

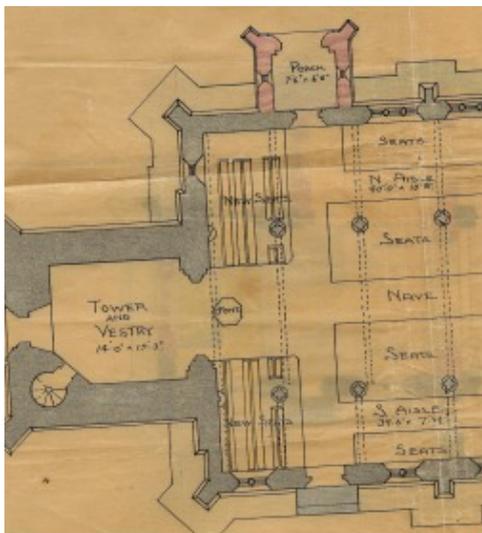
The early twentieth century development of St Nicolas', Great Coates



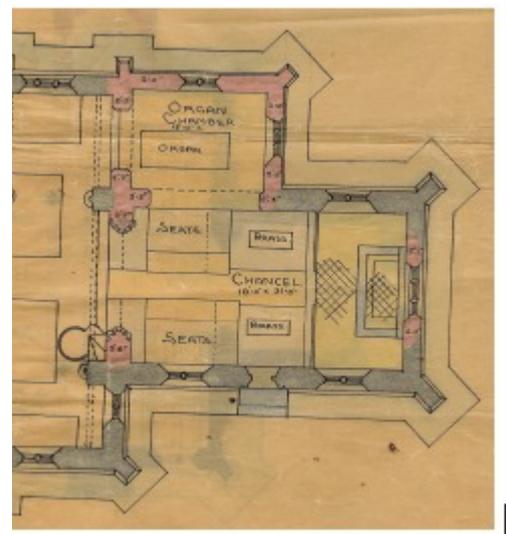
This is what it was like looking into the chancel of St Nicolas' a hundred years ago. The structure of the building is instantly recognisable - the walls, the windows and the door are all in the right places (the door is in fact covered by a curtain) and so is the monument on the left of the picture. But almost everything else is different. Most obviously the box pews in the nave are not the present pews, and the organ which takes up so much of the chancel is not where the organ is now. A close look at the picture also shows a surprisingly large number of other differences: the floor of the nave is stone; there is an arch just visible over the entrance to the chancel; the walls of the chancel are of exposed stonework; the ceiling is low and white; the altar is not set on the present semi-circular dais; the east window does not seem to be as tall it is now and is set within a deep curved alcove. It is fascinating to try to trace the development of the church from then until now.

There had been a major restoration of the church in 1865 which was well before this picture was taken. This was undertaken by the Louth architect James Fowler whose work is evident in a remarkably large number of Lincolnshire churches. It was supported by the patron of the time (Sir Robert Sutton) whose initials appear high on the outside of the east wall as a result. A study of this Victorian restoration would be interesting because it would show to what extent it may have remodelled the medieval building, but I have not yet been able to trace the papers relating to it. Twentieth century papers including those in the Lincolnshire Records Office, however, give an immediate indication of some of the subsequent work which has reshaped the appearance of the inside of the church.

These begin with a Faculty which was granted in 1900. It provides for taking out the old square pews, providing new pews of deal with oak sills, and for laying a new concrete floor in much of the church with woodblock on top of this. This appears to have been the fashionable thing to do at that time (exactly the same change of pews took place at St Michael's only a couple of years earlier) and might represent the personal preference of the then relatively new incumbent James Quirk who had arrived as Vicar in 1897 (and who was to remain until 1927). An expert might be able to confirm for us that the present pews and woodblock floors date from 1900 (or, for example, whether they are replacements following the 1932 fire).



Substantial plans were then developed for a further restoration of the church. Detailed drawings survive in the church safe which were prepared in 1913 by H. M Townsend and R A Fordham of Peterborough, a couple of parts of which are reproduced above. These proposed extending the north aisle eastwards



allowing the organ to be moved back from the position shown in the photograph into a newly built organ chamber, and creating a porch outside for the north door.

These planned improvements, which also included the introduction of windows in the clerestory (the space in the nave above the roof line of the aisles), were abandoned at the beginning of the First World War: there is a letter with the drawings from Townsend to Quirk saying that he understood but regretted the then Sir Richard Sutton's decision about this; the letter is an interesting historical record of attitudes at the beginning of the First World War before its full horrors became known in which Townsend expresses pride in cavalry training and anticipates the Kaiser being surprised the patriotism which the War had provoked in England.

The plan appears to show the 1900 seating roughly as it is today including the platforms at the back of the church without seating on them (he marks the area for new seats) but it is impossible to know how far it shows such features of the church as Townsend found them or as he intended to leave them; the two medieval brasses are shown on either side of the chancel but it seems doubtful whether the northern one could have been in that position already unless the organ had been placed over it.

The major changes had to wait for another ten years. First a Faculty was granted in 1925 for the creation of an oak wooden reredos (the backing panel behind the altar) with symbols of the passion. This seems to be the one which now stands behind the altar in place of the curtain which appears in the photograph.

But by far the greatest amount of work followed four years later. Quirk had been succeeded by James Barber who was Vicar from 1927 to 1954. It is possible that Barber needed to put right some things which Quirk had not managed to carry through at the end of his long incumbency. It is also possible that Barber in his turn had his own ideas about how he wanted the church to look. Anyway, a Faculty was granted in 1929 to do a substantial amount of work. The most urgent of these were repairs to the tower: renewing the bosses and pinnacles which had become dangerous; renewing the louvres and replacing a host of iron cramps and dowels with copper; unblocking the west door. The slate roofs were also renewed, as they had to be again sixty six years later in the most expensive of the recent works on the building in 1995.

The less urgent changes were the ones which made the most substantial contribution to changing the appearance of the inside of the church from that in the photograph to that which we see today. The plaster ceilings were removed as was the chancel arch (which the Faculty says was also of plaster) and the east window frame (which the Faculty says was wooden). The gilded oak ceilings (which match the 1925 reredos) were inserted, and the present organ gallery and the present east window (for both of which the Faculty papers include drawings) were also inserted; the window is a memorial to Quirk.

It is possible that the plastering of the walls took place at this time: repairs in 2005 revealed that most of the central lower part of the east wall is modern brick which seems to have been inserted to create a flat wall in place of the alcove. Equally it is possible that the semi-circular platform for the altar may have been created at this time, and the two historic brasses may have been resited at this time; the Faculty certainly allows for the removal of the railing around the altar and their replacement with wooden kneelers which are likely to be those we have now which match the roof work. It is also possible that the font was resited at this time; the 1913 drawing shows it further west where it would have been in the way of the 1929 screen.

The intention was also to insert a rood (a beam or screen across the entrance to the chancel to carry a representation of the crucifixion above it), and the corbels placed where the plaster arch had sprung seem to have been inserted to carry this, but obviously this work was never done.

All this work was supervised by Wilfred Bond of Grantham - it was Laurence Bond of this firm who was to design St Martin's, Grimsby.

One other feature of all this work was the lifting of what was believed to have been a stone altar slab from the floor and placing it on the existing wooden frame of the altar; the slab was mentioned as being split. The architect had wanted to place the slab on stone supports but this was not allowed as it would not make a table which could at least in theory be moved. The weight of the slab appears to have caused the wooden frame to split over time and in the 1990s it appears to have been moved outside the church and workmanlike repairs made to the wooden altar, although I'm not clear whether this work was authorised by Faculty.

Further Faculties authorise the introduction of a new heating system in 1931 and electrical light in 1935, but in between was the fire of Sunday afternoon 13th April 1932 within less than a month of which an insurance settlement of £1,203 14/6 was made for the restoration of the organ and other damage. The present organ case differs from that in the early photograph so it is possible that this is the result of the restoration rather than of what may merely have been a relocation four years earlier; it would be interesting to discover details about this and about the extent of the 'other damage' to be more sure about these things.

Anyway by the time of the Second World War it is possible that the church had substantially acquired its present appearance, although a detailed trawl through Minutes and Faculties since 1939 might reveal more. I have always suspected, for example, what is sometimes seen and used as a Lady Chapel is really a 1950s children's chapel; no furnishings are shown here in the 1913 drawings.

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