

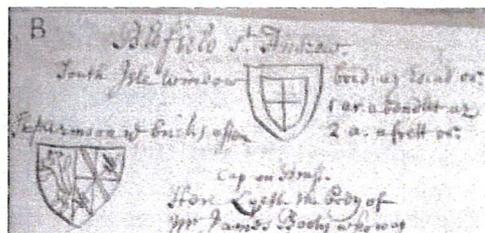
The nave screen at Blofield Church – a theological and ecclesiastical journey

The Pre-Reformation era

1427 Blofield church was dedicated. One can only guess what it would have looked like.

The only wooden survivors of Reformation/Commonwealth upheavals are the lower panels of the chancel screen but how much of this is original is also subject to debate.

We know from descriptions and drawings that chancel windows, and those in the nave, were once filled with stained glass (none from this period remains).



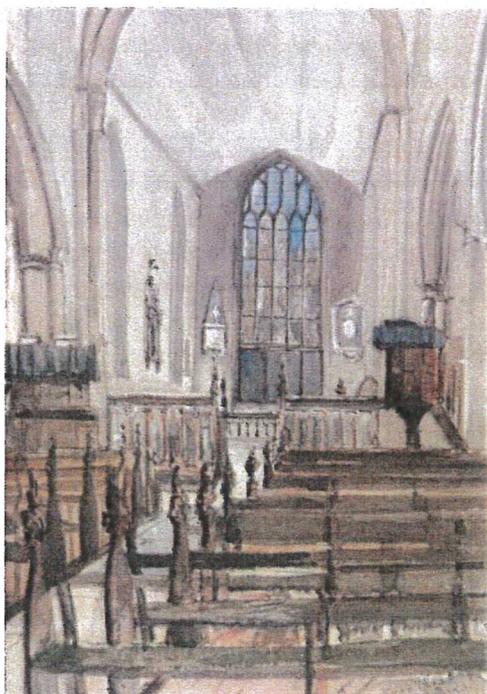
The Prayer Book Church – ministry of the Word

A Faculty was obtained in 1812 to block the chancel windows in the north and south walls and to unblock the east window. This was the age when Morning and Evening Prayer and the sermon were foremost. With Holy Communion celebrated infrequently chancels became somewhat redundant (Churchwarden's accounts at this time show payments for bread and wine at Easter, Whit Sunday, St Michael and Christmas).

The early 19th century refit. Bryant says the church was 're-pewed in 1819 at a cost of £350', the year pew rents and occupancy lists begin. This re-pewing we assume was for the fitting of box pews in the north and south aisles and at the back of the nave. It is also thought that the reading desk and pulpit date from this around this time. The panels of the former pulpit seem to match the style of the box pews.



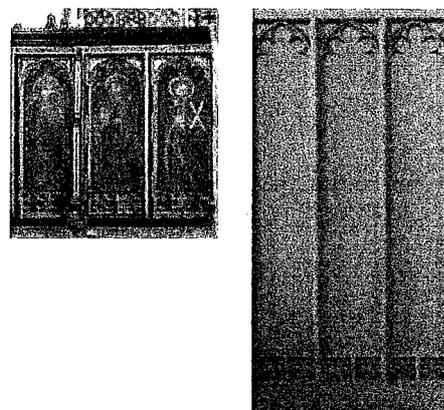
Robert Angell (writing 1820's) notes '*at the entrance of the arch Chancel and on the north side is erected upon a wooden pedestal the reading desk and opposite is also erected upon a Similar plan the pulpit. Although a good Church. It is not well pewed, in the North and South aisles are in each a row of pews, in the middle aisle are very few pews and which are at the west end and all the rest down to the pulpit are long seats without backs – the belfry which is open is excluded by a low partition of wood the top embattled and a door at each aisle'* (this is the first reference to the screen).



Sir Peter Ede noted the social effects of this new seating: *The sittings in the church were arranged thus: the north aisle and south aisles were fitted with tall pews for the families of the 'better classes' of parishioners, and the reputed quality of these 'owners' began at the top of the aisle and gradually diminished down wards to its lower part, where many of the gentlemen's servants were located. The nave was fitted with open benches, those on the right of the central walk being appropriated to the poor women of the parish and those on the left to the poor men, the sexes among the poorer classes only of the congregation being then separated.* (Autobiography of Sir Peter Ede, edited Sidney H Long 1916. Chapter 2 – Childhood memories c1830's?)

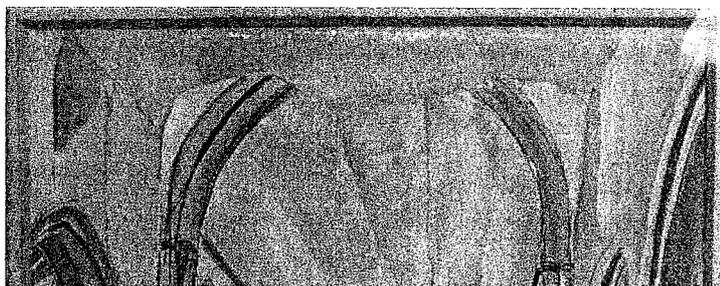
A painting (1866) shows a bare chancel, and although communion rails can be seen, there is no sign of a Holy Table. Clear glass, white washed walls, raised pulpit and reading desk emphasise the focus on the ministry of the Word.

The screen was incorporated into the design of the box pews, presumably to prevent drafts, but also to match the chancel screen: both have carved tracery at the top of each panel and quartrefoils at the base and both are in sections which are six panels wide.



Other symmetries within the church at that time came from the arrangements of box pews in the north and south aisles and rear of the nave. The pulpit and reading desk at the front of church completed a tidy sense of period unity. Here was the Georgian 'preaching box' where people could gather around the Word without the distractions of the 'idolatry' of former ages.

At some point in time the nave roof was lowered and a flat ceiling inserted (a Faculty, 1816, exists for re-roofing the church and Robert Angell, c1825, notes the church was 'ceiled'), dissecting the chancel arch before its apex. This also added to the feeling of enclosing the nave space.



Tractarian influences – late 19th century restorations and beyond

The plain 'preaching box' interior design of churches began to come to an end with the influence of the Oxford Movement. Colour, sacrament, and an idealised vision of pre-reformation church order influenced many a Victorian restoration. One late Victorian Rector of Blofield was a friend of the vicar of St John's Timberhill in the city, a church with 'high church inclinations' and preached there a number of times. These influences began to impact upon the church in Blofield. As the church became more sacramental in outlook fittings and fixtures began to change.

The restoration of 1878 saw the nave roof being set at its original pitch. The chancel restoration followed a few years later, again heightened and reroofed. The reading desk and high pulpit were removed (a new one given in memory of a Rector who died 1876).

The Georgian 'preaching box' and furnishings were gradually being stripped out. Kelly's Directory of 1883 notes, 'there are pews in the aisles, but it is proposed to substitute open seats for them'. Clearly the conversation over the box pews continued over the decades. The Norwich Mercury (1906) carried the following report from Mr Caroe, the church architect: *'The present deal screen which is merely an eyesore of less than no value, should be removed to admit of this. It will at once be said, however, that protection from draught – for which purpose no doubt this ugly screen was erected – must be considered. This can be done easily and more effectively by putting a frame round the inner porch doors and erecting new porch doors to the external opening. The box pews in the aisles are of deal, and have no merit to warrant their preservation, while they are wasteful of space. Oak seats should be introduced to replace them, and regain the proportion of the church.'*

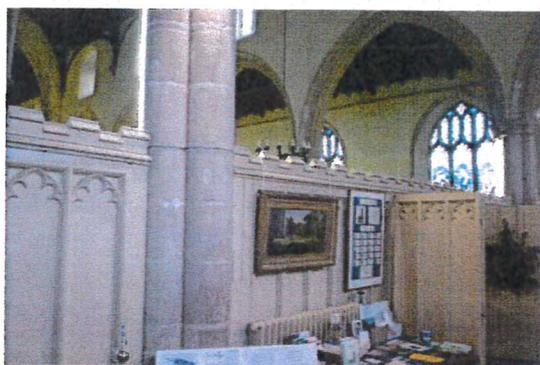
By 1914 a Faculty had been granted for the removal of the screen and all the box pews. For some reason only the box pews from the north and south aisles were taken out, and although a draft lobby was installed to prevent the drafts, the nave screen remained.

As the churchmanship continued to shift from a focus on 'Word preached' to 'Sacrament received' so the chancel became important again. The brightening up and adding colour to the church saw stained glass windows once again being installed. The chancel reredos (no Faculty evidence for its installation!) was painted in the 1930's gaining its inspiration from the chancel screen.

It appears that the chancel screen was also 'touched up' at the same time with the same red, green and gold paint. The effect of this repainting was to take the eye beyond the chancel screen to the reredos and the high altar.



The separation between the nave and chancel screens was finally made in the last quarter of the twentieth century when the nave screen, by now looking very shabby, and having not responded to being stripped down was painted cream. This act finally 'dislocated' the screen from any other fitting within the building. Today it stands as a barrier between the entrance lobby and the worship space.



Conclusions – in a light of early 21st century mission and worship considerations

- The fact that the nave screen has been part of a debate around its origins and date highlights its dislocation from its original context: it was the back of a Georgian 'preaching box' interior and connected with the chancel screen – but very few people today have made this connection.
- Clearly the screen is part of the box pews so some kind of retention/reuse has merit
- It is now an anachronism – the draft lobby deals with the drafts and the screen no longer blends with the chancel screen or the box pews themselves.
- Its retention in its present form and place adds nothing to the theological & ecclesiastical needs of our age. In an age of 'breaking down barriers' this screen hinders a sense of belonging.
- It is noted that the central sections of the screen match exactly those of the side aisles. These could easily be removed from the central section and placed 'back to back' to those in the aisles giving tracery on both sides of the screen .
- A new glass 'screen' behind the box pews and gallery above would open up the vista of the church and make a visual connection between welcome space and the worship space.