

The Parish of Sutton with Seaford

A Brief History of St. Leonard's Church

Historical and Architectural Significance

Although Seaford is not mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, its rise to importance as a sea port on what was then the estuary of the River Ouse probably began about that time – and with it the building of St Leonard's Church, thought to date from around 1090. On rising ground not far from the quayside, this first church was of simple cruciform plan, probably with a central tower.

The increase in trade with the Continent following the Norman Conquest meant a growing population in Seaford – which soon required the church to be enlarged. About 1120 or 1130 aisles with round-headed windows appear to have been built on the outside of the nave, while curved arches, probably three on either side, were hewn in the main walls, leaving the masonry between them as piers, which were then finished with Caen stone brought back as ships' ballast from Normandy. (Two of these arches remain: one on the south side of the tower, the other in the choir vestry.)

The last quarter of that century saw further rebuilding, to remedy the church's low pitch and gloom. The nave walls were raised and clerestory windows inserted, and above them a parapet with corbels, of which some on the north side carved with grotesques and ornamental rosettes still remain, though weathered. At the same time two pairs of lofty, pointed arches were formed in either side of the nave. Each pier for these was surmounted with a circle of stiff-leaved foliage in a variety of designs – while the central pier on the south side was carved with a 'historied' capital depicting eight biblical scenes. Possibly a unique feature in English parish churches, this unfortunately deteriorated with later exposure to the elements. The work of transforming the nave was never finished, however, possibly because the reign of King John saw both foreign invasion and civil strife. During the 13th century Seaford enjoyed considerable prosperity, from exporting corn and wool and importing wines, and in 1298 the town had two Members of Parliament. But records show that during the following century, with piracy, the Black Death and French raids of the Hundred Years War, the town was reduced to poverty and largely gutted by fire. All that remained standing of the church was the nave and north aisle.

Then in the latter part of the 15th century, soon after the end of that war, a massive tower was erected within the west end of the church, while the nave was re-roofed with its striking high pitch, and the south aisle was rebuilt, with the addition of a large new porch. The tower, just over 68 feet in height, is of four stories. Above the first two stories is a tabling of stone within which rises the clock chamber, and above this is another tabling and further reduced thickness of walls for the bell chamber. On top the battlemented parapet projects on corbelling, while within the parapet rises a low pyramidal Sussex red-tiled roof, since 1884 surmounted by a gilded weather vane and more recently by a flagstaff too. The faces of the tower walls above the old nave walls are composed of coursed ashlar of green sandstone, decorated with flints and pebbles and chequered with stone diapers. There is a cross of black flints below each face of the clock, while a gargoyle in the shape of a ram's head remains on the east front. It has been said that this imposing tower 'must be almost if not quite unique in English church architecture'.

However, during the first half of the 16th century, probably following a storm, the estuary silted up and the river changed its course to run out at what was to become Newhaven. As a result Seaford fell into a prolonged period of decline - so that by the end of the century the householders numbered only 38. Not surprisingly, very little was done to the fabric of the church during this time –

except for the opening of a north door (since blocked up) about the time the nearby parish of Sutton was annexed to the Seaford parish. (There are also two intriguing tiny angled windows in the north aisle, and a hole for another on the outer wall of the choir vestry.) This period of decline accounts for there being not a single example of Tudor or Jacobean monument, which are found in so many other old parish churches.

By the middle of the 19th century the population of the town had grown again, while the new and fashionable pastime of sea bathing brought many visitors. The railway was extended to Seaford in 1864. So it was that more seating was required in the church – and a major scheme of enlargement and restoration was completed in 1862: including raising roofs at the east end of each aisle to create transepts with large circular windows, and adding an extensive chancel rounded off by a five-sided sanctuary, with decorative stonework beneath its eaves. The substantial porch was replaced by a smaller one (and it may have been then that the west end of the south aisle - apparently incorporating a dwelling, possibly for a sexton - was demolished). Inside, the ceiling of the nave was removed to reveal the old roof timbers; a seating gallery at the west end accessed by outside stairs was removed; the small organ that had been there was moved to south of the chancel; and the old high closed pews were replaced with varnished deal ones. Before the close of that century the west door under the tower was to be re-opened and the lych-gate erected. This lych-gate with the sturdy decorated tower behind it has long since been a notable landmark in the town; while the view of the church from the south-east is also a popular scene for paintings and photographs.

It was in 1902 that the northward extension to the chancel was built to provide further seating. Then in 1914 the walls of the sanctuary were lined with fine oak panelling; oak choir stalls decorated with carved tracery replaced slighter ones in the chancel; a square oak pulpit with similar tracery was erected on the plinth where a stone pulpit had stood; and a new wooden eagle lectern was placed at the chancel steps. In the sanctuary a wooden box altar, later hung with coloured frontals, looks to be of similar date. In 1950 a fine tracery wooden screen, with coloured emblems, was erected to separate the northward extension from the chancel itself: and in 1970 this extension was furnished as the Chapel of the Holy Spirit, with an aumbry added in 1980. Meanwhile, golden drapes were hung behind the altar in 1958.

The year 2006 saw another major re-ordering in the church, to provide open space for contemporary worship and other community gatherings. The raised suspended timber floors beneath the pews in the nave and side aisles, along with the central and side aisles of red and black clay tiles, were removed and replaced with an even floor of light oak wood blocks throughout – with the central and cross aisles marked out, and a trinary cross inlaid with darker wood at the centre of their crossing. A new dais, also of wood blocks and edged with two stone steps, was built out from the chancel steps: and a new forward altar, designed by Polly Meynell, is to be placed at the centre of this dais. Meanwhile, the pulpit was lowered to rest on the dais, to serve also as a reading ambo, and the eagle lectern was moved to stand in the side chapel. A new font, designed by Mel Howse, is to be placed on the dais: replacing the large square stone font which had stood at the south doorway since 1895 (when the west door was reopened) (and before that under the tower, where it had replaced an earlier one which is said to have disappeared about 1862).

Since 1862 the church had been furnished with straight-backed deal pews throughout the nave and aisles. After the 1st World War two of these at the front of the nave had been replaced with dark oak pews with maple leaf brass plates indicating that they were presented by the Canadian Army to commemorate the billeting of troops in Seaford. Later, some other pews for the north aisle had been donated, some coming from closing school chapels in Seaford (there having been a large number of schools in the town through the mid 20th century). Now in the re-ordering of 2006, while the Canadian pews were moved to the west end of the nave, all the other pews were replaced by fine

ash chairs, each embossed with the trinary cross. The old solid timber south doors, with metal studs and fitments, were replaced with glass doors, etched with the trinary cross; and the height of the outer doors of the porch was raised to allow coffins more easily to be carried through.

Bells and Organ

In 1724 there was a peal of five new bells in the tower. In 1811 they were recast and increased to eight (which were again recast and hung to a new teak frame in 1923). The three-dial clock in the tower, chiming every quarter hour, in 1886 replaced an earlier one, and was converted to automatic electric winding in 1964. The wooden casement for its old winding chains remains beneath the tower. These bells and clock chimes can be heard far across the town, giving pleasure to many. There is no other peal of bells in the vicinity.

Meanwhile in 1965 the two-manual organ, which had been built by Morgan & Smith of Brighton in 1909 (to replace one installed in 1875), was rebuilt by Hill, Norman & Beard of London; while a new clergy vestry was erected where the old hydraulic blowing plant had been. In 2002 a new trumpet stop was added, bringing the total number of organ pipes to approximately 1620. It is a fine instrument, much enjoyed.

Windows and Memorials

The stained glass windows in the sanctuary are of the 1860s. A window of particular merit is that in the south aisle, portraying three saints including St Leonard with ball and chain, crafted by C E Kempe in 1901, whose signature wheat sheaf may be seen in one corner. Other windows of interest include one commemorating the fallen of the 1st World War, another from Seaford Ladies' College, and the thought-provoking 'cartwheel' window in the south transept which depicts, from the Book of Revelation, God in heaven and the Lamb and the four evangelists. Some other windows were destroyed by enemy action during the 2nd World War. Ten memorial wall tablets of the early 19th century, which were in the church prior to the 1862 restoration, have been grouped beneath the tower. One of them commemorates Admiral James Walker who served with Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen. Round the aisles are brass and stone plates remembering soldiers, teachers, doctors, clergy and others, including Major Cuthbert Bromley who was awarded the VC at Gallipoli in 1915. On a pillar in the nave hangs a stone carving of the Archangel Michael overcoming the Dragon. This fine feature may have formed the tympanum of the original Norman doorway or been part of a reredos. On the opposite pillar is a roof corbel with two heads, one upside-down, which was probably brought down during the erection of the tower in the 15th century. A medieval stone coffin and a coffin lid with floriated cross, found on the site of the chancel, are fixed to a wall beneath the tower.

Furnishings

In a glass display case under the tower may be seen a copy of the first edition of the Authorised Version of the Bible printed in 1611. It is known as the 'He Bible', because a word in Ruth 3:15 was printed as 'he', whereas in later editions it was changed to 'she' to give a different understanding of who was doing what in an incident involving Ruth and Boaz. There is also a copy of a Prayer Book from the time of James I. A fine pewter flagon, bequeathed to the church by John Beane in 1642, is lodged in the British Museum. All the other church plate is modern. The tall slender silver cross and candlesticks on the sanctuary altar were donated in 1962. The extant registers date from 1559 to 1693 and from 1724 onwards and are deposited in the County Records Office in Lewes. A list of Chaplains and Vicars dating from 1160 hangs under the tower.