



St. Margaret's Church

I P S W I C H

Pews, their Purpose and The Red House Pew

Originally churches did not have pews. One stood or knelt for the mass. If you were old or infirm, then you could sit on the stone benches along the side walls - hence "The weak shall go to the wall".



A poppyhead carving in St Margaret's, Ipswich by Henry Ringham

By the 14th century, people wanted greater comfort and first the nobility, then the gentry and finally the commoners began to install pews. Not only did pews help kneeling and rising, but they also secured a personal space. Thus came into being the splendid poppy head pews with a wide variety of carvings of people, scenes from ordinary life – some quite risqué- animals and fantastical creatures like the Sciapod in St Mary's Church in Dennington.



Dennington Sciapod

The establishment of the Protestant faith in England in the 16th century led to the sermon becoming an important and often very lengthy part of the service particularly on the Puritan wing of the church. Archbishop Grindal told Elizabeth I. in 1576:-

"Public and continual preaching of God's word is the ordinary mean and instrument of the salvation of Man".

She, however, made clear her dislike of any lengthy sermons. All this made pews not only vital but also indicators of social standing. "The rich shall go to the front" replaced the weak going to the wall. Once established in New England away from restrictions, the Puritans could enjoy sermons of up to two hours twice a day!

Box pews, some elaborately carved, with high sides to give privacy became common. St. Margaret's installed pews at that time and the church is shown in the enclosed illustration.



The size and placement of the pews reflected the standing of the families of the parish.

A remarkable local surviving example of this is Kedington, Suffolk, which is probably as St Margaret's would have looked in the 17th century. At the front is the Barnardiston family pew as befitted their status as the most important landowners of the area from medieval times. Parts of their pew are reused from the demolished medieval Rood screen. The family seating in the south aisles and nave then shades to small uncomfortable benches at the back. The three decker pulpit still has its wig stand and hour glass.

The problem came when a new family of prominence and wealth came to the church, which disturbed the pecking order. This occurred at St Margaret's with the arrival of the Edgar family.

The Edgars had been in Suffolk for centuries. In 1237 John Edgar left Dunwich to settle in Glemham. In 1545 the manor of North Glemham was granted to William Edgar by Henry VIII.

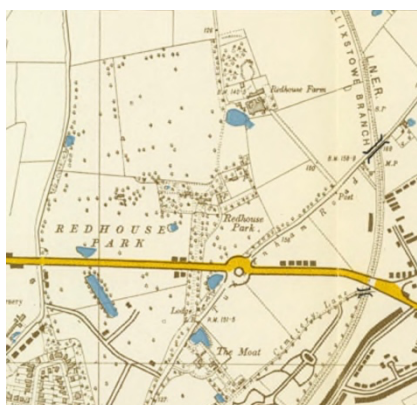
The family began their move into the parish of St Margaret's in 1550 with the purchase of a plot of land by Richard Edgar.

In 1602 Lionel Edgar was settled at Framdsen and there his son Thomas (1602-1692), later Recorder of Ipswich, was born. In 1641 Lionel bought a newly built house with 67 acres attached (technically a messuage) in the parish of St Margaret's. This was the basis of the estate they built up over the years with the help of astute marriages. Thus the Edgars migrated to Ipswich and lived at Grimstone House in Tower Street.

Thomas married Mary Powel and they had a son also named Thomas (1649-77). Thomas had married Mary, his second wife, at the age of 38 and was 47 when his son was born and 75 when his Grandson was born – he lived until he was 90, a great age for the period. The son had married Agatha Mileson in 1670 and their only son (1677- 1713) was given the name Mileson after his mother's family name. Unfortunately, the father died from smallpox in the year of Mileson's birth. Mileson's Grandfather had started to build a house for his son in 1658 just to the north of Ipswich, on the Tuddenham Road. This became known as the Red House and passed eventually to Mileson.



Photo Credit Colchester & Ipswich Museums Service, Ipswich Borough Council Collection.



The Red House, which was demolished in 1937, consisted of a three-storey central block with projecting corners built circa 1658 flanked later by recessed wings of two stories with neo classical Venetian windows on the first floor. It was approached by an avenue of trees, the remnants of which can be seen to the left of Tuddenham Road starting at Borrowdale Avenue and continuing across Colchester/Valley Road to the left of the Cranfield Almshouses. The estate diminished as the town of Ipswich grew and the train tracks were built across their land, until in 1937 the house was sold at auction and demolished.

The strong attachment to the name Milesen continued with its use seen on the memorial on the North wall of St Margaret's to Rev Milesen Gery Edgar (1784-1853) and finally Captain Milesen Edgar who died in 1935, the last direct descendant of this eminent family.

Another Christian name which came into use at this time in the Edgar family is Devereux which can only be in deference to the marriage of Elizabeth Withipoll, the heiress to Christchurch mansion and its extensive estates to Leicester Devereux. It was first used for Devereux Edgar (1651-1739), a son of Thomas the elder and his first wife Mary Powle. Devereux became a leading magistrate and a Tory loyalist. In 1694 he linked with Cave Beck, Master of Ipswich School, vicar of St Margaret's and private chaplain to Viscount Hereford, to devise a scheme of decoration for the roof of St Margaret's to reflect their joy at the overthrow of catholic James II and the accession of protestant William III & Mary. Most importantly he paid for it. This act of great generosity had to be recognised. Hence a meeting of the Parish Council was held in 1695 to give the Edgar family a pew which reflected their status and munificence.

The records detail the allocation with an exactitude that makes obvious the importance of the placement of the pew and prestige it conferred at that period. (NB the lack of consistency in spelling of names etc).

"whereas it doth appear that the said parish and especially we whose names are under written parishioners and Inhabitants of the said parish That the house called the Reddhouse in the said parish and now in the possession of Devereux Edgar Gent. His sonn hath not any pew or seat in the said church of St Margaret's of right belonging to it and considering the Inconveniencies of the same And in consideration of the services and benevolence of the said Devreux one of the late Churchwardens of the said parish Hath donn for the said parish church in beautifyeing of the Roof thereof Wee the Parishioners under named att a General parish meeting in the Channcell of the said Church on Teuesday the Eighteenth day of June AD 1695 Doe appoint give & grant unto the said Devreux Edgar his herres & the owners of the said Reddhouse as their proper right to goe along with & to be annexed to the said house one pew or seate or stoole, situate in the body of the said Church Namely the West side therof abutting upon a Pew which joynes to the Passage leading from the North Isle to the Middle Isle, the East side joynes to a pew which joyns to the Ld Viscount Colman & Thomas King and the South end upon the middle Isle & conteyns in length from North to South six feet And from East to West three feet two inches and wee doe agree that the said Devreux his heires & proprietors shall peaceably sit and enjoy the same pew or seat. And do request that this our grant & consent may be entered in its proper place for confirmation."

Written in the margin is how this prime location was achieved. It had belonged to Thomas Bunning who was persuaded to move *"and made choyse of the Pew next below it for his own & sitting in."* How much "choyse" he really had is open to speculation.

It is interesting to note that the box pew was placed immediately below the Hatchments of the Edgar family on the north wall of the nave, although this is not mentioned in the discussion.

Following that is a Memorandum dated 7th October 1706 of the parish meeting, by which time Thomas Bunning had died. This granted Mr Bunning's new pew to the Edgars who requested it, as their current pew was *"incapacious and insufficient to contain his family"*. Edward Hubbard *"joyner of this parish"* was ordered to remove the partition between the two seating areas.

Thus the Edgars and subsequent tenants of the Red House occupied their prestigious seat at the front of the church until the 19th century when all the pews were removed and replaced by the current ones.

The replacement of the pews was first mooted in the Vestry Minutes dated 22nd December 1842:-

"Pursuant to a notice given for the purpose of considering the propriety of doing away with the pews in the church and the substituting seats in lieu thereof".

The motion was put forward by William Charles Fonnereau, the owner of Christchurch Mansion, and the most eminent member of the church and seconded by a Mr Mason. It required that the churchwardens:-

"in the exercise of their duties to declare the pews of the church henceforth to be free to every individual resident in the parish who chooses to be in possession of them. And to appoint one or more [?questioners?] to the pews to prevent confusions and inconvenience – the pew doors to be taken off or shut back according to the discretion of the churchwardens".

Mr Schreiber, a member of the Council, seconded by Mr. Berrett, put forward a counter motion:-

"that the pew doors remain as they are and that the pews be appropriated as heretofore."

This motion was easily defeated, which suggests a great deal of discussion by members of the Parish Council before the meeting to overcome the previous hierarchical organisation of the pews which reflected the social standing of the occupants.

It is interesting that the motion to alter the seating was led by the person with the most to lose, William Charles Fonnereau.

Why they voted for this move which ended the public display of their status is intriguing - was it because of the growth in population and the need to put more seats in? We know that the population of the parish of St Margaret's had grown from 1,923 in 1801 to 4,512 in 1841.

This reason is the most likely as at the next Vestry Meeting on 19th January 1843 the agenda was the usual consideration of the Poor Rate and:-

"to consider and decide upon the propriety of doing away with the pews in the church and the substituting of benches in lieu thereof and upon the best means of carrying the same into effect."

Fonnereau again led by suggesting a committee to work out how best to replace pews with benches. An amendment by Thomas Stearns and the Rev. Edgar also recommended a committee to report and mentioned the lack of accommodation in the church.

Thereafter discussion in the Parish Vestry meetings about the pews disappears until 1845 and is taken over by discussion of highways, change of footpath routes and the Poor Rate. There are also notes of adjournments to the Admiral's Head!

The topic reappears in the minutes of 17th April 1845 when it is the main item on the agenda. It is obvious that much work had been going on behind the scenes.

"it was proposed by by William Charles Fonnereau Esq and seconded by Mr William Bailey Webster that it is the opinion of this meeting that the pews in this parish church should be taken down and open seats all similar in form and general outline to the one now exhibited to the meeting replaced in their stead."

Upon which Mr John Clarke moved as an amendment which was seconded by Thomas Berrett:-

"That the pews of the church be not taken down."

This was easily defeated by a show of hands.

It was then resolved unanimously:-

- *That the present occupants of pews shall now have seats allotted to them in the nave of the church according to the actual requirement of each pew holder.*
- *That the rest of the nave which remains unappropriated and the two side aisles be for ever free and unappropriated and shall have the word "Free" legibly written on each Free seat.*
- *That, as the present pewholder removes from the parish or dies or from any other cause discontinue their attendance at Church, the number of seats thus vacated shall become free and the westernmost seats now appropriated in the nave shall be those selected by the churchwardens to be free in future.*
- *That a Committee be appointed to carry these resolutions into effect – to collect subscriptions- to obtain aid from Church Extension Societies – and to arrange all other details respecting the plan, to be approved that nine be the number of the Committee and five a quorum."*



Print of Interior of St Margaret's Church after the new pews were installed.

In the end a compromise is reached, in that the pew holders of the past still have allotted pews and at the front. However, all are of standard design and revert to free use with the demise or relocation of the families. Thus some semblance of the social pecking order was retained.

The question of the pews disappears from the Vestry Minutes after a meeting on the 13th April 1846 when Henry Ringham, a church architect of Carr Street, is complimented for his *“great exertions in completing the alterations in the church in the short space of eight weeks and for the design and execution of all the works which have been finished this year in the church”*.

One wonders how the congregation managed during the eight weeks.

Old territorial habits, nevertheless, died hard and the Edgar family insisted on the replacement of their original pew by a specially designated one. From 1872 to 1881, Lord Hatherley, formerly Sir William Page Wood, leased the Red House and attended church sitting on the special pew assigned to the Red House.

Thus St Margaret's still has “Red House” written on one of the front left pews but members of today's congregation can sit where they please.

