of open space. Seating must often have been trestles or stools that could easily be moved out of the way. DBG members who attended the Church House conference, in 2003, will remember that the arrival of schemes of fixed seating in Devon's late medieval churches was a spur to the erection of Church Houses. These supplied the space for social activities that had previously taken place in the church nave.

The type of seat that gradually replaced the oak bench with carved ends was the box pew. This was a relatively tall enclose with a door. The box pew incorporated seats which might face east, but could extend round three sides of the box, necessarily including seats facing north, south or west. Church services in the 17th and 18th centuries required congregations to sit and listen to long sermons. The average length of a church service between 1660 and 1840 has been estimated as one hour forty-five minutes, for the morning service and one hour twenty-five minutes, for the evening service[1]. Communion was provided quarterly in many churches, but less often in others. This meant that the congregation remained seated for the majority of services. Given the character of church services, box pews had any advantages. It was common for the pulpit to be in an elevated position, often attached to a pier of the north arcade, or in the centre of the church, and box pews with seats facing north, south or west could allow the best view and audibility of the minister preaching the sermon. The enclosure kept out draughts and the doors gave a measure of privacy.

The term 'pew' can be confusing. In the 19th century it was specifically applied to what we would call box pews, and the word 'pew' or 'pue' in the 19th century nearly always means a box pew. Seats with low backs and no doors were known in the 19th century as 'benches' or 'open benches' or 'open seats'. These terms covered a range of seats from simple moveable benches, with or without backs, to more substantial fixed seating with low backs and no doors, but with shaped and/or carved ends. However, the word 'pew' (spelled various different ways) in documentation from the late 15th century can refer to an open bench and not to a box pew.

The Origins of Box Pews

The origins of box pews are not entirely clear. There are examples of pre-Reformation congregational seats with doors. Raising the height of the seat back, the door and the seat back of the pew in front, in order to create an enclosure, may be a simple case of evolution. They may also have been influenced by the chantry chapel, which introduced the concept of a screened enclosure inside the church, specific to and funded by a secular individual or group: the squire, a craft guild, or a family. Devon has two exceptional examples of early family enclosures. In the church of St Peter, Tawstock, a timber enclosure, dated pre-Reformation by Pevsner, has the appearance of a giant sedan chair and is usually identified as the canopied pew for the Bourchier family (Fig 1). It has some curious features, including small hinged openings in the panelling, and may be a 'magpie' construction, with woodwork of different dates made into a canopied pew. The Bluett family enclosure at the church of All Saints at Holcombe Rogus is an equally remarkable, but much larger family enclosure, dating from the early 17th century. The surrounding screen (which was altered in the late 19th century) is crowned with a series of carved medallions showing scenes from Genesis and Exodus. The size of the space it encloses, which originally incorporated major family monuments, provides an obvious architectural reference to a pre-Reformation chantry chapel (Fig 2).

From about 1600-1630 there are English examples, some known only from documentation, of individual box pews installed in churches for important individuals or families. These were often located in the chancel and might be set aside for a secular grandee or for parish or church officers. The earliest example of a box pew scheme to seat the whole congregation,

1. The canopied pew in St John's Church, Tawstock. This was reputedly sited at the east end of the nave before it was moved to its present position against the east wall of the north transept. The woodwork includes the Bourchier knot.

2. The early 17th-century Bluett family enclosure at the Church of All Saints, Holcombe Rogus is crowned with carved scenes in medallions, including the Fall. It originally enclosed the east end of the north aisle, where fine early 17th-century family monuments are sited, see detail of the c.1613 monument to Richard Bluett and his wife. Complicated late 19th-century alterations to the screening placed the major monuments outside the enclosure. It seems likely that the family sat in the enclosure in its original form in the early 17th century.

identified by J M Neal who wrote a history of pews (box pews) in 1841, is St John's church, Bishop's Castle, Shropshire, dating from 1634.

There was a period of overlap between the arrival of the earliest box pews and new open benches with carved ends. Benches continued to be installed in more conservative churches in the 17th century. There was also a period of overlap between new box pews and surviving open benches, whether pre-Reformation or later, in individual churches. The church of St Pancras, Widecombe-in-the-Moor, appears to have had both types of seat in 1638, according to a pamphlet of that date, cited by Neale: *A true relation of those sad and lamentable accidents which happened in and about the parish church of Withycombe, in the Dartmoors, Oct 21 1638*. This described a catastrophic thunderstorm, during which 'Mistress Ditford sitting in the same pew with the minister's wife, was hurt, but the maid sitting near the door of the pew had no harm'. From this it seems likely that the women were sitting in a box pew, perhaps one set aside for the parson's wife. However, 'Some seats in the body of the church were turned upside down'. These must have been moveable benches of some kind and not box pews, which were fixed to a low timber platform.

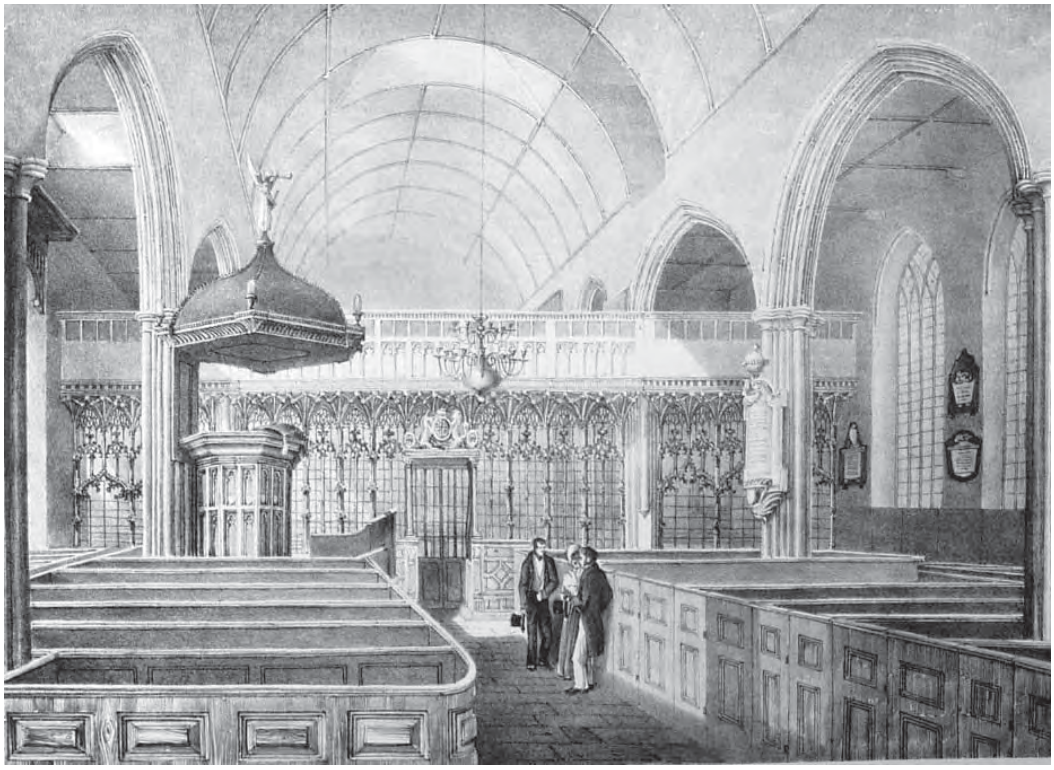
There is good evidence that carved bench ends and other elements of early woodwork, such as rood screen wainscots, were sometimes incorporated into box pews. Carved ends, recycled as parts of box pews, were sometimes rescued during Victorian restorations and re-attached to 19th century benches.

Box pews did not find favour with all churchmen. In c1641, Dr Udall, Rector of St Austin's in London, complained in a tract of the: 'late new kind of building pues so much higher and closer than heretofore'. Box pews encouraged the system of the minister taking communion to the seated congregation. Dr Udall grumbled that in London the minister had to hunt out communicants scattered round the church 'shut up close' in different places in which 'they can neither see nor hear the minister come to the pews where they sit'[2].

Town and Country

In the 17th and 18th centuries late medieval congregational seating was more likely to survive in rural churches: box pews were more common in towns. Urban churches were the first to follow a new fashion for church seating. There was more capacity in towns for raising the funds for constructing and renting box pews. Town society was more complex, fluid and full of strangers than its rural counterpart. In London in 1641, Dr Udall's tract mentioned the danger of infection from people with plague sores as a reason for the fashion for box pews[3]. There was more pressure in a town to make status and rank, well understood in rural areas, publicly clear in church. This could be emphasised by customised con-struction of a box pew, paid for by the occupant, and by painting the pews, which might be different colours.

Box pews could arrive in a church accumulatively or as part of a single re-seating scheme, much as pre-Reformation seating had arrived. The size of box pews was variable, both in the height of the partitions and the floor plan of the pew. Different sized pews could be found in the same church. Spreat's engravings of the interiors of the town churches of Ottery St Mary, Cullompton, Crediton, Chittlehampton and Dartmouth, in his *Picturesque Sketches of Devon Churches*, 1842, give a good impression of the diversity of box pews in Devon town churches at that date, as well as their visual impact on the church interior (Figs 3-5).



3. Totnes, looking east, from W Spreat's *Picturesque Views of Devon Churches* (Exeter 1842).

4. Dartmouth, looking east, from the organ gallery. Spreat shows some of the box pew seats facing west. Small benches, and individual seats are attached to the box pews in the nave alley. The benches were probably seats for the poor, who could not afford pew rents. The individual seats may have been for apprentices of families who rented the pews or for 'pew-openers', who were employed in some urban churches to lead families to their pews and open and close the doors for them. From *W Spreat's Picturesque Views of Devon Churches* (Exeter 1842).

5. The Lane aisle, Cullompton church, looking east. Note the different heights of the box pew enclosures and the ramped cornices to the taller pews. From W Spreat's *Picturesque Views of Devon Churches* (Exeter 1842).

Pew Rents

There is pre-Reformation documentary evidence of the system of paying rent for a particular seat in church. This commercialisation of congregational seating developed in the box pew period. Individual families or tenants of specified properties might pay rent for the privilege of a particular box pew, and the name of the family or place was sometimes painted on the door. A rare c1701 re-seating plan for Cruwys Morchard church in Mid Devon, partially rebuilt and re-pewed following a fire in 1685, shows the proposed congregational seating of box pews at that date (Fig 6). Here the context for the box pews is not a galleried, auditorium-style interior, so commonly associated with the box pew, but one where the principal liturgical elements are given a respectable amount of space. The seating certainly gives good visual and auditory access to the pulpit, which is sited in the north-east corner of the nave. The south aisle seats facing north are shown raked on the plan, as are the west end seats. However, the font is sited in a generous baptistery, and the chancel (not shown on the plan) has an expensive classical chancel screen and fine early 18th century rails round three sides of the altar, in high church fashion.

The Faculty Cause (an application for permission to make a change) accompanying the seating plan states that the parish had expressed:

'good intentions of adorning theire pish church and regularly seating the pishioners thereof according to theire respective qualities and estates within the said pish[4]'.

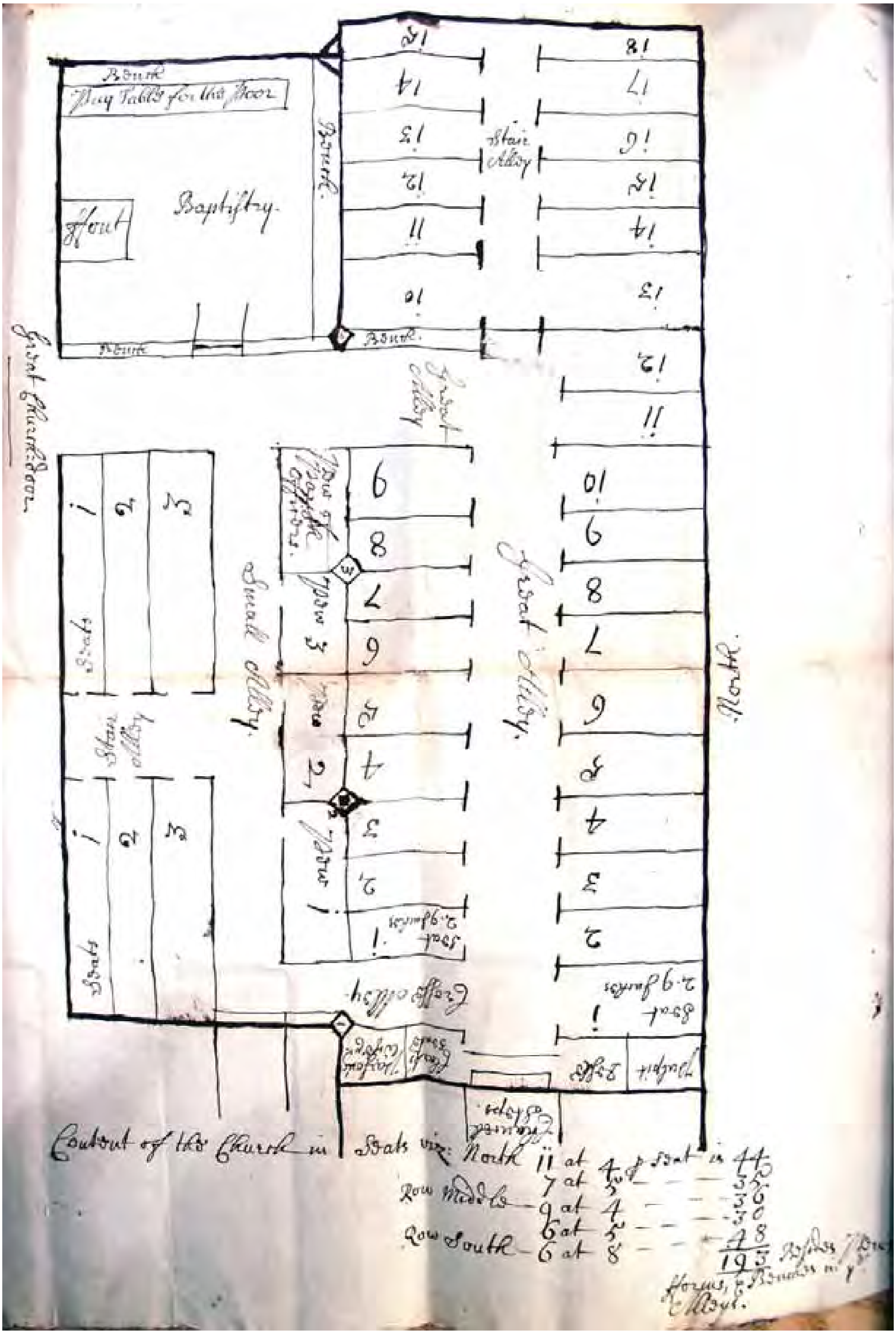
It is clear from another contemporary document that parishioners from named properties who had contributed, through the church rate, to the post-fire rebuilding were to be rewarded with one man's seat and one woman's – the sexes were seated separately. Those that paid most had first choice of location. The names of the tenements were to be painted on the pews to avoid disputes[5]. Squabbles over appropriated box pews were notorious.

A rental of 1716 shows that pew rents at Cruwys Morchard were either 1s per annum or 6d, presumably reflecting proximity to the pulpit and chancel. At least one married couple sat parallel to one another, on opposite sides of the 'great alley' down the middle of the nave. There was seating at Cruwys Morchard for 193 people in the pews shown on the plan. This is unlikely to bear any relation to the population of the parish (556 in 1801). Not all the pews are counted in the total of 193 congregation seats. Pews not included were the Cruwys family pew and an adjacent pew for their servants (these were at the east end of the south aisle, and not shown on the plan) and seats set aside for the clerk, the parson's wife and parish officers. The plan does not show, but refers to 'pews forms and benches in the alleys'. These are likely to have been backless forms or benches for the poor.

Cruwys Morchard is especially interesting as a church that has retained much of its early 18th century internal plan and fittings into the 21st century. The box pews in the nave were cut down in c1901, losing the raking at the west end, and were remodelled as open benches (Fig 7), but preserving much of the old oak panelling and some of the names of the properties which showed who was to sit where[6]. The dado to the north block of open benches preserves a list of property names. There are four property names, sometimes squeezed in with difficulty, above each wide dado panel, which is 29 inches from the former pew seat back to seat back. This is the width marked on the 1701 plan, with an annotation recording four seats per pew in the north nave block, east of the main cross alley. The existing open benches no longer correspond to the panelling, but it is still possible to see which four tenants sat together in an individual pew on the men's side (Fig 8).

The south aisle pews facing east have also been cut down and thoroughly remodelled but a couple include tiny pull-out seats, like small shelves off the ends, reputedly for apprentices (Fig 9). The south block of pews, facing north (Fig 10), have also been altered, but retain higher partitions which are ramped, like the Cruwys family and servants' pews at the east end of the aisle (Fig 11). There is a south east door into the church which was presumably exclusive to the family.

Cruwys Morchard is a particularly clear example



6. The 1701 plan of the nave and south aisle (west at the top) accompanying the Faculty Cause for re-seating Cruwys Morchard, Devon Record Office, Faculty Causes, Cruwys Morchard 1. Reproduced by kind permission of the Exeter Diocesan Registry.

7. The box pews in the north aisle of Cruwys Morchard were completely remodelled as open benches in c.1901. However, much of the box pew fabric was recycled. The bench ends with fielded panels are part of the 1701 box pew fabric. The panelled dado was retained but reduced in height.

8. The wide panel of the dado against the north aisle indicates the depth, from seat back to seat back, of the 1701 box pews (29 inches, as shown on the plan). The lettering lists the names of four properties in the parish. The original box pew contained four seats for the (male) tenants of these properties.

9. A pull-out seat in the south aisle, associated with some recycled panelling from the box pew scheme converted into a bench end. The seat preserves its ring-pull and can be pushed back under the main seat when not in use. The splendid Corinthian chancel screen can be seen in the background.

10. The south aisle, looking east. The Cruwys family box pew and servants' pew are at the east end. The south block of box pews in the aisle faces north. These are less altered than the seats in the nave, but the organ is a later insertion.

11. The Cruwys family pew is in the corner, abutting the Corinthian parclose screen. The servants' pew is adjacent, to right.

of the re-use of box pew fabric as open benches, because some of the box pews survive intact. Richard Parker, who has looked closely at church seating in a wide range of Devon churches, notes that there are numerous, less obvious examples of the conversion of box pews into open benches in the second half of the 19th century, removing the doors, thinning (to provide extra leg room and kneeling space) and widening the seats (*pers. comm*).

By the early 18th century individual families or the owners of particular properties had often obtained a faculty for a box pew, which established their legal right to their own appropriated seat. By c1800, however, with variations from church to church, many box pews were rented by custom alone from the churchwardens, who were responsible for the seating in a church. Rents provided a valuable source of income, which might be used for church maintenance or for the stipend of a curate. The dates at which pew rents ceased vary from church to church and in one Somerset example are known to have continued until 1921[7]. By the early 19th century, either by accumulation or sometimes by complete re-seating schemes managed by the churchwardens, the sheer quantity of rented box pews in some churches had reduced 'free' seats to a tiny percentage of the whole. This proved to be much more of a problem in towns with expanding populations than in rural churches (Fig 12).

Pew rents had many advantages. As well as funding fabric repairs and stipends, imaginative churchwardens could fund a re-seating scheme or new gallery by auctioning un-built pews in advance. This could be beneficial to all, and the funds raised might be used to pay for

12. The Church of St Andrew, Plymouth, looking west, from an engraving in *Devonshire Illustrated* (London 1829). This shows a variety of seating within the galleried interior of a busy urban church. There are plain open benches with backs, with a view of the back of the preacher, presumably 'free' seats. To the left, panelled box pews are probably 18th-century. Box pews to the right have Gothick decoration and are probably later.

seating for the poor. The importance of pew rents to Anglican churches was recognised by the Church Building Commission, charged with grant-aiding six hundred new churches with government funds between 1818 and 1856. While insisting on an appropriate number of free seats in churches, and favouring open benches over box pews, the Commission did not ban pew rents. The Commissioners required a scale of pew rents and sometimes set the rents themselves, at what were considered to be reasonable rates for the new churches[8]. The application of pew rents to consistent schemes of open benches meant that congregational seating had the appearance of architectural equality for all in God's House. This equality was superficial only, and preserved the old ranking system of seats set a side for those who could afford them.

As the rented box pew custom developed, it gradually converted more and more of the church into private property. Pews were bequeathed to heirs, sub-let or passed on to creditors if the owner became bankrupt. Individuals might accumulate more than one 'family' pew in a church, leaving the others empty but unusable. A gentleman in the parish church at Yeovil in Somerset managed to accumulate eleven box pews, while newcomers to the town could not find a place to sit and churchwardens found it impossible to ulfil their duty of seating, or decently seating, all-comers[9].

Selected Devon Examples of Anglican Box Pews

If towns were in the forefront of introducing box pews, survival has reversed that pattern, as towns were the first to move on to the next seating fashion, the open bench. Devon has some fine rural examples of schemes of box pews. A quick scan of the English Heritage listed building database reveals 33 references to box pews in listed Anglican churches, plus several examples of box pews in non-conformist places of worship. The list is by no means comprehensive. There is at least one urban example, St Martin's Church, Exeter, where the description does not refer to the pews (*pers. comm*. Richard Parker).

13. The nave of St Mary's church, Molland, looking east. The pews in the nave were reserved for men, women sat in the north aisle.

The examples do not include open benches converted from box pews. Some of the best rural examples are in churches where the presence of a dominating family can be keenly felt. The church of St Mary, Molland, is a particularly memorable scheme. Here the box pew congregational seating survives in the context of an almost complete liturgical re-arrangement. Yates points out that the plan used the medieval north aisle (where women were seated) to distinguish a 'preaching' space, with the pulpit at its east end, from the 'sacrament' space (where men were seated) in the nave (figs 13, 14). The Molland seating preserves many fascinating details, including

14. The north aisle at Molland, looking west. The box pews east of the pulpit have seats facing west, to give a good view of the pulpit.

15. Detail showing the classic box pew hinge (which allows the doors to fold back and avoid obstructing the alley), a simple wooden turnbuckle for closing the door and the moulded cornice of the partition, cut at an angle to allow the door to close neatly.

large wooden hat pegs inside the box pews. Yates dates the refitting of the church (tympanum and screen) and, by implication the box pews as 1808, although this seems surprisingly late for the style of woodwork[10] (Fig 15). A handful of 'open benches' apparently contemporary with the box pews survives (Fig 16). The largest box pew, no doubt for the squire and his family (Fig 17), is distinguished by ramped partitions and given superior seats, which are wider by two inches than those supplied for ordinary members of the congregation abd given moulded edges.

The church of St Petrock, Parracombe (redundant) is equally atmospheric and combines plain open benches, which might be 16th century, with 18th century box pews dramatically raked up to the west end, in the fashion of a theatre. The church of St Andrew, Clysthydon, has the same estate church character as Cruwys Morchard, and includes box pews of different dates and stairs to the pulpit rising out of the Huyshe family pew.

The church of St Michael, Gittisham, retains its west gallery and nave box pews. These all face east and are probably early 19th century. The interior of the church is an architectural object lesson in the division of responsibilities for repair and refurbishment between the incumbent and the parish. The chancel was re-gothicised in the late 19th century at the expense of the incumbent or rector, but it was clearly not possible to persuade the parishioners to follow suit. The box pews remained in the nave, which is still roughcast externally and the window tracery, lost at some point after the Reformation, has never been re-installed in the nave on the north side. The latest box pews in any county are likely to be 1840s and Parker points out that they were installed in the church of St Mary, Whimple, in John Hayward's partial rebuilding and restoration of 1845. This was in rather surprising contrast to his contemporary work at St Michael's, Sowton, where he designed open benches with carved ends on the medieval

16. An open bench, now at the west end of the north aisle, presumably a ‘free seat’. This may have been intended for children.

17. The largest box pew in the church, presumably for the squire, is distinguished by ramped partitions and includes seats two inches wider than the seating for the congregation.

model. No doubt patronage was responsible for the difference. The expensive Sowton work was funded by the High Churchman, John Garratt, of Bishop's Court, Clyst Honiton.

The Fall of the Box Pew

There were many reasons for the change from box pews to 'open benches' in church restorations after about 1840. Liturgical revival of the 1840s, which began with the Oxford Movement, required the parish church interior to be re-planned, converting the auditorium style of architecture (which often included galleries) to a processional interior that abandoned galleries and was designed to conclude in the highest ranking space, the sanctuary. The pulpit was often re-sited to ensure that it played architectural second fiddle to the communion table or, as it became, the altar. Appropriate seating, facing east, was crucial for the reformed liturgy. Kneeling was an almost impossible physical manoeuvre in a box pew and was part of the new ritualist liturgy.

The Anglican reformers of the 1840s detested box pews and fought a fierce campaign against them. In 1843 the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society, which was at the national forefront of reform, included an article ' The Advantages of Open Seats', in the first volume of its *Transactions*. This was written by their leading reforming heavyweight, the Reverend Medley of St Thomas' Church, Exeter. Medley's paper is characteristically elegant. He concentrates on the lack of reverence represented by box pews and the question of their legality. He refers to a handbill, 'To be sold in fee at public auction, all that convenient pew in the parish church of Topsham, Devon', which illustrated the unacceptable and shocking trade in church space[11]. He accepted that some families and properties had a right by faculty to a box pew. However, most box pews that were rented, were rented by custom alone and, like his fellow reformers, he considered this to be illegal.

In 1844 the leading reform group, the Cambridge Camden Society, published a pamphlet, *Twenty-Four Reasons for Getting Rid of Church Pews (or Pues)*. There were arguments from history:

I. 'Because, in the good old times, when churches were first built, and for many years after, there were no Pues at all'.

There was an argument from the Bible, citing verses from James II, regularly quoted in the anti-box pew literature:

V. 'Because Pues shut out the poor, who ought, if there be any difference, to be the first cared for in church, not last. "If there come into your assembly", says S. James, "a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment, ye have respect unto him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place, and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool, are ye not then partial in yourselves, and become judges of evil thoughts?"'

There were also arguments of reverence and propriety. Box pews made it difficult for people to attend properly to the church service and prevented the congregation from seeing and being seen from the altar, 'towards which every worshipper should be turned' (Reasons VII and XXIII). Wicked practices were and continued to be carried on in them, including amusement and sleeping (Reason XVI). Box pews were seen as sinful in other ways, too. They were an extravagant use of space, reducing the number of people who could be seated in the parish church, especially the poor, who were tempted to 'leave off going to church and to go to meeting instead: thus becoming guilty of the fearful sin of schism' (Reason IX). Pew rents were no better than simony (Reason XIX). Box pews were unwholesome (Reason XVIII), spoiled the look of churches (Reason XIII) and concealed evidence of disrepair (Reason XIV). They were also illegal, unless they had been confirmed by a faculty (Reason XII).

In 1845, *The Ecclesiologist* reported on:

'the progress against our ancient enemy, pues … The bombardment has been general and incessant; and if we cannot yet announce that every battlemented enclosure, every towering partition, has been levelled with the dust, we may confidently affirm that so many have fallen, so many there are tottering to their fall, so many

breaches everywhere appear *jamjam elucente ruina*, that no reasonable doubt can now be entertained of a complete and speedy vistory'.

The reformers, the writer trumpeted, could count fourteen new churches and six restorations 'entirely freed from the yoke'.

Victorian restorations in the Diocese of Exeter, inspired by the principles expressed in *The Ecclesiologist*, came early and often. They swept away almost all of the old schemes of box pews, both in urban and most rural churches, and replaced them with open benches. This was contentious and often imposed on reluctant and conservative congregations by reforming incumbents.

Box pews are sufficiently rare and early, to have a wide public appeal. At present this writer knows of no Devon church which is proposing to remove its box pews. Surviving mostly in rural churches, where there are fewer possibilities than in towns for redeveloping the church nave with cafes or exhibition areas, there is less pressure to remove them in order to provide space for multiple uses. How long this will continue to be the case is uncertain and it does not apply to churches where box pew fabric has been recycled into open benches after 1850.

It is hoped to cover the 19th century revival of open benches in Devon, in the next DBG Newsletter. This type of church seating is less highly-valued than box pews by congregations and currently at a high level of risk, as churches seek to clear their naves of seating.

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(Endnotes)

[1] Yates, 1991, 63

[2] The Reverend Ephraim Udall's Tract *Communion Comelinesse: wherein is discovered the conveniency of the people's drawing nigh to the Table in the sight thereof, where they receive the LORD's Supper. With the great unfitnesse of receiving it in Pewes in London, for the novelty of High and Close Pews* is cited by Neale in *The History of Pues*, 1843, 67. Udall's attitude may be far from typical, as Neale was seeking out ammunition against box pews.

[3] Ibid. 1843, 69.

[4] Devon RO, Faculty Causes, Cruwys Morchard, 1.

[5] This document is partly transcribed in Margaret Cruwys's *A Cruwys Morchard Notebook 1066-1874*, 36-37.

[6] Devon RO, Faculty Petitions, Cruwys Morchard, 2.

[7] Farrington, 2005, 77.

[8] Port, 2006, 218-226.

[9] 'The Law of Pews:- A Case at Yeovil', *The Ecclesiologist*, No 82, new series 46, Feb 1851, 16-19.

[10] Yates, 1991, 52, 75.

[11] Medley, 1843, 163, footnote d.

Jo Cox
May 2007

DBG NEWS

New Members

We welcome new and returning members:
Caroline Garrett, 5 The Deanes, Tiverton EX16 5GT
Dr Theresa Oakley, 3 Rosemary Lane, Scoriton, Buckfastleigh TQ11 0JA
Torquil & Ruth McNeilage, Weeks Farm, Talaton, Exeter EX52 2RG

AGM 2007

The AGM will be held on Saturday 27th October 2007, the venue to be announced.