

Faxton was a village sited about 15 km south of Market Harborough, between Lamport and Old. On a modern Ordnance Survey map there is no more shown than the name, two buildings and two patches of woodland reached by a byway, bridleway and footpaths.

At the time of the Domesday survey there were 32 families in Faxton. Its largest recorded population was 108 in 1841. By 1921 its population was 37 and by 1951 only one person lived at Faxton. Aerial photographs show there were about 20 or 30 dwellings in the area.

My interest has been with the village church of St Denis,¹ initially its wall paintings, then its fate, the saints linked to the church and more recently the Font. Almost a year after I discovered a slim file at the National Archives, Kew describing the wall paintings I visited the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, (SPAB). Their archivist had found a file of letters, reports and photographs and a plan of the church showing the locations of the monuments of the Nicholls and Raynsford families. The brown folder and buff envelope looked innocuous, but the record of events within was quite dramatic.

“A DANGEROUS STRUCTURE” - THE SAD FATE OF ST. DENIS CHURCH, FAXTON.

By Janice Morris



ST. DENIS CHURCH FAXTON IN THE 1860S.

Isolated, little used, crumbling and defenceless against vandals, both official and unofficial, St Denis church waited thirty years for its fate to be decided. In that time architects and surveyors, artists, writers and local historians visited the church in the fields, saw its state, commented, usually sympathetically, but passed on. A battle of words erupted, emotions ran high, accusations were made, appeals were sent to potential allies, forces rallied and hopes raised, only to be dashed. It was reminiscent of Anthony Trollope's *The Warden*, but this was a true story.

The file started in 1924 with letters relating to the poor state of the monument to Judge Nicholls. Then in 1926 the architect Laurence Gotch was asked to give his opinion on the state of both monument and church. His report was particularly negative stating:

“This is a building of very little Architectural interest compared with most Northamptonshire Churches, and has no feature of outstanding merit except the Nicholls monument.”

The roof and walls were in need of repair, the internal walls were decaying because of excess moisture, the pews and floors were

“worm eaten, mildewed and rotting” and the capitals of the arches were “mutilated and the stone is crumbling away.”

He concluded by saying

“I have no hesitation in stating that it would be a waste of money to attempt any restoration of the fabric as I consider the Church is uninteresting and superfluous.”

The monument was the one feature worthy of being saved².

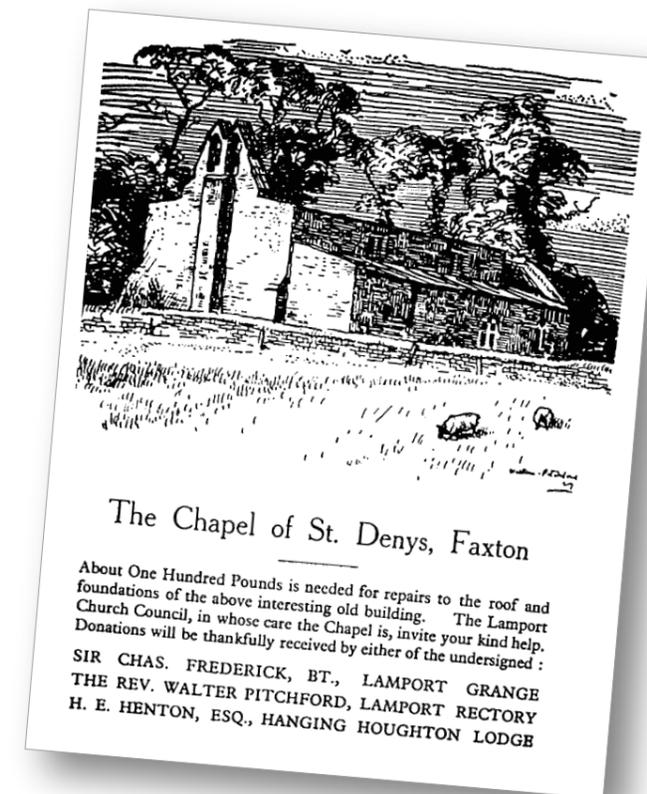
In June 1928 the SPAB asked Charles Maresco Pearce to visit the church. His report was much more positive in its assessment, and a month later wrote to the SPAB describing the church as:

“a charming little building mainly of the fourteenth century....Externally the walling is in fair condition and very pleasant to look at.” He concluded “it is worth careful repairing.”

This seemed to be a more promising view. Following that report the SPAB wrote to the Architectural and Archaeological Society for the Archdeaconries of Northampton and Oakham, to ask if the Society would be interested in the church. Three months later, having looked carefully at the church, the Society wrote to the SPAB saying they would not be doing anything.



THE MONUMENT OF SIR AUGUSTINE NICHOLLS, 1559 – 1616



THE APPEALS LEAFLET FOR FUNDING FOR REPAIRS

In 1929 an appeal leaflet was produced by the Lamport Church Council featuring a sketch of the church signed “Watkins Pitchford”. This was presumably Denys Watkins Pitchford, author and artist, known as “BB.” His father, Walter, was the Rector of Lamport and was also responsible for Faxton. Denys had spent his childhood at Lamport Rectory. In 1929 he was teaching art at Rugby School. The appeal raised funds for repairs to the roof and foundations. By August 1930 the repairs had been carried out at a cost of £74 18s. Here was another glimmer of hope, in that the repairs might ensure the church would escape demolition.

There was no further correspondence in the file until 1946 when a Mr P. Amos wrote to express fears that the church

would be lost if not repaired. About this time, or a little earlier John Piper, artist, and Arnold Palmer, writer, must have visited the church for the Recording Britain Project.³ The Project was set up at the outbreak of the Second World War and employed artists to record the landscape, way of life and architectural heritage of Britain. It was intended to promote morale and the war effort. John Piper drew the exterior and interior of the church. The accompanying text on the exterior refers to the difficulties of reaching it and comments

“the building as a whole is remarkable as one of the very few unrestored churches in this part of the country.” It ends “A certain amount of simple repair is now needed if the church is to be saved from the opposing dangers of decay and restoration. The interior, damp, and forlorn from disuse, retains its simple beauty.”

The volume in which this appeared was published in 1947, the year in which J.L.Carr saw the church.⁴ He also found “a hint of medieval wall paintings upon a flaking limewashed wall”.

The next correspondence came from architects Knapp-Fisher, Powell and Russell of London, in July 1950 suggesting the SPAB might take an interest in the church and give advice. The Rector and Church Council of Lamport had been made responsible for the decision about the future of the church, but they felt “totally unfitted” to decide on whether it should be demolished. The church was described as

“very dilapidated (though not at present ruinous)” and “from its form and position, an interesting feature of the landscape.”

On 31st July, 1950 another architect, Mr David Martin, made a report and drew a plan giving the location of the Nicholls and Raynesford monuments. The report mentioned the current incumbent, Reverend Anderson, had tried to find a religious body to take over St Denis, but its remote position and lack of facilities had meant no interest had been shown. Mr Martin suggested the church was left as a ruin with the roof and interior woodwork removed and the walls capped.

The SPAB agreed with his suggestion, although there had been previous indications that such action would lessen SPAB's interest in the building. It was a compromise between demolition and repair, but not very positive.

In late October 1952 Miss Joan Wake, who founded the Northamptonshire Record Society, entered energetically into the fight to save the church. She wrote to the SPAB stating the Bishop of Peterborough, Spencer Leeson, agreed with the idea of leaving the church as a ruin. However, his Chancellor, the Rector of Lamport and the Archdeacon of Northampton wanted to pull it down, even though they had had no advice from an architect. Miss Wake was going to meet the Bishop in November and indicated she favoured his view. The SPAB responded supportively.

In December 1952 the churchwardens and Reverend Anderson petitioned the Consistory Court, Peterborough for an order allowing the removal of lead, the roof and interior fittings. The Northampton Mercury reported the impending removal of the roof on 10th April, 1953.

Miss Wake must have continued to fight the demolition and asked Mr H.C.R.Frost of the Archaeological Section of Northampton Natural History Society to visit St Denis church. He wrote to the Bishop on 17th May, 1953 informing him he had found traces of mural paintings of at least four distinct periods. He asked the Bishop to withhold the faculty for any further demolition until the paintings could be examined by experts. In late May a Mr Thacker produced an initial report for the Ministry of Works on the wall paintings and the condition of the church.

In view of Mr Thacker's information about the wall paintings Miss Wake appealed urgently to the SPAB for advice and on 4th June Mr Martin and Mr Frost visited the church again. Although the roof had been removed the walls had not been capped to prevent deterioration and Mr Martin wrote to the SPAB of his concern about the rather perilous state of some parts of what remained of the church. He said the wall paintings were

“rather interesting and most certainly should be carefully investigated before any further damage is done to the plaster work or masonry.”

He described black lettering and fret design, holly leaves and other red and black painting. There were several sets of paintings, some covered with limewash.

The Ministry of Works could not investigate the paintings until November and December 1953. Wall paintings from medieval, Tudor and Stuart times were uncovered, some quite substantial.

This could have proved to be a turning point in the church's fortunes. For a while it appears there were no significant concerns, or at least nothing involving the SPAB. It was not until 1958 that there was further correspondence to the Society from Miss Wake. She sent copies of various letters she had written and a cutting from an unnamed newspaper. The cutting was dated 28th June, 1957 and was of a letter from Councillor D.J.Ashby of Burton Latimer. He had visited the church the previous week and had been horrified by what he found.

“Gravestones had been uprooted from the churchyard. Cows were being allowed to use the consecrated spot, and indeed were at liberty to use the church as a cowshed. The interior of the church was one mass of filth”. He concluded “let it not be said that this generation failed in its duty to preserve Faxton church even as a ruin in its present consecrated and beautiful surrounding.”

Miss Wake was no longer living in Northamptonshire, but her letter of 17th February, 1958 to the Archdeacon of Northampton makes it clear that she was still very concerned about Faxton. She also sought reassurance from him about the policy of the Diocesan Committee towards the ancient churches of the diocese when they were no longer in regular use. Her letter was quite strongly worded, amongst other things she pointed out the walls had been left uncapped after the roof had been removed, leaving the fabric open to the elements. She had been told the money for the capping and erecting a railing around the building had been used elsewhere. She felt the ecclesiastical authorities had neglected their responsibilities towards “this beautiful little building”.



MODEL OF CHURCH

Her letter of 20 March 1958 to the SPAB expressed even stronger sentiments about what was happening to the church. Bishop Leeson who had wanted the church to be maintained as a ruin died in 1956. His successor and the Archdeacon of Northampton had met with Sir Gyles Isham of Lamport at Faxton on 19th March. Sir Gyles was a local historian and had succeeded Miss Wake as the Northamptonshire correspondent of the Ancient Monuments Department of the Office of Works.

Miss Wake may well have hoped Sir Gyles would be an ally. However, she wrote:

"The place is now in such a deplorable state they think total demolition will be necessary. And sad as he is about it, I am afraid Sir Gyles agrees...They may be right but I will NEVER accept a decision of this kind from amateurs".

She was uncertain of the intentions of the ecclesiastical authorities towards Faxton and said that if Faxton was lost

"let us get good out of evil by publishing the facts, and demanding that the Church if unable or unwilling to look after its treasures, should hand them over to the secular arm."

She also wrote to express her concerns to the Bishop of Peterborough on 20th March. She asked him to request a further report from the SPAB as they might have suggestions that could avoid the remains of the church being demolished. She begged him to have a barbed wire fence put round the church. She added



THE FONT OF ST. DENIS CHURCH NOW IN A KETTERING CHURCH.

"the Archdeacon of Northampton wrote to me only on Feb 26th last that the proceeds of the sale of the lead were 'available for providing a proper fence and dealing with the building and this will be done in the near future.'

On 4th March he wrote to her again:

'There is no reason why the remainder (i.e. the roofless building) should be demolished. But it must be properly capped if it is to remain an 'organised ruin' and also securely fenced.'

The Bishop replied on 25th March saying he would be glad of help in settling the matter.

"The only thing which I cannot agree to is the continuance of the present situation which is a scandal".

According to the Bishop there was approximately £200 left which was inadequate for the erecting of a fence round the site. Lamport P.C.C. was without finances and Diocesan funds were needed to provide new churches. It was no long possible for the church to continue as an organised ruin.

"The whole business of Faxton is an object lesson in how not to do these things".

Miss Wake made a final appeal to the SPAB, indicating her feelings about the agenda of some of the clergy regarding Faxton. She suggested leaving the church to decay naturally and erecting signs to warn people of the risk of approaching it. She asked whether the SPAB could advise on the legal aspects of this, the extent of the Bishop's powers to preserve or demolish a church, who actually owned the churches and whether the Council for the Defence of Churches could take up Faxton's case.

This was to no avail. The church by then was seen as a "dangerous structure" and demolition was carried out later in 1958/9. J.L. Carr in his foreword to 'Churches in Retirement' wrote

"So the walls were flattened, the headstones buried face downward, the yard wall sagged to a grassy ridge. The late Sir Gyles Isham of Lamport Hall erected a stone plinth. Its simple inscription 'the altar of the church of St Denys stood here', did not stir all hearts."

The Font was eventually relocated to a church in Kettering, where it is still used, and an arch from the church is in the garden of Lamport Rectory.

St Denis church needed help at a time when money was very limited and the drive was for the old to make way for the new. Indeed after the Second World War the site of the medieval village of Faxton was one of a number considered for a New Town development. Now few people even know of the name of Faxton, the location of the village which is said to have dated from at least the ninth century, or that a little church served the community there for about eight hundred years. If there is one positive to the story of St Denis church it is that it made people aware that churches can be demolished.

Footnotes

¹ The spelling of St Denis and St Denys is interchangeable. 'The Oxford Dictionary of Saints' uses Denys and just lists the alternatives Dennis, Dionis, Dionysuis. It moves from Denys to Denis without comment. ² The Nicholls Monument was in a very bad condition when taken to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in 1965, but was seen as a very good example of Nicholas Stone's work (an important sculptor of 17th century) and was restored. ³ Carr J.L. 'Churches in Retirement,' Foreword pp ix-x, (1990), H.M.S.O. ⁴ Palmer, Arnold 'Recording Britain Volume II,' Geoffrey Cumberledge & Pilgrim Trust (1947), Oxford University Press.

Acknowledgements

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The Society was begun in 1877. It is a charity and provides lectures and events for its members. It continues to provide consultation, advice and training to those concerned with listed buildings. It has to be notified of any application to demolish or partly demolish listed buildings and may take up cases to oppose such plans.

Contact 37 Spital Square London E1 6DY E: info@spab.org.uk