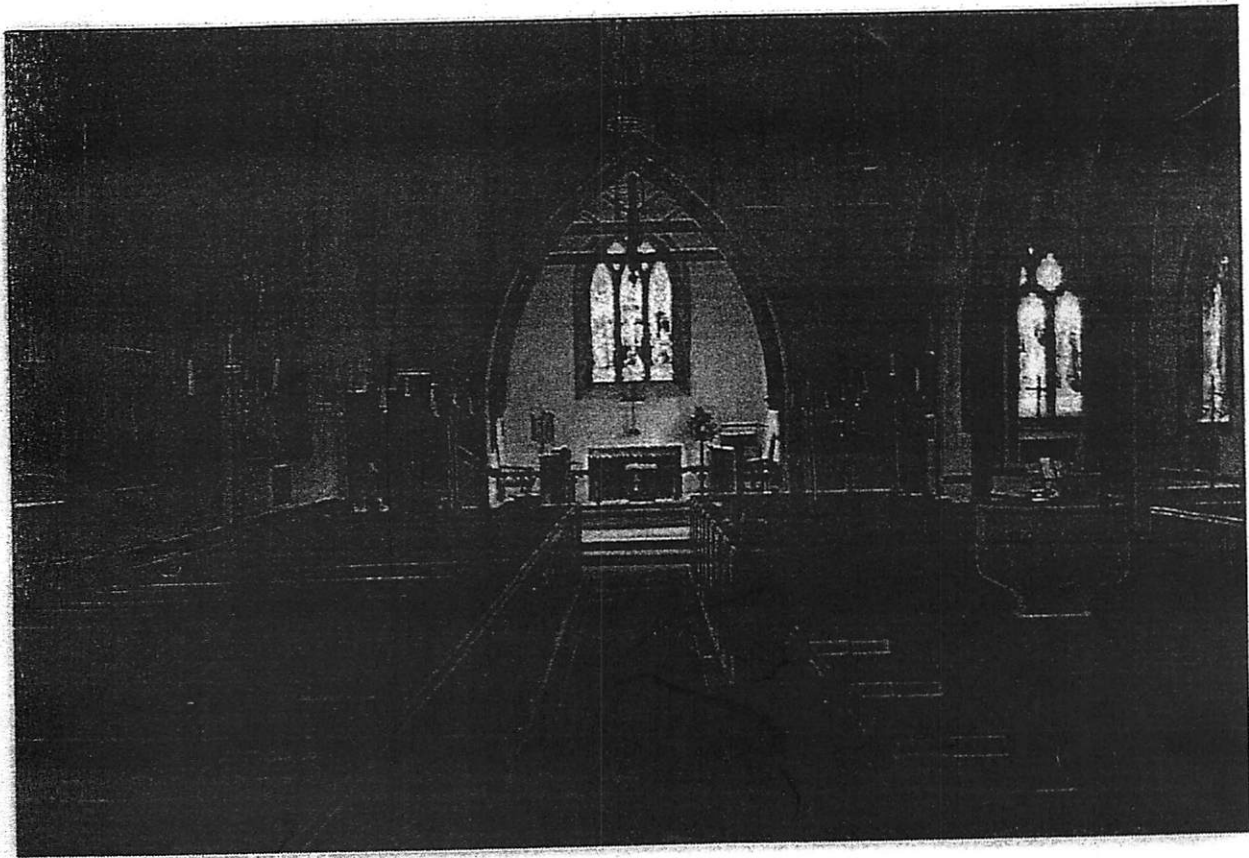


## BERROW, St. Mary



Archaeological Survey of the Nave Seating: 2010

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.. 30 November 2010

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**Berrow, St Mary****The Nave Seating**

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- 1 Introduction - the circumstances of the report
  - 1.1 This report on the status of the nave seating has been prepared at the request of Verity Trevor-Morgan, churchwarden of St Mary's, Berrow, on behalf of the Parochial Church Council, in order to inform proposals for reordering the nave. It is based on a site visit made by the author on 24 November 2010.
  - 1.2 The holdings of Somerset Record Office and Local Studies Library have not been investigated at this point, beyond a search of the online catalogues of the former. It is possible that interior views of the church by Buckler or Wheatley exist, and may throw light on the pre-1844 furnishings.
- 2 Previous commentators and documentary evidence
  - 2.1 Berrow St Mary is an interesting building which deserves better than the occasional brief notices which it has received from past ecclesiologists.
  - 2.2 Rev. John Collinson is typically succinct,

'The church stands near the sea, and consists of a nave and porch tiled, and a chancel and south aisle leaded. At the west end there is a plain square tower fifty-six feet high, in which are five bells.'<sup>1</sup>
  - 2.3 Sir Stephen Glynne appears not to have visited the church,<sup>2</sup> and the excursions of the Somerset Archaeological Society, even when their annual meeting was based nearby, did not include St Mary's.

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<sup>1</sup> Collinson 1791, vol. i, p.202

<sup>2</sup> McGarvie 1994.

- 2.4 Pevsner described the building in more fulsome terms, and mentioned the important wooden furnishings (though misdating the surviving fragment of the gallery by a century):

'WEST GALLERY. The cornice with an inscription of 1537 is all that is left of it. - PULPIT. Jacobean. With the usual short blank arches in two tiers. - READER'S DESK. Of the same style, dated 1631.'<sup>3</sup>

- 2.5 Listed Grade 1 on 9 February 1961, the English Heritage listing gives a full architectural description, mentioning the important wooden fittings and making the first mention of the pews and benches,

'Pulpit of 1621; reading desk dated 1631, Jacobean altar table... in the South aisle a carved bressumer dated 1637, once part of a former Western gallery. C19 pews and altar rail.'<sup>4</sup>

- 2.6 Kenneth Wickham does not mention Berrow in his monograph on Somerset churches, nor does the church figure in Robert Dunning's *'Fifty Somerset Churches'*.

- 2.7 Robin Bush also refers to the *'Jacobean pulpit dated 1621, a slender reader's desk of 1631 and a western gallery of 1637'*<sup>5</sup> - omitting to mention that only a single beam survives from it.

- 2.8 These three items are shown on the plan of the church drawn up by George Phillips Manners in 1843, preparatory to the major restoration and reseating programme which he directed. This plan (held by the Society of Antiquaries of London) and the plan showing the proposed reordering, drawn up in the following year, provide before and after evidence of the appearance of the interior and the contemporary disposition of the seating.<sup>6</sup>

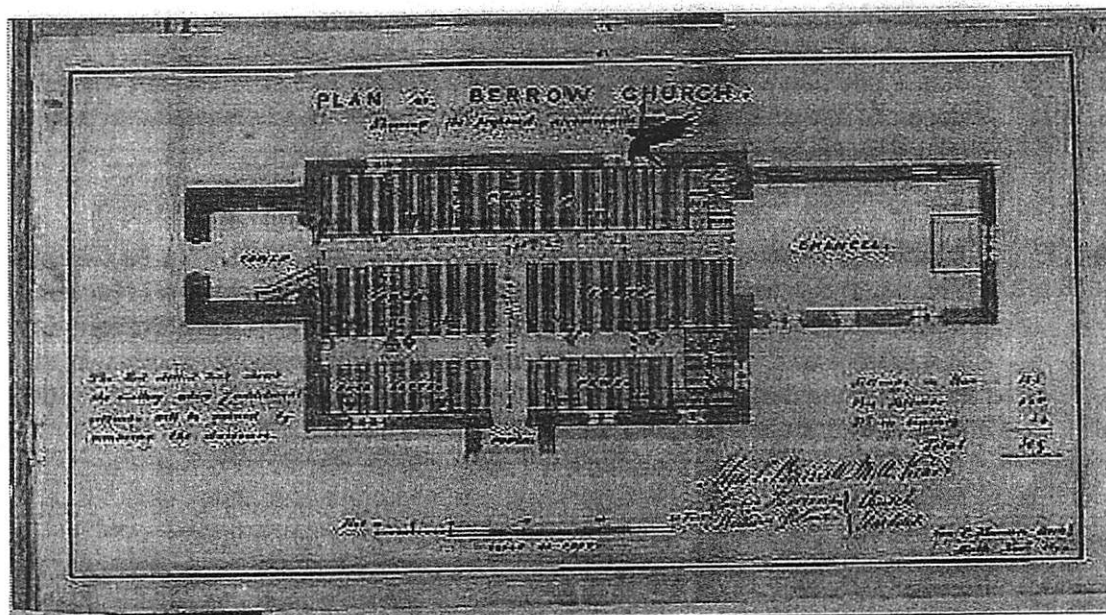
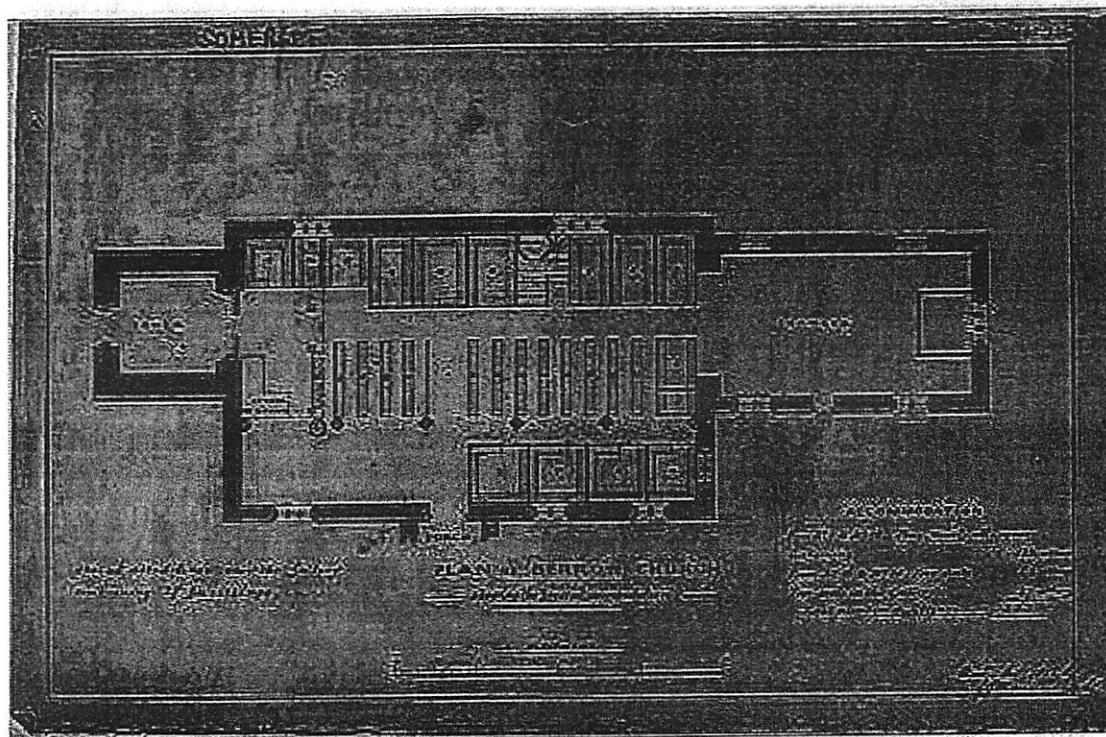
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<sup>3</sup> Pevsner 1958, p.86.

<sup>4</sup> EH Listing, available online at [www.imagesofengland.org](http://www.imagesofengland.org)

<sup>5</sup> Bush 1994, p.35

<sup>6</sup> Both plans are available online at [www.churchplansonline.org](http://www.churchplansonline.org) which houses the digitised plans held by the Incorporated Church Building Society (ICBS). The archive of the ICBS shows that the organisation approved a grant application for 'reseating / repairs' during the 1843-4 work [ICBS 03292 - minutes: Volume 12, pages 33, 143.]



Berrow St Mary - seating plans before (top) and after (below) the George Manners restoration of 1843-4



- 2.9 By 1843 when the 'before' plan was drawn, the north side of the nave had been furnished with a total of nine box pews, set to either side of the pulpit and desk. The latter stood just to the west of the eastern window in the north nave wall, with three box pews to the east, three to the west, and a further three with a shallower projection beyond these, the western pair beneath the west gallery. Four other box pews filled the eastern part of the south nave aisle, east of the porch door, and another stood at the east of the seats in the southern part of the nave, against and overlapping the south side of the chancel arch. The southern half of the nave from the west gallery to this eastern box pew was filled with open benches, in two banks of seating separated by the cross-aisle from the south porch: five benches and a bench-front to the west, eight benches to the east. At the west end the west gallery projected from the west wall and tower arch almost as far as the first arcade pier, but not extending into the south aisle. The western part of the south nave aisle was unfurnished.
- 2.10 The plan gives no indication of the relative dates of these furnishings. The pulpit, desk and west gallery are dated in the 1620s and 30s, and it is likely that the pews were the result of slow accretion, rather than a single campaign of reseating, individual pew owners creating or rebuilding their seating accommodation when funds or personal pride allowed or dictated. The open benches in the south side of the nave could well have been survivals of a late medieval campaign of seating.
- 2.11 The proposal drawing of the following year shows the interior of the church fully repewed, the box pews dispensed with and the pulpit and desk moved to the north-eastern corner of the nave and reconfigured. Interestingly, the west gallery appears to have survived the reordering, though it was now approached by a stair within the tower base, rather than the stair beneath its southern end which was shown in 1843. The font, too, remained in its 1843 position beneath the western arch of the south nave aisle, but the empty western end of the south aisle (which had presumably served as a baptistry) was now furnished.
- 2.12 The new seating was divided into 'pews', occupying the north side of the nave and the eastern half of the south aisle, and 'free seats' occupying the south side of the nave and the western half of the aisle. The pews included four set facing north at the south-eastern corner of the aisle, seven in the east end of the aisle facing east, and eighteen on the north side of the nave - this configuration matches the existing numbering on the pew doors. The free seats were arranged in three blocks: ten (or perhaps nine and a bench-front) on the south side of the nave to the west of the cross-aisle from the porch; eleven and a bench-front to the east of the cross-aisle; and nine and a bench-

front in the western part of the south aisle, west of the cross-aisle.

- 2.13 The arrangement of the 'free seats' probably reflects the pre-1843 usage: with the closed pews replacing the form, function, position and (most importantly, the) status of the old box pews, and the free seats occupying the former position of the open benches in the south side of the nave, and the previously open space in the south aisle, furthest from the pulpit and altar.<sup>7</sup> This division also serves to explain the difference in the form of the seating in the south side of the nave, the arrangement of the numbering of the pews, and supplies contributory evidence that the whole of the reseating belongs to a single phase of alterations.

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<sup>7</sup> Though it is interesting that the nave is still dominant as the preaching space, and the chancel remained unaffected by the reordering.

### **3        The Nave Seating**

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#### **3.1        The present disposition of the seating**

##### **3.1.1        The nave of St Mary's church at present contains four banks of pews and benches:**

- The north side of the nave is occupied by sixteen closed pews forming a single bank, with a seventeenth seating at the eastern end partly cut away by the installation of the modern organ, and a further seat at the west end replacing a closed pew where a choir stall has been placed against the west wall.

- A matching choir stall is placed against the west wall to the south of the tower arch, and in front of this is a series of six open benches with a bench-front, the rear three benches having been reduced in length by the installation of the pipe organ beneath the western arch of the south nave arcade.<sup>8</sup>

- To the east of this, occupying the south-eastern part of the nave is a bank of nine open benches with a bench-front, having identical bench-ends to the western bank, but a different form to the backs. The bench-front and back of this bank, and the bench-front of the south western bank of nave seats have the same form of moulding and panelling.

- The south nave aisle contains a block of closed pews of the same design as those on the north side of the nave, comprising seven pews; and immediately to the east of these (leaving a narrow gangway only 44 cm wide) is the pew platform for a further three pews, retaining the sill-plates, parquet floor and 'shadow' of the pew divisions, together with the top dado rail running from the south side of the arcade's eastern respond into the

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<sup>8</sup> A faculty D/D/cf/1973/10/15 dated 24 October 1973 is held at Somerset Record Office for 'New Organ, re-laying of chancel floor, and removal of carved wooden reredos'. The form of the organ in the chancel prior to this date can be seen in early photographs (see Plate 2).



south-east angle of the aisle and returning as a continuous timber along the south wall, integral with the south bank of pews.

The western end of the aisle, beyond the cross-aisle leading from the south porch, is now laid out as a creche, but the wall-face panels for benches or pews still remains against the south wall, and in several instances the shadow of the top rails, backs and book-rests of the original seats can be seen on the surviving woodwork. These are placed somewhat closer together than the seats in the closed pews, since the two clearest 'shadows' have the tops of their centre rails only 30 inches apart; whereas those in the pew banks are generally between 32.5 and 33 inches apart. It seems likely therefore, that this confirms the evidence of the 1844 plan that the western part of the aisle was occupied by open benches, rather than a continuation of the bank of pews occupying the eastern part of the aisle. This bank of seats would have been the furthest from the pulpit.

### **3.2 The date and phasing of the seating**

#### **3.2.1 Introduction**

**3.2.1.1** While all the seating is clearly of nineteenth century design and execution, and no timberwork preserved from the 1843 furnishings has been identified as having been reused in the present seating (except for the pulpit and reader's desk), there are distinct differences in the form of the seats at the sides of the church and those at the centre. The two central banks of seats also have inconsistencies, even though the bench ends appear to be of the same design.

#### **3.2.2 The closed pews**

**3.2.2.1** The two blocks of closed pews are clearly a consistent set, designed and manufactured for their present configuration and sites, and their resemblance to other such sets of seats - such as those at Cowbridge (Glam., by John Prichard 1844-50) or Stoke St Gregory (Som., by Richard Carver 1843-4) -

strongly suggests that they belong to the G.P. Manners campaign of restoration in 1843-4. That they all belong together is supported by the numbering system which the doors bear, and by the consistency and design of the fittings - the hinges and latches all being of a standard type.

- 3.2.2.2 These benches consist of pews closed by two-hinged doors with a brass latch with a circular plate fixed with five flat-headed screws: two on the smaller section of the plate fitted to the door, three on that belonging to the bench-end proper. Each door has two recessed panels surrounded by a moulded frame; the narrower bench ends flanking the doors having the same moulding with a slightly wider single recessed panel. The top moulding is a three-quarter roll which returns onto the top rail above the bench backs - the backs themselves being very nearly vertical, with the face of the top rail and the back set in line. The top rail projects on the back of the bench-back above the book-rest. The wide seats are curved beside the door, and at the underside of the seats the bench back steps forward to allow greater leg-room. The bench ends and doors stand above fairly shallow sill-plates, and it would appear that only the side posts of the bench-ends are fixed to the sill-plates, since there is a visible void between the sill-plate and the moulded base of the central panel. Indeed, the exposed sections of sill-plate (where alterations have occurred) suggests that the posts are not actually morticed into the plates.
- 3.2.2.3 Against the side walls the panelling ceases at the height of the tops of the seats - though this may be a more recent alteration to accommodate the heating pipes, which run against the wall below this, and which have clearly been cut through the lower parts of the seat backs.<sup>9</sup> The bench-backs above the seats consist of a single horizontally-set plank, rather than the more usual vertical tongue and groove, or panelled plank and muntin designs. Behind them are book-rests, chamfered off towards the end beside the door; and the back below the seat is panelled, with four panels having chamfered edges set between vertical stiles rising from continuous sills. There is a moulded central support beneath each of the seats.
- 3.2.2.4 Each of the doors bears a painted numeral in yellow: beginning at '5' on the eastern end of the south aisle bank of seats, running to '11' at its western end; '12' is the missing door at the western end of the bank of seats on the north side of the nave (displaced by the inserted choir stall). The first extant door here being numbered '13', and the numbers run consistently to the east, to no.

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<sup>9</sup> S.R.O. DID/cf/1915/7 is a faculty for 'heating' dated 1915, which probably relates to the initial installation of the existing heating system. Earlier corroded cast iron pipes can be seen beneath the floor against the east elevation of the east wall of the tower, which probably relate to the Manners restoration of 1843-4.

'29' - a door now fixed permanently closed in front of the modern organ, its bench front displaced by the latter.

### 3.2.3 The open benches

- 3.2.3.1 The central banks of seats, occupying the south eastern and south western parts of the nave are of a different design, consisting of open benches, but nonetheless these are set on sill-plates and flooring of the same design as those associated with the blocks of closed pews, and their top moulding (with three-quarter roll, shoulder and hollow chamfer) appears to be identical to the moulding of the closed pews.
- 3.2.3.2 The seats have the same curved profile where they approach the bench ends, and the central moulded supports beneath the centres of the seats also appears to have the same profile.
- 3.2.3.3 The form of the bench-fronts and the single bench-back (of the eastern bank) appear similar to the mouldings of the doors of the pews, and it seems probable therefore that these open benches belong to the same reseating programme as the closed pews themselves.
- 3.2.3.4 There are differences in the design of the eastern and western bank of the central seating: the western set having the backs open beneath the level of the book-rest, and the book-rest itself having an additional sloping fitting. The eastern bank has solid backs consisting of planks set vertically, with a slight slope, using a total of 15½, 6½ inch wide planks. The second seat from the east is of slightly different design, having 24 and two half 4 inch tongue-and-groove boards, set further back and framed into the top-rail and the central support post. However, beneath the seat of this bench the standard 15½ planks are visible, suggesting that this is a repair or alteration.
- 3.2.3.5 This bank of seats does not possess the sloping book-rest with which the western benches are equipped.
- 3.2.3.6 In the western bank of seats the three existing western benches have been reduced in length by the insertion of the organ to the south within the western arch of the south nave arcade. These benches were clearly not made to this length, since in the two western the central support still survives almost touching the southern bench end, and in the third from the west the 'shadow' of the joint for this support can be seen on the back of the seat.

### 3.3 The lighting sconces

3.3.1 Associated with both sets of seating is a handsome series of three-light candle holders, with foliate openwork heads: six associated with the northern bank of closed pews; three in the centre-east (nave, south-east); and two in the south aisle - these being absent from the centre-west area (nave, south-west). However, in the centre-west bank of seats, in the soffit of the book-rest of the third bench from the east there is a circular hole which would clearly have accommodated such a fitting, and in the centre of the western surviving of these benches there is another such hole and the metal clip for locating the staff of such a fitting - indicating that at least two such candle holders were originally present in this bank of seats.

3.3.2 The fourth bench in the centre-east bank of seats (nave, south-east) also has the marks of the metal loop and a hole drilled through the book-rest, and it seems likely that this once housed a similar fitting. Given the re-ordering of the seating from the plan shown in the original Manners' drawing, this may indicate that the benches have been re-arranged.

### 3.4 Other fittings

3.4.1 Alternate benches and bench-ends to either side of the eastern half of the nave central aisle also have pairs of modern metal loops (fixed with cross-head screws), probably to accommodate supports for decorations for special services.

3.4.2 Kneelers have been provided for the seven western benches of the nave's south-eastern bank of seats; and for the front four benches (those of full length) in the south-western nave. Kneelers are not provided in the closed pews, and there is no sign on the panelling below the seats that these have ever existed here.

3.4.3 There is remarkably little sign of graffiti on the woodwork of the seats - only the book rest of the western pew of the extant south-aisle bank has been marked in any significant way.

3.4.4 There is little sign of any other furnishings associated with the pews or

benches, or of attachments to the benches or doors. Even loops for locating verger's staves seem to be absent.

### 3.5 Construction

3.5.1 The bench-ends and doors of the closed pews are typical of such mid-nineteenth century fittings, framed in several pieces, rather than being cut in the solid as was the tradition well into the seventeenth century. Most of the fixings in the closed pews are concealed, but the open benches have nails fixing the seats, top rails and book-rests driven through the bench ends. The upper three-quarter rolls of the edge mouldings of both closed pews and bench ends are nailed.

3.5.2 Some of the bench ends themselves are in two separate planks - also a trait of nineteenth century work.

### 3.6 Alterations to the Manners scheme

3.6.1 The reconfiguration of the original Manners furnishings has affected the eastward extent of the benches, and has probably reduced the north-facing seats in the south eastern corner of the south aisle by one, since the painted numerals begin at five, and there are at present only spaces for three seats on the surviving parquet pew-platform. It seems likely from the 1844 plan that this platform originally extended one pew further to the north, making access to the east end of the nave from the south aisle extremely awkward; and that the platform has been moved back subsequent to the 1840s reordering.

3.6.2 Both ends of the northern bank of pews have been truncated, affecting nos. 12 and 29 - to the west by the installation of one of the choir stalls which stood in front of the organ until the reordering of the chancel c.1973; to the east by the modern organ.

3.6.3 The south-eastern block of nave benches has been reduced by two benches at its eastern end from the original eleven and a bench-front, and it is possible that this occurred in two phases, since the pre-1973 photograph (Plate 2) appears to show ten benches in this position. The arrangement of benches adapted to house candelabra suggests that one of the eastern benches

replaced either the fourth or fifth from the east of the present configuration, since both of these have holes for the staves which support them, and it is unlikely that two were ever intended to be positioned together in the original scheme. In this area, also, the second seat from the east has a different form to the, perhaps the result of an early repair.

- 3.6.4 The south-western block of nave benches has also been considerably altered. Ten benches were envisaged in the 1844 reordering, of which seven and a bench front can be seen in the pre-1973 photograph, and an eighth probably existed behind the open tower screen door. Presumably two were removed when the font was moved from beneath the south aisle arcade - the absence of a faculty for this from the list held in Somerset Record Office suggesting that this had occurred prior to 1915. A further bench at the west of the block has been replaced by the matching choir stall to that against the north side of the tower east elevation. The removal of the organ from the chancel to the western arch of the south arcade also caused the cutting-down of three remaining western benches in this block.
- 3.6.5 The largest single alteration is the removal of the nine benches and bench-front from the western half of the south aisle.
- 3.6.6 The dates of the alterations to the seating are only partially known. The destruction of the west gallery appears to postdate the 1844 restoration since it is clearly shown on the plan of that date, complete with a new stair against the south wall of the tower base. The movement of the font may have taken place at the same time, since it stood beneath the western arch of the south aisle adjacent to the gallery, and this must have been the point at which the south-western block of seats was reduced to the east.
- 3.6.7 It is likely that the cutting away of the backs of the pews against the side walls took place when the heating was altered or replaced in 1915 and pipes were installed against the lower parts of the south aisle and north nave walls.
- 3.6.8 In 1933 the form of the pulpit was altered, probably to its present form, since a faculty was granted at this time for 'pulpit steps and rail'.<sup>10</sup> Three faculties for unspecified repairs could relate to episodes of minor reordering,<sup>11</sup> but the two

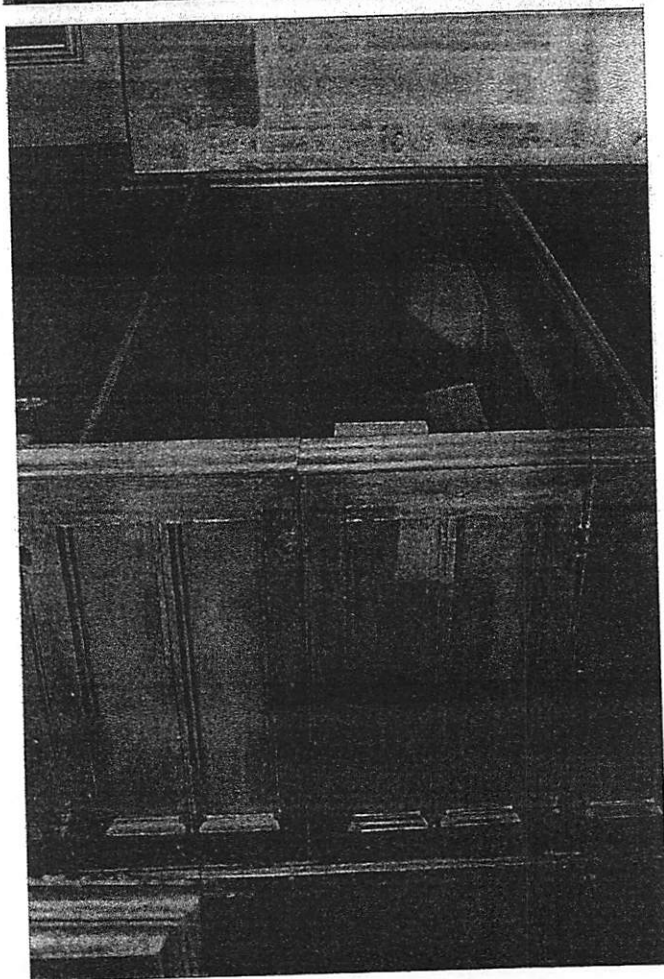
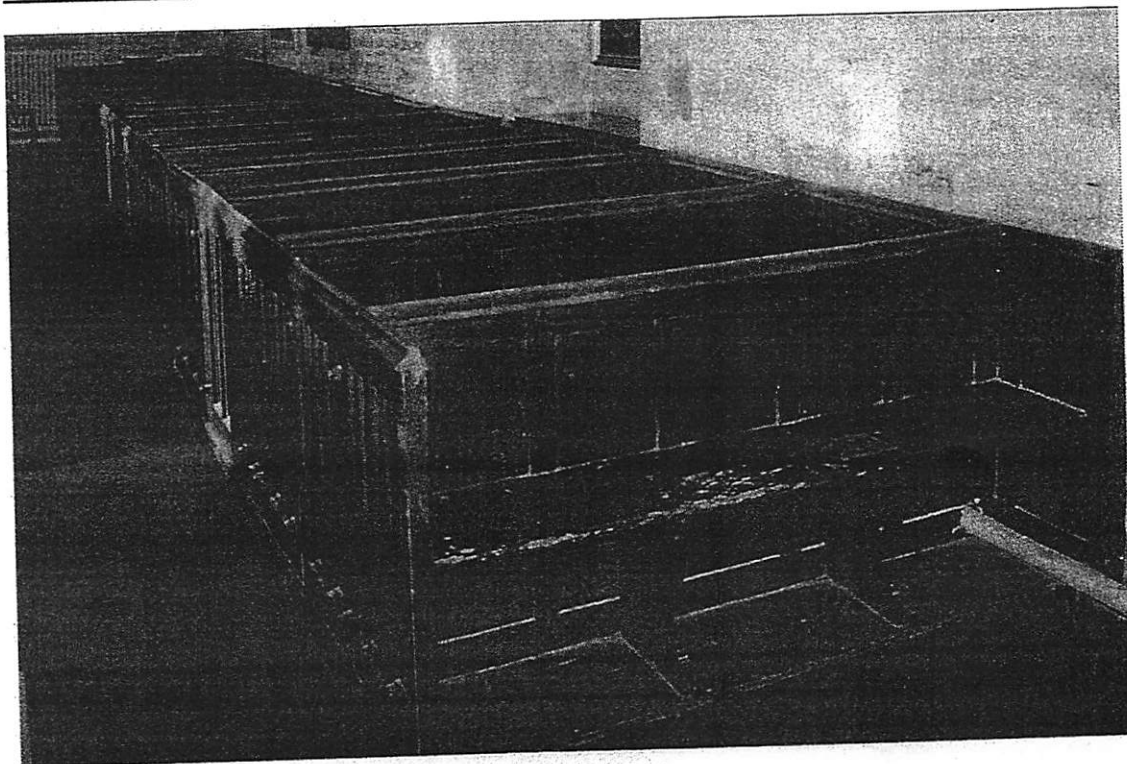
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<sup>10</sup> S.R.O. D\D/cf/1933/45.

<sup>11</sup> S.R.O. D\D/cf/1957/7/14 in 1957 for 'General repairs/restoration to the fabric at St. Mary's church', includes a detailed specification; D\D/cf/1966/5/5 on 6 May 1966 is for 'repairs'; as is D\D/cf/1985/7/26 granted on 22 July 1985.



faculties which relate directly to the seating are S.R.O. D\D/cf/1976/11/6 of 1 November 1976 for '*removal of pews*', and D\D/cf/1994/2/3 of 4 February 1994 for the installation of the amplification system and to '*remove two pews*'. The alterations at the west end of the nave were concomitant on the reordering of the chancel in 1973.



The contemporary pews by Richard Carver at Stoke St Gregory (1843) form a regular series of 3 foot by 6 foot pews in north and south aisles.

The north aisle series (above) has been truncated at the east end of the aisle, and the western pew in both aisles has been partly destroyed.

### Implications of reordering

The Manners seating scheme has already been subject to major losses, with the western benches removed altogether in the south aisle, and smaller reductions at the east and west ends in the nave. The loss of Victorian seating schemes proceeds apace, but it has always been thus: medieval benches were replaced with box pews in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while the Anglican revival saw these taken out to be replaced with open benches or regular doored pews in the mid- and later nineteenth century. Changing liturgical requirements have required different forms of furnishing throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods, and the occasional survivals of unchanged early seating schemes tend to be rare accidents - often the result of the inability of a parish to fund desirable alterations.

Increasingly, the formal layout of Victorian church seating patterns (generally derived from high Anglican liturgical practice of the second half of the nineteenth century), is perceived as inflexible in a modern church which is called on to accommodate a developing liturgical practice and to provide a comfortable venue for an ever wider programme of religious, cultural and social events. When a commentator of the status of Sir Roy Strong can state in cold blood that one result of his tour of churches in his home county of Herefordshire was that

‘In most I wanted to do what the commissioners under Edward VI and latterly under Elizabeth had done with the roods, take an axe and hatchet to the utterly awful kipper coloured choir stalls and pews, drag them out of the church and burn them.’<sup>1</sup>

then it is clear that a proper study and record of church seating of all periods is required while it still exists. This is particularly important for Victorian and Edwardian church seating schemes, whose proximity to us in time tends to diminish their perceived value, and which are fast disappearing without adequate record.

It is understood that the current proposals for reordering at Berrow do not envisage the complete removal of any one of the three types of seating in the nave, so that examples of each will be preserved in the church - in which case the suggestions below will not be relevant at this time.

However, should future proposals require the clearance of either of the two types of open bench or the closed pews, an adequate record of their form is desirable as a resource for

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Roy Strong, *The Beauty of Holiness and its Perils: what is to happen to 10,000 parish churches?*, lecture at Gresham College, 30 May 2007, available as a transcript from [www.gresham.ac.uk](http://www.gresham.ac.uk) or as an audio / visual download.

future studies. The foregoing report is intended to go some way towards providing a proper record of the Manners seating at Berrow, but it is suggested that a few other things could be done prior to and during the removal of the pews if faculty for so doing is granted:

- preparation of a scale drawing of one bench end or (for the pews) end assembly (door / bench end / sill-plate) in external and internal elevation, including the section of the seat, and recording the pattern of pegging.

- examination of the construction of the end assembly to record the components (are the framing mouldings made up of separate pieces, for instance).

- record the mouldings of the panel-frames and top rails and other significant forms as a possible means of establishing workshop connections and date relationships with other schemes

- retention and safe storage of at least some typical components - for the benches a bench-end; for the pews, if not a complete end assembly, then at least an example of the latches and hinges.

- a photographic record of the structure of the benches to supplement and complete that provided with the current report.

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