

A possible Easter sepulchre at St Helen's church, Sefton

M. K. Stammers

St Helen's church, Sefton, was the mother church for ten parishes north of Walton. A stone church was probably erected here about 1170 on the site of the present chancel. Some fragments of Norman capitals were excavated in the late nineteenth century.¹ There may have been a pre-existing pagan place of worship before the country's conversion to Christianity. This is suggested by the oval boundary of the original churchyard and the existence of a sacred well dedicated to St Helen nearby. It was also one of the centres of the Molyneux family, who had their moated hall close by and whose sons provided many of the rectors. The main body of the nave dates from about 1320, with later extensions mainly in the north aisle in the fifteenth century. The whole church was rebuilt in the early sixteenth century with a clerestory in the nave and chancel, together with a new south aisle and porch.

As Pevsner noted, the church has 'a marvellous wealth of fittings'.² These included 'a rood screen of noble height' running the whole width of the church, the original choir stalls and pews, a pulpit of 1635 and a fine set of tombs, monumental brasses and hatchments, most of which recall the local landed families – the Molyneux, the Blundells of Little Crosby and Ince Blundell and the Rothwells. The church, which must be one of the best medieval churches in the whole of the North West, has attracted a deal of antiquarian interest. The Society's *Transactions* contain papers on a variety aspects, ranging from its hatchments to the

¹ E. W. Cox, 'Norman remains found at Sephton church, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 47 (1895), pp. 25-37.

² N. Pevsner, *The buildings of England: Lancashire, 1: The industrial and commercial south* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 399.

mock corporation that maintained a pew at the back of the church in the late eighteenth century.³ The most authoritative account of the church and its architecture was produced by the noted ecclesiastical architect W. D. Caroe and his sister-in-law E. J. A. Gordon in 1893. This was based on the researches of the Reverend E. Horley, who had been rector between 1871 and 1883.⁴ Caroe was responsible for the restoration of the church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Among the church's wealth of fitments, there is a stone archway below the north window of the chancel. This has a moulded ogee arch topped with a large foliated pinnacle, which must be a replacement because of the different colour of its stone. Its opening is filled with a carved oak frame and a panelled door. Caroe and Gordon describe this as an aumbry.⁵ An aumbry was a cupboard for the storage of the sacred vessels of the mass and communion. The Reverend G. W. Wall agreed with this description and added that 'the border of oaken carved work is of a different style to the other work in the church'.⁶ Pevsner also agreed with this identification. The position of this aumbry next to the altar and its size and its elaborate moulding suggest that it might have had a greater importance – the Easter sepulchre of the church. Caroe and Wall both considered that an arched recess in the north aisle, which contains the sculpture of Sir William Molyneux, might have been an Easter sepulchre.

The Easter sepulchre was always associated with the north side of the chancel.⁷ This was the symbolic representation of the entombment of Christ when, on the afternoon of Good Friday, the blessed sacrament was removed from the altar and

³ E. Horley, 'The mock corporation of Sephton', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 33 (1880-81), pp. 223-46, and 34 (1881-2), pp. 25-38; G. W. Wall, 'St Helen's church, Sephton', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 47 (1895), pp. 38-102; F. Tyrer, 'The hatchments in Sefton church', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 107 (1955), pp. 153-56.

⁴ W. D. Caroe & E. J. A. Gordon, *Sefton, a descriptive and historical account* (London, 1893). Gordon appears to have been responsible for the illustrations.

⁵ '... an aumbry which looks like a late insertion and has a modern door', Caroe & Gordon, *Sefton*, p. 21.

⁶ Wall, 'St Helen's church', p. 79.

⁷ E. Vale, *Churches* (London, 1954), p. 19.

placed with a crucifix wrapped in linen cloths in a specially prepared place on the north side of the altar, as if it were in the tomb of Gethsemane. There would be a vigil through all the hours until early on Easter morning. Before the Easter mass, the host was replaced in the hanging pyx before the altar and the crucifix 'raised' and processed round the church with candles and bells and choir singing *Christus resurgens*. As Duffy put it, this was the most 'imaginatively compelling of the Good Friday ceremonies'.⁸ As such, it remained a popular feature of worship in English churches right up until the time late in Henry VIII's reign when it was specifically banned as idolatrous.

The Easter sepulchre was usually a temporary structure, which might consist of a wooden frame draped with rich tapestries or embroidered cloths. A possible wooden sepulchre survives at Cowthorpe church, Yorkshire. In a few cases, Easter sepulchres were permanent fixtures made in stone. The major examples include: Hawton, Yorkshire; Heckington, Lincolnshire; Northwold, Norfolk; Lincoln cathedral; and Tarrant Hinton, Dorset. The latter included Renaissance motifs which testify to the popularity of the ceremony well into the sixteenth century.⁹ The noble or the wealthy considered the north side of the chancel the most desirable of places to be buried because of the presence of the Easter sepulchre. In some cases, tombs included the sepulchre, such as the Sackville tomb at Westhanpuett, Sussex, or the Clopton tomb at Long Melford.

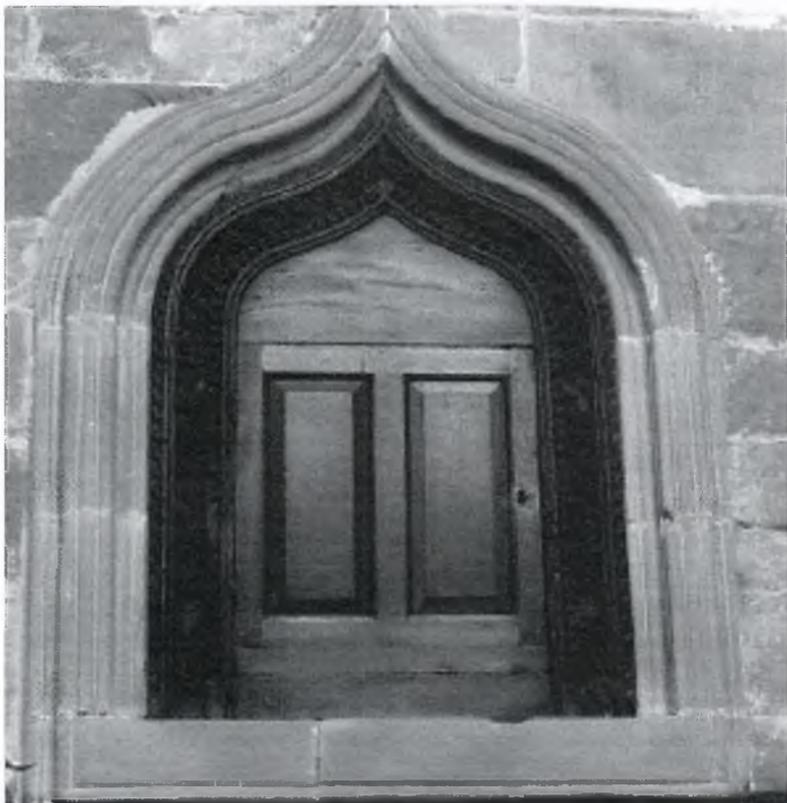
The 'aumbry' at St Helen's is close in size to the Easter sepulchres at Hawton and Heckington, but lacks their elaborate carved surrounds. It does have a large foliated finial which is similar to these two examples. The leaf forms symbolize growth and renewal.¹⁰ The Heckington finial was surmounted by a figure of the risen Christ. The finial at St Helen's has had its top knocked off and replaced in a different coloured stone. It is possible that the original finial might have also carried a figure of

⁸ E. Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: Traditional religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven, 1992), p. 28.

⁹ M. D. Anderson, *History and imagery in British churches* (London, 1971), p. 158.

¹⁰ J. C. Cooper, *An illustrated encyclopaedia of traditional symbols* (London, 1979), p. 56.

the risen Christ. The churchwardens would have been obliged to take this down. This piece of destruction also points to the fact that this more than an aumbry. At some time after the abandonment of the Easter sepulchre ritual, it was converted into a safe storage place with a lockable door and thus became an aumbry. As for the recess in the north aisle, there is no evidence that the subsidiary position was ever used for the Easter sepulchre in any other medieval churches and so can be discounted. The Easter sepulchre had to be at the most sacred part of the church because it was so central to the Christian doctrine and the most important festival of the year.



The existing cupboard or aumbry on the north side of the chancel of St Helen's church, Sefton, with its decorative surround and door.