

## Hadstock St. Botolph, Foundation, Fabric and the North Door

Hadstock is well known for its late Saxon church. It is an unusually large cruciform church. The crossing arches and north door have rare and very fine carved ornament datable c. 1060-80. The church has been explained as the site of the monastery founded by St Botolph in 654, or as the minster built by Canute to celebrate his victory at the battle of Assandun in 1016. Excavation inside the church in 1974 by Warwick Rodwell showed that the first church for which there was evidence was of cruciform plan, but did not reveal anything to demonstrate a connection with Botolph or Canute.

Another famous feature of the church is the north door, the carpentry of which was believed to be Saxon by the late Cecil Hewett. Further research by Jane Geddes showed that the carpentry techniques used to make it are found from the mid 11th to the early 12th century. However, the ironwork on the outside of the door, apparently once a pattern of dense scrolls, is consistent with examples in late Saxon manuscripts. The door has remained a subject of continuing interest, partly because of its great age and potential for dating by dendrochronology and partly because of the interest in historic carpentry stimulated by Hewett's work. A grant from the Society of Antiquaries made it possible for Dan Miles and Martin Bridge of the Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory to take cores from the door using a microborer, a narrow hollow section drill specially developed for drilling across the width of narrow planks to obtain cores for dating. This was done successfully in 2003, and analysis of the cores indicated a date of c. 1040-70, confirming the door to be the oldest known in England. This prompted a reassessment of its carpentry and ironwork by Jane Geddes and Adrian Gibson.

To put these exciting discoveries about the door in the context of the history and development of the church as a whole, a seminar was held on 8 July 2004 at the invitation of the Hadstock Society, bringing together those who have worked on the Church over the past 30 years. Pat Croxton-Smith summarised the history of the Church and the village, emphasising its relatively small size and poverty, always with an absentee manorial lord, which begs the question of why such a large church should have been built there if there were not a connection with Botolph or Canute.

Martin Bridge related how attempts had first been made to tree-ring date the door 30 years ago, and described the technical feat of taking the door off its hinges and using the microborer to obtain cores from all four boards of which it is made. The boards probably all came from the same tree, probably a large pollard perhaps 1.2m in diameter and over 400 years old. The rings in the boards cover the period 663-1022. The outermost sapwood rings have been removed, but making an allowance for these, it can be estimated that the tree was felled after 1034, most likely in the period 1040-1070.

Jane Geddes had reconstructed the history of the north door using antiquarian papers now in the British Library. People first took an interest in the door because of the skin on it said to be of a Dane, but recently shown by DNA analysis to be cowhide. A drawing by James Essex made before 1775 showed decorative hoops at the top of the door. An early 19<sup>th</sup>-century drawing by Buckler shows the Y-shaped hinge fittings, making it fairly certain these are original fixtures. These can also be paralleled in an 11<sup>th</sup>-century Norwegian door at Urnes. Evidence from Saffron Walden Museum indicates that the door was repaired in 1830, whilst Richard Neville's records reveal that the door was removed and replaced with one more weathertight for some time in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Adrian Gibson explained how the door had been repaired, the three-quarter round ledges being carefully removed so that the hinges could be repaired. The inner Y-shaped parts of the hinges had been retained,

but the bars had been cut off and new ones skilfully and almost invisibly welded on and secured with specially made facet-headed nails. Just when this restoration was carried out is uncertain. Examination of the hundreds of nail holes in the door has identified some of the original decoration, including the hoops shown in the antiquarian drawings and a series of S-shaped patterns. The original appearance of the door would have been striking, with the decorative ironwork against the background of the cowhide, which traces of pigment show to have been coloured red.

The door in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century west tower has also been re-examined. The boards of which this is made are probably contemporary with the tower and have no potential for tree-ring dating. But the hinges have the same Y-shaped fixture as the north door and must also date from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Remarkably, one strap has a decorative scroll still attached.

Warwick Rodwell reviewed the results of his excavation, in particular for what light it shed on the north doorway. This is not in its original position: the evidence of the masonry around it indicates it has been moved here and rebuilt, probably in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the south door was inserted. This raises the question of where the doorway was moved from. Similarly, there is the related problem of where the ironwork of the west door came from. Originally, the main door into the church was probably at the west end. There was also a doorway about half way along the north wall, before the existing one was formed, uncomfortably close to the crossing. But there were also doors in the north wall of the north transept, and the north wall of the medieval chancel. A 1775 drawing of the latter shows it to have been Saxo-Norman in style. So the original positions in the church of the north door, and of the ironwork of the west door, apparently contemporary with that of the north door, remain problematic.

Eric Fernie considered the architectural context of the carved and moulded stonework of the transept arches and north doorway. He argues that, however curiously irregular and rebuilt the stonework of the south transept arch might seem, and even if the two bottom courses of the bases are reused, it was designed and originally built as a single entity. In addition, the base mouldings are mirrored by the impost of the north door. As to dating, the detached shafts have a potentially wide date range, and the palmette motif no very satisfactory parallels. However, the angle roll round the doorway arch is much more diagnostic, not being known before the 1060s. This, of course, fits well with the new date of c.1040-70 for the boards of the door.

The transept arches and north doorway belong to the third building phase identified in the church by Rodwell. They indicate a major programme of work to the fabric, perhaps following a fire. The date, c.1060-80, does not fit in with the possible foundation of Canute's minster in 1020, or any other known historical event which has been associated with the church. Indeed, the archaeological evidence suggests there was a major church here before then. That this church was a successor to Botolph's monastery remains a possible and attractive explanation. A field adjacent to the church, which has produced pottery and other finds and has long been identified as a possible site of medieval settlement, may hold a key to a clearer picture of Hadstock's origins. The Hadstock Society therefore proposes to try to obtain grant aid for a project which would encompass:

- further limited investigation of aspects of the fabric of the church.
- publication by Warwick Rodwell of his excavation and research on the church.
- archaeological investigation of the field adjacent to the church.