

SEATING PLAN, CALSTOCK CHURCH, 1587-1588

by Gordon Honeycombe

The seating plan was discovered in the 1980s when the records of Calstock Parish Church were deposited at the Cornwall County Record Office in Truro. The plan is a copy, made on parchment, of the seating in the church about 1587.

Although the copy is dated 24 May 1654, a glance at the plan, signed by the rector, Henry Verchill and ten parishioners, shows that those named on the plan were living in the village some 70 years earlier. The squire's pew, at the west end or rear of the church, is occupied by Piers Edgcumbe, the eldest son of Sir Richard Edgcumbe and his wife Elizabeth, who owned Cotehele at the time. Piers died on 4 January 1607/08. He had a brother called Richard who probably died in 1586. We can make this assumption as there is a memorial to him, dated 1588, in the floor of the mortuary chapel attached to the church, and the inventory of his possessions that was made after his death is dated 17 January 1587 - which implies that he died a week or a few weeks before that. As Piers is the only Edgcumbe to appear on the seating plan, Richard was very probably dead when the plan was made.

The date of the original seating plan makes it a rare document, as the only earlier seating plan for a church, as far as is known, is that of Trull in Somerset, which is dated 1569. Other such seating plans, dated much later, have survived for some Cornish churches; there is one for St Ewe, dated 1676, and another for Crowan, dated 1666. The latter plan was made, on the instructions of the bishop, by the vicar and church wardens to 'draw up a table of the seating with reference to all private rights'. It continues, 'Since the time of the late sedition (the period of Cromwell's rule as Lord Protector), and since, the parishioners have taken what places they pleased in church, sitting promiscuously and unequally, so that many contentions and discussions arise, to the scandal of religion and violation of public peace.'

Clearly the Calstock seating plan was intended to impose some order on where the congregation sat - to place them according to their rank and social position, to separate the sexes, and of course to raise some revenue for the church.

It shows seating in box-like pews for 220 persons, including the squire, the parson, the parson's wife, the warden and the parish clerk. It shows that pew-rents ranged from two pence to two shillings, and that the most expensive seats were in the middle at the front (as in most theatres these days), with those sitting in the north and south chancels being charged less, and those at the back the least. Men and women were segregated, to avoid any unseemly behaviour or distractions. There is no indication that the church had an altar; the pulpit seems to have been the focal point.

Fixed pews didn't appear in churches until about 1290. Before that people stood, or sat on benches. In canon law the disposing of the seats belonged to the bishop of the diocese, except when a nobleman or country gentleman had donated a chapel or some extension to the church for his family's private use and continued to maintain and repair it. But from 1500, churchwardens took over the allocation of pews; they levied and collected what were supposed to be reasonable and affordable rents. The seats at the back went to 'labourers and their wives not already seated'. Wives and widows were also accommodated at the rear of the north and south aisles. In a seating plan for the church of St Just in Roseland in 1700, some non-designated seats were assigned to the 'meaner sort of payers and inhabitants within the said parish', and the commission for the plan refers to the placing of the parishioners 'according to their degrees and qualities'. Pews in fact became freehold property and could be bought and sold and leased. As late as 1900 there are instances of bequests of pews in wills.

At the time of the Calstock seating plan the box-pews were probably made up of benches within low partitioned-off enclosures, not too high, so that the occupants could be seen as well as see.

But Piers Edgcumbe, the rector and the warden would have been sitting in higher, better quality pews, more solidly made and ornately carved.

Some background to the Honeycombes who had seats in the parish church (and those who didn't) can be gleaned from the Duchy of Cornwall Court Rolls of 1591/91/93 and the Assession Roll of 1593.

According to the Court Rolls for the manor of Calstock in 1591, John and James Honeycombe were in debt, as was Roger Honeycombe; Philip Honeycombe gave a close, Chilescombe in Harrowbarrow, to Thomas Salmon; Thomas Honeycombe received Church Park in Harrowbarrow from Samson Webb; Philip Honeycombe, junior, received a close called Higher Broadland from Roger Dodge; and Richard Honeycombe was a plaintiff in some suit.

In 1592, Stephen Honeycombe was a juror; Elizabeth Honeycombe got a close from John Jane and gave it to Walter Jane; and John and Thomas Honeycombe were in debt.

In 1593, Stephen Honeycombe was again a juror.

According to the Assession Roll for the manor of Calstock in 1593, Alice Stentaford and John Bartlett were in possession of Honicombe (then consisting of one dwelling and 30 acres); one of her sons was William Stentaford. Sampson Grills, whose third wife was Dorothy Honeycombe of Hill, was an absentee owner of some land; and Piers Edgecumbe lived in Cotehele.

Of the Honeycombes . . . Stephen Honeycombe had most of two houses and 25 acres (with Agnes Baker and Philip Facey) at Beas and Crosse; he also shared half of Bromeclose (seven acres) with Sampson Hunn, and on his own possessed a cottage and a yard at Hill. Thomas Honeycombe had half of a house and 14 acres in Kingsgarden; Elizabeth Honeycombe shared a house and 11 acres in Kingsgarden with 11 other villagers; Joan Honeycombe, widow of John, and Thomasina Honeycombe, widow of another John, shared a house and 11 acres in Kingsgarden with John Symons; Grace Honeycombe, wife of William Honeycombe, had a piece of land in Latchley, which she shared with 10 others; and Philip Honeycombe had a garden in Harrowbarrow.

An investigation of other rolls of this period reveals that Stephen Honeycombe (in pew 4, centre left, beside the parish clerk) was one of a family of about seven children; his father was Thomas Honeycombe. His eldest brother, also called Thomas, lived to be over 80 and was alive in 1614. This must be the Thomas in pew 5, far right. Stephen's wife, Joan, must be the Joan Honicomb senior in 8 centre left. Stephen died in 1601 and she in 1606.

His will is the earliest extant will of a Honeycombe. At his death his goods were assessed by John Facey and John Combe to be worth 18 pounds, 19 shillings and 10 pence. He had two cows, one yearling, one colt, 20 sheep, two pigs, three hens, corn in the mow and in the barn, and various items of furniture - also one cottage. The 20 sheep were the most valuable item, being worth more than 3 pounds, 6 shillings. He bequeathed a sheep to various people, including two married daughters (Moad and Joan); an unmarried daughter, Thomasina, got 5 pounds, as well as a sheep. Stephen's servant, Henry Mayster, got a lamb - Henry was under the age of 21. The rest of Stephen's estate was divided between his widow, Joan, and his son, Anthony.

Joan's will, made in 1603, a few years before she died, shows a severe decline in her fortunes. By this time she was probably sitting towards the rear of the church. She died in 1606 and was only worth 4 pounds, 9 shillings. She had four sheep, some pewter dishes, pots and pans, a feather bolster, some old blankets and coverlets and some woollen apparel. It sounds as if her home was a hovel and little more than a hut or shed.

Her married daughter, Grace Wills, got three of the sheep; Thomasina, now married, was given a bushel of wheat and a pair of silver hooks. But something that her son, Anthony, had done had evidently much distressed her, for all she gave him was the fourth part of one spit, the fourth part of an iron bar, and the fourth part of one winding sheet - in other words, nothing. It sounds like she hated him. She was not too keen on another married daughter, Joan Coole, who was given one worthless platter. The oldest daughter, Moad or Moate Hitching, was made the sole executor and given the rest of Joan's goods.

None of her daughters - nor Anthony - appears on the seating plan. Nor does Stephen's brother, James, who died in 1623; he seems to have been unmarried.

Stephen is first mentioned in the Court Rolls in 1559 - the year in which a Philip Honeycombe hanged himself ('se suspendit' in Latin); Stephen seems to have been in his mid-teens at the time. I surmise that Philip was born about 1544. He was a juror in 1575, and again in 1592, 1593 and 1599. The fact that there is a 17-year gap in his official court duties seems to indicate that Philip was elsewhere, or ill, or not among the most respected persons in the manor. The Philip Honeycombe in the seating plan (pew 9 far left) is obviously not the Philip who hanged himself in 1559. The Philip in the plan died in 1596. His wife was an Elizabeth and is probably the one in pew 7 centre right. At his death he had an unmarried daughter called Alice, and he owned one house, a garden and a close. He seems to have been a great-nephew or grandson of the Philip who hanged himself and a nephew of Stephen Honeycombe. It seems that the Philip in the plan also had a son of the same name.

Richard Honeycombe was a piper and the poorest or least significant socially of the Honeycombes in the church; he sits right at the back. He died in 1593 and leased 12 acres of waste ground on Duncombe (Danescombe?) Hill, which may have been near Honicombe. His wife was called Cecilia and they had a son called Roger. Perhaps this Richard was a shepherd or a cowherd.

John Honeycombe, senior, in pew 8 far left, is apparently another nephew of Stephen, a son of Stephen's brother, Thomas; this John died before 1601. His wife was another Elizabeth and he also had a daughter called Alice. Perhaps John's wife sits in pew 8 far right.

There were at least three Elizabeth Honeycombes in Calstock at this time - and at least three Joan Honeycombes, all presumably wives or widows or unmarried daughters. One of the Elizabeths, Elizabeth junior, sits in pew 7 middle right; a Jane Honeycombe is in front of her, perhaps an older sister or a sister-in-law. There were also three Johns. For in 1593, the Assession Roll names an Elizabeth Honeycombe as being a widow of a John, and a Thomasina Honeycombe is the widow of another John.

Are these the two Johns, perhaps father and son, who sit together in pew 13 at the back? Was there an epidemic that year (1593) in which these two Johns, and also Richard, died?

Joan Honeycombe of Crosse, pew 7 far right, is apparently another widow. Her husband could have been the Thomas Honeycombe who fathered Stephen and Thomas Honeycombe.

It is obvious from the seating plan and our knowledge of the Honeycombes named in manorial records that about half of the Honeycombes who were living in the parish of Calstock in 1590/93 had literally no place in the church. Presumably they couldn't afford the rent, or were Catholics or non-believers, or were aged or ill or very young. Absent from the seating plan are James Honeycombe and Thomasina Honeycombe; Roger and his wife, Jane; Anthony and his wife, Laura; Walter, William and Grace - all mentioned in the manorial records of this time.

It is noticeable that families attending parish church services had been doing so for many years. Surnames like Facy, Taylor, Hawkin, Hilland, Martin, Edward, Baker, Strike and Bond appear regularly in the manorial records across 300 years. Also noticeable is the fact that hardly any of the surnames in the seating plan are Cornish in origin. Clearly this area of eastern Cornwall had been Anglicised since the Norman Conquest, if not before.

Finally, the family historian's nightmare of the repetition of Christian names is given a ghostly reality by the repeated appearance in the plan of John, Richard, Robert, Roger, Thomas and William, as well as Joan, Elizabeth, Margery and Alice. There are in fact 33 Johns in the church and 34 Joans and only one Barbara and a George.

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