



St. Margaret's Church

I P S W I C H

A Withipoll tomb at St Margaret's, Bishop Wren and the Puritan Backlash



Edmund Withipoll from medal
by Steven van Herwijk

In 1568, in his first will, Edmund Withipoll, the builder of Christchurch Mansion, asked to be buried "*without any great ceremony*" in the chancel of St Margaret's church "*under the northe windowe there with the great stone and all as it is now appointed for my wyffe and mee and our children*".

In his second will signed shortly before his death in May 1582, he desires to be buried "*wheare the place is appointed in Saincte Margarettes Church in Ipswich*".

The surviving black marble slab, which topped it, has the date 1574 engraved on it, perhaps a reference to its completion date. It is now placed on the north wall by the side door behind the organ. It has been referred to as an altar tomb and that would explain its plainness in comparison to tombs of similarly wealthy families, which often are topped by effigies of themselves and surrounded by their extensive families. An example can be found in the south chapel of another altar tomb, which originally had brasses inlaid, to the Ropkyn family. The engraving of the date of the tomb's creation rather than Edmund's death may also point to its altar status.



Despite the clarity of his instructions we know that the Withipoll tomb was positioned in front of the main altar by the beginning of the 17th century, and not in the north chancel as requested, as it formed part of a prosecution described below. Whether this is the only place it has been within the church or whether it was moved at some point is not known.

In the next sixty years both the tomb and the chancel proved contentious and illustrate the acrimonious theology of that period.

Initially, it was the repair of the chancel, or rather its disrepair, which was a problem.

Before the Reformation, rectors of parish churches were responsible for the repairs for the chancel, their parishioners maintained the rest of the church. Once the rectories had been sold, at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536, the new owner had to take on the task. In the case of St Margaret's in Ipswich that meant the Withypoll family. Despite the fact that his great tomb dominated the chancel, Edmund had allowed the chancel to deteriorate, and under his great grandson William (1596-1645) it was no better maintained.

In Pre- and early Post Reformation English parish churches the altar had been a simple table in the middle of the choir. Only cathedrals had them at the east end and not all of those. William Laud, on his appointment as Dean of Gloucester cathedral found a plain table in the choir and promptly moved it to set up an altar at the east end, which infuriated his Bishop. Thus the altar at St Margaret's originally may well have been in front of the Withypoll tomb. However, by the 1630s the altar was situated in the east end and its position and the configuration of the church formed part of Bishop Wren's defence in his trial in 1644.



Matthew Wren had been appointed Bishop of Norwich in 1635, having previously been Bishop of Hereford and Ely. He was an enthusiastic enforcer of the changes in the Anglican Church begun under King James (1603-25), which were designed to give services greater formality and uphold the greater significance of the sacrament over preaching. The Puritan wing of the church held to Calvinist views of Predestination and saw the changes as a regression to Catholic practice. William Laud, first as Bishop of London (1628) and later as Archbishop of Canterbury (1633) fiercely

enforced the changes laid down in Charles I's Instructions or Directions of 1629. Services had to be conducted strictly according to the Book of Common Prayer, ministers were to wear surplices, the communion table was to be moved to the east end and railed off from the congregation amongst other things.

In St Margaret's church, the placement of the tomb and its relationship to the altar was a problem both practical and spiritual. It not only blocked the view of the altar for the parishioners but also, in a place like Ipswich which had strong Puritan sympathies, seemed to enhance the role of the priest by his separation from the congregation. The visual solution was the raising of the altar on steps with rails in front but it also left a gulf from the congregation.

Bishop Wren's unpopularity was increased by his demand for a reduction in the length and frequency of sermons and control of their content. In East Anglia where preachers (or lecturers) who were unlicensed and not bound to any church were very popular, this was dangerous. The influence of Calvinist weavers who had fled, especially to Norwich, to escape religious persecution in the Netherlands was strong and initially in the 16th century they had been allowed to hold their own services.

Nevertheless Wren suspended any minister who did not enforce these stringent rules.

The debts incurred as a result of his failed Scottish wars forced Charles I to recall Parliament after a gap of eleven years. The Long Parliament, which met in 1640, used its powers to dismantle Charles' regime especially his ecclesiastical system. Archbishop Laud and his fellow bishops were called to account. The Proceedings of the House of Commons records

"that they have received information of a very high nature against Matthew Wren, Lord Bishop of Elie, for setting up of Idolatry and Superstition in divers Places.' He was ordered to pay bail of £10,000 in case he decided to leave the country."

This was followed in 1642 by his arrest and confinement in the Tower of London. In 1644 he and eleven other bishops were indicted and he prepared a vigorous defence of his actions in his dioceses.

Twenty five articles of indictment were brought against him personally.

The first article of his indictment read

Whereas many chancels of churches during Queen Elizabeth's reign and ever since were flat and ordered to continue as they were by rubric, he being Bishop of Norwich, without any lawful authority, enjoined in 1636, that the same should be raised by two or three and sometimes four steps that the communion table might be placed altar-wise, might be seen by the people.

The second

In the same year he ordered, that the communion table, appointed by the Rubric, to be placed in the body of the church, should be set at the east end of the chancel.

Wren mounted a vigorous defence

"he never did enjoin that any chancel be railed three or four steps: but he remembereth that in St. Margaret's church in Ipswich, finding a tomb which had been placed (not above twenty years before, and without Licence from the Ordinary) at the entering into the Chancel, and in the very Middle thereof, and was high and so great, that it did much encumbered the use of said chancel, and did quite obscure and hinder the sight of the Communion Table and of the Minister, when he executed the divine Service thereafter; he professed that he would complain thereof, to cause the same to be removed, or taken down

entire; whereupon it was desired by Sir William Withipoll's friends (whose father's tomb it was) that in regard the said Knight was beyond the Seas, they might raise the upper end of the chancel (being large enough beyond the said Tomb) and make of it of such competent height, that the Tomb might be no inconvenience or hindrance to the Execution of divine service there: To which the Bishop assented, as aiming at nothing but due convenience; and thereupon as he believeth after a Years Expectation, the said Knight not returning, his Agents did at their own charge voluntarily perform the said railing of Steps, as they desired."

He was fortunate that, in 1648, it was decided that he should not be brought to trial as his crimes were not such that he should be executed. Instead he was imprisoned until 1659.

In 1660 the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II led to his own restoration to the bishopric of Ely. While in the Tower, he had pledged to give to "some holy and pious employment" should he be released. He kept his word by commissioning a young architect to build a new chapel at his old College in Cambridge, which was consecrated in 1665. The cost was considerable for the day £4-5,000 and he also endowed it with the "royalty of Hardwick" to cover repair costs. His stone coffin was placed beneath the chapel on his death in 1667.

The young architect was his nephew Christopher and thus Pembroke College became one of Sir Christopher Wren's first commissions.

The position of the Communion table or altar in the east end or body of the church may seem to us a matter of style but in the seventeenth century the importance of its placement meant it was the first accusation levelled against Matthew Wren. It was the symbol of deeply felt, passionate - even bigoted - views about Man's relationship to God and Man's journey to salvation. The bitter divisions led to the English Civil War and its thousands of deaths.

Thus the configuration of St Margaret's east end is a significant detail in the religious history of the seventeenth century. It formed part of the indictment of Matthew Wren whose freedom promoted the career of one of England's great architects. Today it represents the loss of the great Withipoll tomb and a link to a highly influential Ipswich family.

Post scripts

Matthew Wren's wife came from Ipswich, Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Cutler of Ipswich, Suffolk, and widow of Robert Brownrigg of Sproughton. She seems to have died in 1642.



In the floor of the chancel is a reddish brown granite slab whose engraving is much worn which may mark the spot where the tomb stood. Its first lines read

DEPOSITUS
EDMUND WITHIPOLL
1574

Thereafter it becomes harder to read and seems to have inscriptions to the Fonnereau family who replaced the last descendant of the Withipolls in 1735. Claudius Fonnereau who died in 1785 is mentioned. Thus it was not the slab that first covered the place of the great Withipoll tomb. It is an oddity as is the persistence of the 1574 date.