



ORGAN TRANSPLANT

HAVING ATTENDED ST WILFRID'S IN DERBYSHIRE SINCE CHILDHOOD, ANNE HEATHCOTE REMEMBERS SEEING A DAMAGED FIGURE ABANDONED BEHIND ORGAN PIPES. NOW THE EFFIGY'S IMPORTANCE HAS BEEN REVEALED - AND IT'S OPENED UP A NEW READING OF THE CHURCH'S PAST

Where do you start in a story that covers over a thousand years? Well, my contribution to St Wilfrid's, in Barrow upon Trent, covers only the last 70 or so. As a small child, during long sermons I'd gaze about me, wondering about the history of this fascinating building whose foundations date back to Anglo-Saxon times, and pondering the people who had gone before me.

Latterly, when I took over as churchwarden and organist in the footsteps of my father, grandmother, grandfathers and great-grandfather, it became apparent that, to keep the church open, drastic action was needed. There's no way the building would close on my watch! Thanks to the help and support of a large group of parishioners, funding was eventually raised to transform the church to make it more useful for modern life.

That's when the fun began. Not only did we find out much more about the Knights Hospitaller – the military order was given this unassuming little Derbyshire church in 1165 – but we also learned much more about a neglected, dirty and damaged effigy that had been hidden for hundreds of years behind the pipe organ and, previously, box pews. As a child I was aware of this unusual lump of stone that lay in the dark – I'd clambered around the back of the wooden organ casing many times. But I had no idea of what it was, where it had come from, nor who it represented.

Out of the blue one afternoon, I received a phone call from Sally Badham, vice-president of the Church Monuments Society. A Victorian report of St Wilfrid's she'd seen mentioned an effigy of a priest here. Confirming this, I sent her some photographs and was immediately hit with an excited email asking for more.

The sculpture work is extremely fine – better than you'd expect to find in a small rural church. Although badly defaced, possibly during the Reformation, it clearly represented a significant person. Ensuing research showed that this was possibly the oldest

alabaster effigy of a priest in Britain, and dated from about 1345-50. We surmised that he may be John de Belton, a priest transferred from Crayke, near York, at the behest of the Knights Hospitaller and the Bishop of Coventry. He was in our parish in the 1340s and then disappeared off the roll of vicars. Was he a victim of the Black Death? We certainly have two plague pits in the churchyard dating from that time, and part of the Knights Hospitaller's role was to look after the sick, so it's fair to assume that St Wilfrid's was a centre of care for victims. How sad that our village is again under siege from another pandemic.

We raised £10,000 to pay for extensive cleaning and conservation of the effigy. The process entailed moving it from a niche in the south wall of the church where it had lain for many hundreds of years. So tightly did the figure fit, and so heavy was it, that it required a huge effort to move it to a central part of the church. (Returning him to the niche was just as hard.) There the conservator got to work. She discovered patches of Medieval paint – gold leaf, azurite, cinnabar and so on – adhering to the surface, suggesting he was brightly coloured when first installed; another indication of his eminent status.

Our transformation of St Wilfrid's involved getting rid of extraneous Victorian furnishings, and returning the interior to how it looked when the Knights Hospitaller left in 1540, having enlarged the church. The twists and turns of the project have led to many discoveries: Hospitaller grave slabs embedded in the walls of the chancel, a possible anchorite cell, a cartoon drawing of a knight – probably, again, of 1345 vintage.

Who knew that a small village like ours would contain such a heritage gem – and a time capsule? The role of churchwarden is almost as old, dating back to the early Middle Ages. Speaking for myself, it never fails to fascinate, worry and delight ■