



The purchase of seat-places in church in 18th century Minchinhampton

by A. C. Turk

In the Minchinhampton church warden's accounts for 1703 there is the following paragraph 'Memorandum that Noah Ferrers of this parish have Bought the uppermost Seate roome in the South Gallery in the Seate which Wm. Cooke Bought of Mrs Mary Ridler which place he giveth to John Vick for his Seat place where his Mother and Mrs Deane sitteth in the Body of the parish Church of Minchinhampton which Seat wholly Belongeth to the said Noah Ferrers'.

Such memoranda occur frequently throughout the book. Seat places could be bought, sold, gifted, exchanged, enlarged and newly built. It was necessary to keep a witnessed notice of all changes, giving a description of where the seat was, the names of the people concerned, and often finishing with 'which seat belongs to him and his heirs or assigns for ever.'

Some seat places belonged to particular houses—e.g. in 1703 'the Seat in the Body of the Church which belongs to the House where Joseph Rudge liveth'. Another in the same area of the church belonged to the Bell Inn. In 1705 is noted 'the Secunt Seate adjoining to ye Pillow on ye left hans of ye Aly as you goe in at ye Porch Doore which Seat place belongeth to ye Salutation.' In 1709 there is a reference to a seat place belonging to 'ye House of Ford ye Chandler' and later in 1712 to one belonging to 'the Crown and Dan Holbrow's House.'

The need to describe the position of the seat provides us with a picture of the old church. Thus in 1717 John Davis exchanged with Stephen Perry a seat 'ye back of ye Pulpit' for 'ye 2nd Seate over ye Tower door'; in 1716 Thomas Hill buys 'the backend most Seat in the Tower gallery over the Tower Doore'; about 1720 John Webb bought a seat 'neare the procession Door under the old gallery' and in 1730 Samuel Webb bought 'the Third Seat joyning the Wall on the West side of the Porch door'.

There are many references to the galleries. In 1707

Samual Cambridge bought 'the Second Seate on the South Side in the Gallery over the Chancel'. Earlier in 1705 Charles Skirton bought a seat 'below ye passage on ye South Side on ye East Gallery' and, still earlier, Joseph Davis' seat was 'half of ye fore Seat in ye West Galery'. There is an interesting memorandum concerning singing seats in the galleries—in 1715 Jeremiah Bishop bought 'one seat place in the ould Singing Seat that is in the East galery'. This 'ould Singing Seat' had been replaced in 1711 by a seat 'Erected in ye north Ile by John Holyday, Carpenter by a Company of Singers at their own proper cost and charge'. An addition was made to it in 1720, then proving seven seat places, and this record gives the names of the people occupying these seats. But over the next few years many of these men sold their seats, whether to new 'Singers' or for profit is not clear.

New seats were often recorded as having been erected. In 1701 'the Seate in the forme of a Gllaery in Anslows Chappell was built by the Consent of the Minister and Churchwardens by John Iles of Chalford'. There is another memorandum on Anslow's chapel; in 1727 'Jonathan Harvey Hath note of Mr Samuell Yeats of ye Spout and his Brother Mr Thomas Yeats four Seate places in ye Seate yt belongs to them in Anslows Chapel'. Much new seating was erected by Stephen Skinner, joiner, whose name occurs frequently as selling seats.

There are some examples of enlargement, repair or exchange. In 1717 'Mary Baylie have Repayred upon her charge the fowerth Seate in the north Ile the next Seate to the Widdow Cortises Seat'. In 1703 'Mr Vick of this parish have enlarged two Seat Rooms in the Seat in the Body of the Church'. In 1720 Joseph Pinfold exchanged 'one Seat place in the third Seat from the door of the old Gallery on the North side to John Eddles for a Seat place behind the porch door'. No reason for these exchanges is ever given. Did they give greater social standing, were more convenient or were relations, friends or neighbours sitting nearby? It does not seem to have been financial, as money is never mentioned.

The Vestry did not concern itself with private seats except in so far as the churchwardens usually witnessed any memorandum about such seats; but they did deal with general seating as the following notice shows. 'At a vestry held 23rd Day of January 1734/5 it was agreed that the following Repairs and Decorations in the Chancel shall be forthwith made and set up—

Nothing to be done to the Walls either by plaister or winscote or other All the old Baken Benches to be used again as fas as they will go

To Repair the old Rails and let them stand as they are

New Baken or Deal benches where the old will not do'

Buying a seat was costly. It is difficult to be certain what multiplier to use in order to compare 18th Century prices with those of today, not only because of inflation but also because the relative value put on the same object varies over the years, but a multiplier of 100 would seem to be right. With this in mind it is obvious that only the fairly well-off could afford a personal seat in the church. Here are some examples of the amounts paid. In 1726 Samuel Day of Littleworth paid Daniel King 14s (70p) for a 'Singing Seat.' This is the same amount that Thomas Wicks paid John Cambridge in 1728. But in 1731 Thomas Iddles paid Frances Saunders, widow 'one pound and one shilling' for a seat

in the old gallery, and this was more usually the price. At the lower end of the scale Thomas Payton of the Black Ditch, Rodborough, in 1739 paid John Weaver of Houndscroft 5s (25p) for 'one Seat place Behind the pulpit', while at the upper end Samuel Yeats in 1717 paid his brother John Yeats £7 for a 'Seat in a Gallery lately Erected in the East end of the South Ile'. (This seat, though, did give room for eight people).

As mentioned earlier, Stephen Skinner erected many seats. His best efforts came in 1717 when 'of his own

proper cost and charg' he erected 'three Seat places that are Cooshind with blew and edged with Red Edging and wainscoted on ye back'. One wonders who sat in time and what has happened to them. Stephen Skinner, sadly, became poor in his old age when, presumably, he was incapable of working at joinery. His house was substantial and he was highly rated, but in 1735, when he must have been in his sixties—his father died in 1685 leaving Stephen the eldest of a large family—he was excused rates of 4/8d because of his poverty.