

St Michael's Church

COXWOLD

In the beginning..

When Christianity came to England, the sites of pagan temples which were converted to churches were often dedicated to St Michael and all Angels, presumably to ensure the old gods were outnumbered. There is no doubt that St Michael's Church, Coxwold, was one of the first churches in Yorkshire and is probably built on the site of a pagan temple.

The people of Northumbria were converted to Christianity in 627 AD when St Paulinus visited King Edwin who lived near York, probably at Topcliffe. The story is told by the Venerable Bede writing in 731 AD.

When the King had heard Paulinus preach he consulted his nobles, one of whom said: "The life of man, O King, compared with the time of which we know not, is like the flight of a sparrow through this ball. There you sit at meat with your chieftains and servants in Winter time, with a fire blazing in the midst and raia and stonn blustering outside, and in it flies through one door and out of the other. While it is inside it is not touched by the winter storm, after a little while of calm it vanishes from sight into the winter again. Thus we see the life of man for a span, but what carne before or after we know not. If the New Teaching brings sure knowledge of the after life we must follow it."

King Edwin then ordered all his tribe to be baptised by Paulinus in the River Swale. The Venerable Bede tells how Coifi, the ex-pagan chief priest, mounted on a stallion with sword girded and grasping a lance, rode off to destroy the shrine and idols. I like to think it might have been to Coxwold that Coifi rode.

The first positive mention of a church at Coxwold is in a letter from Pope Paul 1, dated 757 AD, telling King Eadbert of Northumbria to repair three Minsters, those at York, Ripon and Coxwold. We

can assume from this that there was a Saxon centre of Christian worship here from about 700 AD, also a Saxon Manor and Parish.

Records do not report if King Eadbert carried out repairs but the Saxon building was replaced by a Norman one during the late 11th century. This Norman church was in its turn replaced by the present "perpendicular style" church which was built between 1420 and 1430. Except for minor repairs this church still stands as it was built.

Looking down the nave you will see the Royal Coat of Arms of King George II over the chancel arch which divides the main body of the church from the narrower chancel. The Royal Arms were first used in churches at the time of King Henry VIII to remind everyone that the English monarch rather than the Pope was now the authority responsible for seeing that the Church's laws were obeyed.

On either side are the armorial bearings of the Earls of Fauconberg, with the motto being a pun on the family name of Belasyse:

et Belle Assez" (To be good and beautiful is enough).

The Royal Coat of Arms is that used from the accession to the throne of the Hanovers in 1714 until the lapse of the claim by the English king to the throne of France in 1801. The four quarters are the leopards of England and the lion of Scotland side by side, the fleur de lys of France, the harp of Ireland, and lastly a composition of the devices of Hanover,

St Michael's Church, Coxwold

Luneberg and Westphalia with the crown of Charlemagne in the centre.

The magnificent nave ceiling, which is unusually wide, is made of oak. It is



Detail from a roof boss — a grotesque

the original ceiling and still looks very much as it did when built in 1420. Some woodwork has had to be renewed and the bosses repainted. The bosses — decorative plaques at the intersection of the roof beams — include the armorial bearings of families prominent in the county of Yorkshire in the early 15th century: they include those of the Percys, Nevils, Mowbrays, Colvils and Stutelys.

In addition there are some grotesques, perhaps showing a certain

disregard for the great families by the craftsmen of the day. In 1904 during restoration of the ceiling the shield of the arms of Wombwell quartering Belasyse was introduced over the Lady Chapel at the right of the nave.

The windows at the north side of the nave are filled with stained glass. The glass in the tracery lights is very old. Some of it may be as much as 100 years older than the building, coming from an earlier Norman church. The larger panels — memorials to members of the Wombwell family — are of Victorian glass, not to everyone's taste but the very best of its type. Also on the north wall

are memorials to the two soldier sons of Sir George and Lady Wombwell.

At the west end of the nave there is a gallery containing the organ. This is a new instrument installed in 1972 by Church & Sons. Until recent times the choir also had their seats in the gallery.

At the back of the gallery are two diamond-shaped funereal hatchments of the Fauconberg arms, placed there after the deaths of members of the family. Below these hatchments can be seen black lettering which is just discernable as the Lord's Prayer. The date of this lettering is not known.

Under the gallery, just to the left of the vestry door, may be seen the signatures of Queen Mary, wife of King George V, together with those of Princess Mary, the Princess Royal, her husband the Earl of Harewood and members of their suite. They visited the church while staying at Newburgh Priory as guests of Captain V.M. Wombwell.

The pews are "box pews" and many still have locks dating from the time when each family in the village rented its own pew. Until 1906 the pew backs and sides were about 18 inches higher than at present. They were reduced to

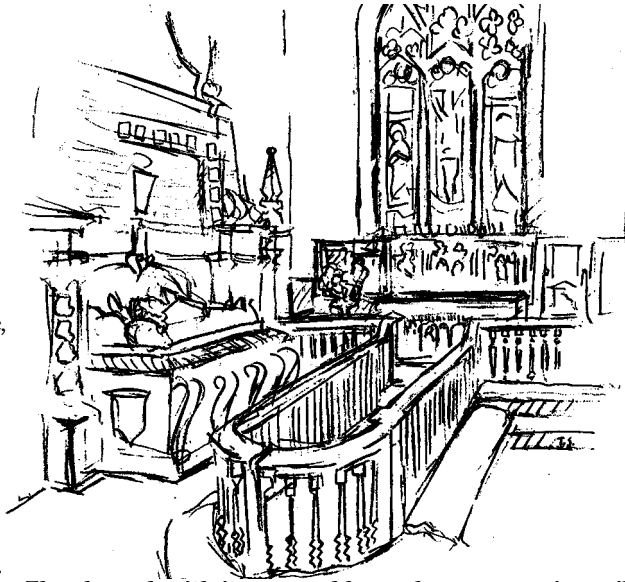


The lectern, carved by Josef Heu, an Austrian sculptor who found refuge in Coxwold in 1941 after fleeing the

their present size by the joiners taking off wood from the bottom of the pews.

At the same time the pulpit was reduced from being a "three decker" by the removal of the bottom deck. The original pews and pulpit were the idea of the parson at the time who was the author, the Reverend Laurence Sterne, perhaps best known for his novel "Tristram Shandy". They were built while he was the incumbent during the period 1760-1768.

In the floor of the aisle, as you approach the chancel arch, is a black slab with two brass plates. One of these



The chancel, with its unusual horseshoe communion rail

records the death of Sir John Manston, who died in 1464. The name of his wife Elizabeth is added with a blank space for the date of her death. The date was never inserted, and as there is no parish record of burials before 1583 a mystery remains as to whether she was buried by the side of her husband.

In the nave you will find four carvings of a little mouse, the trade mark of Robert Thompson, a well-known furniture maker whose family business is still in Kilburn, a neighbouring village. Two of these are in the Lady Chapel, one being clearly visible under the ledge of the niche in the wall. The third mouse is on the lectern stand. The top of the lectern was carved by Josef Heu, a distinguished Austrian sculptor who found refuge in Coxwold in 1941 after fleeing from the Nazis.

The fourth mouse is on the Bible case which contains a "Breeches Bible" so-called from the use of the word in verse 7, chapter 3 of Book of Genesis, which in modern versions is given as "loinclothes". It is more properly called the Geneva Bible. This Bible was printed in 1601 by Robert Barker, printer to Queen Elizabeth I.

The Chancel

Four monuments dominate the chancel and they will be dealt with in detail later. The chancel was rebuilt in 1774 by Thomas Atkinson and it is probable that the unusual horse-shoe shaped altar rail was installed at this time. This delightful feature is in regular use at Communion and does give a sense of togetherness to the congregation.

In the chancel is a framed list of priests who have ministered at Coxwold. For 400 years — from 1145 until 1545 — the Prior of the Augustian Priory at Newburgh was responsible for the pastoral of the neighbourhood and the charge of the parish church of Coxwold. This means there was no specific vicar during this period.

Also in the chancel are two framed lists of those members of the Parish who served their King and Country during the two World Wars. The ancient sword fixed to the wall is said to be a Toledo blade, its provenance is unknown.

The Lady Chapel

The Lady Chapel is accurately so-called because it was so designated when the church was built. There is a record, in fact, that in September 1498 Elizabeth Vavasour of Thorton Hill willed to be buried in the church of Cockwold and bequeathed to the altar of St Mary in that church a silver chalice and paten and two best candlesticks.

Elizabeth Vavasour was a cousin of Lady Elizabeth Manston, wife of Sir John, mentioned earlier as lying beneath the aisle.

The Monuments

The four magnificent monuments in the chancel typify four eras of tombstones in England and also give an insight into the history of the Belasyse family.

King Henry VIII implemented the act of judicial robbery known as the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1558. He handed over many of the monastic estates to his supporters and thereby created a new landed gentry committed to the monarch and his policies. One of them was Dr Anthony de Belasyse, who acted as a King's Commissioner at the Dissolution.

He was a lawyer and an ordained priest and therefore not married. He was granted the estate of Newburgh in 1545. Anthony Belasyse did not take control of the King's gift but willed it to his nephew Sir William Belasyse, who inherited the estate in 1546.

The monument to the north east corner of the chancel, to the left of the altar, is that of Sir William Belasyse and his wife Margaret, daughter of Sir Nicholas Fairfax of Gilling. The recumbent effigies of William and Margaret with their hands in prayer lie

on their tomb with smaller effigies of their children — four sons and a daughter — placed around it. The many armorial bearings surrounding the tomb are those of Sir William's ancestors.

The tomb itself, with its mass of elaborate columns and pinnacles, was originally painted in glorious gold, black and red. Perhaps it is as well that it has faded over the years. The tomb was carved by Thomas Browne, a Yorkshire sculptor, in 1603 using magnesian limestone from the Vavasour estate near Tadcaster.

The son of William and Margaret, Henry and his wife Ursula Fairfax, have their tomb in York Minster. However, the tomb of William's grandson Thomas, the 1st Viscount Fauconberg, and his wife Barbara Cholmeley, is opposite his grandfather's. They kneel in prayer facing the altar. This tomb was carved by Nicholas Stone in 1652.

The son of the 1st Viscount, Henry (died 1647), and his grandson Thomas share the same pretentious marble monument on the left side of the chancel. Thomas is in court dress holding an Earl's coronet in his right hand. His father Henry is seen



Thomas, the 1st Viscount Fauconberg and his wife Babara face the altar in



Henry, Viscount Fauconberg (died 1647), and his grandson Thomas share the same pretentious marble monument disdaining the earthly coronet, preferring the heavenly crown held by an angel above his head. He is dressed as a Roman but has the curled periwig of his period.

Thomas was created the first Earl Fauconberg, having served with distinction as a diplomat at home and abroad during the Cromwell period, and under Kings Charles 11, James 1 and William 111. It is of interest that Thomas, who died in 1700, was married to Mary, the daughter of Oliver Cromwell. The tomb was carved by John Nost.

Having progressed from humble praying effigies via kneeling ones to arrogant standing figures who seem to take their entry to heaven for granted, the last tomb has no effigies. This is the tomb of Henry, the last Earl Fauconberg, who died in 1802 and his Countess, Charlotte Lamb. This tomb, with its space under the arch, looks curiously blank as though it awaits the last of the Fauconbergs.

Henry had no male heir. His daughter, Lady Anne Belasyse, married a Wombwell from the West Riding of Yorkshire. Sir George and Lady Wombwell settled at Newburgh and

the present owner of the Newburgh estate — also Sir George Wombwell — is a direct descendant.

On the south side of the chancel there is a tablet in memory of Lord Adolphus FitzClarence, son of King William W. He died while visiting Newburgh in 1856 and is buried under the floor of the chancel.

The Porch

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here are several memorial slabs in the floor of the porch. On the east wall there is a brass plate reproducing the crumbling lettering in the stone above telling of the death of Elizabeth Faucon, a young lady of 23 years who died on October 27, 1651. There is also a framed newspaper extract explaining how the bones of



A relief of Sir George Orby Wombwell

The Tower

It is not possible to allow the public into the tower but the rare octagonal shape from base to top can be admired from outside, as can its pierced battlements and *crocketed pinnacles. The tower

contains three bells hung from a massive oak frame dated with a carved 1601.

The tenor and second are dated 1771 and 1652, the second is also inscribed *Soll Deo Gloria Pax Hominibus*. The tenor bell, which is tolled at funerals, is inscribed *Fiat Voluntas Tua Pater Omnipotens* (Thy Will Be Done Father Almighty). The treble bell, which is not dated, is used as the clock chime.

The tower had a certain amount of restoration work carried out in 1991, and the new pinnacles show up as a cleaner stone. At the same time the roof was replaced throughout the building with stainless steel as much of the original lead roof had been stolen. This work was assisted by a grant from English Heritage.

The Churchyard

The remains of Laurence Sterne are by the south wall of the nave just east of the porch. One feature of the churchyard is the great age that many of the inhabitants have achieved: over 90 years is quite common. You may find the grave of the man who was vicar of Coxwold for 53 years. He must have been baptized, married and buried many parishioners.

The area enclosed by a yew hedge is the burial ground of the Wombwells. Sir George Orby Wombwell, was famous for surviving the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava when a lieutenant in the 17th Lancers and as an aide-de-camp to Lord Cardigan. He died in 1913 at the aged 81.

Captain Victor Malcolm Wombwell, a nephew of Sir George Orby, inherited the estate. He died aged 93 in 1986 and is also buried in the family plot.

The fine brick path was laid in 1992. It was given by the Armitage family, for many generations the owners of a brick making company, in memory of Mrs Mildred Armitage who lived in the village

The Village

The oldest recorded spelling of the village is Cuhu-walda: Cuhu is a personal name and walda is a wood. In Norman times it became Cucwald: cuc is to crow as a cock. Which is the correct origin of the name is a matter of choice.

After the Norman conquest in 1066 the Colvils became Lords of the Manor. Colville Hall, on the site of the original manor, is to the south west of the church. The adjacent farm is still called Manor Farm.

To the north east of the church over the road is the Old Hall. This was built as the Grammar School in 1603 by Sir John Harte, a lad from Kilburn who went to London to become an apprentice grocer, married his master's daughter and in due course became Lord Mayor of London. The school was closed in 1894 and is now a private residence.

Shandy Hall, at one time the residence of the author Laurence Sterne, is just past the Vicarage up the hill from the church. It has regular opening times to the public.

Newburgh Priory, also open to the public, is half a mile to the east of the church down the hill past the cross roads. Many houses in the village display the crest and monogram of Sir George Ormby Wombwell. The date shown is when the house was modernised.

For refreshment the Fauconberg Arms provides lunches and evening meals. The School House, once the residence of the village school master, is just to the west of the cross roads, and serves home baked teas and Yorkshire high teas.

Opposite the School House there is a pottery and a furniture maker: both are well worth a visit. The village shop in the centre of the village has a very good stock including sweets and ice-cream. It is also the post office.

