

# AN ACCOUNT OF SOME EIGHTEENTH CENTURY COMMUNION TABLES IN DORSET

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*'The dead still have their right in them. That which they laboured for, the praise of achievement, or the expression of religious feeling, or whatsoever else it may be, which they have intended to be permanent, we have no right to obliterate. What we have ourselves built we are at liberty to throw down, but what other men gave their strength and wealth and life to accomplish, their right over does not pass away with their death, still less is the right to the use of what they have left, vested in us only. It belongs to all their successors.'*

These emotive words of John Ruskin were quoted in a paper on the importance of preserving the belongings of parish and other churches, given at the Exeter Diocesan Conference of 1888 by J. Brooking Rowe, archaeologist, antiquarian and Lay Representative for the Deanery of Plympton.<sup>1</sup> Brooking Rowe's argument was well received and a resolution requesting that the Bishop instruct Archdeacons and Rural Deans to ensure a proper record of furniture, fittings and other articles be obtained and preserved was carried unanimously. This is another manifestation of the recognition of the importance of the heritage in the care of church authorities that had encouraged William Morris to found the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in the 1880s; both were in direct opposition to the enthusiastic 'restoration' of so many churches in the mid nineteenth century. Today we may add other concerns to those so movingly expressed by John Ruskin, such as the information such objects may add to a study of local communities, to the source and transfer of design, to the use of materials and changes in methods of construction, and perhaps to the study of particular businesses. The information contained in these furnishings and fittings regarding the history of worship should be of sufficient importance to the church itself for there to be no question regarding their care and continuing presence in the church; how can an institution understand itself without understanding how it arrived where it is now? Were the joined stools made locally or was there a reason they were made somewhere else? Were they made by a member of the church or a member of another congregation? Can this tell us anything about relations between different churches at that time? It is hoped that the five eighteenth century communion tables to be discussed in this article may illustrate some of the points mentioned here.

The moderation and restraint of the Anglican church in the eighteenth century, as practised in both religious observance and architecture, was perhaps an understandable reaction to the religious zeal and consequent turmoil of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The value placed upon such moderation is illustrated in the epitaph to the early eighteenth century rebuilder of the church at Avington, Hampshire, Margaret, Marchioness of Carnarvon, celebrated as *'religious without enthusiasm, generous*

*without profusion*'. Newly built churches were classical in design, often simply a rectangular nave with an apse at the east end but no chancel. They were well proportioned and well lit with large windows of plain glass. The interiors aimed at an elegant simplicity, the panelled altarpiece at the east end following the same style as wall decoration in country houses of the day. The furniture too followed secular fashions and this is particularly true of eighteenth century communion tables, which closely resemble serving or pier tables of their time. In many parishes communion was celebrated only occasionally, perhaps once a month; in the main services centred on readings from the prayer book and on sermons. The pulpit was the dominant feature in the church. Many churches were supplied with quite elaborate pulpits, often fitted with sounding boards. Some pulpits were three-decker, the lower being for the clerk, the middle for the readings, and the top for the sermon. Box pews provided an element of comfort and warmth, particularly if fitted with cushions and carpet as some were.

The first communion table to be considered (Figure 1) is an early eighteenth century table in the parish church of St Mary the Virgin at Charlton Marshall, a village some four miles south of the town of Blandford Forum. Dr Charles Sloper, Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford and Chancellor of the Diocese of Bristol, was presented to the living of the neighbouring village of Spettisbury 'with Charlton annexed' by John Henley in 1705. In Spettisbury he built a new rectory on land almost opposite the church. It was completed in 1716. No longer a rectory, it is now known as John's House. Alterations in the late eighteenth century and again in the mid nineteenth century mean that from the outside it now belies its 1716 date. In Charlton Marshall Dr Sloper rebuilt the church between 1712-15. John Hutchins, Dorset's eighteenth century county historian, described it as follows:

*'The chapel of Charlton-Marshall stands near the middle of the village and consists of a chancel, body and isle equal to it, all neatly ceiled: the former tiled and the two latter covered with lead. The tower is pretty high, and with a pinnacle at each corner, and contains four bells and a clock. The pews are of good wainscot. The chancel paved with slabs of white and black stone, in imitation of marble. The altarpiece is carved, japanned and gilt; on it the Lord's Prayer, creed and ten commandments, in gold capitals on a black ground. The pulpit is inlaid, and over the canopy an eagle, gilt. The whole was finished in a very elegant manner, at the expence of near 1000l. by Dr Sloper, late rector, 1715, and is one of the neatest chapels in these parts.'*<sup>2</sup>

Sympathetic restoration in 1895 allowed the church to retain its early eighteenth century peace, restraint and light, enlivened by the drama of altarpiece and pulpit. The chief loss has been the box pews; the seats and doors were re-made into the current pews, while the backs have been fitted to the walls as panelling, perhaps as an attempt to protect members of the congregation from the damp wall. Dr Sloper's communion table originally stood in front of the altarpiece, protected on three sides by communion rails; the banisters of the communion rails and the legs of the communion table are of very similar design. In its place today is a seventeenth century turned leg table and the communion rails have been altered to run in a continuous north-to-south line, dividing

the altarpiece and table from the rest of the chancel. A witness mark on the chancel paving beneath the present communion table suggests a plinth may once have been fitted there, perhaps for the early eighteenth century table to stand on. Although no longer in use as the communion table, Dr Sloper's table survives. It is currently kept in the ground floor of the tower and is used as a writing table.

Dr Sloper's table is in wainscot oak. The oblong, two-board top is glue-jointed lengthwise to depth and has a fillet over a torus moulding all round, over and combined with a scotia moulding all round. The top is glue-blocked to its dry assembled, morticed, tenoned and pegged table frame. The four arcaded frieze rails are profile-cut; the front and back frieze rails have two arches and each side frieze rail only one. The front and side frieze rails are trimmed with cockbead to the edges of their arcading. The central point of the two arches of the front frieze rail is glue blocked to thickness for a dowel hole, witness for a turned pendant, now missing. The plain top square of the leg, set slightly in advance of the frieze rail, is over a waisted turning with cap and astragal mouldings, an inverted, tapering, octagonal-faceted middle section, to a waisted turning with two reeds and base mouldings. The leg finishes as a turned dowel, which passes as a dry assembly through the cross frame stretcher and peg foot. The foot is turned as a cyma reversa above a short, waisted peg; the cross stretcher and peg foot assembly is secured by means of a glued wedge driven in to a saw kerf in the end of the dowel at the bottom of the peg foot. The peg section has been completely cut away on two of the peg feet but the other two have sufficient remaining to allow an idea of the original shape to be assessed. The four members of the glued, cross-halved, cross frame stretcher have end squares arranged to take the turned dowel of the leg, and are cranked in profile, serpentine moulded in section to their top, and sweep up to the central platform as volute scrolls carved in high relief, which are glue-jointed to thickness. The central platform has a scotia-moulded edge and is fitted with a turned and reeded finial with a dowel, which is glued in a central position.

The base moulding of the leg does not fit centrally on the end squares of the cross stretcher. It seems unlikely this misalignment was part of the original design and it appears more likely that the joiner miscalculated when setting out the cross frame stretcher. Interestingly, incised lines and pencil marks, possibly relating to the setting out of the cross frame stretcher, are to be found on the underside of the top. This is a rare example of a table that has survived with its surface in a dry, untouched state.

Unfortunately no documentation is known to survive for Dr Sloper's work at Charlton Marshall or Spetisbury. There are no churchwarden's accounts for Charlton Marshall for the years 1708 to 1714. As both John Hutchin's account and a memorial in the church record that the work was carried out at Dr Sloper's expense, it may be that there was never any documentation in the parish records. However, the building of the rectory and the work at the church have been attributed to the Blandford Forum joiner Thomas Bastard, died 1720<sup>3</sup>. The founder of a family firm that was to continue for three generations, Thomas is thought to have been trained as a joiner before becoming, in the words of his sons on the family monument they erected in the church of Sts Peter and Paul in Blandford Forum, '*eminent for his skill in Architecture*'. This progression was not unusual at a time when no formal training was recognised for the role of architect other than a grounding in the building trades. Although an attribution to the now best-known

joiner and master builder working in the locality at the time seems obvious, it is an attribution based on close similarities between work at the rectory and church, and documented work by the firm. For example the volute terminal to the staircase handrail at the rectory appears in Sherborne House, Dorset of the 1720s, of which Hutchins records *'The architect was Mr Bastard of Sherbourne'*. This Mr Bastard was Benjamin, one of Thomas's three younger sons who left Blandford to establish building concerns elsewhere. Benjamin had been apprenticed as a mason to William Townesend in Oxford, a builder who worked with Sir John Vanbrugh at Blenheim and also provided many of the buildings for the Oxford colleges in the first half of the eighteenth century. Benjamin was free of his apprenticeship just in time to begin work on Sherborne House for Henry Seymour Portman, owner of extensive estates in Dorset and Somerset. One of his two principal seats was Bryanston, a house that lay just outside the town of Blandford, on the opposite bank of the River Stour. It is possible the three elder brothers, all trained as joiners, may have supplied the joinery for Sherborne House, including the elegant staircase with marquetry tread ends in the staircase hall, the walls of which were decorated by Sir James Thornhill with scenes of the Caledonian Hunt. The same volute appears again on the staircase of their own house in Blandford Forum, rebuilt after the disastrous fire in the town in 1731. Many examples of this terminal occur throughout the area, some documented and some not. An undocumented example of similar date to that in the rectory, and with very similar shouldered inverted balusters, survives at Wadham House, Portesham, Dorset, where it is thought to date c1710<sup>5</sup>.

Frequent payments to the family firm are recorded in the surviving churchwarden's accounts for Charlton Marshall; for example 10s6d for supplying brushes for cleaning the church in 1716, £1.5s for work to the bells in 1719, and £21.14s for work 'about the tower' in 1728. In 1729 they were paid £3 for several jobs that included *'puton up of the canopy of the pulpit'*<sup>6</sup>. The lack of payment for either the pulpit or sounding board (canopy) in the churchwarden's accounts suggests both items may have been provided by Dr Sloper. Both the pulpit and sounding board are in oak, with parquetry designs in oak veneer.

The payments post 1721 were to the three eldest sons of Thomas Bastard, Thomas, John and William who, following their father's death in 1720, signed a deed of incorporation establishing the firm of Bastard & Co. They worked together for the following 10 years until Thomas's untimely death in June 1731. John and William continued the family firm, later taking Thomas's eldest son, also Thomas ('the younger'), into the business, together with another nephew, yet another Thomas ('the elder'). These two nephews inherited the business. The Bastard family's continued involvement with this church is commemorated in two of the marble monuments that adorn its walls. Thomas 'the younger' inherited land at Charlton Marshall from his mother, Mary Horlock and retired here for the summers sometime in the 1770s when the family firm closed. His descendants added the Horlock name to their own and lived in the parish throughout the nineteenth century as members of the Dorset gentry.

The lack of documentation for Dr Sloper's work at the church is much to be regretted as the work is very fine and it would be very satisfactory to be able to definitively ascribe it to Thomas Bastard. The backplate on the wall between the pulpit and sounding board includes a panel with three vigorously carved angels heads, while the altarpiece has



carved and gilt winged angels heads and is surmounted by carved and gilt wood ewers. The designs are reminiscent of contemporary work in London churches and Oxford college chapels.

A similar table to that at Charlton Marshall is known to have been in the parish church of St Peter's, Shaftesbury at least until the 1970s. Shaftesbury is a market town approximately 11 miles north of Blandford Forum, very close to the border with the neighbouring county of Wiltshire. In the eighteenth century it was on the 'great road' from London to Cornwall. The Royal Commission for Historic Monuments records the table as '*of oak, with tapering octagonal legs with claw feet, arcuated rails, scrolled diagonal stretchers with turned finial at intersection and beaded edge to top board, circa 1700*'<sup>7</sup>. Unfortunately no documentary evidence is known for the table at this time; the earliest surviving churchwarden's accounts commence in 1722<sup>8</sup>. The existence of two pieces of dated silver amongst the plate belonging to the parish may provide evidence of work having been undertaken at an ideal date for the table. These are a silver paten inscribed 1714<sup>9</sup> and a silver stand-paten inscribed 'ex dono Thomae Hackney 1714'. At Charlton Marshall Dr Sloper's wife Catherine marked the restoration of the church with the gift of a silver flagon, cup and cover in 1712. There is now little evidence of the eighteenth century arrangements of St Peter's church; a panelled pulpit survives but this has been altered and removed from its original position, while the wooden altarpiece of four raised and moulded panels, painted with the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer and the Creed now at the east end of the church came from the neighbouring church of Holy Trinity when the chancel there was enlarged in 1909. Other items in the church are also known to have come from Holy Trinity; the two parishes have recently been united and the church of Holy Trinity converted to office use. As the churchwarden's accounts for Holy Trinity do not survive prior to 1790<sup>10</sup>, it is equally difficult to find evidence for the eighteenth century interior of that church. Comparison of this communion table with that at Charlton Marshall might have contributed some information regarding the eighteenth century history of the church and, in any event, would have been of great interest to furniture historians. Unfortunately the table no longer survives in the church. A major restoration of the fabric of the church was undertaken in the 1970s and the table may have left the church at this time.

A communion table for which documentation does exist (Figure 4) is almost certainly the table still in use in the parish church of Sts Peter and Paul in the market town of Blandford Forum. Blandford lies at a crossing point of the River Stour, midway between Dorchester and Salisbury, on the coaching route from London to Weymouth and Portland. In the mid eighteenth century John Hutchins records about 400 houses in the town and said there are '*a great number of gentlemen's seats in the neighbourhood .... Its chief support is the resort of travellers and the neighbouring gentry, its market and fairs, and the races.*'<sup>11</sup> This was the town in which Thomas Bastard had established his joinery business sometime during the last quarter of the seventeenth century. He had married Bridget, daughter of a local gentleman, Thomas Creech, and had been appointed to the Corporation. This group of some ten to twelve capital burgesses were responsible for the administration of the town. The position of capital burgess was held for life, short of conviction of a capital offence. The leader of the Corporation was the Bailiff, elected

annually by the capital burgesses from amongst their number. Thomas Bastard was elected Bailiff for the first time in 1713; in their turn his sons John and William became burgesses and served as Bailiff and also as Chamberlain. The Chamberlain acted as treasurer; John served as chamberlain from 1732 through to 1736, which were very important years in the history of the town. Involvement in the organisation responsible for public building work in the town must have been very useful for a firm of joiners, builders and architects.

Blandford was also the seat of the Archdeacon of Dorset; the majority of parishes within the county came under his administration. Transferred to the diocese of Bristol at its foundation in 1542, the Archdeaconry remained in the Bristol diocese until 1836 when it returned to the diocese of Salisbury. The fact that the Archdeacon's court was held in Blandford had the practical effect that rectors and churchwardens from all over this administrative area regularly visited the town to make their presentments on the state of their parish, which included a report on the fabric of the church. It has been suggested that attending the court provided an opportunity for rectors or churchwardens to purchase items required for the church, such as bell ropes, which may not have been easily available in a smaller town or village. It also may have been an opportunity to enquire where other churchwardens had acquired their new screen or pulpit or monument<sup>12</sup>. Whatever the truth of this is, all three of Thomas's sons who stayed in Blandford considered it worthwhile to serve as churchwardens, as did his grandsons in their turn. In addition, they chose to establish their business in premises not only in the very centre of the town but as near to the church as possible. Immediately opposite the church was their 'shop next the strete' with living accommodation above, a parlour where they were able to entertain clients, and their counting house. Beyond this were joinery workshops, containing 10 joiner's benches and 8 joiner's chests, glazing, stone and painting workshops, a warehouse, covered storage, a saw pit and a forge. On the other side of the church lay the Parsonage Barn and Yard, which they rented for storage. Here they kept much of their extensive stock of timber, as well as their mourning coach and hearse for funerals. Whether the presence of the Archdeaconry court provided business opportunities or no, it is certain that they regularly carried out work for Dorset churches as, for example, a Table of Affinity for Sturminster Newton parish church in 1728 and pulpit, canopy and pews for Hampreston church in 1731<sup>13</sup>.

In June 1731 the town of Blandford was devastated by a very serious fire; two-thirds of the town was destroyed, including the parish church, Town Hall and the main shops and inns surrounding the Market Place. Bastard and Company's losses were considerable and included property, stock and personal belongings. In a '*list of Sufferers drawn up after the Fire*' their losses are given as £3,709.10s.4d, the largest individual sum recorded by more than £700<sup>14</sup>. In addition John and William were to lose their brother and partner, Thomas, who died just over a month later, possibly as a result of stress or injury during the fire, or perhaps as a victim of smallpox which was present in the town at the time. However, the necessity to rebuild the town, and the pressure to do so before it lost its commercial advantage over other local market towns, meant the firm's skills were much in demand. Many of the principal buildings in the town were designed and built by the brothers. These included the parish church of Sts Peter and Paul, the Town

Hall, their own premises and one of the foremost inns in the town, The Greyhound, which they owned.

Trustees were appointed to collect contributions for rebuilding the church and it is assumed that John and William would have entered into a contract with the Trustees to provide the building as a whole, and that the brothers would have dealt with appropriate tradesmen regarding the masonry, plumbing and glazing. Unfortunately no accounts survive for the rebuilding of the church. A temporary boarded structure known as the Tabernacle was built soon after the fire, and church services were held here until the new church opened on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1739. The brothers' original design had been for a spire on top of the tower at the west end of the church; lack of funds meant this was put on hold and when work began again it was decided, much to the disappointment of John and William, to save money by finishing the tower with a wooden cupola rather than the spire. In his 1948 article on the family firm<sup>15</sup>, the architectural historian Howard Colvin regretted this decision, commenting that the spire, as shown in a surviving drawing, *'would have provided a central architectural feature for the rebuilt town in a way which the existing rather ineffectual cupola does not'*. However he did find *'the church itself proof of the Bastard's competence to design'* and that there was much to admire in this *'big Hanoverian church'*.

With regard to the woodwork in the church, Colvin made the not-unreasonable assumption that John and William *'as master-joiners no doubt undertook the pews, pulpit, Bailiff's seat and other woodwork'*. While some of this is undoubtedly their work<sup>16</sup>, the survival amongst the churchwarden's accounts of an invoice from another Blandford joiner, proves that other firms were involved in work at the church. This invoice is from the firm of Ambrose Biles and Co. and covers the twelve months from November 1738, when the Tabernacle was still in use, to November 1739, when the transfer to the new church had been completed<sup>17</sup>. The invoice begins with work at the Tabernacle but on March 26<sup>th</sup> Ambrose Biles is providing mops and brooms for the new church, due to open on April 8<sup>th</sup>. Deadlines in the eighteenth century can have been no different than they are today; on April 7<sup>th</sup> he and his men were in called in to the church to clean, paint and re-hang the panel of the Ten Commandments, supply a stool for the minister's desk, and alter the pulpit cloth and fasten it with brass nails. At the end of April they supplied a Table of Affinity for £4 and then, on August 28<sup>th</sup>, provided a *'Good Communion Table Carvd after the Best Manner in Wainscot'* for £4.15s. This is almost certainly one of the two tables still in use in the church today. It was recorded, and photographed, by the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments<sup>18</sup>, at which time it is shown standing on a plinth. The other communion table now in the church is late seventeenth century with twist turned legs; it may have survived the fire and be the other communion table referred to in Ambrose Biles' invoice; on April 20<sup>th</sup> he charged 4s.6d for mending and painting the Old Communion Table. This entry, together with the one concerning the Ten Commandments, suggest some items had been rescued from the flames. This is quite possible as the church was one of the last buildings to catch fire and had been used during the day as a place of refuge for people's belongings. The fire reappeared in the timbers of the church roof in the early hours of the following morning and soon had such a hold that it proved impossible to save the church<sup>19</sup>.

The carved communion table in wainscot oak has an oblong, two board top, glue jointed lengthwise to depth; the edge is moulded with a three quarter run of a fillet and ovolo carved with acanthus leaves, over and combined with a three quarter run of a bold ovolo carved with egg and leaf, the two front mitred corners overlain with carved leaves. The top is glue blocked to its dry assembled, morticed, tenoned and pegged table frame; two transverse, oblong section, support rails beneath the top are jointed into the front and back frieze rails. The back frieze rail is plain, as are the two top squares of the back cabriole legs. The two side and the front frieze rails are carved in low relief with alternate motifs of 5 stemmed flower heads and pendant acanthus leaves, both set within leafy scrolls, flanked by pairs of pendant garrya husks to the two top squares of the front cabriole legs, all on a punched, seeded ground within a narrow flat framing. Jointed to the front frieze rail is a central, profile-cut waved apron carved with leafy scrolls flanking a pendant scallop shell. Although a common decorative motif of the period, the use of the scallop shell here may have religious significance; the symbol of medieval pilgrims who had journeyed to the shrine of St James at Compostella, the scallop shell came to be adopted as protection against the devil. If this was the intention here, it is the only religious image on an otherwise secular article, although it may be argued that the stemmed flower heads represent the short span of human life. A half round, cross grain moulding to the bottom edge of the front and side frieze rails links the central apron and the ears and knees of the four cabriole legs. The knees of the four, square section, cabriole legs are carved with an acanthus leaf, as are the ears, which are glue-jointed to the knee. Below a beaded anklet moulding, the cyma reversa foot is carved with an acanthus leaf on a punched, seeded ground within a narrow flat frame, over and combined with a plain secondary cyma reversa moulding.

The front cabriole legs are cut from pieces of timber large enough to contain their design, while the back legs, presumably for reasons of economy as materials were more costly than time, have been cut from timber that required to be glue jointed up to width to contain their design. Witness to this jointing up are the now visible flat jointing surfaces on the backs of these legs; the table has been affected by damp and the damp has caused the glue joint here to fail; the backs of the knees of both legs are now missing. Ambrose Biles has restricted the use of this technique to the back legs, possibly because the jointing up to width could cause an unsightly misalignment with the grain of the leg itself.

The carver has been unable to centre the carved motifs on the side frieze rails; in order to do this the table would have to have been deeper. However this does not detract from the excellent carving and the rich design which have made this an outstanding communion table. One wonders if the design was Ambrose Biles' alone or if John and William Bastard made some suggestions concerning the new communion table for their church.

One of the interesting aspects to Ambrose Biles' work in the parish church is that he was not a member of the congregation but is known to have been a non-conformist who worshipped with other members of his family in the dissenting chapel in Salisbury Street, Blandford<sup>20</sup>. This had been founded after the Restoration of Charles II when the then rector of Blandford, William Alleine, being unwilling to comply with the Act of

Uniformity, resigned the living and, supported by a considerable following, established the first congregation of protestant dissenters in Blandford. The Toleration Act of 1689 allowed meetings to be held in private houses; in 1692 the meetings were held in Langhorne's barn, between Salisbury Street and White Cliff Mill Street and the first chapel was built here in 1722. In 1721 Ambrose acquired a plot of land near where the chapel would be in Salisbury Street. This had previously been arable land and three gardens and Ambrose built a house, workshops and other outbuildings on the site. Following the Fire in 1731, John and William Bastard provided a valuation of property lost in the town for the Commissioners dealing with the distribution of money collected after the Fire<sup>21</sup>. John Bastard records that *'those that received the most had 5s6d in the pound.'* Properties were measured and valued at differing rates according to their construction. The entries for Ambrose Biles give an overview of the buildings he had erected during the previous ten years.

*Amboris Byles*

*A workshop two stories thatched*

*8sqr 1/2 at 9l* £76.10s

*another workshop and stable 4sqr 1/2*

*at 5l* £22.10s

*a wood house thachd sids borded 5sqr at 4l* £20.0s

*a tild shed 2sqr 1/4 at 2l* £4.5s

*a dwelling house ground floor chambers and  
garrets tiled walls and chimney standing*

*6sqr at 18l* £108

These entries suggest that the fire had totally destroyed the thatched and wooden buildings on the site but that the walls and chimney of the tiled and, almost certainly, brick house had survived. A later entry in the list for another house owned by Ambrose Biles is for a dwelling house with ground floor chambers and garrets but this time it is recorded as flemish and tiled, so this property was definitely brick. Although smaller than the previous house at 5 1/2 squares, John has valued this at £20 a square, giving a total valuation of £110. The total sum of Ambrose Biles' losses in the Fire was recorded as £867.1s.8d.<sup>22</sup>

Ambrose Biles must have begun rebuilding very quickly after the Fire. Perhaps aided by the standing walls and chimney of his house, by 1732 he was insuring with the Sun Fire Insurance Company for £700: £100 was for the house in Salisbury Street with a further £50 to cover the household goods while another £100 was for workshops and chambers, with £450 for the stock in his warehouse<sup>23</sup>.

In 1734 Ambrose subdivided the east end of the plot, fronting White Cliff Mill Street, giving this to his two sons, Benjamin and Ambrose, who both worked in the family business. A cottage for each son was built on this site<sup>24</sup>. Nothing is currently known regarding Ambrose's training as a joiner. He may have belonged to a family that had been settled in Blandford for quite a time as the surname appears in a list of 1641 of males over 18 who were required to sign an undertaking to support the rights of Parliament<sup>25</sup>.

Both Benjamin and the younger Ambrose may have been trained by their father. How long the family joinery business continued is still unknown. Ambrose Senior was buried in the churchyard of Sts Peter and Paul on the 21st July 1758<sup>26</sup>. (The dissenters did not have their own cemetery until 1803 when land behind the chapel was given for this purpose). His son Benjamin pre-deceased him. Although Benjamin's will was not proved until January 1752, it was written in 1742. There is no mention of Benjamin's wife, which suggests he was by then widowed. Benjamin's land, money and stock-in-trade were left equally between his son Benjamin and his daughter Ann, while the two Ambroses, Benjamin's father and brother, were appointed trustees until Benjamin junior came of age. Whether Benjamin junior joined the family business is uncertain; his marriage to the daughter of another member of the Blandford building trades, William Percy, a glazier, suggests he may have done so. However Benjamin only survived his grandfather by six years, being buried at Sts Peter and Paul on September 19th 1764. His uncle Ambrose was still alive; his burial at Sts Peter and Paul is recorded on September 3rd 1773, by which time he is referred to as Ambrose Senior. Whether the Ambrose Biles buried at Sts Peter and Paul five years later on December 7th 1778 was his son is as yet unknown.

Being a dissenter was not something to be undertaken lightly as there would most likely be an economic effect in not belonging to the established church. As a dissenter Ambrose Biles could not become a capital burgess and take part in the administration of the town; it was not until the 1834 Municipal Corporations Act that a dissenter stood for election to the then Blandford Borough Council. For example, an entry in the Corporation Memorandum Book on 20th April 1739 records that plans and estimates were received by the Corporation from Mr Bastard and Mr Biles for rebuilding the old almshouse '*and it appearing to them that Mr Bastard was the most reasonable they agreed that the said Mr Bastard should rebuild the same accordingly*'<sup>27</sup>. John Bastard was Bailiff at this time, and William a member of the Corporation. Following the fire there are constant payments to the Bastard firm from the Corporation, for both major undertakings, such as the Town Hall, and minor jobs, such as re-desking of the school.

However, Ambrose Biles was certainly not averse to working for the established church and his name appears in other churchwarden's accounts, for example when the Bastard firm were supplying the Table of Affinity to Sturminster Newton in 1728, the Biles family were also working in the church<sup>28</sup>. Another invoice from Mr Biles for work at Blandford parish church survives from 1749–50 when the firm was helping the clockmaker John Spinney fit a turret clock in the tower<sup>29</sup>. Although little work by the firm is currently recognised, the communion table in Blandford suggests that its design, construction and carving will be of a high standard.

A communion table (Figure 8) of similar design, but probably slightly later date, survives in the parish church of St Andrew in the large village of Okeford Fitzpaine, some five miles north west of Blandford Forum. Not currently in use as the communion table, it stands in the south aisle.

The carved oak communion table has an oblong, three board top, glue jointed lengthwise to depth, moulded with a fillet and ovolo all round, over and combined with a scotia moulding all round. The top is glue-blocked to its glued, morticed and tenoned

table frame. The four frieze rails are profile cut to their lower edge with arching at the knees of the cabriole legs; the back and side rails are plain and the front rail is carved. Following the arched outline of the front frieze rail is a narrow flat frame which contains the complex carved details of a moulded circular frame at either end enclosing acanthus leaves with a beaded centre on a punched, seeded ground, with figure-of-eight leafy scrolls to garrya husks on a lightly-incised, flower head centred, diaper ground, flanking the central narrow flat oval frame enclosing an acanthus leaf with hatched centre on a ring-punched ground. The four cabriole legs, square in section, have plain top squares; the two rear legs are plain while the knees of the front legs are carved with an oval cabuchon in a frilled frame, set on an acanthus leaf scrolling over onto the ears. All four feet have a plain torus bead anklet moulding over a plain moulded cyma reversa foot; the foot appears to have been considerably reduced in height and may originally have terminated with a secondary plain cyma reversa moulding as does the foot of Ambrose Biles' table in Blandford church. The setting out of such a large amount of mid eighteenth century decorative detail seems to have occasioned the carver some difficulty; he might have avoided the somewhat muddled appearance at the junction of the front frieze rail and top square of the leg had he continued the narrow flat framing on the arched lower edge of the front frieze rail over the ear of the cabriole leg. This may suggest the carver of the table lacked experience in executing a design of this complexity. The reduction in height of the feet has made it difficult to evaluate the original balance of this table. The table now has a very good colour and patinated surface.

This is another instance when no documentation for the table is known. The churchwarden's accounts exist from 1764<sup>30</sup>, probably too late to record the arrival of the table, and no mention of it has been traced. However, as at Charlton Marshall, some eighteenth century work in the church here may well have been at the expense of the incumbent. The Reverend Duke Butler was Rector here from 1750 until his death in 1779, during which time he carried out two major schemes of work in the church. In 1756 the three aisles of the church were ceiled and Reverend Butler provided a new pulpit<sup>31</sup>. As mention is also made of a reading desk and clerk's seat, it would seem this was a three-decker pulpit. The fifteenth century carved stone pulpit was retained but converted for use as a font, a situation that was not to last long in the overall scheme of things as, during the major rebuilding of the church in 1866, stone figures were placed in the niches of the pulpit and it was returned to its original use. Of the eighteenth century pulpit there is now no trace. In 1772 Reverend Butler rebuilt the chancel on a smaller scale, possibly, as the church guide book suggests, '*in order to adapt the building to the liturgical needs of the time with the Altar and people brought closer together as the Prayer Book requires*'. The 1756 date seems to be a possible date for the table; although the overall design would appear rather late for this date, the carved detail on the frieze could well be of the 1750s.

The 1756 work involved one of the celebrity trees of Dorset, the Damory Oak. This tree had stood near Damory Court, a house on the eastern edge of Blandford Forum. John Hutchins considered the tree of sufficient interest to include an illustration and plan of it, both provided by John Bastard, in his history, together with the following

description.

*'A little N. of this house was a remarkable oak, called Damory oak. In 1747 it measured seventy-five feet high, the branches extended seventy-two feet but many were torn off in the storm of 1703; the trunk was twelve feet in diameter at seventeen feet above ground; the circumference on the surface of the ground was sixty-eight feet, its diameter on the surface of the ground twenty-three feet: the cavity at bottom was fifteen feet wide and seventeen feet high, and would hold near twenty men. In the civil war, and till after the Restoration, an old man sold ale in it. It was sold standing for 14l. and rooted up 1755, the wood being only fit for firing'.<sup>32</sup>*

Interestingly, despite his description of the quality of the timber once it had been felled, both the second and third edition of Hutchin's work state that the pulpit provided by Reverend Butler in 1756 was made out of the Damory Oak<sup>33</sup>. Is it possible that the table also is made from the Damory oak?

A third communion table of similar design and presumably similar date to the table in Blandford Forum church, survived in the parish church of St Andrew's at East Lulworth until at least 1999, when it was noted in the vestry. Sadly it is no longer in the church. The dark patination of the surface of the table, together with having to work from a photograph, have made it difficult to be certain of the timbers of which the table is constructed. The frieze rails of the table appear to be of oak; horizontal and vertical incised lines on the frieze rails are witness to the loss of a decorative scheme here. It was cabinet making practice for carcase members having applied surface decoration to be made of a secondary timber rather than the show wood of the article. The show wood of the table may have been mahogany or possibly black walnut, both premier cabinet woods of the second quarter of the eighteenth century.

The three board oblong top, jointed lengthwise to depth, has a square edge and considerable overhang, two features that did not appear on the tables at Blandford or Okeford Fitzpaine, and it may be that this is not the original top. However, had the decorative scheme now missing from the frieze included a bold cavetto moulding, a deep overhang of the top would have been required to cover its bold projection. Unfortunately the position of the incised lines on the frieze rails makes the presence of a cavetto moulding here unlikely. The top was probably glue blocked to its glued, morticed and tenoned table frame. The lightly incised lines on the straight frieze rails are witness to the lost scheme of decoration: a horizontal line to the face side at the top of the front and side frieze rails provides a border to which a moulding may have been glued all round; vertical incised lines below this may relate to jointing up of pieces of vertical grain veneer, glued as decoration to the middle portion of the frieze rail; the ears and knees of the cabriole legs finish on a line outlining a border to the lower edge of the face of the front and side frieze rails, to which a half round, cross grain moulding was glued, linking the ears and knees of the four cabriole legs. The section of this moulding would be taken from the profile of the ears and knees of the cabriole leg. The four cabriole legs are square in section. The forward arris of the leg is moulded with a bead; the leg terminates with a



plain torus bead anklet moulding, over a cyma reversa moulded foot and fillet.

The loss of the decorative scheme to the frieze, together with the question concerning the possible replacement of the top, make it difficult accurately to assess the table's original appearance, while the loss of decorative detail has also made dating the table more problematic. Nevertheless, the well-drawn cabriole legs and the cyma reversa feet make it obvious that this table is by a competent designer; its construction and the possible use of veneer points to it being the work of a trained cabinet maker. The dark patination on the cabriole legs suggests there had been little interference with the surface of the table.

The registers of baptisms, marriages and burials at St Andrews are lodged at the Dorset History Centre but no churchwarden's accounts are held here and no documentation for the table is currently known. However, St Andrews is, interestingly, an Anglican church with Roman Catholic patrons, the Welds of Lulworth Castle; their family vault was here and family baptisms, marriages and burials took place here, in much the same way as the dissenters in Blandford were obliged to use the parish church for burials and recording marriages and baptisms. John Hutchins, a rector in the Anglican church as well as a local historian, includes a testimonial to his friend, Edward Weld, which throws much light on relationships between recusant Catholic families and others. He describes Edward as

*an agreeable person, sweet, modest and humane temper, easy affable and obliging behaviour. He lived in great credit and hospitality and maintained a good correspondence and harmony with the neighbouring gentry and clergy; nor did the difference in opinion create reserve or distance. His charity and generosity was not confined to those of his own persuasion, but universal; and his character in every social relation of life truly amiable.*<sup>34</sup>

The Weld archive is extensive and it is possible a record regarding the provision of this communion table may one day be found. The church now stands in the park of the castle, laid out by Edward Weld in the second half of the eighteenth century in place of extensive formal gardens. This involved pulling down some of the village buildings and rebuilding them to the east of the park. In the 1780s Thomas Weld built a new Roman Catholic chapel in the park and transferred the bodies in the family vault at St Andrew's to the vault below the new chapel. At the same time he modernised St Andrew's, changing it from an aisled gothic church to 'one open space with an apsidal sacrarium'<sup>35</sup> by pulling down the south aisle and old chancel and building a new apse in its place, and a west gallery. He retained the fifteenth century west tower, which has also survived the complete rebuilding of the body of the church in the 1860s. The Victorian church was designed by the Dorchester architect John Hicks. His 1860 report, produced prior to 'restoration', gives the most complete surviving description of the interior of the eighteenth century church, most of which does not seem to have pleased Mr Hicks: he refers to 'the present mean proportions' of the chancel and says of the fittings 'nearly half of the church is seated with high unsightly pews and the open benches are of inconsistent form and very much out of repair'<sup>36</sup>. Whatever Mr Hicks thought of the eighteenth century work, the communion table was testament to the

quality of at least one of the eighteenth century articles in the church and its loss is much to be regretted.

A date for the table would add considerably to our knowledge of the use of this design in Dorset in the eighteenth century. The late 1780s would appear much too late stylistically, but had this become accepted as a suitable design for a communion table and therefore used much later than we would expect? Does the table in Okeford Fitzpaine belong to Reverend Butler's work in 1772, rather than to that of 1756? Thomas Weld's personal accounts include several unspecified payments to Robert Gillow at the time the new chapel was being finished and the work at St Andrew's carried out; £36.15s and £26.5s.6d in 1788, £14.19s.1d in 1789, and £12.9s in 1790<sup>37</sup>. (Some of these payments may relate to two apprenticeships Thomas sponsored with Gillows in Lancaster in the 1780s and 90s<sup>38</sup>). If the table dates earlier in the eighteenth century, as its design suggests, it may well be the work of Bastard and Company: John Bastard was Edward Weld's principal architect, builder, interior designer and furniture maker from 1726, the year after Edward came of age, until Edward's death in 1761. The firm, by then being run by the two Thomas cousins, continued to work at Lulworth Castle until the business closed in the 1770s.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, as there is no longer any opportunity to inspect the table, the physical evidence has also now been lost. Moreover, the church itself has lost the final evidence of its eighteenth century history.

So, to sum up: one table, with full documentation regarding maker and date, survives in the church in Blandford Forum. Although still fulfilling its intended function, it no longer stands in front of the Corinthian columned altarpiece in the apse, but now stands on a stage at the east end of the nave. This might not have been considered necessary but for the provision of a chancel between the nave and apse in 1895, made possible by ingeniously detaching the apse from the east wall and, with the use of rollers, moving it further east. The chancel effectively increased the distance between congregation and altarpiece, a move directly opposite to the eighteenth century alterations at Okeford Fitzpaine and East Lulworth, when Reverend Butler and Thomas Weld reduced the distance between congregation and altarpiece. With this exception, the original interior, with its sea of box pews including the elaborate Corporation pew and carved Bailiff's armchair of 1748, survives to a considerable degree. A second table survives in its original interior, in Charlton Marshall. The surviving interior in this instance provides the documentation and date, although the maker is only an attribution. A third table, that at Okeford Fitzpaine, survives, in a now much-altered church, but as a valued item of the church's eighteenth century history. No documentation for this table is known. There is currently little that can be said about the two lost tables. The Shaftesbury table was recorded by the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments; a corner of the table appears in the background of a photograph of a carved seventeenth poor box.<sup>40</sup> The East Lulworth table was not recorded by the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments and the photograph published here was taken by the authors when attending a wedding at the church, when there was no opportunity to make any detailed record of the table. No documentation for either of these two tables is currently known.

The early years of the nineteenth century saw an increase in secularism and a move to disestablish the Anglican Church. During the 1830s and 40s the Tractarian movement

developed in response to this; the interest in the relationship between Anglicanism and the traditions of the old Catholic church led to a new enthusiasm for the altar and chancel, divine liturgy, beautiful vestments and Gothic architecture. This had the practical effect of threatening the survival of eighteenth century church interiors. The altarpieces with Tables of the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer blocked the East window either wholly or partially and were removed in many instances, while the domestic scale of the communion table was often considered '*hardly befitting of the House of God*'.<sup>41</sup> The founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in the 1880s and the increasing awareness of the importance of the history of items held in churches, as illustrated in the lecture by J. Brooking Rowe, encouraged an atmosphere in which even eighteenth century furnishings were respected. However, we must never be complacent regarding the survival of heritage in churches; after all, the two lost communion tables discussed here have both disappeared within the last 35 years. Thomas Hardy, the Dorset novelist who, as a young man, trained with the Dorchester architect John Hicks, was much involved in the restoration and rebuilding of Dorset churches in the 1860s, including the rebuilding of St Andrew's at East Lulworth. Overcome with guilt regarding this early work, in 1881 he joined the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and remained an active supporter until his death in 1928, often being asked by the Society to investigate proposed work to a local church or other building with which they had become involved. In his lecture '*Memories of Church Restoration*' which he wrote in 1906 for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and which was read on his behalf by the architect Colonel Eustace Balfour, Thomas Hardy pointed out the fundamental problem:

*In respect of an ancient church, the difficulty we encounter on the threshold, and one which besets us at every turn, is the fact that the building is beheld in two contradictory lights, and required for two incompatible purposes. To the incumbent the church is a workshop, to the antiquary it is a relic. To the parish it is a utility, to the outsider a luxury. How unite these incompatibles? A utilitarian machine has naturally to be kept going, so that it may continue to discharge its original functions; an antiquarian specimen has to be preserved without making good even its worse deficiencies. The quaintly carved seat that a touch will damage has to be sat in, the frameless doors with the queer old locks and hinges have to keep out draughts, the bells whose shaking endangers the graceful steeple have to be rung.<sup>42</sup>*

His conclusion was that the only way to treat the problem was by compromise, recognising that his suggestion of building a new church for use and placing the old in a '*crystal palace*' was prohibitive for '*even a parish composed of opulent members of this Society*'. Enthusiasm, support and education is a way forward, plus the recognition that valued items of nineteenth, eighteenth, and seventeenth century work were, in their time, replacing equally valued work of earlier centuries, and applying this recognition to the twenty first century, difficult though this may be for some of us. However, if there has to be change, please somehow ensure that that which is being replaced is retained

somewhere, together with its history. Surely the best place for their retention is the place for which they were originally intended, where the dead still have their right in them.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

DHC	Dorset History Centre, previously Dorset Record Office
RCHM	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments

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8. DHC PE/SY/CW1/1; MIC/R/1089.
9. RCHM, *County of Dorset. Vol. 1V, North* (1972), p.63
10. DHC PE/SY/CW2/1/1; MIC/R/1089
11. Hutchins, 1st edition (1774), vol 1, p75.
12. I am grateful to Dr. David Reeve for this suggestion.
13. Sturminster Newton DHC PE/SN/CW1/1.  
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14. This list is in the Shipp Collection at the Dorset County Museum. It was discovered in a folio volume of miscellaneous manuscripts from a private library in Devon and was published in *Blandford Forum in the county of Dorset. This is that Blandford which was devastated by Fire June 4th 1731*. (1931).
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22. From list, see note 14.

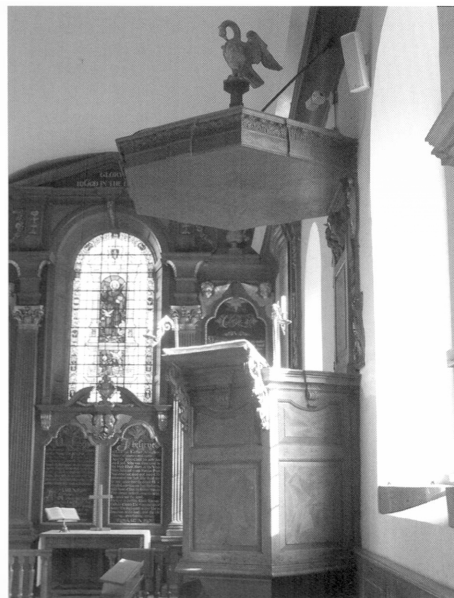
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1. Dr Sloper's communion table, St Mary the Virgin, Charlton Marshall, Dorset, circa 1712.  
Approximate overall sizes: height 31" (79cm), width 37" (94cm), depth 24" (61cm)



2. Communion rails, St Mary the Virgin, Charlton Marshall, Dorset. circa 1712



3. Pulpit, St Mary the Virgin, Charlton Marshall, Dorset, circa 1712



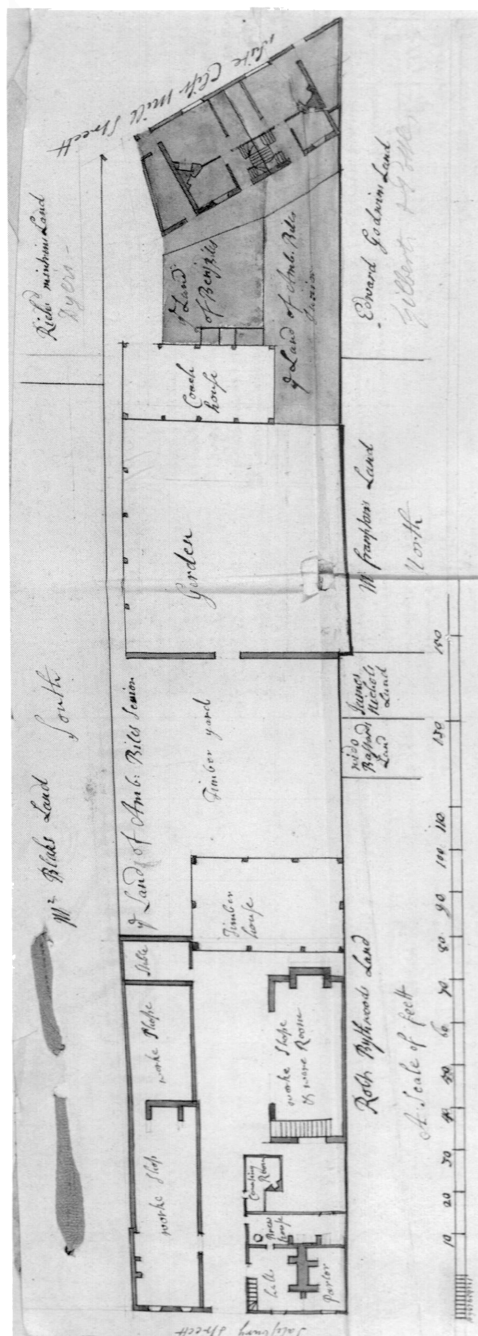
4. Communion table made by Ambrose Biles, Sts. Peter and Paul, Blandford Forum, Dorset. 1739. Approximate overall sizes: height 33"(84cm), width 54"(137cm), depth 26.5"(67cm)



5. Glue jointing surfaces on the back legs of the communion table made by Ambrose Biles, Sts. Peter and Paul, Blandford Forum, Dorset, 1739



6. Side frieze rail, communion table made by Ambrose Biles, Sts. Peter and Paul, Blandford Forum, Dorset, 1739

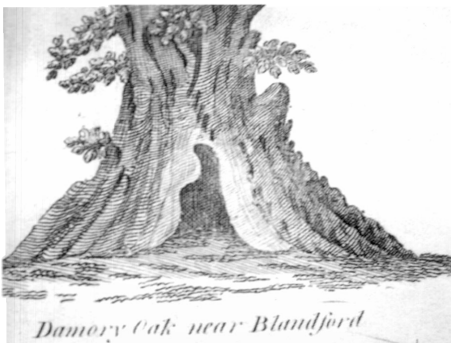


7. Ground plan of the plot owned by Ambrose Biles on Salisbury St, Blandford Forum, Dorset, attached to assignment of mortgage dated 1741, DHC/NP34/TS1/133

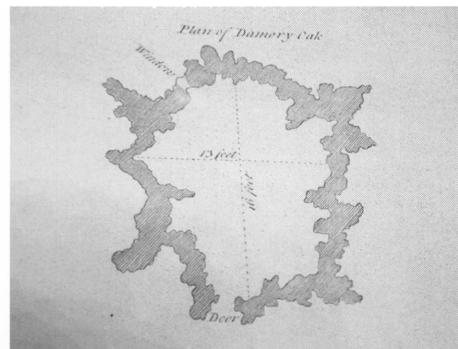




8. Communion table, St. Andrew's, Okeford Fitzpaine, Dorset.  
Approximate overall sizes: height 31.5" (79cm), width 48" (122cm), depth 32" (81.5cm)



9. View of the Damory Oak, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Drawn by John Bastard for John Hutchin's *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (1774)



10. Cross section of the Damory Oak, Blandford Forum, Dorset. Measured and drawn by John Bastard for John Hutchin's *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (1774)



11. Communion table in the vestry at St. Andrew's, East Lulworth, Dorset, photographed in May 1999