

A Rural Cinderella St John Baptist, Chelveston



INTRODUCTION BY CANON RICHARD GILES

IT IS ALL TOO easy in rural parishes to opt out of any attempt to re-order church buildings, and rural clergy can have an infuriating habit of admiring what is done in urban areas while at the same time writing off at a stroke their whole constituency with a dismissive "Oh you would never get away with that in a country parish!" Such an attitude is a convenient cover-up for idleness or complete lack of imagination, but the story of St John Baptist, Chelveston, shows exactly what can be done.

I have happy memories of Chelveston, for it became my "baby" soon after ordination to the priesthood in 1966, and it's the place where I cut my teeth in the re-ordering business, learning from my mentor Canon Roger Davison all about space and simplicity and order, together with a few tricks of the trade which we had better not mention in front of English Heritage.

A dowdy, cluttered, nondescript and neglected country church – very Low in more senses than one – was transformed into a little gem set in a churchyard brought back from

the dead, where the rooks caw in the old sycamores above a green sward white with snowdrops every spring. (Yes, I've booked my plot!).

This transformation required no architectural design scheme, nor vast sums of money, but was achieved at minimal cost, much labouring for love by a dedicated congregation, and the inspired leadership (including blood, sweat and tears) of a parish priest with a vision. Roger Davison tells us the story of the original work in the 1960's, and his successor, Eric Buchanan, gives us an account of the liturgical use of the building following its recent refurbishment.

THE RESCUE PACKAGE: BY CANON ROGER DAVISON, PARISH PRIEST 1965-88

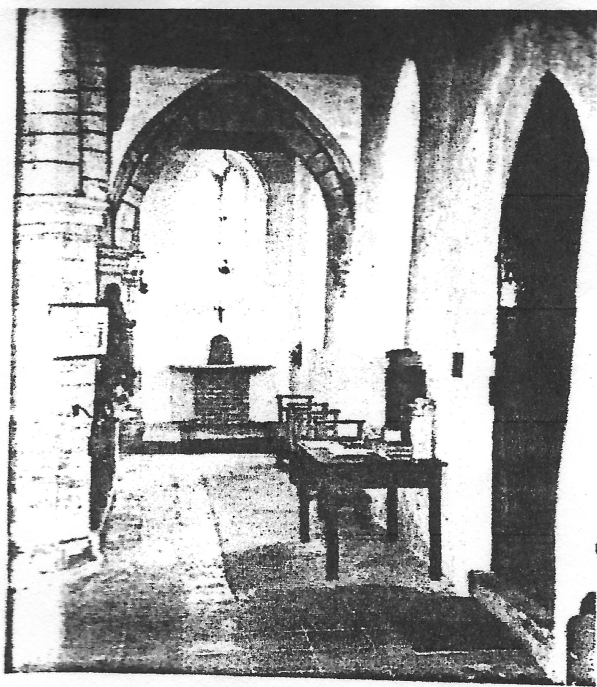
WHEN A NEW incumbent was to be inducted to the living of Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire, in June 1965, he was informed of one snag, the condition of the village church in the adjoining parish of Chelveston which was shortly to be joined as a united benefice.

Apparently the Diocese of Peterborough considered Chelveston Church as one of its

headaches. An interesting 13th century building with its original clerestory of single lancets, and a stately transeptal tower, it was in a bad state of repair, damp and dismal with stained and discoloured walls inside. Serious consideration was being given to block out the nave by building up the chancel and providing a lean-to vestry leading out of the sanctuary north door.

The new regime was a Company of Mission Priests undertaking with three priests living communally in a Clergy House at Higham Ferrers. Together with one lay helper they were determined to tackle Chelveston's Cinderella condition and so the summer months of 1965 saw much clearing of dusty clutter (a harmonium with a dead mouse behind), a vestry with cassocks stiff with mildew. The north aisle roof leaked badly and so an old door was pushed up into the rafters as a temporary measure.

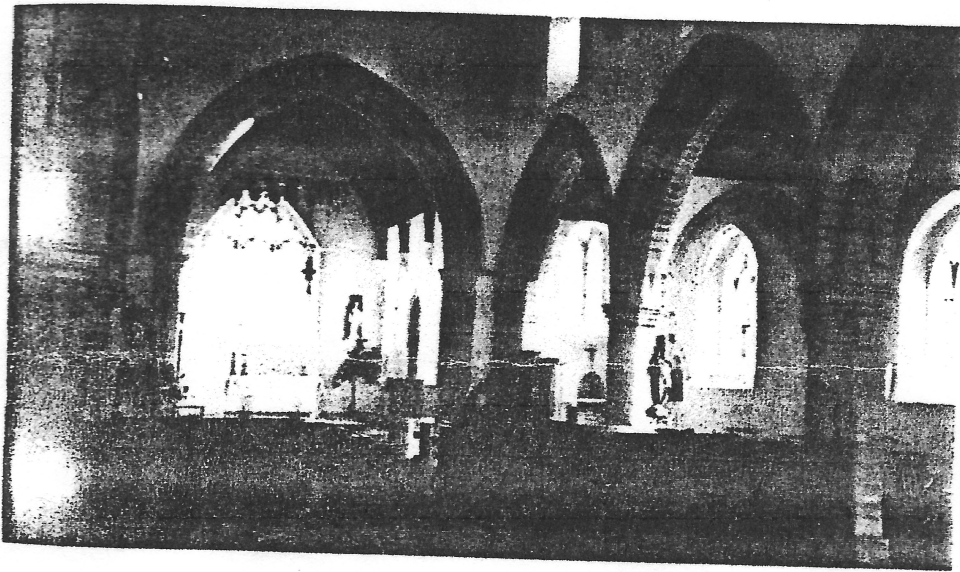
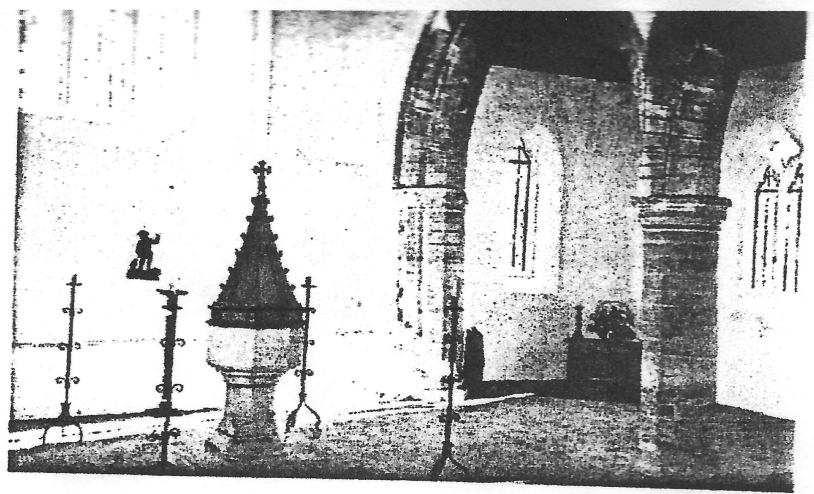
Although fabric restoration was urgently needed, it seemed that the first thing was to make the interior less depressing. By September 1965 the chancel walls were whitewashed. Then faculties were obtained to remove a (plaster) reredos which masked a third of the Perpendicular east window. Pews



LEFT: the south aisle

ABOVE: the west end

BELOW: interior looking east



novels. Old service registers of the Thirties revealed some Sundays with no communicants. The absence of a local squire meant that there was no "official" lay support. The church is slightly withdrawn from the village, so a great deal militated against. Enthusiasm, tempered with a bit of kindness and pastoral care, are catalysts which can achieve a revival in the most moribund of parishes.

CHELVESTON TODAY: CANON ERIC BUCHANAN, PARISH PRIEST SINCE 1990. 97

THE MAIN USE of the church is for a weekly Sunday Eucharist attended by 20-25 people. Evensongs, marriages, funerals and baptisms take place but very infrequently. The appointment of the Church is effective for several reasons.

Its simplicity lies in the economy of its furnishing. The central block of pews in the nave seats 50. Small congregations never seem sparse. The rest of the nave and aisle are open floor except for the font, which stands central to the western end of the nave as prominent and accessible as the altar, which sits in the middle of an otherwise empty chancel. It is uncompromisingly a modern Eucharistic worship centre in an ancient hallowed place.

Its beauty comes from its simplicity. Unbroken lines of arches lead the eye through to the altar, lit by plain glass windows and framed by a hanging canopy. It is fitting and undistracting to worshippers. Its flexibility is not compromised by fixed pews which take up no more than a quarter of the floor area. Chairs can be brought in when needed for a big occasion. A large baptism party can gather round the font. Refreshments can be served after festive events with space to mingle. The ceremonial of village weddings or funerals is easily accommodated.

Even small congregations are kept together and the ministry of the word is delivered close at hand. Westward celebration over a free standing altar maintains the sense of the corporate nature of the eucharistic action. A small chapel created at the end of the south aisle suffices for the two or three who gather for very occasional mid-week celebrations.

The church is easily maintained – a matter of some importance in a small community where helpers are few. There is little to dust and less to impede sweeping and cleaning.

NB Chelveston is just off the A46 two miles east of Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire.

What was achieved at a minimum cost and the use of commonsense and elbowgrease? Principally a sense of space. With nave aisles and west end free of pews there was ample seating for a congregation of 50. Chairs could be brought in for special occasions. Liturgically the chancel was a perfect setting for eucharistic celebration with a new altar almost in the centre, and in full view of the whole congregation. The Comper-style hanging canopy was brought from All Saints' Warwick which had to be demolished as unsafe. This gives the altar an enrichment and dignity, brought into relief against the white walls and clear glazing.

Country village parishes are naturally conservative and suspicious of change. What is clutter to the liturgically-minded is familiar and liked for old-times sake. One of the sorrier innovations of the Tractarian Revival was the introduction of choir-stalls into every church, something completely unknown before the 19th century – and so the delusion of every church being monastic with its stalls became part of Anglican folklore. A pity Thomas Hardy is not more widely read with the old English tradition of a singing gallery and organ at the west end featuring in his

in the aisles at the west end were also officially removed and the floor made good with cement scored to resemble paving stone. The font which had been in the south aisle was moved to a central position at the west end, and the font cover (begged from Uppingham where it lay unused) miraculously fitted exactly and was painted in mediaeval style in red and green. The choir stalls were removed, fortunately not over pits, but resting on the old stone floor of the chancel.

With no money available, we relied on voluntary skills and labour throughout. An employee of a local building firm extended the altar step at the east end and a stone table altar brought from Higham Ferrers' Bede House was erected free-standing. The chapel in the south aisle was to be used as a place of Reservation and the altar was constructed from stone coloured bricks (from a demolished lavatory block at Higham Ferrers' Parish Rooms). The altar slab was made specially by a Finedon firm who worked in reconstructed stone. A brother and sister paid for a Flemish style figure of Virgin and Child in natural pine. The rest of the church, (chancel already been treated by clergy and lay-labour) was whitewashed by a local firm for £75!