

# SEVENTEENTH AND EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CHURCH FURNITURE IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

David Wilson

For the purposes of this paper<sup>1</sup> the county of Gloucestershire can be divided into two regions: the Cotswolds to the east, and to the west the Vales of Gloucester and Berkeley, together with the area west of the Severn including the Forest of Dean. In the Cotswold region there are thirty-one churches that have pulpits that can be dated to the seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Six of these are of particular interest occurring as they do within a small area: St Michael's, Buckland (Figure 1), where the pulpit was 'made new' by James Thynne, who died in 1709;<sup>2</sup> St George's, Didbrook (Figure 2); St Faith's, Farmcote (Figure 3); and at Hailes (no dedication) (Figure 4). Each of these churches has a plain panelled pulpit with a sounding-board, although the Buckland sounding-board was removed in 1885.<sup>3</sup> Adjacent to these churches are those of St Michael, Stanton, and St Peter, Stanway, both with pulpits of large undecorated panels, the former having a sounding-board and dated 1684. There was a carpenter, Gyles Webb, recorded at Stanway in 1687<sup>4</sup> and he could have been responsible for both of the latter pulpits, and perhaps others. Whether or not this is so, there does seem to have been a workshop constructing pulpits in this part of the Cotswolds which are undecorated and within the scope of a good local carpenter.

A pair of Cotswold pulpits that can be linked by both constructional and decorative features are those in the church of St Peter, Dyrham and Hinton (Figure 5), and St Mary the Virgin, Marshfield (Figure 6), in adjacent parishes. Each has large applied wooden corbels at the corner of each face of the pulpit supporting the pulpit's top rail. Between these corbels is a series of small dentils; below these a row of deep-carved applied gadroons, centred on a half-oval boss; and below this a series of even smaller dentils. The large panels on each face have applied arcading with very similar spandrels, and the interiors of the arcades are empty. Although there are some differences in the decoration of these two pulpits, the similarities are sufficient to suggest a common origin, perhaps the work of Robert Barker, a joiner who constructed the walnut staircase and the Balcony Room in Dyrham House in the 1690s.<sup>5</sup>

Although two probable groupings of pulpits have been suggested above, the most striking aspect of the Cotswold pulpits is their diversity. This may not necessarily indicate the presence of many different woodworkers, but could reflect the decorative wishes of the granter of the benefices or a benefactor, as was the case with the superb, but highly individual pulpit in St James', Chipping Campden (Figure 7), given in 1612 by Sir Baptist Hicks and no doubt decorated to his instructions. It is significant that three of the more elaborate pulpits in the Cotswold region were the gifts of wealthy local men, and are so recorded on the pulpits. That at Chipping Campden has EX DO NO BE NIG NI

BAPTISTAE HICKES. Hicks, a generous benefactor, also donated a fifteenth-century latten eagle in 1618.<sup>6</sup>

St Eadburge's, Ebrington, has a well-decorated pulpit, the sounding-board of which is inscribed EX DONO JOHANNIS ARRIS JUN DE CHARRINGWORTH GENROSI ANNO DOMINI 1679. John Arris' grandfather, also John Arris, is listed as a 'Gent' in 1608.<sup>7</sup>

The writing on the elaborate pulpit in the church of St Mary Magdalene, Rodborough, leaves us in no doubt as to the benefactor; a plate beneath a shield reads, *The Gift of Iasper Estcourte of Lightpill Gent Anno Dom. 1624*, and the other faces of the pulpit repeat this in Latin. Clearly, the elaborate decoration of these pulpits was intended to reflect the status of the donor, and the pulpits themselves became, in effect, showcase items of furniture, through which the benefactor might set up store for himself in heaven. Further, these sorts of benefaction also reflect the fortunes that could accrue from sheep-farming in the Cotswolds.

In the west of the county there are thirty churches with wooden pulpits that can be dated between 1600 and 1740. As with the Cotswold churches, it is possible on occasions to relate the pulpit of one church with that of another. The parishes of Abson and Siston are next to each other, and the church in each has a pulpit with undecorated moulded panels (Figures 8 and 9). The pulpit at St James, Abson, is dated 1630, but it has not been possible to locate in the documents any woodworkers in either parish at that time, although in 1608 there were two carpenters in Abson and one in Siston, each aged about forty.<sup>8</sup>

Another pair of pulpits, in the churches of St Andrew and St Bartholomew, Ashleworth (Figure 10), and St Giles, Maisemore (Figure 11), have strikingly similar features; again the two parishes are contiguous, and both are west of the Severn. Each pulpit has an arcaded panel of similar form, in the centre of which is an oval boss. Further, each panel has on its sides an applied split baluster with ring turns. Although the other decorations on the pulpits differ, there seems little doubt that the two pulpits were produced by the same hand or workshop, and this suggestion is strengthened by the dating evidence: the Ashleworth pulpit is dated 1635 and the Maisemore 1636. Again, the documents have not produced the names of any woodworkers active in these two parishes at these dates, but in 1608 there were three carpenters and two joiners in Ashleworth, all aged about forty,<sup>9</sup> a surprisingly large number of woodworkers for a very small parish.

We have mentioned above the donors of pulpits in the Cotswold region, but in contrast there are no examples of such donations to churches in the west of the county, where cattle rather than sheep were reared and profits were smaller. What we do find, however, is a number of instances of the initials of churchwardens on pulpits: for example, the pulpit of St Anne's, Oxenhall, has WP WW 1632, where the initials stand for William Pipett (a husbandman) and William Wetherlock respectively; on one panel of the pulpit at St Mary's, Frampton-on-Severn, there is the name WILLIAM KNIGHT (a butcher), on another panel is WILLIAM SHERING, and on another CHURCH MEN 1622; and the pulpit at St Nicholas, Teddington, has on it:

MICHAEL  
TYLLER  
CHURCH

16

WILLIAM  
AWOODE  
WARDEN

55



In the Cotswold region fourteen churches have altar rails that can be ascribed to the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and these, like pulpits, can sometimes link churches and suggest a common source of manufacture. The neighbouring churches of St Peter, Farmington (Figure 12), and St Michael, Yanworth (Figure 13), have altar rails with virtually identical turnings that must have been made in the same workshop. Although there is no dating evidence for either set of rails, the turnings are not dissimilar to those on a staircase at Faber's Farm, Hambrook, Gloucs., which is dated 1698.<sup>10</sup>

Two further churches in adjacent parishes in the Cotswolds are St Peter's, Rendcomb (Figure 14), and St John's, Elkstone (Figure 15), and in each church the altar rails are united by top rails decorated with the same lunettes, a form of decoration not found on rails in any other part of the county. The pulpit at Elkstone is dated 1609 and it is likely that the altar rails here, and at Rendcomb, are of approximately the same date. A carpenter, Robert Hide, is recorded in 1608 as living in Elkstone,<sup>11</sup> and he may have been responsible for making this church furniture.

Of the nine churches in the western region of Gloucestershire that have seventeenth-century altar rails, two, St Mary Magdalene, Boddington (Figure 16), and St John the Baptist, Tredington (Figure 17), have identical rails, both sets probably made by Guy Wingod, who was recorded as a carpenter in Boddington in 1608, aged around twenty.<sup>12</sup>

That carpenters and joiners, in addition to turners, had the facility to make altar rails and other turned furniture is made clear by the regular listing of lathes in their inventories during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. For example, the inventory of a joiner from Tewkesbury, dated 1678, includes in a list of tools 'One laeth'; that of a carpenter from Dursley dated 1699 has 'a lave'; and another, of a carpenter from Newent dated 1702 lists 'one lathbench'. The latter carpenter was Edward Taylor, who was responsible for the rebuilding of the nave roof of St Mary's, Newent, between 1675 and 1679, and who had worked under Christopher Wren in London<sup>13</sup> before returning to his native area. A late set of altar rails, for which there is documentary evidence, was made for All Saints, North Cerney, by a local carpenter Robert Broad, in 1734, interestingly of 'Norway oak'.<sup>14</sup> On occasions, altar rails can be linked to other items of furniture within the church, as at St Mary's, Lasborough (Figure 18), where the turnings are identical to those on the legs of a small table in the church (Figure 19), leaving no doubt as to their shared origin. Both items were probably made at the same time that Lasborough Manor was being built in c.1610, and it may be significant in terms of dating that Lasborough is not listed in 1608, suggesting that there was no population at this time, and that the church, mediaeval in date, was lying idle until the building of the manor house.

The altar rails in St Faith's, Farmcote (Figure 20), with gun barrel columns and ring turnings can be dated to the first half of the seventeenth century, and are identical in form to the turnings of the legs of the altar table (Figure 21). It is possible that they were made by William Renolds, a carpenter in the parish of Pinnock and Hyde, under the aegis of which Farmcote lay. Renolds is recorded in 1608 as being about twenty years of age.<sup>15</sup>

Both the altar rails (Figure 22) and the pulpit (Figure 23) in St Mary's, Great Witcombe, are constructed from elements removed from the old manor house: the pulpit comprises oak panels from this source, together with some of the banisters from the

staircase of the house<sup>16</sup>, other banisters being used as altar rails.

The discussion so far has been of fixed furniture in churches, but it might be profitable to look at moveable furniture, such as chairs, tables and chests. There is an immediate, obvious problem here, in that moveable furniture, by definition, can travel, not only within the church, but from one part of the country to another, so that finding, for instance, a chair in a Gloucestershire church does not guarantee its being a Gloucestershire piece. For example, the panel-backed armchairs in All Saints Church, Newland, and St Peter's, Rendcombe, to judge by their pyramid finials and trailing floral back panels and top rails, were made in South Lancashire or North Cheshire, and the chair at St Peter's, Wapley, is of caquetteuse form reminiscent of chairs from Salisbury (and, more commonly, Scotland). As the late Christopher Gilbert reminded us, 'it is imperative to establish the provenance of furniture, since the trade in old oak was certainly flourishing by the 1820s'.<sup>17</sup>

There is usually no difference between moveable furniture in churches and that in domestic contexts. Indeed, it is not uncommon for items to be given to a church by individual parishioners. The very fine and large early seventeenth-century altar table in St Mary's, Lasborough, was brought from one of the Estcourt family farms at Arlingham when the church was rebuilt in 1861.<sup>18</sup> Another altar table which probably began life in a domestic context is that in St Mary's, Meysey Hampton, which has inscribed around its four sides: THIS TABLE WAS GIVEN BY EDWARD ARCHAR THE ELDER/TO HIS PARISH CHURCH/FOR THE USE OF THE CHURCH WARDENS. HEE DESESED MAY/THE XII 1632. A much more recent example of domestic furniture is a chest in St Stephen's, Moreton Valence, which has a plate in its lid stating, *Presented to Moreton Valence church by Miss Elizabeth Stratton (1880-1965) formerly of Woodfield House, Moreton Valence*. That items of furniture were not always donated *gratis* is evidenced by a chest which was once in St Andrew's, Chedworth, which is listed in the Churchwardens' Accounts for 1689, *stating pd. to the widow Bishop for one chest of three foote o. o.6d.*

We have noted above that the turnings of the legs of a side table in St Mary's, Lasborough, are identical to those of the altar rails, and that there is a similar relationship between the altar table and the altar rails at St Faith's, Farmcote, where in each case the tables and rails were made as a match. And there are other occasions when fixed furniture can be linked with either fixed or moveable items, indicating a shared and local origin. For example, the pulpit at St George's, Cam (Figure 24), has a frieze of openwork, inverted lunettes, very similar to the frieze of a chest in St John's, Slimbridge (Figure 25), and of a sort not seen elsewhere in the county. As these two parishes are contiguous the pulpit and chest were doubtless made, or at least decorated, by the same woodworker. Both are probably early seventeenth century in date and each of the parishes of Cam and Slimbridge had two carpenters recorded in 1608.

Sometimes, in addition to links between fixed and moveable furniture, we can see links between moveable items. In St Nicholas' church, Hardwicke, there is a coffer (Figure 26) with gouged, rectilinear carving painted black on its front, giving the area within it the appearance of a large panel. In the church of St Stephen in the neighbouring parish of Moreton Valence there is a coffer (Figure 27) which, like the Hardwicke coffer, has rectilinear chisel and gouge work on the front, this time creating the appearance of four

fielded panels. It is significant that this technique should have been used in churches in two adjacent parishes and not apparently elsewhere.

A final example of two items of moveable furniture sharing characteristics, is from St Mary's, Meysey Hampton, where there are two seventeenth-century armchairs (Figures 28 and 29), and although there are major differences in the main decorative areas of these chairs, there are significant similarities in other aspects. First, the arm shapes are virtually identical; second, the front top of each arm has the same gouged decoration; third, each arm ends in a scroll; fourth, both chairs have similar, although not identical column arm supports and front legs with ring turns. The similarities in the arms may well indicate a particular workshop or carpenter as their source, for arms of chairs could have been made in some numbers to be applied to chairs whatever other the decoration might be. A further feature linking these two chairs is their 'ears' (damaged), a form of applied decoration that has been considered uncommon in Gloucestershire,<sup>19</sup> although further research is suggesting that 'ears' are more common in the county than previously thought.

In the past, there has been perhaps an over-concentration on the description of individual pieces of church furniture, with suggestions for the origins of their decoration. It is hoped that this brief article indicates that there are other approaches to the study of this furniture, approaches which can take us beyond the merely descriptive.

#### REFERENCES

1. This paper deliberately moves away from an art-historical approach, which the writer believes has very limited value in the study of regional furniture, to a synchronic approach where decorative motifs, when discussed, are seen in relation to each other and not to their possible historical origins. Other relationships are also discussed, notably between groups of pulpits and altar rails and between fixed and moveable items of furniture, where individual workshops or woodworkers can be suggested.
2. Sir Robert Atkyns, *The Ancient and Present State of Gloucestershire*, 1712, p.35, quoted in David Verey, *Gloucestershire: I. The Cotswolds*, Harmondsworth, 1970, p.139.
3. Verey, 1970, p.139.
4. Brian Firth (Ed), *Gloucestershire Marriage Allegations Vol I*, Bristol, 1954.
5. Verey, 1970, p.231.
6. Verey, 1970, p.155.
7. John Smith, *The Names and Surnames of all the Able and Sufficient Men in Body fit for His Majesty's Service in the Wars, within the County of Gloucester*, 1608. Reprinted as *Men and Armour for Gloucestershire in 1608*, Gloucester, 1980, pp.210, 213.
8. John Smith, p.95.
9. John Smith, pp.181, 182.
10. N.W. Alcock and Linda Hall, *Fixtures and Fittings in Dated Houses 1567-1763*, York, 1994, p.2.
11. John Smith, p.256.
12. John Smith, p.115.
13. David Verey, *Gloucestershire: The Vale and the Forest of Dean*, Second Edition, Harmondsworth, 1998, p.302.
14. Verey, 1970, p.336.
15. John Smith, p.86.
16. Verey, 1998, p.257.
17. David Jones (Ed), *Christopher Gilbert – Selected Writings on Vernacular Furniture 1966-98*, Leeds, 2001, p.76.
18. Hilary Lees, *Porch and Pew – Small Churches in the Cotswolds*, Dursley, 1998, p.42.
19. Anthony Wells-Cole, *Oak Furniture from Gloucestershire and Somerset*, (Exhibition Catalogue), 1976, Caption to Fig. 7.



1. Pulpit, St Michael, Buckland  
*Photo: Author*



2. Pulpit, St George, Didbrook  
*Photo: Author*



3. Pulpit, St Faith, Farmcote  
*Photo: Author*



4. Pulpit at Hailes  
*Photo: Author*



5. Pulpit, St Peter, Dyrham & Hinton  
*Photo: Author*



6. Pulpit, St Mary the Virgin, Marshfield  
*Photo: Author*



7. Pulpit, St James, Chipping Campden  
*Photo: Author*



8. Pulpit, St James, Abson  
*Photo: Author*



9. Pulpit, St Anne, Siston  
*Photo: Author*





10. Pulpit, St Andrew & St Bartholomew, Ashleworth  
*Photo: Author*



11. Pulpit, St Giles, Maisemore  
*Photo: Author*



12. Communion Rails, St Peter, Farmington  
*Photo: Author*



13. Communion Rails, St Michael, Yanworth  
*Photo: Author*



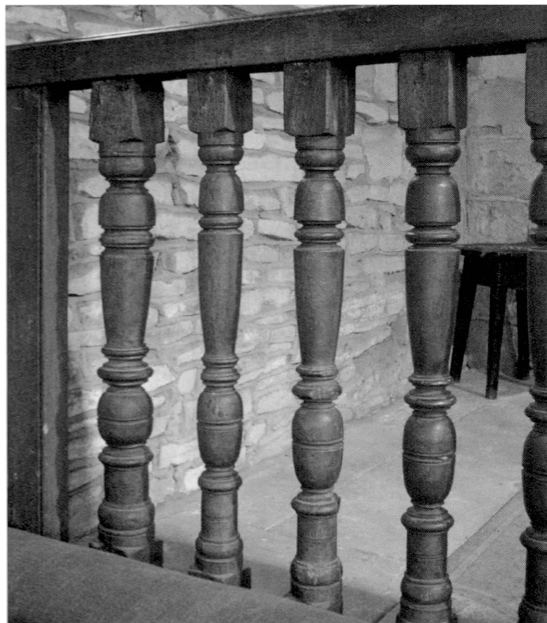
14. Communion Rails, St Peter, Rendcomb  
*Photo: Author*



15. Communion Rails, St John, Elkstone  
*Photo: Author*



16. Communion Rails, St Mary Magdalene, Boddington  
*Photo: Author*



17. Communion Rails, St John the Baptist, Tredington  
*Photo: Author*



18. Communion Rails, St Mary, Lasborough  
*Photo: Author*



19. Small Table, St Mary, Lasborough  
*Photo: Author*



20. Communion Rails, St Faith, Farmcote  
*Photo: Author*



21. Communion Table, St Faith, Farmcote  
*Photo: Author*



22. Communion Rails, St Mary, Great Witcombe  
*Photo: Author*



23. Pulpit, St Mary, Great Witcombe  
*Photo: Author*



24. Pulpit, St George, Cam  
*Photo: Author*



25. Chest, St John, Slimbridge  
*Photo: Author*





26. Coffin, St Nicholas, Hardwicke  
*Photo: Author*



27. Coffin, St Stephen, Moreton Valence  
*Photo: Author*



28. Chair, St Mary, Meysey Hampton  
*Photo: Author*



29. Chair, St Mary, Meysey Hampton  
*Photo: Author*