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**St Lawrence, Bovingdon,**

**Hertfordshire**

**The nave pews**

**A significance assessment**

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*St*

*Lawrence, Bovingdon, Hertfordshire. View of nave from east. Author*



*St Lawrence, Bovingdon, Hertfordshire. View of nave from north nave aisle, with side view of nave pews. R. Clutterbuck, History of Hertfordshire, 1815-27, 325-28. Hertford Archives and Local Studies( HALS) DP47A/29/4*



## INTRODUCTION

In 1843 Bovingdon Church was said by its consulting architects, Thomas Smith, Messrs Scott and Moffat and Thomas Talbot Bury, to be in a 'decayed and dangerous condition', 'a state of general and serious dilapidation' and in need of a complete rebuilding, with the exception of the tower. Even by the late 18th century, it seems that the original low pitched roof had been replaced most of the parapet had gone. Thomas Talbot Bury was appointed as the architect and by 1st March, 1846 the church was reopened after only twenty-three months had elapsed since the old one was pulled down. (Bovingdon Parish Church. 'The Story of the Re-Building 1844-46, as told in the Vestry Minutes of the time', the 1944 Centenary Parish leaflet, the Vestry Minutes 1835-46, *Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies* HALS DP47A/8/2, and the Vestry Minutes from 1847 kept in the parish).

Given that the winter of 1845 had been a very hard one, with little building work being possible, the church was not roofed until the following December, and the architect recommended that the fixing of the parapet walls and the plastering be postponed 'until the Spring'. The additions and alterations alluded to in the 1835-46 Vestry Minutes includes the substitution of the use of the originally planned Tottenhoe stone for the windows by 'the more durable Bath stone', thereby having 'largely increased the expense - (which) to what precise amount cannot yet be ascertained, owing to the sudden and lamented death of Mr Fry, the mason... and to the absconding of Mr Jarrett who executed the chief part of the ornamental work within'. It was estimated that the overrun on the contract price would exceed £600. Mr Jarrett's former responsibilities may have extended to making the stone furniture and carving it in the chancel, as well as the responsibility for fitting the outsourced timber furnishings in the nave. Another competent stone mason, to replace Mr Fry, as well as another carver/joiner, must have had to be urgently sought. The church interior probably still resembled a mason's yard cum-general workshop. Progress must have been at least four months behind schedule, and by then the parish was hard up against the official opening date. In the absence of Mr Jarrett, the rapid erection of the nave pews would have amounted to a major challenge.

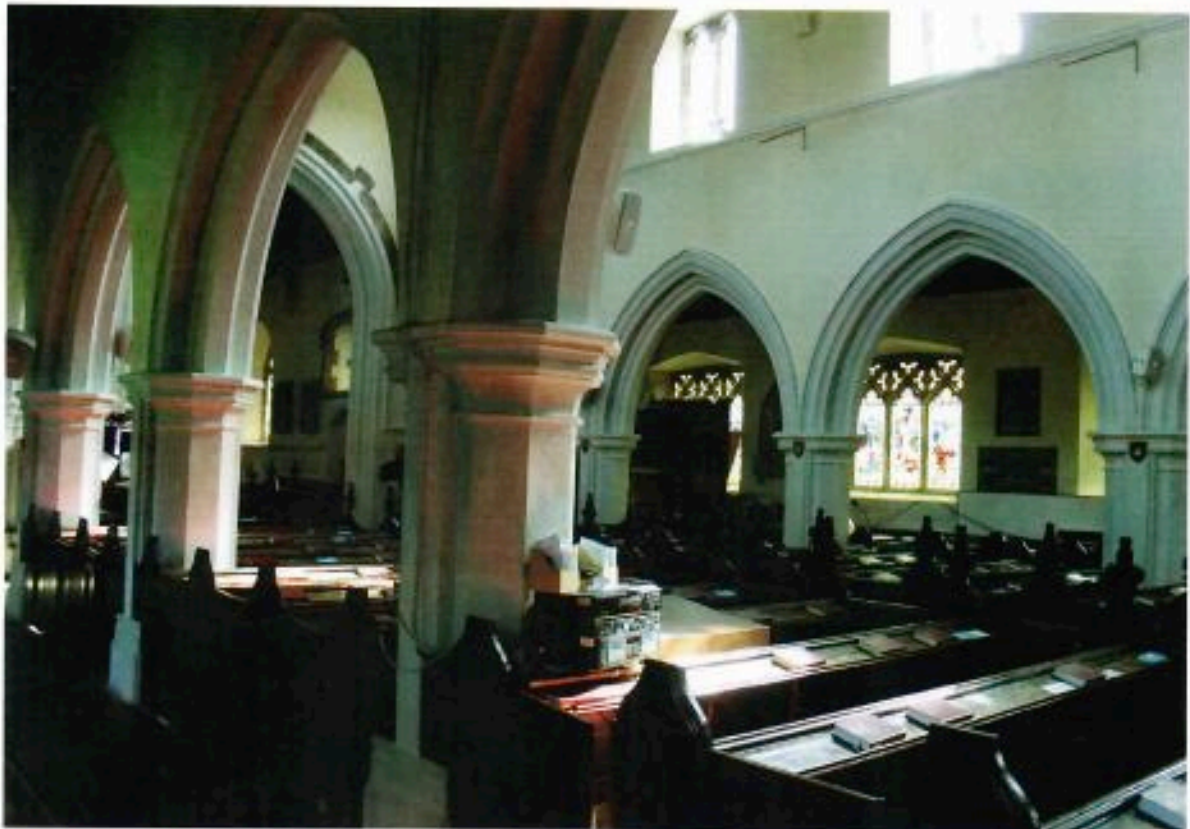
## THE FURNITURE

Today's tally of pews at Bovingdon is significantly fewer than was originally provided. On the basis of ten congregants in each pew, there is now accommodation for some two hundred and fifty worshippers in the remaining twenty-six pews in the nave itself. However, with the evident loss of at least two pews at each end, there would have been a total of thirty pews in this part of the church. Thus the original nave pews could have accommodated approximately three hundred worshippers. The south nave aisle now contains only six of its probably originally fifteen pews wholly intact. The north nave aisle has lost all of its original provision, which would have



matched, as near as possible those on the south side, although reducing its provision to thirteen benches to accommodate the north door.

The partial immersion, as it were, of the architect's pale limestone 'Perpendicular' nave arcade within a set of monotonously dark oak-stained softwood pews is solecistic. The furniture obliterates almost half the height of the modestly proportioned columns, which, in any case, measure only six feet from floor to abacus, as well as the outer faces of the bases. The overall appearance is unnerving, and quite unsuited to the architecture. It is inconceivable that the arrangement emanated from Talbot Bury's practice. The pews join up seamlessly along the nave aisle but, to maximise their accommodation, they hug the arcade columns at both ends. This produces the unfortunate effect created by a series of ugly periodic interventions on the pew sides of startlingly bleached breaks in an otherwise anticipated panelled continuity. For this and other reasons, the rarely successful cohabitation of Baroque-style and Gothic church furniture is well exemplified.



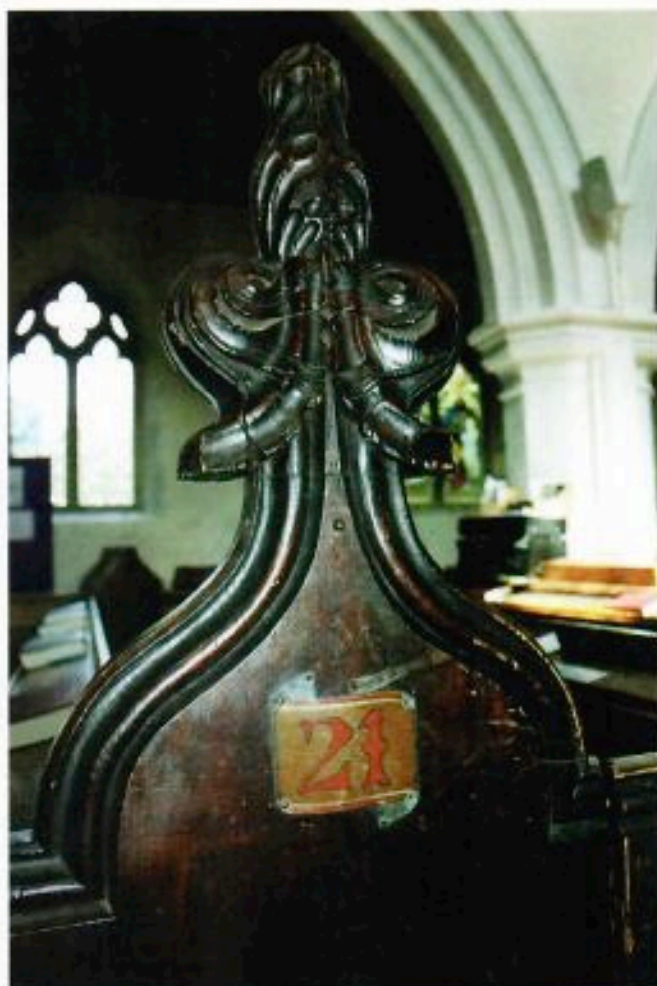
*St Lawrence, Bovington, Hertfordshire. View across nave from the N.W.*

Author

A tentative Gothic note is produced by the addition of carved foliate poppy-heads, but only on the inside of the nave aisle. This captures a stylistic ambivalence, given that Gothic benches were always provided with a poppy-head at *each* end. This is but only one problem emanating from an attempt to combine the Baroque box-pew



format with an open Gothic-style bench. Other ambiguities include the inadequate width of the nave aisle for processional purposes, the separate attachment of the poppy-heads, which in the Gothic mode would always have been carved in the solid with the bench-ends, the lack of coordination in the choice of decoration between the Gothic late-14th-century style of the tracery at the east end of the the front pews, and the later-15th-century-style Gothic poppy-heads. The latter rely on a range of characteristic English models. They are in softwood and carved exclusively with the use of machine tools, quite without education or inspiration. The parsimonious scantlings of the timbers throughout is also noticeable. Other shortcomings include the absence of a plinth to match the top rail of the pew sides, a vital element in English medieval pews



*Note the join line of the right-hand poppy head*





*Bodging solutions inside and outside the pews. At right note the panelling's conformation to the column base*



*South nave aisle from west. Author*





*Left. Inside view of a pew*

*Above. Detail from back board west end of south side main aisle*



*Nave aisle from west. Author*





*Late-14th-century style tracery on front pews. Author*

*Continued from p. 5*

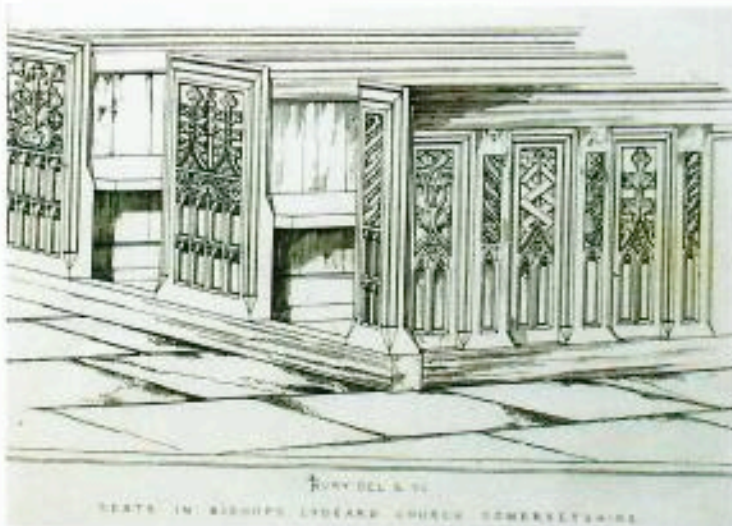
in either Gothic or 'Baroque' mode, and, once again, the complete absence of a craftsman's touch throughout this litany of machine finishing. The provision for the undecorated side aisle pews is relatively even more utilitarian. The furniture bears all the hallmarks of a hurried assembly of a set of off-the-peg furniture, needing a degree of nipping and tucking to make it fit. This is particularly evidenced where the executant is regularly caught out by the unexpected appearance of an arcade column.

## **WHAT WAS THE ARCHITECT'S ROLE IN THE FURNISHINGS AT BOVINGDON?**

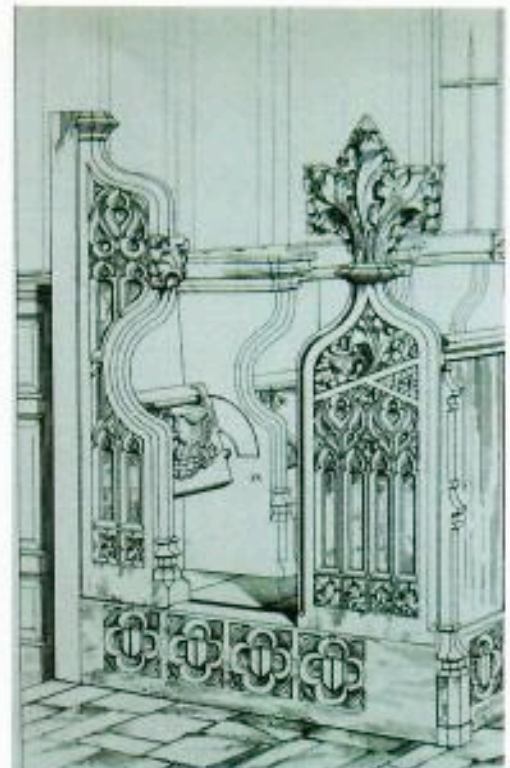
Given that in the early 21st century it is proposed to remove these pews, it is important that we glean as much information about them, their design and manufacture. The intention is to estimate the furniture's art-historical significance, based on its aesthetic qualities, stylistic features, and historical context. Given that in 1847, just one year after the completion of the Bovington project, Talbot Bury published a book of engraved measured drawings of timber church furniture, entitled *Remains of Ecclesiastical Woodwork* (see below). We know that, by that time, he was already armed with an intimate knowledge of some of the most important late-medieval church furnishings in southern England (*T. Talbot Bury, Remains of Ecclesiastical Woodwork* [John Weale, London 1847]), including the screens from Aldenham and Berkhamstead in Hertfordshire. Elsewhere in the book he illustrates a variety of choir-stalls and benches. Unfortunately, at Bovington, we have no



knowledge of the style of the nave pews he may have had in mind, let alone in having the luxury of being able to assess any measured drawings or interior visualisations of the same. Searches at the *RIBA* and the *V&A Drawings Collection* have turned up nothing. Thus we only have the monument to guide us. On the other hand we know a great deal about the architect's professional career. He was baptised 1809, and in 1824 was articled to Augustus Charles Pugin. In 1830 he opened his first practice (W. H. Tregellas, revised Annette Peach, *Oxford Dictionary of Biography*). What is striking is that, apart he was often employed in producing other practitioners' designs, notably from 1846 for A.W.N. Pugin's interior furniture and designs at the Houses of Parliament, Westminster, as well as architectural details for Sir Charles Barry at the same place. Bury's own architectural output consisted of thirty-five churches and chapels, fifteen parsonages, twelve schools and twenty other large public buildings and private houses.



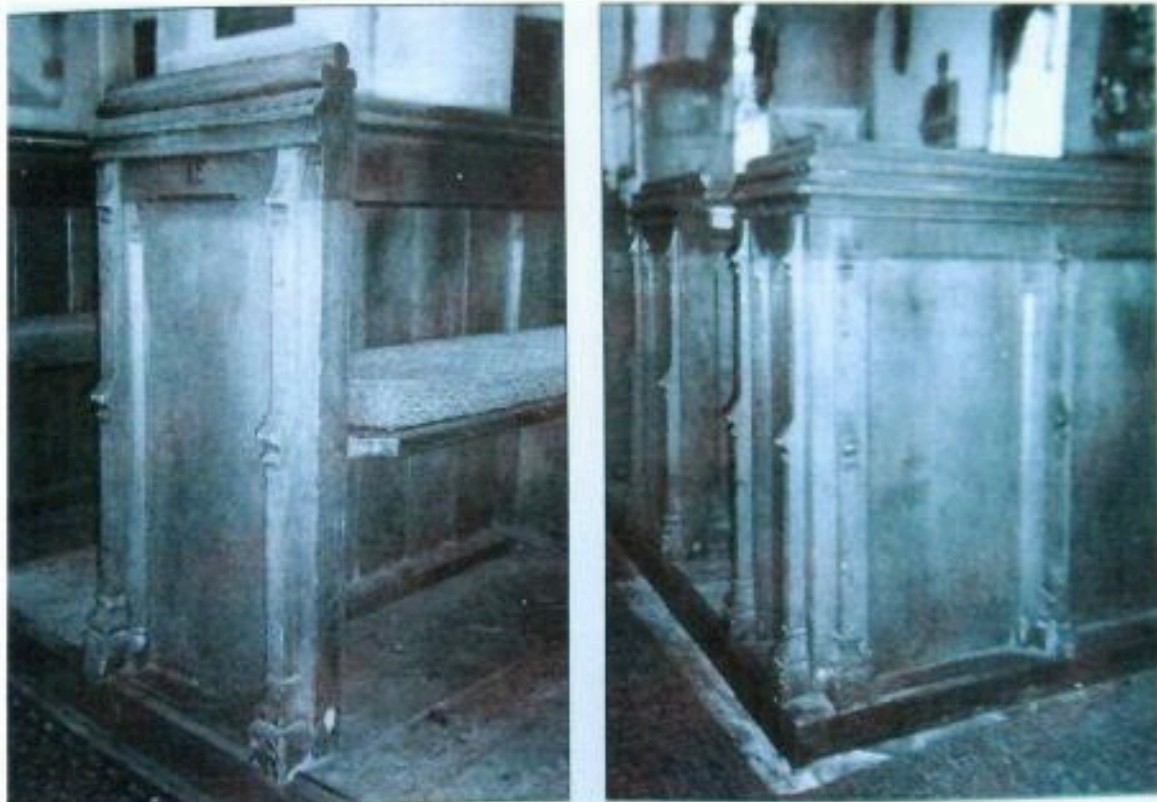
*Benches at St Mary, Bishops Lydeard, Somerset and choir-stalls at St Mary, Wantage. Details from 'Remains of Ecclesiastical Woodwork'*



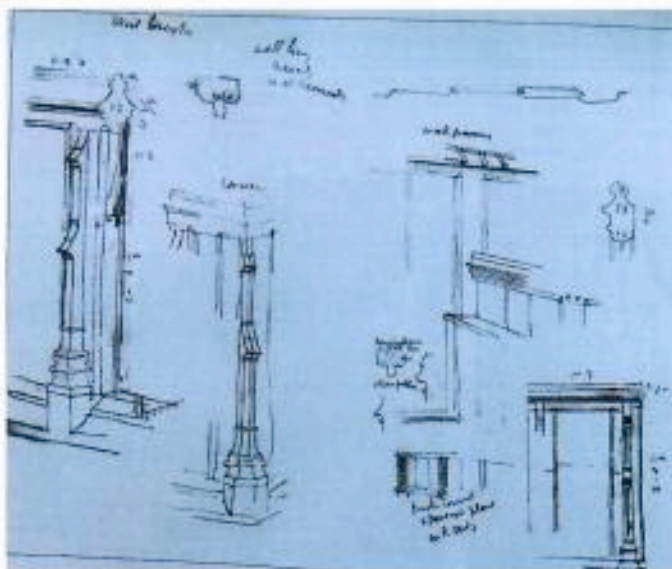


At this period nave furnishings started to be replaced, either with chairs, as, for instance, at St Peter's, Sudbury, or fixed benches, which were prepared by, either by specialist craft workshops or purchased off the peg from a commercial supplier (T Cooper and S. Brown, *Pews, Benches and Chairs. The Ecclesiastical Society* [2011], 303, 307, 462-5). The cutting edge of the revival of interest in English medieval church furniture at this time relied on a more scholarly and archaeological approach to the problem and, above all, an adherence to medieval Gothic models. Under the influence of George Gilbert Scott, parochial benching evidences an important change in the manufacture of Gothic-style pews (S. Branfoot, 'The same fashion as the present ancient seats' : G. G. Scott and the reseating of medieval churches. T Cooper and S. Brown, *Pews, Benches and Chairs. The Ecclesiastical Society* [London 2011], 257-66,). Scott was a trail blazer, and his attitude was 'that if new were needed, old benches from churches of similar period or nearby be used as models with consideration given to period styles, and particularly to local styles and craftsmanship'. Branfoot pointed out that, although more expensive than pine, his preferred medium was oak. Some of the clergy approved his conservationist stance on this matter, and insisted on its use. In 1847 he recorded medieval examples of the somewhat arbitrarily termed 'Midlands style' on medieval pews at Harmondsworth and West Drayton, which he used for his reseating of Iver Church in Buckinghamshire the following year (both the drawings and the pews broadly resemble the style of the mid-19th-century pine benches at St Peter's at St Albans). This is not the only evidence for an interest being taken in recording surviving pews in this style, as can be seen in the publication of the working drawings of a medieval pew at Steeple Aston, Oxfordshire by the *Oxford Architectural Society* in 1843. The *Incorporated Church Building Society*, which started in 1818, offered grants towards new parochial pewing schemes, and was also influential in promoting working drawings of well designed medieval pews. These would have been useful to architects, who would doubtless have passed them on to a chosen joinery workshop.





*Iver Church, Buckinghamshire. Details of bench end and bench front. Note the same details, as Scott's drawing of buttresses (below), moulded capping rails and grooved planked on the seat backs. Essentially the same was followed at St Peter's, St Albans but in pine. After Branfoot, Fig. 5, Cooper and Brown, p. 261.*



*G.G. Scott notebook 23, 1847. Sketches from St Mary, Harmondsworth and St Martin, West Drayton. After Branfoot, Fig. 4, in Cooper and Brown, p. 260.*

The historic and conservative country parish of St Lawrence, Bovingdon, was apparently not minded to join up with the innovators by introducing completely open benching. The *ICBS* had a particular obligation to provide churches with free seating, and stipulated that, as far as possible, the churches in receipt of their assistance supported the use of the open bench. It is clear from the careful numbering on the pew sides, that at Bovingdon they preferred to retain something of the traditional box pew style with its doors and panelled sides.

The above diversion into the history of the Gothic revival in the mid-19th century is inserted to suggest that, had the money not run out at Bovingdon, the architect probably would have ensured that the parish adopt the full-blown medieval style for their nave furniture. Of course it is possible that they might not have been able to afford this, yet Iver cannot have been an affluent parish either. Ingeniously at that place only a skeleton of the Gothic stylistic repertory is on offer; just plain panels on the bench ends and fronts with no tracery and simple stripped down plinths and mouldings. However, at Bovingdon we can only respect the final outcome, and speculate on the particular circumstances at the time.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. We will probably never fully understand how Thomas Talbot Bury's well designed rebuilt parish church at Bovingdon could have been so badly let down by the poor quality and uninspiring design of the extant set of box pews.
2. It is hard to intuit how one of the doyens of English 19th-century neo-Gothic architecture could have personally signed off these pews.