



St Botolph's – the blocked North Door? By George Boyden

My discussions with David Leslie Franks on his visits to his birthplace were rewarded by him relating his earliest memories of the pattern of the village. One inconclusive discussion of earlier times centred around the strangeness of a parish church with a North door.

This is rare in the general run of churches serving small communities, especially when the dwellings are on the South side and almost none on the North. Considering that the church is a 12th century structure, it is much more likely that there would have been one at all. The circumstantial evidence that such was the case lies in the fact that Church Lane was not a through-road until the time of the Enclosures. It is not mentioned as a thoroughfare but appears on the Award plan of 1820. Until that time the public right of way ended in line with the side of the house (now the Exeter Arms). Opposite, against the church wall, is a small area which earlier served for stabling. The last existing of these buildings was not removed until quite recent times and to-date remains the property of the Exeter Arms.

The present Inn building is assessed to be c1700 and when built was provided with a very large upstairs room – the largest in the house – constructed with a concrete floor. To this room was given the long-used name of Court room.

Judicial responsibility in this part of the Nassaburgh Hundred passed to Sir William Cecil KG, Lord Burghley and his son, Sir Thomas Cecil KT by an indenture of 20 December 1576. The part wording of the transfer reads that a Court must be held at his house in Helpston three times a year to include Lady Day and Michaelmas, to the utmost power of capital punishment, with a lesser court every third week which could be presided over by the Steward.

It is reasonable to assume that before a sitting of the Court with powers of capital punishment, it would have been deemed improper without a prior visit to the Church to receive spiritual guidance on their deliberations.

The latest document of the Court is of 1851, being a register of charges for straying animals issued by the Lower Court and signed by the Steward. Details of the last sitting of the Higher Court are not known. The stone which used to

house the gibbet at Langdyke Bush is preserved in the grounds of Manor Farm, having been taken there by William Franks, father of Leslie.

So where would the approach to the Church from the court house have been? The provision of a North Door for direct access from the Court to the church can only be assumed as being through a gateway now walled up, or over the wall by steps to the area for stabling.

Signs of a pathway have long since been erased by vegetation, and the church yard was closed for further burials with effect from 1st January 1882. At what date was the North Door blocked up, as we see it now? An opportunity to seal the North Door with substantial material could have been taken during the rebuilding of the tower in 1865.

The assumptions, I believe at this stage, reach a reasonable conclusion and provide room to spur an effort for further research.

In memory of David Leslie Franks, born at the Manor House, 25th June 1900 and who died 18th September, 1994.

This article first appeared in the December 1994 edition of the Helpston, Eton and Woodcroft Chronicle.

