

THE TILSHEAD CHURCH PEWS

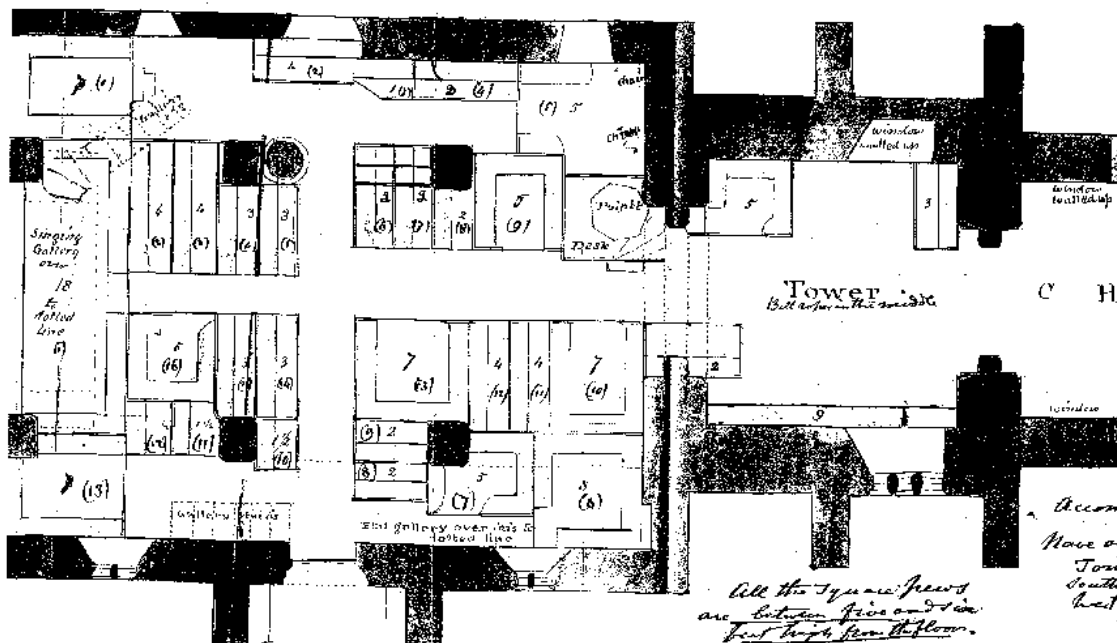
(This is a slightly edited version of an article that first appeared in the Spring 2010 issue of the Friends of Tilshead Church newsletter)

Anyone who has visited Tilshead Church will have noticed the pews in the nave of the church, 'modern' and very plain in style, dating from the 1960s and not very comfortable. They were made by Mr Robert Jones, the then headmaster of the school, in the 1960s. But what was there beforehand, and for how long?



In medieval times people stood or knelt during the mass – those needing support sought a position with their 'backs to the wall'. Seats for the congregation appear to have been introduced from the 15th or 16th century, when following the reformation in England preaching came to the fore. But in a poor country parish such as Tilshead, the first pews may not have been installed until much later, perhaps the 17th century. It is quite possible that these were the pews removed during the 1846 restoration of the church (when the nave was re-roofed and the north aisle extended to its present width).

We know a certain amount about these pews as the Vicar at that time (Rev J H Johnson) made 'before and after' drawings of the church. His 'before' drawing shows that the church had high-backed box pews.



These were allocated to families by the churchwardens according to their social rank. The highest ranking pews were those nearest the pulpit, the lowest furthest away. It would seem from Johnson's drawing (below) that some people sat with their backs to the altar. The wooden pulpit, with a lower desk in front for the parish clerk, who read the lessons and notices, was on the opposite side to the present Victorian pulpit, in the position where the priest's stall is today.

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There were also two wooden galleries in the church. At the west end there was a gallery for 6 singers and musicians with a staircase descending diagonally to the north aisle. In the south aisle with a staircase just to the left of the doorway was a gallery for the boys of the boarding school for young gentlemen, which existed in the village from the mid 18th century until probably the 1830s, run first by William Cooper and later Richard Tucker (both of whom are buried in rather grand chest tombs in the churchyard). In all the church could seat 184 people including places for 20 children in the south gallery.

The need to accommodate a growing population was one of the driving forces for the 1846 restoration. The box pews were swept away and new bench pews were installed in the nave and the north aisle which was widened by rebuilding the side wall further out. Those in the north aisle, of course, remain in place today. The seating capacity was increased (according to the plan) to 320. But not everything from the old box pews was thrown out. For economy some of the oak was used to make the panels below the seats of the new benches - see, for example, the back panels below the seats in the first two rows in the north aisle. Two such panels from the backs of the old box pews and bearing the names of John Bartley (with the date 1788) and Ann Smith (1840) were 'rescued' by Tom Blake when the Victorian pews in the nave were broken up to make room for the present seats during the 1960s repairs and alterations to the church. A third piece with the name William Alsop Lawes 1788 (whose memorial is on the wall in the tower), remains in place upside down in the north aisle. Have a look and see if you can find it



A photograph of the church circa 1950 shows how it looked before the Victorian pews were removed from the nave, with the organ then at the east end of the north aisle. Also of interest is that the Royal Arms appear to be on the north wall of the nave and their present position above the chancel arch is occupied by what seems to be a list of the Ten Commandments.

The installation of the 1960s pews seems to have undone all the Rev Johnson's expansion, as one would be hard pressed without extra chairs to seat more than 120 in the church today!

