

# ‘To take their places where they shall not offend others’ — the 1635 Re-seating of Puddletown Church, Dorset

by

BOB MACHIN

*Architectural historians have studied seventeenth- and eighteenth-century re-seating of parish churches from a liturgical viewpoint, whilst social historians have viewed early-seventeenth-century disputes about re-seatings as a minor reflection of socio-economic realignments. But the unique documentary evidence dating from 1635 at Puddletown in Dorset highlights something more – the ‘new social order’ of Jacobethan society was made manifest in the re-seating of parish churches – and it did not meet with unqualified approval.*

The Church’s Restoration  
In eighteen-eighty-three  
Has left for contemplation  
Not what there used to be.  
(Sir John Betjeman, *Hymn*, 1932)

First amongst the tasteless Victorian improvements, that Betjeman went on to disapprove of, were pine bench pews. Therefore, it is a delightful contrast to enter a church which the Victorians forgot. Even if there is not a social hierarchy of eighteenth-century box pews, the ranks of simpler seventeenth-century pews, with their doors and metal furniture, all facing an elevated pulpit, seem so much more suitable for a Reformation Church of England environment. The parish church of St Mary, Puddletown, Dorset is one such (Fig. 1), although the rebuilding of the chancel in 1910 is unfortunate.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth visiting because it appears to be the only surviving early-seventeenth-century interior for which there is documentary evidence for what was done, why, and how it was received by the parishioners.

---

Bob Machin read History at Oxford and until 1994 was Bristol University Resident Tutor in Dorset, where retirement has provided him with an opportunity to reconsider thirty years of historical research in the county.



Fig. 1

Puddletown Church interior from the east

*RCHM, Dorset III, part 2 (1970), pl. 185*

Just as many people object to Victorian pine ‘free sittings’, there were plenty who objected to the re-seating of parish churches in the early seventeenth century. Dorset Churchwardens’ Presentments are full of examples. At Ryme Intrinseca in 1609, Susan Husday and Agnes Ploweman were presented ‘for contending and strivieing in the Church for a seate: [and] the one thrustinge and pullinge owt the other’. Every Sunday at Lyme Regis in 1631, Hester Jordayne disturbed Ann Gregory, ‘and other her pewmates by Continuall Sittinge & unseemly & Immodest thrusting of her selfe into their seates, she havinge no right there’. At Folke in 1631, three female servants of William Fauntleroy, Esq., intruded ‘themselves into the two former women seates appointed for other of the parishioners and doe disturb them in their seates whereas there is a place allotted for them in their Master’s Ile’.

Exactly what the parishioners were arguing about is not always clear, even when we try to read between the lines. Folke was re-seated in 1628 and is still largely intact, but there was a dispute over seating. On 3 December 1630, Walter Rideout, gentleman, ‘did break open a locke sett uppon the seate appoynted for the churching of women, the

seate being locked upp by Mr Dean's direcion, which lock was carried away by him: afterwarde the said seate being againe locked upp by us with an other locke, he ... severall tymes very uncivilly climed over the said seate, and giveth out in speeches that he will sitt in the said seate notwithstanding Mr Deanes order to the contrary'. According to the Churchwardens' presentment of the preceding year, everyone had agreed to be seated 'according to their severall rancks & Degrees' except Mr Walter Rideout who had refused two alternative locations – either 'the uppermost seat save one on the north syde of ... the Church' or 'next unto the seate of William Fauntleroy, Esq., in the Ile on the south side'.<sup>2</sup>

The Churchwardens had bent over backwards to accommodate Mr Rideout, but he died an embittered man. The only other thing we know about him is his epitaph, which he himself wrote. He died in 1643, aged eighty-four and the memorial in the church reads

Here lyeth a true Christian, now at quiet rest,  
Who whilst he lyved was by the world oprest.  
But praysed be God he hath overcome this evill,  
And vanquished hath the world, the flesh, the devil.

One wonders if Walter Rideout was just a foolish old man or the three servants of William Fauntleroy just foolish women – like Susan Husday and Agnes Plowman of Ryme, or Hester Jordayne of Lyme – making mountains out of molehills. However, when one finds hundreds of such disputes about seating, from all over the country, the suspicion grows that these arguments were symptoms of something vitally important to the protagonists.

When *The Ministry of the Word* replaced *The Mystery of the Mass* at the Reformation, a new 'auditory' layout was required. Most English parish churches were completely refurnished, with a 'three-decker' pulpit and pews. Only a few examples survived Georgian and Victorian restorations, but Dorset is fortunate – the early-seventeenth-century fittings at Folke, Leweston and Puddletown are virtually intact. But Puddletown is unique. As far as can be discovered, this is the only seventeenth-century parish church interior in England where we have both the 1635 fittings and documentary evidence explaining what was done and why.<sup>3</sup>

After evening service on Sunday 10th August 1634, the congregation remained seated whilst the Churchwardens described a proposal for totally re-fitting the interior. An earlier report had said 'That a maine pillar & arech was in Decaye and to be strengthened and that the seats eare not Dessent but mutch out of order and in Decaye and that thear wanted Roome for the parrishoners being Increased'. The starting point was the need to strengthen the north pillar of the chancel arch. In 1505 the west wall of the north transept had been taken down to incorporate it in the new north aisle. It was now realised that this demolished wall had been taking most of the thrust of the chancel arch. The solution proposed by 'skilful workmen' sounds almost as dotty as the cause of the problem – to strengthen the arch by erecting a new screen. This would put the rest of the fittings to shame, so it was further proposed that the church should be 'new Seated throughout' and that there should be 'A gallarie at the weste ende to Receive seates that the church

cannott supplie'. Having gone this far, the most important fittings had to be replaced: 'A communion table and a frame about yt for the communion and a settle without that'; 'A pulpit and Reading place to be made and advanzed'; and 'A newe cover for the font that is All in Decaie'. All of these improvements were authorised and survive, except that in 1910 the chancel was rebuilt so that its 1635 fittings were re-arranged.

The estimated cost of the work was £130. A levy of five shillings on each of the 240 people to be seated raised £60. The balance of £70 was raised by five ordinary rates on the 129 households. We are told that everyone who paid, 'shall in their Degree and Ranke be seated and Recorded that hereafter They be not Impeached by any that have not Joynd in the costs of this Worke But such to take their places wheare they shall not offend others'.

All of these proposals were endorsed by the Archdeacon and, according to the inscription on the gallery front (Fig. 2), the work was completed within a year. But although the 'beauty of holiness' was achieved in the church fittings at Puddletown, it caused some unholy dissensions within the congregation. Entertaining details of seating disputes, as quoted earlier, are lacking, but two years after the refitting in 1637, the Churchwardens drew up a document headed 'Things propounded and Desired by Lawfull fauour of Authoritie to be furthered and confirmed for the quietinge of the parrishoners in settling them in their proper places and seates in the church'. It contained six principles, a written statement of where each social group should sit, and originally had a seating plan annexed which does not survive.

The first principle was financial: everyone was to pay their contribution to the costs. Those too poor to pay anything could not be excluded from church but they could be stigmatised: 'for the poorer men as undertenants or cottagers that contribut not to the worke they to take their places in the Belfrie as the like is in other parrishes'. This is a most illuminating remark. The poor were required to stand (in the medieval manner) in the tower opening at the furthest west end of the church. This was both demeaning and divisive. The fourth principle was related: 'That mens hindes [i.e. servants] and poore undertenants doe putt themselves in their places prepared and assigned and not into the Channsell'. Presumably many of the poor had previously stood around the pulpit and communion rail. That they should continue to do so in full view of the main body of the seated congregation was now considered either improper or unsightly.



Fig. 2

Inscription, 1635, on west gallery

*Photograph: author*

We do not know exactly how many poor there were in Puddletown in 1635, but the estimates for raising the cost of re-seating speak of 129 rate-paying households in the parish. The usual multiplier of 4.5 persons per household would give a total population of around 580. The estimates also speak of 240 persons paying five shillings each for a seat. Therefore, 580 minus 240 gives an estimated total of 340 poor. This was more than half the population of the parish, which is an unbelievably high proportion for the seventeenth century. Gregory King's calculations of 1688 led him to believe that half the population of England was 'diminishing the wealth of the kingdom' by earning less than it required for subsistence. The 1672/3 Hearth Tax Assessments from various counties give an exemption rate for the poor of around thirty per cent.

Whatever the real numbers of the poor in early seventeenth century Puddletown, it would be physically impossible for more than a score of them to stand at the back of the church. Most of those 'that contribut not to the worke' were not just demeaned – they were, in practical terms, excluded.

The sixth principle dealt with a different financial matter – 'That none be permitted to lett their seates in the Church to Rent'. Pews were either 'private' or 'church' pews. 'Private pews' had been built at their own costs by individuals who had bought a space within the church: they were private property that could be bequeathed or sold. Although Puddletown parishioners had paid for their pews in 1635, they remained parochial property. Pew-holders who were temporarily absent could lend their seats to neighbours or friends, but they could not disrupt the social grading of the seating arrangements decreed by the Churchwardens and 'cheef parrishoners'.

The three remaining principles were all concerned with social hierarchy within the building. The third stated 'That menn and woemen be not Intermixed in seates but eyther sorte & sexe to be seated by themselves in their proper quarters and squadrons'. The separation of the sexes was normal and survived until comparatively recently in some conservative churches. 'The proper quarters' for men and women is readily understood, but their 'proper squadrons' is not so obvious. The villagers were to be divided not only by sex but also by age and socio-economic status. This was also commonplace until well into the nineteenth century. That 'the subordination of ranks is of divine institution and never is more beautifully or harmoniously exhibited than in the House of God, where rich and poor meet together to share the blessings of their common Father' is a commentary from 1840 but the same concept was expressed in innumerable earlier descriptions.

Pride of place at Puddletown went to the two manorial Lords of Puddletown and Waterson – the Hon. Henry Hastings and the Right Hon. Earl of Suffolk. Their superior pews survive immediately beneath the pulpit in the nave (Fig. 3) – the separate pews for their wives in the north aisle have been removed.

Male tenants sat behind their respective manorial lords in the body of the nave with their wives behind them. The division can be seen by the presence of hat pegs in the men's area. Their sons – 'of best Ranke and estate' – sat with the servants of the manorial lords in a lost pew on the east side of the pulpit. 'Daughters of the Best ranke' sat with the ladies' maids to the west of the ladies in the north aisle. All other young girls and maid servants sat either at the 'seats ends' in the north aisle or 'in that part of the gallarie ... fitted and prepared for them'. The gallery (Fig. 5) was divided into three parts: one for



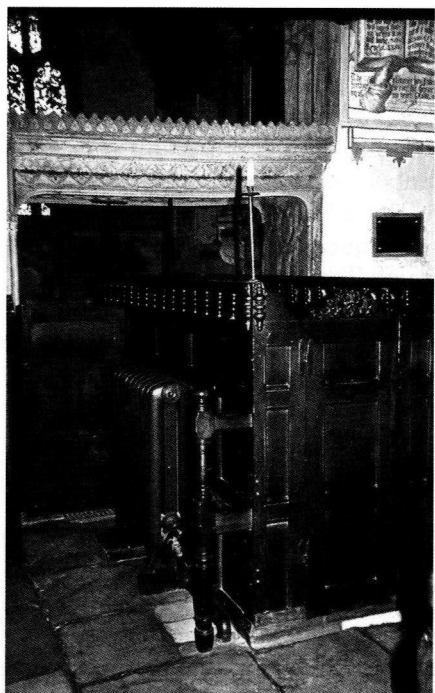


Fig. 3 (*left*)  
Manorial  
pew in front  
of the pulpit  
(the children's  
bench has  
been replaced  
by a radiator)

*Photograph:*  
*author*



Fig. 4 (*right*)  
Pulpit and  
priest's  
reading desk

*Photograph:*  
*author*



Fig. 5

West gallery

*Photograph:* *author*

the overflow of young girls from the aisle, another for 'the newe cottagers that contribute to the worke', and the third for their wives. 'Smaler boyes and scholers' were assigned to the alley 'right before the minister's Pue', on surviving open benches.

Basically, the church was divided into four areas: first, immediately around the pulpit were the manorial lords, their ladies, their maids and the children; second, behind them were their tenants; third, in the gallery were the cottagers; and fourthly, standing in the bell-tower were those few poor people who chose still to come to church. Looking down the church from his pulpit (Fig. 4) in 1637, the vicar could see that the divine institution of subordinate ranks had been made manifest. Whether or not he thought it beautiful, he knew, as we now do, that it was not achieved harmoniously but only after some acrimonious wrangles.

We do not know what the excluded poor thought about the refurnishing of their church. Their opinions were of so little consequence that no literate person bothered to record them. Presumably a few poor continued to attend church, either through piety or to 'earn' the extra charity of bread and fuel doles which some of their wealthier neighbours established from time to time. But the majority only received confirmation of what was already becoming clear in Reformation England, that the poor were now an unwanted surplus population, which those with an economic stake in society would prefer to exclude and forget about.

Those who could afford to pay for the right to sit in their parish church had much to contend about. Some conservatives, such as Walter Rideout, could not accept the changes. Others, like Susan Husday, Agnes Plowman or Hester Jordayne, felt that they had not received the social recognition that they deserved. The re-seating, at Puddletown and elsewhere, reflected a restructuring of traditional society. This brave new world was based primarily upon each person's position on the ladder of wealth. Those who could not contribute financially were to be thrust out – 'as the like is in other parishes'. Those who could afford to pay were seated not according to tradition, birth or the practical contributions they made to community life but according to their financial stake in the parish as manorial lords, tenant farmers or cottagers.

It was a simple polarisation into 'haves' and 'have nots'. We have already heard some of the respectable 'haves' at Puddletown describe themselves as the 'chief parishioners' and those 'of best rank and estate'. Elsewhere, in petitions and court judgements, such men called themselves 'the major part' or 'the better sort'. 'Sort' recurs so frequently in sixteenth-century texts that it seems to have replaced the medieval classification into 'ranks and estates'. Sixteenth-century people were either of 'the better sort' or they were not. A 1596 commentator in Devon wrote that 'the gentlemen of the country and some of the better sort' ought to keep hospitality, relieve the poor, and 'be at hand to stay the fury of the inferior multitude if they should happen to break out'.<sup>4</sup>

The mid-seventeenth-century Civil Wars made it necessary to take sides. There has been much debate as to who joined which side and for what reason. But many contemporaries were agreed that, by and large, the royalists were aristocrats, their dependants and 'the needy multitude', whilst parliament had the hearts of 'the yeomen, farmers, clothiers and the whole middle rank of the people'; 'tradesmen and freeholders, and the middle sort of men'; 'the middle sort of people, who are the body of the kingdom'.

All that is lacking here is the term class. It will not be used until the late eighteenth century. But for all practical purposes, a new rural middle class was already established by the mid-seventeenth century and had been establishing its values for several generations.

Where, or even whether, one had a seat when the community gathered for worship now depended upon one's ability to pay – in this case five shillings per person and the product of five parish rates per household. It was a simple and rational way to raise money. The appearance of Rate Books among early-seventeenth-century parish records and the frequent appeals to Quarter Sessions against inequitable assessments demonstrates the novelty of the method. The traditional way to raise money for community causes was Church Ales and Revels. These convivial and sometimes boisterous gatherings were now suppressed in the interests of 'law and order'.<sup>5</sup>

The surviving re-fittings at Puddletown, Folke and scores of other places certainly show 'the architectural setting of Anglican worship'.<sup>6</sup> But their ranked seating also shows the pattern of the new social order desired by 'the middling' or 'better sort' of society. This was not achieved without a struggle, but eventually the lower orders were persuaded 'to take their places where they did not offend others'.

#### NOTES

1. For the controversy over the 1910 rebuilding of the chancel see Claudius J. P. Beatty, *Thomas Hardy: conservation architect – his work for the SPAB* (1995), 42-9.
2. Dorset Churchwardens' Presentments are catalogued by year in the Wiltshire Record Office.
3. The Puddletown documents are in The Dorset Local History Centre (formerly the Dorset County Record Office) PE/PUD/CW 5/1 and 5/2.
4. Keith Wrightson, 'Estates, degrees and sorts: changing perceptions of society in Tudor and Stuart England' in P. J. Corfield (ed.) *Language, History and Class* (1991).
5. See D. Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (1985).
6. See the pioneering work by G. W. O. Addleshaw and F. Etchells, *The Architectural Setting of Anglican Worship* (1948) and N. Yates, *Buildings, Faith and Worship: the liturgical arrangement of Anglican churches 1600-1900* (1991, rev. ed. 2000).