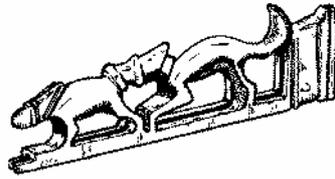


Amphill & District Archaeological &



Local History Society

All Saints Church

Segenhoe

Bedfordshire

“A Teaching Aid”

Ivan J. O’dell

Segenho(e) Church

The proximity of this church to the early settlement, which gave the area its name (see connexions with DUNSTABLE PRIORY etc.), is one of the many examples of a manorial-ecclesiastical link. This is not the place to sketch in the manorial history: the ancient structures have long since disappeared, as have the surrounding tenements of the medieval and later inhabitants, traceable only by mounds or humps as hollows here and there. For centuries the church served its function as the 'parish' church when Ridgmont had none. Presumably because Ridgmont's population increased, whilst Segenhoe degenerated into a farmstead, the need was felt for a church at a more convenient distance and position in the former place. Once the new church was built in 1854 and the people 'transferred' to it, the old church was allowed to fall into decay - until it stands today as a forlorn and roofless ruin whose future cannot be in doubt if no steps are taken to consolidate it. Apparently, the County Council reversed its decision to do this, once the church had been declared redundant; and it stands under threat of complete demolition.

Because a church has ceased to function as a place of worship, it has not ceased to be a source of architectural and antiquarian interest¹ - though the primary function of a church is not that of being a 'museum'. However we have in the structure - so far as the county is concerned an almost unique example of a building whose history, architecturally speaking can be traced back to the early 11th Century. It may be regrettable (it is regrettable) that this church has deteriorated so alarmingly; but it allows, as few churches can, a view of its building sequence - almost stone by stone. Further, it is of a size such as to enable this sequence to be taken in almost 'at one go' and for this (and other) lessons, it is most strongly felt that its consolidation should be assured.

We have much more than an academic theoretical showpiece: under the stimulus of an enthusiastic teacher (or indeed professor) of architecture students could be brought to elucidate, by question and answer (not by pre-digested material) the various stages for themselves. Of course they would have to know the basic features of the succession of styles. Segenhoe church offers a remarkably easy way to follow it. Except where churches have never had their interiors plastered, it is not always easy to ascertain the sequence of periods and methods of workmanship.

At a later stage the relationship between manor and church could be worked out if it were thought necessary. The present contention is that the structure should be PRESERVED. As has been said, its dimensions are such as to facilitate a grasp of the whole structure, from which students could go on to examine larger and more elaborate buildings. Such a procedure from the simple to the more complex is surely logical and good teaching sense.

At this point it may be said that any treatment of the fabric should be such as to minimise, if not eliminate, possible danger. It should be expected that the remains would be respected- at least, such a hope is expressed, over-sanguine though it may be.....

¹ Pevsner goes as far as to say archaeological

We pass on to the church itself and it is hoped that, in an attempt to follow through the sequence² the importance of it as a teaching example will have become increasingly apparent, indeed, a matter of conviction well beyond the confines of the immediate district.

To start its history, whatever may have preceded it on the site, one must start at the East end with the Chancel. At once one is confronted with the matter of MATERIALS used here and throughout the structure. Students should be made aware of materials used, some will be local (stone(s), timber or brick) some will have had to be fetched long distances - clunch for example). Here at Segenhoe the 11th Century builders used 'cobble stones' - some more than 2 or 3 lbs in weight; a few were heavier, set in cement; is this hard or friable? What is the lime content? Apart from the remaining North and South walls the only other 11th Century features are the narrow slit, wide splayed windows in the North wall - the head of one bearing distinctive decoration - has it any symbolism? The heads are one piece. The height of each window is 60" the outer width 6" the inner splay is 48". We may imagine the South wall to have had a pair of similar windows. One can only conjecture the fenestration of the East wall. In any event the chancel would have been dark. Its dimensions are within the walls 20' 6" by 14' 6". To this was added (if we consider the chancel as one 'cell') two further cells - possibly of the same size - the South wall of the nave representing the surviving remains of this structure. Its West wall would be across from the base of the West tower. There was a South door³ (now blocked) with tympanum and lintel and a Mass dial on a Western jamb well preserved. A broad, plain unmoulded arch separates nave from chancel - the abaci north and south showing a zigzag decorative motif. Parts have been cut away evidently when the rood beam was put up. Holes for wooden pegs indicate the position of the beam. It is doubtful whether the present South door to the chancel is coeval with it. Entrance would have been through the now blocked South door in the nave (see above). For a couple of centuries perhaps Segenhoe Church was big enough to accommodate the worshippers. Still with slit windows, the interior would have been dark. The chancel was reckoned big enough for the priest's ministrations. The nave proved to be inadequate and in the 13th Century the first measures to enlarge it were taken. The arch to the East of the North arcade clearly shows this - its East respond bears evident signs of having been chopped about. The mouldings are simple - the stone is very coarse, hard grit which would not allow elaborate carving. It has been suggested that this cell represents a 'chapel' made by removing a portion of the 11th Century North wall - such a chapel would have had a West wall - its limits ascertainable by the sandstone pillar. Thus, the gradual modification may be traced.

Two factors now appear to have a major effect on the building - the darkness and smallness. To remedy this two measures were taken - apparently at the same time or with no long interval between them: the Norman windows in the South Wall were replaced by more or less square headed, two light windows which were later barbarously messed about and partially blocked. So little tracery in the heads remains that it is difficult to say what they were like - except for relics of cusps. Of what was done in or to the East wall it is quite impossible to say. (Reference has already been made to the chancel door.)

² See, Particularly, Mr. K Fadden's drawings *A pictorial survey of Segenhoe Church*.

³ Reset according to Pevcner.

The other alteration was even more drastic and involved the piercing (or taking down) of the North Wall - or what remained of it in order to extend the church by adding further space than that afforded by the 'chapel' and constructing a complete North aisle, whose roof was no higher than the sills of the now blocked three clerestory windows above the arcade. Presumably, this extension meant a new roof to the nave as well as that required for the new aisle.

The clunch components of the two centre bays contrast very sharply with the dark brown austerity of the sandstone. It is interesting to note that the church pillars are somewhat similar to those in Higham Gobion Church and these are dated by Pevsner as C1300 and described as 'good work'. It would be fanciful to suppose the same masons carved and constructed the two arcades - the mouldings in Segenhoe being rounded and smooth compared with the angular chamfering of Higham Gobion. The two churches are not greatly different in size.

It is not difficult, in so unpretentious a church to envisage the work involved: the quarrying, transport and setting of the new stone; the cutting and seasoning of the timber.⁴ By the first quarter of the 14th Century we have the Norman Church, deemed big enough but too dark (therefore made lighter), and the now enlarged nave with entrances on South and North. The 'new aisle' would require windows - and it is possible to see exactly where they were put: later radical changes have meant the total disappearance of the jambs and heads except for the West window which has been blocked up with sandstone lumps leaving only the 'frame' visible. A feature such as this is very instructive. Standing on the roadway to the North East of the church, the student will see other clear evidence of still later additions and blockings. Inside he will see the charming and clear cut niche in the East wall of the north aisle - which I remember bearing clear marks of medieval painting as do the jambs of the entrance to the rood loft. (How would one have reached the first step? Here is another question to stimulate the student - apart from question of the time of its installation.)

The windows large or small, new or old in those parts of the church we have examined are not the only ones. The outline of part of a large window is to be plainly seen to the left of the tower as you face West. It must have been set in the ancient West wall which at one time constituted the extremity of the '3 cell' structure.

For how long this 'state of the church' continued is not easy to say. Something like a major alteration took place when it was felt, once more, that the interior was insufficiently lit (from outside) for it was decided to raise the roof, literally, as this was done by adding a clerestory to the arcade wall (above the arches) and obviously by heightening the corresponding South wall. By standing at the west end of the church and looking at the west end of the north aisle it is possible to see a further alteration i.e. the line of the other roof is not obscured by the additional masonry used when the aisle roof was raised.

Apart from one or two other features, to which reference will be made, such was the shape and plan of the church until very drastic modifications were made in the 18th Century. The high altar would have stood up against the east wall of the chancel; but as the wall was rebuilt in brick on the old foundations no trace of either its base or other details can be seen. If there was

4 Three or four beams lie on the nave floor. Other beams as I recall from visits on and off from 1932 were soft wood which soon rotted once the slates had gone and the lath and plaster fallen

a piscina and/or sedilia then they were obliterated by the brick base of the window immediately above where it would have been.

In the opposite wall but low down is an aumbry opening 16½ x 14" and 18" deep. No traces of hinges or door catch remain. Visible both internally and externally at the South West corner of the nave is the base, sections and capital of a pillar of clunch, the same design as those of the North arcade...

This poses an intriguing problem. Students can be asked how they account for it. Evidently it was put there at the same time as those of the North arcade or was the intention to erect a South arcade to match the North - and to imitate it? To have submitted the fabric to such an upheaval would have been a formidable disturbance - all at one 'go' - so to speak. Judgement will have to be suspended. Even so, there is the question as to why the project was abandoned. Was the Black Death responsible? F A Blaydes' *Fasti*⁵ shows that William Hardwick continued as vicar there from 1334-1361 - so that, even if the masons succumbed and the inhabitants were decimated, he survived. The existence of this lone pillar may serve to show how such supports were inserted, by removing a part of the walling (always at the risk of a partial or total collapse, depending on its solidity, or otherwise) and building, section by section, the new support. The insertion of a complete arch by the same method must have been even more hazardous - even using a template.

Somewhere among the Ducal documents there ought to be accounts pertaining to the final 'revamping' of the church - evidence was apparent when the exterior was thick with 'stucco' as it is now when elder bushes, thistles, nettles and other herbage are thriving in any cracks and crevice they may find to lodge in. If such records exist, then the period of this drastic modernising might be pinpointed. All the signs are of an 18th Century onslaught. The large semi-circular headed windows with their spindly wooden pseudo-gothic 'tracery'⁶ are of brick - itself of a somewhat friable material and probably of local provenance. The changes effected at this time may be listed as follows⁷:

1. A 'classical' fenestration.
 - (a) Chancel East window
 - (b) South and North walls of the nave.
2. A re-roofing with slate (visible until the 'clean up' of about a year ago. (See Bedfordshire Times pictures and article, 21 April 1978).
3. New chancel entrance on South side.
4. Possible blocking of window, North aisle.
5. Possible paving of chancel and nave and aisle.

⁵ Clergy lists for every parish in the County (CRO).

⁶ Whilst masons could be found (and employed) who could carve stone for mansions and baronial halls, in the new taste - few seem to have bothered about replacing medieval stone.

⁷ Student can be requested to develop lists from their own observations.

6. North porch, using one of the clerestory windows.
7. Blocking by brick of the three clerestory windows, to strengthen the walls prior to re-roofing the nave.
8. The tower.

But here a problem arises. There is so much brick at both base (floor) and nave roof level that little of the medieval tower remains. I think the West, South and North walls are substantially older work. The top stage is entirely of brick, battlements with stucco quoins and the whole 'rendered', as was much of the aisle and nave walling. I do not think the chancel was so treated.

As for the seating, when I first began to visit the church over forty years ago there were no pews of any kind, no pulpit, no lectern, and no reading desk. The only other object was the font, said in Murray's 'Handbook to Herts, Beds and Hunts 1895, to have been removed from the old church and has been coloured and gilt". Macklin's 'Beds and Hunts' referred to by P G Langdon 1929, speaks of "a Dec. octagonal font painted over with canopied work on the sides of the basin". It was in situ on 20 April 1944. On a visit on 7 January 1961 I saw that it was overturned and smashed into several large fragments.

The niche at the east of the North aisle still showed the painted canopy and shafts referred to in Macklin. On a visit on 2 July 1981 all traces had disappeared - though as previously said - paint is still visible on the jambs of the rood stair opening, a dark red in colour.

Students can see for themselves the work involved in building an arch to carry the upper stages of the tower. The position of the brick here and in the window heads merits close attention. Of sepulchral slabs only one is visible ⁸- the armorial bearing and inscription should be copied and dates noted. Excavation of the interior might reveal early burials (as at Wharram Percy E.R.).

The 'A History of our District' revised and enlarged 1962 gives some details on the church (p 120) including "During 1929 much repair work was done with a view to repairing the church but noted the building is in a sad condition." Evidence of this repair may be seen on the West buttress of the South Wall. North (Church Bells of Bedfordshire, 1883) refers to four bells in the tower, three of which are said to have been sold about sixty years ago⁹ to Husborne Crawley in order to raise money for repairs and the fourth still remains hanging in a tower in far too dilapidated a condition to be safe for anyone to ascend¹⁰. The sale is said to have been 'about 1820' according to a tradition at Ridgmont¹¹.

In 'Topographical and Statistical Description of the County of Bedford' bound with a similar volume for Bucks (London printed for C Cooke¹² appears the following statement (p 110):

⁸ Powage Press Ltd, Aspley Guise; details in *A History of our District 1962* Edn p 120.

⁹ 1823

¹⁰ p179 *North (Church Bells of Bedfordshire)*.

¹¹ p21 *North (Church Bells of Bedfordshire)*.

¹² No date but after 1801 and before 1832.

"There was formerly a church at Segenhoe which has been demolished." So much for the information supplied by George Alexander Cooke 'Editor of the Universal system of Geography'.... his statement may have been based on hearsay.

Whether this erroneous assertion was picked up from any of the authorities Cooke lists is a question equally speculative.

The foregoing is not an exhaustive account of the church on which considerable work surely remains to be done - both from documentation and investigation on the site. Enough has been said of the fabric and the structural sequence to show the importance of preserving it. One final point may be made - a repetition, really, of what Mr K Fadden said in the course of the visit on Thursday 2 July.

It is said that the 18th Century was a period of neo-classicism when symmetry and order were the ruling criteria. In their zeal to submit and subject lopsided and piecemeal Gothic churches to repair, some 18th Century "improvers" wrought near havoc in their determination to produce a neat and balanced edifice. Segenhoe was a victim of such "strait-jacketing" - and students could well exercise their eyes and minds on the details of the process.

I J O'DELL

4 July 1981

Foot Note

Ivan O'dell wrote this "Teaching Aid" while the campaign to save the church was in progress. Unfortunately he died shortly after and there are some anomalies when compared with the Pictorial Survey. However all the principles are correct and could be followed in future studies.

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7 March 2009